

Writing effective letters

It is **generally better to raise your concerns and resolve problems informally**, but it is usually best to **follow up in writing**, even if it is just to confirm what you have raised and what is going to be done. If you do have success, make sure there is something in writing confirming what has been agreed and when it will be actioned – either a letter to you or from you. If your manager says they will write but don't, then a low key letter from you confirming what was agreed is fine.

Always **show your letter** to a friend, your union representative or someone you trust before you press that "send" button. Do a rough draft first. Better to take advice before rather than after.

Never send a letter in anger!

Microsoft Spell Check is the lazy person's wonder tool but don't rely on it. **Check your spelling, grammar and punctuation**. Unless your letter is very short, print it off and read it carefully. Sloppy spelling, poor grammar, dodgy punctuation, overlong paragraphs and poor layout undermine the impact of your letter.

Write in a low key and understated manner. Always assume your letter will be read not only by those it is intended for but also by others. **Always sound reasonable!** Don't let the tone of your letter get in the way of its message. Remember, it may be raised in supervision, as evidence in a grievance, or even in court.

Asking questions can be more effective than making statements. So, asking why a decision has been made (or not made) is usually better than attacking the decision. You can always ask more questions when you get a reply.

If you make a statement be sure it is correct. Understate rather than overstate. If there is any doubt, then qualify what you are saying. Use phrases like "I understand that" or "this document appears to suggest that" rather than be put on the defensive by slightly overstating your case. For example, it is generally better to say "it is widely believed" than "I know", unless you are absolutely certain and can reveal your source.

If you have evidence to back up your claims, then use it. Use your judgement and training to determine how sound the evidence is, whether it can be relied upon, how it might be challenged and whether it does actually support or prove your case. Be extremely careful to respect patient confidentiality. Anticipate what the response might be to your points.

The Duty of Care is a Public World project led by Roger Kline to provide practical advice and resources to health care workers in England if they are concerned that ethical standards and professional accountability are being compromised by spending cuts or other changes in their place of work.

Please note

This advice is for information only and does not constitute legal advice. Each situation is unique and the information provided here is not to be relied on without also seeking advice from a competent trade union official, professional body or a qualified lawyer aware of your specific situation.

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If you quote someone else as supporting what you say be sure they will back you up when the pressure is on. If possible get them to put their name to a statement. Make sure they know you are referring to them before you send your letter and that they are happy with what you say.

Get the balance right. **Get the length and layout of the letter right.** Too short and it can sound rude or abrupt. Too long and it may not get read or the points you want to make may get lost. Where appropriate use numbered paragraphs and bullet points. Make clear what you hope your letter will elicit by way of reply. Always date letters and set out a clear subject heading.

Emails are almost always better than hard copy letters. Letters can get lost but with emails you can be sure they have arrived (even check when they have arrived and been opened in some systems) and you always have a copy (provided you back up your hard disc regularly!). It is also easier to copy them to other people, when that is appropriate.

If you are writing to someone very senior or someone outside your organisation then a letter with a signature may be more appropriate. Be careful about using your employer's headed notepaper in case it looks as if your views purport to be those of your employer.

Make sure the person you are writing to is the right person to write to at this stage, and think carefully about **who (if anyone at this stage) should receive a copy.** If the concern you want to raise should be raised with your line manager in the first instance, do not send it to his boss as well. The manager will feel undermined and anyway his boss will tell you to discuss it with your own manager first. On the other hand if your concern is an employer-wide one (such as lack of resources or unlawful policy) then it may sometimes be appropriate to send it further afield, but if so tell your manager that is what you are doing.

Be straightforward and honest! It is not a smart idea to claim a letter is private and confidential and then be confronted with evidence that it is circulating widely. On the other hand there will be circumstances where you will want your manager to know that you have raised your concerns with others, such as your union representative, team members and so on. If it is a group letter, of course, it is appropriate that all who have consented to being identified as supporters are copied in.

Make sure the purpose or subject of your letter is clear to the recipient. A long and rambling letter that leaves even a sympathetic recipient unclear as to what you want them to do is counter-productive. Your heading should make clear what you are writing about and the letter must explain what you are suggesting should be done. If you are writing to raise concerns in accordance with a professional Code then the letter should refer to the relevant sections of the Code.

Take extra care with letters intended to initiate a grievance or a formal complaint. You must take advice. Your first letter must set out very clearly what your complaint is and what action you are seeking in response. A letter from a trade union representative or a health and safety representative should follow similar guidelines. If union representatives or full time officials are writing to management on your behalf, then those on whose behalf it is written should normally see the letter before it goes. Staff should normally know what is being said unless there are exceptional reasons (such as confidential matters about an individual member of staff).

On the following pages you can find examples of model letters for particular purposes.

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Letter 1. Individual letter following up an informal conversation about the impact of a heavy workload

Date

Dear (manager)

Workload concerns

I am writing, following our discussion, to set out my concerns about the impact on both myself and patients of my current workload. I offered to (*or you asked me to*) set out my concerns to help your consideration of them.

I believe I may not be the only person in this situation within our team/department/service. (*But only if you are sure that is true!*)

This letter is written in accordance with the (relevant paragraph of relevant Code) which requires me to (insert exact paragraph stating you must bring concerns to the attention of a relevant authority etc).

My concerns arise from the following:

Here list your concerns

I have already raised an incident alert (*if appropriate*).

I believe that the impact on the work I am responsible for, and upon my own ability to ensure I always comply with my professional Code and my duty of care, is significant.

I would therefore hope that now that I have placed my concerns on the record that we can have a comprehensive discussion to consider how my concerns can be addressed so that I, and those with whom I work most closely, can work safely in everyone's interest.

I look forward to your acknowledgement and our taking this matter forward in a timely manner.

Yours sincerely

(If you copy it, think carefully about who to, and why)

Letter 2. Individual letter about the delegation of work

Date

Dear (manager)

The delegation of work to less qualified healthcare staff

I write to raise concerns regarding the delegation of work within our ward/department/my caseload. I believe similar concerns may be shared by some of my colleagues (*only if you are sure they are*).

My concerns are that it is not always clear that, in the arrangements for delegating work, these less qualified staff (*name them or give titles*) have the necessary skills and knowledge required to carry out the work safely without further training or closer supervision and support. In particular:

Here list your concerns

Given my own heavy workload, as discussed at our last supervision session on (*give date*), it is not possible for me to give the level of supervision and support that it would be appropriate to provide to these staff.

Nor am I always clear that the work delegated falls easily into established protocols and job descriptions within the Trust. The members of staff (*give names but check they know you are doing this*) to whom this work has been delegated are committed members of staff but I understand some of these colleagues may themselves be uneasy about these new responsibilities.

I note that, in accordance with (*give the paragraph of the relevant Code*), those staff delegating work "remain responsible for the work that you have delegated to other workers" (*give the precise words from your own Code*).

I am obliged by my Code to draw your attention to these concerns as I believe that, were the concerns to remain, there is a risk in the future that, despite the commitment of my colleagues, their practice may be unsafe or adversely affect standards of care (*give precise quote and paragraph*).

I would therefore appreciate an early discussion so we may discuss how best to address my concerns.

Yours sincerely

(If you copy it, think carefully about who to, and why.)

Letter 3. Group letter raising concerns about the impact of excessive workload

Date

Dear (Manager)

The impact of workloads

We are writing, following our last team discussion on (*date*), to draw your attention to concerns regarding the impact on both ourselves and patients of our current workloads. At that meeting we indicated that, as preparation for our next meeting, and to assist our joint discussion, we would set out our concerns in writing.

The letter is written in accordance with our professional Code which requires us (*quote the relevant paragraph*) to bring such matters to the attention of appropriate persons, such as our manager.

Our concerns arise from the following:

1. (List the important facts in respect of hours, stress/ health, etc)
2. (List the impact on the work you do or need to do to meet service needs in a safe manner, and on your ability to do the work that needs doing. Where possible give dates, statistics, references from local and national policies or standards, and caseload and workload management data set out chronologically or thematically.)

As a result we would appreciate our discussing this in a comprehensive manner at our next team meeting/a special team meeting to consider how this situation can be addressed in a manner that enables ourselves and those with whom we work most closely to work safely in everyone's interest.

Yours sincerely

(A copy of this letter should go to every member of the team)

Letter 4. Letter from a manager to his/her own manager if concerns that have been raised with him/her are shared by him/her

Date

Dear (manager)

Concerns regarding (name of concern)

I write to draw your attention to concerns which have been raised (*within team/department/by an individual*) regarding (*name concern*). I would appreciate your advice on how best to respond.

The issues were first raised with me by on [*date*]. I then met (*name the staff*) again on (*date*) to clarify precisely what the concerns were and to see how best they could be addressed.

I attach my note of that meeting and the original letter from (*name*). I also attach my initial response, which seeks to address some of the concerns but also promises to respond further on the outstanding issues.

I am concerned that the outstanding matters raise issues which impinge on the duty of care of the Trust towards patients and to the staff I manage, and indeed may impinge on my own duty of care. In particular I would draw your attention to:

1. (List concerns)
- 2.

I believe I have done my best within the available resources to address these concerns by:

1. [List actions taken]
- 2.

I would appreciate our discussing this correspondence as soon as possible so that we may tackle these matters now rather than await a potential grievance and a continuing potential risk to patients and indeed to (name of employer).

Yours sincerely

Letter 5. Stress at work.

Date

Dear (name of manager)

Stress levels at (*name of employer or department*)

I/we write to raise concerns regarding the high levels of stress at the (department/service). I/we believe similar concerns exist amongst our colleagues.

In particular I/we wish to draw to your attention the following:

1. List concerns [e.g. sickness, ill health, backlog of work due to workloads, impact of bullying or unsupportive management, or challenging patients]

As a result of these pressures I/we believe that the Trust may be at risk of breaching Trust policy on the management of workplace stress (give exact title).

I/we also note that we may also be at risk of breaching Section 7 of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act which states:

“It shall be the duty of every employee while at work to take reasonable care for the health and safety of himself and of other persons who may be affected by his acts or omissions at work.”

I/we believe that the high stress levels are placing our health at risk, and are likely to adversely affect our ability to provide the best possible support to patients.

I understand that, notwithstanding the sympathy expressed for my/our situation, there is apparently no immediate likelihood of the additional staff cover that is the most important measure needed to reduce stress levels.

I have been advised by our safety representative that the appropriate step to take would therefore be to request an urgent risk assessment, using the HSE Management Standards for Workplace Stress, which cover key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and well-being, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. The safety representative will therefore, I understand, be requesting such an assessment which we hope will alleviate the stress levels, ensure the Authority/Trust observes its duty of care to staff, and thereby also assist those patients we are responsible for.

Yours sincerely

Cc Department health and safety representative

Letter 6. Letter from trade union representative or staff group on consultation on proposed service changes

Date

Dear (manager – the appropriate senior manager of the affecting service or department)

Proposed service changes

I/we are writing to seek clarification arising from the proposed changes to [*name service and/or location*].

Staff working in (*name of ward/department/locality/profession*) have a number of concerns about the proposed changes. My/our purpose in writing to you at this stage is to seek assurances that the following will take place prior to any final decision to proceed with the proposed changes:

- The Trust will ensure there is proper consultation with staff and their recognised trade unions on such matters as is provided for in the trade union recognition agreement and in the TUPE Regulations.
- The Trust will consult local patients and public organisations at a time and in a manner that allows them to influence any final decision on the proposed service changes and the process of contracting.
- The Trust will conduct, consult on, and publish an assessment of the equality impact of the proposed changes, prior to finalisation of any proposal since we believe the proposed changes may well impact in specific ways on the services and advice provided to patients with disabilities, from ethnic minorities and who are women. The proposed changes may well also affect other groups of staff in a disproportionate manner.

Government policy emphasises the importance of consulting with patients and local communities in such circumstances. Members of staff may draw to the attention of service users and their appropriate representative organisations the potential impact on local services they use in accordance with our professional Code(s) which requires us (*give paragraph and precise quote*) to assist with promoting the independence of service users and assisting them to exercise their rights.

I/we would appreciate it, therefore, if you could clarify who will be consulted, in what way, and when, in accordance with the above consultation requirements. I/we would also appreciate a copy of the documents which sets out:

1. Precisely what is proposed
2. The evidence that this will either improve services or at least not adversely affect them
3. The considerations that have taken place with regard to the impact of these proposals on staff compliance with their Code of Practice and their duty of care
4. The arrangements currently proposed to consult staff and patients.

For the avoidance of doubt this a request made both for the purposes of collective bargaining under Section 181 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 (TULRCA) and under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Yours sincerely

Cc All staff affected by the proposals, relevant service users and carers organisations, Regional official trade union, Appropriate HR manager.

Letter 7. Letter informing the relevant manager of concerns about patient care or dignity

Date

Dear (manager)

Report of patient concern/complaint

I write to draw your attention to a complaint/concern raised by a patient/carer within team/department/by an individual regarding (their treatment/advice).

I do so in accordance with the Trust protocol on ensuring that patient complaints or concerns are dealt with in a timely and appropriate manner.

The complaint/concern was as follows (*set out complaint/concern briefly or attach pro forma*)

The complaint/concern was made by (*name person raising complaint/concern*) who is a patient (*or carer/relative/friend*).

The matter was initially raised with (*name member of staff*) who responded by (*set out their initial response*).

The immediate concern has now been addressed with the following action taken (*list action taken or explanation given*).

However I have explained to the (patient/carer/relative/friend) that if they do wish to take it further, we have a complaints procedure they should follow which is designed to ensure such matters are addressed swiftly.

I believe the matter raised may not an isolated incident and it would helpful if you could check if there is a pattern of such incidents and if so what the root cause is and how we can tackle the problem.

Yours sincerely

Letter 8. Example letter requesting equality information (this may be amended, in particular, in respect of gender and disability information) to help identify any patterns of discrimination. This letter is in respect of staff issues but the latter can be adapted for patient issues. It should be sent by a trade union representative.

Date

Dear (FOI manager or service lead)

Freedom of information request

1. This request is made under section 1 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. For the (Trust) as a whole, please provide the following information for each of the last three years for which information is available, all of which should have been collected under the Trust's statutory equality duty under the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 and now the Equality Act 2010:
 - a. The total number of (i) employees and (ii) their grades, each analysed by ethnic origin
 - b. The total number of staff investigated under the council's disciplinary procedure analysed by ethnic origin
 - c. The total number of staff subject to disciplinary hearings analysed by ethnic origin for each year
 - d. The total number of staff against whom no action was taken analysed by ethnic origin
 - e. The total number of staff (i) receiving written warnings (ii) dismissed, each analysed by ethnic origin
 - f. The total number of staff under the disciplinary procedure analysed by ethnic origin
 - g. The total number of staff who commenced Employment Tribunal proceedings against the Authority analysed by ethnic origin
 - h. The total number of staff who lodged claims of harassment or bullying under the Authority's internal procedures
 - i. The number of staff made compulsorily redundant in the year 2010-11 analysed by ethnic origin
2. Please provide the numbers of applicants for all posts, numbers shortlisted, and numbers appointed, for each of the years 2006 to 2012, analysed by ethnic origin. If the information is also analysed by grade and ethnic origin please also provide that information.

As you will know the Authority was required, under its statutory equality duty for the period 2006-2010, to monitor and record all the information in this request and we assume that monitoring has continued. The information requested should be in the public domain and is disclosable under the Freedom of Information Act. In the light of the presumption of openness and transparency which underpins such requests made to a public body please provide detailed reasons for any non-disclosure and explain the steps you have taken to balance this decision against the public interest.

I look forward to your response within the statutory 20 working days.

Yours sincerely

Letter 9. Letter from student/trainee on placement

Dear (tutor's name)

Concerns regarding an aspect of my work placement

After careful consideration I am writing to ask for your advice regarding an incident/concern which I believe may compromise my duty of care or the principles of ethical care that I have been taught on my course.

I am writing in accordance with the guidance from my professional regulator (*give title of guidance and link*) and the university procedure for raising concerns (*give title and reference*).

The incident/concern that I have is as follows:

Summarise the incident/concern being as precise as possible regarding dates, what happened, why you are concerned, and what steps if any you have taken so far to draw your concerns to the attention of your work placement manager, colleagues or practice educator)

I am aware that my duty of care and professional accountability is not the same as that of a registered practitioner but I am also aware that I should draw such concerns to the attention of an appropriate person which I believe is yourself in the first instance.

I would appreciate it if you could advise me on how to respond further, if that is appropriate, to this situation, bearing in mind the university's whistle blowing procedure and the responsibilities that I have as a student and that you have as a tutor.

Yours sincerely

Cc Student representative

Letter 10. Access to personal records held by employer

Your address

Date

Dear [name]

Access to records under the Data Protection Act (1998)

I write to formally request access to all records held by [*name of organisation*] in relation to myself, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998).

To assist in gathering all the information, my personal details as held on file are (*list job title, department, start of employment*).

The information held may include:

- Formal and informal records/notes held by different managers including HR and Occupational Health
- Your contracts of employment, job description, person specifications, interview notes
- Appraisal and supervision notes
- Sickness and absence records
- Complaints and disciplinary records (if applicable)
- Copies of emails to and from yourself from managers, HR etc and notes of any meetings or emails about you

I am aware that requesting access to records may sometimes incur financial costs. In accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) I request that the charge be waived.

Finally, please provide written confirmation of receipt of this request, along with your action plan and timescales to provide the information requested.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Name, job title, department and employee number.

Letter 11. Being accompanied by an “ACAS companion” to a disciplinary or grievance hearing from the ACAS companion.

Date

Dear *(name of HR manager or manager convening hearing)*

I am writing as the person who will accompany *(name)* to the *(grievance or disciplinary hearing)*. I will be acting in the capacity of an “ACAS companion”. I am doing so as an official of a trade union/someone accredited by my union to act as an ACAS companion. The union which I work for/has accredited me is *(name of union)*.

The ACAS Code of Practice explains *(cite reference)*

13. Workers have a statutory right to be accompanied by a companion where the disciplinary meeting could result in:
- a formal warning being issued; or
 - the taking of some other disciplinary action; or
 - the confirmation of a warning or some other disciplinary action (appeal hearings).

14. The chosen companion may be a fellow worker, a trade union representative, or an official employed by a trade union. A trade union representative who is not an employed official must have been certified by their union as being competent to accompany a worker.

The ACAS Code of Practice also explains that

11. The meeting should be held without unreasonable delay whilst allowing the employee reasonable time to prepare their case.

The ACAS Guide further explains that

“The employer should allow a companion to have a say about the date and time of a hearing. If the companion cannot attend on a proposed date, the worker can suggest an alternative time and date so long as it is reasonable and it is not more than five working days after the original date”. *(Refer to this if the proposed date is not possible or convenient.)*

The ACAS Guide explains that “workers may ask an official from any trade union to accompany them at a disciplinary or grievance hearing, regardless of whether or not they are a member or the union is recognised”.

At the hearing, the ACAS Guide explains

“The companion should be allowed to address the hearing in order to:

- put the worker’s case
- sum up the worker’s case
- respond on the worker’s behalf to any view expressed at the hearing.

The companion can also confer with the worker during the hearing. It is good practice to allow the companion to participate as fully as possible in the hearing, including asking witnesses questions.”

I am able to accompany *(name)* to the grievance/disciplinary hearing in accordance with the *(name’s)* statutory rights and look forward to meeting you. *(Say of you need the date to be changed)*.

Yours sincerely

Cc *Name of person being represented*