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What makes Good Policy?

1. Background

1.1 Schools, like many other organisations, are required to have many policies. Too often however, policy writing can seem a rather haphazard exercise in compliance. This document offers some guidance as to what makes good policy.

1.2 There can be an understandable temptation for schools to seek out another school's policy – an easy task these days with the ubiquitous Google – and then just 'lift and shift'. This guidance document provides schools with the tools to start from the other end i.e. with a blank piece of paper in order to create policies that consistently meet the specific needs of the school, and which are living documents.

1.3 Effective policy documents start from within the organisation, reflecting the culture and ethos of the school; they are more nuanced than just about compliance because they are working documents known and understood by all members of the school community.

1.4 A note of caution, however: policy drives action but is also the standard against which the school will be held to account. For this reason, the wording of policy matters. Schools must take care that the detail of what is set out in the policy is actually delivered.

2. Start with the 'Why'

2.1 What is the purpose of a policy? A well-written policy is a clear statement of the principles underpinning organisational behaviour and activity in a particular area. A policy provides a consistent and logical framework for action but does not spell out the action itself. The policy, when carefully crafted, will be authoritative and will provide the definitive reference document on which other documents are based.

2.2 Policy implementation documents (such as procedures and other operationalising documents) are derived from the policy document but are separate from it. These tell you how the policy is to be implemented. In order to provide clarity for those using the documents, it is recommended that policy and policy implementation documents be separated out.

3. Policy Structure

3.1 Each school should develop its own policy template. Having a consistent structure (or writing frame) for the school's policies means the structure doesn't

need to be re-invented each time a new policy is created. It also means that readers can navigate their way around the policy with ease because the structure is familiar.

Although it is strongly recommended that schools develop a policy template, this shouldn't become a straightjacket and an end in itself. Good policy writing should always be meaningful, which means that within the template there should be sufficient flexibility for additional or different headings when required.

3.2 The formatting of the policy should give clarity to the structure. Clear headings, for example, signpost the structure; and falling in underneath each heading should be numbered sections with one idea per paragraph. The use of numbering (rather than bullet points) enables the reader to make easy reference to a specific paragraph.

3.3 Each individual school should decide its own policy structure to reflect the specific needs of the school. For example, the policy template in a faith-based school may be different from the policy template in one that is not.

3.4 In creating the school's policy template, some headings are recommended:

   i. **Purpose:** A very short sentence or at most two explaining why this policy has been created. This may include a statement of commitment.
   ii. **Principles, values, ethos:** What higher order philosophy of the school is driving or underpinning this policy?
   iii. **Clear outcomes:** The two or three high level objectives this policy is seeking to achieve and the strategies that will be used to deliver these.
   iv. **Definitions:** Definitions of key terms (if needed); references to external policy, relevant legislation and compliance documents e.g. Ministerial Orders.
   v. **Scope:** To whom is this policy applicable e.g. boarding staff, all staff, etc?
   vi. **Roles and responsibilities:** Roles and responsibilities should be referenced by title not by name and where possible an individual role rather than a group or a committee. The project management tool RACI[1] is a useful framework for thinking about roles and responsibilities. The policy document should identify:

   - **Responsible:** The policy 'owner' (may be the same as the Approver) who has primary responsibility for delivering the work. This is the person who is responsible for ensuring the policy is implemented and is a working document.
   - **Approver/Accountable:** Who is responsible for approving or authorising the policy i.e. the one who signs it off and delegates to the person who is responsible for delivery.
   - **Consulted:** Those who contribute to the policy and with whom there is a two-way communication.
   - **'Informed:** Those who need to be kept in the loop – a one-way communication.

   The school may also appoint someone who is responsible for the management of policies (e.g. formatting, keeping a register, reminding policy owners about review dates). This person is not responsible for the policies themselves.

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[1] For example https://www.projectsmart.co.uk/raci-matrix.php (Accessed 19 July 2017)

vii. **Links to other policies:** A brief list of the key related policies.
viii. **Review:** All policies should have a review cycle (e.g. annual) with the policy owner taking responsibility for making sure the review happens.

3.5   All policies must have a clear title and be dated. If the policy supersedes an earlier version that must be identified so there is no confusion. It is recommended that this information be written as a heading rather than as a footnote.

3.6   Sometimes, it may feel as if the policy needs to include a substantive section that falls outside the school's standard policy template. One way to handle this is to include this section as an appendix.

4.   Writing Style Advice

4.1   Good policy is as brief as possible – a maximum of two or three pages is ideal.

4.2   The writing should be straightforward, concise and precise – make every word count.

4.3   Intentional and consistent use of the words 'must', 'should' and 'may' is important and helpful:
- 'Must' = a requirement
- 'Should' = good or best practice
- 'May' = advice.

4.4   The language shouldn't be too technical – straightforward enough for a new employee to understand. Acronyms should be spelt out the first time they are used.

4.5   Avoid using information that may be quickly outdated (e.g. phone numbers, names).

4.6   Facts need to be double-checked for accuracy.