Communication Plan
Adults with Learning Disabilities

Guidelines
September 2005
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The pictures used in this document are from photosymbols

The drawings used in this document are from CHANGE Picture Bank.

These guidelines are based on Mencap’s guidelines for accessible writing. Mencap (2002): *Am I making myself clear?*
1. Face to Face Communication

Everyone with a learning disability is an individual and will have individual communication needs. However, the general points below should help when you are talking to an individual with a learning disability.

**Talk to the person with the learning disability**

If something is not clear or they do not respond, only then ask them if you can check with their carer.

**Use simple everyday language**

Avoid using complex language and long sentences. Break down instructions, checking that the person has understood before moving on to the next bit of information.
Use natural gesture and sign key words using Makaton signs.

This will enable the person to understand more than if you just use speech as it gives visual information as well.

People with learning disabilities need to have enough time to speak for themselves.

Allow extra time when making appointments for the person with the learning disability. It may take the person longer to get words out, and they may use communication aid such as photos or symbols, or a voice output device.

Some people may find crowds, waiting, or confined spaces difficult to cope with and may become distressed

Offer the first appointment of the day to the person with the learning disability.
**Talk about things in the here and now**

The person may have difficulty with understanding time. Give the person written appointment times rather than just saying, ‘come back next Tuesday’. Use visual information to support what you are saying such as photos, pictures or drawings.

**Check that the person has understood**

Some people with a learning disability will appear to have understood what you have said and may be able to repeat back what you have said. However, this does not mean they have understood. Ask them to repeat back in their own words.

**Use words and phrases in a literal way**

The person with a learning disability may have difficulty understanding phrases that are not literal, such as ‘it’s raining cats and dogs’ or ‘this file is on its last legs’. Instead say ‘it’s raining very heavily’ and ‘this file is very old, we need to make a new one’.
1. Making ourselves clear - key points

If you want to communicate in writing with people with learning disabilities:

Use clear and simple text (plain English) with short sentences, simple punctuation and no jargon.

Use bullet points or story boxes and fact boxes to make the main points clear.

Use images such as photos, drawings or symbols to support your text. Aim to make the subject of your material clear at a glance, even to a non-reader.
Do not rely heavily on abstract symbols unless you know your readers are confident symbol users. Choose one or two simple, pictorial symbols and put them to the side of the words.

2. Using plain English

Plan what you want to say
Cut out the unnecessary detail and present the important information in a logical sequence, one step at a time.

Try to write as you speak
Don’t use jargon, unnecessary technical detail or abbreviations. If you need to use difficult words, include a ‘list of useful words’ to explain them.
Keep sentences short
Have only one main idea per sentence. See if any sentences using commas or joined with 'and' can be broken in two.

Use simple punctuation
Avoid semicolons (;), colons (:), hyphens (-) or sentences broken up with too many commas.

Use active and personal language
Talk to your readers directly using active and personal language. Using 'you' and 'we' makes your writing more direct and understandable. Use the person's name wherever possible.

Be consistent
For important concepts, use the same words and phrases consistently even if it sounds repetitive. Do not begin writing about 'the delegates' when you used before different words, such as 'attendees' or 'participants', to describe the same thing.
Use the number and not the word
Always use the number and not the word even for small numbers. Use 3 instead of ‘three’. Try not to use percentages or large numbers. You can say ‘a few’ instead of 7% and ‘many’ instead of 1,552.

Make it clear what action is required
For example:

An invitation to a conference or

Material that is just for information or

A reply is needed
3. Using layout and design

Use large print. Use at least type point 14 for the main text and 16 for the titles and allow plenty of spacing.

Use a clear typeface such as AvantGarde BK BT, Century Gothic, or Futura. All these typefaces have an easy to understand ‘a’.

Use a good contrast between the text and the background. For example black letters to a cream background. In this way the text is easier to read.

Use good quality matt paper. The writing on the other side will not show through, and there will not be a glare to make it hard to read.
Do not run writing over the top of a photo or drawing.

Avoid block capitals, italics or underlining. They all make text hard to read. Highlight important points with bolding.

Use a ragged right edge rather than justified.

Do not break up words with a hyphen at the end of a line.

Always start and finish a sentence on the same page. Don’t let articles run onto another page.

Break the text into short chunks with plenty of white space around it.

Keep the line length short. Running across the width of an A3 page is too long.

Use bullet points and fact boxes to make the main points clear.

Provide clear contents lists and section headings.
• Write all addresses as they appear on an envelope, not on one line separated by commas:
  John Smith
  357 Blue Lane
  London
  N22 3XT

Keep the layout consistent for a large publication. Try to put similar articles in the same place or page in each issue.

Consider using a large A3 format. It can feel friendlier and lets you use larger print and images.

Use images to support your text.
4. Using symbols, drawings and photos

Choose the image which best explains your text

It can be a photograph, drawing or symbol. Within the same document you may need to use a photo you have scanned in yourself, some line drawings, and some common symbols.

Link together words and pictures

Make it clear which part of the text each image relates to. Usually this is by placing the image alongside the text. Some people like to use an image for each main idea or paragraph. It is important that images help explain the text and are not just there to make the material ‘look accessible’.

Don’t use too many symbols

Do not rely heavily on symbols unless you know the people receiving your material are confident symbol users.
4a. Using symbols

You can use computer software like Writing with Symbols 2000 to add symbols to your writing. This is a computer programme where you type the text and symbols pop up. This program includes Makaton signs and symbols as well as Rhebus Symbols and Picture Communication Symbols.

Some people find too many symbols on a page confusing. Unless you know your readers like symbols above most words, it is better to use symbols just for key words or ideas.

If someone writes to you in symbols, try to use them in your reply. It takes practice and training to use symbols effectively. The first step is always to write a clear message in plain English.

Do not use the first symbol you find. Find a symbol that best represents what you want to say and is easy to understand.
Use symbols to illustrate the key words or ideas and place them alongside the text (symbol to the left, text to the right) rather than above the words. Do not place them above words unless you know your readers use the symbols this way.

Explaining complicated concepts will often be easier with a drawing or photo. Common or obvious symbols (such as toilet, meal time, no smoking) are useful for signs and timetables.

**Remember: Do not rely heavily on symbols unless you know your readers are confident symbol users.**
4b. Using drawings

A good drawing can convey more information than a symbol, or even than a photo with too much irrelevant detail in it.

Use **CHANGE Picture Bank**: this is a bank of drawings for everyday life like the ones used in this document. People with learning disabilities have done the drawings.

Keep in mind that what some people like, others do not like.

The best drawings are often the simplest. Sometimes drawings are too ‘busy’. They have shading which can make them hard to see when made smaller, and have too much extra detail which is confusing. Avoid using drawings that are too ‘busy’.
4.c Using Pictures

A photo can carry a lot of information and be very easy to ‘read’. Photos of people (especially of faces) catch the eye.

If you are writing about a specific building or person, a photo will aid recognition and understanding.

Put a photo of the writer at the end of a letter or article.

Sometimes photos can be too ‘specific’, which can be confusing. You also have to be very careful when you show recognisable people. You should always ask their permission.

Photos in colour or with lots of detail do not photocopy well.
5. Using technology to make ourselves clear

Many people prefer to get information on audio tape, CD or video.

Tapes and CDs are accessible for people who do not read. You can stop the tape or CD and go over something you did not understand. Keep tapes short. Always say when to turn the tape over, and when it ends.

If someone communicates with you by tape, try to record your reply on tape.

Be consistent when you say numbers, such as telephone numbers. Say zero instead of ‘oh’. For example, in phone numbers, say zero-eight-zero-zero instead of oh-eight-oh-oh.
Meeting minutes can be recorded on audio or video tape.

Many people with learning disabilities are confident using computers, but if you send e-mails remember they can lose formatting and become harder to understand.

Provide aids and props for supporters to use in discussions with people with a learning disability. Examples are large photographs, overhead transparencies or an object to pick up and feel.
6. Examples

- Haringey Active London Project leaflet - example of good practice.
- Hospital appointment letter - example of good practice.
- Day plan for Communication Awareness Training - example of good practice.
- Hospital appointment letter - example of bad practice.
Haringey Active London Project

Haringey Council and Haringey Mencap working together

We want to know what you think about our ideas. Please come and tell us.

Thursday 23 June 2005
11:00 - 3:00pm

Frederick Knight Sports Ground
Willoughby Lane N17

Come and try the sports taster group.
Tell us what you would like to do.
Find out what other things you can do.
Ms Sue Renton
30 Heysham Road
South Tottenham
London
N15 6HL

21 February 2005

Dear Sue Renton

You have an appointment at the X-Ray department on 21 March 2005 at 1.30
Hospital Transport will pick you up at 9.00am

Yours sincerely

Shirley McDonald
Sue Renton  
30 Heysham Road  
South Tottenham  
London N15 6HL

21 February 2005

Dear Sue Renton

Appointment at  
North Middlesex Hospital

21 March 2005
X-Ray

1.30pm

Hospital Transport
Will pick you up

9.00am
and take you to the hospital

Hospital Transport

will take you back home again

Yours sincerely

Shirley McDonald
Thank you for coming to

Communication Awareness Training

On 21 June 2005

From 9.15 to 4.30

At
St George’s Estate
Unit 5
White Hart Lane
N22 5QL
Tel: 0208 489 1327
### Communication Awareness Training

**Plan of training on 21 June 2005**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.15</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction and Start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>History of People with Learning Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideas on Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drinks and Break</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11:15</td>
<td>Things to do to help Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30</td>
<td>More Ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work with a partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work in Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>Drinks and Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>Evaluation forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>Finish</td>
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</tbody>
</table>