

# Guidelines for writing FAQs

## Scottish A-Z and Knowledge Base Project

As part of the Improvement Service's Customer First Programme, Scottish councils have been working together to develop a shared A - Z of website content, a common services list and a Scottish navigation structure. If that's not enough, these are all being linked to a comprehensive Knowledge Base of 1700 FAQs and Electronic Forms. The simple aim is to help citizens access services and find, in a consistent way, what they are looking for, on council websites and, help take councils closer to the Scottish Executive's goal of 75% of citizen enquiries being answered at the first point of contact.

Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire Councils have been leading the project, in partnership with the Improvement Service. The esd-toolkit has acted as the strategic partner.

As well as the Knowledge Base of FAQs & Electronic Forms - developed in conjunction with esd-toolkit and Porism - this set of Guidance Notes is a further distinct output from the Scottish A-Z and Knowledge Base Project.

For further information, see the contact details at the end of the Guidelines.

### The five FAQ golden rules:

FAQs should:

- 1 - be short, accurate and couched in easily accessible everyday language.
- 2 - be written, wherever possible, in the first person.
- 3 - answer the question and give the reader options of finding out further information (for example, tell them where to find forms, who to call, when opening hours are, what the contact numbers are, and so on) - see "FAQ Template - The Basics" for an example of what should be included when creating an FAQ.
- 4 - stand alone: if you take the FAQ out of context (read it on its own without any other text and without having read any other FAQs), you should be able to understand straight away what it is about.
- 5 - be genuinely frequently asked questions; they should not be about telling people what you want to tell them, but should answer questions that they really are asking.

These guidelines on language, length and content, will help you to write good FAQs. The examples at the end, illustrate the points raised.

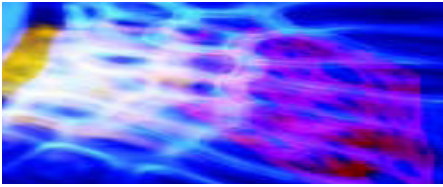
### Language

- Use simple, everyday, conversational language: write the answer as though you were talking to someone standing in front of you. Be conversational, not terse. Tip: Read your answers aloud. If they sound like a tax form, your FAQs need fixing!
- Don't use formal council-style ways of expressing yourself (for example, use "you'll need to", not "you will be required to"; use "How can I get home care?" not "How do I access this service?").
- Use your audience's language - avoid council speak. People outside the council won't know your insider jargon—and shouldn't have to. When you use the language of everyday people, you aren't dumbing things down. You're communicating.
- Where possible, use the first person; for example:

Good Question: How can I apply to get on the council's housing list?

Bad Answer: Applicants require to fill in a form, available ...

Good Answer: To apply to get on the council's housing list, you'll need to fill in a form, which you can get by...



- Don't waffle on and on - use short sentences.
- No abbreviated Latin terms (put "for example" not "e.g.", "and so on", not "etc" "in other words" not "i.e.").
- No acronyms without explaining them, for example:

Question: How can I apply for a discretionary housing payment?

Bad Answer: You can apply for a DHP by...

It is better to include the acronym in the question as well as the answer, like this:

Better Question: How can I apply for a discretionary housing payment (DHP)?

Good Answer: You can apply for a discretionary housing payment (DHP) by...

## Length

- Keep it as short as possible. Aim for no more than 50-100 words in the answer. If it runs to a lot more than that, can you break it down into more than one question and answer each one separately?
- Check to see if the question is answered fully on the website. If it is, summarise the answer, and ensure that the user is directed to the relevant page on the website.
- Don't assume readers will have read other FAQs, so answer each question as if that's the only one someone will read - fully, but as concisely as possible.

## Content

- Ask, and answer, only one question at a time. If you're asking more than one question in one FAQ, break it down into separate questions and answer each one concisely but fully.
- Don't assume people will know which department particular services are administered by or how to find out. So, if it isn't going to be included automatically on the FAQ webpage, include contact details/explain how people can access the service/find further information.
- Reiterate/restate the question in the answer, for example:

Question: How do I find out if a road has been adopted by the council?

Bad Answer: A letter should be written to the Head of Roads.

Good Answer: To find out if a road has been adopted, you need to write to the Head of Roads at...

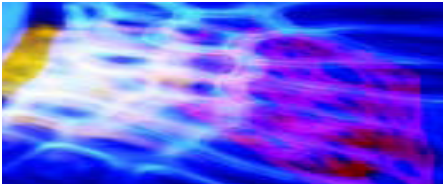
- Remember that questions may show without other related questions, so you should make sure that any acronyms are properly explained in every question.
- FAQs can help with search engine ratings so they should include keywords (this is another reason why you should reiterate the question in the answer).
- The question should be comprehensive and be able to stand alone (i.e. "How much does Renfrewshire Council charge for getting rid of wasps nests?" rather than "How much does it cost?").
- Don't preach - Don't pad your FAQ list with questions nobody really asks. An FAQ list isn't the place to say what you want to say, it's the place to answer what they (your audience members) want to know. You can make your points elsewhere on the website.
- Be specific - Don't just tell people to call the housing office. Give them the number, a specific person's name (when appropriate), times to call, and when to expect a response.
- One-word answers (i.e. "Yes" or "No") are not acceptable. You must clarify your answer, for example:

Question: I have recently started work in a fairly low paid job. Can I still apply for Council Tax and Housing Benefits even though I don't have the amount of payslips needed to process my claim?

Bad Answer: Yes

Good Answer: Yes, you can still apply for Council Tax and Housing Benefit, but you should apply as soon as possible as any delay may mean a loss of benefit. You should include a note stating that you have only recently started work and will provide payslips as soon as they become available.

- Simply stating that the answer is available on the website is also not acceptable.



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### Exercise FAQs:

Evaluate the following FAQs, bearing in mind the guidelines given previously. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the FAQ stand alone?
- Is it written in easily understandable English, avoiding council-speak?
- Is the question properly asked and answered?
- Is it a question that is genuinely asked frequently?
- Is it written in the first person (if appropriate)?

Identify which (if any) of the Five FAQ Golden Rules each FAQ breaks, and if you think that the FAQ should be re-worded, provide alternative text. Sample responses are provided in the boxes.

Q1: What do I do if the equipment I have from occupational therapy is broken and needs to be repaired or replaced?

A1: Contact your Occupational Therapist.

Q1: This question is well-worded. It explains what the question is about. A bad example of this question would be, "What do I do if the equipment is broken or needs to be replaced?" as this gives no indication of what sort of equipment you are referring to.

A1: This response is insufficient on a number of counts, particularly rule 3. A more appropriate response would be, "If your occupational therapy equipment needs to be repaired or replaced, you should contact your occupational therapist by (Calling/emailing/filling out this online form, whatever)" and give the contact details. This version explains what the question is about, and gives the reader the necessary information to actually carry out the request that they've asked about.

Q2: How much does it cost?

A2: It doesn't cost you anything.

Q2: This question breaks rules 3 and 4, and could be about anything. Let's say it's a question about bulky uplift. It could be re-worded as "How much does it cost to get an old washing machine taken away?"

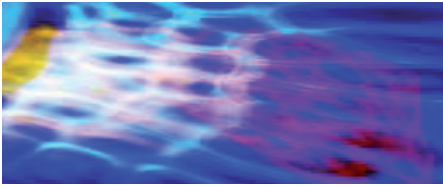
A2: Again, this response breaks rules 3 and 4 and is inadequate. Assuming the question was about bulky uplift, a suitable response would be: "It doesn't cost you anything to get an old washing machine taken away, but you need to contact us and make arrangements for its uplift." You would also include information telling them how they should contact you to arrange for its uplift, and should give an indication of how long it takes.

Q3: Why is my council tax only payable over 10 months?

A3: The council tax payment year is over 10 months whereas the charge year is over 12 months. The 10 month payment year allows councils a two month period for preparation and issue of the bills for the next year.

Q3: This question is fine.

A3: This response is fine.



Q4: How far back can backdated housing benefit and council tax benefit be paid?

A4: 52 weeks.

Q4: This question is fine.

A4: The response breaks rule 3 and is inadequate. A more appropriate response would be: "We can backdate a housing benefit and council tax benefit claim for up to 52 weeks for you, counting back from the date we receive a written request from you. This letter must explain why you haven't applied for benefit before."

Q5: Will you accept a photocopy of the birth certificate?

A5: No, it needs to be an original.

Q5: This question breaks rule 4 and does not stand alone - there is no indication of what the question is about. Let's say it was for education maintenance allowance; it should read, "Will you accept a photocopy of the birth certificate for an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) application?"

A5: This response could be better. "No, in order to apply for an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), you must submit an original birth certificate."

Q6: How do I request new pavements or footpaths?

A6: A letter should be written to the Head of Roads for a definitive answer.

Q6: The question is fine.

A6: The response is inadequate and breaks rules 3 and 4. A more appropriate response would be "If you want to request new pavements or footpaths, please contact the Head of Roads Department on" (give contact details), "and we will get back to you (within five working days/within the next 24 hours/whatever)".

Refer to "FAQ Template - the Basics" to see suggested FAQ content.



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[www.esd.org.uk/a-zscotland](http://www.esd.org.uk/a-zscotland)