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# **NHS Lanarkshire Good Practice Guide to Written Communication**

**Version 5**

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## 1. Introduction

NHS Lanarkshire's Organisational Values include a commitment to "aim for effective two-way communications with the public, patients and staff." This means providing and sharing information that is "understandable and meets needs."

Our delivery of this commitment will be tested using mystery shopping techniques involving members of the public partnership forums.

This guide sets out how we can and should achieve this goal, focusing particularly on written communications. It is aimed at every member of staff in NHS Lanarkshire who provides written information, in whatever format, to the public, patients or colleagues.

It is important that our communications display "Fairness and Consistency", another of NHS Lanarkshire's Organisational Values. Through this value we have a commitment "to strive to promote equality of access, treatment and opportunity for all."

This means we must recognise that for some individuals, even good quality written information will not meet their particular needs. There is specific guidance on addressing additional communication needs in section 3 – Accessibility.

NHS Lanarkshire also has legal responsibilities in this regard under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The act states that you must ensure your information is accessible. For a copy of the Act visit [www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1995/ukpga\\_19950050\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1995/ukpga_19950050_en_1) .

## **2. Plain English**

### **2.1 What is plain English?**

The Plain English Campaign defines it as “a message, written with the reader in mind and with the right tone of voice, that is clear and concise.”

It doesn't mean dumbing down or over simplifying. It does mean respecting the needs of your audience. You will benefit the reader by making your document more understandable, which will benefit you by getting your point across more effectively.

### **2.2 What should be written in plain English?**

All outgoing information should be written in plain English and take into account the particular needs of its audience. Examples include:

- Annual reports
- Leaflets
- FirstPort (the staff intranet)
- Briefings
- Posters
- Public website

NHS Lanarkshire also produces many documents that may have a narrower audience or circulation. However, the public and all staff have a right to access and understand these documents and the plain English standard applies. Examples include:

- Strategies
- Consultation documents
- Committee papers
- Reports of workshops
- Policies
- Board papers
- Business cases
- Minutes of meetings

This list is not exhaustive and it is good practice to write in plain English at all times. It is also important to remember that all NHS Lanarkshire written information, not covered by specific exemptions, can be requested by anyone under the Freedom of Information Act.

### **2.3 Plain English Guidelines**

There is more than one way to write in plain English. However, the following guidelines will help keep you on the right track:

- Structure the information by discussing only one main idea in each paragraph.
- Use short sentences (generally 15 - 20 words per sentence). Include only one main point in each sentence.
- Try to limit each paragraph to no more than three sentences.
- Write in the first and second person (I, we, you).
- Write in an active rather than passive voice. It is more personal, lively and direct. For example:
  - ✓ Take your tablets three times a day (active)
  - x Your tablets should be taken three times a day (passive)
- Use verbs rather than nouns. For example:
  - When you arrive, instead of upon arrival
  - When you leave hospital, instead of on discharge
  - When your operation is over, instead of following surgery.
- Avoid medical and NHS jargon and abbreviations, for example, MINTS, A&E, electives, allied health professional. If a term cannot be avoided, it should be fully explained.
- A question and answer format can sometimes be helpful to divide up text.

Further information on how to write in plain English can be found on the Plain English Campaign's website at [www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk) . It includes the following guides:

- Guide to writing in Plain English  
[www.plainenglish.co.uk/howto.pdf](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/howto.pdf)
- A-Z of alternative words  
[www.plainenglish.co.uk/alternative.pdf](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/alternative.pdf)
- Plain English guide to Medical Information  
[www.plainenglish.co.uk/medicalguide.pdf](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/medicalguide.pdf)

## 2.4 Formatting

- Avoid using **BOLD BLOCK CAPITALS** for emphasis.

- Avoid underlining as this can distract the reader and makes the text more difficult to read.
- The Royal National Institute for the Blind ([www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)) states that type size is a fundamental factor in legibility. It recommends a type size between 12 and 14 point. The larger the minimum type size, the more people you will reach.
- The NHS Scotland corporate typeface is Stone Sans or Garamond. Where neither font is available use Arial or Times New Roman.
- Use unjustified right hand margins (*range left*) as this provides even word spacing which is easier to read.

## **2.5 Further information and advice**

Members of the Communications Department can provide advice and assistance with a wide range of writing projects. In the first instance contact:

Calvin Brown  
Divisional Communications Manager  
NHS Lanarkshire  
Tel: 01698 245006  
[calvin.brown@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:calvin.brown@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk)

### **3. Accessibility – additional needs and other languages**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

It is important staff identify at the earliest opportunity that someone has an additional need in relation to communication. Staff should have a patient-centred approach to communication so that it is tailored to each person's individual needs.

For example, not all people with visual impairments will read Braille. People who have been deaf since birth may not be able to read English. Some foreign language speakers may not be able to read information in their native language.

Pictures and symbols can often be very useful for people with certain communications difficulties. For example, people who have difficulties with reading, writing, listening or interacting are likely to benefit from picture and symbol support.

#### **3.2 Alternative languages and formats**

It is recognised that it is not practical to produce all NHS Lanarkshire information aimed at the public in multiple formats or languages. A more practical and valuable approach is to respond to individual person's requirements to ensure the format and language meet their precise needs.

An exception would be a leaflet or document aimed at target audience known to have specific language or format requirements. Even then, production should not commence until the ideal format has been discussed with the target group to ensure it meets their needs.

The following text should be included on leaflets and other information aimed at the public and patients:

This leaflet contains information about ..... . If you need this information in another language or format, please telephone 01698 6..... or e-mail .....

This text should be repeated in the following languages .....

### 3.3 Available resources

It is important that staff are aware of different needs and how to access the necessary support or resource. Staff should establish a person's need for additional support at the earliest possible opportunity.

Here is a list of resources to help meet these needs:

- Interpreting services - Sometimes written information is not appropriate or sufficient and an interpreter will be required. Staff can request a foreign language interpreter by calling ..... . A sign language interpreter can be accessed by calling .....
- Pictorial food menus – These are available at each of the hospitals from the Catering Department.
- Boardmaker - This is a popular and easy to use programme to allow staff to create good quality picture communication symbol materials quickly and to personalise these to fit individual users' needs or particular settings and activities. Boardmaker is available from Speech and Language Therapy.
- Hints and tips guides – These are currently in development. The guides will provide a quick reference for staff to help them understand the different types of needs individual groups have.
- Talk for Scotland Communication Toolkit - A practical toolkit for communicating with people with communication support needs [www.communicationforumsotland.org.uk/TFS.html](http://www.communicationforumsotland.org.uk/TFS.html)
- Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF) [www.saifscotland.org.uk](http://www.saifscotland.org.uk) - SAIF works to improve accessible information for disabled people by producing and promoting standards and guidelines. Publications include Making Word Documents Accessible, Making E-communication Accessible plus many more including useful checklists found at: [www.saifscotland.org.uk/publications/publicat.htm](http://www.saifscotland.org.uk/publications/publicat.htm)
- Disability Rights Commission (DRC) [www.drc-gb.org](http://www.drc-gb.org) - The DRC provides information on the needs of specific groups.

- Easy Read - The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) provides advice on how documents should be written for people with learning disabilities. It recommends a style called Easy Read, which involves simple words, big writing and pictures. You can download a guide on writing in this style from the DRC's website at [www.drc-gb.org/library/publications/advice\\_and\\_information/how\\_to\\_use\\_easy\\_words\\_and\\_pict.aspx?basket=add&pub=How+to+use+easy+words+and+pictures%7cFOCUS12ER](http://www.drc-gb.org/library/publications/advice_and_information/how_to_use_easy_words_and_pict.aspx?basket=add&pub=How+to+use+easy+words+and+pictures%7cFOCUS12ER)
- Royal National Institute of the Blind – It provides guidance on presenting information for people who are partially sighted. Its clear print guidelines are available at [www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public\\_printdesign.hcsp#P6\\_523](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_printdesign.hcsp#P6_523)
- Large print – Contact the Medical Illustration Department on 01236 712127 for help and advice to convert leaflets and documents into large print.
- “see me” guidelines - NHS Lanarkshire has signed the mental health anti stigma “see me” pledge to demonstrate its commitment to ensuring people with mental ill health are not discriminated against through inappropriate language or attitudes. All written information should follow the “see me” “Mind your language” guidelines available at: [www.seemescotland.org.uk/stigma/include/downloads/media\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.seemescotland.org.uk/stigma/include/downloads/media_guidelines.pdf) .

## 4. Guidelines for use of clipart or images from the web

### 4.1 Introduction

If you want to add images to a power-point presentation, a leaflet, document or Firstport, you must make sure you have permission from the owner or ensure that the image is copyright free.

Many images are covered by copyright and cannot be used without permission. Some clipart on your computer and certain images on the web are **not free** to use without permission.

### 4.2 What do we mean by images?

Images can be cartoons, photographs, maps, paintings, illustrations decorative graphics, diagrams charts, graphs, drawings and logos. This is not an exhaustive, but an indicative list.

### 4.3 Clipart restrictions

Even if the clipart is free to use and does not have any copyright restrictions, they do contain other restrictions. Again, this is not an exhaustive list.

- Clipart is for personal, non-commercial use only
- Clipart should not be used on NHS documents unless permission has been given by the owner
- Clipart may not be used for logos
- Clipart may not be used on an item/publication to be sold
- Clipart cannot be used to advertise a business

### 4.4 Copyright

Copyright lasts for 70 years and items are automatically covered by copyright. You may see the copyright symbol below but this does not need to be present for the item to be covered by the law.



If you are unsure of whether or not you are able to use an image, check the following:

- Do you know the source of the image, does the copyright symbol appear anywhere on the image or on the website?

- Does the website have a copyright statement
- Can you identify the artist of the image?
- Can you contact the website in question and ask permission to use the image?

Library staff can help you with checking sources and permission of images if you are unsure.

#### **4.5 Further Information**

For further information contact NHS Lanarkshire library staff or visit the following websites:

- [www.microsoft.com/about/legal/permissions/default.msp](http://www.microsoft.com/about/legal/permissions/default.msp) - copyright statement from Microsoft regarding Clipart
- [www.cla.co.uk](http://www.cla.co.uk) - Copyright Licensing Agency
- [www.copyrightfreephotos.com/default.aspx](http://www.copyrightfreephotos.com/default.aspx) - a website of copyright free images

## 5. Written correspondence including email

### 5.1 Standards for sending written correspondence

These standards apply to all written correspondence which comprise letters, memos, compliment slips, emails and fax front covers:

- Install NHS Lanarkshire (NHSL) templates on your computer. NHSL templates exist for letters, faxes, PowerPoint presentations and the NHSL logo. Access to the NHSL templates and guidance on how to use them is available on FirstPort ([link to be added](#)).
- Refresh your templates to ensure you are using the new recommended layout and are displaying the appropriate organisation/department name and contact number.
- Ensure your name and contact details are provided on all written correspondence.
- Direct telephone lines should be provided on written correspondence where possible. If there is no direct line the extension number of the department should be given along with the main switchboard number. Do not provide both as this can cause confusion (Customer Care Standards for dealing with telephone enquiries should be adhered to. [Link to document on FirstPort to be added](#)).
- Shred and recycle old stationery which contains old logos, old telephone numbers and organisation/department names.

### 5.2 E-mail good practice

You should take note of the following guidance in relation to every email you send:

- Consider whether an email the most appropriate medium for your communication.
- Follow the plain English guidance (2.3) relating to the use of paragraphs and short sentences.
- Use the spell checker before sending the email
- Use the subject line to help the recipient quickly grasp the content of your message and prioritise it. For example: "Draft

document: urgent comment required” or “Minutes of Team Meeting: For Your Information”.

- State clearly if the e-mail requires action. Explain what is required and when. If no action is needed write “For information only”.
- Consider the confidentiality and sensitivity of your message. E-mail is not guaranteed to be private. Your e-mail could be requested under the Freedom of Information Act. Sensitive or confidential information sent internally can be placed in a password-protected attachment. For advice on password protection, please contact the IM&T Helpdesk <http://helpdesk/internetdesk/> or by telephone on 01698 258787.
- Include your name, title and telephone number at the bottom of the e-mail. You can do this automatically using the electronic signature function in Microsoft Outlook. (Go to the Tools menu. Click Options, then Mail Format and go to Signature.)
- Do not use capital letters. They are the e-mail equivalent of SHOUTING, which can be considered rude. Capitals are also harder to read.
- Only use “Reply to All” if your message really needs to be seen by everyone who received the original message.
- Never send an email if you think it could be considered rude or offensive.

You should take note of the following guidance when dealing with e-mails you receive:

- Send an acknowledgement if an enquiry is going to take longer than ten working days to send a full response.
- Use the “Out of Office” facility to provide details of your return date and who to contact if a response is required urgently. It should also explain how email will be dealt with during your absence.
- Where a group e-mail address has been set up, ensure someone has responsibility for checking it each day.

- If an e-mail is received that should be answered by another department, inform the sender that their enquiry has been transferred and to whom.
- If an e-mail is transferred into your office for a response, use the date the e-mail was first received by NHS Lanarkshire for the 10 working day acknowledgement time, not the date the e-mail was received by your office.
- Remember that stored emails can be requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

## 6. Patient and carer information leaflets and posters

### 6.1 Planning

If you are considering producing a leaflet, ask yourself:

- What are you trying to produce?
- Who is the information for?
- What do you want to achieve?
- Will this leaflet benefit the public/patient/carer?

Is this information already available?

- In any other department throughout NHS Lanarkshire?
- From an external source?
- Discuss your idea with colleagues.
- Check the Patient Information Database available on FirstPort at <http://firstport/sites/patientinformation> .
- If you are planning a leaflet for patients or carers you must contact the Patient Information Manager and Clinical Effectiveness Manager for advice. See section 5.8 for contact details.
- Discuss plans for new information leaflets with your Service Manager / Clinical Effectiveness Manager.
- Consider how your leaflet will be distributed. Will it be displayed in a rack, handed out or posted?
- If your leaflet is going to be useful it should provide the kind of information that your intended audience needs and wants. Therefore it is important to find out what people want to know. Please see Appendix 1 in the Policy for Written Information Leaflets (available on FirstPort at

<http://firstport/sites/patientinformation>) for guidance on inviting feedback.

- Identify a budget for the production of your leaflet, and if appropriate the recurring cost of reproduction.

## 6.2 Development

The clearer, more inviting and higher quality a leaflet looks, the more likely it is that people will read it.

Produce a first draft. Check it against these guidelines and NHS Lanarkshire's Policy for Written Information Leaflets (available on FirstPort at <http://firstport/sites/patientinformation>).

Complete a proposal form and send off an electronic copy of the proposed text for your leaflet to the Patient Information Manager / Clinical Effectiveness Manager. See section 5.8 for contact details.

- Proposal forms are available to download from the Patient Information section on FirstPort at <http://firstport/sites/patientinformation> or contact the Patient Information Manager / Clinical Effectiveness Manager for advice. See section 5.8 for contact details.
- Text must be sent for quality checks to the Patient Information Manager / Clinical Effectiveness Manager in Microsoft Word format, either by email or on disc.

Piloting your leaflet before going to print will inevitably save money and time and will create a leaflet which the patient or carer feels is needed rather than what you feel is needed.

Piloting is easily done by asking potential users of your proposed leaflet and staff to read and comment on the content and layout and whether it has achieved its purpose. Please see Appendix 1 in the Policy for Written Information Leaflets for guidance on inviting feedback.

Once a final draft has been approved by the Patient Information Manager / Clinical Effectiveness Manager your leaflet will be logged onto the Patient Information Database on FirstPort.

## 6.3 Content

You should consider the content carefully when putting your leaflet together. This will vary depending on the type of leaflet and your target audience. The NHS Identity toolkit for patient information provides useful examples. It can be downloaded from [www.nhsidentity.nhs.uk/patientinformationtoolkit/](http://www.nhsidentity.nhs.uk/patientinformationtoolkit/)

Please follow the Plain English Guidance (provided in section 2.3).

Remember to include details of where the reader can find more information, for example, support groups and websites.

An evidence-based approach is essential in developing good quality patient information. Information should be based on the most recent and accurate evidence available and be peer reviewed for verification of clinical content.

## 6.4 Corporate style

Front Cover - All information leaflets should display where appropriate:

- NHS Lanarkshire logo
- Hospital name
- Department/Service
- What the leaflet is about
- For whom the leaflet is intended

Back Page - Leaflets must include:

- Publication date, review date and issue number
- Relevant contact and telephone number
- Author's name
- Translation panel (see section 3.2)

## 6.5 Reviewing and up-dating

Health, healthcare and service information will not remain accurate and relevant forever. Therefore it is important that you review your leaflet at least every two years.

Every two years a reminder will be sent to you by the Patient Information Manager / Clinical Effectiveness Manager for revision of your information leaflet.

Revision should lead to a common information base across NHS Lanarkshire.

Ask patients and carers to evaluate your leaflet. Feedback should be obtained prior to revision in order to allow amendments to be made.

## **6.6 Design and printing**

Contact the Medical Illustration Department or Health Promotion Graphic Design Department for advice on design and printing. See section 5.8 for contact details. The designers will layout your leaflet in a range of templates in order to produce consistent, high quality information material.

Consider how many leaflets/booklets you need to produce and how often this information is likely to change. Ordering a large amount may be cheaper, but it is often wasteful as it can go out of date quickly. You should consider ordering no more than a one-year supply. You will also need to consider storage of the leaflets/booklets.

Avoid photocopying leaflets.

## **6.7 Posters**

Things to consider while developing a poster are:

- Posters need to be informative and concise.
- The text needs to be clear, easy to follow and use only enough text to put your point across.
- Use titles and subtitles to aid easy navigation.
- Avoid jargon and medical terminology where possible. If you do need to use this, always provide a clear explanation.
- Consider using charts, graphs and diagrams to support your text. Posters are a visual tool therefore the use of photographic images will attract attention to your poster.
- Ensure your references are correct and gain appropriate permissions such as patient consent or copyright.

## 6.8 Further information and advice

### Patient information contacts:

Arlene Campbell  
Patient Information Manager  
Lanarkshire Acute Division  
NHSL Headquarters  
Strathclyde Hospital, Motherwell  
Tel: 01698 245203  
[arlene.campbell@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:arlene.campbell@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk)

Janie Reid / Maria Ferguson (Job share)  
Clinical Effectiveness Manager  
Law House  
Airdrie Road, Carluke  
Tel: 01698 377781  
[janie.reid@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:janie.reid@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk)

### Design contacts:

Medical Illustration Department  
Hairmyres Hospital  
Tel: 01355 585498

Medical Illustration Department  
Monklands Hospital  
Tel: 01236 712127

Medical Illustration Department  
Wishaw General Hospital  
Tel: 01698 366425

Health Promotion Graphic Design Department  
Law House  
Tel: 01698 377643

Desktop Publishing  
Clinical Effectiveness Department  
Law House  
Tel: 01698 377786

## 7. NHS Lanarkshire websites and intranet

### 7.1 Introduction

The NHS Lanarkshire website, [www.nhslanarkshire.org.uk](http://www.nhslanarkshire.org.uk), is the public facing internet website. The information contained on this external website is for Lanarkshire patients, relatives, carers and the general public.

FirstPort, <http://firstport/default.aspx>, is NHS Lanarkshire's staff intranet website. The information contained on this internal website is for NHS Lanarkshire staff and GPs. It cannot be accessed by the public.

### 7.2 Planning

When planning content for your section on either website you should consider:

- Who is the information for? Is the information for staff, the public or both?
- What do you want to achieve?
- Will this information benefit your intended audience?

If your website content is to be useful, it should provide the kind of information that your intended audience (Lanarkshire patients, relatives and carers or staff) needs and wants. Therefore, it is important to find out what people want to know by asking them.

You should also check if this information is already available:

- On another NHS Lanarkshire web page or FirstPort web page.
- From an external source. If so, would it be sufficient to create a link to this information?

Discuss your idea/plans for web content with colleagues across NHS Lanarkshire to avoid duplication and ensure consistency. For example, is there both an acute and primary care aspect to your service?

### **7.3 Layout and style**

Website users generally do not systematically read all content on web pages. They scan pages for keywords to identify the information they are looking for. Use headings and subheadings to split information into logical chunks as a method of signposting.

Do not put text in block capitals, bold or underline it. It can make the text more difficult to read and could be confused with a web link.

### **7.4 Other considerations**

Include a contact name, telephone number, e-mail and postal address for anyone wishing further information.

Identify key words for each page. These can be added to the template for each page. Key words are used by search engines such as Google to identify relevant web pages.

Identify potential hyperlinks to other pages on the website or FirstPort.

Visually impaired people often use screen readers/ speech synthesisers to read text to them. Provide text equivalents for all non-text objects on the page.

### **7.5 Further information and advice**

For the NHS Lanarkshire public website contact:

Yvonne Law  
Web Editor  
NHS Lanarkshire  
Tel: 01698 245214  
[yvonne.law@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:yvonne.law@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk)

For FirstPort (NHS Lanarkshire intranet) contact:

Neil Warren  
Firstport Development Manager  
NHS Lanarkshire  
Tel: 01698 281313  
[neil.warren@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:neil.warren@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk)