

# POLICY ON USING STANDARDISED SYMBOL SUPPORT WITH CHILDREN WITH ASD

September 2022



## **BACKGROUND**

The policy has been developed by a multi-agency group including:

- ASD Outreach Service
- Oxleas SALT service
- Willow Dene School specialist ASD teachers
- STEPS Outreach Service

It was developed because of the need to standardise symbol use, where this is practical, across all settings in the Royal Borough of Greenwich. It is NOT intended to be completely prescriptive, as there will always be a need to vary and deviate from the policy to be able to meet the needs of an individual child or setting. However, it does provide a set of basic principles and guidance for practitioners working with Autistic students in settings.

## **WHAT IS A SYMBOL/VISUAL TIMETABLE/PECS**

- A symbol is a pictorial representation of an object/person/concept. Symbols are typically standardised so they can be used across users and settings. They can be black and white or coloured.
- A visual timetable /Now and Next board etc...is a schedule typically supported by symbols (see above) or written word to tell a child what is happening and what will happen next. This is used BEFORE the transition NOT during it.
- PECS is a unique alternative/augmentative communication system developed in the USA in 1985 to teach functional communication. PECS consists of six phases and begins by teaching an individual to give a single picture of a desired item or action to a “communicative partner” who immediately honours the exchange as a request. The system goes on to teach discrimination of pictures and how to put them together in sentences. In the more advanced phases, individuals are taught to use modifiers, answer questions and comment.

## **GENERAL PRINCIPLES**

- All children will need an individualised specialist assessment to recommend the type of symbol support that would best meet their needs, which will typically be done by a SALT or a specialist Teacher.
- This assessment will need to be updated on an ongoing basis as the child’s communication needs and the demands of the classroom setting alter.

- In general, children will usually need to be introduced to symbols that are a larger size while they are at the earliest stages of symbols/PECS being introduced.
- Children MAY (on some occasions) need to use coloured symbols/photographs BUT a SALT/Specialist teacher opinion should always be sought when making this decision.
- Children MAY need object support if they are not yet ready for symbol/photo use. Again, a SALT/ Specialist teacher opinion should always be sought when making this decision.
- Symbols may also need to be made larger when using to support a whole class timetable, particularly in a mainstream setting.
- ALWAYS put the written word on a photo/symbol, even if you think the child is not reading as they may learn through association.
- Children with ASD often develop reading through whole word recognition, rather than a phonic based approach. This can often be supported by using symbols.
- If you don't have a symbol handy..Draw one!

## **APPEARANCE OF SYMBOLS**

1. Font MUST be Comic Sans OR FSME
2. Capital letters should **ONLY** be used with proper nouns.
3. Grid sizes should be set according to use as detailed below.
4. Font size dependent on grid size as detailed below.
5. Symbols should ALWAYS have the word included
6. Photographs should ALWAYS have the word included
7. If adding a symbol to a photo put it in the bottom left corner.

## **STANDARDISED GUIDELINES FOR FORMATTING SYMBOLS FOR FUNCTIONAL USE, USING “COMMUNICATE IN PRINT”**

See **APPENDIX A** for details

## VISUAL TIMETABLES AND INDIVIDUAL SCHEDULES

Many people rely on daily visual schedules to tell them where they have to be and when, examples including school timetables, diaries, virtual calendars and applications on phones. Children and young people with autism usually need visual schedules across all parts of their day and in all settings.

The aims of visual schedules are:

- To show the pupil what is happening and when
- To provide predictability
- To prepare for change
- To promote independence
- To reduce anxiety

Schedules should be individualised and should be at a level easily understood by the pupil. Factors to consider include:

- The child's cognitive level
- Their ability to focus and interpret visuals
- Using the schedule **BEFORE** the transition not during it.

All children will need an individualised specialist assessment to recommend the type of symbol support that would best meet their needs. This can typically be done by a SALT or a specialist Teacher.

Pupils at an early stage of development can be more prepared to make transitions by the use of visuals. The type of visual to be used should be matched to the child's level of understanding.

**The steps in the hierarchy may be:**

- Objects of reference such as a plate for lunchtime or a ball for playtime.
- Photographs representing different areas or activities.
- Symbols
- Text

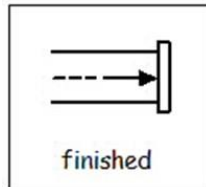
The first level for an individual visual timetable would be the use of a **Now board**. This would display the activity the child is engaging in at that time.



The **Now/Next board** would show the child what they are currently doing and what will be happening next.



It is recommended that staff use a 'finished' symbol in conjunction with the Now/Next board to reinforce the understanding of the end of an activity.

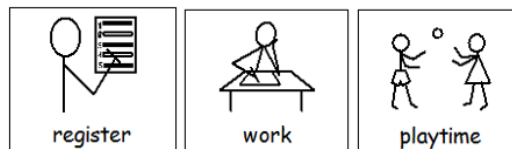


## Whole Class Visual Timetables

The use of a whole class visual timetable can help children cope with transitions that take place across the school day and prepare for any changes that may be necessary to their normal routines.

Running through the different activities at the beginning of both the morning and afternoon session is advised, as well as returning to remind the children at the beginning and end of individual lessons or activities.

Removing the symbol at the end of a session and posting it in a "finished" box can help to clearly illustrate to the class when activities are at finished.



## USING SYMBOLS FOR INDIVIDUAL SCHEDULES/ TIMETABLES/ WORK SYSTEMS

### A. NOW and NOW/NEXT Boards

- These should have the labels at the **BOTTOM** of the board
- Typically, they should be presented in a left to right sequence.
- It may be desirable to move a child on to a 3-step sequence by using a NOW/NEXT/THEN board so they have some consistency with earlier support and gradually move to a 1/2/3 board.

### B. LONGER SEQUENCE boards

- These should be presented with a 1,2,3 etc..at the top of the board

- Typically, they should be presented in a left to right sequence.

### C. VISUAL SUPPORT IN A WORK/ CURRICULUM SESSION

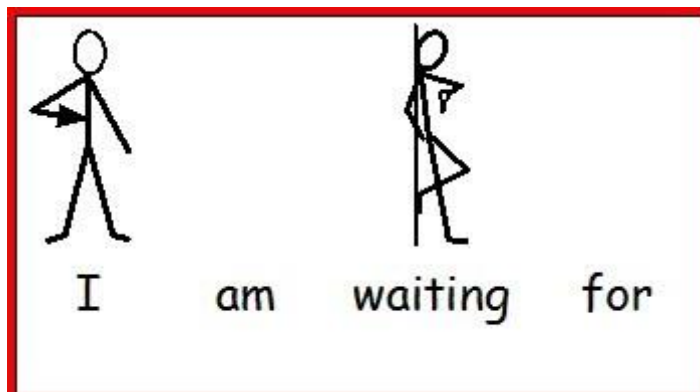
- These do NOT need numbers at the top unless this seems appropriate.
- Where practical they should be presented in a left to right sequence, and when not in a top- down sequence.

### D. MORNING/AFTERNOON TIMETABLES

- Morning with the symbol to be printed onto a yellow paper background
- Afternoon with the symbol to be printed onto a light blue paper background

### E. I AM WAITING FOR.....

- These should have a red border around the symbol and the symbol the child is waiting for placed next to the sentence strip.



### F. **BREAK** (This should be printed on green paper background)

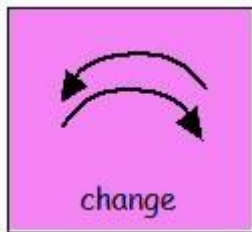
- Use the symbol for “leave” and substitute the word to “break”



**G HELP** (This should be printed on yellow paper background)



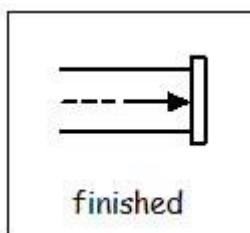
**H. CHANGE** (This should be printed on pink paper)



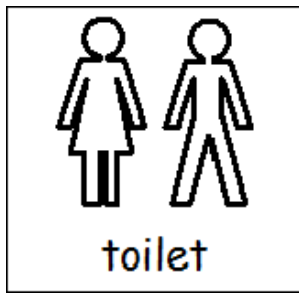
## **USING FUNCTIONAL SYMBOL SUPPORT ACROSS THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**

**Functional symbols are attached in APPENDIX B**

- Symbols should convey the essential message **ONLY** in most cases and phrases such as “Please” OR “Thank you” should be omitted.
- When printing a “finished” symbol, use the symbol for finish and change name **NOT** the “finish” symbol on communicate in print. This is a much more meaningful symbol for the student.



- When printing symbols for “toilet” use the Ladies or Gents sign and double back it with the toilet symbol. This is to re-enforce the use of the general toilet symbol in the community.



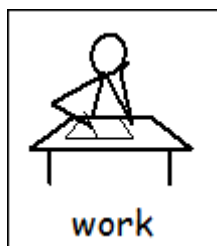
- The medical room should have a green cross.



**GENERAL PRINCIPLES IN USING SYMBOLS FOR TIMETABLES/  
CURRICULUM TOPICS OR A LOCATION THEY WILL TAKE PLACE  
IN.**

**See APPENDIX C for agreed standard timetable symbols**

- Symbols will need to be agreed on an individual basis, so that they are appropriate to the level of understanding of the child.
- Where children are at an early stage of using symbols, it will be more appropriate to use a “work” symbol, as below to indicate targeted sessions of input.



- Do NOT put a “PECS time” or “talking” on the timetables
- Symbols will usually need to be simplified so there are not too many options e.g., using a single symbol for PE, whether this is dance or games and one for assembly whether this is for sharing or general.
- With older/more able students, it may be more responsive to use drawn symbols (with the written word underneath) on a white board with the student, which may then move onto the use of the written word without a symbol.



## **SYMBOLS TO SUPPORT PECS**

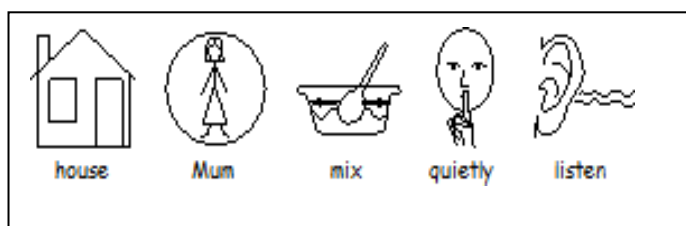
- PECS is the CHILD'S VOICE and symbols are the VOICE OF THE ADULT, supporting them with what to do...
- Usually, symbols would be the same and can be downloaded from Communicate in print or Writing with Symbols 2000
- Typically, children will have a set of specific PECS symbols in their PECS folder. Other symbols that they are using in their everyday context such as timetable symbols "more" and "stop" /feelings/weather etc..should NOT be stored in their PECS folder but in another place.
- Carrier phrases for use in PECS such as "I want"/ "I see" / "I hear" are attached in APPENDIX D

## **SYMBOLS TO SUPPORT CONCEPTS**

- Symbols can be used to support learning of concepts and provide an additional means to support the child
- Some commonly used concept symbols are included in APPENDIX E

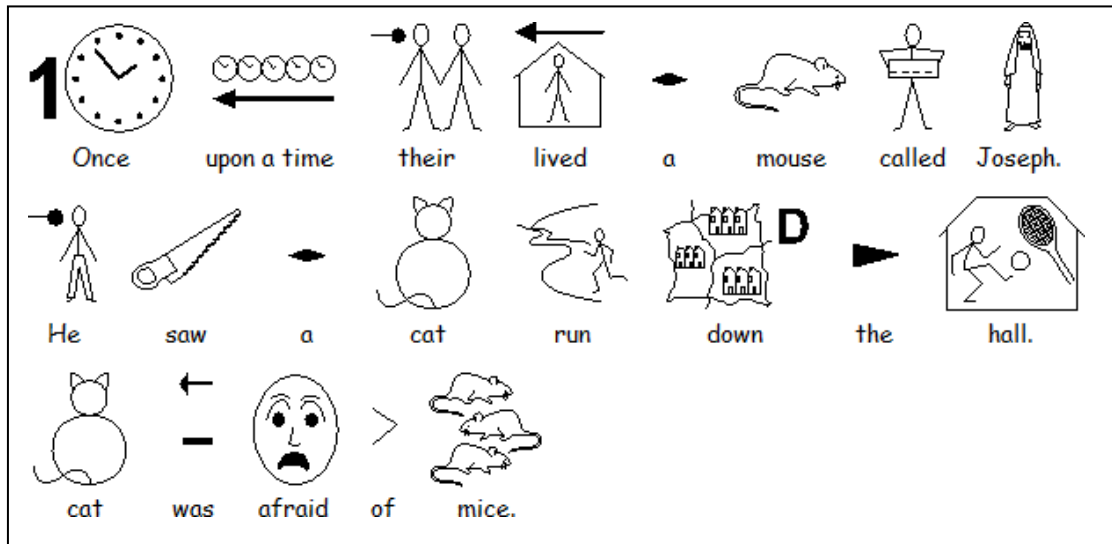
## **USING SYMBOLS TO SUPPORT BLOCKS OF TEXT**

- Where symbol supported text is used in circumstances which necessitate using large blocks of text, such as stories, recipes or instructions, the use of symbols should be reduced.
- Only the key words should be symbol supported.
- Key words are those which are the most important information bearing ones, and those which tend to be most easily represented graphically by symbols.
- They include nouns, some verbs and adjectives (where they are clearly representative of the meaning of the text).

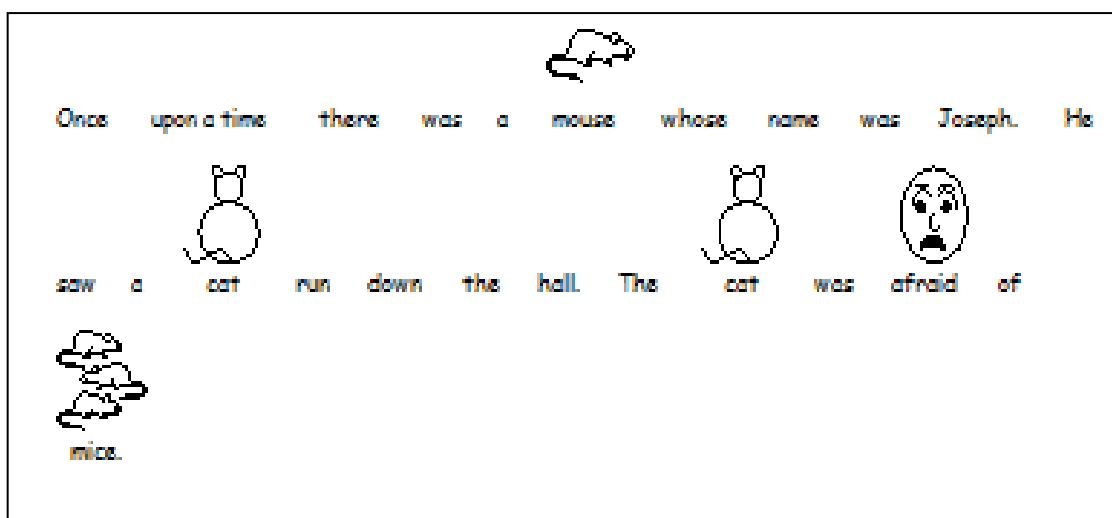


**Some examples of Key words**

- Non-key words are those which tend not to be information bearing and typically include conjunctions, articles, and many adjectives and adverbs.



Above is an example of text which includes too many symbols and in which the symbols do not always help with the meaning of the text.



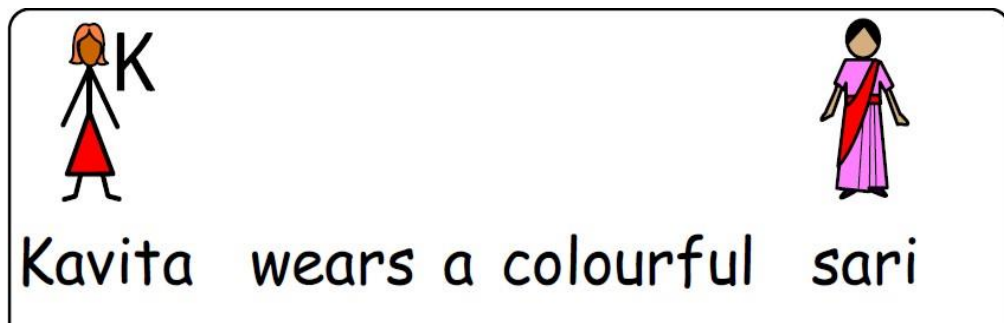
Above is a corrected version of the text which in which only key words are supported by symbols.

## USE OF SYMBOLS TO SUPPORT STORIES

Where symbol supported text is used in children's story and information books a more flexible approach is recommended in term of the use of colour.

Children's books frequently use vibrant colour to engage the reader and to paint a picture of the setting and characters in the story.

The symbols used should use colour in character of the book so that they appear to merge with the pages of the story.



## USE OF COLOUR TO REFLECT DIVERSITY OF ROYAL BOROUGH OF GREENWICH

Greenwich is a multicultural community, and it is recommended that symbols used to support text should reflect such diversity in skin tones and colour.

Where individual visual resources are made for a child, it is recommended that the resource uses either a photo of the child or a symbol which reflects their ethnic origin.



## PORTABLE USE OF SYMBOLS

Children should be supported throughout the day by an individual **visual timetable**. This should include activities and places the child will visit throughout their week.

To support adult communication to children, it is helpful for staff to have a number of visual supports on a keyring or lanyard. Portable keyring visuals are a back-up / addition to a child's individual timetable. As a result, they are mainly focussed on actions and behaviours (eg walking, sitting, waiting or when something is finished). There should be as few visuals as possible on a portable keyring, meaning they can be found quickly when needed.

### Keyring or Timetable? Which Symbol Goes Where?

Examples of <b>KEYRING</b> symbols (Actions and Behaviours)	Examples of <b>TIMETABLE</b> symbols (Places and Activities)
<p><b>Very useful:</b> finished walk stand sitting waiting (red border)</p> <p><b>Locations (helpful):</b> toilet class name</p> <p><b>Behavioural (only if needed):</b> quiet voice hands down feet down etc.</p>	<p>classroom areas assembly forest school playground hall sensory circuit sensory rooms dinner home PE Music Etc.</p>

## KEY THINGS TO REMEMBER

Children should still be allowed time to process requests / instructions from keyrings, and only key words should be used.

Say **Less** and **Stress**. Go **Slow** and **Show**.  
(Sussman, 1999)

**Date of revised policy: 04/07/22**

**Next revision: TBC**