Policy Scotland Style Guide

This provides guidance on the styles used in Policy Scotland documents and webpages. It also relates to text used in other formats such as video, presentations and infographics.

It is intended to help you write and style text for documents and webpages so they have a consistent style which supports readability, and to ensure we adopt practices that support accessibility for people with disabilities.

This is a living document and so will be amended, as and when required.

Guidance on the requirements for creating specific forms of content is on the website:

- Commentaries guidance https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/commentaries-guidance
- Policy briefings guidance https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/policy-briefing-guidance

There's also information about the Policy Scotland publishing process https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/publish

Language and words

Acronyms

Write the name in full the first time it is used with the acronym in brackets after it. Thereafter use the acronym alone.

Policy Scotland should be written in full (except in filenames where it can be abbreviated to PS).

Upper and lower case

Apart from starting sentences, names and other proper nouns, avoid capitalisation. This is because initial caps in sentences can reduce readability.

Only use 'camel case' in filenames.

Spelling and hyphenation

Use British English. Be aware that spellcheckers may be set to American spellings.

Numbers from one to ten should be written as words, from 11 onwards write in numeric form.

Though, if you start a sentence with a number then write it as a word even if it's bigger than ten. (But try not start sentences with a numbers).

Formatting content

Alignment

Text should be left-aligned. Left-aligned text is generally considered easier to read, particularly online where reading is already a bit harder because on-screen text is less dense than printed text. Justified text can also create additional barriers for people with dyslexia.

Left alignment is also advised by the Web Accessibility Initiative in its advisory techniques for making text content readable and understandable: "Using left-justified text for languages that are written left to right and right-justified text for languages that are written right-to-left".[1]

Styles

Use the document template to ensure consistency of fonts and colours and heading sizes etc. Using the styles also makes it easier to create the contents list and makes the document more accessible to people who use screenreaders.

All documents should contain the Policy Scotland url.

Bulleted and numbered lists

You can use bullet points to make text easier to read. These can either use a lead-in line where the bullets continue the sentence or a sentence that introduces a list. Both of these end with colon.

If using a lead-in line ensure that all of the bullets make sense when reading on from the lead-in and use lower case at the start of the bullet. Only the last bullet has a full stop.

If using an introductory sentence, then the bullets need to be complete sentences, started with a capital letter and finished with a full stop.

Don't use full stops within bullet points; where possible start another bullet point, or use commas, dashes or a semi-colon to expand within the bullet

Use numbered steps instead of bullet points to guide a user through a process. For a numbered list you don't need a lead-in line. Each step ends with a full stop because each step should be a complete sentence.

Bold, italics and underlining

Bold is used to make a word or phrase stand out and draw the readers' attention. Use sparingly. As with any attempt to attract attention, overuse means that it loses impact. Do not use it in conjunction with other ways of highlighting content such as bullets or italics.

Italics are used to add emphasis to a word or phrase, encouraging the reader to consider the italicised words or phrase to have additional importance. Italics can also be used in body text for the titles of publications, books, films and TV programmes.

Avoid underlining text. People can think that the underlined text is supposed to be a link.

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[1] See the Web Accessibility Initiative at https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG20/quickref/?showtechniques=31#principle3

Quote marks

Use double quotes for the quotes by people or from publications.

Use single quote marks for the first usage of an unfamiliar or unusual term but thereafter it should be used without quote marks. For example on first mention 'wicked issues', and thereafter wicked issues.

Images

All images – in documents and on webpages – should have alt text. This is text that describes the content of the image and is accessed by screenreaders for users who have visual impairments. Alt text is not required for purely decorative images but is crucial for images which convey information, such as diagrams, graphs, charts etc. You are free to provide the alt text, or it can be created by the proofreaders/copyeditor.

Files

We publish documents and presentations in PDF format unless the document is a resource intended to be adapted by our users.

We use PDF format because the file cannot be changed by users, it will not change regardless of the device or browser being used and can be opened using a freely available reader. PDFs can also be accessible for screenreaders.

The file properties should be completed correctly: these properties can have an impact on Google rankings. (Do this before converting to PDF)

Filenames should be in camel case with no spaces. Filenames should include at least some of the words from the document title – this can help with Google rankings – and helps to distinguish one of our documents from another. It should also include PS at the start; including this and the document title means that when someone downloads it, the file has a very clear provenance and focus when saved on their device with lots of other files.

Weblinks

It is good practice to give readers an indication of what will happen when they click on a link, for example whether they will be taken away from the Policy Scotland website or if the link will open a document file. On webpages this can be done in the text.

In documents it is good practice to write out the full web address – this can be done in a footnote – in case someone is reading a printed version and so does not have access to the hyperlinked text.

Don't link from one document straight into another file such as Word, PDF or PowerPoint. If possible, find a webpage that holds the document and link to that instead.

We do this because:

- pages are often quicker to load than files
- being on the webpage helps the user to situate themselves

- being on a webpage with site navigation offers users the opportunity to further explore the website

It is good practice for links to open in the same browser tab (or window). This is because opening in a new browser tab or window can confuse the screenreaders used by people with visual impairments. For all users, a new tab (window) disconnects them from the previous page so they can't use the 'back button' to return which can sometimes cause confusion. People can use Ctrl + click to choose to open a link in a new tab themselves.

Common words and phrases

Check words and phrases for capitalisation, hyphenation and spelling etc in the:

- Scottish Government's A-Z of common terms
  https://resources.mygov.scot/standards/content-style/#a-to-z-of-common-terms

If it doesn't contain the word you need to check, then consult these other style guides in this order:

- UK Government   https://www.gov.uk/guidance/style-guide/a-to-z-of-gov-uk-style
- The Guardian   https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a
- The Economist   http://www.economist.com/styleguide/introduction
- Lexico (OUP & Dictionary.com)   https://www.lexico.com/

Some common issues for Policy Scotland

This offers guidance on some of the terms that we use frequently:

Word or term	Guidance notes	Why?
asset-based asset-based community development (ABCD)	With hyphen, lower case	This is the form used by the ABCD Institute https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/about/Pages/partners.aspx
capabilities approach (CA)	Lower case	
Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services	Official title of the Christie Commission's report Can also refer to 'the Christie Report' or 'the Christie Commission'	http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/06/27154527/0 The 'four pillars' are contained in chapter 8, http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/06/27154527/10

	Renewing Scotland's Public Services - Priorities for reform in response to the Christie Commission is the Official title of the Scottish Government's response	http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/09/21104740/0
Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy		https://www.localdemocracy.info/
collaborative action research (CAR)	Lower case	
community planning community planning partnership Glasgow Community Planning Partnership	Use lower case when referring to the generic concept and activity even within a specific locality. For example, 'The Scottish Government will be writing to all the community planning partnerships in Scotland.' Upper case when referring to an individual entity. For example: 'I've read the Glasgow Community Plan' and 'I go to all the Edinburgh Community Planning Partnership meetings'.	Scottish Government Plain English guide to Community Planning http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/12/4607/1
co-production co-producing co-producers	Lower case, hyphen	https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/co-production The Scottish Co-production Network also uses a hyphen
coronavirus (COVID-19)	Coronavirus is the virus which causes the illness COVID-19. Coronavirus is lower case.	https://www.gov.uk/guidance/style-guide-a-to-z-of-gov-uk-style
decision-making *but* decision maker	Use hyphen for 'decision-making bodies', 'decision-making processes' but 'the council was making decisions about their future'	https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/decision-making https://www.lexico.com/definition/decision_maker

email	No hyphen	
evidence-based *but* evidence base		
health and wellbeing	No hyphen in wellbeing	
improvement science (IS)	Lower case (not to be confused with the Improvement Service)	http://isrn.net/about/improvement_science.asp
enquiry not inquiry		We prefer enquiry as it is the more common British English version.
joined-up working	Hyphen	
mainstreaming	One word, no hyphen	
multi-agency	Hyphenated	https://www.lexico.com/definition/multi-agency
multidisciplinary		https://www.lexico.com/definition/multidisciplinary
ongoing	No hyphen	
outcomes-based outcomes-focused	With hyphen	
participatory budgeting	Lower case	
partnership working	No hyphen	
policyholder policymaker policymaking *but* policy design policy note policy briefing	All one word, no hyphen	https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-p
powerholder	One word	Not yet a definitive spelling but we use it as one word for consistency with stakeholder, gatekeeper etc

public service reform (PSR)	lower case	
third sector interfaces (TSIs)		