CONTENT STRATEGY

[Sample]



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# Our Content Strategy

## Introduction

In recent years the understanding of the ways in which customers use Local Government websites has significantly changed the way in which we understand the purpose of the Council’s website. Significantly, customers do not come to the website to read about the Council, but to transact with us - as and when they have a specific need. Therefore the need to present useful, but usable content, to enable customers to efficiently achieve their goals has become of paramount importance. In accordance with this there is a need for a clear, documented strategy defining the Council’s approach to digital content.

Content Strategy is a, “necessary practice in any and all organisations that create and publish content online” (Kristina Halvorson, *Content Strategy For The Web*, 2012). This document defines the Council’s Content Strategy and approach to the development and publication of useful and usable content intended for consumption via our digital channels (predominantly web and mobile).

It includes the following elements:

* The objectives and benefits of the strategy
* Guidelines defining what content is appropriate for digital publication, and how it should be written and presented
* Key considerations to ensure that our content performs well in search engines
* The content workflow process
* The process for appealing content decisions
* Content review guidelines

All content must be produced and managed following the principles laid out in this document.

## Strategy Review

The Council’s Content Strategy must be reviewed every 12 months to ensure that it is still relevant in light of changing technologies and customer behaviour.

## Strategic Objectives and Benefits

The quality of the digital content that the Council produces will directly affect the success of our digital channels as poor content always equates to confused and unhappy customers. Well structured content that enables our customers to efficiently transact with us via these channels will lead to happy customers, and financial savings.

Our Content Strategy will provide the following objectives and benefits:

**Provide structure and guidance for our authors**

This is particularly important as the Council is using a devolved authoring model. While it really helps to have users who ‘own’ the content responsible for updating it, it is vital that they are given a clear framework within which to work.

**Ensure that our ‘useful’ content is ‘usable’**

In *The Discipline of Content Strategy* (2008), Kristina Halvorson says that, “Content strategy plans for the creation, publication, and governance of useful, usable content.”

The key word to focus on in this definition is ‘usable’ - no matter how useful our content is, if it is not presented in a usable way then it will not meet the needs of our customers.

‘Useful’ content is only ‘Usable’ when the customer can achieve what they need:

* Efficiently
* Effectively
* Accurately

All content must focus on the needs of the customer, “offering them precisely what they need, exactly when they need it, and in just the right form” (Erin Kissane, *The Elements of Content Strategy*).

**Build trust through consistency**

Our Content Strategy will incorporate clear voice and tone guidelines to govern the way in which our content is written.

If our content is presented using a clear single voice, even if it has been written by a range of different authors, it will encourage a higher level of trust from our customers.

**Reduce avoidable contact via other channels**

Effectively enforcing this Content Strategy will reduce the time and costs involved in managing customers who are driven to contact us via other channels because they cannot find what they need. This strategy will ensure that content is produced and presented in a manner that will encourage Channel Shift where appropriate.

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# Writing Style Guidelines

## Best Practice Recommendations

The purpose of the Council’s website is not to publish everything about us, but to present clear customer-focused information to enable them to interact with us efficiently. This means avoiding wherever possible the publication of overly detailed information, or information for which the Council is not responsible or does not directly help the customer - it is about publishing only the information that the customer needs to complete the task. As Erin Kissane says in *The Elements of Content Strategy* (2011):

“Content is appropriate for users when it helps them accomplish their goals… offering them precisely what they need, exactly when they need it, and in just the right form.”

The LocalGov Digital Content Guidelines provide a set of useful questions to ask in order to determine whether an item is published on the website, and whether the item is presented in a useful way. These should be referred to every time you are considering creating an item of content, and when reviewing your content:

[**Is the content original?**](http://localgovdigital.info/localgov-digital-makers/outputs/digital-content-standards/the-golden-rules/is-the-content-original/)

It is important to ask this question in relation to services delivered by third parties, partners, central government, etc. Publishing content that is available elsewhere can raise a range of issues in relation to copyright, accuracy and the overheads associated with managing information that the Council does not ‘own’.

If the information is available elsewhere just provide a deep link to the relevant website.

[**Is the content answering a question that our customers are asking?**](http://localgovdigital.info/localgov-digital-makers/outputs/digital-content-standards/the-golden-rules/is-the-content-answering-a-question-that-our-customers-are-asking/)

Every piece of content should serve a customer focused purpose, and not be published just because we have the information.

Always ask why the customer would be on the page and what you would expect them to do next. If you cannot answer this question then the content should not be published.

Content that serves no customer focused purpose will clutter the website with unnecessary information, making it harder for customers to find the information they actually need. It also wastes your time having to manage it.

[**Can the content be found using search words that make sense to the customer?**](http://localgovdigital.info/localgov-digital-makers/outputs/digital-content-standards/the-golden-rules/can-the-content-be-found-using-search-words-that-make-sense-to-the-customer/)

When writing your content use language that the customer would use. This will help boost your content ranking in search as the text will match the terms that the customer is searching for. Pay particular attentions to the use of keywords in your title and include the key term the customer would search for (for example, on GOV.uk there is a page called ‘Renew Your Tax Disc’ even though the term is incorrect, but in general people don’t use the correct term which is ‘Vehicle License’).

[**Is your content easy-to-read and understandable to a layperson?**](http://localgovdigital.info/localgov-digital-makers/outputs/digital-content-standards/the-golden-rules/is-your-content-easy-to-read-and-understandable-to-a-layperson/)

Use accessible, Plain English and avoid jargon. Your content is written for consumption by users that will not have the same level of understanding of council services as you so you need to account for this when writing it.

[**Are the graphics and pictures appropriate, and do they add something to the page?**](http://localgovdigital.info/localgov-digital-makers/outputs/digital-content-standards/the-golden-rules/are-the-graphics-and-pictures-appropriate-and-do-they-add-something-to-the-page/)

Only use graphics and images if they help the customer to understand the content. Customers are not interested in ‘decorative’ images that add no meaning and they can often hinder the user experience by increasing page load times - especially on mobile devices.

As a general rule do not use images.

Take the time to read the [LocalGov Digital Content Guidelines](http://localgovdigital.info/localgov-digital-makers/outputs/digital-content-standards/) as these provide a useful ‘best practice’ guide to help you to understand key concepts to use when writing your content.

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## Make Reading Easy for All Devices

* Use clear and meaningful headings and sub-headings to guide the reader through your content.
* Don’t shout by USING CAPITALS for emphasis. This is extremely hard to read.
* Slow down the scanning eye and draw attention to important points by using bulleted lists.
* One idea per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph).
* Reduce words - use half the word count (or less) than conventional writing. Keep sentences short and simple. Remove any unnecessary detail.

## Frequently Asked Questions

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) should not be used as a structure for delivering important content and information. Information should be presented on clear task-focused pages that provide the customer with all of the information they need in order to complete their goal.

User research shows that FAQs tend to be a very internally focused way of presenting information and rarely meet the needs of the customer:

“FAQs are a way to show you've thought about what your users should know but haven't thought about your users” (James Hupp @jameshupp, in response to the question ‘What are FAQs?’ from Sarah Richards @escmum, Head of Content at Government Digital Service)

The Government Digital Service (GDS), responsible for developing the award winning content on GOV.UK, have published a useful post that provides a useful summary - [FAQs: why we don’t have them](https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2013/07/25/faqs-why-we-dont-have-them/)

## Attachments (Microsoft Office Files and PDFs)

Important information that is needed for a customer to complete a task must be presented as content on the page. Attachments must only be used for content that it is not possible / practical to add in this way (for example, complex strategy documents).

* Unless there is a statutory requirement to the contrary attachments must be in PDF format only.
* Attachments must not duplicate information already available elsewhere on the website.
* Attachment content must be published in readable, web friendly format so that pages are presented in the correct order when viewed in a browser.
* Attachments must be regularly reviewed and tested for broken links (and accessibility where possible).

## Content Structure

There are two different ways in which content should be structured:

**Task focused content**

* An action based page title (e.g. Report an abandoned vehicle).
* Clear information outlining what information the customer needs to complete the task at the top of the page.
* A clear call to action.
* Any additional useful information.
* Do not include any information that is not directly relevant to the completion of the task.

**Information based content**

* The first paragraph of content should be a brief overview of the content to help the customer understand if it is what they are looking for.
* Break detailed information into clear sections using sub-headings.

## Terms to Avoid

* Writing well for the Web means taking advantage of the options the Web offers, but at the same time, not calling attention to the Web. "Click here," "follow this link," and "this Web site" are just a few self-referential terms to avoid.
* Generally, if the words or phrases are specific to Web use, then they are probably words to avoid. A good test of web-term overuse is to print the page out, read it, and ask yourself if it makes as much sense on paper as it does on screen.
* Don’t use words that date content such as ‘new’.
* Don’t use jargon.
* Use language that the customer would use.

## Writing Guidelines

When writing for the web, it is important to follow the principles of Plain English. In other words, keep your meanings simple and clear – and, just think, if you do not really understand something, who else will? For more information on Plain English, visit [www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk)

**General writing style**

* British English standard spelling, -ise not -ize, programme not program (unless referring to a computer program) etc.
* Website, email, internet, intranet: one word, lower case.
* Use double quotes for reported speech and when referring to an excerpt from a quote. Single quotes are only used as display quotes.
* Headings: lower case – write headings that can also be used as meta tags – concise and descriptive.
* No exclamation marks (!) and no caps for emphasis.
* Use the sub heading style within content (editor toolbar, drop down list)

**Addresses**

* Write street numbers, names and postcodes
* Always write out Street (not St), Road (not Rd) etc.
* When letters are included, always lower case

**Numbers**

* One to nine written out, 10 upwards in numbers with the following exceptions:   
  + Century always write out, eg nineteenth century.
  + Bus numbers eg bus 5, 6, 7 or 27.
  + Times 6pm, 9pm, 5.30pm.
  + Where it would cause inconsistencies eg children aged 4-10 rather than four-10.
  + Where unit of measurement is abbreviated eg km.
  + Where version of software eg internet explorer 5.
  + 60s not 1960s, and not 60's.
* Always use figures with decimal points and percentages.
* Use symbols with figures eg £243.57, 16%.
* Spell out amounts over one hundred thousand eg three million, 12 billion. (The rule of figures over 10 still applies). Except with symbols eg £130,000.
* Try to avoid numbers at the beginning of sentences, if this is not possible always write it in full.

**Currency**

* Prices should be written with currency first then number, closed up eg £9.99, £10,000. Do not include decimal point if whole number, eg £5. Millions should be written as eg £1 million, £1.5 million.

**Dates**

* Should follow the format: day, date, month, year. Only use the year if the event is not in the current year eg Monday 7 September 2000. Do not use date suffixes st, th etc.

**Times**

* Use am or pm, no space eg 9am, 4.30pm, 7pm.
* Use a full stop to separate hours and minutes eg 5.30pm.

**Distances and measurements**

* Conversions (in brackets) to imperial units should be provided wherever this seems useful. Metric followed by imperial in brackets eg 16km (10 miles).
* Write out kilometres, metres etc when writing out the number (one to nine) so eight kilometres (five miles); otherwise numerals and abbreviation (mm, cm, m, km, ft).
* Always write out miles, inches, hectares and acres.
* When area – use sq ft, sq metres, sq miles, sq kilometres.

**Abbreviations**

* Do not abbreviate days, months etc
* Do not use full stops in abbreviations, or spaces between initials: BBC, US, mph, eg, No 10, PJ O'Rourke, WH Smith, etc
* Spell out less well known abbreviations on first reference with abbreviation following in brackets. It is not necessary to spell out well known ones, such as EU, UN, US, BBC, CD
* Acronyms take initial cap: Aids, Isa, Mori, Unison.
* Use all caps only if the abbreviation is pronounced as the individual letters.

**And or &**

* Only use the ampersand where it is part of an official title or name eg: Marks & Spencer, P&O. Do not use the ampersand for internal departments eg housing and social services not housing & social services.

**Bullet points**

* Useful for breaking up chunks of text and clarifying it. They serve the same purpose as a semi-colon or comma in continuous text. Bullet points should start with initial lower-case, no full-stop (including for final point) and have no double-line spacing between them. They should be prioritised and where possible should not run to more than one line.

**Underlining**

* Do not underline text – as this could be confused with a hyperlink.

**Common Mistakes**

* Council is singular eg the council is ... not the council are.
* Never abbreviate to Cllr. It should be Councillor John Smith, then Councillor Smith.

# Content Governance

## Quality Assurance

Robust content governance will ensure that the Council’s website provides customers with useful and useable content to meet their needs. It will make sure that all content published on the website:

* Meets a customer need
* Is of a high quality
* Conforms with the Council’s Writing Style Guidelines
* Remains relevant and up-to-date
* Helps to reduce internal workloads and customer frustration
* Helps reduce contact via other, more expensive, channels

## Roles and Responsibilities

Insert details of roles and responsibilities in relation to content production and website governance.

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## Workflow

All key content is subject to workflow approval, managed within the Council’s Content Management System.

Before sending content for approval it must be spell checked and proof-read to ensure that it conforms with the Council’s Writing Style Guidelines as outlined in this document.

All content must be submitted to the Web Team for approval and publication. It will be reviewed to confirm that it meets the Council’s Writing Style Guidelines, and that to ensure that it meets the requirements for online publication - this will include assessing whether the content serves a customer focused purpose.

All content will be either approved or rejected within 5 days of submission to the Web Team. In cases where content is deemed to be urgent the Web Team must be directly contacted and the reason for its urgency discussed - a final decision will then be made on a case-by-case basis.

When an item of content is rejected by the Web Team, details for the rejection will be included for review alongside the item in the users Task List. It is therefore important for users awaiting content approval to check their Task List on a daily basis.

When a rejected item has been re-submitted for approval the 5 day approval turn around period will again apply.

The Web Team are responsible for the quality of the Council’s website and the user experience provided to our customers. As such the Web Team have final say in all matters relating to online content.

## Content Review Timetable

A review or expiry date must be set for every item of content using the Content Schedule option within the Council’s Content Management System. This must be done prior to the item being submitted to the Web Team for approval and publication.

Review Dates: The frequency of the review period should be judged according to the nature of the content itself but every item much be reviewed at least annually.

Expiry Dates: Where an item has a fixed lifespan (e.g. a campaign, seasonal content, etc.) an expiry date must be set to remove the content automatically as soon as it is not relevant.

If no review or expiry date has been set then the item will be rejected by the Web Team.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Content Inventory

This should include a full list of all content on your website. As a minimum it should include details of:

* Title
* Content Owner
* Creation Date
* Last Review Date
* Next Review Date

## Appendix 2: Sample Content

Provide annotated examples of task based and information based content for reference.

## Appendix 3: Site Structure and Content Types

Provide an overview of the site structure with illustrative screenshots (homepage, landing page, document page, etc.)