

# **A Good Practice Guide to Communicating with Older People**



Produced by **Agewell's**  
**Communicating with Older People Working Group**

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# A Good Practice Guide to Communicating with Older People

This guide is for anyone who wants to improve the quality and accessibility of their information provision to older people.

Good practice should be followed in all communications: letters, leaflets, posters, website designs, newsletters, forms, advertisements, signs and notices, and in giving spoken information.

Information empowers people to make informed choices. Everyone has the right to accurate information, and this right is enshrined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. However, research shows that information often does not reach those who need it most. Producing effective information does not have to be very expensive. It does need some creative thinking and persistence.



# **8 steps towards getting my message across**

## **step 1**

**Who is my information for?**

## **step 2**

**How should I get my message across?**

## **step 3**

**How should I design my written information  
– the look, the images and the text?**

## **step 4**

**How should I write my information?**

## **step 5**

**What other ways are there to communicate -face to face,  
other languages, other formats and media?**

## **step 6**

**Why, how and who should I consult?**

## **step 7**

**How can I distribute information and maximise access?**

## **step 8**

**How can I evaluate my information and how I distributed it?**

# Contents

Who is my information for?	Page 6
How should I get my message across?	Page 7
How should I design my written information – the look, the images, and the text?	Page 8
How should I write my information?	Page 12
What other ways are there to communicate – face to face, other languages, other formats and media?	Page 13
Why, how and who should I consult?	Page 18
How can I distribute information and maximise access?	Page 19
How can I evaluate my information and how I distributed it?	Page 21
Acknowledgements	Page 22
Evaluation form for this guide.	Page 23

# step 1

## Who is my information for?

- Even if you are targeting the community in general, remember that older people will constitute a significant proportion of your audience. There are 53,595 adults in Sandwell who are of pensionable age (19% of the population - 2001 Census) .
- Know your audience - are you targeting older people, or other people on their behalf (such as carers or professionals working with them)? This may influence how you choose to get your message across.
- If you are targeting older people, you should state this explicitly. Not all older people will identify themselves with the terminology you use – so think carefully.

## step 2

# How should I get my message across?

### Some of the benefits of written information:

- It can support information given in other forms, reinforcing your message.
- It can give more information than can be communicated verbally.
- Your audience may keep it for future reference.
- It may be shown to friends and relatives thereby helping people to share information.
- It may help to ensure that everyone receives the same level of information.

### Are you sure it is necessary to produce new written information? Have you checked:

- Whether it would be better to ask voluntary groups if you could include the information in their newsletter?
- Whether people would prefer to hear the information in person, for example, by attending meetings of community groups?
- If there are leaflets already available, produced by other organisations, which give the same information, you may not need to produce your own leaflet.
- If it is possible to work together on information provision and publications with other organisations with a common audience and/or aims, in order to maximise the benefits for the recipients of your information?

## step 3

# How should I design my written information?

If you are using designers, make it very clear to them that visual clarity is necessary. They and you should follow these guidelines:

### The look

- Use a clear simple design and provide good navigational aids for the reader such as a contents list and clear headings. Order the document in a logical way that makes sense to the reader.
- If your organisation has a 'house style' it should be adapted to make it accessible for older people.
- Include your logo and name so that the reader knows who the information is from.
- Leave spaces between paragraphs and don't cram the page. Provide plenty of spaces on forms, as many older people have some visual impairment, and their handwriting may be larger than average.
- If using more than one column per page, make sure that they are clearly marked by a line or there is enough space between them as this layout often confuses the reader.
- Use matt rather than glossy or reflective finishes of paper. Very thin semi-transparent paper can cause problems if it is not strong enough as text can show through from the other side.

### step 3 How should I design my written information?

- Check the size is suitable: posters larger than A4 may not be accepted on noticeboards because of the pressure on space, and large leaflets may not fit in standard leaflet racks unless they are folded.
- There are many benefits to professionally designed information but if you have restricted resources there are benefits in producing your own information on a computer: it could allow you to save costs, correct any mistakes, make amendments if details change, and print more copies on demand.

### The images

- All illustrations/photographs/cartoons should be positive images of older people in the community and should reflect all cultures that are relevant to the text.
- Make sure the illustrations/photographs/cartoons appropriately reflect the text.
- The image should be appropriate for the race and cultural needs of your audience.
- Before using a photograph of an older person, you should check with them that they consent to its use, even if consent has previously been given, as it may no longer be appropriate to use the image.

### step 3 How should I design my written information?

#### The text

- Use plain fonts (usually sans serif) avoiding unusual or indistinct fonts.
- Do not incorporate images into the text as this may obscure the words.
- Ideally use font size 16 and never use less than font size 14 – size can significantly improve legibility.
- Increasing the ‘leading’ – the spacing between the lines of text – can also improve legibility.
- Stick to even word spacing rather than condensing or stretching lines of type.
- Justify your text to the left. If you justify to the right this will make the spacing between words irregular, and decrease visibility.
- Line length should be in the range of 50-65 characters. Blind and partially sighted people may prefer even shorter lines than this. Avoid splitting words at the ends of lines.

Helvetica	✓
Arial	✓
Gill Sans	✓
<hr/>	
GeoSlab	✗
Times	✗

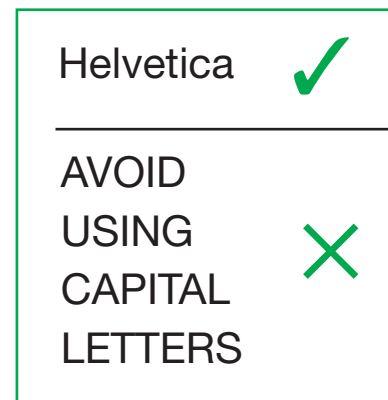
16 point	✓
<hr/>	
12 point	✗

16 point on 22 point leading	✓
<hr/>	
16 point on 16 point leading	✗

Even word spacing	✓
<hr/>	
Condensed Expanded	✗

### step 3 How should I design my written information?

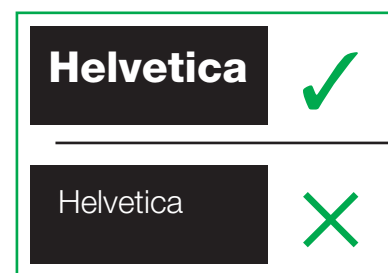
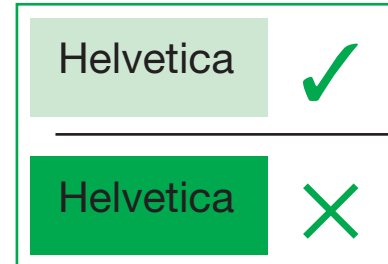
- Avoid using capital letters for continuous text as they are harder to read than lower case letters.
- Never lay text over photos/images e.g. the use of watermarks.



- Make sure that there is contrast between background and text by using dark lettering on a light background. Black type on white or yellow paper gives the best contrast.



- Reversals of type (white type on black) will only be acceptable if the typeface, font size and paper weight are suitable. Avoid reversing small font sizes and, if possible, avoid reversing completely.



## step 4

# How should I write my information?

- Use jargon free 'English' – all your audiences (both professional and service users) will understand this better. You can get advice from the Plain English Campaign. Telephone 01663 744409 or visit their website at [www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk)
- Use personal pronouns (I, we, and you) to help the reader to identify with the material.
- Use numbers and bullet points when you are making several points under one heading, rather than list the points in a paragraph of continuous text.
- All published information should be dated with the month and year to ensure that out of date information can be easily identified.
- All information should include contact details (including emergency contact numbers) where appropriate, and these should be in large clear print, like the rest of the text.

# step 5

## What other ways are there to communicate?

### Face to face information

- People who come to talk to you, to get information or advice, may prefer to be seen in a private room, or in a screened-off area of an open plan office.
- Do not assume that the person to whom you are talking wishes to be called by their first name; ask how they would like to be addressed i.e. Joyce or Mrs Smith.
- Places where you give face to face information should have low levels of background noise. Remember a hearing aid amplifies the background noise as well as speech. Some florescent strip lighting may emit a humming noise, which can be distracting to hearing aid wearers.
- When talking to older people, staff should try to keep their faces visible and not obscure their mouths, as some older people rely on lip reading to supplement their hearing. Try not to turn your back on someone whilst talking to them.
- Places where you give face to face information should be well lit and ideally your seating arrangements should place the older person with their back to windows or lighting sources. This ensures that shadows do not fall on the staff member's face, which can obscure their mouth and therefore prevent the older person from reading their lips.
- It is important to speak clearly and not too fast but shouting or over-mouthing will alter the lip pattern and may not be helpful.

## step 5 What other ways are there to communicate?

- Write down clearly any important facts for people to take away with them.
- Periodically check with the person you are talking to that he/she has understood what you have said.

### Ethnic minority languages

- Plain English is equally necessary for information that is going to be translated into other languages.
- All translations should be checked before use to ensure clarity and accuracy.
- Not all minority ethnic communities have a written language culture and therefore alternative methods of communicating should be considered, such as translations read onto audiotape or using word of mouth or pictures.
- Written information could include a telephone number to obtain further information from someone in his or her mother tongue, if this option is available.
- Use existing support services for example the Community Health Network and Lay Health Workers within the Primary Care Trust.

## step 5 What other ways are there to communicate?

### Other formats and media

- You should make your written information available in formats other than standard text and in ethnic minority languages, according to the needs of your target audience.
- You should publicise the alternative formats you can offer in those other formats.
- If you are not sure if there will be sufficient demand for alternative formats you should make arrangements to provide them on request.

### Video and audio tape

There are a number of reasons to consider producing information in video or audio tape formats:

- In Britain around 20% of the adult population has poor literacy skills.
- Not all minority ethnic communities have a written language culture.
- You can use people from different cultures and backgrounds in the information you produce. This will reflect Sandwell's diverse communities.
- Many older people have some visual or hearing impairment, therefore audio and videotapes are a useful method of communication.
- Video taped information should avoid loud background music or noises and flashing or rapidly changing images.

## step 5 What other ways are there to communicate?

### Websites

- Websites should use the same good practice about design and content as other written information and additionally should avoid flashing images.
- Producing a 'text only' version of your website, and avoiding the use of frames, can avoid conflict with the software which reads pages out to people with visual impairment.

The Web Accessibility Initiative publishes guidelines on making your website accessible. You will find their website at [www.w3.org/WAI](http://www.w3.org/WAI)

### Hearing impairment

There are a number of alternative formats and communication aids you can consider, when targeting information at older people with hearing impairments:

- British sign language video
- Videophone
- Typetalk
- Email
- Signing, in person
- Minicom
- Fax
- Induction loop

For more advice you can contact the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) Helpline on 0870 605 0123.

## step 5 What other ways are there to communicate?

### Visual impairment

There are a number of alternative formats and communication aids you can consider, when targeting information at older people with visual impairments:

- Braille
- Large print text
- Audio tape

For more advice you can contact the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) Helpline on 0845 7388 9999.

### Dual sensory impairment

Studies by the Department of Health indicate that 1 in 3 people over 75 have deafblindness.

For more information you can contact:

Sense West, 9a Birkdale Avenue, off Heeley Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham or telephone 0121 415 2720.

## step 6

# Why, how and who should I consult?

- Before producing your information, consult your audience to find out what information they want or need to know. You should also ask your colleagues for their opinions.
- Make sure that a draft of the document is read and commented on by your audience – both for content and presentation – before being finalised. Try to approach people who are not frequently consulted, and are therefore unfamiliar with jargon and services i.e. people in nursing or residential settings.
- Some of the ways in which you can involve your audience in developing your information include talking to them via existing forums, inviting members of your audience to a focus group, asking them to complete a survey.

## step 7

# How can I distribute my information and maximise access to it?

- Establish if your target audience identifies themselves as ‘older people’?
- You can target different groups of older people through different processes. Be imaginative e.g. via pubs, supermarkets, and religious venues.
- Don’t assume your leaflets will be displayed effectively, or indeed displayed at all! You should ask organisations if they are able to distribute your information, and how much they are able to distribute. You may have to supply your own display rack.
- Keep a list of named contacts at all your distribution points for future use, such as for gathering feedback and re-stocking. Give them a named contact in your organisation.
- Ask those who distribute your information to destroy information that is out of date.
- Send copies of your information to all professionals who should have it, such as library archives, communications/information departments, heads of services and referers to your service.
- Use a variety of sources to get your information out, such as health professionals, in order to reinforce the message.

## step 7 How can I distribute my information and maximise access to it?

- Are the places that people might go to obtain information physically accessible for older people, with disabled access, parking, ramps, toilets, signs, handrails on steps, good lighting, automatic or easily opened doors?
- Are there hearing loops in reception areas and meeting rooms?
- Are the noticeboards, reception, enquiry desks and information areas clearly signed?
- Are the information racks at an accessible level and is there any seating near the information points, offering people a chance to examine the information before moving on?

## step 8

# How can I evaluate my information and how I distributed it?

How will you know if your information reaches your target audience – the people who need it?

- Talk to older people to identify if and where they have encountered your information, and if the information was effective.
- If your information is publicising a specific service then monitor the level of service take up or inquiries both before and after producing your information.
- Where relevant, include an evaluation form to allow individuals to comment after publication. If you are posting your information to people you can include a Freepost envelope with your evaluation form.

We have produced a simple evaluation form for this guide (see inside back cover). We hope you will fill in and return to us.

# Acknowledgements

This guide has been produced by Agewell, working in partnership with Age Concern Sandwell, the African Caribbean Resource Centre, Partnership in Action, Wednesbury and West Bromwich Primary Care Trust and Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust.

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We would also like to acknowledge the support given to us by the Health Improvement Programme for Older People in Camden and Islington and for permitting us to use their guide as the basis for our own.

## Evaluation Form

We are keen to find out what you think of our Guide and how you think it could be improved. We would be very grateful if you would take the time to fill in this page and return it to Agewell using one of the methods detailed below.

By post: **Agewell, 15-17 Bull Street, West Bromwich B70 6EU**

By fax: **0121 525 9512**

By email: **[agewell@ageconcernsandwell.org.uk](mailto:agewell@ageconcernsandwell.org.uk)**

Do you have any suggestions to improve the content of the Guide?

If so, what would they be?

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Any suggestions to improve the presentation or appearance of the Guide?

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Please write any other comments you have about the Guide?

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Anyone aged over 50 and living in Sandwell can help make a difference to their life and those of others by being a part of Agewell. If you would like to find out more, please get in touch as follows:-

By post:

**Agewell, 15-17 Bull Street,  
West Bromwich B70 6EU**

By telephone:

**0121 525 7605**

By fax:

**0121 525 9512**

By email:

**[agewell@ageconcernsandwell.org.uk](mailto:agewell@ageconcernsandwell.org.uk)**

