



Communication procedure

FOR ACT TOGETHER STAFF & OUR SERVICE USERS

We're excited to introduce this procedure to enhance communication and nurture positive relationships between ACT Together and our Service Users. Our Service Users encompass children, young people, foster and kinship carers, family and community members, and government and non-government agencies – a diverse group.

We understand that the roles we fulfil and the collective responsibilities we bear can sometimes give rise to stress stemming from various challenges. Our objective is to foster a supportive environment in response to these challenges.

It's important to highlight that this procedure does not restrict the rights of our Service Users to express grievances. In situations where alternative processes might be more appropriate, we strongly encourage individuals to assert their rights and use the relevant channels.

At the heart of our commitment is an environment where communication thrives, paving the way for stronger connections and shared benefits for all our Service Users.

General communication guidance

- If a formal communication plan is in place, it will take precedence over this procedure.
- All parties involved are to be mindful of the perceived tone of written communication and to maintain a respectful approach, emphasising collaborative work.
- If any party has concerns about the content of written communication, they are encouraged to address the issue in the first place through direct conversation or phone communication.
- All parties are reminded to consider that written communication becomes part of the child or young person's file, as well as the carer's file, and therefore comments should always be professional and appropriate.
- It is to be assumed that the child or young person will have access to their file in the future, either through the *Freedom of Information Act 1989* or other mechanisms.
- Foster and kinship carers will have access to information about themselves and be allowed to review the information.
- If a Service User is dissatisfied with the content of the information held about them, they will be given an opportunity to have the record annotated.
- If a document requires a signature and return from any party, it should be completed within a week.
- It is considered good practice to communicate all key decisions in writing to all parties after they have been discussed verbally.
- All communication should be accurately documented in an individual file note including where information is exchanged verbally. Always be mindful that the file note may be read by a third party.
- Always make a file note where information is exchanged verbally. Clearly document 'who will do what, and when'.

Correspondence

Letters and emails *(we aim to acknowledge receipt within two working days)*

- Email communication should not replace opportunities for verbal communication and relationship building.
- If the information contained in a written communication requires an urgent response, the author will make a phone call to alert the recipient. For urgent matters, ACT Together will attempt to make direct contact by phone.
- If the information in the email is sensitive and likely to be distressing, a phone call or meeting request should be considered as an alternative.
- The original author of written correspondence can send a reminder at any time.
- ACT Together staff are to utilise out-of-office when they are on leave. Out-of-office replies should advise the duration of absence and provide an alternative contact.
- If the 'cc' function is used in emails, it means that the people listed in the 'cc' field receive the email for information purposes only and are not expected to respond.
- When utilising the 'cc' function, it is recommended to limit the inclusion of individuals to those who are specifically relevant to the subject matter, whenever possible.

Text communication

- ACT Together will prioritise making direct contact through phone calls for urgent matters.
- Do not use text messages for relaying urgent, sensitive, or confidential information.
- Text messages can be useful for sending small updates or checking in on non-urgent matters.
- Remember to always identify yourself by name when sending a text message.

Time frames

- When written correspondence is received, ACT Together will acknowledge receipt within two working days. The acknowledgement will include clear information about an approximate timeframe for a more thorough response.
- If acknowledgment or an explanation for a response is not received within a week, raise the matter with the relevant Program Manager.
- If there is no reply within a further two working days, escalate the matter to the Regional Manager of the relevant portfolio.
- If issues raised in an email cannot be answered within two working days, the recipient should still acknowledge the email with clear information about an approximate timeframe for a more thorough response.

DAY 1	DAY 2	NO REPLY BY DAY 7	NO REPLY BY DAY 9
Correspondence arrives from a Service User	ACT Together acknowledges receipt of correspondence and creates file note. If the reply is expected to require more than 2 days, the Service User is to be advised of the expected time frame.	The Service User to raise with Program Manager	The Service User escalates to Regional Manager

Voicemail should be documented in a file note. It is sufficient to summarise the content of the voicemail unless there is a reason to directly quote it (e.g., voicemail contains a threat or allegation). Text messages should also be documented in a file note, either by saving a screenshot of the message into the file note or transcribing it.

Phone calls

Urgent (we will return the call on the same day)

If the case manager is not answering, the ACT Together duty procedure will be followed. In cases identified as urgent, a response is expected on the same day as soon as possible.

For all calls out-of-hours the after-hours number is 0402 036 254.

If the duty worker or an after-hours worker determines that the matter is non-urgent, they will have a conversation with the caller. During this conversation, the duty worker will outline a course of action that includes providing information to the appropriate party, such as the Case Manager, and setting an expected response time of two working days.

Standard (we aim to return calls within 2 working days)

- Phone calls will be returned within two working days.
- If a phone call is not returned within this timeframe, the caller should request to speak with a duty worker or, if they are a carer, the Carer Support Worker.
- If no response is received within one week, the caller should approach the Program Manager of the relevant portfolio.

Meetings

- It is recommended to include a draft agenda with the invitations, whenever possible.
- All parties should be invited to contribute to the agenda.
- It is considered good practice to ensure attendees are aware of who else has been invited to the meeting.
- Any person advocating on behalf of a Service User must declare any perceived or actual conflict of interest before the meeting begins. If conflicts arise during their advocacy, they should be disclosed promptly.
- Service Users have the right to have an advocate or support person present. The Service User will inform the chair of the meeting about the attendance of their advocate.
- If there is a perceived conflict of interest with the chosen advocate, this should be discussed and agreed upon before the meeting, if possible. If not, the attendance of the advocate should be discussed and agreed upon at the start of the meeting.
- If minutes are required, the draft should be sent out within 10 working days. The minutes will be prepared and circulated by the designated minute taker.
- The minutes should include key points and agreed-upon actions.
- Attendees will have the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft minutes within 5 working days or any shorter period agreed upon during the meeting by all present parties. Corrections should be made unless there is disagreement, in which case both versions of the discussion will be recorded. Final minutes will be provided to all parties by the minute taker.
- When a Service User requests a meeting with ACT Together, their request will be accommodated as soon as possible.

Virtual Meetings

- Virtual meetings should not replace a face-to-face meeting
- Only the Chair will admit people into the meeting (noting only people invited are to attend)
- Join the meeting with the mute button turned on
- Have your camera turned on

- Use background blur to minimise distractions
- Stay muted when you're not talking
- Use the chat function to ask questions or share resources
- Raise your hand (icon) to speak
- Plug in your headphones if at your desk (for privacy reasons and to reduce unwanted background noise)
- Participate, pay attention and be present.

Please be aware that some meetings may involve discussions that are not suitable for children present in the same room to hear.

Review Meetings (previously called ROAs)

- Review meetings are held at least annually.
- The *Children and Young People Act 2008* directs that a meeting is to be arranged to discuss the matters that will be included in an Annual Review Report. This consultation occurs with foster or kinship carers, children and young people, birth parents and for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and young people, additional people such as community members or Elders should all be invited to attend the meeting.
- Review meetings are about the child/young person and their Care Plan, as well as gathering updated information about the child/young person to inform an Annual Review Report. The focus of the meeting must be on the child/young person. If other issues arise, the Chair will direct these conversations to occur at a later time.
- The minutes will be prepared and circulated by the designated minute taker.

Reports and assessments

- The *Children and Young People Act 2008* (s497) require Annual Review Reports to be provided yearly to the child or young person, each kinship or foster carer caring for that child or young person, as well as the biological parent/s, CYPS and the Public Advocate.
- Carers must be provided with an opportunity to be consulted (as far as practicable) before the Annual Review Report is finalised.
- Where a report is authored by ACT Together, relates to, or refers to a carer, the report must be provided to the carer, and an opportunity to respond must be provided.
- ACT Together may redact information to protect the privacy and confidentiality of a person named in the document. The Service User may request certain information to be redacted.
- Not limiting the above, Family Time (Contact) reports can be provided to parties who are present during the Family Time, upon request. The request is to be provided to CYPS for children and young people subject to an Interim Care and Protection Order, or to the ACT Together Case Manager for long-term Care and Protection Orders.

INFORMATION SHARING:

All other reports or assessments (excluding child concern reports and reportable conduct reports) may be provided if in line with the *Children and Young People Act 2008*:

- ACT Together has the authority to release the information;
- the information is not sensitive information S845;
- the person receiving the information is a documented member of the child/young person's Declared Care Team S863(2), and
- the information is for the safety and well-being information of the child/young person S858.

Directions and Decisions

- Good practice is to always engage in conversations face-to-face in the first instance.
- Provide decision outcomes in a Decision-Making Statement letter.
- All decision requests, recommendations, and communications must be also be sent to the ACT Together DMT inbox dmt@acttogether.org.au
- Decisions are to be made in a timely manner and are to:
 - be made by the person with the appropriate decision-making delegation;
 - consider all available, relevant evidence;
 - be based on that evidence; and,
 - wherever possible, be provided in writing explaining the reason for the decision.
- Affected parties are to be accorded procedural fairness, including natural justice.
- Affected parties can request referral of certain decisions to CSD. If you are unclear about this reach out to the case manager or carer support worker.

Automated notifications

Mobile phone and landline

Message: Hi. I am unable to take your call at the moment. If I haven't returned your call, please contact 6110 2200 during business hours or 0402 036 254 after hours.

Email

Message: Hi. I am unable to respond to emails [as I am on leave]. If the matter is urgent, please email my manager [name] at [email address]. Alternatively, contact 6110 2200 during business hours or 0402 036 254 after hours, otherwise I will respond on my return on [add date].

Unplanned leave

If you are unwell or on unplanned leave, notify your manager and ask them to email IT Support to change your out-of-office message.

Our Practice Framework guides our practice:

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES	1	Be Child Focussed	Respect the voice of children and young people as they have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions considered	Page 13
	4	Approach Culture with Humility, Respect and Curiosity	Reflects two of the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles (ATSICPP): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership – Ensuring the participation of community representatives in service design, delivery and individual case decisions. • Participation – Ensuring the participation of children, parents and family members in decisions regarding the care and protection of their children. 	Page 25
	6	Help Clients heal from the effects of trauma	Trustworthiness and transparency Service delivery decisions are made transparently and in ways that build and maintain trust.	Page 36

FURTHER INFORMATION

ACT Together office: Ground Floor, 26 Thynne Street, Bruce ACT
Phone: 6110 2200. After-hours: 0402 036 254

Web: acttogether.org.au **Mail:** PO Box 7215, Kaleen ACT 2617