



Guidance to crack the information  
barrier in Health, Social Services and  
Public Safety

# The 5 C's of Information Provision

2003

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Guidance for anyone involved in the planning, design, production, dissemination and review of information. Including details on the process and tasks, the basis of the advice and some good practice tips.

### **Acknowledgement**

This Guidance was produced by the Eastern Area, Best Practice Equality Group.

The Group members wish to thank all those people who contributed in any way to its production. Your help was very welcome and very much appreciated.



# Introduction

## Why are we doing it?

The concept of user and public involvement is at the centre of health and social care policy. Greater and more accessible information is a key element of various Government policies and strategies on user empowerment. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 will also have major implications on how information is produced and provided.

In 2000-2001 following the implementation of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, Health and Social Services organisations consulted with representatives of the nine equality groups identified under Section 75 of the legislation. The objective of this consultation was to identify what organisations should do to better promote equality of opportunity and good relations. A major theme emerging from this consultation exercise was the recurrent message that, people encountered problems arising from the lack of accessible, timely, and relevant information about Health, Social Services and Public Safety. People reported that one of the building blocks of a society which truly embraced equality was a commitment to making information accessible. The right to information is also enshrined within the Human Rights Act 1998.

## The aim of the publications

The aim of this and associated publications is to raise the standards of basic information provision. We believe that by helping all our staff and our customers to understand and think about information and its provision standards will improve. The intention is to encourage best practice and promote consistency in application by all Health, Social Services and Public Safety organisations in Northern Ireland. The publications provide clear, concise advice and guidance about information provision and what needs to be considered by those involved in its production.

The different needs of the recipients of information are acknowledged throughout the publications and simple straightforward tips are provided on how to make information more accessible for all. The checklists included in this publication give easy reminders as to what should be done. The guide can be accessed through the checklists alone, if readers are familiar with the basic concepts of information provision.

Through raising standards and increasing people's access to information we believe that Health, Social Services and Public Safety will be better placed to demonstrate a practical commitment to the promotion of equality of opportunity and outcomes.

## Who are the publications aimed at?

The publications are aimed at all staff who have a responsibility to approve the production of information and those who actually produce it. A central part of what managers and policy makers do in their daily work is to produce or authorise the production of material. This publication is therefore aimed at a broad range of staff who possess a range of expertise in this area.

The public will also benefit, as there will now be a set of guidance and a commitment as to the standards people can expect from Health, Social Services and Public Safety when they provide information.

## What information is covered by the publication?

Information exists in many forms and our intention is to provide guidance about how to produce and supply information regarding; services, policies, procedures, treatments, facilities, conditions, legislation, duties and entitlements.

It is not about preparing and providing statistics; it is not about what is in a court report; it is not about analysing financial data; although the presentation aspects of these tasks should follow the same good practice advice.

This document is not a substitute for consulting with communications and public relations specialists within your organisations. If you follow this guidance from the outset you will help to make their job a lot easier. There may also be style guides and corporate house styles to which you need to adhere.

There is no claim that the document is definitive. It should continue to grow and develop as practice improves, legislative requirements change and we incorporate the feedback we receive.

We have included some resource material which helps to illustrate the importance of the guidance. More detailed background advice and guidance is available in the reference document associated with this Guide.

This is a starting point, and an acknowledgement of our desire to better meet the needs of those we serve.



## Good Practice - An introduction to the 5 C's

## Good Practice

- **Consider** Why are you doing it?  
Information should only be produced or provided when there is a reason and an identified target audience
- **Content** What is in it?  
Information in any medium needs to contain certain key items.
- **Composition** How is it presented?  
Information must be accessible, easy to understand, relevant and acceptable to target audiences.
- **Circulate** Where should it go?  
Information should be circulated to the target audience through channels which people use the most.
- **Check** Does it work?  
There will be a way to measure if it worked.

## 1. Consider - Why are you doing it?

Information should only be produced or provided when there is a reason and an identified target audience.

As with any process, planning is important. You must know why the information is being produced and who it is for. You should at an early stage identify who else should be involved and the sources of funding. Check if someone else has already done this as you can often use their ideas.

## Why produce it?

In order to assess what information is required and its context you need to listen to what different people and groups say they need.

Be clear about your aims and objectives, always keep in mind that there may be more than one. It can be valuable to look at sources of referrals and complaints as these can provide pointers as to what needs doing.

Describe what it is intended to achieve and consult at an early stage with your communications specialists.

## Who is it actually for?

The best way to clearly define your target audience is to list all the people who might need or use the information. Be imaginative as it is not always obvious who may need to be informed.

When you can describe how many different groups or sets of people need your information decide which is the best way to get your message across. Remember that the message may be different for your different groups.

Do not forget that other people may be doing the same work as you. Coordinate your approach and efforts to avoid duplication and wasted effort. It is also important that you avoid confusing your audience by giving them mixed messages from different sources.

## Who else should you talk too?

Draw up a list of the relevant groups, organisations and professionals who have an interest in what you are doing. Decide who should have a lead role and the line of accountability.

Early consultation will prove to be invaluable.

Pilot the information as early as possible. This can prevent the waste of time and money, and will better involve your target groups.

## How are you going to pay for it?

Everything we do has a cost. The production of information is no different, even if its only to photocopy 50 sheets of paper. Be certain that there is a real and quantifiable need before you commit to spending public money. Agree at an early stage who will do what and who will pay for what.

Establish what your budget is and its source and make sure that the product will be within the cost. It is often overlooked that translations and the production of information in other formats can add considerably to costs.

Do not forget to comply with Standing Financial Instructions and Corporate Governance rules.

## What have other people produced?

Review other literature for best practice and see what can be easily adopted or adapted. Be careful about copyright, although that is less of a problem when using information produced within the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

You can contact other National and Regional bodies to see what they have produced. Do not be afraid to ask and consider what has not worked in the past.

As long as you acknowledge other people's work they are usually happy for you to use it.

# 1. Consider - Why are you doing it?

## CHECKLIST

Producing effective information takes time and money, so please ensure that during planning you considered the following :

Why is the information needed and what is it trying to achieve?

Have you defined and described the target audience?

Do people want and need the information you plan to give?

Have you assessed the best ways of presenting your information?

Have you considered how it will be circulated?

Is the information needed by individuals, single groups, or more than one group?

Is it about a single service or a combination of services?

Does everyone need the consistent information presented in the same way?

Is your budget plan realistic and does it take everything into account?

Have you applied your organisation's Standing Financial Instructions and Corporate Governance rules?

How will you pilot the design and content?

Has anyone else produced this information, and can you use their ideas?

What help or advice have you sought from your organisation's communications specialist?

# 2. Content - What is in it?

Information in any format needs to contain certain key items.

Key components of all publications are, who it is for, what is it about who produced it and when they did so? It should tell people where to go and what to do next. It should include any other sources of information, services or advice. It should tell people of their rights and eligibility criteria and other formats available and how to obtain them.

## Who is it for and what is it about?

Identify the target audience for the information and ensure that this is immediately obvious. It may be helpful to clearly state who the information is not for and what it does not do.

Think carefully about making the information accessible to the target audience. Use words and ideas that people can easily understand.

Make sure the message is obvious and clear so as not to waste people's time if it is not for them.

## Who produced this and when?

You must identify the organisation which has produced the information and be as precise as possible. This can be usefully achieved by the inclusion of Logos. Consult your communications specialist about appropriate corporate styles.

There must be a date of publication, and a date by which the information should be reviewed. If at production it is clear that the information has a limited shelf life then include a 'sell by' or 'best before date'. In other words if you know when it will no longer apply, tell people.

When you are working in partnership and want to tell people, make sure you have the prior consent of your partner agencies.

## What to do next?

Include details on how to contact the service and how to obtain more information. When you include a contact point make sure there is a text phone number and e-mail address as well as the usual telephone and fax numbers.

Include other sources of service, advice and support. Make sure to tell people if there is an Out of Hours or an Emergency service available.

## Who can access the service?

If there are eligibility criteria or a needs assessment process for the service be sure to tell people what these are or how they can find out about them.

When you explain any assessment procedures do not forget to tell people about the cost. If a service is free, tell people. Remind people that they may have to wait for the service to be provided.

## What are people's rights?

People have rights and it is our duty to take every opportunity to inform them and remind them of these rights and our duties. Include a statement that explains their rights in the context of the information you are providing. This often includes telling people how, when and where to complain or make comment.

Include a statement on equality of access to information. Your Equality Scheme should be examined to identify your organisation's commitment to making information available. Remember that this statement itself needs to be in a range of formats.

## 2. Content - What is in it?

### CHECKLIST

All publications contain some key components so check the following :

Is it obvious who the information is aimed at?

Is there clarity about the content and what it should achieve?

Is there a clear listing or statement of the service or groups covered?

Does it make it clear for whom the information is not intended?

Have you stated who produced the information?

Are the appropriate Logos included in the publication and have you consulted on this?

Is the information accurate, timely and up to date?

Is there a date of publication?

Does the publication have a limited life, and if so is there a 'sell by date'?

Are all the necessary details of how to contact the service included?

Have you provided a list of independent sources of service, advice or support?

Have you explained who can access the service and how, when and where?

Does the publication make it clear what people's rights are?

Have you ensured compliance with relevant legislation?

Are there details provided about how to comment or complain?

Is the equality statement about alternative formats clear and accessible?

## 3. Composition - How is it presented?

Information must be accessible, easy to understand, relevant and acceptable to target audiences.

When providing information for patients, clients, carers or the public consider the issue from their point of view. If people cannot get it, read it or hear it, your information is of little value.

There is a danger of simplifying the message too much, appearing patronising or reducing the quality of the content. What you produce needs to be of a quality that is fit for purpose and acceptable to the target audience.

Involving your audience in a two way process is the best means of ensuring acceptability.

## Can people understand your message?

Use plain, straightforward language, avoiding long and complex words. Use simple punctuation. Include only one idea in a sentence. Complicated ideas work best in short sentences of around 15 to 20 words.

Ensure tone is polite and conversational, use 'you' and 'we'. Avoid jargon. If you must use technical language keep it to a minimum, and use plain language. Include a glossary, list or dictionary as good practice. Do not use abbreviations or short forms unless you give the full wording on first use.

## Is the information accessible?

Check that you are using all the information formats and channels identified during consultation. Consider how certain formats may be more suitable for particular audiences. A radio campaign may not reach people with a hearing impairment. It may however be the most effective method to communicate with people with a visual impairment or those who spend a lot of time in the car.

Simply translating existing English sources may not always result in the production of useful material. New materials may need to be developed.

The most universally accepted font size and style is 14 point Arial or Helvetica. Do not use font sizes smaller than 12 point. This should be presented as dark text against a light background. You should avoid continuing type across a photograph or illustration. Do not use glossy or very thin semi transparent papers. If text must be presented in columns make sure these are clearly separated. Try to avoid fitting text around illustrations.

A number of tools exist to make web sites accessible. The Royal National Institute of the Blind undertake web visual accessibility audits. The 'Bobby' software helps identify changes that will make your web site more accessible to users with disabilities.

## Are you satisfied with the quality?

The publication must achieve the original aims and objectives so always pilot a draft and use the feedback to improve your product. The use of reader panels is a useful way to check the impact of a publication.

Check that you have got the message correct and accurate. Ensure that you are as cost effective as possible. Remember to take account of the coverage and volume required to reach your intended audience.

## Is the information relevant?

You should have evidence that your information addresses the needs identified. A level of mistrust and disengagement will result if people feel that their time and effort has been wasted.

When you revisit your original intention be sure to have explanations for the things you have left out. Do not bombard people with messages that have no relevance to them.

Appropriate use of images and pictures may make the message more relevant for a range of audiences. This includes those with low literacy levels and those people who do not use English as their first language. Make sure this information is acceptable.

Avoid the use of language which conveys negative stereotypes. Do not use images or terminology that discriminates. Language affects and reflects the way we live and so there is a need to ensure that our use of language promotes diversity and equality.

Do not assume prior knowledge but be careful not to patronise your audience. This can be very difficult when you consider that the average reading ability of adults in Northern Ireland is that expected of a 9 to 11 year old child.

The good use of pictures reflecting the diversity of society can promote inclusion and equality of opportunity. If using images or pictures ensure that these are culturally sensitive to the audience.

Some languages do not have a written form. It is more appropriate to use other mediums such as translated audio cassettes or videos which could include sign languages and interpreters.

### 3. Composition - How is it presented?

#### CHECKLIST

If the right message is to reach the right people at the right time and in a way they can use, check the following :

Is the message presented using plain language?

Is it easy to understand?

Is there any jargon?

Are sentences within the 15-20 word count?

Does it require a glossary or listing of unavoidable technical language?

Have you produced all the required formats and provided information on how to access them?

Is the font size correct?

Have you followed all the published national guidance?

Have you consent for the use of all illustrations and photographs?

Have you included the feedback from your pilot?

Is the message clear and consistent throughout?

Is your final product cost effective?

Have you ordered sufficient quantities?

Will the product cause any offence?

Do any of the concepts or images discriminate?

### 4. Circulate - Where should it go?

Information should be circulated to the target audience through channels which people use the most.

The key components of any circulation strategy should ensure that you get the message out. When developing a strategy consideration should be given to other circulation channels which reach your target audience. You may be able to use these and so draw on other ideas.

## Who is it for?

Clearly identify the target audience for the information and establish a list of all the access points used by this audience. Is oral, written, visual, or a combination the best method of circulation?

Make contact with organisations or individuals who can facilitate the circulation of your information.

## How do we get to the target audience?

Consider the channels used by the target audience themselves. These may be newsletters, web sites or meetings. Ask your audience what works best for them.

Be imaginative and do not be afraid to try new ways, these may fail but you will be checking this out. Text messages on networks are a new way to reach a large number of people. Health messages for men in particular are wasted if only placed within health service sites. Try more imaginative methods for circulation.

Let organisations who can access your target audience reproduce your information in their publications.

## What is the best way to circulate?

Careful thought about appropriate circulation can increase access to information. Consider the timing of the circulation. Is it a one off, an occasionally repeated message or a regular message?

Consult your Communications or Public Relations specialist about the best opportunities to circulate your information.

Dates on your publication help people to understand how up to date it is. They also allow you the opportunity to review and renew if necessary. Some documentation has a shelf life and so can be removed from circulation when appropriate.

Within your identified circulation costs, include items such as, postage, delivery, display, web and telecommunications costs, and magazine or newspaper advertising charges.

## 4. Circulate - Where should it go?

### CHECKLIST

There are some key circulation components that apply to all publications, so check the following :

Is it obvious for whom the information is intended?

Is there clarity about how it is going to get to them?

Is it clear how you are going to circulate the information?

Is it clear how often you are going to circulate the information?

Is there an 'out of date by', on the publication?

Are the other circulation channels identified?

Have you made contact with organisations who can help your circulation?

Has a circulation strategy been considered at the outset?

Has a circulation cost been included in overall costing for the publication?

Are there other possible sources to raise awareness?

## 5. Check - Does it work?

There will be a way to measure if it worked.

An integral part of information provision is to develop a plan to measure if it achieved its objective.

## Has an evaluation plan been developed?

Ensure that someone takes a lead in developing this plan. Do not forget that there will be a cost for this. The bigger the campaign or the audience the higher this cost is likely to be.

Identify the precise means of collecting the data at key stages. Ask the intended audience how well they think the information worked. Did it serve its purpose?

Use simple methods of data collection for example, interviews, surveys, observations or feedback mechanisms included as part of the original information. The evaluation method used should be relevant to the purpose of the information. Is the evaluation based on numbers, uptake or costs? Consider if you should ask how people felt and if the information made any difference.

Use common sense in deciding on the appropriate level of your evaluation. Some small scale or very short term information provision initiatives may not merit extensive evaluation.

## What was the value?

Information provision is not just a good idea. Health, Social Services and Public Safety organisations have a statutory obligation to provide information and to ensure that it is accessible.

You should revisit the outcomes set in the planning stage. Assess how well these have been achieved. Was it worth the money?

## What do people think about it?

Remember people have a right and are expected to give and receive feedback. Key questions they should be asked are, what worked and why and what they liked and disliked?

Staff views should also be sought as they may be the first to know when something is not working. For all those who were engaged in the earlier consultations, opportunities should be provided to allow them to comment.

Analyse and write up feedback obtained, do not file it away. Do not allow the scale of any evaluation to exceed the scale of the information in the first place.

## How well has it worked?

Some campaigns require regular evaluation. A campaign targeting 16 year olds is playing to an annually changing audience. This requires regular evaluation to update and modernise your campaign.

Organisations can often learn more from careful considerations of what has not worked and how it can be made more relevant. There is nothing wrong with making a mistake, it is wrong to make the same mistake time and time again.

## What might need changed?

It can often be more important to consider how best to make changes than to continue in the knowledge that the information is time limited. Change means you have listened.

Remember to share your outcomes within your organisation and outside, so others can learn. People's circumstances and expectations constantly change so information needs refreshed.

## 5. Check - Does it work?

### CHECKLIST

A key part of any process for producing information is the consideration of whether or not it has worked :

Has someone taken a lead in developing the evaluation plan?

Have resources been identified for evaluation?

Are all the statutory requirements met?

Were opportunities given to receive feedback?

Have target audience views been taken into account?

Were changes included as an ongoing process?

Have you provided feedback on the process?

Did people get a chance to comment on draft reports?

How have you included evaluation as a key part of the planning process?

Produced on behalf of the Department of Health, Social  
Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland.

This and the other publications in the series are available on:

**[www.dhsspsni.gov.uk](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/econsultation/practice.html)**  
**[/econsultation/practice.html](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/econsultation/practice.html)**

This document can be made available in a range of other  
languages and formats.

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