



**We Bring Care**  
**We Bring Clarity**  
**We Bring Confidence**



# Our words bring people together

## Words can put barriers up or they can bring people together.

By writing with care, clarity and confidence, we show we're friendly human beings who are here to help. We make it easy for everyone to understand and use our services. We build trust in the council and leave people feeling great about the experience they've had with us.

### **Your words make a big difference**

Whether you're writing to your customers or your colleagues, the words you use make a big difference.

### **This is a guide to our communication style, not our policies**

We should always aim to make our writing caring, clear and confident. This guide shows you how, with lots of practical tips and examples.

These give us a helpful reference for the tone and structure of our writing. Please don't base any policy decisions on them, as the content of these examples may be different for your customer and their situation.

If you need any more support, please reach out to the Customer Excellence team by emailing:

[customer.excellence@wokingham.gov.uk](mailto:customer.excellence@wokingham.gov.uk)

Thank you.

A pair of hands, wearing light blue denim sleeves, holds a large white speech bubble against a solid yellow background. The speech bubble contains the text "We Bring Care".

We Bring  
**Care**

We show empathy for our customers' lives and needs



# We Bring Care

## Put their needs first

Start with your customer. Think about their specific needs and how you'll meet them. Always put what's most important to them first in your message.

### For example

#### **What to do first:**

*We find an informal chat often quickly and easily fixes a problem. So if something's gone wrong or you're not happy, the first thing to do is to speak to someone in the service or team concerned.*

## Show you know what's important to them

A little empathy goes a long way. Show you know what's important to them by personalising your message wherever you can. For example, include something they've told us, or show you understand how they feel.

### For example

*I'm sorry to hear you're unhappy we've given your neighbours planning permission, and that you don't believe we took everything into account when we did. I appreciate you also feel we've been unfair because you had to change your plans to avoid overlooking their garden, and now they will partially overlook your front bedroom.*

## Talk to your neighbour

Even where you can't personalise your message, you can still sound caring by using a warm, conversational tone. This helps your customer know they're dealing with a real person. A good way to do this is to imagine you're speaking with a neighbour or someone you know - write what you'd say to them.

### For example

*When our officers visited the tree, it was alive and well and they saw no reason to remove the tree or the Tree Preservation Order (TPO). We also heard from many local residents who value the tree and wanted it to be protected with a TPO.*

## Test the care

Read it out loud. Did it sound like you talking? If so, you've hit the right caring tone. If it sounds robotic or corporate, that's how it will come across to your customer. So get rid of any words you wouldn't say if you were speaking face to face with them. And if you ran out of breath, add a full stop!



We Bring  
**Clarity**

We make everything easy to understand



# We Bring Clarity

## Use a clear format

We all make a split-second decision about whether we want to read something based on what it looks like. And the last thing anyone wants is a wall of words. By making your communication easy on the eye, you'll make people want to read it. Do this using headings, bullets, short paragraphs and short sentences.

### For example

INSTEAD OF:

*Data Protection: We collect information for Council Tax purposes, but it may be shared with other departments to enable the Council to carry out its statutory duties and functions. We may check information you provide, or a third party provides about you, with other information we hold. We may give information to third parties to check the accuracy or to prevent or detect crime, or to protect public funds in other ways as permitted by law. We will not disclose information about you to anyone outside the Council unless the law commits us to. Our privacy notices are available at: [www.wokingham.go.uk/privacy/](http://www.wokingham.go.uk/privacy/)*

TRY:

### **Protecting your data**

*We collect information about you so we can manage your Council Tax. We will not share your information outside the Council unless the law allows so we can meet our legal responsibilities and do our jobs. We sometimes:*

- share information with other departments so they can meet their legal responsibilities as well*
- check it with other information we have already*
- share it with third parties to check it's accurate or to prevent or detect crime.*

*You can read more about data protection in our privacy notice at [www.wokingham.gov.uk/privacy/](http://www.wokingham.gov.uk/privacy/).*

## Use clear words

Avoid terms you only hear at the council and use clear words instead. Never assume your customer understands what they mean, even if they use these words themselves. If you feel you need to use technical or legalistic language, stop and ask yourself why. Would a straightforward word be better? If you need to use a technical term, be sure your customer will understand it – and always give a plain English explanation if there's any doubt.

### For example

INSTEAD OF:

*Amend  
Cease, Stop  
Commence, Start  
Endeavour  
Hence, Therefore  
In conjunction with  
In order to  
Per annum  
Refer to  
Whilst*

TRY:

*Change  
End  
Begin  
Try  
So, As  
With  
To, So  
A year  
Read, See  
While*

# We Bring Clarity



## Use clear facts and figures

Facts and figures are a great way to make a clear point. Choose facts and figures that are relevant to your customer - make them as local and specific to their life as you can. This will be much more persuasive and helpful for them. Don't overwhelm them. Choose one key fact or figure at time.

### For example

*To make sure back gardens stay private and are not overlooked too much, there needs to be at least 11 metres between new first floor windows and back garden boundaries.*

## Test the clarity

Use a readability test to assess the clarity of your writing. There is a readability feature built into Microsoft Word. You can also use the readability test on our agency partner's website:

[www.thefirstword.co.uk/readabilitytest](http://www.thefirstword.co.uk/readabilitytest)

- If you're writing to the general public, aim for a score of 65 or above. This is the vast majority of the communications we write.
- If you're writing a technical document, aim for a score of 60 or above.
- If you know your customer will have difficulty understanding your communication, find out what specific help they need. As a general rule, aim for a score of 70 or above.

A pair of hands, wearing light blue denim sleeves, holds a large white speech bubble against a solid yellow background. The speech bubble contains the text 'We Bring Confidence'.

We Bring  
**Confidence**

We build trust by being positive and direct





# We Bring Confidence

## Say what we can do

Always think about what we can do to help people and make this the focus of your message. Use direct statements and calls to action to say how we can help and how the customer can help themselves.

### For example

*If you're still worried, your management company can submit a Tree Works Application for the tree at [www.wokingham.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/trees-and-hedges/apply-tree-works](http://www.wokingham.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/trees-and-hedges/apply-tree-works). There's no charge for applying.*

## Say what you mean and stop there

Confident people don't waffle. They don't bury important information either. They say what they need to say and no more - whether it's good news or bad. Worried you'll sound blunt? It's easier to add words than take them away, so start short and write more if you need to.

### For example

*If you don't have a teal sticker on your bin, our team won't collect your garden waste.*

## Say who's doing what


People believe people. So we need to make it clear who's doing what in communications - whether that's you, someone else at the council, a team or the customer themselves. Use *I*, *we* and *they*, and always write to *you*. This is called active writing. It shows ownership and builds trust.

### For example

*I've checked all the details of your neighbour's application and yours so I can answer you thoroughly. I've also reviewed your emails with our case officer and the decisions our planning team made.*

## Test the confidence

Think about someone you know.  
Would they believe this message?

A pair of hands, wearing light blue denim sleeves, holds a large white speech bubble against a solid yellow background. The speech bubble contains the text 'What care, clarity and confidence looks like'.

What care, clarity  
and confidence  
looks like

Here are some examples to show you the difference we make when we bring care, clarity and confidence to our writing.



# A planning complaint response

## 01 CONFIDENCE:

Active language makes it clear who's doing what and shows ownership and responsibility.

## 02 CLARITY:

Headings split up dense blocks of text to make them more readable, and guide the reader to help them find the information they need.

## 03 CONFIDENCE:

Even when the news isn't what they might want to hear, it's best to be direct, clear and upfront.

## 04 CARE:

We think about what the customer will want to know and give them the information they need.

## 05 CLARITY:

We give facts and straightforward explanations to make sure everything is clear and easy to understand.

## 06 CONFIDENCE:

Using active language helps show there's a real person writing our letters, and we take ownership for the actions and decisions we make.

## 07 CARE:

Using contractions and conversational language sounds warm, approachable and human.

Dear Matthew

Your complaint about your neighbour's planning permission

Thank you for your email dated 15 August 2021 about the planning application for East House. I'm sorry to hear you're unhappy we've given your neighbour's planning permission, and that you don't believe we took everything into account when we did.

01 | I've checked all the details of your neighbour's application so I can answer you thoroughly.  
I've also reviewed your emails with our case officer and the decisions our planning team made.

02 | **What we've decided about your complaint**

From the information we have, I can see our planning team took everything into account when they considered the impact next door's extension would have on your property. They also included all the relevant details in their reports and carefully considered your objection and letters of support. **So I don't agree we treated you unfairly or that we didn't follow the proper process.**

04 | I know this is not the answer you were hoping for and I understand you might be disappointed.  
So I've explained how I came to my decision for you below.

### **The window overlooking your front bedroom**

From the case officer's report, I can see that your neighbour's planned back window will not directly face your bedroom. Most of their view will be of their back garden, which our case officer took into account for their decision.

05 | **There's also no minimum distance for a back window to a front window in the planning guidelines. This is because front gardens and front windows are always overlooked from the street to some degree, so there's already limited privacy. As the report mentions, your neighbour's windows will not allow them to overlook your window any more than your home is overlooked from Mock Lane.**

06 | **Bearing in mind the outlook of your neighbour's planned window, I agree with the decision our officer made about their application. I believe they correctly considered the application individually and fairly, and worked within the planning rules and guidance.**

### **If you have a question**

07 | I hope my letter makes it clear why we approved the extension at 123 Fake Street. If you have any questions please let me know - **I'll be happy to talk** the details through with you. You can call me on (0118) 974 6000.



# A garden waste collection letter

- 01 CARE:  
A warm, conversational tone helps to connect with people.
- 02 CLARITY:  
Swap formal, corporate words like *therefore* for ones that are easier to read and digest.
- 03 CONFIDENCE:  
Calls to action and instructions should be clear and straightforward.
- 04 CARE:  
We think about what the customer would want to know and put it up front so they don't have to hunt for it.
- 05 CLARITY:  
Bullet points are clearer and easier to follow, particularly when giving options.
- 06 CONFIDENCE:  
Take responsibility with active, direct language.
- 07 CARE:  
Always think of how the customer might feel and acknowledge that.
- 08 CARE:  
Think about what the customer will want to know and make it clear who's doing what.
- 09 CLARITY:  
Short sentences and paragraphs are much easier to read and digest.

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Dear Jasmine

## It's time to renew your garden waste collection

Thank you for signing up to our garden waste collection service last year.

I'm sorry we didn't manage to collect everyone's garden waste in June and July during the Covid pandemic – we didn't have enough drivers to run a full service.

## Your service will now end on 30 April 2021

Your service was originally due to end in March. But, to make up for any collections we missed, we've included an extra month for you this year. So your new renewal date is 30 April 2021.

## How to renew for another year

If you don't want us to collect your brown bin anymore, you don't need to do anything.

If you'd like us to collect your garden waste every fortnight from 1 May 2021 until 30 April 2022, you can sign up again:

- at [www.wokingham.gov.uk/ordergardenwastecollection](http://www.wokingham.gov.uk/ordergardenwastecollection)
- by calling (0118) 974 6000 and choosing the "waste" option.

## We've put the price up for the first time

Since we started the service in 2012, we've kept the price at £60. You'll notice that this year it will cost £65 for 1 May 2021 to 30 April 2022. This is to allow for inflation and the fact it's costing us more to manage the service now. It's a little bit extra but we hope you still think our service is worth it.

## What to do when you've signed up


Once you've paid, we'll send you a teal-coloured sticker to put on your brown bin. If you have more than one bin, we'll send you more stickers. If you order another bin, we'll send it with a sticker on already.

It may take up to ten days for your sticker(s) to arrive. So please make sure you renew in plenty of time before your first collection date in May.

If you don't have a teal sticker on your bin, our team won't collect your garden waste.

## If you need more information

To find out more about our garden waste collection service, go to [www.wokingham.gov.uk/rubbish-and-recycling/garden-waste](http://www.wokingham.gov.uk/rubbish-and-recycling/garden-waste). If you have any other questions about our service or what you need to do, please call us on [number].

A pair of hands, wearing light blue denim sleeves, holds a large white speech bubble against a solid yellow background. The speech bubble contains the text 'Our checklist for care, clarity and confidence'.

Our checklist  
for care, clarity  
and confidence

# Our checklist



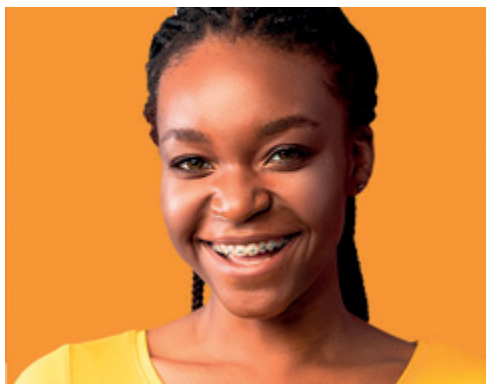
## We Bring Care

### Did you:

- put their needs first, with the most important information upfront?
- show you know what's important to them and personalise the message where you can?
- write like you would talk to your neighbour, to sound human and warm?

### Test the care

Read it out loud. Did it sound like you talking?



## We Bring Clarity

### Did you:

- use a clear format with headings, bullet points, short paragraphs, short sentences and white space?
- use clear words, with no jargon or technical language? Only use technical terms if you're certain your customer will understand them.
- use clear facts and figures that are as relevant, local and specific as possible to your customer?

### Test the clarity

For the general public, aim for 65 or more on the readability test: [www.thefirstword.co.uk/readabilitytest](http://www.thefirstword.co.uk/readabilitytest)



## We Bring Confidence

### Did you:

- say what we can do, with positive statements and direct calls to action?
- say what you mean and stop there, with no waffle?
- write to you and say who's doing what using *I*, *we* and *they*, or names?

### Test the confidence

Think about someone you know. Would they believe this message?