Royal Borough of Greenwich

Visual Support Policy for Children in Schools

2025

ROYAL *borough of* GREENWICH

ROYAL GREENWICH VISUAL SUPPORT POLICY

BACKGROUND

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

- Oxleas Speech and Language Therapy service
- Royal Greenwich Autism Outreach Service
- Royal Greenwich STEPS Outreach Service
- Royal Greenwich Early Years Inclusion Service

It has been developed to be in line with visual support as they are used across specialist schools in Royal Greenwich.

This policy is intended to give guidelines, advice and best practice for supporting *all* children who need additional help with their communication and understanding. Although often used and recommended for those on the autism spectrum, visual supports can benefit many children. This policy sets out basic principles and guidance in an effort to help *all* children, whether they have a diagnosis of autism or not.

This policy is *not* intended to be completely prescriptive. There will always be the need to vary and adapt to meet the particular communication profile of individual children.

WHAT ARE VISUAL SUPPORTS?

- Visual supports or 'visuals' are the things we use to help communication or understanding.

- Visual supports can be:
    gestures
    objects – often called 'objects of reference'
    photographs
    symbols

- Visual supports are often used to help an adult communicate with a child, though a child may also use them for their own communication.

- Some children require more time to process information. Visuals are permanent and remain visible to allow for this 'processing time.'

WHY HAVE THE SAME VISUALS ACROSS GREENWICH?

- Having visuals that are the same across the borough can help children who may move between schools or settings. This is particularly helpful for autistic children.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- Visual supports must be used **consistently**, regardless of which adult is supporting a child. It can be helpful if the same visuals are used at home.

- Visual supports tend to be '**your voice**' and help to reinforce what *you* are communicating to a child. (By contrast, strategies such as PECS, detailed below, are the 'child's voice'.)

- In Greenwich our policy is to use **black and white symbols**. This is intended to avoid specificity. For example, if the colour symbol is of a red coat, an autistic child may not recognise that this means their coat, if their coat is a different colour. Symbols are usually created on software such as *Communicate In Print* or *Widget.* There are a lot of downloadable symbols on the Royal Greenwich Local Offer, details below.

- **Always have the word on a photo/symbol**. This ensures all adults say the same thing, reduces extraneous language and reinforces what the word looks like to the child. The word usually goes below the image. When adding a word, capital letters should only be used with proper nouns.

- It is recommended that visuals should go from **left to right**, as this is how we read. However, top to bottom is acceptable in some cases.

- If you do not have a symbol, be flexible! Draw one, use an object, gesture, take a photo on a device or even write the word if your child can read.

- **Any visual is better than no visual.**

TYPES OF VISUAL SUPPORTS

Visual supports should be adapted to each child at a level they understand, taking into account the child's cognitive level and their ability to focus, attend to, interpret and respond to what they are being shown.

Adults need to choose the type of visuals that work best for each child – typically objects, photos or symbols (perhaps even single words). If in doubt, start a child on black and white symbols and then adjust if you feel the child does not understand. Also, seek support from a Speech and Language Therapist or Advisory Teacher.

Downloadable visuals for the resources below are available on the Local Offer.

Whole class timetable	
Every class should have a visible timetable which can help children understand their day and manage transitions between activities. They can also help prepare for any changes to routines. The timetable is usually in a central, clearly visible place in class (eg, by the main screen). Adults should refer to it at regular intervals. When an activity is finished, the visual is removed and put into a 'finished' box or wallet.	
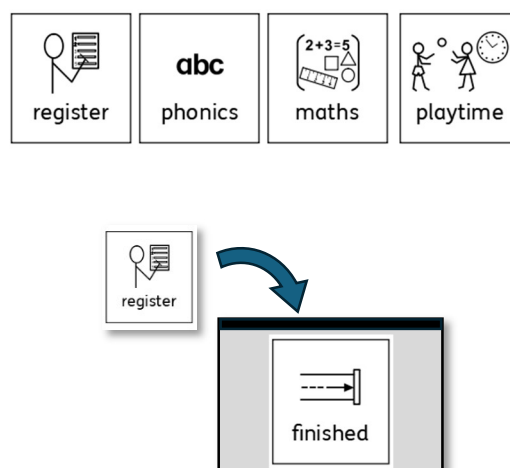
|	
Sometimes it can be helpful to show only one part of the day at a time – eg, the morning up to break, then after break to lunch, then everything after lunch until home time. Timetable visuals are **subjects, places or activities.**	
Portable Now/Next Timetable These are individual schedules to support individual children. Depending on the child's level of understanding, they may only show what is happening *now*, or may show what is happening *next*, or maybe even what is *now, next and then*. They: • provide predictability • prepare children for changes • promote independence • reduce anxiety • encourage engagement When an activity ends, its visual is 'finished' and removed. The next visual moves into its place. If a child needs a portable timetable, it must be used: • consistently • *before* every transition • and brought with the child wherever they go The *now* or *now/next* can be mounted on a small ring-binder, with the rest of the day set out *in order* on inserts inside the folder, enabling the child to see what is happening and become more involved in managing the timetable. *Photos*, *symbols* or even *words* can be used on an individual timetable, depending on the child's level of understanding. If you are using **morning** or **afternoon** in a whole class or individual timetable: • Morning = yellow background • Afternoon = light blue background	
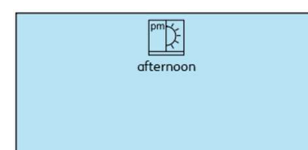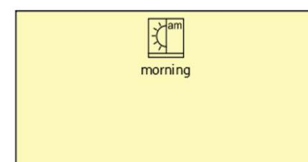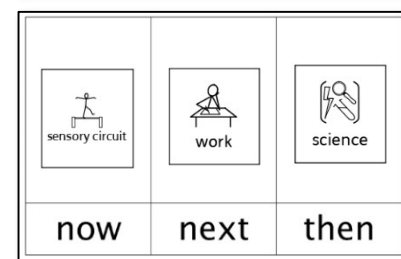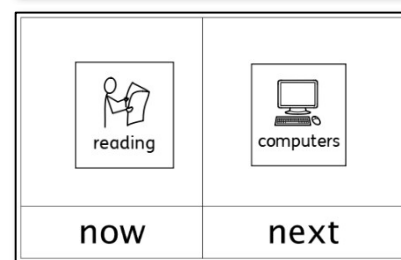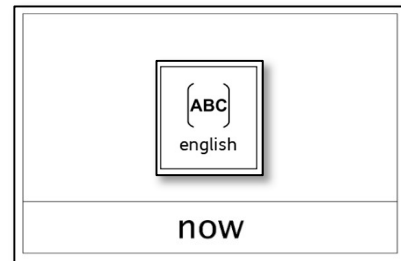
Lanyard / Keyring Visuals

Lanyard / Keyring visuals are mostly **actions** and **behaviours**.

They are a *back-up / addition* to a child's individual timetable, as they serve a different purpose.

There should be *as few visuals as possible* on a lanyard / keyring, so they can be found quickly when needed.

Very useful:
- finished
- walking
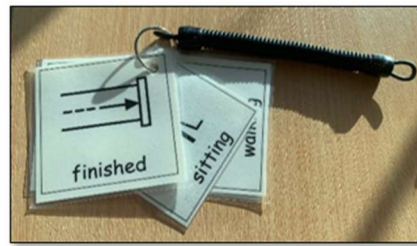- sitting
- waiting (red border)
- change

Locations (kept to a minimum):
- toilet
- class name

Behavioural (*only if needed*):
- quiet voice
- hands down
- feet down

In general, it is recommended that you *say what you want,* not what you don't. So instead of saying, 'Stop kicking', we use, 'Feet down'.

Core Vocabulary Boards / Fringe Vocabulary Boards / Aided Language Stimulation

These are typically visuals on a printed sheet which can be used by adults to back up communication, and to broaden language. Staff should model how to use them by pointing to any relevant visual as that word may occur in their natural communication with a child, and saying the word. Staff *should not* physically guide a child to use them.

These boards can come with a 12 symbol, 30 symbol or 50 symbol display (12 and 30 are shown, right).

'Core' vocabulary comprises the most useful words for a child that can be used within multiple contexts in their life.

'Fringe' vocabulary comprises more topic-specific words. These can be individualised and is likely to

Core

Fringe

Core

Fringe
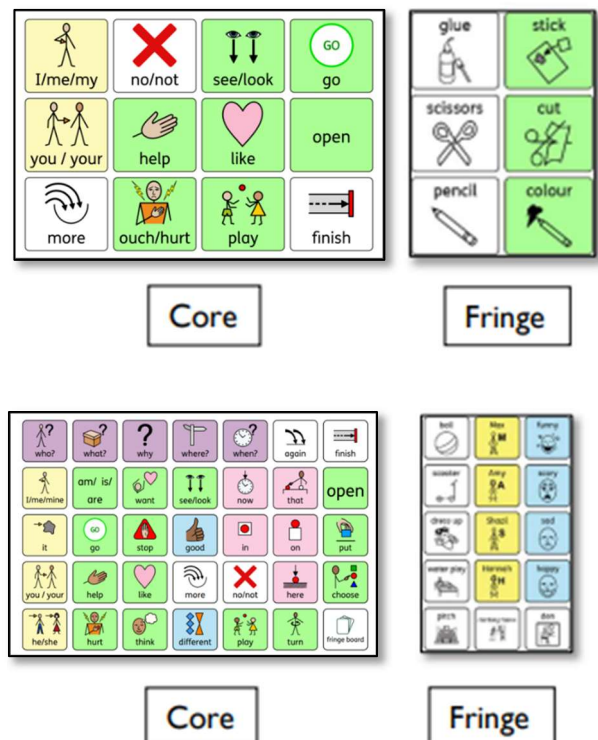
change between contexts and situations e.g. adding topic words for a lesson on magnets (push/pull).

These boards should always be used as part of a *Total Communication* approach. This means using *all* available methods to facilitate understanding and expression – e.g. visuals, spoken language, signing and non-verbal means, such as pointing and gesture.

AAC

Stands for *Augmentative and Alternative Communication,* meaning the tools, resources, equipment and strategies that can help someone with communication difficulties understand and be understood. This is the 'child's voice' enabling them to be able to communicate using methods that work best for them.

AAC can be 'paper-based', such as Core Vocabulary / Core Word boards, topic boards, signing and Communication Books.

AAC can also be 'power-based', such as software for tablets, laptops and speech-generating devices, such as SmartBox.

PECS

The Picture Exchange Communication System, where a child 'exchanges' a picture or symbol with an adult for something they want.

PECS is typically recommended by a Speech and Language Therapist or Autism Outreach Professional and requires additional professional support to be implemented.

PECS, if used, is the 'child's voice'. PECS is one type of visual communication system – *it is not the same as visual supports or timetables.*

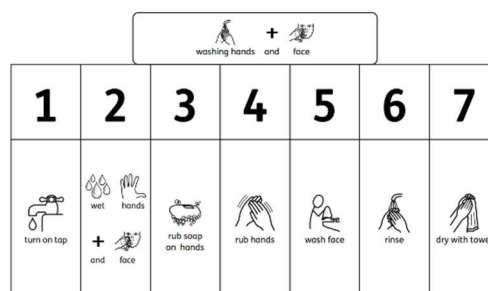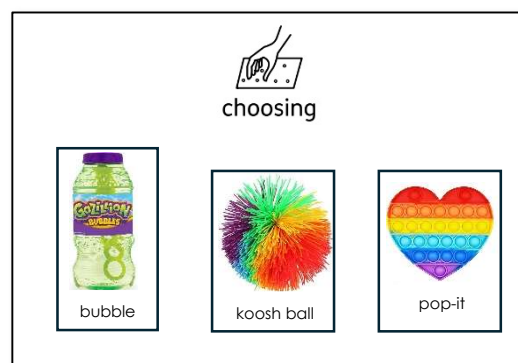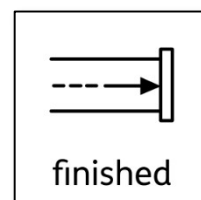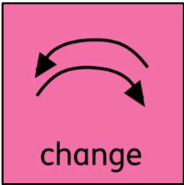|	
Visual Task Schedule Breaks down a task into steps that are more easily followed. This reduces 'cognitive load' (how much the child is having to think about at once) and allows them to concentrate on one thing at a time. They also help reduce reliance on adult prompts.	
Self-Care Schedules Can help to break down a routine so that a child can focus on one step of the task at a time. In this way they can develop independence.	
Choosing Boards Where several visuals are presented as choices, which the child can point to or reach for and exchange in order to request.	
Finished Should be used *at the end of every activity*. Can also be used when communicating that something must stop or is no longer available. Finished is not always negative. Make sure to *teach it in positive situations* – 'Work has finished, now it's playtime!'	
Waiting This can support a child when something is not happening as soon as they would like. It is printed with a red border.	
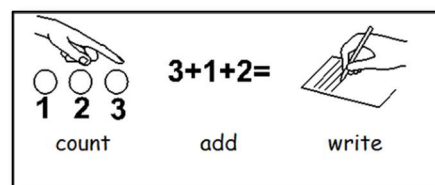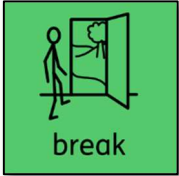
|	
Break This can be used by a child to request time away from an activity if they feel they need it. It is printed on a green background. (In some software, use the visual for 'leave' and change the word.)	 break
Help This can support children to request assistance in a variety of situations. The help visual is printed on a coloured background. Help has generally been yellow, though help symbols on Core Boards are green – this is to match the colour on power-based devices. Either colour is fine but be consistent in order to allow a child to distinguish this word from others.	 help
Change The change visual can support children to understand, anticipate and accept when there is something different. It is printed on a pink background.	 change
Toilet We recommend using the logo of the man and woman as this is the symbol that is widely used in the community.	 toilet

USING VISUALS TO SUPPORT LEARNING

- When making symbol-supported text, only the **key words** should be symbolised. Key words are those which are *the most important information-bearing words*, which tend to be most easily represented by symbols.
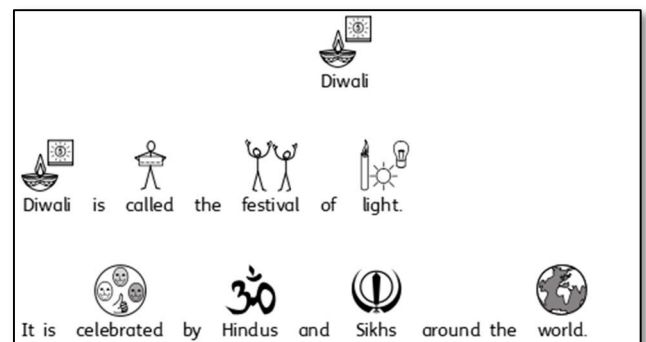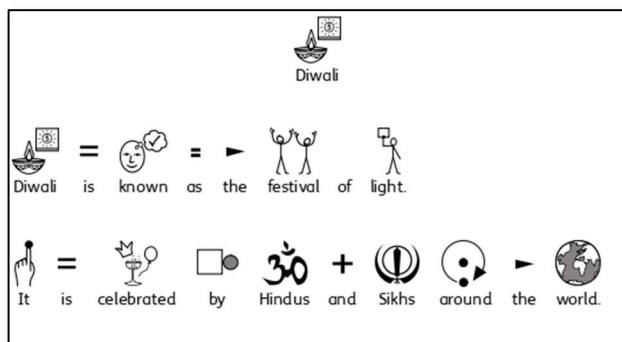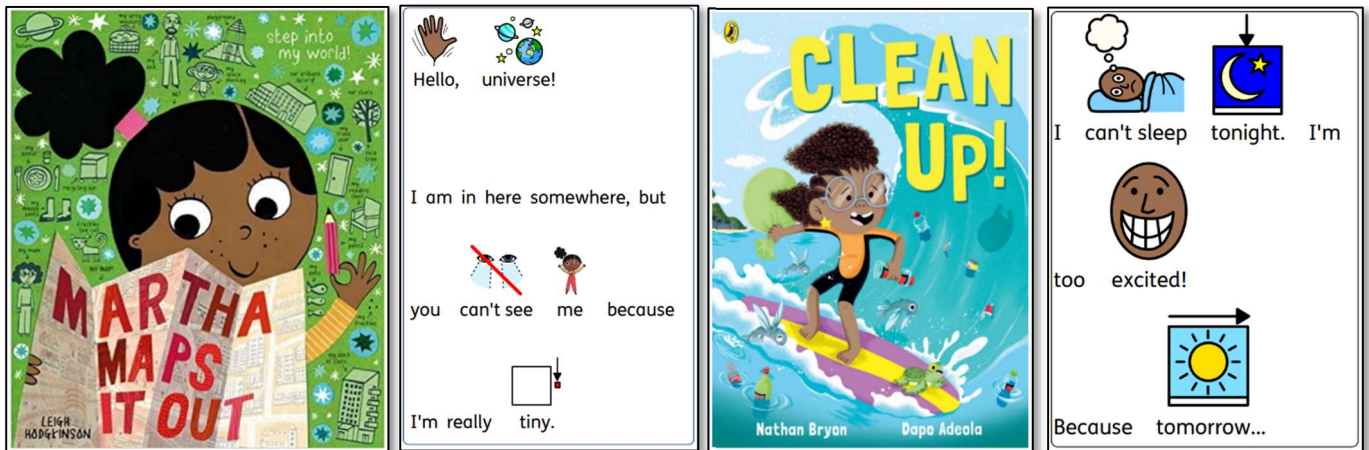

- Be careful that the appropriate symbol is used!

I saw a cat.
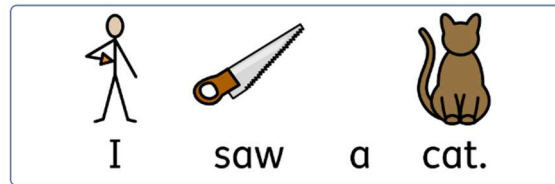
- Some topics, subjects or activities may be more accessible if colour is used. This can, for example, help link visuals to specific characters in books.

REFLECTING DIVERSITY

Greenwich is a very diverse borough, and it is recommended that symbols should reflect such diversity in relation to skin tone and colour, as well as family dynamics.

Where visual resources are made for a specific child, it is recommended that you use either a photo of the child or a symbol which reflects their ethnicity.
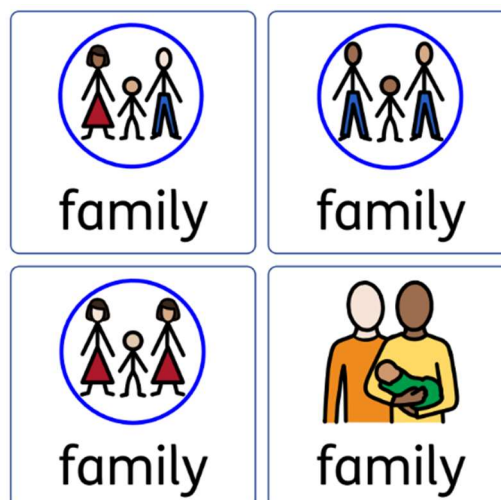
'Think visually'

In any situation, how might using visuals help resolve an issue?

How could they clarify communication, give a child more opportunity to communicate, make expectations clear, explain what is happening, how long something lasts, show whose turn it is, etc.
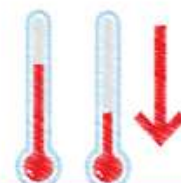
Date of revised policy: September 2025

Next revision: TBC