



# Forest Heath

District Council

## **Forest Heath District Council Communications Strategy**

We want to make our services accessible to all everyone. This document can be provided in alternative formats, such as on audio tape, or in other languages, upon request. Please phone Corporate Development (Communications) on 01638 719361 or email [comms@forest-heath.gov.uk](mailto:comms@forest-heath.gov.uk) and we will be happy to discuss your needs

# Forest Heath District Council

## Corporate Communications Strategy

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Head of Corporate Development David Ellis

Corporate Development Officer (Communications) Sally Rodé  
01638 719361/07778129930 email: [sally.rodé@forest-heath.gov.uk](mailto:sally.rodé@forest-heath.gov.uk)

Communications Officer Julie White  
01638 719236 email: [Julie.white@forest-heath.gov.uk](mailto:Julie.white@forest-heath.gov.uk)

## 1. The aim of the Corporate Development (Communications) team is:

To keep customers informed of the services and work of Forest Heath District Council and to thus improve their satisfaction with the council and the area they live in.

## 2. The key tools we use for external communication are:

**Forest Heath News** - magazine produced by Forest Heath District Council and delivered directly to 25,000 homes

**Website** - updated daily

**Media** - national, regional, local newspapers, radio and television, parish and voluntary sector newsletters where appropriate.

**Parish Briefing** - This new initiative starting in January 2007 and is an e-publication, delivered monthly to all town and parish councils. The briefing contains information from Forest Heath District Council about key subject areas and staff. It is compiled by the Communications Team with input from all services.

### The key tools we use for internal communication are:

**FogHorn** - This is an internal staff newsletter, issued to all staff and members. It aims to:

- inform staff about current and forthcoming issues and projects
- highlight the Council's and employees' achievements
- increase understanding of the work of other services
- enhance the relationship between councillors and staff

**FogHorn** is produced bi-monthly and distributed electronically, thereby avoiding printing costs. Copies can be printed for staff who do not have access to email. Special editions can be produced if there is a requirement to cover a particular issue urgently or a high demand for content space. A text only version of FogHorn can be produced on request.

**Core Brief** - This is a monthly summary of progress on current issues and information about policy items. Management Team decides the content and the Core Brief is circulated to all managers electronically and disseminated to all staff via team meetings.

**Use of e-mail** - This is covered by the Internet Protocol.

**Staff photos** - To assist new members of staff and improve recognition amongst employees, it is intended to include photos of staff on the Council's intranet. Photos will be write-protected and will not be used on the Council's public website (other than photos of Management Team).

## 3. The benefits of good communications include:

- Raising awareness of the various ways in which the council is supporting the delivery of its objectives of corporate excellence; sustainable economic wellbeing; social wellbeing and environmental wellbeing - the council's objectives
- Raising awareness and understanding of major projects and, where appropriate, encouraging public involvement
- Encouraging confidence in the council and strengthening its reputation

- Encouraging residents/service users to communicate freely with members and officers
- Building a strong image and identity for the council
- Ensuring information about our aims, objectives and services is targeted to key stakeholders bearing in mind such factors as their age, social group, gender, disability, employment status, language and culture.
- Developing and sustaining effective relationships with relevant agencies/partners and other key stakeholders.

#### **4. How we will achieve our aim:**

Every opportunity will continue to be taken to explain the council's objectives and priorities to the public. Wherever possible they will continue to be referred to in material issued by the council, particularly in Forest Heath News and when communicating with the media.

The table below shows what we already do and areas for improvement in the period 2007 - 2009.

<b>Key Stakeholders</b>	<b>Key communication issues</b>	<b>Main channels of communication</b>	<b>Areas for development 2007 - 2009</b>
All residents and organisations with which the council does business.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Branding &amp; reputation;</li> <li>• Awareness of key messages;</li> <li>• Involvement in developing key policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media;</li> <li>• Forest Heath News &amp; publications;</li> <li>• Written and electronic communication;</li> <li>• Face to face contact;</li> <li>• Corporate Identity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer Service Access Strategy;</li> <li>• Increasing use the internet</li> <li>• FHDC branding of street name signs</li> <li>• Increase in frequency of Forest Heath News to include accurate and timely information.</li> </ul>
Sectors of the community which have historically had less involvement with the council.	As above, plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring information is available in appropriate formats and languages to ensure accessibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As above</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased proactive work with the Consultation Advisor</li> <li>• Website translations</li> <li>• Leaflet translations</li> </ul>
The media (national, regional, local, specialist and minority media)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reputation;</li> <li>• Awareness of key messages;</li> <li>• Ways to increase positive coverage in the media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Press releases</li> <li>• Personal working relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased proactive work</li> <li>• Positive campaigns with local media</li> </ul>
Service delivery partners - the local strategic partnership; town and parish councils; community liaison fora; voluntary and religious groups and recipients of council grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reputation</li> <li>• Awareness of key messages</li> <li>• Two-way communications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media</li> <li>• Members</li> <li>• Publications - written and electronic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parish Briefing for town and parish councils to be distributed via email.</li> </ul>

<b>Key Stakeholders</b>	<b>Key communication issues</b>	<b>Main channels of communication currently used</b>	<b>Areas for development 2007 - 2009</b>
Businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reputation;</li> <li>• Awareness of key messages;</li> <li>• Contact with the council;</li> <li>• Two-way communications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members,</li> <li>• Business media;</li> <li>• Specific information exercises</li> </ul>	Member involvement
National opinion-formers (civil servants, ministers, MPs, and national organisations such as Audit Commission, LGA and IdeA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reputation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal relationships;</li> <li>• Public relations activity</li> </ul>	Member involvement
Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduit for communications;</li> <li>• Should be acting as “ambassadors” for the council</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face to face;</li> <li>• e-mail;</li> <li>• written material.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training post May 2007 elections to include media awareness.</li> <li>• Media protocols to be re-circulated</li> <li>• Forest Heath News editorial guidelines to be re-circulated</li> <li>• Members Blog on website</li> <li>• Ask The Leader/Your Councillor webcasts</li> <li>• Information bulletins for members</li> </ul>
Staff (including front line staff, managers and unions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two way internal communications &amp; cultural change;</li> <li>• Developing communication skills across the council;</li> <li>• Should be acting as “ambassadors” for the council;</li> <li>• IIP accreditation.</li> <li>• Ensuring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foghorn;</li> <li>• Notice boards;</li> <li>• e-mail;</li> <li>• Flightpath;</li> <li>• team meetings;</li> <li>• training;</li> <li>• induction;</li> <li>• Core Brief</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross service team initiatives</li> <li>• Working with teams for positive publicity</li> <li>• Working with teams on campaigns with local media</li> <li>• Continue training in web content management;</li> </ul>

	communication and involvement of disabled staff?		Plain English; media relations
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## Appendix One

### Accessible Information

#### Aim of the guidance

To make sure that the information we provide is accessible to all individuals or groups. We must make sure that we are meeting the needs of all our customers. This accessible information guide provides help to comply with legislation and undertake good practice. It will help to ensure that an even approach is taken throughout the council and that we are leading by example by making our communications accessible.

The guide forms part of the council's Communications Strategy.

#### Why do we need accessible information?

Under the Disability Discrimination Act, and good practice guidelines, we have a responsibility to provide reasonable adjustments in information provision. In line with our commitment to equal opportunities it is important that we take steps to ensure that all publications produced by FHDC are as accessible as possible and are available in alternative formats for those who need, or request, them.

It is important to remember that accessible information does not simply mean providing a document in an alternative format. Information is provided in many forms, through leaflets, signs, posters and the internet. It is important to be aware of your audience and ensure information is clear and concise.

#### When should alternative formats be offered?

We should assess each new publication or piece of information individually. Generally speaking anything for distribution to a lot of people, or to the wider community, should be available in alternative formats to ensure the information is accessible to all.

It is important not to assume that lack of demand for different formats means that people with disabilities don't want them - it is more likely to mean they don't know it's available. By including a standard alternative format statement (an example is included in this guidance) we actively encourage people to make requests. You should also consider involving disabled people in the production of publications to ensure accessibility.

#### Flyers and posters

There is no need to publish the alternative format statement on these publications, however, if a request is made to produce them in an alternative format it may be reasonable to do so - or talk through the flyer with the individual.

Think about the type of paper you use - matt paper reduces reflection; colour contrast - this must be high, for example dark text on a light background, or vice versa; typeface - sans serif fonts such as Arial are recommended.

## **Leaflets and small publications**

The alternative format statement should be included in your publication if it is aimed at the general public. Despite the small size of these publications it is still important to plan for alternative formats and make the font used as large as is possible.

## **Large publications**

The alternative formats statement should always be included on large publications. It is important to plan for alternative format requests including transcription services when budgeting for large publications as these may take longer to produce.

Indexes and introductions become more important as navigational tools in larger publications and this is equally true for alternative formats. It may be advisable to divide large publications into manageable sections when producing an alternative format. Transcription services will advise on how to provide your information in a concise, practical and effective way.

## **Surveys and forms**

The alternative formats statement should be included on surveys and forms. It may also be reasonable to offer help with completing the survey or form with an individual. With a survey this should be done by someone outside the service the survey covers, to avoid any suggestion of bias. As with large publications it is important to plan for alternative format requests when budgeting for larger surveys and forms. It may be necessary to make arrangements for surveys sent to people with visual impairment or writing difficulties to be completed by telephone.

## **How should alternative formats be offered?**

The council is committed to equality in information provision and therefore the following statement should be included in any new publication that is aimed at the wider community

Full version - "We want to make our services accessible to all everyone. This document can be provided in alternative formats, such as on audio tape, or in other languages, upon request. Please phone (insert relevant contact name) on (relevant phone number) or email (relevant email) and we will be happy to discuss your needs"

Shortened version (for use on smaller documents): "If you required this leaflet in another format or language phone (relevant name) on (relevant number) or email (relevant email) to discuss your needs."

The Royal National Institute for Blind People recommends this statement be in a prominent position, at the front of the publication, preferably in 16pt. The inside cover is recommended.

In larger policy documents, and where space allows, you should also consider including the following sentence in key BME group languages:

"This document is about..... Please phone us on (relevant number) or email (relevant email) if you would like it translated or would like further information".

## **Which formats should we offer?**

Not all visually impaired people read Braille or require a document in large print, therefore it is important not to assume which format will suit a particular disability. Easy read versions of publications should also be offered in order to include people with learning disabilities.

## **How long will alternative formatting take?**

The timescale to produce a document in an alternative format will depend on its size and style. Transcription services may need prior notice and have their own turnaround times.

## **How much will it cost?**

Where there are cost implications, such as a request for an audio tape, the cost will depend on the size of publication. Large transcriptions may not be a practical solution. It is always best to discuss with the individual the basic information that they need and work out a suitable solution. During the planning stages the approximate size of your document will be enough to get an estimate. The initial transcription is often the main expense with any further requests treated as "copies". The member of the public/service user requesting information in an alternative format must not be charged for this being produced.

## **Appendix Two**

### **Media Protocols**

The central handling of media relations is recognised as best practice as it ensures consistency in messages and issues and high quality in the content and speed of responses to media enquiries.

All officers, members and organisations funded by the Council must comply with the Code of Practice on Local Government Publicity, issued under the Local Government Act 1986 (as amended in 1988 and 2001). The code stipulates that publicity or information campaigns should:

- ◆ promote well being
- ◆ not be politically partisan
- ◆ be balanced, informative and accurate
- ◆ not be designed to persuade people to hold a certain view.

The Communications Team will ensure that the Council's communications are clear, consistent, timely and in keeping with our corporate vision and policies.

Wherever possible the emphasis of our communications should be proactive, informative and customer centred rather than reactive, defensive and internally focused.

## **Media relations**

Press releases and media comments about council issues will be issued by the Communications Team and be authorised by the Corporate Development Officer (Communications) or the Communications Officer. No officers, other than the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors, should issue press releases.

All press releases will be issued on the corporate press releases headed paper which carries specific contact details.

Press releases need to ensure appropriate language is used, for example, always use 'disabled people' not 'the disabled'.

All press releases fall into one of four categories:

- a. Press releases on factual matters (such as announcing the date and content of an event or policy). These will be cleared by a senior officer with relevant experience as agreed by the appropriate Head of Service. Any quote within the press release will be attributed to the relevant senior officer or elected member.
- b. Press releases arising from any meetings or directly related to service issues. These will be cleared with the appropriate Head of Service and relevant Committee Chairman. Any quote within the press release will be attributed to the relevant senior officer or elected member.
- c. Press releases with a political emphasis or covering significant or sensitive issues. These will be cleared by the Leader AND the Chief Executive or, in his absence, a Strategic Director.
- d. Press releases produced within partnerships or with partner organisations. These will be cleared by the relevant senior officer working within the partnership. They should be issued as combined press releases and may be branded with the partnership's brand, if relevant, and/or other partner organisations' logos.
- e. Press releases will, where appropriate, include a quote from the relevant Member Champion or council Leader.

All press releases will be sent by email to all members at the time of them being issued to the media. Hard copies will be sent to the elected members without email.

All press releases will be posted on the Council's website as soon as possible after their circulation to the media.

Member Champions should take the lead when speaking to the media on relevant issues. The Chief Executive, Strategic Directors and Heads of Service shall be authorised to speak to the media on behalf of the Council, including appearing on both

radio and television. The Chief Executive or a Strategic Director or a Head of Service may authorise other responsible officers to speak to the media. These people are:

### ***Community Services/Economic Development***

Lesley-Ann Gyte  
Nicola King  
Cyril Brown  
Tom Barrance

### **Planning**

Richard Plowman

### **Leisure**

Ian Shipp  
Lizzi Cocker  
Ian Jackson  
Nick Wyatt  
Rebecca Robinson

When responding to press, radio and television requests for information or interviews of a political nature, journalists should be referred to the Leader, Deputy Leader, Chairman or Vice-Chairman of the appropriate committee or Member Champion.

Members may respond to requests for press, radio and television interviews in a purely personal capacity outside these procedures and the proceedings will be the personal responsibility of the member concerned. Similar considerations will apply to letters to the press. However, officers will, of course, be able to supply factual information at the request of members and it would be helpful if the Communications staff were kept informed of councillor comments made on controversial issues.

Where press conferences or media events involving members are arranged the Leader, Deputy Leader and/or relevant Chairman or Vice-Chairman and/or Member Champion will be invited to attend.

### **Correcting media errors**

Where factual errors are made in a newspaper article or media broadcast the Communications Team will contact the appropriate editor/journalist to have the information corrected and seek an appropriate apology.

The Press Complaints Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Agency regulate the media. The Communications Team, in consultation with the Chief Executive or Strategic Director AND the Leader will undertake to liaise with these organisations should the need arise.

### **Elections**

The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all forms by the Council for candidates and also for other politicians indirectly involved in the election. Publicity should not deal with controversial

issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in such a way that identifies them with individual members or groups.

We will respond to events and legitimate service enquiries providing factual responses. Members holding key political or civic positions may comment officially in an emergency situation or where there is a genuine need for a member response to an important event outside the Council's control.

## **Appendix Three**

### **Forest Heath News Editorial Guidelines**

#### **Introduction**

Our image as an organisation which provides best value services is reflected in the way we communicate with customers/partners, the use of our logo and corporate colours, the design of our stationery, signs and vehicle livery. The way we write and our use of words also sends out a message about who we are and our values. These editorial guidelines set out how and why we produce Forest Heath News and also how we use language consistently.

#### **The purpose in publishing Forest Heath News is to:**

- ◆ keep residents and other key stakeholders informed about our priorities, achievements, policies and news
- ◆ help uphold and maintain our good reputation by highlighting achievements, seeking views on services provided and publicising action taken to deal with shortcomings
- ◆ provide coverage of key issues/plans, especially where not covered in sufficient depth by the media
- ◆ demonstrate how we are responding to customer needs and listening and reacting to people's concerns
- ◆ explain how, where and when people can access or find more information about our services or about services they might find useful.

- ◆ give voluntary groups and town and parish councils an outlet for news and publicity about their services/events.

## **Paid for space**

While no business advertising is either canvassed or accepted, there shall be the option to accept payment for space from stakeholders and partners such as the PCT, Suffolk County Council, town and parish councils. All money received from such sales shall be used to help finance Forest Heath News.

## **Content**

As far as possible the content in each issue will:

- ◆ aim to achieve a good mix between shorter, more immediate news items and longer, more in depth features
- ◆ be associated directly with at least one of our priorities
- ◆ cover information from a broad range of services to show the extent of our responsibility
- ◆ be written, designed and printed in line with our guidelines on plain English and legibility
- ◆ identify where further information is available via our website or a telephone number
- ◆ provide the opportunity for services to distribute direct response material questionnaires, either as part of the magazine or as an insert which may incur a charge to the service.

## **Editorial management**

The Corporate Development Officer (Communications) has responsibility for the editorial content of Forest Heath News. As with all other Council activity, the postholder is accountable to the Chief Executive and Head of Corporate Development and abides by any legal or Council rules.

Stories in Forest Heath News will only have input from councillors where they are quoted in material reporting directly on their activities.

The Leader and/or the Chairman will be quoted when they are speaking for the Council on policies approved by the Council.

Ward councillors will only be quoted where the issue involved relates directly to their ward.

## **The Corporate Development Officer (Communications) will:**

- ◆ publish an annual production schedule, highlighting copy deadlines and publication dates
- ◆ with as much advance warning as possible, circulate by e-mail a reminder of copy deadlines and publication dates and information of any changes
- ◆ clear all copy with relevant officers
- ◆ on contentious issues, clear copy with the Legal team and, where appropriate, political group leaders
- ◆ arrange printing and distribution as effectively and economically as possible with one copy to every household in Forest Heath plus bulk distribution to the council offices, and by mail to key business contacts, partners, voluntary groups etc
- ◆ arrange for Forest Heath News to be published and distributed in a large print and audio format and arrange for Forest Heath News to be published on our website.

## **Appendix Four**

### **Website guidelines**

Local authority internet sites are playing an increasingly important role in service provision. The Forest Heath District Council website has recently undergone a cosmetic change to make it brighter and easier to use.

The next stage is a comprehensive review of content. An effective internet site needs good, well written, authoritative content. People scan rather than read information on a website so they can quickly find the words that are directly relevant to them. We will also be reviewing the relevance of information under various menu items across the website.

At the moment each service area has an internet author and editor who use the Content Management System to post information about their work. This system has resulted in differing standards of information on the site and it is the intention that the Communications Team of two to become the only website Editors. In this way the team can control the standard of language and presentation. The style of information presented needs to be appropriate to a web audience - it is not acceptable, or accessible, just to reproduce a department's information leaflet, for example.

We will continue to ensure that the Forest Heath District Council website meets the legal requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and acknowledged best practice as promoted by organisations such as the RNIB.

The Communications Team will promote use of the website. This work began when the refreshed look of the site was launched (December 2006). Bright, modern posters were displayed around the district encouraging use of the site to pay or request services, find information, read agendas and contact people. This promotion will continue across the district.

## Appendix Five

### A plain language guide to saying what we mean

#### 1. Aim

The aim of this guide is to help us all communicate better and to get our message across clearly and simply to all residents.

Using this guide will also create a clear Forest Heath District Council written style which is not only “good English” but consistent and lucid. It is not intended to restrict creativity but set standards and encourage simplicity and readability.

Please bear in mind that easy read documents aimed at people with learning difficulties are not the same as plain language documents. Easy read documents use pictures and words to get the message across.

#### What is wrong with this paragraph?

##### **Before**

*If there are any points on which you require explanation or further particulars we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required by telephone.*

This could be written so much clearer and shorter if the writer used plain language. Re-written it looks like this:

##### **After**

*If you have any questions, please ring.*

Here's another example:

##### **Before**

*It is important that you shall read the notes, advice and information detailed opposite then complete the form overleaf (all sections) prior to its immediate return to the Council by way of the envelope provided.*

##### **After**

Please read the notes opposite before you fill in the form. Then send it back to us as soon as possible in the envelope provided.

#### 2. So what is plain language?

Good, plain language comes from writing with the reader in mind, producing text that he or she can quickly and clearly understand and that gets your information across in the most succinct and simple way.

All our communication is about getting information across to our customers and clients. Using plain language achieves this in a considerate and effective way and will help people understand Forest Heath District Council and the work we do. You will save your time, and the council's money, by being clear and to the point. Using plain language will help reduce minimise calls from people confused by literature we send out. Once you get used to writing in plain language it will also speed up your writing.

This guide is divided into four sections:

- ◆ the use of plain, everyday language;
- ◆ setting common standards representing information (dates, numbers, emphasis);
- ◆ punctuation; and
- ◆ creating standard letters.

At the end there is a short checklist covering the main points.

### 3. Everyday language

#### Before you start writing decide:

- ◆ who you are writing for;
- ◆ what you want to say to them;
- ◆ whether you want anything back from them;
- ◆ what they might ask when they read your information;
- ◆ your "tone of voice" (imagine you are talking to your reader as if they are someone you know);
- ◆ who they should contact for more information and assistance.

In local government we tend to use words and phrases like 'sustainability', 'corporate' and 'social inclusion'. These terms are quite specialised and not always understood by general readers. If they cannot be simplified then it is worth explaining them clearly, even if it takes an extra sentence or two.

Always read what you've written out loud. It should flow easily and its meaning should be clear and unambiguous. Have someone else read it to be sure – preferably someone who is not as expert in the subject as you.

#### ***Redundant words***

These words add little to what you want to say. Make your writing clearer and more readable by cutting out unnecessary words. The examples below illustrate some common redundant words.

*eliminate completely; new initiative; advance warning; each individual; added bonus; joint partnership; really necessary; new record; future planning; the colour red; proper facts; existing garage.*

Before you write phrases like 'as appropriate' or 'where necessary', ask yourself if they add anything to the reader's understanding.

## Formal and legal words

Many formal (usually long) words have more commonly-used (usually shorter) alternatives which make reading easier. For instance, use *help* for *facilitate*, *need* for *requirement*, *give* or *send* for *disseminate*.

You should also avoid legalistic words which are now old-fashioned. For example: *herewith*, *aforesaid*, *forthwith*, *heretofore* and others can all be avoided.

## Simple words

Many of the words and phrases we commonly use at work can be replaced with much simpler ones. Here are a few examples:

<u>Avoid</u> require	<u>Prefer</u> <i>need</i>	<u>Avoid</u> in the event of	<u>Prefer</u> <i>If</i>
enquire	<i>ask</i>	implement	<i>carry out, do</i>
per annum in excess of	<i>a year, yearly more than</i>	commence in receipt of	<i>Start, begin getting, receiving</i>
prior to residence complete	<i>before home fill in</i>	submit accordingly in lieu of	<i>Send, give So instead of</i>
<u>Avoid</u> reimburse	<u>Prefer</u> <i>repay, back</i>	<u>Avoid</u> utilise	<u>Prefer</u> <i>Use</i>
accompany in connection with frequently jeopardise on the grounds that	<i>go with about often risk because</i>	accomplish denote hitherto modification provided that	<i>Do Show until now change if, as long as</i>
remuneration	<i>pay, wages, salary</i>	statutory	<i>legal, byelaw</i>

## Short sentences

Long, complicated sentences can be difficult to follow. Short sentences make punchy points. Reduce them to readable lengths by separating your different points. You can do this with punctuation or by using lists. For example, instead of:

*'It would be for local authorities to determine what measures were appropriate for their area, and to co-ordinate appropriately with local companies and with neighbouring authorities...'*

use:

*Local authorities should decide their area's needs. To do this they should work with local companies and neighbouring authorities.*

Don't produce long lists as one sentence. Try bullet points to keep it simple and clear. However, too many very short sentences can make your writing very jerky, so varying the length of your sentences can make your writing livelier. Aim for an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words.

### **Passive and active verbs**

Using a lot of passive verbs makes writing dull, bureaucratic and impersonal. Active verbs help produce clearer, and generally shorter, sentences. You should aim to make most of your verbs active.

Compare:

*'It is expected that guidance will be forthcoming' (Passive)*

with

*'We expect to receive guidance' (Active)*

Active verbs simplify what is said, creating sentences with a “doer” who does something to a “thing”.

Passive verbs change this order to “thing - verb – doer”. More words have to be added to make it work and the sentence becomes clumsy.

For example: *The goal was scored by the footballer.*

Compared to the more direct example: *The footballer scored.*

Passive verbs usually have two elements:

- ◆ Part of the verb “to be” - is, was, have been, were, be, being, are, am
- ◆ A past participle - made, broken, given, written, done, put

So avoid these - for example:

Passive - *A further report will be brought to the next review board meeting.*

Active - The review board will discuss a further report at its next meeting.

Passive - *The fact that the equipment was faulty was not known by the electrician.*

Active - The electrician did not know that the equipment was faulty.

Aim for 80 per cent to 90 per cent active verbs in everything you write.

There are times, though, when passive verbs work.

- ◆ When an active verb sounds too hostile -  
*The invoice has not been paid.* - Passive  
*You have not paid the invoice.* - Active

- ◆ When the focus of the statement is the thing - often found in headlines -  
*Councillor attacked by dog*  
*Director's fine is doubled*  
*Lottery money eaten by snail*
- ◆ When you don't know who did something -  
*The letter was put through the letterbox.*

So use passive verbs to soften the tone of your writing when necessary.

Finally, “doers” are not always people, and “things” are not always things.  
*The sea washed away Jonah.*

### **Use Verbs - Not Nouns**

Avoid nouns ending in “tion” - it's usually simpler and shorter to use a verb.  
 For example:

- Noun - *Consideration will be given to the reorganisation of the filing.*
- Verb - *We will consider reorganising the filing.*
- Noun - *Interpretation of the rules was provided by Peter.*
- Verb - *Peter interpreted the rules.*

Making a noun out of a verb means your writing can become tedious. Use the simpler

- ◆ 'to arrange' instead of 'to make arrangements for'
- ◆ 'to provide' instead of 'to implement the provision of'
- ◆ 'we intend' instead of 'the intention would be'.

### **Prepositions**

A preposition is a word used with a noun to relate the noun to some other word, e.g.: in, over, with, for, upon. Sentences can be overrun by prepositions, e.g., "Our seats were very near to the orchestra". “Near” is enough and “to” can be left out. So it reads: “We sat near the orchestra”.

It is generally agreed that you should not end a sentence with a preposition. You can break this rule if your ear tells you that that is where the preposition goes best.

### **Double negatives**

Do not use double negatives. While it might seem not unclear to do so it can be confusing. Or rather, while it might seem clear, it can be confusing.

## **Split infinitives**

To boldly go, is the classic split infinitive – that is where a word, or words, come between the “to” part of a verb and the verb itself. You should move the word that splits the infinitive if this does not change your meaning. It should read “To go boldly”.

## **Consistency**

Varying the words you use for the same item may make your writing more pleasing and interesting. But, if you do, it can confuse and annoy the reader. If you are writing to inform it's far better to choose the correct word and keep to it. So, if you are writing to someone about their house, stick to “house” and don't change to “dwelling”, “property” or “home” part way through the letter.

## **Use English not foreign or Latin phrases**

Avoid foreign or Latin phrases.

*Inter alia*, *ultra vires* and *ipso facto* will mean nothing to most of the population and most of the council staff as well!

## **S or Z?**

Where words can be spelled with either an s or a z, such as organise (organize) - use the s.

## **Use Non Offensive Language**

There's no need to go overboard on politically correct (PC) words and phrases. But it is quite easy to use non-sexist terminology. You should try to avoid causing offence, especially with terms that apply equally to men and women.

For example, use:

*Staffing* not *Manpower* or *manning*

*Refuse Collector* not *Dustman*

*Fire Fighter* not *Fireman*

*Disabled people* not *the disabled*

Many of the PC phrases you will hear are either deliberate jokes or have acquired the status of jokes. *Vertically restricted pre-adults* (children) or *personhole cover*, for example. Don't use them.

However, Forest Heath District Council has, by tradition used *Chairman*, not *Chair* or *Chairperson* or even *Chairwoman*. Whilst breaking the above rule this is our practice at Forest Heath and should be continued.

## **Spelling**

Many English words sound the same and look alike. Do you mean horde or hoard?

Boarder or border? Licensing or licence? Is it toe or tow the line? (It's toe.) The wrong one can affect the meaning horribly.

Use the spellchecker on your PC to check your work but use your brain too. Always have someone else read your text before publication, preferably someone not an expert in the subject. This will ensure it says what you think it does. Keep a list of those words you know trip you up regularly, it happens to us all. **If you are producing a leaflet/document for the public then the Communications Unit must proofread it BEFORE it goes to the printer. Call Sally (1361) or Julie (1236) for more information.**

#### 4. Corporate Standards

This section sets standards for a number of common additions to your writing and ways of presenting information – use of emphasis, quotation marks, numbers, dates etc.

##### Adding Emphasis

Using *italics*, underlining and **boldening** text are really the only ways to add emphasis to your letters or other writing. Don't overuse these and don't use them together. *Don't use underlining for work intended for webpages.*

Other methods of adding emphasis are complicated and ultimately tiring on the eyes. When producing an article or a leaflet you can put some text in a box to emphasis it, but too many of these are confusing and distract from the main text, so that it might be ignored altogether.

Adding special features changes the spacing and sizing of the text and people find it more difficult to read than ordinary text. You should use them to add emphasis only, and not in large blocks of text. For example:

☺ *Keep text in bold, capitals, reverse (black on white) and italics under control. Use bold rather than other methods to add emphasis.*

Adding special features changes the spacing and sizing of the text and people find it more difficult to read than normally produced text. You should use them to add emphasis only, and not in large blocks of text.

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ADDING SPECIAL FEATURES CHANGES THE SPACING AND SIZING OF THE TEXT AND PEOPLE FIND IT MORE DIFFICULT TO READ THAN NORMALLY PRODUCED TEXT. YOU SHOULD USE THEM TO ADD EMPHASIS ONLY, AND NOT IN LARGE BLOCKS OF TEXT.

## Quotations

Quotation marks are for quoting reported speech or from a document. For example: *as you said at the time "no comment"*; *as you wrote in your letter "no way"*. Use double quotation marks for quotes and use single marks when you use a quote within a quote, for example: "he said 'you'll be alright'". However if it is a heading or headline, use single quotes.

Often people put single quotes around a word or phrase to indicate there is something about it that they are not comfortable with. This is not correct English and should not be done.

The double quotation marks should come after any punctuation mark which is part of the quotation, but before any punctuation mark which is not part of the quotation.

**"He asked me 'Where are we?'"**, she replied

but

*"Did he say 'Here we are'?"*, she pondered.

Full stops always come after the last set of quotation marks.

## Always Explain Abbreviations

Abbreviations are a good, shorthand way of passing information. But only if everybody knows what they mean! Using abbreviations can exclude your reader and look patronising if you do not explain them fully. We get so used to using them that we can forget that the majority of the country has no idea what LGA, BV, INTERREG etc mean.

At the beginning of your document say: *Because of Best Value (BV) ...*  
then later you can write: *BV requires us to ...*

Here are some more to avoid.

- ◆ Jan and Feb - months deserve their full name.
- ◆ Ampersands - the symbol &. Write 'and', it helps your reader's understanding (unless it forms part of a brand or trademark such as Marks & Spencer)
- ◆ Whilst most people understand that km stands for kilometres not everyone understands that 10k means 10,000 - so don't use this. Also 10,000ha is no laughing matter: ha is an abbreviation for hectares, which everyone may not understand. Use hectares in full.
- ◆ Xmas - write Christmas.
- ◆ FHDC - take the trouble to write Forest Heath or Forest Heath District Council.
- ◆ It's tempting to add *etc* at the end of a list. Do you really need it? Or are you just adding insurance in case something has been forgotten? Remember that if you use "eg" you shouldn't use "etc." at the end of the list of examples. Using "eg" indicates the

list is a short version of a range of examples and this includes the possibility of there being more examples which could be added.

- ◆ Use open punctuation for common abbreviations at all times. For example: eg not e.g., ie not i.e., etc not etc. Use Mr A Wilcox not Mr. A. Wilcox. Even better, avoid using titles and initials wherever possible as they only make the Council seem unapproachable. Ashley Wilcox sounds far friendlier.
- ◆ Use of open punctuation also applies to acronyms - FHDC not F.H.D.C. This is also easier to type.
- ◆ Use Cllr in the title for a council member, for example Cllr Geoffrey Jaggard, but when referring to a councillor or councillors, spell the word in full.

## Numbers

- ◆ Always write out the numbers one to nine in words and use numerals for 10 upwards.  
  
The exception is when a sentence starts with a number, in which case the number should be spelt out. For example: 'Seventeen year old....' But avoid really big numbers like 1,243 at the beginning of sentences.
- ◆ The same goes for positions – it's first to ninth, 10<sup>th</sup> and above in figures.
- ◆ Numbers with four figures take commas: 3,000 not 3000, £4,500 not £4500
- ◆ With money and time avoid clutter. If it is a round figure, leave out the zero. So £6, not £6.00 but £6.25; 10am not 10.00am but 10.25am, 12 noon, midnight
- ◆ Use figures in lists of units of measurement – 6, 12 and 18 hectares
- ◆ Use figures with standard abbreviations – 6ft, 8p – but explain specialist ones.
- ◆ The word "per cent" should always be used in the main body of your text: 50 per cent, not 50%. Use the symbol in tables.
- ◆ Telephone numbers should be split into readable sections. Usually two sets of three numbers: 01474 337 333, occasionally three sets of two where it makes sense: 01474 33 33 33. Never split telephone numbers over two lines.
- ◆ Never split any number over two lines as it will make your meaning less clear.
- ◆ It is common in planning to use the following *2 no 4 bedroom houses*. This would be better written as two, four-bedroom houses.

## Dates

Always write them with the day of the week first and in plain numbers: Wednesday 27 February 2006 (day, date, month, year). Not 22<sup>nd</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup> just 22 or 23. This applies in the body of text as well on letters and memos.

For example: Thank you for your letter received on January 1 2006.

## Bullet points

Bullet points or lists provide a simple and effective way of getting messages across. They usually follow either a heading or an introductory phrase ending in a colon. In general and in committee papers in particular, members prefer to have paragraphs numbered. To switch to this use the Format menu, click on Bullets and Numbering and select the number option. In other documents where non-numbered bullets can be used always select the diamond bullet point (◆) from the same menu.

In a formal document the words split into bullet points still form a single sentence when read with the introduction:

- ◆ so end each section with a semicolon;
- ◆ start the section with a lower case letter; and
- ◆ finish the section with a full stop.

However, in a formal document, if each bullet point is followed by a complete sentence, then each section needs a full stop. Where this is the case, the sections should start with a capital letter.

In display material such as posters, leaflets and exhibition boards you can keep things simple. Leave out the punctuation at the end of each line as fewer marks make less clutter which gives greater impact and ensures the words stand out.

## Punctuation

Punctuation is important and can change the entire meaning of a sentence. Some of the punctuation marks that are commonly misused and their correct use are:

### Comma (,)

This is used:

- ◆ to separate main points when the second is not closely identified with the first;  
*Cars will turn here, coaches will go straight on.*
- ◆ to avoid momentary misunderstanding;  
*In the valley below, the villages looked very small.*
- ◆ in a sentence which would mean something different without the comma;

*I did not come home, in order to play golf*

.

- ◆ between adjectives qualifying a noun;  
*a cautious, eloquent man*

- ◆ to separate items in a list of more than two items;  
*potatoes, peas and carrots*
- ◆ to mark the beginning and end of a word or phrase inserted in an otherwise grammatically complete sentence.  
*It appears, however, that they were wrong.*

### **Semicolon (;)**

This separates two or more points which are of more or less equal importance and are linked as a pair.

*To err is human; to forgive, divine.*

There are few instances where a semicolon will be necessary in our writing; so avoid using it.

### **Colon (:)**

This is used:

- ◆ to separate main points when there is a step forward from the first to the second, as from introduction to main theme, or from cause to effect; *Hockey is a great game: playing it will give you a real thrill.*
- ◆ to introduce a list of items (a dash should *not* be added), and after expressions such as *namely:*, *for example:*, *to sum up:*.
- ◆ before a quotation.  
*John Brown said: "I am delighted to accept this prize."*

## **Apostrophes**

Apostrophes indicate possession (something belonging to someone or something) and in some cases abbreviation of a word.

The apostrophe goes after the person who, or the thing which, possesses something or someone. If the word is singular it goes before the 's', and if plural, after it (with the exception of already plural words such as children – possessive, children's

Examples: *The boy's toy (one boy), boys' toys (more than one boy), the family's house, the families' houses, children's home, managers' seminar*

Where a name ends with "s" the rule is to add an apostrophe and extra "s" if that is how the word is pronounced, and just an apostrophe if the extra "s" is not heard.

For example *Forest Heaths' policy is..., the Jones's house...*

There is often confusion between "its" and "it's", which frequently appear in the wrong form.

- ◆ “Its” is the possessive form of “it”, like “your” is the possessive form of “you” and is a complete word in its own right. When “it” possesses something “it” doesn’t have an apostrophe.
- ◆ “It’s” is the abbreviation for “it is”, with the apostrophe indicating the missing second “i” in “it is”. For example: *It’s finished ...* It is often better not to abbreviate in this case.

Avoid words where an apostrophe is used to indicate missing letters – won’t, can’t, shouldn’t.

Use apostrophes to indicate the plural of single letters – mind your P’s and Q’s.

Apostrophes are not needed in abbreviations such as MPs, unless indicating possession, as in the MP’s surgery. Please use PCs and not PC’s unless your referring to the PC’s screen. Decades and centuries such as 1960s, 1800s do not need apostrophes.

### Hyphen (-)

This is used:

- ◆ in compound words used about someone or something;  
*He is a well-known man but the man is well known.*
- ◆ to join a prefix to a proper name;  
*anti-Darwinian*
- ◆ to prevent misconceptions by linking words;  
*twenty-odd people*
- ◆ to prevent misconceptions by separating a prefix from the main word;  
*One player resigned, but later he re-signed*
- ◆ to represent a common second element in all but the last word of a list;  
*two-, three-, or four-fold*
- ◆ at the end of a line in printing, to indicate that the last word has been divided. However it not usual to do this and the automatic hyphenation should be switched off.

Hyphens should only be used within words, for example self-confident, while dashes are used to separate a clause in a sentence – like this – and give a clearer, longer break than commas.

Don’t use a dash instead of ‘to’, for example: The event is from 1 to 4pm, not 1-4pm

### Exclamation marks

An exclamation is a short expression of surprise, shock or anger. Wow! You surprise me! As such they don’t often occur within our text except in publicity material.

When exclamation marks are used correctly there should be only one.

## Standard Letters

Below are standards for the content of letters.

### The greeting

Where possible start a letter using the person's title and last name: *Dear Mr Brown* or sometimes, if you know the person well and it does not compromise or jar with the text of the letter, *Dear David*. There's normally no need to include initials or first names in the greeting.

So *Dear Mrs Green*, not *Dear Mrs Vera Green* or *Dear Mrs V Green*.

The only exception is when you don't know a woman's preferred title, but you do know her first name. In such cases it is perfectly acceptable to write *Dear Susan Hedges* or *Dear Ms Hedges*.

If you don't know the person's name, use:

*Dear Sir*, *Dear Madam*, *Dear Sir or Madam* or *Dear Sirs as appropriate*.

If you are writing to a councillor, use: *Dear Councillor Jaggard*. At Forest Heath we distinguish between male and female councillors, so use *Dear Councillor Mrs Burt*.

And finally, use the title the person uses. If they write to you as *Ms Johnson*, don't reply to *Miss Johnson*.

When referring to a person ie Mrs P Bragg it is preferable not to split Mrs from P or P from Bragg at a line end. This can be achieved in Word by using Ctrl, Shift, space between the elements of a name, this will then keep the whole name together. Looks a lot better. The same applies to dates.

In the address panel and when typing people's names and title do not punctuate.

<i>Mr J O King</i> <i>22 Liverpool Road</i> <i>Brighton</i> <i>East Sussex</i> <i>BN1 6YH</i>	Not	<i>Mr. J. O. King,</i> <i>22, Liverpool Road,</i> <i>Brighton,</i> <i>East Sussex,</i> <i>BN1 6YH</i>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

<i>Dear Mr King</i>	<i>Dear Mr. King,</i>
---------------------	-----------------------

### Endings

If the letter begins "*Dear name*", end it with *Yours sincerely*. If it starts any other way, end the letter with *Yours faithfully*.

### Headings

All letters benefit from a heading. Avoid ALL CAPITALS - they are unfriendly and can be difficult to read. Embolden it, and leave a clear line before the main text:

For

example:

Dear Mr Smart

**Building at 34 High Street, Brandon**

Your text then carries on...

### **Identifying the Author**

Your letters should read as if they came from a person, not an organisation.

Use *I* or *We* where possible, not *the council*.

For example:

*I can send you the information on Tuesday.*

not,

*The council will send you the information on Tuesday.*

This will help you to write actively, not passively.

### **Signatures**

In general, if **you** have written the letter then **you** should be identified at the bottom of the letter and should sign it.

Everybody gets letters where they can't tell who sent it - don't let yours be one of them. Underneath your signature put your name and job title.

If you're female, you do not have to include your title, but it helps the person receiving the letter to know how you wish to be addressed.

*Joseph Butler*  
*Administration Assistant*

*Miss Pamela Ash*  
*Marketing Manager*

Sign the letter - don't initial it.

### **Paragraphs**

Use paragraphs to make separate points and ease reading.

### **Letter Formats**

Keep everything ranged to the left - no indentations unless you really want a section to stand out.

## **Copies and Enclosures**

If you want to tell the reader that other people are getting copies of the letter, list their names at the foot of the letter under the heading *Cc:* . If there are enclosures, list them at the foot of the letter under the heading *Enc:*

**The end - well done, you've read the entire plain language guide!**

## **Appendix Six**

### **PR Planner**

This is an ever changing document and is reproduced here as an example only. The content will have changed!



## PR PLANNER

Date	Event	What FHDC is doing	PR work	Evaluation	Lead officers	C (Char)
October to March 07	Leisure and Cultural Trust	Press releases Adverts Info packs Public meetings	Press releases on Trust; Media briefing; Info packs for potential trustees; Press releases on shadow board; Press releases on shadow trustees; Press release/media briefing on formation of trust; press release on hand-over of management; Press release on appointment of CE	Coverage of trust in all local newspapers after press releases; request for media briefing granted and resulted in positive coverage.	Tony Bass	Bi Ne
1 - 30 November	Lung Cancer Awareness	Publicity on stop smoking campaigns	Article in Forest Heath News in March issue to promote Stop Smoking initiatives		Jess Arnold	
3 December	Day of Disabled Persons <i>(should be people really?)</i>	DES needs to be published	Promote with the media (press release) our DES. Leaflets to <b>disability</b> groups. Website info		Emma Reynard	
8 December	Promotion of Police Stay Safe campaign	FHDC to add quote	Police arranging for Met Police horses in Newmarket High Street			
12 December	Plain English Day		Internal campaign to promote the use of plain language in letters/documents FHDC produces. Q&D Plain language guides emailed and on Intranet		Sally	

13 December	Member Champions		Press release - names, biogs, pics of new Member Champions			Geoffi
26 December - 2 Jan.	Winter Walks festival	Possible further Health Walks	Press releases Photo opps		Nick Wyatt	Su counc
1 Jan	Smoking banned at Brandon Leisure Centre		Press release and photo opp Promotion of stop smoking clinic	Awareness of change and increased attendance at the clinic	Jessica Arnold	Su
January to March	Election		Promotion of standing as councillor (roadshows); postal vote changes; changes at polling stations. Possible ring-fenced gov. money to pay for poster campaign	Increased turn-out	Sarah Cheek	Sue S
January	Home of Horseracing	Report going to council	Prepare large scale press briefing - national, regional and local BEFORE stories are written from the agenda papers. Use external freelance PR help		Tony Bass	Bi Robin
Jan 07	Sloppy slippers	Suffolk safety campaign - cash from WSLSP	Feature in Forest Heath News		Jessica Arnold	Su
27 Jan - 03 Feb 2007	National Story Telling Week	Story telling sessions in leisure centres/council foyer	Photo opps.		Lizzie Cocker	Lisa
12 - 26 Feb	Fair Trade Fortnight	FREE fairly traded tea and coffee at Bus Station	Press release/photo opps	Media coverage/promotion of fair trade/vib. Town centres	Charlotte Collins	Sue ( Ca
14 - 21 Feb 2007	BTO National Nest Box Week	Put up nest boxes in local nature reserves/FHDC offices	Photo opps. Press releases		Nick Wyatt	
11 - 18 March	Real Nappy Week	Promotion of real nappies	Press release on how many disposable nappies are in landfill sites		Charlotte Collins	
11 - 17 March	Obesity Awareness	Work with leisure centres	Photo opps; press releases		Leisure	

		to raise awareness - it is now an FHDC health priority				
14 March	No Smoking Day	Ban on smoking anywhere on FHDC property !!	Press release; adverts		Jess Arnold	
1 April	Carbon Emmissions	EERA initiatives	Work with Charlotte/planners etc - promote car sharing/bike riding internally?			
1 April	FHDC hands over management of leisure/cultural services to new trust					
23 April	Turn off TV Day	Provide a range of activities for young people	Photo opps. Press release FHN article		Leisure	
6 to 12 May	Compost Awareness Week	Publicity for our Brown Bin scheme; free composter offer	FHN; Photo opp Press release Advertise composter offer		Environmental Services	
16 - 24 June	Bike Week	Encourage cycling to work - offer free hi-vis straps to cyclists?	Photo opp; incentive for FHDC staff to cycle to work;		Jess Arnold	Sue
18 June	Men's Health Week	Father's Day in the Forest	Info in the foyer Press release Photo opps (possibly)		Jess Arnold	