IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL

It's the talk of the town!

Good housing starts with listening.

When tenants have a real say, homes are safer, services work better, and money is spent where it is needed most. That is why across the country, landlords and social housing providers are expected by government and housing regulators to work with tenants, not just for them.

SAFER HOMES
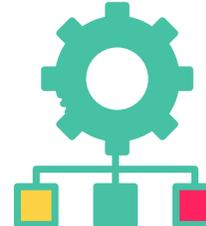
BETTER SERVICES

SMARTER SPENDING

The way we talk and the tone we set is about more than words. We offer many services to a wide and diverse audience, so it is important that our message reaches all of them. We are committed to going beyond national housing regulatory requirements by continuously improving how tenants are involved in shaping all that we do. But it isn't just about what we are saying, **it is how we say it.**

It's the talk of the town!

The type of language and terminology we use is important to those we are communicating to. The need for greater transparency, openness, and accountability between us and our tenants is just as vital as good governance and sound financial management. We want our tenants, customers and public to enjoy talking to us. After all, this plays a major role in deciding what experience they receive. This commitment to change is essential to rebuilding trust, restoring our reputation, and securing a successful future.

Our style of communicating doesn't have to be all bad news. We've all received that email or letter that could've been far simpler. By using an easier way to talk can be better for us too. With that being said, we can take from this guide a new approach to benefit internal conversations and set the tone at home. Together, we can build a language to tackle tenant stigma and deliver a tone of respect they deserve.

Set the tone

Transparency

Simpler communication

Our approach

As our town's local authority, we can all be proud of the job we do. Our language can be part of this too. The tone we deliver can be friendly and polite whilst still being professional. Be clear and confident in the services we deliver through communication but let's leave out the jargon!

Using complicated words and industry terminology might be fine when speaking to someone in your own department. But do we know when to change how we communicate when our audience changes? By knowing who we are talking to can help us deliver our message with empathy, kindness and consideration.

IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Why words matter

The words we use have a bigger impact than we may realise. Something we may take for granted can be received in a different way by others. It isn't our fault. In fact, it shows the level of understanding that our own employees have in their area of expertise. But together we can make some simple changes to make a positive difference.

Perhaps the best place to start is how we refer to our biggest audience. Are they customers? Residents? Tenants?

We have consulted our own experts on the subject by discussing lists of words and sentences. Members of the Tenant Engagement Panel have been able to give us an insight into the language they want to hear (a full list can be seen at the bottom of this guide). The words we asked them to challenge have been a combination of employee, tenant and other social housing providers' suggestions.

Don't take my word for it!

4

IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Why words matter

❌ **CUSTOMER**

❌ **RESIDENT**

✔️ **TENANT**

Defining residents and customers as **tenants**, received a 100% agreement at our panel and here is why:

Customers can apply to numerous members of our community. We provide different services to the wider public including sports centres and swimming pools. Residents make up everyone who lives in Ipswich not just people living in Ipswich Borough Council homes. By using one single word that only applies to **Council** tenants gives them a unique identity. It defines them and them alone.

How do we know who a **tenant** is? That's easy. Anyone who lives in one of our assets or stock, right? Wrong. The words **asset** and **stock** might make sense on a spreadsheet when talking about housing stock, but how does this sound to our tenants?

This impersonal approach lacks empathy, adds to tenant stigma and overlooks what these properties really are. Be it a house, flat or bungalow, all these buildings have one thing in common that can't be ignored – they are people's **homes!**

And it safe to say that our tenants have been heard and we want them to hear us. So please save your **Decants** for the dinner table and your **Rounds** for the bar.

Putting words into sentences

It's more than just individual words that can be misunderstood. What about sentences? This can be harder to unravel than the sentences themselves. We need to adopt a fresh way of building our words for many reasons. Emails and letters are the perfect example of how we can improve our communication by removing unnecessary and generic terminology. It is too easy to slip into this impersonal approach, especially when we are addressing a broader audience.

Say what you mean

Use simpler words

Make sentences shorter

Read aloud the sentences you put together or use the Read Aloud function in Word/Outlook

Does it lack empathy?

It is also important to remember that it is sometimes a case of not what we say but how we say it. For example, **'Due to unforeseen circumstances'.** These words may look professional and commonplace but what are we really saying? An example might be:

'We're sorry that this repair has taken longer than expected. Our tradesman has had to order a part that won't be available until...'

IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Putting words into sentences

By removing the unforeseen circumstances, we are being honest and transparent. This open approach shows that we are human whilst providing a valid reason. We are taking ownership of the problem and providing a solution.

Other examples we see too often

To

Subject

'Please accept our sincere apologies'

'I'm sorry you feel that way'

A ⬜ 🖼 🙂   Send 🗑 ⋮

Even when delivered with good intentions, this approach is impersonal and lacks empathy. Don't be afraid to take ownership of the situation. Although the words are there, we're still not showing what we're saying - **'I'm sorry'**

By further considering our sentences, we can build easier to understand communications. Long words or too many can often put readers off or feel isolated.

Putting words into sentences

SENTENCE STRUCTURE
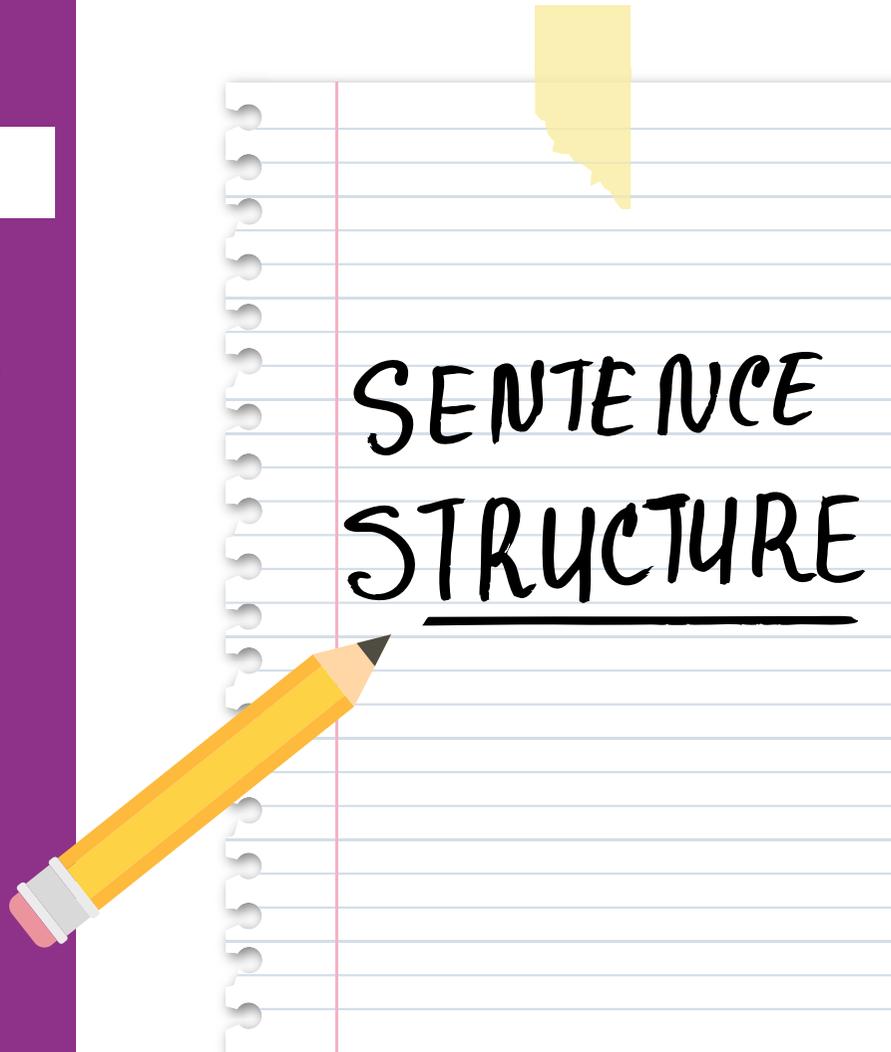
But don't panic!

This guide alone might seem quite a daunting task. We all have busy workloads and learning how to write in a new way may sound harder than it is. That's why we have these handy tools to help us all along the way.

Readability Analyzer (datayze.com)

Readability Scoring System (readabilityformulas.com)

StoryToolz | Readability Results

Simply copy and paste your writing into the drop box. The tools will review your writing to show what reading age the writing level is at. The detailed summary can provide help on how many complicated words or too long sentences are in the paragraph.

Our target audience

Okay, so you've written out your document and chosen your words carefully. The readability tool has given you a rating, but how do we know if it's ready to send? This can still be tricky if we don't know who our target audience is. Did you know that the average reading age in the UK is in decline and that it currently stands at 9-11 years old?

The NHS use a different tool when sending out medical letters to patients using this target. As a professional governing body, we have set a target age at the upper reaches of 16 years old. To help you understand what that would look like, you might be surprised to know that everything you have read on this guide so far scored a reading age of 14 to 15 years old. Well within the limits.

9

Is this enough?

Simply put – No. Our tenants are made up of a wide range of individuals who all have different levels of reading abilities for many different reasons. From learning disabilities, language barriers and varying experiences of education. By looking at different forms of written communication, we can reach a wider audience.

Easy read is a great example of what we can introduce going forward. This type of communication can be understood with those who have a low reading ability or limited understanding of English language. We already have some great examples of easy read literature. See the recycling example we already use

This is a great start, but we need to do more to help inclusivity. We're not leaving anyone behind! It is also important to remember that our values need to be delivered in a professional manner. We will need to have a constantly evolving way at how we communicate to a wider audience remembering those with learning difficulties and where English is not a first language. This is why it might be necessary to consider including an easy read document alongside a letter to provide everyone with a communication fit for them.

Together we can get our recycling right

Is this enough?

Here is an example of a letter produced by us that scored a reading age of 13 to14. Wellington Bin Letter.docx

Great! Well, not quite. Although there is nothing wrong with the letter or the content, it still excludes too many of our tenants with differing reading abilities. Let's face it, we don't want the letter itself to end up in the bin!

Here is an easy read example that could accompany the first letter for those who need it: Tenants who live in Rendlesham Court Wellington Court Blenheim Court

By providing clear images alongside a few lines to deliver the purpose of the letter changes the reading ability instantly. in this example, the writing alone scores a reading level of 10 to 11 without the pictures.

You don't have to be Banksy to create an easy read piece of literature. This one was simple to make and can be done through various programmes available to use and our corporate design service can provide support. MarketDirect Storefront

But relax, we don't expect you to create easy read for every email/document/survey/letter and beyond. Follow the links for an example of how the NHS have used easy read to develop communication with patients - Easy-Read-Section-5-What-rights-do-you-have-when-thinking-about-where-to-live_.pdf Easyread TRAINING (EXTERNAL).pdf

11

Knowing your audience

This is really important when deciding the language we should use. Although we want to show a consistent tone across all our communications, there will be times when examples such as easy read, words and terminology can be tailored to individual audiences.

Our Tenant Representatives were able to give a great example of when this might be relevant. When considering the list of words, they didn't want to change the word **Scrutiny,** but felt other tenants might need more help with it. If unsure how a word will be understood, then try introducing it in simpler words first by breaking it down. This means that the word can then be introduced further into the document. If unsure, then just keep it simple!

To help with the harder terms and words that are so commonly used in housing, **Tendring District Council** have developed A guide to housing jargon. This helpful document breaks down language we take for granted in our sector and provides examples of how to describe them to tenants.

Knowing your audience

Another valuable piece of feedback from our panel, was that they don't want to be spoken to like a child. By introducing words with introductions, this will be possible to achieve understanding without being condescending across the audience.

Over time we will be able to build a better understanding of who our tenants are. This will be provided through the **Protected Characteristics form** for new tenants. With the benefit of knowing who we are talking to, an easier understanding will form of how to speak to individuals.

If we are speaking to wider groups, then it is best practice to consider all abilities.

Further guidance may be required when communicating to those with additional needs. Our aim is that the results of the survey will provide insight into how we can better communicate with tenants.

Tenants with another primary language also need a more personal approach. Consider easy read literature or contact your line manager for advice on who can help with translation.

Communication goes both ways. This is why it is important that our tenants know who they are speaking to. When signing off a letter or email, make sure to attach your name and title. We work for a transparent organisation and have nothing to hide. This helps to builds trust and confidence with our tenants. Our own Tenant Representatives voted in 100% agreement that staff and contractors should display their names and job titles in all communications.

We need to talk with people, not at them.

IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Turning a Negative into a Positive

Negative connotations are descriptive words that can be perceived negatively by others. We might not see the impact in the words we are using. We may even see them as words that have a strong impact and support what we are saying, but with most communications – there are two sides to everything.
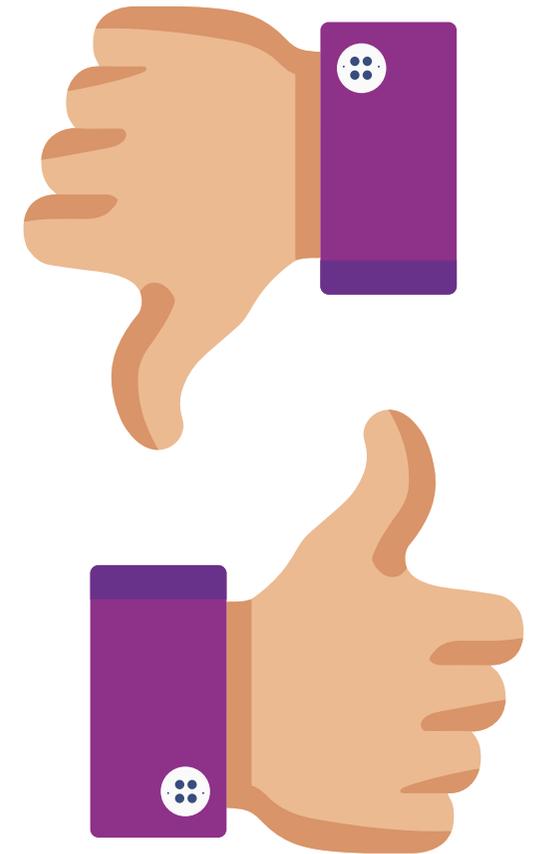
A great example that we picked up internally is in our list of commonly used phrases. The full list can be found at the end of this guide.

"Aggressively delivered at pace"

We can all see the impact that this might have but is it the right impact? It is easy to understand that the intention was to assure the person it was intended for. The words show a high commitment to completing a task. But we need to consider the negativity associated with such uses. We don't want to make our tenants feel threatened by the good work we are trying to.

For more information and a list of commonly negative connotations visit the link below.

30+ Negative Connotation Examples

Useful Tips to help get inclusivity right

At times we might be asked to gather information on our tenants that makes us uncomfortable.

Common reasons for this are usually because we don't want to offend anyone and that shows that we care about our tenants. Like most of what we have discovered in this guide, it is not what we say but how we say it. Learning the right way to ask questions helps us to develop our approach and include everyone.

Check out these handy tips to make those hard to ask questions easier.

Be open-minded – we can't begin to offer support if we are holding opinions or biases. Educate yourself on issues that are of importance of race, religion, sexuality and gender identity to individuals and communities. Educate other colleagues about what you find.

Be willing to talk – if somebody starts to share something with you be willing to have a discussion, it's a learning experience! Ask questions respectfully; recognise that it may take a lot of energy and courage for people to hear and answer your questions and they are justified in not answering any questions that make them uncomfortable.

Be inclusive - It is quite easy for some people to feel on the fringe or outside of work social circles. Include them and encourage them to be part of the team/community.

Useful Tips to help get inclusivity right

Don't assume – you never know when someone may be on the point of coming out! As often as possible, ask politely what pronouns they use "What are your pronouns/What pronouns do you use? The same goes for race and religion, never assume but don't be afraid to ask about religion or what nationality they identify as. For most people this is a way to express their pride in their own words.

Be a listener – Support by listening to how people talk about themselves and their experience. It will help you know how to address them and to start to understand some of the challenges they face.

Confront your own prejudices – we all have them, but you can't change them until you do. View difference as a positive identity rather than a tragic or confused situation.

Understand your own privilege - Take everyone's concerns seriously, even if you do not understand their concern or why it is so important to them.

Don't patronise – never play down, belittle or disregard somebody's negative experience, it was important enough for them to share! Being inclusive isn't just about creating affirming spaces in your work environment; it is also about creating affirming and welcoming social environments.

For more information please follow this link to our website Equality and Diversity | ipswich.gov.uk.

Social media

With the ever-expanding reach of social platforms, it is an essential part of communication. Whilst our words and terminology are just as important online, it is possible to relax our approach. **Press and Communications** continue to post on behalf of staff, but we can help by making the messages we deliver work in line with their responsibilities.

Effective text formatting and writing tips

- Use simple and plain language
- Break up long paragraphs and keep sentences short and to the point.
- Limit **Bold** and *Italic* text as much as possible, or don't use at all.

Too much bolding and using italics can make text harder to read, especially for those with dyslexia or low vision. Instead, use headings or lists to highlight important information.

- Don't use underlined text to emphasise information.

Underlined text is usually seen as a link, which can confuse users. Use correct headings or lists to highlight important parts of your content.

- Don't use all capital letters as they can be hard to read and may be interpreted as shouting. Stick to normal sentence case for better readability.
- Use bullet points or numbered lists to organise information. Lists make content easier to scan and understand, especially for those with cognitive difficulties or shorter attention spans.

It is also encouraged to lower your target reading age to reach a wider audience. Just remember! We are still accountable; others might not be. So don't engage with negative criticism and keep it professional. Don't feed the trolls!

IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Acronyms and abbreviations

"FYI this guide to L&T guide has been approved by the TEP and AHP by TER and Cllrs BAE. IMO this guide to comms needs to be used ASAP or is it TMI? LOL."

Yes, we all love them. Acronyms and abbreviations have their place when we are trying to save precious time, but does anyone else know what we are saying? Best practice is to introduce them in brackets alongside the long hand terminology. This can provide a reference for readers to refer to. Just try not to overload any of your communications with them and consider if your reader knows what they mean.

18

Tone of voice

Tone of voice represents our brand and is important across all our communications. We have a huge responsibility to our tenants and it's essential to remain kind and empathetic. At times we may deal with complaints and difficult conversations, but it's not personal. Consider each one of our tenants on an individual basis and listen to their words. All our communications should be approached in a friendly and helpful manner. Tenants are the reason we exist and if they are frustrated or angry it's up to us to maintain our values.

Research has shown us that by dropping the corporate tone is what our tenants want. By making these simple yet effective changes help us avoid a lack of empathy. Our tenants want to be reassured and see us take responsibility. We can show this by recognising that the complaint is just the tip of the iceberg. We need to respect the problem this may have caused and offer an empathetic solution.

Our tenants deserve to be communicated with the same way we would want to. If we remember that, then we can't go far wrong!

Finally, we must not be afraid to be proud of what we do. We can celebrate our achievements and publicise them. As long as we don't use a smug tone then why shouldn't we celebrate ourselves? Just be mindful, there's a time and place. In other words, if you are receiving a complaint, then it might not be best to mention something amazing we do.

Say it Right!

We live in a diverse and ever-changing society, so it is not surprising that we are learning new words, names and pronunciations all the time. This is nothing new, our language has evolved continuously over the history of the English Language. With each culture shift comes a new name or word to learn, it is clear to see that we are capable of learning to adapt our understanding of words and how to say them correctly. If we didn't learn to evolve then we could all still be walking around and quoting Shakespeare. Right?

Well, not quite but the message is clear – we can, do and are always capable of learning new ways to pronounce words and names. This is important when it comes to names. A name is more than a word, it is a title and represents each person and recognises their individuality.

Pronunciation is particularly important in Housing and Tenancy as we are responsible for the home and tenancy of many different cultures and nationalities. As we come across new and unfamiliar names it is our responsibility to learn them. Language, spelling and letters are there to keep us on our toes. But once we learn the way they are meant to be used our brains can commit these pronunciations to memory.

Say it Right!

So how do we get it right first time? That's not easy on our own. Using phonics might seem like a great way to start but different languages use different vowels, and we all know how complex our own language can be.

12:32 pm

Be careful of ordering a bear in the desert if your ever their

...Ouch!

Q W E R T Y U I O P

A S D F G H J K L
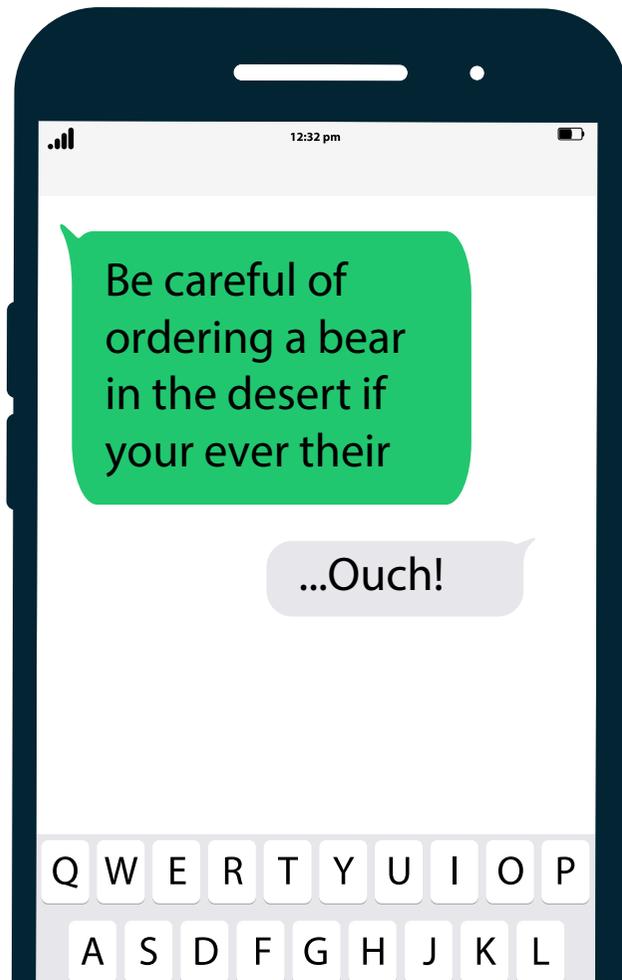
Aside from asking the person outright how they pronounce their name (and we have probably all had that awkward conversation), there are several helpful tools that can help us show that we have at least made the effort.

How To Pronounce: Online Multilingual Pronunciation Dictionary

Free English Pronunciation Practice Tool | Stellar Pronunciation Hero

These two websites are free and easy to use. Have a try and you might be surprised to find out how easy our minds can turn tricky words into common language.

IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Digby's Tentacles

- Be empathetic
- Keep it simple!
- Be friendly
- Avoid Jargon and corporate tone
- Be proud but not smug
- Write for your audience
- Be honest and transparent
- Be kind and treat everyone the way you would like to be treated

22
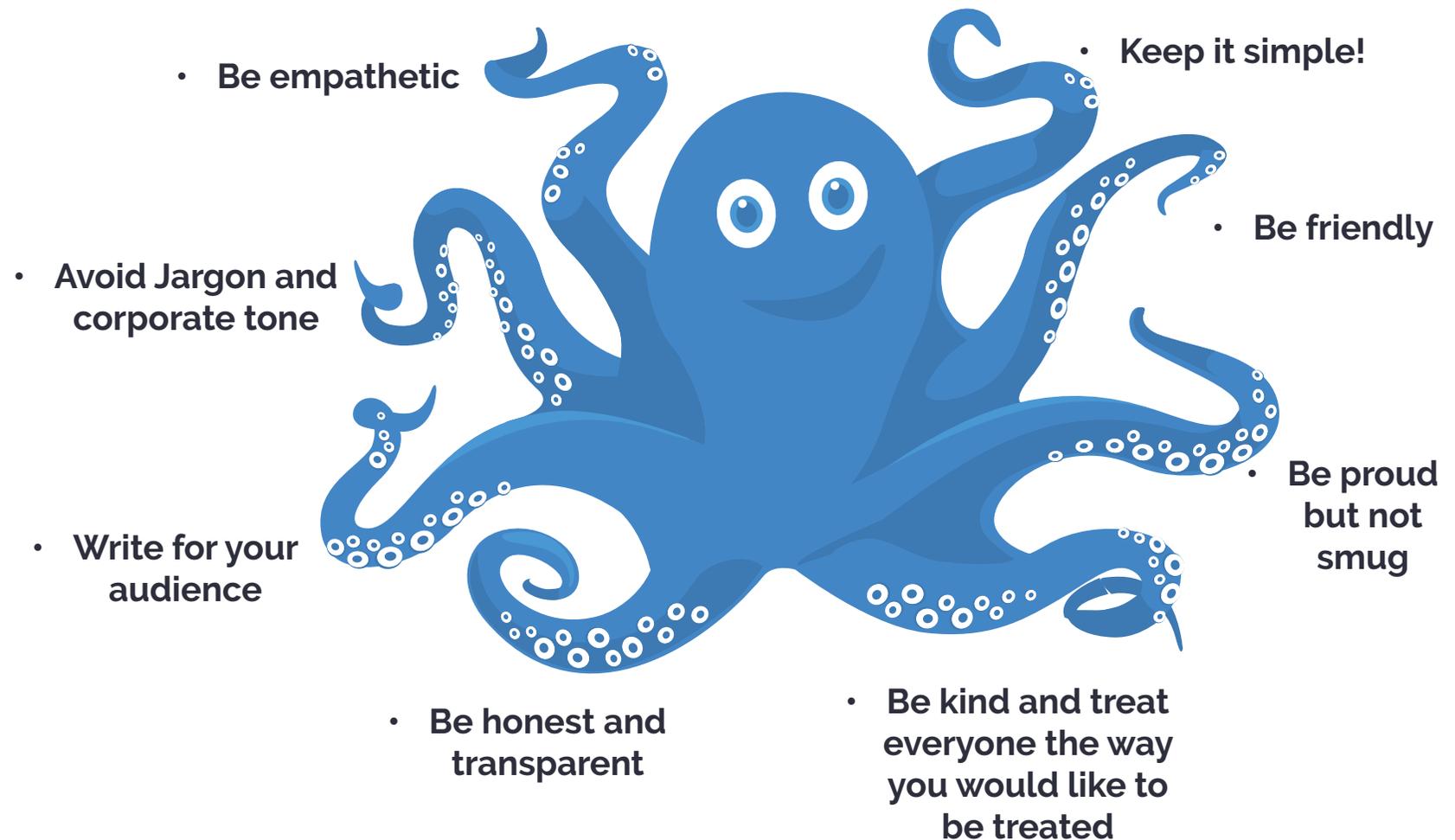
For a complete list of suggested words and common phrases:

Words chosen by Tenant Engagement Panel.docx

List of phrases agreed by Tenant Engagement Panel Members.docx

References:

https://socialhousingmatters.co.uk/index.php/2021/05/11/language-matters-use-of-vulnerability/

https://www.tpas.org.uk/blog/tenant-customer-or-resident-why-the-words-we-use-matter

ERUK_Final_screen_Accessible__Standards_combined.pdf

Inside Housing - Comment - Set the right tone: how do residents want us to speak to them?

A guide to housing jargon – Tendring District Council

Easyread TRAINING (EXTERNAL).pdf

Easy-Read-Section-5-What-rights-do-you-have-when-thinking-about-where-to-live_.pdf

IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL