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World Health Organization
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Developing Behaviourally Informed Communications



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Behavioural Science Unit:

The Public Health Wales Behavioural Science Unit was launched in May 2022 to provide specialist expertise on behavioural science, and develop the application of it, to improve health & wellbeing in Wales. The Unit is part of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Collaborating Centre on Investment in Health and Wellbeing.

For further information, or support around the application of behavioural science to improve and protect health and wellbeing in Wales please get in touch.

Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg / This document is available in Welsh

Some tools in this guide have been previously published, and are owned by others. Their content has been translated, with retention of some of the originally published language and design. Of note are pages 7-11, which have been adapted from the 'Principles of Behaviour Change Communications' guide, details of which can be found in the references and additional resources page.

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Developing Behaviourally Informed Communications

Introduction

A behaviour is an action, it's something that we do that's measurable. If you're striving to get individuals or groups within the population to start, stop or change a behaviour this guide can help. Behavioural science can make a powerful contribution to our efforts to improve and protect health and wellbeing.

Communications that have impact are often a critical component of policy and intervention development, as well as contributing to the maintenance and improvement of quality services. Designing and delivering public sector communications through a behavioural lens simply increases the chances of meeting policy objectives and making a difference.

This brief 'grab-and-go' guide is for anyone who needs to influence behaviour through communications. Throughout the guide, we share with you what we're looking for when we review communications from a behavioural science perspective. We advise using a 'SCALE' approach to help strengthen communications through the application of behavioural science. The guide aligns with existing communications professional standards such as the OASIS framework, more details can be found in the 'references and additional sources' section.

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User Guide

This guide can be used at any point whilst you are designing your communication. It's most effective when used right at the start.

This document is an editable PDF so you can type your thoughts and answers into the boxes provided for further discussion with your team.

S

Specify

Be specific about what you are asking people to do

This first step will help you to be as specific as possible about the behaviour your communication is going to address.

Addressing a specific behaviour (e.g., if you're 65 or over, click the link below to book in for your flu vaccination before the 30th of September) is more effective than describing a general behaviour (e.g., it's important to get vaccinated).

Who needs to adopt the behaviour?

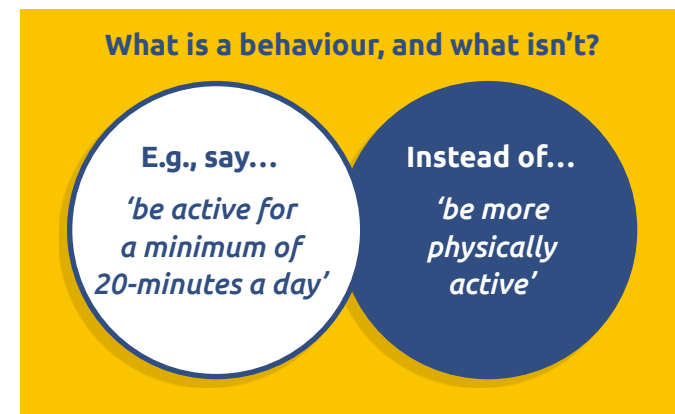
What is the behaviour we want them to do?

Gender:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Disabilities:



How will they do it?

Where will they do it?

When will they do it?

Why should they do it?

Are there multiple steps?

One:

Two:

Three:

Once you've answered the questions above, you have a clear objective for your communication:

The objective of the communication is for

[target audience]

to

[behaviour]

by

[how/where/when]

C

Consider

Explore barriers and facilitators

To elicit behaviour change amongst your target population it is important to understand what is stopping them from engaging in the desired behaviour. A behavioural diagnosis will help to identify the key aspects that your communication should focus on. The scale of your diagnosis will depend on available resources including time, and the quality/needs around the communication being designed, you may choose to:

Discuss what your **collective experiences** tell you about the barriers and facilitators to adopting the behaviour



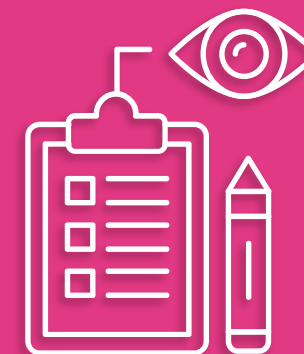
Research what local sources (research, guidance, reports) reveal about the barriers and facilitators to the behaviour



Collect insight from your target audience via appropriate networks



Commission a piece of research to gather insight data on a larger scale



A behaviour change framework, such as a COM-B, can support your behavioural diagnosis. The model suggests that there are three conditions that need to be met before behaviour change takes place: capability, opportunity, and motivation.

COM-B: Capability

Capability refers to an individual's psychological and physical capacity to engage in the behaviour

In communications, capability typically refers to the audience having the awareness, knowledge, and skills to enact the intended behaviour. A "capability barrier" occurs when a person cannot enact a behaviour due to not possessing the necessary awareness, knowledge, or skills. Communications that intend to encourage behaviour change by promoting awareness or providing educational information aim to address capability barriers. Generally, capability barriers may be the easiest to address using communications; it feels like the natural job of communications to inform and educate audiences.

Questions to consider:

Knowledge & Skills

Does the audience **know what** the specific behaviour required is?

Does the audience **have the ability** to adopt the behaviour?

Do they **know how** to adopt the desired behaviour?

Physical & Mental ability

Do they have the **physical skills** to adopt the behaviour?

Do they **remember** to do the desired behaviour?

Does **memory** influence it?

How are they **managing** their behaviour?

Are they aware of **what barriers** there are?

Example

Your target audience may not be aware of the benefits physical activity can have on their mental and physical health, or they may not have the physical ability to do the activity suggested in the communications

COM-B: Opportunity

Opportunity refers to the external factors that make the behaviour possible, or prompt it.

In practice, this refers to things like having the time, resources, tools, and money to enact the desired behaviour. An “opportunity barrier” occurs when a person cannot, and so does not, adopt a behaviour due to something outside their control - For example, lacking the money to pay a fee for a service, or lacking access to a computer to use an online tool. Typically, communications alone cannot easily address opportunity barriers, as these sit outside of the control of the audience. It is particularly important to explore opportunity barriers, as communications alone may not be sufficient to remove these barriers and drive behaviour change.

Questions to consider:

What **resources** might they need?

Would they have **access** to these?

How is the **environment** influencing their behaviour?

What cues are **prompting** their behaviour?

What do the target audience **believe** most people (like them) are doing?

Do we need to **emphasise** a different norm?

Do they have **people around them** who will help or hinder them to carry out the new behaviour?

Example

Your target audience might not have the time to do more physical activity, or they may not have access to a space where they can be physically active

COM-B: Motivation

Motivation refers to the thoughts that direct behaviour including habitual processes, emotional responding and decision making.

It is helpful to think of motivation as the beliefs and attitudes that drive enthusiasm, or lack of it, to enact a behaviour. A “motivation barrier” occurs when a person does not enact a behaviour due to not wanting to do it, or not believing that they should do it. Communications that intend to encourage behaviour change by evoking emotion, highlighting risks of inaction, or changing opinion about the importance of a behaviour will typically be aiming to address motivation barriers. Motivation barriers can be addressed using communications, to encourage people to change their beliefs or attitudes towards a behaviour.

Questions to consider:

What is the **motivation/incentive** for doing the behaviour?

Does the **behaviour** fit with what’s important to them?

What do they **gain** by changing?

How **confident** are they at adopting the desired behaviour?

What would make them more confident?

Do they **believe** they should adopt the behaviour?

What are their **attitudes** towards the desired behaviour?

What **habits** are in place which would need to be disrupted?

What is **reinforcing the habit?** What is their identity, self-image or perceived social role?

Example

Your target audience may have had previous negative experiences when being physically active, or they may find it difficult to replace old habits with new ones

A

Assemble

Write your content

Once it is clear what is influencing the behaviour, you can design the content of your communication

Get your target audience's attention. Your audience must understand that the message is meant for them. Messaging should mirror the words and language used by the target audience to make sure they recognise themselves in the message. If you have the resource, co-producing or testing your messaging with your target audience can really help to get this bit right.

What will make the audience recognise themselves?

What else might be **competing** for their attention?

Does the message use the target audience's **familiar language and words**?

Are they likely to **trust** the source of the message?

Example

"Anyone who is over 65" rather than "elderly people" which some people may not use to describe themselves.

How do your target audience describe themselves?

Don't assume!

Tell the target audience what they should do. The message should be as specific as possible about exactly what they need to do. The message should give them enough information to make a plan to change their behaviour.

Is the required behaviour clear?

Does the message help to form a plan?

Are the next steps clear?

Does the message convey timelines?

Is it clear who is responsible for adopting the behaviour?

Motivate the target audience to act. The wording you choose should be informed by the motivation barriers often experienced by the target audience.

Why would the audience want to follow the instructions?

Are the **consequences** of not doing anything clear?

Does the message make people feel **empowered** to act?



Layout

Consider your layout

Instructions:

Is the main point of the communication prominent, clearly written, and explained?

Is the language simple and easy to understand for someone new to the topic?

Is there a checklist of steps and other when/where/how prompts?

Are the audience's next steps clear, in order, and prominent?

Is there a clear deadline for response?

Tone and personalisation:

Is the communication personalised beyond just the recipient's name?

Is the sender's name included with title and contact information?

Is the sender a person who the recipient will recognize and respect?

Is the communication written in the second person, referencing actions "you" should take?

Hierarchy:

Is the most important information at the top of the page or emphasized using colour, size variation, and/or additional formatting?

Is the text concise, including only the necessary information included?

Importance:

Have you explained why the action should be taken?

Have you highlighted what the reader could lose if they do not take action?

Does the language and tone help the reader identify as someone who would adopt the behaviour?

Timing:

Are you sending the communication at a time when the audience is likely to have the mental and financial resources to act?

Have you sent the communication with enough time to allow the audience to complete the task?

Is the timing relevant to a calendar event?

Does the number of communications and reminders align with the difficulty and urgency of the task?

E

Evaluate

Plan your evaluation

Testing comms with your target audience. Reaching out to your target audience whilst you're designing and writing your communication can help to ensure it's fit for purpose. This can be done through a variety of different ways such as questionnaires or focus groups. The purpose of the discussion will often be to establish:

What do the target audience think about the written content?

How do they feel reading it?

What do they think about the style?

Does it change their intention to do what is being asked?

Evaluating your communication. Once the communication has been written, designed, and implemented it's important to evaluate the effectiveness. Even if the communication is part of a wider strategy, or campaign, there are lots of ways a communication can be evaluated. It's important to consider what your communication was trying to address when planning your evaluation. Your answer to this section, should help to focus your evaluation:

The objective of the communication is for

[target audience]

to

[behaviour]

by

[how/where/when]

Some of the most frequently used evaluation methods are listed below. Remember, your evaluation should aim to capture any changes to capability, opportunity, or motivation - depending on which one your communication was designed to address

Pre/Post Comparison

- This sort of evaluation compares a variable (vaccination uptake, for example) before and after the communication has been implemented
- This method can be used to gather data from large numbers of the population
- The evaluation will depend on the data available, or your ability to collect the data if it is not routinely collected
- It's important to remember that it cannot be determined if the changes to the variable are a direct result of the communication, because there will be other changes in circumstance that the evaluation cannot control for

Process Evaluation

- A process evaluation aims to collect data whilst the communication is being implemented
- This can help to understand if the communication is being received as intended (are the target population seeing it, for example)
- It can help to identify problems that can be amended whilst the communication is running

Questionnaires

- Questionnaires can help to understand the opinions of a specific group, often a sample of the target population
- They can provide helpful information about how the communication was received and if the communication had an influence over intention to change behaviour
- This type of evaluation can often reach a large number of the population
- Questionnaires often provide quantitative data, which means answers can't be explored in more detail

Focus Groups

- Similar to questionnaires, focus groups can help to understand the opinions of a specific group, often a smaller sample of the target population
- Focus groups can help to explore perceptions, opinions and attitudes towards a communication and the qualitative nature means whoever is asking the questions can ask for clarification or elaboration
- This type of evaluation can be resource intensive, and a plan for recruiting participants is often required

References and Additional Resources

[Response Playbook Final.pdf \(local.gov.uk\)](#)

[Behaviour Change – Message Checklist \(hee.nhs.uk\)](#)

[The Principles of Behaviour Change Communications - GCS \(civilservice.gov.uk\)](#)

[Strategic Communications: a behavioural approach - GCS \(civilservice.gov.uk\)](#)

[7 GRAPHIC Principles of Public Health Infographic Design \(thewellresource.org.au\)](#)

[The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions | Implementation Science | Full Text \(biomedcentral.com\)](#)

[Home - AMEC Integrated Evaluation Framework \(amecorg.com\)](#)

[Guide to campaign planning: OASIS - GCS \(civilservice.gov.uk\)](#)

We hope this guide has been useful, if you would like more information, or have any questions please do get in contact with us via:



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or



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