

poverty
truth
network

**Brown
Envelope
Code**

Summary

Government needs to communicate with us about various things such as tax, benefits and services. We are sent letters in brown envelopes, but these are not always understandable and sometimes worsen our mental health. This 'Brown Envelope Code' was developed by a group of Commissioners from the Poverty Truth Network to set a standard for communication around bills, debts, benefits and services. We appreciate that even when everyone is trying their best, communication will not be perfect, but we hope this code will improve interactions, including for people facing the struggle against poverty.



'Nothing about us, without us, is for us' is the starting point for Poverty Truth Commissions. It identifies that lasting social change only happens when those who experience the struggle participate in generating that change. Yet, if we want to go far we have to go together. People experiencing poverty should take this journey with decision-makers and organisational leaders. By listening to each other, sharing wisdom and building empathy, trusting relationships are formed to have difficult conversations and find the way forward. Poverty Truth Commissions (PTCs) are places where those transformational relationships are formed and nurtured. The Poverty Truth Network supports this work.



Amplify

Sometimes issues bubble up from Poverty Truth Commissioners that need change at a national level. That is what our 'Amplify' work is all about. Commissioners from local PTCs across the UK are working on six themes – and one of those is government communications.



Brown envelope theme group

In September 2022, Commissioners at our National Gathering selected three new themes to work on nationally. One theme was mental health, because this came up in almost every Commission. A theme group was formed. Over several meetings, we agreed to focus on what some PTCs have called 'Brown Envelope Syndrome'. This is the experience of ignoring letters because they are complicated and intimidating, which can lead to problems accessing benefits, and escalating debts, making mental health worse. With input from Commissioners with experience of both writing and receiving letters, we developed the following code.

Purpose

We want this code to be used by people involved in creating communications around bills, debts, benefits and services. We are focused on government communications, but this resource can also be used by private companies such as energy and telecoms providers. It is offered as a standard for checking communications and to inspire improvements. In our experience, change happens best in relationship so, where possible, we'd encourage you to review communications together with your local PTC or similar group.



Keep it kind



Communication I receive is personalised to me, treating me as a human being and understanding my history and current reality.

I am asked about my preferences for communication – whether letter, email, phone call or WhatsApp – and these are respected. If a letter has to be sent, I am also sent a summary in my preferred communication method.

There is an acknowledgement of the impact that information might have on me. Examples are given of how other people in my situation have been supported.

Keep it accurate & transparent



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The reason I'm receiving the letter is clear from the start, summarised in a reassuring way.

The information in the letter is correct, including a named contact to follow-up with.

Letters aren't generic but are tailored to me, with an offer to explain why decisions have been made.

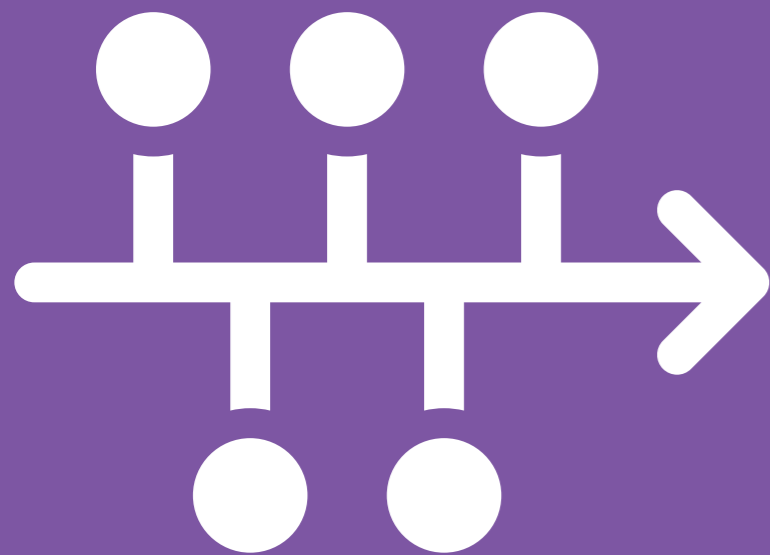
Keep it simple



I can easily understand everything that is written in the letter, including any legal requirements. It has been checked against quality standards for plain language and accessibility. If English isn't my first language, a good translation is available.

Letters are kept as short as possible and there aren't needless blank pages. Important information comes first and is highlighted.

Keep it realistic



When I receive communications that ask me to do something, the timescales are realistic. Not so short as to cause stress or too long, causing rumination.

Communications take account of my individual needs which might impact my ability to respond.

I am never threatened with worst case scenarios but instead it is clear why I am being asked to do something, and what the next steps, options and realistic consequences are so I am kept in the loop.

Keep talking



Communication makes me feel heard, respected and trusted.

Letters include an invitation to speak with or meet with someone who can help, with different options for how I do that. If there's a number to call, it is free, and clearly so.

When you are making changes that will affect me, involve me in creating the change. Ask my opinion, value my experience and use my feedback.