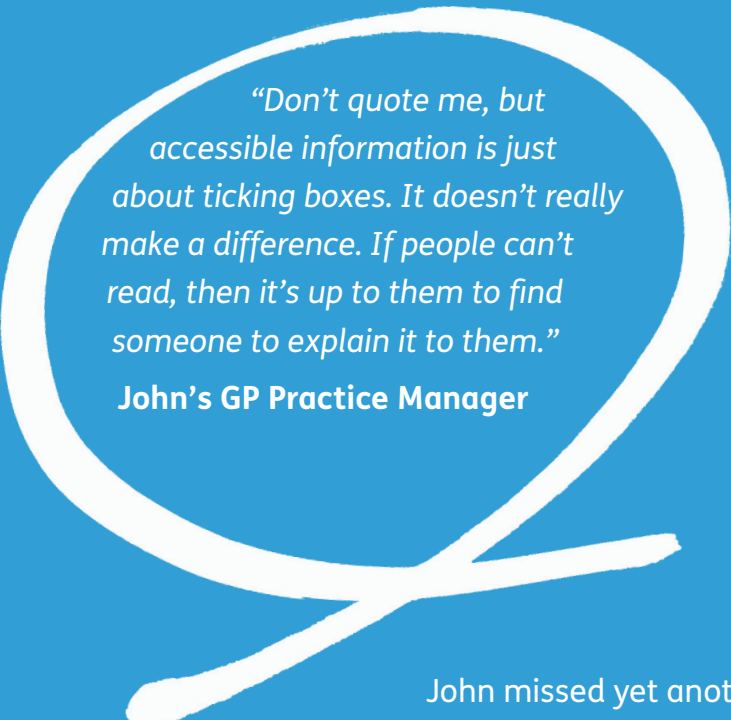


Guidelines for making information easy to read and understand for people with learning disabilities

1. Thinking






“Don’t quote me, but accessible information is just about ticking boxes. It doesn’t really make a difference. If people can’t read, then it’s up to them to find someone to explain it to them.”

John’s GP Practice Manager

John missed yet another surgery appointment - the writing on his card is too small and he kept misreading the information. By the time he saw a GP, his diabetes was out of control. He had an emergency admission to hospital, and had to stay there for 10 days.



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1. Thinking

Introduction

These guidelines contain detailed guidance on how to make your written information accessible to more people.

Features:

- **Two short videos about accessible information**
- **Planning to do accessible information**
- **Focus on Easy Read**
- **Introducing ‘Everyday’ writing**
- **Guidance for doing accessible information in English**
- **Guidance for doing accessible information in Welsh**
- ***Check it!* toolkit to help check the quality of accessible information**
- **Helping organisations start doing accessible information**
- **Finding out more.**

The videos introduce you to John. Throughout the handbook, you will hear more about John and some of the people in his life.

Meet John

John is a 53 year old single man, living alone in supported housing. He sees his friend, Ed, most days. John’s support worker calls daily.

We will also meet the Practice Manager at John’s GP surgery, staff from the hospital, people from his Local Health Board, a front desk worker at Job Centre Plus and staff from John’s bank.

John’s experiences and the comments attributed to others are based on fact. The story and quotations are, however, fictionalised.

1. Thinking

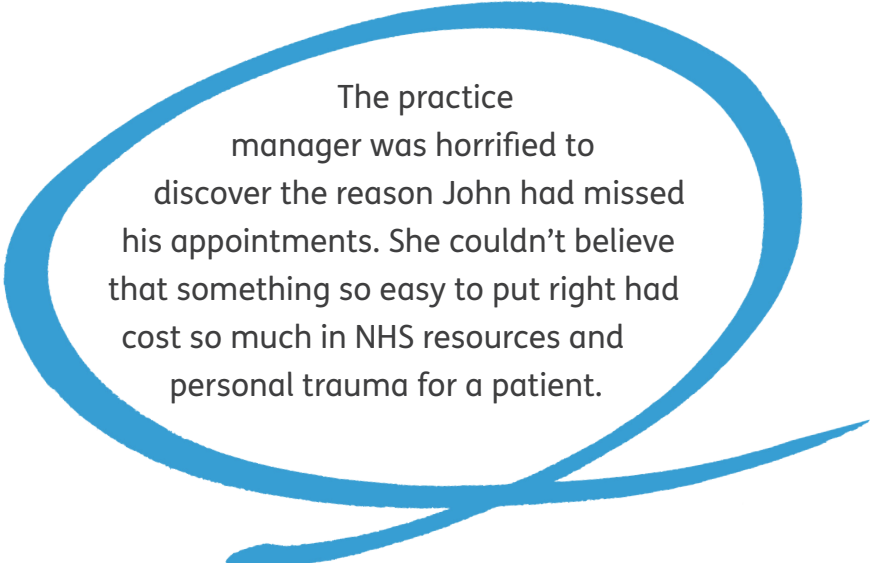
Why is accessible information important?

The truth is that accessible information is:

- good for your organisation
- good for individuals
- good for Wales
- a legal right.

Good for your organisation

- There will be fewer mistakes, missed appointments and misunderstandings.
- Where there is a choice, more people will choose your organisation.
- People will have a higher opinion of your organisation.
- Your organisation will do its job more smoothly and effectively.
- It helps you comply with legal requirements.



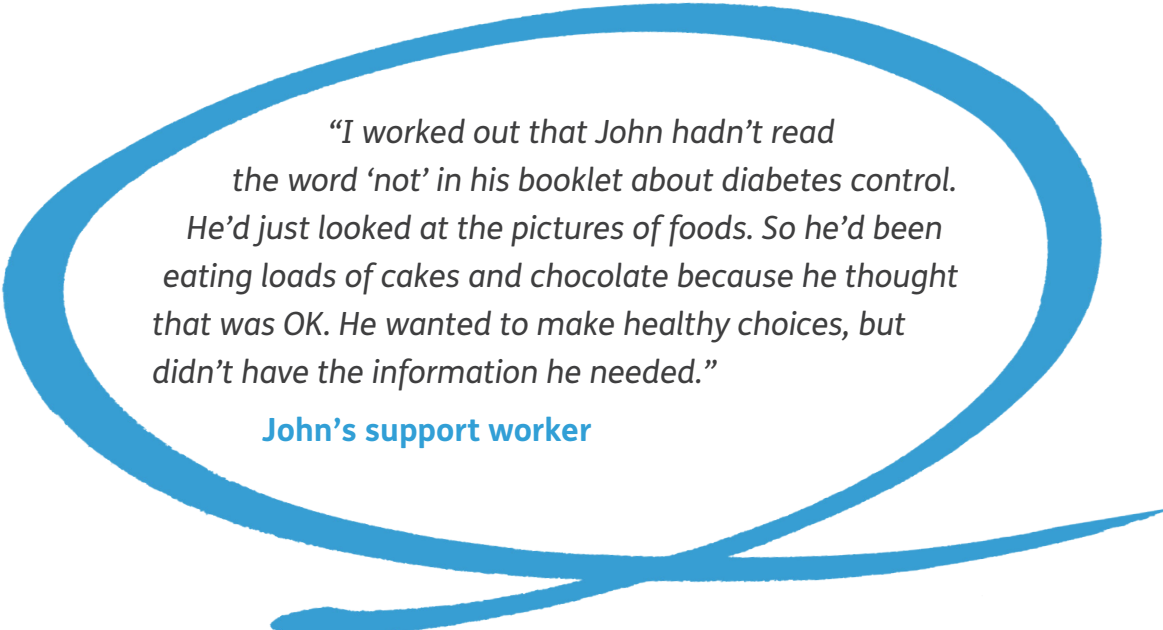
The practice manager was horrified to discover the reason John had missed his appointments. She couldn't believe that something so easy to put right had cost so much in NHS resources and personal trauma for a patient.

1. Thinking

Good for individuals

- People know how to get the services, advice, information and help that they need when they need it.
- It is easier to make informed choices.
- It cuts down on mistakes, misunderstandings and accidents.

We live in a world of choices. For our choices to be genuine, we need information. We need to be able to understand that information. We need to think about how that information applies to us. Only then can we make an informed choice. Without accessible information, choice becomes meaningless for people with learning disabilities.



“I worked out that John hadn’t read the word ‘not’ in his booklet about diabetes control. He’d just looked at the pictures of foods. So he’d been eating loads of cakes and chocolate because he thought that was OK. He wanted to make healthy choices, but didn’t have the information he needed.”

John’s support worker

Good for Wales

The Welsh Government puts the people who use public services at the heart of public service reform. The reform of social care is built around giving people accessible information, a stronger voice and more control, eg **Social Services (Wales) Bill** and **Carers Strategies (Wales) Measure 2010**. **Better Outcomes for Tougher Times: The Next Phase of Public Service Improvement** (2009) lays out five priority actions, including more accessible information for the public.

1. Thinking

The Welsh Government encourages citizens to have their say, to get involved, to make choices about local services. People need information, and they need the information to be accessible in order to take on these roles.

A legal right

Providing accessible information is not optional. It is not just good business sense or good practice, it is also a legal requirement. The most relevant pieces of legislation are the **Equality Act 2010** and the **Mental Capacity Act 2005**. In addition, the UK ratified the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** in June 2009.

The **Equality Act 2010** came into force in October 2010. The Act places requirements on service providers to think ahead about what disabled people may need in order to use their services. If you provide a service, you cannot simply wait for a disabled person to ask you to make your services accessible. If you send out or produce written information, this means you must think about how to make your information accessible to people with a range of impairments - including people with learning disabilities. The Act also requires public bodies to produce an equality plan that must be easy for the public to understand and use. You can find out more about the Act at www.equalityhumanrights.com/advice-and-guidance/new-equality-act-guidance/equality-act-guidance-downloads.

The **Mental Capacity Act 2005** supports people's right to make choices about their lives. Someone cannot be assessed as lacking the ability to make a decision unless they have been given all the support they need to make an informed choice. Making information accessible is an essential part of this process.

The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** is woven through with references to accessible information. The preamble refers to the importance of access to "*information and communication, in enabling persons with disabilities to fully enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms*". Article 9 commits the UK to accessibility, including accessible information. Article 21 links freedom of expression and opinion to access to information. Accessible formats are part of Articles 28 (participation in political and public life) and 29 (participation in cultural life, recreation and sport).

1. Thinking

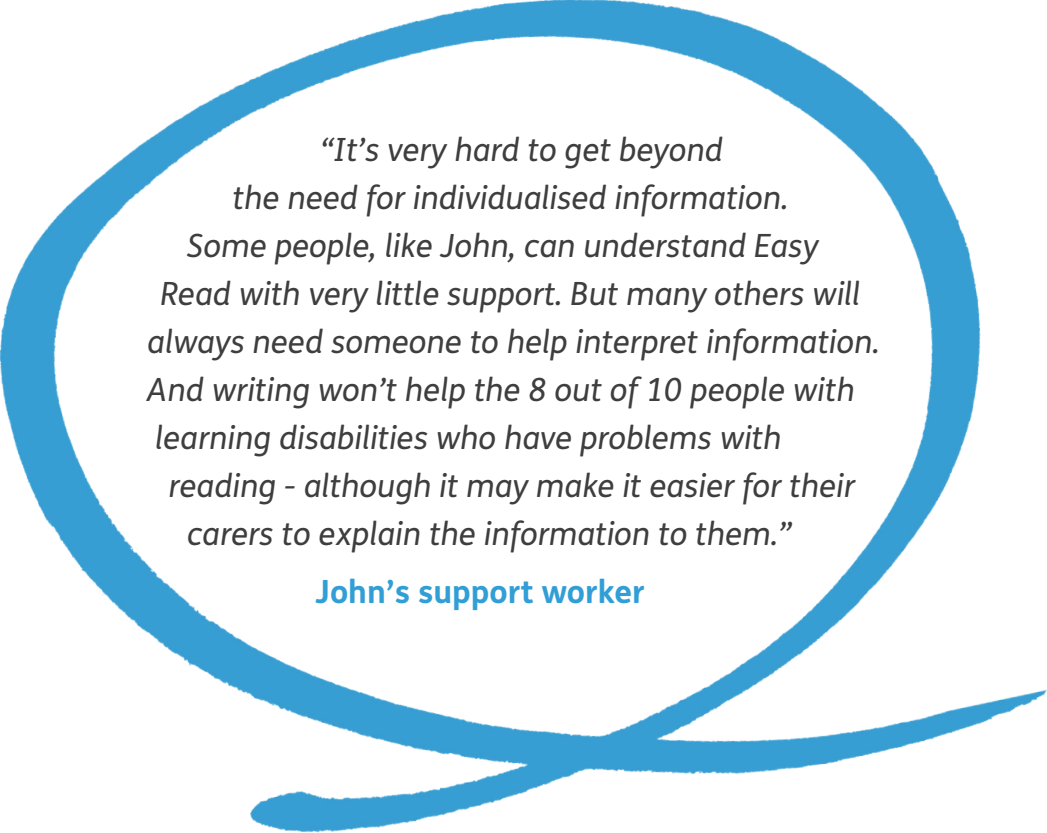
What does 'accessible' mean?

Information is only truly accessible if it is easy for you to:

- find the information
- realise the information is relevant or important to you
- understand and use the information.

This means that what is accessible for one person may be completely inaccessible to someone else. There is no 'one size fits all'. When you are writing for a general audience, the best you can do is make the information accessible to as many people as possible. That is what this handbook will help you to do.

If you are giving information to one person you will need to think carefully about how this person communicates and what will help this person to understand.



"It's very hard to get beyond the need for individualised information. Some people, like John, can understand Easy Read with very little support. But many others will always need someone to help interpret information. And writing won't help the 8 out of 10 people with learning disabilities who have problems with reading - although it may make it easier for their carers to explain the information to them."

John's support worker

1. Thinking

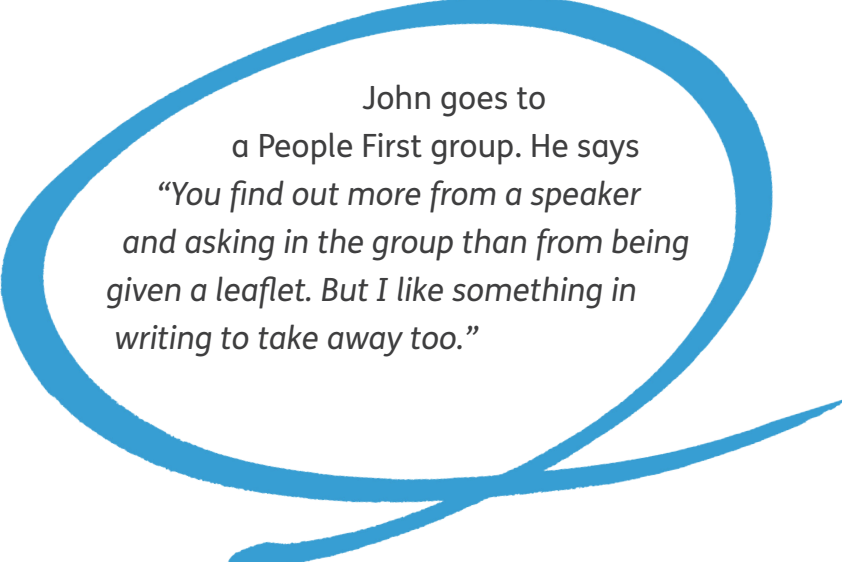
If the person has very individual communication needs, you may need a Speech and Language Therapist to help you prepare information for that person. However, some general tips are:

- find out from others how the person communicates best
- think about pictures and symbols, and whether you could have a general set of photos and pictures that you can use to back up what you are telling the person
- think about giving information in two or three different ways, rather than relying on one way
- make sure the person has information to take away with them so they can check (or ask someone else to check) that they have understood the information
- if someone has a carer or support worker, make sure that person has understood the information and has the support they need to explain the information to the person they support.

This handbook focuses on written information, because this is still the most common way for organisations to give information to the general public. However, written information on its own is rarely the most accessible way to give information. It relies on people having high levels of skill at finding the right written information, knowing how to read the information and then being able to remember, understand and use written information. Even people who are good at reading often find it easier to remember, understand and use information when they talked and listened.


Many, if not most, people in Wales get most of their information from talking and listening - and not from reading. Talking also allows people to get the information that is personally relevant, rather than relying on general information.

1. Thinking



John goes to a People First group. He says *“You find out more from a speaker and asking in the group than from being given a leaflet. But I like something in writing to take away too.”*

Even talking and listening on their own can be inaccessible.



“The key is talking, showing, practising and ‘desensitising’ if it’s a new situation, like going to the dentist. Talking and looking at a booklet just wasn’t enough.”

John’s support worker

1. Thinking

What are the barriers?

It's in writing

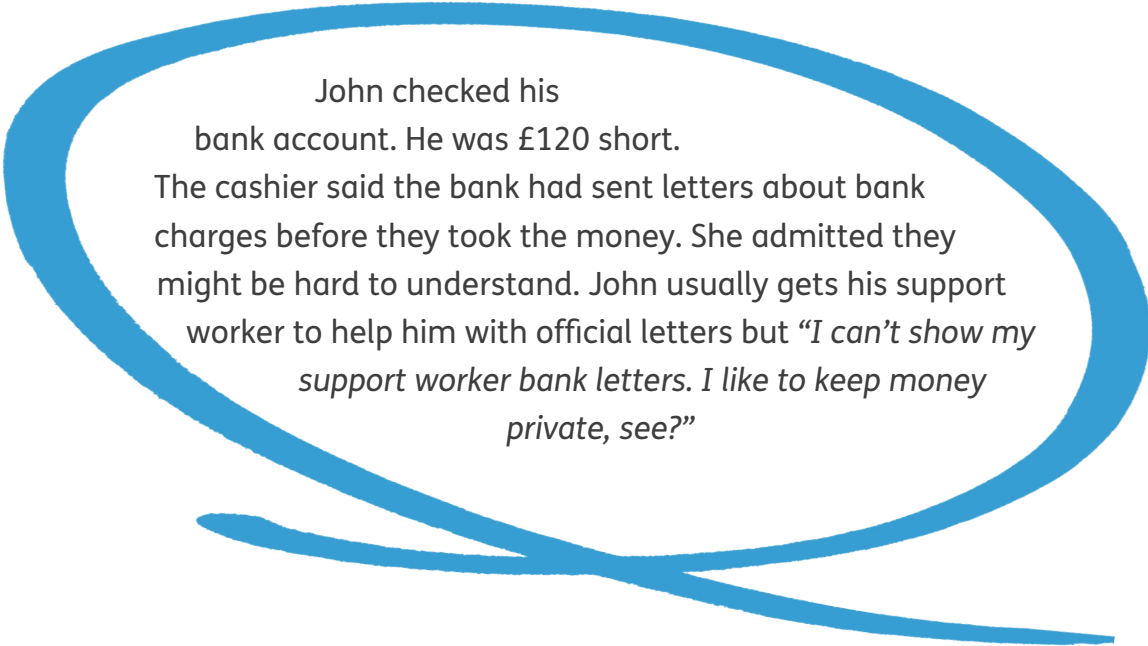
Relying on writing automatically makes your information less accessible to many people.

Think of different ways to give the information, like talking face to face, going to groups and places where people meet or giving people a DVD. You may want to talk to people and then give them something in writing to help them remember what you said.

Sometimes there is no alternative to writing. However you can make your writing less inaccessible by using these guidelines.

The writing is too hard

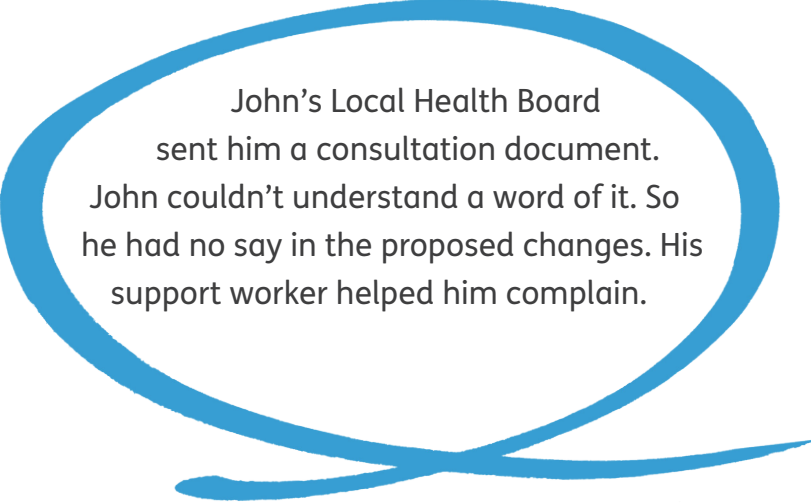
The **National Survey of Adult Basic Skills in Wales** (2004) suggested that well over half (65%) of the general public in Wales would struggle with using English or Welsh to GCSE standard. These guidelines use A-level standard of writing. A typical official letter uses undergraduate or postgraduate standard of writing.



John checked his bank account. He was £120 short. The cashier said the bank had sent letters about bank charges before they took the money. She admitted they might be hard to understand. John usually gets his support worker to help him with official letters but *“I can't show my support worker bank letters. I like to keep money private, see?”*

1. Thinking

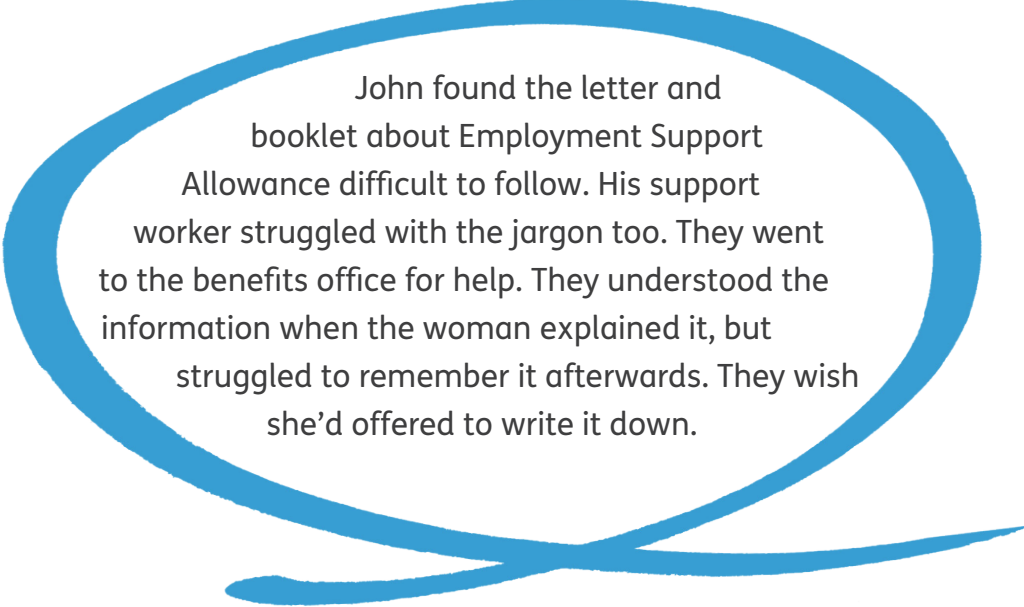
A typical consultation document or policy handbook uses post-graduate equivalent writing.



John's Local Health Board sent him a consultation document. John couldn't understand a word of it. So he had no say in the proposed changes. His support worker helped him complain.

You use too much jargon

Jargon is words and phrases that have a special meaning or are part of a special kind of language. Every way of life has its own special language. Once you know the language you are 'in'; if you don't know the language you are 'out'. It is very hard for an insider to spot when they are using jargon, because it has become an everyday part of their language.



John found the letter and booklet about Employment Support Allowance difficult to follow. His support worker struggled with the jargon too. They went to the benefits office for help. They understood the information when the woman explained it, but struggled to remember it afterwards. They wish she'd offered to write it down.

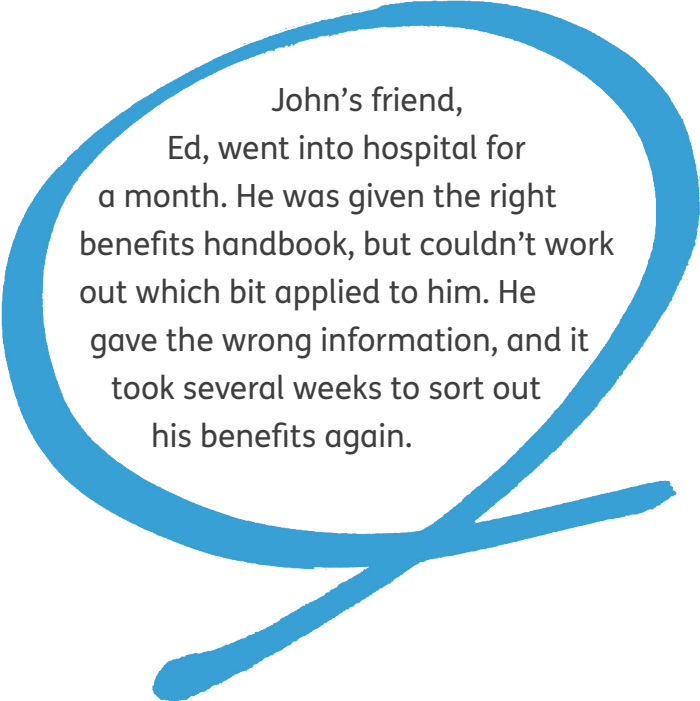
1. Thinking

Usually, jargon can be explained in a few ordinary words that everyone understands. For example, 'participation' could mean 'joining in' or 'taking part' or 'having a say' depending on the context you are writing about. The Plain English Campaign website has lists of jargon and alternative everyday words.

Occasionally, one word of jargon is short-hand for something very complicated to explain. For example, 'advocacy' is jargon but it is very difficult to find one or two alternative everyday words. It takes a sentence or two to explain 'advocacy'. In examples like this, it may be better to teach people the meaning of a word. In written information, you can do this by having a word list at the start that explains the meaning of any jargon or hard words you are going to use.

It's not relevant

Try not to bombard people with information. Keep information as personal as possible so you are only giving them information that is relevant to them.



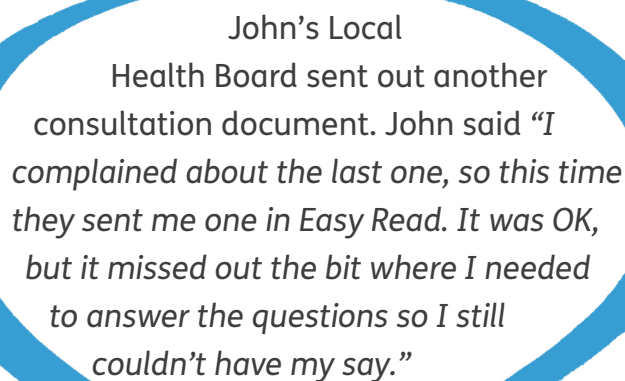
John's friend,
Ed, went into hospital for
a month. He was given the right
benefits handbook, but couldn't work
out which bit applied to him. He
gave the wrong information, and it
took several weeks to sort out
his benefits again.

Sometimes you will need to show people why the information is relevant to them.

1. Thinking

You've left information out!

Easy Read and Everyday versions still need to include all the information someone needs. Start by writing down the key points someone needs to know. Then you can start writing the actual letter or leaflet or Easy Read version of a document.



John's Local Health Board sent out another consultation document. John said *"I complained about the last one, so this time they sent me one in Easy Read. It was OK, but it missed out the bit where I needed to answer the questions so I still couldn't have my say."*

It's hard to follow the text

It can be hard to follow the text if:

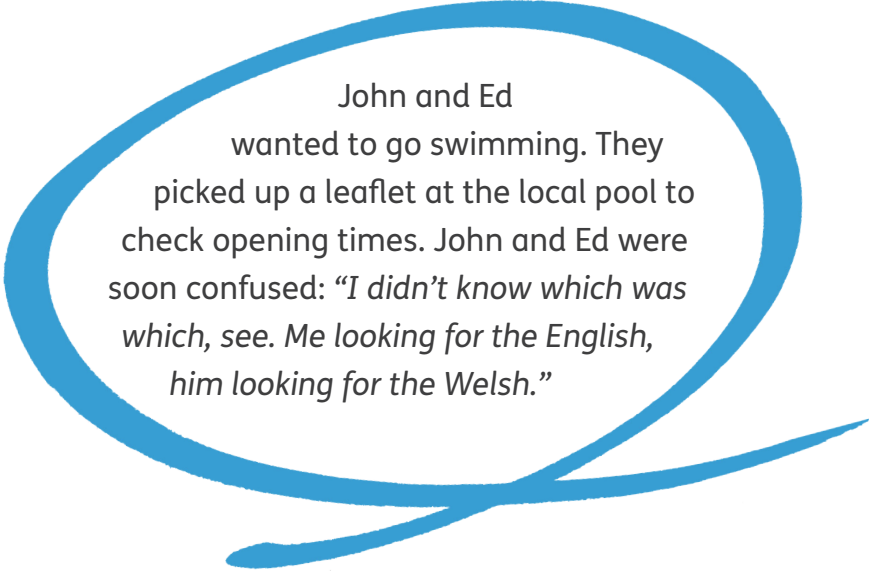
- the text is too small for comfort
- it uses a serif font (like Times New Roman) or a fancy font (like Accent or Old English)
- there are no images
- text is on top of images
- the headings are poor, or there are no headings
- the page design uses lots of boxes or columns and makes it hard to know which part of the page to read first
- the page looks 'busy' because it uses too many different colours, shapes, borders and types of image.

1. Thinking

Where's my language?

Information needs to be in people's preferred language. If it is hard to read at all, it is even harder if you have to read in your second language.

It needs to be easy to tell if you are looking at Welsh or English, and easy to find your preferred language.



John and Ed
wanted to go swimming. They
picked up a leaflet at the local pool to
check opening times. John and Ed were
soon confused: *"I didn't know which was
which, see. Me looking for the English,
him looking for the Welsh."*

Mencap Cymru and Learning Disability Wales have produced guidelines called **Making Welsh Easy to Read and Understand**. The Welsh Language Board also has guidance on bilingual design.

The images confuse me

Images are used to make something look friendly and relevant. Images are also used to help explain the meaning of the writing.

Images can be powerful. But images can also be confusing. Often two people look at the same image and see different things. Always get someone else to tell you what they think an image means before you include it in your written information.

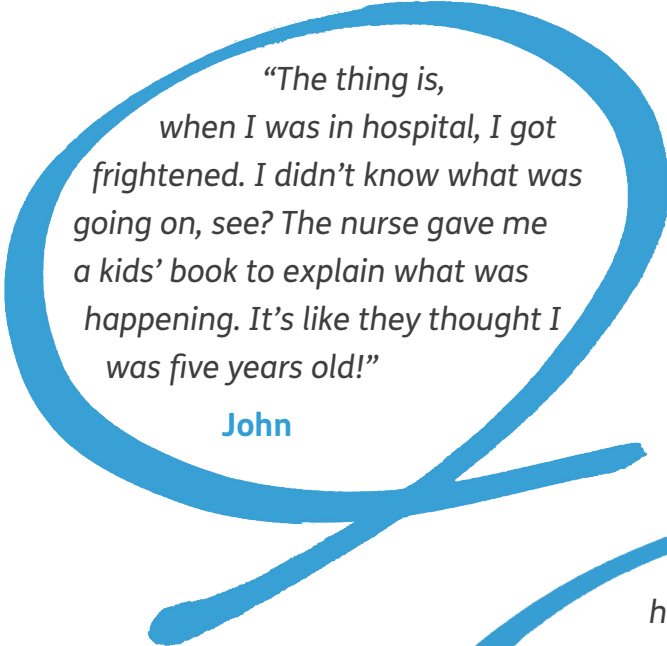
1. Thinking

Stop treating me like a child!

Adults who struggle with reading and adults with learning disabilities are still adults. It may be helpful to think about a reading age. But it is important to remember that you are writing for adults.

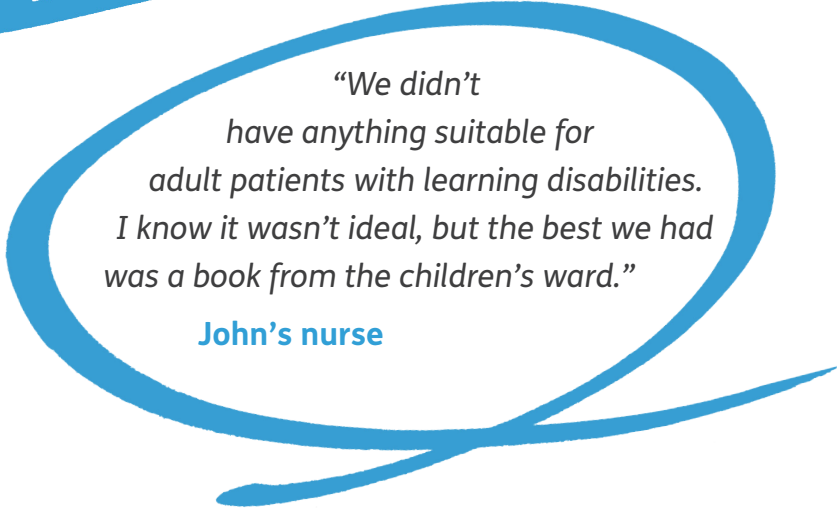
You need to think about font. Comic Sans is a font that is often used for children, so it is best to avoid using it for adults.

You need to think about images. Are you using a style of image that usually appears in writing for children or to illustrate children's books?



"The thing is, when I was in hospital, I got frightened. I didn't know what was going on, see? The nurse gave me a kids' book to explain what was happening. It's like they thought I was five years old!"

John



"We didn't have anything suitable for adult patients with learning disabilities. I know it wasn't ideal, but the best we had was a book from the children's ward."

John's nurse

You also need to think about words. Using easy words does not mean writing to people as if they were children with a child's understanding of the world. Try reading your information out loud to another adult, and see if it feels appropriate.

1. Thinking

Why is my version poor quality?

You may find a professional-looking report with a high quality cover and professional binding displayed next to an Easy Read version that is photocopied on cheap A4 paper and held together with staples. This gives the message that Easy Read is an after-thought, that people with learning disabilities do not really matter, and that anyone important will be able to read the professional-looking report.

Easy Read needs to be built into an organisation's communication strategy. For small organisations, this may mean remembering to think about everyone's needs when you plan to give out information. For large organisations, this means having a corporate policy that gives all versions of a document equal status, and a process that means Easy Read is designed and developed at the same time as any other version.

1. Thinking

Easy Read and Everyday

The handbook uses the terms **Easy Read** and **Everyday** to describe two different styles of writing.

Easy Read uses easy words, short sentences and pictures. Easy Read is designed to help people who struggle to read in English/Welsh. It is also designed to be easy to understand if someone reads it out loud to you. Easy Read is not a copyrighted term. This means anything can be called Easy Read. A lot of organisations have written their own rules for Easy Read. Some of these are listed in the chapter **Finding out more**.

We looked at existing guidelines, drafted our own and then tested and re-tested the guidelines to make sure:

1. They were easy to understand.
2. They were reliable. This means different people could use the guidelines and come up with the same answers.
3. They were valid. This means people were shown documents, and the ones that people thought were most accessible were the ones that followed the guidelines most closely.

Everyday is writing that most people in Wales will understand. A lot of people in Wales find it an effort to read, and a significant number struggle with reading. Everyday writing uses words that people use every day when they are speaking or listening to the television. It keeps sentences as simple as possible. The guidelines for Everyday writing are based on research carried out by the **Basic Skills Agency** and **NIACE (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education)** and their advice on making information suitable for the general public. The guidelines were tested by showing carers different versions of the same information and asking them to choose which version was more accessible. Everyday writing includes rules about layout and design as well as words.

If you are producing information for the general public or parent/carers, we recommend that you use the guidelines for Everyday writing.

Why not just use Plain English? Plain English rules are very helpful, and give good ideas for swapping hard words for easier words. But written information can get the Crystal Mark for Plain English and still be too difficult for many people in Wales to understand.

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Front cover photo: Mencap

