Digital Content Guide

Content design

We do not need to publish everything online. We only need to publish what someone needs to know so they can complete their task.

All content must meet a 'user need' - the needs that Harlow residents, visitors and businesses have of Harlow Council. If we can't prove they need the information, we shouldn't put it on there. Irrelevant content makes relevant information harder to find by making it difficult to navigate to and search for.

Content should be published either:

- as guidance to help users complete a transaction with the council
- to help users understand what the council is doing
- to meet legislation

Content that does not do one of these things should not be published on the website.

The following types of content should not be published on the website.

- content that repeats or significantly overlaps with existing content - duplicate content produces poor search results and confuses the user
- advertising third party websites - if we are promoting the work of other organisations these must meet a user need and have a direct link to Harlow
- content designed for staff use only
- information or advice that is not specific to the council and can be provided by other organisations or charities, for example housing advice from Shelter
- legislation that's on www.legislation.gov.uk
- FAQs - duplicate content confuses the user, they cannot be front-loaded and are usually not frequently asked questions by the public, but important information dumped by the content editor

We do not have set page length limits, but we need to consider:

- [people only read 20 to 28% of text on a web page](#)
- pressure on the brain to understand increases for every 100 words you put on a page

This means that the quicker you get to the point, the greater the chance your target audience will see the information you want them to. We must keep content as focussed as possible.

Accessible content

We must make sure any content we create is accessible to all. For something to be accessible someone needs to be able to complete the task they are trying to achieve without encountering a barrier or issue.

Accessibility is not only important in meeting [government accessibility requirements](#), it makes content quicker and easier to understand for everyone.

We follow the four principles of [the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#):

- The information that a user needs must be **perceivable** to them. That is, it is available to one of their senses (sight, hearing or touch).
- The information that the user needs must be **understandable** to them. That is, the information makes sense to them.
- The web page needs to be **operable**. That is, if someone is using a keyboard for example, they can still do everything that someone using a mouse can do.
- The web page needs to be **robust**. That means that the web page works as expected in the technology that someone is using such as a screen reader.

Content style

We write conversationally – as if you were talking to your audience face-to-face but with the authority of someone who can actively help.

Before publishing content online, the style must be signed off by a member of the Communications team.

We are guided by the [GOV.UK style guide](#)

We follow the following style guidelines:

- always write in [plain English](#)
- avoid using [jargon words](#)
- all content should be readable by a 9 year old, the average reading age in the UK – do not 'dumb down' your content, just write simply and clearly
- sentences should have no more than 25 words
- paragraphs should have no more than 5 sentences - break up text with descriptive subheadings
- look to use bullet points to make text easier to read - [follow GOV.UK style](#)
- use numbered steps when describing a process – [follow GOV.UK style](#)
- all links should be descriptive ('contact us' rather than 'click here') – never write out the URL
- avoid terms like 'you may be able to'- it's better to say 'you can' and 'we will'
- use the active voice, not the passive – it's more transparent ('we will fine you' rather than 'you will be fined')
- address our residents as 'you' where possible
- address ourselves as 'we' instead of repeating Harlow council, it's more approachable – but only where it is clear who 'we' is
- use Harlow council with a lower case 'c'
- avoid using block capitals – they are hard to read
- only capitalise the first letter where absolutely necessary – it's less formal
- use contractions like you'll and we'll – it's quicker for users to read
- avoid negative contractions like can't and don't - users find them harder to read
- titles should be descriptive ('Apply for a Private Hire licence', not 'Private Hire')
- avoid gerunds in titles ('Apply for a licence' not 'Applying for a licence')
- use colons to break up long title as it helps users to scan ('Planning appeal procedures: technical review' not 'Technical review of planning appeal procedures')
- avoid semicolons as they are often misread – just use separate sentences
- Headings (H1) need to be 65 characters or less (including spaces) – anything over is cut off by search engines

- use 'one' but write all other numbers in numerals (including 2 to 9) - if a number starts a sentence, write it out in full, except where it starts a heading
- use 'to' in time and date ranges, not dashes or hyphens (10am to 11am, not 10-11am) – it's more accessible
- avoid the 24 hour clock (5:30pm not 1730hrs), use 11.59pm rather than midnight and use midday rather than 12 noon or 12pm – it's easier for people to understand
- dates are 1 January 2019 (not 1st January or January 1)
- avoid personal emails for contact details - use team emails

Documents

Compared with HTML content, information published in a PDF is harder to find, use and maintain. Most importantly they also fail to meet accessibility standards.

Our default position is that we do not use pdfs on our website. We can put pdfs on the website in exceptional circumstances. These might be because the information is:

- a policy
- a report or strategy

If you do have to create a document, we need to make sure we enter the following into the properties section of the document:

- advanced > set the language
- a descriptive title (which will match the title used on the website and in the CMS)
- the author should be set to "Harlow Council"
- Document properties > make sure the security settings of the document allow for assistive technologies to extract text
- Document properties > Initial view > "Show" should be set to "Document Title"
- Advanced > add accessibility tags
- PDFs should not contain any active links - before publishing a PDF, use the 'Remove web links' tool
- [Verify the PDF accessibility before publishing](#)

Use the heading styles in Word to create a logical document structure. Don't increase the size of text or make it bold to create the appearance of headings.

Use built in features within the authoring tool to define headings, paragraph text, lists, tables, alternative text for images etc.

When adding documents to the website the filename must match the link text given wherever possible. For example harlow-council-annual-report.pdf would be Harlow council annual report.

Images and videos

Images and videos should be kept to a minimum – as multiple images are likely to decrease download speeds.

We should add images only where these add to user's understanding (a picture of what the blue recycling bin looks like), but images should never be used in place of information (images should never include text).

- all images must have alt text – this must be a meaningful description of the image for somebody using a screenreader
- all images should be optimised for the web
- the naming convention for image files is lower case with hyphens between the words (for example – harlow-council-logo.jpg)