



Written Communication Policy

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Policy on Written Communication

Written communication is a vitally important part of Fair Deal's everyday work. It is not uncommon for staff to complain that too much time is spent on paperwork and not enough on working with people. Whilst this may seem a reasonable point of view, the fundamental purpose of good recording is missed. Good recording and good record keeping are essential ingredients of good practice. Recording is part of our service to the people we support, and one of the cornerstones of the organisation's approach to partnership and good practice. Moreover, recording is an important part of the accountability of Fair Deal's employees to those who use our services. This policy addresses some of the key issues relating to written communication and in doing so underlines its importance as a basic aspect of good practice in supporting people.

The Legal Framework

Fair Deal is firmly committed to meeting the provisions of:

- *** The Data Protection Act 1998** and is registered under the appropriate categories thus complying with the eight Data Protection Principles
- *** Freedom of information Act 2000**
- **The National Care Standards** (Housing Support Services & Care at Home in standards 3 & 4 respectively... *the provider has policies and procedures which cover all legal requirements, including; proper record-keeping, including recording incidents and complaints*)

*See the Data Protection & Confidentiality Policy for further information.

Why Written Communication (Records & Recording) is Important

Good recording can help to ensure that:

- all staff are informed about the needs of people we support
- there is continuity of support
- staff are accountable
- good practice is evidenced and not "lost"
- appointments are kept and important events planned for
- organisational policies and procedures are followed
- important care/support planning decisions are implemented
- progress can be monitored
- Fair Deal fulfils its legal obligations
- we review and evaluate practice/plans/support
- we achieve continuity and can provide guidance about good practice

Written communication may be used as evidence in a court of law or industrial tribunal. Written work can be the basis of learning. Discussion of written accounts of practice can help to develop understanding & enhance practice. *Being able to communicate effectively in writing is therefore a fundamental part of good practice. If we are ineffective or careless in this area, we may undermine the good practice in terms of "hands on" or direct support work undertaken. Care therefore needs to be taken to ensure that the necessary level of skills and understanding are developed.*

Key Rules in Written Communication

In undertaking written communication, it is vitally important to adhere to the following rules in relation to: Purpose; Relevance; Planning; Structure; Clarity; Fact & Opinion; Objectivity & Accuracy; Presentation; Anti-discriminatory Practice and Confidentiality.

Purpose

We need to ask the question “why?” We need to be clear about the purpose of writing. We need to establish:

- Who will be reading the written work
- What will it be used for
- What the writer hopes that it will achieve

For example, in writing a report, the worker needs to ensure that the tone, format, style and content are appropriate to the purpose of the report. For example, a report prepared for a court hearing would be different in every way from a report prepared for a person-centred review meeting. The purpose of a particular piece of written work will define its tone, content and ultimate presentation style.

Relevance

A major question to consider for written work is: “what shall I include, what shall I leave out?” Two dangers can be identified:

1. Too much information is included. Too much “padding” is not only a waste of time but can also distract attention from the actual central message that is to be conveyed. In short: providing more information than is necessary is more likely to hamper communication than assist it
2. Too little information is included. If a key piece of information is omitted or glossed over, the end result may mean that unsafe decisions and courses of action are reached and taken.

For example, if within a report it states that:

Joe Bloggs has been a bit quiet and low since the death of his father some weeks ago. His supported employment placement is going well...

The response of Joe’s care manager could be quite different to a report that states:

I believe that Joe Bloggs is still very distressed by his father’s death and that a clinical depression may well develop, if we do not attend to his distress. He now has little conversation with me, is not eating and has lost 7lb in weight over the last 2 months. He complained about not sleeping yesterday and became tearful when I asked him how he was coping with his father’s death.

Finding the balance between these two unhelpful extremes is not always an easy task. One principle that can help to guide us in finding this balance is: **provide the minimum information necessary, not the maximum available**. This basically involves focusing carefully on the information available and deciding which elements are necessary to convey the meaning intended. Of course, in order to decide what is necessary we need to refer back to the purpose of the written communication. In determining what is relevant, we need to ask the key question: relevant to what? The purpose of writing will therefore guide us in making

the crucial distinction between “need to know” and “nice to know”. Too much of the latter will muddy the waters of the former.

Planning

Written communications can be confused, confusing and difficult to read if they are not planned in advance. Key points to consider are:

- What points are to be made
- What order they should be in
- What level of formality or indeed informality, is required

Time devoted to planning can be an important investment and may prevent time consuming problems later on.

Structure

Written work benefits considerably from having a clear, logical, structure. One very common and useful way of structuring a report is to divide it into three parts, with each part serving a separate function. The three sections of the report are as follows:

1. Introduction

The purpose of this is to “set the scene” for what has to come in the rest of the report. It should give a brief overview of the reports purpose, content and focus.

2. The Main Body

This is the main substantive part of the report in which the key points are made. These should be presented in a logical order, with a clear flow from one point to the next.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of this section is to draw the report to a logical close. It should briefly summarise the message that the report was intended to convey. If appropriate, this section should contain any recommendations that are to be made.

Clarity

Effective written communication largely depends on clarity. It is therefore important to:

- Avoid long, cumbersome sentences that are confusing and difficult to follow
- Avoid ambiguity and vagueness. Beware of words or phrases that can be misinterpreted or that are too imprecise to be of value
- Do not rely on jargon or technical terms that others may not be able to understand

Fact and Opinion

An important distinction to be drawn is that between facts and opinions. It is important not to confuse the two since this could be very misleading. Good practice therefore demands that, where you give an opinion, it is clear that this is what you are doing. For example, opinions should be prefaced by comments like “I believe...” or “in my view...” Similarly, where a confirmed fact is being stated, it is helpful to explain or justify its factual basis. For example, instead of writing what could be seen as a judgmental statement:

“Mr Hughes is a violent man” it is better to state the precise facts: “Mr Hughes has three convictions for grievous bodily harm”.

Objectivity and Accuracy

This means trying to avoid subjective opinion, prejudice and preconceived ideas. Written communication must be factually accurate and make clear distinction between facts and opinion, as stated above. Facts must be recorded in a way which is unambiguous and leave no room for misunderstanding. Subjective information should be reduced to the minimum necessary and where material based on opinion is entered, it should be clearly identified as such. The type of language and phrases that are used in the records should be clear and precise. For example, rather than writing -John is chaotic - say what he does - John stays out 4 nights a week and refuses any request to discuss his alcohol use. Vague terms such as, at risk or challenging behaviour are not helpful or informative. The writer should be explicit about the nature of the risk or concern. Similarly, if you are expressing an opinion or offering a possible interpretation of someone's behaviour then you must make it clear that this is your opinion.

I believe that John is staying out for 4 nights per week and refusing to discuss his use of alcohol because he may be finding it difficult to deal with the sudden death of his father.

Presentation

The way written work is presented is very important for two main reasons:

1. Making an impression: Poor presentation of written work can create a very negative impression. Errors of spelling, grammar, punctuation and so on can give the impression of sloppy and careless work. Poor presentation can therefore undermine what is in other respects, work of high quality
2. Getting your message across: Poor presentation can reduce clarity and therefore hamper communication. This applies in terms of:
 - Poor use of paragraphs spoiling the flow of what is being conveyed
 - Grammatical or spelling errors changing the meaning of a sentence (or rendering it meaningless)
 - Omitted words or incorrect punctuation affecting the meaning of a sentence

In trying to avoid these problems, it is helpful to:

- Carefully check over what you have written
- Ask someone to proof-read it for you, read it out loud, this can often help
- Identify problems of punctuation or sentence construction

Anti-discriminatory Practice

Written communication should be free from discriminatory language and views. Records/assessments etc should identify special needs arising from ethnicity, race, culture, gender, age, religion, language, communication, sensory impairment, disability and sexual orientation. Writing should reflect anti-discriminatory practice and demonstrate positive and creative work to ensure equal opportunities and a sensitive response for each individual.

Confidentiality

The topic of confidentiality is both very important and very complex. There are, however, a number of points that can help us deal with this aspect of practice appropriately. These are:

- Confidentiality is to the agency not the individual That is, workers should not promise to “keep secrets”, as they are acting on behalf of their employers, not in their own

right. It is misleading to allow people we support to believe no-one else will know the information given when it is likely to be available to others within the organisation

- Confidentiality is not absolute That is, there are certain circumstances in which confidentiality has to be overridden. As Adams (1994) comments:

Workers are accountable to their employers and not just to people who receive support from Fair Deal in general, the appropriate response to the request: “I’ll tell you a secret if you’ll promise not to tell anyone”, is along the lines of, “I’m prepared to listen to you. But if what you tell me involves harm to you or another person, I may have to tell somebody else”.

An example of this would be a situation in which it appears that sexual abuse may be taking place. In a general sense most, written communication is the property of both the author and Fair Deal. Reports, minutes etc should be filed carefully. The support folder in most instances will be retained by the person using Fair Deal services and staff will provide guidance in relation to keeping this folder safe, and access to it. All written communication in relation to people we support, and Fair Deal employees is confidential to Fair Deal and is accessible only to the person using services/employee and those authorised by senior staff members, to have access. Written communication should be kept in a secure locked place. However, there are exceptions to this rule; people using our services may wish to keep their support folder on the coffee table, in their bookshelf in the lounge or any other place in their house where it could be in full view, the same could be said of communication books which are filled in with the involvement of the person. Being rigid about confidentiality in such instances would bring us into conflict with our principles in relation to person centred support and ownership. Fair Deal is committed to following a person centred approach and as such service user involvement and rights are high on Fair Deal’s agenda. People using Fair Deal’s services involvement and participation in Written communication is a fundamental principle. People using Fair Deal’s services must as far as possible be actively encouraged and supported to be involved in developing their support plans and contributing to written communication about them as far as is possible.

People must be encouraged to:

- read (or have reports read out to them) any reports or other written communication
- correct errors and omissions
- record personal statements, including any dissent

Reports etc should be written in plain, jargon free language and in some circumstances, consideration should be given to the use of symbols, graphics, video and audio mediums to ensure the persons understanding.

Types of Written Communication and Records in Fair Deal

Different types of written communication require different approaches If they are to be used to the best effect.

Support Folder

See Person Centred Support Planning Policy. The support folder in most instances will be retained by the person using Fair Deal’s services.

Person using Fair Deal’s services General File

This is held securely by Team Leader’s in the Fair Deal office, and includes:

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Classification: Business Use

- Referral Form which should evidence that the referrer has been informed of the response that the organisation intends to take; and any time scales involved. The funding status of the individual should be included. Referral forms should include sections that allow for ethnic monitoring. See appendix 1
- Financial information including Care Budget Proposal pro forma, note of financial contribution from GCC, THB and ILF
- Contact and time sheets detailing initial work undertaken to establish service
- Third party information, we should avoid retaining if possible, but it may be necessary to hold the following type of information on file: speech therapy, psychology etc.
- Single shared assessment
- Reports that relate to risk assessment for individuals considered to be at risk either to themselves or to others in the community.
- Communication Books (which could be described as running records): There will be slight variance in the format and style of these books which provide information about people on a day to day basis. These books are handwritten and should only contain information directly relevant to the person's support. The key rules for written communication outlined in the foregoing must be observed.

Letters and Memos

These tend to be short but important forms of communication. It is important to ensure that they are concise and to the point. If they are too long, with unnecessary padding, this may distract attention from the important points to be made. It is also important that the level of formality is appropriate.

Reports

Written reports may be required for a variety of reasons. The length, style, format and focus will therefore also vary considerably. A basic principle of report-writing is the need to match the report to the specific requirements, to ensure that it is appropriate to its purpose.

Incident Reports

Serious incidents should be recorded on Fair Deal's incident report pro forma. Recording should be clear, concise and factual. Complete incident reports relating to people using Fair Deal services and support staff must be forwarded to the Chief Executive and retained in her incident file, completed incident reports not involving people we support, or support staff should be forwarded to the relevant Team Leader.

Complaints

Recording in relation to all investigated complaints from people using services/carers must be forwarded to Fair Deal's Chief Executive and retained in her complaints file. See Fair Deal's Complaints Policy for further information.

Minutes

Minutes provide a record of meetings and the main discussion points and actions agreed. Minutes should be concise, factual and formal in style. Minutes may be required by statutory agencies, or even for legal purposes, as evidence of internal practice, decision making or action as undertaken by Fair Deal employees or Directors. Minutes will be filed according to their overall function and purpose, for example Board Minutes are held securely by Fair Deal's Chief Executive, as are minutes relating to disciplinary situations or practice based investigations; Team meeting minutes are held by Team Leaders; minutes of annual

individual service reviews are filed in the support folder which is held in most instances by the person using Fair Deal services.

Assessments/ Risk Assessments

Assessment involves gathering relevant information, developing an overview of any given situation or person's needs, and planning what needs to be done to resolve the problems identified. Again, the key rules for written communication must be observed. Assessments and risk assessments may be retained in the people we support's general file, kept by the person in his/her support folder or in the case of office-based health & safety risk assessments in the central Health & Safety file. Further information and guidance in relation to risk assessment can be obtained from the Fair Deal Policy on Risk Management.

Agreements/Contracts

These documents are usually related to the people who use Fair Deal's services and would be retained within the support folder held in most instances by the person using services and also copied and filed in the person's general file. Service agreements/contracts are a useful and effective means of developing partnerships and achieving change. The worker and people we support identify common areas of agreement in moving towards objectives that have been jointly identified. This is a very skilled process and the written agreement, needs to reflect accurately and appropriately the precise terms of the agreement.

Review Reports/Summaries

Reports for reviews, summaries/minutes of reviews can follow very different formats and be formal or informal in style depending on the purpose of the review. If the review is a review of a person's service then the reports for reviews or minutes/ summaries of the review should be written using straight forward language and may include the use of symbols and friendly formatting.

Telephone Messages

In order to record effectively it is important to ensure that: the message is clear and unambiguous; the date is recorded (and time, if appropriate); the telephone number or other contact point is included. It is also important to sign the note – relying on the other person recognising your handwriting, may lead to confusion. It is less impersonal if the note is signed.

Removal of Written Communication from Service/Office

In normal practice, files/records/reports should not be removed from the office or service to which they properly belong. The removal of any records must be authorised by the workers line manager and duly signed out and dated. The removal of files without the consent of line managers will result in disciplinary action being taken. Line managers are responsible for the maintenance of their filing system. Files and such documents must never be left in an unattended vehicle at any location.

Retention/Storage/Destruction of Case Records*

Fair Deal is required by law to retain written communication/records for certain periods of time as detailed below.

- Records/files relating to people we support should be retained for seven years
- Financial records should be retained for seven years

- Personnel records should be retained for three years
- Recruitment records should be retained for twelve months

All files /records/written communication must be stored in a secure place and shredded or routed through confidential waste suppliers when being disposed of.

Monitoring Performance*

The management task in relation to written communication includes the oversight of practice, checking compliance with Fair Deal's Policies, and the quality of work with people we support through supervision and other decision-making processes.

Poor Performance:

Performance in written communication that falls short of the standards set in this policy must be addressed by Team Leaders. In the first instance reasons for the poor practice will be explored and recorded during supervision and a course of action to improve practice will be agreed, for example on the job coaching or a training course. Workers should make their line manager aware at this stage if they have particular difficulties with written communication, for example if someone has dyslexia or has not been required to produce written work since leaving school, additional support to reach the standards set within this policy will be given. However, if there is no good reason for practice not to improve, then the disciplinary process will be applied.

Team Leaders are ultimately responsible for the standard of written communication within their particular services.

The Chief Executive will regularly audit** the appropriateness and effectiveness of records and recording and furthermore ensure that proper training and supervision is given to staff in relation to recording. In instances of poor performance, the reasons for this will be thoroughly explored with the appropriate branch manager and an action plan will be developed. If performance continues to be poor and there are no mitigating circumstances then the disciplinary process will be applied.

**More detailed information can be obtained from the Fair Deal Data Protection & Confidentiality Policy.*

***Twice yearly as a minimum.*

End of Policy

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