House style guide

Consistency builds trust, which is why everything we write should follow the same standards of grammar, punctuation and usage.

This is our house style guide, which shows the conventions we use for our communications.

For additional guidance on a point of style that is not covered here, please check [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/style-guide/a-to-z-of-gov-uk-style).

If you have any questions or suggestions, please [contact us](https://toolkit.essex.gov.uk/who-to-talk-to/leadership-team/).

### Abbreviations and acronyms

eg can sometimes be read aloud as ‘egg’ by screen reading software. Instead use ‘for example’ or ‘such as’ or ‘like’ or ‘including’ - whichever works best in the specific context.

etc can usually be avoided. Try using ‘for example’ or ‘such as’ or ‘like’ or ‘including’. Never use etc at the end of a list starting with these words.

ie - used to clarify a sentence - is not always understood. Try (re)writing sentences to avoid the need to use it. If that is not possible, use an alternative such as ‘meaning’ or ‘that is’.

The first time you use an acronym, remember to spell out the term in full and follow it with the acronym in brackets. For example:​

* Knowsley Borough Council (ERO)
* ​Department for Education (DfE)

Well-known acronyms and abbreviations are not always necessary to spell out. For example: BBC; HMRC; DVLA; plc.

### American vs UK English

We use UK English spelling and grammar. For example: ‘organise’ not ‘organize’, ‘modelling’ not ‘modeling’, ‘adviser’ not ‘advisor’, and ‘fill in a form’, not ‘fill out a form’. American proper nouns, such as ‘Pearl Harbor’, take American English spelling.

### Among​

Use the word ‘among’ not ‘amongst’.

### Apostrophes

Use the ‘pupil’s work’ for singular (one pupil) and the ‘pupils’ work’ for plural (many pupils).

Where the base word ends in an ‘s’ you can add just the apostrophe or the apostrophe and another ‘s’. Either is correct. For example: ‘St James’ Park’ or ‘St James’s Park’.

When you use ‘it’s’ remember it is only used in place of ‘it is’ and ‘it has’.​

### Bullet points

You can use bullet points to make text easier to read.

Make sure that:

* you always use a lead-in line
* the bullets make sense running on from the lead-in line
* you use lower case at the start of the bullet
* you do not use more than one sentence per bullet point - use commas or dashes to expand on an item
* you do not put ‘or’ or ‘and’ after the bullets
* you do not make the whole bullet a link if it’s a long phrase
* you do not put a semicolon at the end of a bullet
* there is no full stop after the last bullet point

Bullets should normally form a complete sentence following from the lead text. But it’s sometimes necessary to add a short phrase to clarify whether all or some of the points apply. For example: ‘Please contact us if one of the following applies to you:’

### Capitals

Always use capitals for proper nouns such as names of people, places, organisations, institutions, movements, and periods of time. For example: John Smith; Borough Hall; Canvey Island; Merseyside Police; Parliament; Buddhism; Iron Age.

Use Conservative, Labour, Liberal when referring to the political parties, but conservative and liberal when used as adjectives.

Use capitals for titles of office holders and lowercase when being less specific. For example:

* Prime Minister
* Secretary of State for Education and Skills
* John Smith, Chief Executive
* The chief executives of Knowsley companies
* Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation
* The appointment of cabinet members
* Borough Councillor for Harwich
* A decision taken by borough councillors

Use capital letters when you are being specific, but lowercase when you are not.

A few common uppercase examples used at the council:

* Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
* Huyton Village
* Council Tax
* Disability Living Allowance​​

### Colons and semicolons

A colon is used to bring your attention to whatever follows whereas a semicolon is a pause before an independent clause. A colon leads from general or introductory to example. For example: ‘several departments contributed to the report: production, marketing, accounts, distribution and personnel’.

A colon also leads from cause to effect. For example: It was a sunny day: we played cricket on the green.

A semicolon is used to divide up the sentence, to signal the end of one part and the beginning of another part. It's more than a comma, but less than a full stop, so it combines the 2 into a single punctuation mark.

You can also use semicolons to break up lists which already contain commas. For example: government departments such as health; education; agriculture, food, and fisheries; foreign affairs; and employment.

However, they can make text appear harder to read, so use them sparingly. When writing for online, we place the list in bullets for clarity.

### Commas

The general rule to remember is to use a comma where you would naturally pause in speech.

You don’t need to use a comma between the last 2 items in a list. For example: Samantha bought apples, bananas, grapes, tomatoes, and oranges.

Use a comma after the word ‘however’.

### Contractions

We have the freedom to use contractions such as ‘it’s’ and ‘we’re’ when appropriate to the context. These can add warmth and energy to our writing. At other times, for instance on more formal communications, it’s more appropriate to use the longer form, such as ‘it is’ and ‘we are’.

We avoid using longer contractions, such as ‘couldn’t’, ‘hasn’t’ and ‘should’ve’ – in these instances, use the longer form.

Take care not to use too many contractions, so that they don’t become a distraction to the reader or make a serious message sound frivolous.

### Dates

Dates should be shown as day, month, year, with no comma.

For example: 23 October 2009.

When space is an issue, such as in tables or publication titles, you can use truncated months such as Jan, Feb. The rest of the time, use the full word and always with a capital.

Do not use “rd”, “th”, "nd" or “st” after the day.

Use ‘to’ in date ranges - not hyphens, en rules or em dashes. For example:

* tax year 2011 to 2012
* Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm (put different days on a new line, do not separate with a comma)
* 10 November to 21 December

### Email addresses

For email addresses use lowercase throughout. For example: john.smith@knowsley.gov.uk not John.Smith@knowsley.gov.uk

Use ‘email’ not ‘e-mail’.

### Employees

Use the word ‘employees’, not ‘staff’.

### Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council

We use Knowsley Council when referring to our organisation externally. Once we have established that we are talking about Knowsley Council, we avoid repetition by using ‘the council’.

We talk about ourselves in the third person plural (‘we’ or ‘us’), but only when we have already established who we are talking about, such as by mentioning Knowsley Council or alongside the prominent presence of our logo.

We do not typically refer to ourselves as ‘the borough council’ unless the context demands it, for instance when specifically talking about our role for the borough.

To avoid confusion with other acronyms, we do not use KMBC in our external communications – but they are an acceptable shorthand for internal communications.​

### Fewer vs less

Fewer refers to number and less to volume. For example: the crop failure led to fewer raspberries in the field so less fruit at the shop.

### Formatting

#### Headings

Only the first letter of a heading is capitalised (the leading capital) and all the other words are lowercase. For example: How to contact us

The only exception to use capitals is when the heading includes proper nouns. For example: About Bowring Park

Heading styles help readers understand the order of content and should be applied consistently. Use pre-set styles in templates and applications when available.

#### Font

Arial 12 is the standard font and size for letters.

#### Paragraphs

When setting paragraphs, you should:

* not indent or tab them in any way
* maintain consistency when vertically spacing (it is a good idea to space out at least one clear line between each paragraph)
* avoid lengthy paragraphs and break down information where possible, for clarity
* use one space after all punctuation except brackets and forward slashes, where you generally will not need spacing

### Hyphens

When referring to a person’s age, year-old should be hyphenated. For example: 24-year-old Dan and 11 to 13-year-olds.

### ​​Italic​​s

Do not use italics. Use ‘single quotation marks’ if referring to a document, scheme or initiative.

### Lowercase

Use lowercase when referring to people or bodies in a general sense. For example:​ councillors, service users, teachers, governing bodies, your service area, your manager, your councillor, your council.

The word government should be lower case unless it’s a full title. For example: ‘UK government’, but ‘His Majesty’s Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’. Also ‘Welsh Government’, as it’s the full title.

Use lowercase for teacher; headteacher; governor.

Use lowercase for: mathematics; science; religious education but not English.

Use the word borough in lowercase. For example: a borough survey; boroughwide; the borough of Knowsley. The exception would be when it forms part of a name, such as Knowsley Safari Park.

Seasons should all be lower case.

Area locations north, south, east, west should be lower case.

Project titles should be uppercase, but the word project should be lowercase. For example: Property Transformation project.

When referring to a team name, the word team should be lowercase, not uppercase. For example: John Smith from the Customer Service team – not John Smith from the Customer Service Team.

When sending an email or letter addressed to colleagues or managers, both ‘addressees’ should be lowercase. For example: Dear managers and Dear colleagues.

Some common lowercase examples used at the council:

* the borough council
* the council
* councils in Merseyside
* borough councils in England and Wales

### Media release and media invite

Use the phrase ‘media release’ not ‘press release’, and ‘media invite’ not ‘press invite’.

### Numbers

Spell out from numbers one to nine, then use numbers from 10 to 999,999. Exceptions to this rule are:

* when a number forms part of a name or a brand. For example: Channel 4 or O2
* when a number is used at the beginning of a sentence. For example: Thirty people attended the event in Kirkby

Use million, billion and trillion for numbers over 999,999: £138 million.

Do not abbreviate million to m, billion to bn or trillion to tn, except for headlines.

Insert commas with four or more figures, for example: 7,681

Spell out common fractions like one-half.

Use a % sign for percentages, for example: 50%

Use a 0 where there’s no digit before the decimal point.

Use ‘500 to 900’ and not ‘500-900’ (except in tables).

Addresses: use ‘to’ in address ranges: 49 to 53 Cherry Street.

### Plurals

Companies and teams are singular, not plural. For example:

* Knowsley Council is helping people live better lives
* The Customer Service team is in the Municipal Building

Some of the more troublesome singular/plural forms you might encounter when writing:

* analysis/analyses
* appendix/ appendices
* criterion/criteria
* curriculum/curricula
* focus/focuses
* formula/formulas (general); formulae (mathematic)
* index/indices
* matrix/matrices
* phenomenon/phenomena
* referendum/referendums
* series/series
* syllabus/syllabuses
* synopsis/synopses
* virus/viruses

### Prices

Be consistent when including prices. For example:

£2.00 and £3.75 - not £2 and £3.75

It should be £1 million or £1 billion. The exception is if using within headlines when it should be abbreviated to £1m or £1b.

Use the currency symbol in table headers so it doesn’t need to be included on each figure in the table.

### Quotation marks

Use double quotation marks for direct speech and always attribute a quote in the past tense. For example: She said, “My friend thought that I would make an ideal foster parent.”

Use single quotation marks for headlines, unusual terms, quotes within quotes, indirect speech, when referring to words and publications.

In long passages of speech, open quotes for every new paragraph, but close quotes only at the end of the final paragraph.

### Slang

We generally avoid the use of slang in our copy. The occasional exception may occur on social media, where for effect we might sometimes use phrases that are in common usage. Use your individual discretion to ensure that any slang terms used are widely understood, and in line with the council’s values and behaviours.

### Staff

Use the word ‘employees’, not ‘staff’.

For example:

* Council employees

### Symbols

Avoid the use of ampersands (&) except where it is part of a name, institution, or department. For example:

* Education Transport & Awards team
* Highways & Transportation

### Time

Use the 12-hour clock and am or pm without any full stops. For example: 9am; 9.30am; 4pm

Use noon or midnight.

Use a consistent time format, either 10am and 3pm or 10.00am and 3.00pm.

If covering a period of time, use ‘to’ – not hyphens, en rules or em dashes. For example: 8pm to 10pm or 9am to 6pm

### Web terminology

Use:

* email not e-mail
* website not web site
* web page not webpage
* internet not Internet
* online not on-line

When including website addresses in text, include the www. prior to the website details. For example: www.knowsley.gov.uk, not knowsley.gov.uk

Don’t use “click here” as link text. Make your link text active and descriptive. For example: Find out [how your carer can get support](https://www.essex.gov.uk/financial-support-for-carers) ​so they can continue caring for you.

You can use “right-click” if the user needs to right-click to open-up a list of options to progress through the user journey.

### While vs whilst

Use the word ‘while’, not ‘whilst’.​