

Best Practice in Communications Guide



Compiled by NFU Scotland on behalf of Farming with Dyslexia Working Group

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Executive summary

This Best Practice in Communications Guide sets out the aims and objectives of the Farming with Dyslexia campaign, which was launched by NFU Scotland in 2014.

With agriculture and other land-based industries being characterised by form-filling and increasing amounts of paperwork, it has been identified that there is a need to simplify written and verbal communications to make documents and other aspects of working life such as meetings more accessible for dyslexic farmers, crofters, and rural workers.

The document identifies common issues encountered by dyslexic individuals with written communication, as well as verbal and processing difficulties, and suggests tips and techniques to make documents and other communication vehicles such as websites, telephone calls and meetings dyslexia-friendly.

Examples are provided to indicate where NFU Scotland has incorporated the principles of best practice through changes to its house style, formatting and use of language in order to communicate with its members more efficiently.

NFU Scotland hopes that this document will encourage wider stakeholder groups working in the agricultural and rural industries to adopt similar principles of good practice in communications with their respective members and associates. The Memorandum of Understanding reflects this aspiration.

Table of contents

- 1 Introduction and background.....p4
- 2 Common difficulties encountered by dyslexic individuals with written communications.....p6
- 3 Best practice for communication with dyslexic members and stakeholders.....p8
- 4 Examples of how NFU Scotland has incorporated best practice in house style changes.....p10
- 5 Timescale.....p12
- 6 Memorandum of Understanding.....p13

Appendix 1 – Other help that is available

Appendix 2 – NFU Scotland house style template

1 Introduction and background

Dyslexia is a real, but often hidden, issue within the farming community. NFU Scotland understands that, whilst one in 10 of the general population are identified as dyslexic, out of the current intake of agriculture students studying at Scotland's rural college (SRUC) as many as 25 per cent have dyslexia. As farming and other land-based employment is traditionally manual, and with dyslexia being hereditary, we therefore have reason to believe that dyslexia could be much more present within the rural community than previously believed.

It is difficult to retrieve accurate statistics on this issue as many of NFU Scotland's members and other farmers will have lived with dyslexia for their whole lives without being assessed. The issue is also hidden to some extent as many dyslexic farmers or crofters will rely on others to handle their paperwork and organisational issues.

Whilst farming is mainly a hands-on, manual industry, there is in fact a huge amount of paperwork, administration and form-filling that comes as part of the job. This is frequently necessary in order to declare compliance with environmental standards and regulatory regimes. Increasingly, farmers are required to fill in forms online, making them increasingly reliant on computer technology. The compliance system will identify and financially penalise oversights and inaccuracies in these forms. Clearly, for dyslexic farmers, crofters, and individuals working in land-based industries who struggle with day-to-day form filling as well as organisational issues such as time keeping and meeting deadlines, this is a very significant issue.

After being contacted by various farming and crofting members, who had concerns about their dyslexia impinging on their ability to keep on top of the general paperwork and administration that now defines modern-day farming, NFU Scotland launched the Farming with Dyslexia campaign in August 2014.

Real progress has now been made with the establishment of the Farming with Dyslexia Working Group, which was set up upon recommendation from the Scottish Government. NFU Scotland administers this group, which has met five times since September 2014. The group is chaired by NFU Scotland Vice President, Rob Livesey.

The group is made up of representatives from NFU Scotland, Scottish Government Rural Payments Inspection Division, Forestry Commission Scotland, Dyslexia

Scotland, SRUC, Scottish Association of Young Farmers Clubs, Crofting Commission and the rural charity, RSABI. Four dyslexic farmers also sit on this group.

The three key objectives agreed at the first meeting of the Farming with Dyslexia Working group were to:

- Raise awareness of dyslexia to reduce the stigma and promote the abilities of dyslexic individuals, which are of great benefit to the agriculture industry
- Engage with the Scottish Government and other stakeholders to ensure measures to recognise dyslexia among the farming community are in place
- Ensure systems of communication with regulatory bodies are more accessible for dyslexic farmers and crofters with a choice of delivery options

A common vein that runs throughout these objectives is communication. In order to effectively raise awareness and engage in this issue to find practical solutions, we must effectively communicate with one another and with NFU Scotland members as well as others working for the benefit of rural industries.

The following document sets out examples of best practice that all partner groups can adopt in order to make written documents and verbal communications more streamlined, accessible and easier to digest. By making these changes, the aim is to encourage more farmers and crofters to process the information they are sent and for it to be communicated in a more concise and succinct manner. Not only will the changes make documentation dyslexia-friendly, but it will help everyone to digest and understand all communications more easily.

2 Common difficulties encountered by dyslexic individuals with written communications

The working definition of dyslexia is as follows:

“Dyslexia can be described as a continuum of difficulties in learning to read, write and/or spell, which persist despite the provision of appropriate learning opportunities. These difficulties often do not reflect an individual's cognitive abilities and may not be typical of performance in other areas.

The impact of dyslexia as a barrier to learning varies in degree according to the learning and teaching environment, as there are often associated difficulties such as:

- auditory and /or visual processing of language-based information
- phonological awareness
- oral language skills and reading fluency
- short-term and working memory
- sequencing and directionality
- number skills
- organisational ability.”

Looking specifically at the issues encountered by dyslexic individuals with processing and communication, common problems identified by Dyslexia Scotland are as follows:

- Slow reading; omits or confuses small words and can misread words
- Mix up letters in words, e.g. ‘b’ and ‘d’, and numbers e.g. ‘6’ and ‘9’
- Difficulties with reading comprehension and finds it hard to follow instructions in manuals and guidelines; text has to be read numerous times before it is understood
- Problems with de-coding new scientific words – particularly agricultural jargon and acronyms
- Loses place in a line of words
- Sequencing problems with long lines of numbers or letters

- Difficulties remembering series of instructions, messages, loses track of content of meetings, etc
- Handwriting problems
- Anxiety and frustration when trying to complete forms; difficulty planning and organising paperwork or business ideas on paper
- Difficulty reading text that is on top of an image
- Poor short-term memory

Many of these difficulties compound to give rise to low self-esteem and lack of belief in an individual's own abilities.

As far as employment in land-based industries is concerned, this could mean opportunities to expand or diversify the business are passed up, or individuals will turn down opportunities for promotion and furthering their career. Indeed, since launching the Farming with Dyslexia campaign, NFU Scotland has had members share their experiences of giving up rearing certain livestock, due to being unable to keep on top of the paperwork, or even an unwillingness to take over the family business due to a lack of confidence in their business capabilities.

3 Best practice for communication with dyslexic members and stakeholders

We are all guilty of forgetting who our specific audience is and using language that is more complex than it needs to be, whilst including information that is not necessary in our written and verbal communication.

The previous list sets out some of the difficulties that can be encountered by dyslexic individuals in reading, processing and comprehending written communication.

However, it is important for us to also recognise the strengths that come with being dyslexic, which are a huge asset to the agricultural and land-based professions.

For example, people with dyslexia are often highly articulate in verbal conversation and generally possess excellent long-term recall and ability to solve problems.

Dyslexic individuals also tend to think creatively, in 3D and in images.

It is therefore essential that we consider these strengths and abilities when setting out information on paper for members and stakeholders.

Dyslexia Scotland's recommendations for presentation and layout of documents are set out as follows:

- Use text at pitch 12 or above
- Use fonts which are clear, rounded, and have a space between letters, such as:
 - Century Gothic
 - Comic Sans
 - Arial
 - Verdana
- Use 1.5 or 2-line spacing
- Use wide margins
- If possible, avoid black text on a white background and vice versa
- Use lower case rather than capital letters
- Use matt paper as it can help to reduce 'glare'
- Use pastel shades of paper
- Use numbers or bullets as opposed to continuous prose
- Avoid the use of background graphics with text over the top
- Use text boxes or borders for headings or to highlight important text. Avoid underlining and italics which can make words 'run together' – use bold text for

titles, sub-headings or to draw attention to important information and key vocabulary

- Colour-code text – information in one colour, questions in another
- Include flow charts, illustrations and diagrams to break up large sections of text and/or to demonstrate a particular point
- Ensure that data, charts and diagrams are easily accessible and not back-to-back with related tasks
- Ensure sentences and written instructions are short and simple
- Dense blocks of text are difficult to read – keep paragraphs short
- Avoid too much text on the page, and ensure it doesn't appear cluttered
- Plenty of space should be left on a form or writing frame for people with dyslexia to write their responses

It is also important to bear in mind that electronic text should be put in to a format which can be read by a screen reader and assistive software, as outlined in Appendix 1.

More information can be found online here:

http://www.dyslexiascotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/library/dyslexia_friendly_formats.pdf

4 Examples of how NFU Scotland has incorporated best practice in changes to house style

For NFU Scotland, the implementation of this best practice guide needed to be as cost-effective and straightforward as possible. The Union has researched the software assistance that is on the market for dyslexic individuals (set out in appendix 1). Links have also been established with the Access to Work scheme that is run by JobCentrePlus, which can assess employed and self-employed individuals for practical solutions to any problems in their everyday work that are brought about by a particular learning difficulty.

NFU Scotland's members are diverse and every member will have different needs, which are reflected in the way they run their businesses. Following an in-depth survey carried out last year amongst NFU Scotland's members and staff, the need for better communication was identified.

With farm businesses continuously facing a multitude of pressures, there is little time for farmers to sift through a lengthy document to find the key parts that are relevant to them. Writing for a diverse audience is also key – an in-depth report may suit a specific committee, but a shorter, more concise article with key information could be drawn up for the Union's membership magazine, the 'Scottish Farming Leader'.

It has been a number of years since NFU Scotland's house style was changed and it was recognised through the organisation's work on the Farming with Dyslexia campaign that changes must be made to make documents accessible for members, and staff, who may have dyslexia or other learning difficulties. As a result, changes to the house style and a review of the language used in documents and other communication methods was required.

The organisation as a whole has now adapted a new house style (see appendix 2). Documents have been analysed; this has included minutes, agendas, business guide updates, consultations, and submissions. The review has also included material submitted to the Union's membership magazine, the 'Scottish Farming Leader', in order to make everything that is sent to members clearer and easier to read.

All members of staff have some form of communication with committees, members and stakeholders, and training has been given on best practice for writing, and other communication methods such as meetings, with support ongoing.

As a result, this new format will transform communications with our membership and stakeholders and engage more people in topics they may have seen as 'complex' previously. NFU Scotland also hopes that by adapting communications for those with dyslexia or other learning difficulties, members will be inclined to digest and understand more articles and documents and interact with the Union on a more regular basis.

4.1 What changes have been made?

As mentioned above, changes to the house style have incorporated as many of the good practice indicators recommended by Dyslexia Scotland as possible. All communications that are sent out are now consistent in style, whilst providing only relevant information, in a straightforward and succinct format.

Since February 2015 NFU Scotland has been carrying out training sessions with all staff to update them with the new the house style and practically talk them through what has changed.

The workshops focussed on good communication, and how important it is to consider your audience when writing and communicating in other ways. The main aims were to encourage employees to write material that is:

- Succinct
- Engaging
- Visually appealing
- Clear and concise

The sessions were broken down with details of what each document consists of and the style of writing this should encompass. For example, minutes should be a summary of points discussed, rather than word-for-word verbatim.

Following this, feedback has been given on the documents they have written, including minutes and agendas as well as articles for the 'Scottish Farming Leader'.

Following on from initial training sessions, we have taken on board feedback and have been adapting our templates to make them as practical and user-friendly as possible.

5 Timescale

NFU Scotland has been applying the changes set out above to its house style since the start of 2015.

The organisation recognises that good communication is constantly evolving, and are taking feedback from staff, Board of Directors and NFU Scotland members in order to inform this process.

Using this document as a base line, NFU Scotland intends to continually update and review house style procedures, and carry out continual training and review sessions with staff members throughout 2016 and into 2017.

It is hoped that this best practice of communications guide will also be adopted by all partnering groups in the coming months.

6 Memorandum of Understanding

It is not expected that all signatories will make immediate nor vast changes to their house style by signing this Memorandum of Understanding. Instead, it is intended that all signatories will, from this point forward:

- Recognise the principles of best practice in communication in all written documentation or correspondence with respective members and stakeholders.
- Consider how documents and other communications could be adapted to make them accessible for all, regardless of dyslexia or any other disability.
- Implement these considerations in text formatting and the language used in written and verbal communications.
- Acknowledge that reform of communications is an evolving process, and regularly request feedback from members/associates/stakeholders in order to inform the process of promoting best practice in written communications.

Signature	Print name	Organisation	Date
	Clare L Slipper	NFU Scotland	10 May 2016
	Rebecca Dawes	SAYFC	10 May 2016
	Matthew Cartney	Scottish Government	10 May 2016
	Jo Aitken	SRUC	10 May 2016
	F. Dickinson	Dyslexia Scotland	10 May 2016
	John Macfarlane	RSABI	10 May 2016
	Diana McGowan	Forestry Commission Scotland	10 May 2016
	Fiona Macdonald	Crofting Commission	10 May 2016

Appendix 1 - Other help that is available:

For those with dyslexia there are a number of packages and programmes that can help them in everyday life when using computers and other devices. From text to speech programmes and those that add a colour overlay to make it easier to read for people who may have visual issues, it is worth researching what would be most applicable to your organisation.

For NFU Scotland, at present there is no budget to be able to provide software, but this may be identified further down the line. However, for organisations who are looking to assist their employees with dyslexia, and others, there are a number packages and aids available.

Dyslexia Scotland's guide to Dyslexia and ICT provides a useful digest of various online and software tools which can assist dyslexic individuals. The guide can be accessed here:

http://www.dyslexiascotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/page_content/Dyslexia%20and%20ICT_2.pdf

Dyslexia Scotland's Guide for Employers also illustrates a series of reasonable adjustments that employers can make to help employees who are identified as dyslexic:

http://www.dyslexiascotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/library/employers_guide.pdf

Help and guidance is available on the Dyslexia Scotland helpline, which is 0344 800 84 84. Further resources are also available to read or hear online at:

<http://www.dyslexiascotland.org.uk/our-leaflets>.

NFU Scotland's Farming with Dyslexia helpline is: 07775 804 717.

Appendix 2 – NFU Scotland house style



Document type

Date :
Number (if appropriate) :
Contact :
Direct dial number :
E-mail address :

DOCUMENT HEADING UPPER CASE ARIAL BOLD SIZE 14 LEFT JUSTIFIED

Sub headings lower case Arial bold size 12 left justified

- Entire document 1.5 line spacing
- Margins of 1.5cm top and bottom, 2.5cm left and right
- Body of text Arial, size 12, left justified
- Page numbers at bottom of page, centred, starting on page two
- Single return between headings and body of text, single return between paragraphs
- All document over one side of A4 should have introductory, bulleted summary
- Bullet points 0cm indent, bullet text indent 0.63cm
- Action points in bold and right justified at end of relevant paragraph within minutes
- Double space between sentences.

Sub heading

1. Paragraphs and subparagraphs numbered 1, 1.1, 1.2, 2, 2.1, 2.2 etc

1.1. Etc

1.2. Etc