PUBLIC HEALTH SANDWELL COMMUNICATION GUIDE

HEALTHY SANDWELL

We find the support you need

Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council

OCTOBER 2023

Our promise to reach as many members of our community as possible through our written and verbal communications.

Recently, the world has to encounter the COVID-19 pandemic, a global health crisis. During this time our team came together to support all of our residents to ensure the best outcome possible for each of them.

We learned many lessons from the pandemic, including the importance of the ways in which we communicate to reach as many people as we can.

This guide has been put together with that in mind. Reflecting on the society we now have in Sandwell and how we can support them to be their healthiest selves moving forward.

If we follow all elements of this guide we will be more accessible to more people, help more people understand the work we do for and with them and it is simply the right thing to do.

By using simpler, less exclusive language, we are putting our residents first and at the forefront of everything we do.

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SANDWELL EXPLAINED

01 88% of Sandwell residents speak English as their main language compared to 92.3% nationally.

02 Of those residents who do not have English as their main language, 24.8% cannot speak English well and 5.5% cannot speak English at all.

03 In 5 wards of Sandwell less than 80% of residents speak English as their main language.

04 The top four languages spoken in Sandwell after English are Punjabi, Polish, Bengali and Urdu.

05 Sandwell has the lowest literacy levels compared to other Local Authorities in the West Midlands with 25.7% requiring essential skills support.

AIMS

- To reach a further 10% of the population by translating key information into the top 4 languages spoken in Sandwell, after English.
- To make all Public Health communications easier to understand for all and inclusive of community needs.
- To understand the importance of Health Literacy and how we can embed Health Literacy policies across our work, particularly in verbal communications.
- To ensure the services offered by Public Health are inclusive.

MAKING INFORMATION AVAILABLE IN SANDWELL'S COMMON LANGUAGES

A Brief analysis of Sandwell residents

In 2021, almost one in four (23.6%) usual residents of Sandwell were born outside the UK, compared with one in six nationally. This proportion puts Sandwell in the top 50 Local Authorities across England & Wales. 30.3% of residents cannot speak English well or cannot speak English at all.

According to "A rapid evidence review of interpreting interventions in public health" (PHE, 2020) professionals who provide public health services and programmes need to assess the language needs of their local population to plan, fund and implement the use of interpreters to ensure people who don't speak English enjoy their right to health.

Sandwell Language Network

Anyone who requires support to learn English can be referred to Sandwell Consortium at: **referrals@sandwellconsortium.co.uk**

Translation Services

If you require documents to be translated, the following companies are recommended within the Council:

Absolute Translations
Website: https://www.absolutetranslations.com/
Email: main@absolutetranslations.com
Phone: 0808 503 8648

Brasshouse Translations
Website: https://www.brasshouse.ac.uk/tis
Email: btis@birmingham.gov.uk
Phone: 0121 303 1619

SANDWELL LANGUAGE NETWORK

A Brief analysis of Sandwell residents

To achieve our outcome that people will live well and age well, we see learning English is key for migrants and ethnic minority communities in Sandwell. The 2011 Census asked people to rate their general health as 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'bad' or 'very bad'. Only 65% of people who could not speak English well or at all rated themselves as being in good health. This is compared with 88% who could speak English very well or well. They were also less likely to age well.

Sandwell Language Network

The Sandwell Language Network (SLN) provides free, community-based English language learning across Sandwell. SLN aims to
- tackle health and economic differences,
- lower isolation, and
- show community support through basic language learning.

Supported by Sandwell Consortium CIC and delivered by local community voluntary organisations, SLN delivers support in and with the community. This covers early help, preventing people from needing services and helping residents to help themselves.

SLN offers conversational, pre-entry and entry level ESOL (English as Other Language) as well as employability booster sessions. It has a focus upon improving health literacy within our ethnic minority communities (EMC).We would encourage all staff to promote SLN through their networks and marketing/promotion activities.

SLN helps people to help themselves with better awareness and understanding how to access health services. It can help people to cope with normal living so they can reach their full promise for all their lives.

For referrals to SLN and information on where ESOL courses are: sandwellconsortium.co.uk/service/sandwell-language-network/

For more information please email english@sandwellconsortium.co.uk or ring 0121 533 2668

SLN courses are available on SCVO's Route to Wellbeing Portal: route2wellbeing.info/browse/40/english-language-support.html

HEALTH LITERACY

A Brief analysis of Sandwell residents

In Sandwell, 40.8% of people reported very good health, compared with 47.5% in England & Wales. 8% reported bad or very bad health (5.4% in England & Wales).

Techniques of Health Literacy

Teach Back

Use Simple Language

Chunk and Check

Use Pictures

Help with Paperwork

Teach Back

The teach back method is a useful way to confirm that the information you provide is being understood by getting people to 'teach back' what has been discussed and what instruction has been given. This is more than saying 'do you understand?' and is more a check of how you have explained things than the patient/client understanding. For example, you could ask someone to tell you what they will tell a partner or child what you have discussed today.

Use Simple Language

The terminology we use can often be confusing for people, especially at times of stress when people may struggle more than usual to take in information. In health a range of jargon and acronyms are used routinely and we may forget that this language is unfamiliar to others. Therefore, you should use simple language as much as possible, try explaining things to people as you would to a friend or family member. You may find that having examples to use can support you in this.

Chunk and Check

Chunk and check can be used alongside tools such as teach back to assist in promoting understanding. When we speak to people there is often a lot of information to be discussed and we may have to explain more than one concept. People can struggle to take on board a long list of things they are being asked to take in or do, and yet this is often how information is presented. Sometimes the explanation of what people are being asked to understand and to take away and put into practice is left until the end of the discussion.

To implement the chunk and check technique, break down the information that you need to discuss and that you need the person to understand into smaller more manageable chunks rather than providing it all at once. In between each 'chunk' use methods such as teach back to 'check' for understanding before moving on.

People may have questions as things are being discussed with them, if the information is provided all together they may hold their question until the end, meaning their understanding may be affected. Chunk and check should address this by stopping conversations at appropriate moments to check understanding and also to give the opportunity for questions at key points.

Use Pictures

Spoken and written word is often misheard or misread and also misunderstood, pictures and visuals may be effective in improving understanding when communicating new or complex ideas to people. It may be that pictures are used to compliment text.

In some cases, pictures alone may be enough, but pictures alone should only be used as an option where you are sure the person has enough understanding and knowledge to interpret it correctly. Ideally, as with written materials, pictures should be used to assist and support explanations not to replace them. One outcome which has been identified in the use of pictures is that they support recall, people are more likely to recall information they have been provided with if they receive pictures in addition to written or spoken information.

Consider using photo symbols to support written information: https://www.photosymbols.com/

Help with Paperwork

Offer support to those who have to fill in forms and paperwork.

To reduce stigma ensure that everyone is offered help. Offering routine support can reduce pressures on people who may struggle with the forms and also support your service in gathering the information required.
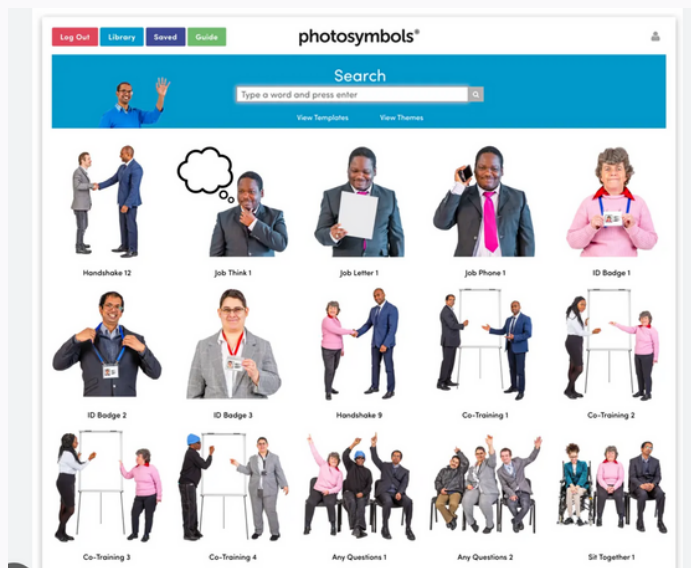
PLAIN ENGLISH

A Brief analysis of Sandwell residents

In 2021, almost 30% of Sandwell residents aged 16 and over (28.9%, 76,840) reported having no qualifications. This is much higher than the England and Wales figure of 18.2%.

Data released by the Learning and Work Institute in June 2022 shows Sandwell has the lowest literacy levels compared to other Local Authorities in the West Midlands area.

What is Plain English?

Plain English is a style of giving information that enables someone to get the facts they need, understand them easily and act on them if they need to. It involves not only writing more clearly, for example through simpler phrases, more direct language or shorter sentences, but also structuring and laying out information in a way that makes it easier to follow. The term usually applies to written information, but plain language in speech is just as important, particularly when there can be more constraints on checking understanding.

The simple rules:

There are a few simple rules for writing in plain English. In summary these are:
- avoid wherever possible using jargon, abbreviations and technical terms – if you have to use them provide a clear explanation
- avoid complicated English or uncommon words
- use active not passive phrases, for example say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'
- keep sentences short
- plan out the order and structure of the summary
- break up the text, for example use bullet lists or headings
- ask local residents and organisations to read a draft to find out if anything is unclear

For more information on writing in Plain English, please see the separate Public Health Sandwell Plain English guide.

WRITING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

A Brief analysis of Social Media

In Sandwell Council, we mainly use Facebook and Twitter social media platforms although there are some accounts on other channels such as Instagram, Reddit and LinkedIn.

The social media platform you are using should determine the style of writing you use. For example, Twitter accounts are mainly followed by local businesses and organisations whereas Facebook is generally more about our individual residents.

Writing for Social Media

It is important that you still follow the Plain English guide for writing social media posts but the content itself may be more open and understandable.

The language should be less formal than used in other places and replicate the way we usually speak.

With this in mind, we should:
- Use the active voice rather than the passive
- Use contractions (e.g. can't, don't etc)
- Ask questions
- Address the reader as "you"
- Refer to Sandwell Council as "we" and "us"

Hashtags

Using hashtags helps us engage with wider conversations and increase our exposure. We can use hashtags for awareness days and trending topics.

- Check for existing hashtags from national sites
- Place hashtags at the end to prevent disrupted reading
- Capitalise each word to make it easier read and avoid confusion
- Don't include punctuation such as hyphens or apostrophes

Structuring a post

Online readers tend to scan text rather than read every word whilst being surrounded by distractions and wanting to get information as quickly as possible.

So, we should do the following:
- Put need-to-know information first
- Structure content with line breaks and bullet points
- Cut unnecessary words
- Avoid puns, metaphorical language, acronyms and jargon
- Include links and hashtags if appropriate
- End with a call to action

Twitter posts can be 280 characters (without a link), or 256 characters with a link to a publication.

Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn posts have a much higher limit (2,000 for Facebook, 2,200 for Instagram and 3,000 for LinkedIn).

Alternative text and accessibility

When publishing content on social media, the images we publish need alt text (alternative text, or alternative descriptions) to summarise the information presented for users who can't see the graphic. It can also be used to describe what should be on the page if the web browser fails to load the images. Screen readers read the alt text out for people with visual disabilities.

Find more information on alternative text on page 20.

Hashtags are an essential part of social media. If you write a hashtag all in lowercase such as: #movemoresandwell – a screen reader will struggle to identify the individual words. For this hashtag to be read aloud accurately, we need to use CamelCase, so this hashtag now becomes #MoveMoreSandwell. CamelCase is a way of writing without spaces or punctuation, but indicating a new word by starting it with a capital letter.

WRITING FOR WEBSITES

A Brief analysis of our websites

The Healthy Sandwell website is the first impression that many of our residents will have of us before they call or meet us. The new website is intended to be a model for other council staff to consider how they are meeting the needs of our residents.

We also have information on the main council website. Any information on here should be written in the same style.

How we read online

We read differently online to how we read on paper. Online users will scan for the information we need rather than read every word. Most people will read the top line and then scan down the left-hand side. This pattern looks roughly like an "F".

Research shows that 80% of users on a mobile or tablet do not scroll past the first quarter of a page.

Eye scanner research shows us that people spend more time looking at pictures than text.

Headings and sub-headings

Headings and sub-headings help users to scan your content. They are also important for people using assistive technologies to navigate a page.

Make sure headings are short, frontloaded and use the active voice.

Do not use questions in headings. They are not frontloaded, can take longer for the user to scan and are harder to understand.

Inverted pyramid

The most important information in your content must be at the start – this is called frontloading.

We can use the inverted pyramid to achieve this, placing information in order of importance on the page. This is the best practice style when writing your content.

The main information of the content – who, why, what, where, when and how – appears in the first paragraphs so that most users will see it.

The inverted pyramid structure is:
1. most important information
2. important details
3. other general or background information
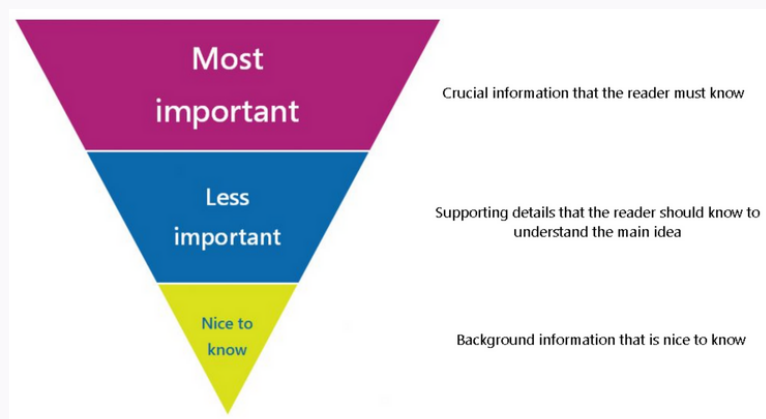
Use clear language

Use the active voice – this is when the subject of the sentence is doing something, rather than having something done to them. Use plain English when writing. For example:

"The statistics were scrutinised by the experts"

Should be rewritten as:

"The experts studied the statistics."

Using "studied" instead of "scrutinised" is plain English and accessible. Having the "expert" doing the action as the subject of the sentence makes it active and easier to understand.

Structuring paragraphs and sentences

As with the overall structure, each paragraph and sentence should be frontloaded with the most important information at the start.

When writing your content, your paragraphs should:
- have no more than four sentences that follow a logical order
- begin with the most important information for that paragraph, meaning readers can skim through the information
- make complete sense on their own
- cover one subject

Individual sentences should be no longer than 20 words. If they are any longer, they may need to be divided into two.

A sentence should not start with a figure. If it does, the sentence should be restructured. For example:

"47% of people in the population of the UK are left-handed."

Should be rewritten as:

"Left-handed people make up 47% of the UK population."

WRITING FOR PRESS RELEASES

A few tips

- Press releases are a great way of helping to get the council's message across via the media.
- The press team do this with help from people all over the council who provide the basic information that we turn into the finished press release.
- Be aware that the media won't use a press release exactly as it is issued. Papers make their own minds up about whether to run a piece based on our releases – and will often re-write them to suit themselves.
- Be ready to help deal with follow-up questions from reporters once a release has been issued. Answering them quickly and comprehensively could make all the difference to securing the positive coverage.
- Do think about specialist magazines in your profession or discipline that we could try to get coverage in – and tell us what they're called. Often, we can do versions of the same release tailored to different outlets – e.g. local press, specialist titles, trade press, broadcast media.
- Think how your story could also work on the web and on social media – we have tens of thousands of people following the council on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, so a good photo and a short, friendly post can help you reach your target audience much quicker than a traditional press release.

How to draft a press release

- Provide clear and concise information covering the who, what, why, where, when and how of the story.
- Give as much notice as possible. A press release about a specific event needs to be issued at least 1-2 weeks before it happens.
- Avoid jargon, technical information and unexplained acronyms. Keep it simple and consider whether someone who knows nothing about the subject would understand it. You don't need to attempt a full press release yourself; bullet points are fine.
- Is there anything quirky, unusual or ground-breaking about the subject matter, or a real human story behind it? If so, include it.
- Wherever possible, provide us with costs of schemes and details of where the funding has come from.
- If it's a major scheme, do you have an artist's impression? Newspapers and web-based media like to reproduce artist's impressions if they are available.
- Advise the press team on the relevant cabinet member and director relating to this release and tell us who will need to see the release before it is issued.
- Include a contact name/phone number/email address/website that can be published, for the public and/or media to call to find out more information.

WRITING EASY READ DOCUMENTS

What does easy read mean?

Easy read can mean something different to different people. For example, this could mean large print or braille. For others, this could mean translated into their first language. In this case we are talking about people who may find reading or writing difficult.

If you are producing easy read documents, it is important to involve some of the people who are making up your intended audience before general release.

Key tips:

- Most people find it easiest if pictures are to the left of the text.
- A good font to use is Arial or something that looks similarly plain. Examples of good fonts include: Tahoma, Verdana, Myriad, Helvetica, Calibri, Candara, Corbel, Segoe, and Gill Sans amongst many others.
- Avoid writing words in capitals. This will make the word look unfamiliar and too uniform.
- Add extra space between the lines of your text. This will make it easier to read. For example in Microsoft Word choose 1.5 line spacing instead of single line spacing.
- Having a toned background behind your text reduces the glare of the paper and makes the text easier to read.
- Try to write your information in short, clear sentences. Do not use complicated words, words that are hard to understand or jargon words.
- Be consistent with the words that you use. If you refer to the same person or object several times in your text, always call them by the same name.
- Try not to put more than one piece of information in each sentence.
- Make the picture as big as possible. It is important that every detail that could help the reader understand is visible.
- Use Photosymbols to select pictures as these are recognised by a wide audience.

ACCESSIBILITY

Why we check accessibility

Not everyone reads in the same way. For that reason, it is important we check a document is accessible before we publish it or share it with others.

An accessibility check will look at your language, reding order, use of bullet points, any images and other factors.

There are different accessibility checks for different systems.

Microsoft Office

When editing any Microsoft document, always use the Check Accessibility feature.

Find it in Word, PowerPoint, Excel and Outlook under the Review tab/menu: select Check Accessibility.

- It identifies issues in your document
- It explains why they can be a problem
- It then suggests how to fix them

This accessibility checking option is available in most Microsoft programs for both Windows and Mac and online Office 365.

To support the accessibility check, consider the following:
- Use a consistent font across the document.
- Use headings to convey structure.
- Do not use tables for layout purposes. Where tables are used keep the structure as simple as possible and use alternative text options.
- Use hyperlinks rather than URLs.
- Provide alternative text for all non-text content.
- Do not use text boxes.
- Do not use colour alone to convey information.

Acrobat PDFs

PDF files are typically created in some other application. Optimally document accessibility should begin in the native document format.

There many things that can be done in native document applications to support accessibility, such as adding alternative text for images; defining structural headings, lists, and data tables; providing document language; and setting document properties such as titles.

Some tips to improve accessibility of a PDF:
- Assistive technology software cannot read or extract the words in a graphical representation.
- Be careful with the font you choose and make sure it is clear.
- Use navigation aids to guide around the document and to outside it.
- Specify the document language.
- Make sure you have a clear title.
- If you use security settings be careful that they do not interfere with screen readers or braille.
- Use alternative text descriptions for non-text elements.

If you are producing a lot of PDF documents, it may be worth investing in the Acrobat Pro so that you can run the Accessibility Check.

## Alternative text

Writing alt text is all about context.

Here are a few of things to keep in mind when writing alt text:
- Alt text should be specific and not overly descriptive.
- Good descriptions are concise, but describe what's in your images accurately enough to understand their context.
- Stay clear of repetition.
- Never start your alt text with 'image of' as this will be obvious to the user.
- Include any essential text or data that's part of the visual.
- Images that already have a caption describing the image, may not need additional alt text.
- Screen readers might not annunciate exclamation or question marks.
- Alt text is used by search engines too, so using alt text can help grow visibility online.

FONTS

Key tips:

- A good font to use is Arial or something that looks similarly plain. Examples of good fonts include: Tahoma, Verdana, Myriad, Helvetica, Calibri, Candara, Corbel, Segoe, and Gill Sans amongst many others.
- Avoid using any font that contains serifs.
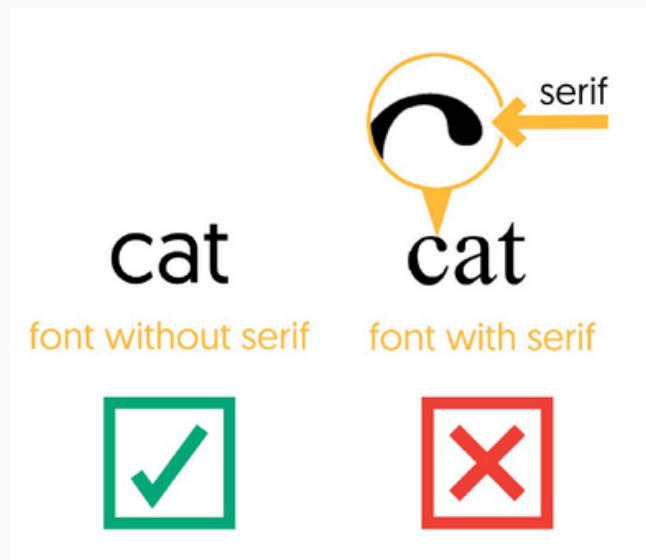
To assist people reading with visual impairment or if using digital screen readers:

Left justified black text on a white background provides the best contrast.

Use a clear font (Arial is preferred), 16 point and good line spacing.

Avoid where possible but if using ensure - accessible hyperlinks, use alt text image descriptors and check that tables tab across.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Microsoft Word Reading Ages

The Flesch-Kincaid score grades your writing on readability. If the score is high, the sentence is more readable. To find this in Microsoft Word, follow these instructions:

1. Select "File", and then select "Options".
2. Select "Proofing".
3. Make sure "Show readability statistics" is selected.

Ideally you should be aiming for a score of 70 or higher.

Flesch Reading Ease	
Score	Style
90 - 100	Very easy
80 - 90	Easy
70 - 80	Fairly easy
60 - 70	Standard
50 - 60	Fairly difficult
30 - 50	Difficult
0 - 30	Very difficult

The A to Z of alternative plain English words

You can search words or phrases, or browse through the A-to-Z pages, and find plain English alternative words to use.

www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html

The Collins Dictionary

The Collins online dictionary classifies words from A1/A2, B1/B2 to C1/C2. The A classified words are readable by beginners and C classified words are for fluent speakers and readers. This can help you to decide whether a word should be used.

www.collinsdictionary.com/

Reading Age checker

You can copy text in to a readability calculator. Avoid putting any confidential information into an online system.

readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php

Text Alternatives

A decision tree to guide you on writing better text alternatives for images.

4syllables.com.au/articles/text-alternatives-decision-tree

OUR PLEDGE

Sandwell Public Health team pledge to implement this communication guide robustly, to include:

- Communications to be translated into the four most commonly spoken languages where possible.
- Services commissioned by Sandwell Public Health to offer language support where possible.
- For all written communications produced by Public Health to have a reading age of Grade 8 or lower (Flesch-Kincaid score of 70 or above).
- That we shall use Health Literacy policies in our communications.
- We shall adopt Plain English across all written communications.
- We shall continue different user needs with each communication style we use.

Sandwell Public Health

Acknowledgements