

Dorset Innovation Hub: Common Language – ‘How To’ Guide

Introduction

The nature of the Dorset Integrated Care System (ICS) means that there is a significant amount of cross organisational collaboration, with each organisation bringing its own distinct language rooted in its context.

This guide was developed to promote the use of a common language between organisations and establish good practice principles, while also signposting various tools and resources for further support. Its goal is to ensure clarity and accessibility for partner organisations across the Dorset ICS, fostering better communication and understanding.

The scope of this guide does not include considerations and principles for communications with service users and the public.

What do we mean by ‘common language’

For the purposes of this document, the term ‘common language’ refers to the use of words and terms that are widely used and understood by a large number of people, including the avoidance of acronym use where possible.

Why is the use of ‘common language’ important?

The risks of not using common language include:

- Miscommunication and confusion
- Delays in service delivery
- Increased public safety risk
- Breakdown in agency trust
- Poor outcomes for service users
- Legal and compliance risks
- Reduced efficiency
- Reduced engagements
- Disempowering people
- Working in silos

As an example, the acronym PR can have several different meanings depending on context and setting:

- Public relations, pulmonary rehabilitation, per rectum, purchase requisition, pulse rate, personal responsibility.

Through the use and promotion of common language we can facilitate:

- Clarity – reduction in confusion between teams, roles and organisations
- Efficiency – speed up decision making and collaboration



- Collaboration – supports alignment of roles, expectations and common goals
- Inclusion – reinforces group belonging and understanding, helps all staff, partners, and service users to engage and contribute
- Spread – makes it easier to share, adopt, and scale improvements across services

Recognising where complex terms and acronyms are important

In certain scenarios it is acknowledged that complex terms and acronyms are important, for example.

- Among professionals with shared knowledge - delivering precise and concise information to enable rapid communication, decision making and action.
- Saving time and space – shortening long phrases in speech, patient records, slides or notes
- Aids digital search – easier to tag, index, or search digital records

However, these scenarios are normally relevant to specialist groups of individuals and does not generally include wider across department and organisation communication.

Good practice principles

Below are some good practice principles important to adhere to, in verbal and written communications, to support and promote common language:

1. Know your audience in all communications
 - Avoid complex terms and acronyms if mixed or public audiences
 - Be aware of cultural and regional differences - some terms may have different meanings in different contexts
2. Support your audience to understand
 - Use complex terms and acronyms only if you are confident your audience understands
 - If understanding is in doubt, explain complex terms and acronyms, and confirm understanding
 - At the start of meetings or projects, agree what key terms mean
 - Be consistent
 - In written communication, if acronyms are used, ensure that the term is written in full once with the acronym presented in bracket after the term, e.g., public relations (PR)



3. Keep it simple, relevant and up to date
 - Use acronyms only when it adds efficiency and its meaning is understood
 - Consider does this term clarify or complicate?
 - Use terms that are up to date and widely accepted – retire outdated and obscure terms unless you are explaining them historically
4. Act as an advocate for common language
 - Speak up if you do not understand terms being used in communications - it is ok not to know and modelling this behaviour supports others to do the same
 - Create an environment which enables others to speak up
 - Avoid overuse – limit the number of acronyms per document or conversation

Signposting and resources

Relevant glossaries to support cross organisation understanding include:

Organisational Setting	Link to Glossary
Local Authority	Think Local Act Personal Jargon Buster: Jargon Buster - TLAP
Local Authority	Local Government Association Glossary: Glossary Local Government Association
Police	Metropolitan Police Glossary: Glossary Metropolitan Police
Academia	The London School of Economics and Political Science – a glossary for research development: A Glossary for Research Development: Exploring core language for tracking and qualification
Healthcare	NHS Confederation Acronym Buster: Acronym Buster NHS Confederation
Healthcare	Our Dorset Glossary and Acronym Buster: Glossary and Acronym Buster – Transformation
Healthcare	NHS England – Abbreviations you may find in your health records: Abbreviations you may find in your health records - NHS App help and support - NHS

Tools and services to support with assessments of readability of documents and text include:

- Hemingway Editor's readability checker: [Free Readability Checker App | Check readability score of your text](#)
- Plain English Campaign: [Plain English Campaign editing services](#). Note: a cost is associated with this service.
- Editor function in MS Word.

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