

# The Scottish Centre for Children with Motor Impairments



**Craighalbert Centre**  
Enabling Children to Achieve

## **Communication & Literacy Policy**

Policy Produced by: Speech and Language Lead, January 2025

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# Contents

1. Introduction & Rationale.....	1
2. Supporting Communication with PODD.....	3
3. Creating an Aided Language Environment.....	5
4. Knowledgeable Communication Partners .....	6
5. Working with Families.....	7
6. Comprehensive Literacy Instruction.....	8
7. Electronic AAC.....	11
8. Dynamic Assessment.....	12
9. UNCRC Wellbeing Screening.....	14

## Consultation

This policy was written and developed by the Speech and Language Lead, in collaboration with, Head of Learning, and the multidisciplinary Literacy Development Group throughout the academic year 2024-2025. The involvement of different stakeholders in this process ensures that diverse perspectives lead to relevancy and inclusive practices.

# Literacy and Communication Policy

## 1. Introduction & Rationale

At Craighalbert, we believe that communication and literacy are fundamental rights that underpin every aspect of a child's education, social interaction, and personal development. Our commitment to fostering an inclusive, language-rich environment ensures that all learners, regardless of their physical, cognitive, or sensory challenges, have access to effective communication tools and comprehensive literacy instruction to allow their voices to be heard.

Children with complex communication needs and complex bodies require robust and tailored support to develop their voice through Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems such as PODD. Access to AAC is not just about providing a tool; it is about creating an environment where communication is valued, supported, and continuously modelled by knowledgeable partners.

Equally, literacy is a gateway to independent communication. The ability to read and write empowers individuals to construct their own messages, moving beyond relying on pre-programmed vocabulary or limited symbol sets. Research shows that literacy development is possible for all learners, including those with motor, cognitive, and sensory challenges, when provided with appropriate, systematic instruction (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2021). Without literacy, AAC users remain dependent on others to anticipate and provide their vocabulary, limiting their ability to engage in autonomous, generative communication (Light & McNaughton, 2013).

At Craighalbert, we implement a centre-wide approach to AAC and literacy instruction that ensures:

- All learners have access to robust AAC systems tailored to their individual needs, providing multiple access methods such as direct selection, partner-assisted scanning, and eye gaze.
- AAC is embedded across all daily interactions to create an immersive aided language environment where communication is modelled and reinforced.
- All staff are trained as knowledgeable communication partners, ensuring consistent, high-quality AAC use and interaction support.
- A comprehensive literacy programme is provided for all learners, integrating emergent and conventional literacy instruction with research-based strategies that support reading and writing development.

By embedding communication and literacy within every aspect of our curriculum, we are not only removing barriers to learning and self-expression but also ensuring that our learners have the tools, confidence, and opportunity to participate fully in their learning and in their wider communities, beyond school.

#### United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The Craighalbert Centre Communication and Literacy policy is underpinned by the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It reflects a commitment to safeguarding the dignity of every child, promoting their rights to inclusive, high-quality education, and empowering them to reach their fullest potential. In particular:

- Article 2 - All children have equal access to their rights
- Article 12 - All children should have a voice and be supported at all times, to develop and use it.
- Article 13 -All children should have a voice to express their thoughts, wishes and wants freely and for this to be heard and respected.

- Article 23 – my position and access methods should be identified to maximise my ability to communicate.
- Article 28 -When education programmes are designed for children, they should be underpinned by communication
- Article 31 – All children should have opportunities to make their wants known regarding play and social time throughout their day.

## **2. Supporting Communication with PODD**

At Craighalbert, we have implemented a whole-school PODD approach to ensure a consistent, robust, and inclusive communication environment. By using PODD as our primary AAC system, we provide learners with a reliable language tool that supports their communication across all settings. This unified approach enhances AAC best practices, strengthens staff expertise, and fosters a school-wide culture of aided language learning, ensuring that all learners have equitable access to effective communication.

PODD is a structured, yet flexible AAC system designed to support individuals with complex communication needs. Developed by Gayle Porter, PODD organises vocabulary in a way that enables users to communicate across a variety of contexts, promoting interaction and self-expression. It facilitates communication through a combination of core and fringe vocabulary, pragmatic branch starters, and structured pathways that guide sentence formation.

PODD provides us with an accessible common language, offering various access options to accommodate for different motor, linguistic, cognitive and sensory needs. This ensures that each pupil has the best possible means to communicate tailored to their own unique profile of strengths and needs.

These access options include:

- Direct Access – where a learner points to symbols on a PODD book or screen.
- Eye Gaze/Eye Pointing – for those who have limited motor control, enabling them to select words and phrases using eye movement.
- Partner-Assisted Scanning – where a communication partner presents options systematically and the learner signals selection through an agreed-upon response. This can take the form of:
  - Visual Scanning – the communication partners scans through the PODD book, pointing to rows & columns but not reading the label.
  - Auditory Scanning – the partner verbally scans through the PODD book, reading the label attached to each symbol. Necessary when a pupil does not have any functional vision.
  - Auditory-Visual Scanning – the partner presents both visual and auditory cues as they scan through the PODD book. This would be used when a pupil has a visual impairment such as CVI, allowing them to use the visual or auditory channel. These PODD books tend to have high contrast symbols which support visual discrimination.

Providing access to PODD in both paper-based and electronic formats ensures flexibility and consistency in communication. By tailoring PODD books and electronic AAC devices to each individual's language level, access needs, and visual presentation preferences, we maximise communication potential.

We also support learners who use alternative electronic page sets, such as TD Snap, and our staff have the knowledge and expertise to implement and support these systems effectively, alongside PODD.

### **3. Creating an Aided Language Environment**

Children who use AAC often experience an input-output asymmetry—they hear spoken language as input but must use other modalities such as symbol-based AAC as their expressive output. To support their language learning, they must be immersed in an environment that ‘speaks AAC’ i.e. models AAC use in natural interactions.

At Craighalbert, we prioritise an Aided Language Environment, ensuring that AAC is integrated into all aspects of daily learning and interaction. Our approach includes:

- PODD books readily available for learners and staff, ensuring immediate access to communication tools. All staff have their own Group PODD book.
- Personalised PODD books for individual learners, considering language complexity, motor control, and visual presentation to meet their specific profile of needs. Anticipation of future needs is also a consideration so that the child’s communication system can grow with them.
- Staff using PODD to communicate with each other and with learners, demonstrating the value and functionality of AAC in everyday interactions.
- Teachers and Learning, Care, and Therapy Practitioners (LCTPs) using PODD to deliver accessible and interactive learning experiences.

- Encouraging and responding to all communication attempts, shaping these into more specific and meaningful interactions.
- Embedding AAC across the curriculum, ensuring learners can use their communication systems in all aspects of their education and social interactions.

By creating an immersive aided language environment, we empower learners to develop their expressive and receptive language skills naturally and meaningfully.

## **4. Knowledgeable Communication Partners**

To build a strong AAC culture, our learners require support from skilled and knowledgeable communication partners. Effective AAC implementation depends on adults who understand how to scaffold communication, model language use, and support individuals with complex needs. At Craighalbert, we ensure:

- A strong belief in the potential of every child to learn and communicate, following the 'least dangerous presumption' approach.
- An understanding of how motor challenges impact communication, ensuring that learners receive appropriate support tailored to their movement abilities and challenges.
- Mandatory PODD training for all child-facing staff, ensuring consistent and effective use of AAC across all learning environments.

- Specialist expertise in communication and motor challenges, with SLTs, teachers, and LCTPs collaborating to assess and support learners' complex communication needs within the context of their wider holistic needs.
- Ongoing professional development, including hands-on CPD sessions and external training opportunities to refine skills and enhance AAC strategies.
- Regular coaching and mentoring from Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) and peer modelling to ensure best practices are maintained and improved over time.

## **5. Working with Families**

- We recognise, that it is essential to provide support tailored to the unique needs of each family, working at a pace that suits them while considering any additional challenges or barriers they may face.
- We offer regular parent training sessions, but we also recognise that some families may prefer one-on-one coaching at a slower pace, acknowledging that there is no "one size fits all" solution.
- We encourage continuous and close collaboration with parents and families, valuing them as integral team members in the AAC and communication process. This approach ensures that a child's communication system is effective in all contexts and promotes participation in both family life and the broader community.
- Given the recognised issue of rejection and abandonment of communication systems in the AAC field, ongoing parental involvement is vital to ensure long-term success.

## 6. Comprehensive Literacy Instruction

Communication and literacy are closely intertwined. Literacy skills empower AAC users to become autonomous communicators, reducing reliance on pre-programmed vocabulary and fostering independent expression. Research from Karen Erickson and David Koppenhaver informs our approach, ensuring a robust literacy curriculum that includes:

**Emergent Literacy Instruction**, focusing on foundational skills such as:

- **Shared Reading** – Encouraging active engagement with books in a supportive and interactive way, providing opportunities for meaning-making and language development. The focus is on the interaction between the pupil and their communication partner, reading with the pupil rather than to the pupil.
- **Independent Reading** – Enabling learners to explore books at their own pace, fostering self-directed learning and a sense of autonomy in literacy. This may involve the use of assistive technology and e-books to enable accessible independent reading opportunities.
- **Independent Writing** – Supporting the early stages of writing development facilitating the use of written language to express communicative intent, beginning writing can often look like drawing or ‘scribbling’. Where children have motor challenges, it is necessary to find a suitable ‘alternative pencil’ that provides access to the full 26 letters of the alphabet, minimising the physical demands of the task to focus on the cognitive aspect of writing. The alternative pencils used by our learners are specific to their individual needs and engagement levels.
- **Shared Writing (e.g., Predictable Chart Writing)** – Predictable chart writing is a type of modelled writing developed by Dr. Patricia Cunningham as a strategy for helping all learners, irrespective of their language skills, to

be successful in the writing process. It provides structured opportunities for learners to contribute ideas and construct written messages collaboratively, with contributions as complex or as simple as their writing development allows.

- Alphabet and Phonological Awareness - Teaching essential pre-literacy skills, including letter recognition, sound-symbol relationships, and phonemic manipulation, to build a strong foundation for reading and writing. The goal of instruction in the alphabetic principle is to teach students to apply their knowledge of letters and letter sounds rather than targeting identification and matching.

**Conventional Literacy Instruction**, building on emergent learnings with a focus on:

- Comprehension instruction - focuses on teaching strategies to understand and engage with texts, fostering critical thinking and connection-making. It includes teaching specific strategies like predicting, clarifying, and self-monitoring to improve comprehension.
- Independent reading - encourages students to practice reading on their own, promoting fluency and fostering a love for books. Matching interests and providing a variety of texts at an appropriate reading level is key to ensure a sustained engagement with reading.
- Working with words - involves activities focused on phonics and vocabulary building, which strengthen students' understanding of language. Integrated word study activities that focus on understanding the structure and meaning of words helps students build strong foundational skills leading them to better identify patterns and

connections within words and in the future having the ability to decode and comprehend texts.

- Writing instruction is central to helping students express their ideas clearly, developing skills in writing for different purposes and audiences through structured support. Practice, feedback and opportunities to 'edit' before 'publishing' are key to learning and improving writing skills.

We provide opportunities for all learners to:

- Be read to and read with others.
- Read and write independently.
- Develop phonological awareness and discuss reading and writing.
- Develop a love for literacy and see themselves as readers and writers.

We are guided by Karen Erickson & David Koppenhaver's Four Key questions to determine whether a pupil is an emergent or conventional literacy learner:

1) *Can the learner recognise letters and sounds?*

2) *Can the learner decode simple words and comprehend text?*

3) *Is the learner able to write independently using letters or words?*

4) *Does the learner engage with text in meaningful ways, such as through prediction or making connections?*

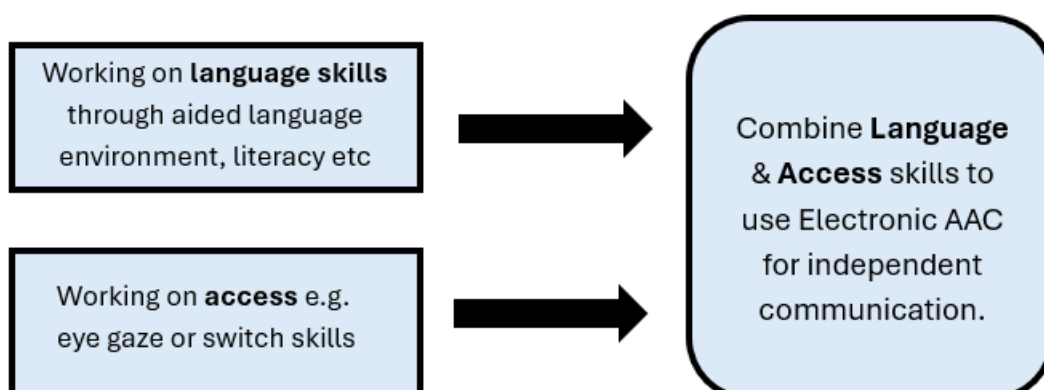
By considering the answers to these questions, we can better understand where a learner is in their literacy development and provide the appropriate level of support.

By embedding AAC and literacy instruction throughout our curriculum, we empower learners to communicate confidently and independently, ensuring they have the skills they need for future success.

## 7. Electronic AAC

At Craighalbert, we recognise the crucial role of technology in supporting learners with complex communication needs through the implementation of powered AAC. In addition to paper-based AAC, we provide access to a range of powered communication systems, incorporating various hardware, software, and access options, such as eye gaze and switch scanning. Guided by our SLT and OT teams, our staff have the expertise to support these technologies, ensuring that each learner has a communication system tailored to their unique needs, abilities, and preferences.

We take a time-efficient, integrated approach by teaching learners' complex operational skills in parallel with language learning, enabling them to build automaticity in the multiple skills required to use complex alternative access options such as eye gaze or switch scanning for communication in the future.



Powered AAC falls under the broader umbrella of Assistive Technology, which has the potential to break down barriers and level the playing field for learners with disabilities (Edyburn, 2020). We recognise that, beyond facilitating independent communication, Assistive Technology empowers our learners to actively engage in their learning, develop greater independence in their surroundings, and explore self-directed mobility, enriching their overall participation in daily life.

## **8. Dynamic Assessment**

We believe in a dynamic approach to communication assessment and monitoring progress led by the SLT Team. This is an ongoing and interactive process whereby communication tool(s) are introduced alongside supportive strategies and opportunities to learn, within the child's zone of proximal development.

As this is a responsive process, we observe the learner's responses and making gradual modifications to ensure best possible fit for the learner and their family. We use tools such as the Roadmap of Communicative Competence (ROCC), Pragmatic Profiles and/ or the CODES Framework to support our assessment processes.

Teachers also assess against the Curriculum for Excellence and Foundation Milestones/Pre-Early Level, which track significant developmental points within a pupil's communication development, using consistent language to guide next steps. This dual approach ensures that learning, assessment, and target-setting remain interconnected.

In addition, the Continuum of Engagement complements learning assessment by measuring levels of engagement, recognising that progress for our pupils may be non-linear. This dual approach evaluates both developmental and

engagement outcomes, enabling us to optimise teaching strategies, learning environments, and resources.

# Children's Rights and Wellbeing Assessment stage



## 1 - Screening

<p><b>Name of Policy/Measure</b></p>	<p>Communication and Literacy Policy</p>		
<p><b>Description of overall aims</b></p>	<p>To ensure that all children and young people have meaningful and relevant learning experiences through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A communication and literacy strategy that is designed to address the diverse and complex needs of our pupils</li> <li>• A communication and literacy strategy underpinned by an MDT approach to ensure our pupils voice is heard, developed and actively listened to.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>What aspects of the policy/ measure will affect children and/ or young people?</b></p>	<p>This policy is one of a package of policies relating to the education and learning experiences of children and young people engaging with our programmes.</p>		
<p><b>What is the likely impact, direct/ indirect, of the policy/ measure on children and/ or young people?</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Positive</b></p> <p>It complies with UNCRC requirements; it has the potential to advance the realisation of children's rights.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Neutral</b></p> <p>It will have no discernible lessening of/ progress in children's rights/ wellbeing.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Negative</b></p> <p>It may impede/ reverse the enjoyment of existing rights, requiring mitigating measures; it fails to comply with UNCRC obligations, requiring modification; it may have detrimental impact on children so should be</p>

			withdrawn/ amended significantly
<b>Which groups of children/ young people will be affected?</b>	Children and young people aged 3-19 who attend Craighalbert for education.		
<b>Is a CRWIA required? Explain rationale for this decision.</b>	<p>CRWIA NOT required.</p> <p>Policy and procedures underpinned by UNCRC, in particular;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Article 2 - All children have equal access to their rights</li> <li>● Article 12 - All children should have a voice and be supported at all times, to develop and use it.</li> <li>● Article 13 -All children should have a voice to express their thoughts, wishes and wants freely and for this to be heard and respected.</li> <li>● Article 23 - my position and access methods should be identified to maximise my ability to communicate.</li> <li>● Article 28 -When education programmes are designed for children, they should be underpinned by communication</li> <li>● Article 31 - All children should have opportunities to make their wants known regarding play and social time throughout their day.</li> </ul>		
<b>Signed</b>	<i>Head of Learning</i>		
<b>Date</b>	13/04/2026		



## **Craighalbert Centre**

Enabling Children to Achieve



KIND



AMBITIOUS



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INSPIRATIONAL



COLLABORATIVE

### **The Scottish Centre for Children with Motor Impairments**

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