Central London Community Healthcare **NHS**

NHS Trust

Your healthcare closer to home

A guide to
team communications

This guide will help team leaders set up a simple personal plan to improve your internal communications. Whether you have a team of 5 or 500 this guide is for you.

www.clch.nhs.uk

This guide covers

If you would like more information on any of the topics covered in this guide please contact your division's communications lead. Keyword search the Hub for **comms lead** and you'll find us.

Introduction

The most successful teams have strong communication up, down and across everyone in the team.

As a leader you need to set aside part of your time specifically to communicating with your team. It doesn't need to be a lot but it benefits from some structure. This guide is designed to help you set up a simple personal plan for your internal communications.

The principles are the same whether your team is a division of 500+ or a service of 5 people.

If you're leading a project or have a leadership role across people and teams you don't directly manage you can still use this guide to improve your internal communications.

If you lead any size of team as a service or project this guide is for you

Our internal staff surveys in 2016/17 showed that around half of us think communications from senior managers is effective. So there is some good practice but also plenty of room for improvement.
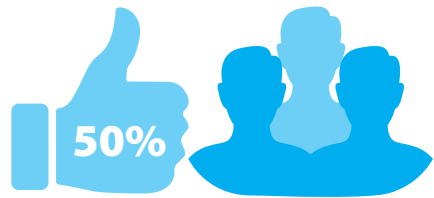
People don't just define "senior managers" as the chief executive and directors. When we've spoken to staff their definition of a senior manager ranges from their team leader to the chief exec. If you lead any size of team as a service or project this guide is for you.

1. Objectives and benefits of good internal communications

The objective of all communication, spoken or written, is to be understood. How well people understand or how they interpret what you say is more important than what you actually say.

INFORMING ➕ UNDERSTANDING ➖ COMMUNICATION

Within **informing** there are two parts: the actual information and how it is passed on. You have to get both right.

Within any information you give always answer the questions:

WHO?
WHAT?
WHEN?
HOW?
WHERE?
WHY?

Within **understanding** there is also the key element of "has it been received?" Communication failures could be due to information not being received at all or being misunderstood.

Is it worth the effort?

Yes, yes, yes. When you have good communications in a team you have happier, healthier, more motivated people who will give patients better care. They'll stay with you longer and they'll recommend the team to others.

More **informed** people will:
- be clear about what they should be doing and why – making the team more effective and efficient
- know what pressures the team face that are beyond your control
- be less stressed or anxious about change.

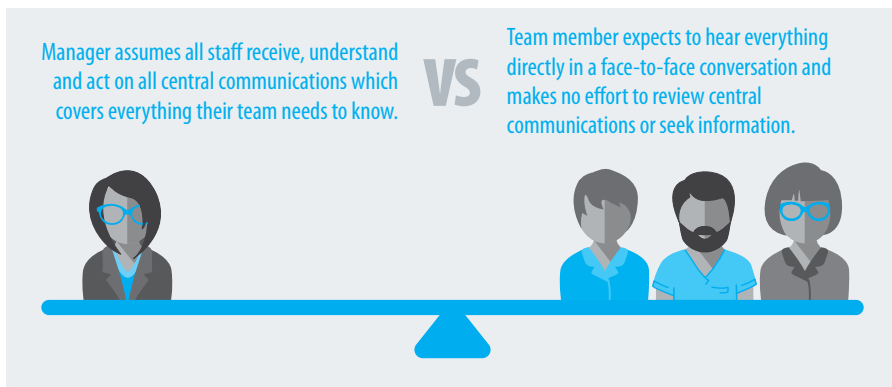More **involved** people (the listening side of your communications) will:
- offer up ideas for improving services
- help solve problems.

More informed people help solve problems.

2. Whose responsibility is it?

Communication always involves two people.

Both sides have a level of responsibility for getting it right. It's a balance between two extremes:

Manager assumes all staff receive, understand and act on all central communications which covers everything their team needs to know.

VS

Team member expects to hear everything directly in a face-to-face conversation and makes no effort to review central communications or seek information.

Great team communications sits nicely in the middle. You consider what your team needs to know and make sure you provide it directly or link people to other internal communications channels; whilst your team actively looks for information and asks questions.

Encourage people to ask questions and highlight topics they'd like more information about.

This guide is focussing on helping you get your side right. But have a discussion with your team about what they can do to stay connected to what's happening across the trust. They should:

- read Today@
- read the Hub home page (news items, campaigns & events)
- subscribe to the chief executive's blog
- read Spotlight on Quality
- lookout for payslip messages
- lookout for screensaver messages

All this only needs to take a few minutes a day. On the back of this encourage people to ask questions and highlight topics they'd like more information about.

3. Knowing your audience

For all communications make sure you're clear about your audience. You want people to receive and understand, so think about:

What types of communications do people prefer?

Ask your team. There's no point persevering with something no one likes. The bigger the team the greater the mix of preferences you'll have, so you may need to repeat messages through different channels. Doing it once through you're preferred channel is only covering half of the communications equation. See the communications tool bag section for ideas (p17).

> If it's new for your team you'll need to put more into answering the what and why

How much do they know about a topic?

Communications is relatively easy when your whole team has a good understanding of a topic. But if you're telling people about something new always think about how much or little they may know about it. You may have heard it several times before, but if it's new for your team you'll need to put more into answering the what and why questions. And avoid or explain jargon and acronyms.

When will they get the message?

- If it's an email and they're clinical staff, how long will it be before they see it?
- Are you relying on others within a large team to cascade?
- Do any of your team work night or weekend shifts?
- Is anyone on long-term leave?

The bigger the team you're talking to the more you should think about the mix of people and how you might need to tailor what you say and the channels you use.

Remember, you're trying to reach the person farthest from you – both in terms of the team hierarchy and the current level of understanding on any given topic.
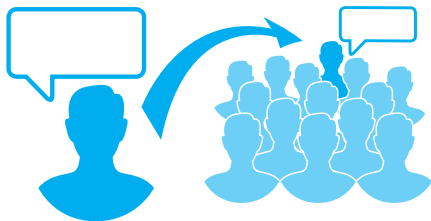
> The bigger the team you're talking to the more you should think about the mix of people

4. Visibility

The bigger your team the harder it is to be visible to everyone. But it's a vital part of being a good communicator and an engaging leader.

The section on face to face communications (p18) covers actually getting out there and being with your team. But there are also things you can do to boost your visibility when you're not actually there.

Tell the wider team about your visits with individuals or small groups

Make news of your visits

Tell the wider team about your visits with individuals or small groups. This shows to the rest of the team that you're out and about even if you weren't with them this time. If you're doing a team news bulletin grab a quick photo of your visit to go in the next issue.

Adding a profile photo is simple to do

Add a photo

Facebook, Twitter and most of the other social media tools would fall flat if they didn't have the little profile photo. It helps people feel like they're talking to other people. The same is true for all your internal communications and there are several places you can add your photo:

- the Hub
- the top or bottom of a regular email update
- a printed team newsletter/bulletin
- your WhatsApp account if you use that
- your Outlook email account (email a photo to the IT service desk with a request to add it to your account)

Adding a profile photo is simple to do and whilst it may seem like a low priority thing it really is worth doing.

Smart phones allow you to make quick video messages

Video

Smart phones allow you to make quick video messages and upload them to a private channel on YouTube, Facebook, the Hub, or send to a WhatsApp group. So when there's information to pass on your team can see and hear you saying it. See the embracing technology section (p21) for some tips on video.

5. Listening and discussing

Great internal communications is a discussion. There's a saying: two ears and one mouth – use them in equal measure.

Two ears and one mouth – use them in equal measure

Listening to your team will help you:

- identify issues that need attention within the team or feeding up to your boss
- gather ideas from your whole team on the best way to tackle thorny issues
- know what gaps in information or understanding people in your team have
- establish and maintain a reputation as a boss who cares.

Acting on what you hear from across your team and letting them know what progress is being made is key. Without the final feedback you risk people thinking you listen but don't act.

Acting on what you hear is key

Build in a way for people to be part of a discussion even with written communications. Invite replies, ask specific "what do you think?" questions and when people do respond always make the time to acknowledge it.

6. Content and presentation

Content is key, but presentation is definitely important too. Good presentation of written or verbal communications makes it easier for people to understand, so increases the likelihood of people getting the message you want to give.

Conversely, bad presentation can turn people off. In the worst case scenario people simply switch-off from listening or stop reading.

Poor content and presentation also sets a low standard for your team to follow. If you want to see high quality, well presented work coming back from your team, make sure that's what you send out to them.

Never send any written communications without reading it through yourself

Top tips

- For any piece of news or information you want to give to your team check that you're answering the six questions **who, what, when, where, why, and how**. If you miss out any of these your communications will be less effective.

- If you want people to do something when they get the information, make sure the "why" is a compelling call to action.

- Keep it short and simple. Individual topics shouldn't need to be more than 150-200 words. If an in-depth topic needs more you may be better to include it as an attachment or discuss it in a face to face meeting.

- Limit jargon unless you're sure everyone the information will go to understands it. Likewise, if you use acronyms people may not know spell them out the first time.

- Never send any written communications without reading it through yourself and running the spell check.

7. Language and tone of voice

How you say things is just as important as what you say. Remember, it's what people hear and whether they believe it that counts.

Keep the tone and language conversational and personal

In writing

For anything you write as internal communications, keep the tone and language conversational and personal. Write how you talk.

If your writing style tends to be quite formal, perhaps developed from writing papers, procedure notes and protocols, it's easy to accidentally write things as instructions. But this risks creating a "them and us" divide, particularly if you're sending something to a large team who aren't all your direct reports.

If you're asking people to do something that everyone should do e.g. fill in the staff survey or book their appraisal, don't make it sound like you're exempt from doing it too, use phrases like "We need to…" rather than "You need to..." and definitely avoid "All staff must..."

If you're asking people to do something that everyone needs to, don't make it sound like you're exempt

But avoid the opposite end of the scale too. Really informal and jokey won't help get a message across; and one person's joke can be another's insult – so it's best to avoid.

You might need to work at getting the informal tone right, but it's worth it.

💡 *Top tips*

If you've got a really important message to send in writing, read it out loud or listen to it through a text to speech converter. When you hear it out loud it is much easier to spot overly formal or harsh language.

In person

Face to face meetings are obviously easier to get the tone conversational. But you also have the added dimension of body language which has a huge impact on how people perceive / believe what you're saying. Some say body language and tone make up 70% of what people use to interpret what others are saying. Be conscious of this without agonising over it.

Plan what you need to say and make sure you get all the points across

For important meetings, plan what you need to say and make sure you get all the points across. You need to be flexible to respond to queries but avoid getting side-tracked or focussing too much on one issue and running out of time.

Build in discussion so it's not all you talking. If you do find meetings tend to be you talking and others listening try reworking the agendas so others have specific slots to update on what they've been doing.

Are you a cynic?

If you're a bit of a natural cynic be aware of it; and that moods rub-off onto others. Your team will take your lead, so your tone and enthusiasm for something will guide people in deciding how much effort they put into it.

Your tone and enthusiasm for something will guide people

Improving face-to-face communications

If you feel you need to strengthen your face-to-face communications, set aside a few minutes after meetings to have a personal debrief and reflect on what you thought went well and what could be better next time. Ask your team if they're getting what they need from you and if not what suggestions do they have.
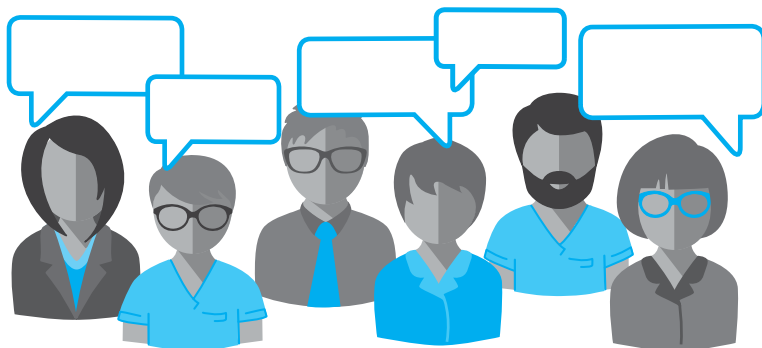
Build in discussion so it's not all you talking.

8. Localising wider trust news

As a leader, you're an essential part of the network that keeps information flowing. The more information that flows smoothly across, up and down the organisation the better we will be; so as well as local team news please cover plenty of wider information about trust news and campaigns.

Flag and repeat wider topics

Being a team leader, you'll be more plugged into wider issues affecting the rest of your service, division and the trust. A key role for your communication with your team is to flag and repeat wider topics and feed your team's comments back to relevant people.

Add local context so your team can see how issues directly affect their work, their patients and themselves. If the connection isn't clear to you speak to your manager or another team leader to get their take on it.

Add local context so your team can see how issues directly affect their work, their patients and themselves
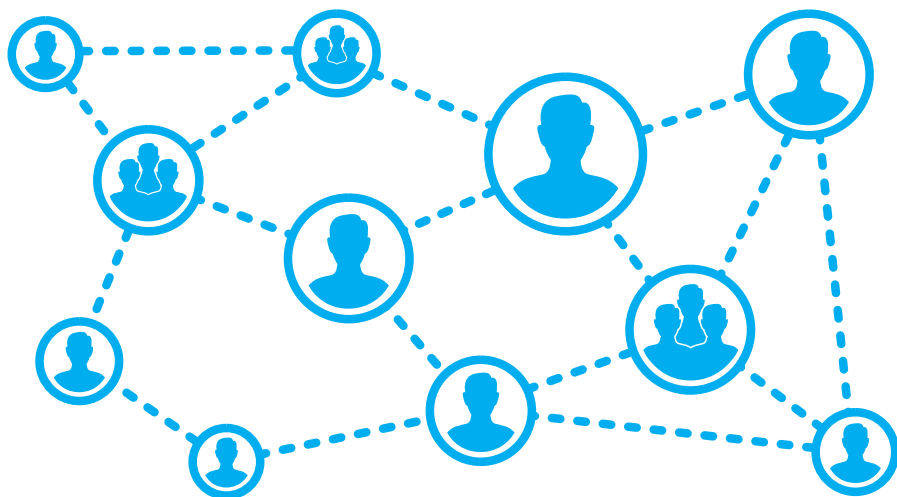
Top tips

- Get **Managers' Cascade** and **Spotlight on Quality** each month, read them through and then use them as part of team discussions or repeat sections in your own written communications.
- Check the **Hub** homepage regularly for **news** stories, announcements and **blogs** from the chief executive and others.
- Read **Today@CLCH** and highlight relevant topics to your team.
- Give an overview of meetings you attend regularly or projects you're involved in – even if they're not directly affecting all of your team.

Some suggestions for other topics to update your team on regularly:

- **Patient reported experience measures (PREMs).** Monthly CBU level reports are prepared for each division. In most cases they're good news about how much patients appreciate the work we do. And if scores are low it's a team discussion that will help address the problem.

- **Feedback on incidents raised by the team.** We want everyone to report incidents, and seeing the results and the actions taken in response to issues raised encourages people and shows it's not wasted effort to complete a report.

- **Progress of service tenders, mobilisations, demobilisations.** These are a reality of the commissioning process; and people have voiced concerns about feeling out of the loop and how it makes them more anxious and uncertain.

- **Policy and procedure updates.** Each month, Managers' Cascade includes titles of policies that have been updated, or you can sort the policy library on the Hub by the 'modified date' column to show new/updated policies at the top of the page.

- **External NHS news.** It's good to connect your team's work to the wider NHS outside of the trust. But when a lot of national media coverage focuses on negative issues make sure you look for the positives too and use credible sources. It's important for people in your teams to know when challenges we face as a trust are the same elsewhere. People's views on whether something is a "local problem" can impact on retention rates.

9. Communicating bad news

Sometimes we need to tell teams about bad news, perhaps the loss of a service which means people transferring out of the trust, a commissioner tightening budgets, or something affection the whole NHS that's going to bite us too.

When it comes to bad news it's important to keep focussed on adult to adult communications

It's important not to shy away from bad news or try to "protect" people from it by not sharing it. If news doesn't come from a credible source rumours will fill the gap.

If news doesn't come from a credible source rumours will fill the gap

Good planning is essential. Don't wing it when passing on bad news. Prepare what you need to say and test it with your boss or peers.

Top tips

- Think hard about how people are likely to react and the questions they're likely to have. If it was you hearing it for the first time how would you react? Aim to answer the obvious questions in the initial information you give. Be ready to respond to the toughest questions you can think of.

- Look for positives. Not to gloss over negatives but to give balance and reassurance to people.

- Tell people as much as you can as soon as you can. But there may be things that can't be clarified straight away. Be open with people about what you can't confirm yet or simply don't know. If you can, give people an idea of when more news will follow. But if you don't know be honest about it and reassure people that they'll be kept in the loop.

- Don't make promises or give reassurances which you can't guarantee. It's tempting to try to help people deal with bad news by playing it down. But false reassurance will make the final reality harder for people.

- Meet face to face if you can; if not organise a conference call. Emails, texts, etc should be the last option.

- If you have a large team and need to cascade the news through others, put the key messages on paper and meet with your direct reports to discuss them. Make sure everyone is clear what is needed and delivers consistent information at similar times.

- Make sure you cover how you'll get the news to people on long-term leave or weekend/night shifts.

- Make sure people know how they can ask further questions after the initial briefing, and respond to any questions promptly. Unless it's a question about specific personal circumstances give answers to everyone in the team, not just the person who asked.

- After an initial briefing be clear with people how often you'll update them and stick to that – even if some updates are just confirming that nothing has changed.

- Make sure that any concerns your team raise are passed on to other relevant people for them to respond to.

When it comes to bad news it's important to keep focussed on adult to adult communications. There can be a tendency to adopt a more parent to child approach to protect people, but that doesn't actually help.

Make sure people know how they can ask further questions after the initial briefing

10. Recognising success

Sharing success in your team communications is essential. Not just openly thanking members of the team for good work, but sharing successes from elsewhere in the trust.

Hearing about wider success helps spread good practice; inspires and motivates people, and gives them confidence and reassurance that they're part of a high performing trust.

Don't be shy about thanking individuals. Most things are a team effort, but that's a group of individuals, so call out the work of specific individuals.

Hearing about wider success helps spread good practice; inspires and motivates people

Top tips

- Use the "Thank you" tool on the Hub home page to give an individual a virtual pat on the back.
- Nominate people for employee of the month and the annual staff awards.
- Put the work of your team forward for external awards.

11. Your communications tool bag

This section lists a range of tools to consider using for team communications. You don't have to use all of them, but you need a mix of spoken and written tools.

If you're introducing new things, talk to your team about it in advance and get some views on whether they like the idea or have suggestions on how to maximise its success.

Face to face

For small teams working alongside each other this comes easy. But for larger teams or if your people are spread across many sites and out on visits for much of the day it needs more effort.

Team meetings – Consider if you can physically get your team together and how often. If you're at the top of a large service or division are you clear how your sub teams meet and can you co-ordinate times to help with quick cascades of news?

One to one meetings – These are also important for sharing wider trust news. One to one sessions are a chance to check people have understood issues and invite questions that they may not have wanted to ask in a larger group. Whilst it means you repeat a message, it's worth doing. Keeping your message consistent is essential.

Floor walks – If you manage a large service, CBU or division it's never going to be easy to meet everyone. Setting aside time for informally meeting people is important. It's a great way to hear what's happening. Planning your diary to give 15 minutes either side of meetings might be all you need.

You don't need a specific purpose and it's generally better suited to listening rather than telling. It's often better not to have a topic or issue that you're coming to see people about – which can risk feeling like an inspection, particularly if they're not a regular part of your team communications.

Drop-ins – The reverse of a floor walk, this is setting aside time in your diary for people to come and see you without pre-booking. They don't work for everyone. Test the idea with your team and give it a go. If it doesn't work and people don't come then drop it. Don't give yourself false reassurance that you've done your bit.

Written

Regular email update – This would be a regular "bulletin" passing on news and inviting comments and feedback; distinct from general emails to the team. Mix team based things with trust-wide projects/priorities and help connect your team to the wider work of the trust.

Frequency could be weekly, fortnightly or monthly. But stick to a fixed routine. The benefit of sending something more frequently is the number of items in each email can be less, so it's more likely to be read from top to bottom.

Top tips

- Keep the text in the actual email (not an attachment)
- Try limiting yourself to three main topics per edition.
- Keep each item short and snappy; one or two short paragraphs each.
- Keep the tone light and chatty. Focus on talking to the one person who is reading it from their inbox.
- Invite responses so it's more like a discussion. It will depend on the size of your audience whether you want to invite "reply all" responses or not.
- Set up a distribution list that gets straight to everyone, rather than cascading through others.

This will be more effective for larger and dispersed teams who struggle to meet as a whole group, and people who have good access to computers or work mobile phones with emails.

Printable news bulletin – A variation on the email update perhaps more suited to clinic based teams with limited time spent on computers. Like an email update, make sure you mix team news with wider trust news.

Top tips

- There is a simple template on the Hub if you want to use it, keyword search "news bulletin". If you set one up yourself, use Word or PowerPoint (don't bother with Publisher). Good layout and presentation is important to aid readability, but don't spend a lot of time on design. Keep it clear and simple. The content is key.
- If you can stick to one side of A4 the bulletin can be pinned to notice boards without people missing what's on a second page.
- Include a head and shoulders photo of yourself - especially for bigger teams e.g. if you're a CBU manager, director etc who doesn't have regular time with everyone in the team.
- Always have a date in the header and make sure old copies are stored somewhere that people can get to them.

Conferencing (telephone, video and web)

When you can't meet in person there are still several ways you can speak rather than write to people. With a team that's spread across a large area these options save people travel time and it's worth the effort to get them running smoothly and effectively.

No one likes joining a bad conference call, but done well they can be a great addition to your team communications.

Telephone conference – These are the lowest tech option and easiest to get going. It can be lots of people dialling in individually or linking a few rooms where groups meet.

Video/web conferences – Some of our sites have built in video conferencing kit. These link two or more rooms together so you can use it to see each other or to share a presentation on the screen.

Web conferencing tools let lots of people join from their desks. If they have web cameras you can see each other, if not you can share presentations whilst talking it through.

Both these options can be quick and easy once people are used to how they work. But they do need testing on "non-urgent" meetings. Be prepared to persevere through some initial glitches as you get them established.

In both cases, having a good plan for what you're going to talk through and the running order is really important. Chairing virtual meetings is harder than a face to face meeting.

With basic phone calls it's worth spending more time preparing what you want to say as people lose all the additional signals of body language and expression that you get when you can see each other.

Useful tools:

BT Meet Me Healthcare Webex accounts – This gives you a basic conference call number and the additional web conferencing options. It has an app to help people join calls or web conferences from smart phones. Keyword search "webex" on the Hub for details.

In-house video conferencing – You'll find guides on the Hub for using the video conferencing kit in our meetings rooms. Keyword search "video conference".

You need a mix of spoken and written tools

12. Embracing technology

This section has some ideas for communications tools that break away from the traditional email, meetings and newsletters. Why not set yourself an objective to introduce one of them in the year ahead? If you or your team don't like them they can always be dropped.

Set yourself an objective to introduce one of them in the year ahead

WhatsApp

Several teams already use WhatsApp (and other online tools) to boost their internal communications. There's a guide about using it safely within Information Governance rules on the Hub (keyword search "WhatsApp").

There are two basic options:

- A **group** lets everyone send messages to others in the group.
- A **broadcast** list would be controlled by you and lets everyone see messages and respond to you, but not respond to others in the list.

If you want to try WhatsApp talk it through in your team and make sure everyone "opts in".

To note: WhatsApp have stopped supporting Blackberry and some older versions of smart phones so you need to check what phones it will run on – www.whatsapp.com

Facebook closed group

As the name suggests this is a private area on Facebook which only approved members can see and post to. You'll see the content in your Facebook account but other friends not in the closed group won't see it. There are two levels of private groups on Facebook: closed and secret. The differences are explained on Facebook at www.facebook.com/help

Twitter

It is possible to have private group discussions on Twitter but on the whole Twitter is aimed at open comments visible to anyone. As such we wouldn't recommend it for team discussions. But it is a good way to promote what your team is doing and openly thank team members for a job well done.

Video blogs (vlogs)

This is a one way tool for giving information, but an alternative option to email or printed news bulletins. The benefit is it puts your face and your personality into the communication. They can be done quickly on most smart phones and then uploaded to a private YouTube channel or the intranet and the link shared with your team.

If you think you've got everything else sorted this could be your adventurous next step! Call your divisional communications lead if you'd like some help getting started. Search the Hub for "comms lead".

Top tips

- Keep them short. Three key messages tops and three minutes max.
- Don't over script it. Work out the headline topics and key points you want to make then just go for it.
- Take 1, take 2, take 3 - have a few goes at getting it right, but don't worry about perfection.

13. Self-assessment - Where are you now?

Run through the questions below giving honest answers. No one is marking it.
The aim is to help you pick things to improve communications in your team.

Finding content

1. How often do you check these central communications for news to pick up with your team:

Today@

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Never

Spotlight on quality

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Never

Managers' cascade

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Never

Hub home page

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Never

Chief executive's blog

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Never

Face-to-face meetings

2. Do you have a regular meeting that the whole team can get to?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

3. Do you have a regular call that the whole team can join?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

4. Do your 1-2-1s with direct reports cover what news needs to be cascaded?

- ☐ All the time
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely

5. How often do you see and talk to people in your wider team who you don't directly line manage?

- ☐ All the time
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely

6. Do you have a regular time held for people to drop in and see you?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Written briefings

7. Do you send a regular email update to your team?

☐ Yes
☐ No

8. Do you have a regular team newsletter/bulletin?

☐ Yes
☐ No

9. Do you re-read your team updates before you send them?

☐ All the time
☐ Sometimes
☐ Rarely

10. Do you have an email distribution list set up that gets to everyone in your team?

☐ Yes
☐ No

New technology

11. How do you feel about using any of the following to communicate with your team:

Twitter

☐ Already using it
☐ Would like to start
☐ Not interested

WhatsApp

☐ Already using it
☐ Would like to start
☐ Not interested

Facebook

☐ Already using it
☐ Would like to start
☐ Not interested

Video blogs

☐ Already using it
☐ Would like to start
☐ Not interested

Listening

12. How often do you actively invite responses in your current team communications channels?

☐ Always
☐ Sometimes
☐ Never

Analysing your results is easy. Wherever you've said no, never, rarely, sometimes or not interested consider if you could start doing it or make it more frequent.

Ask your team what they think. Maybe something a bit out of your comfort zone would really help them.

The next pages provide a simple grid to plan regular communications with your team. For a larger format version keyword search "IC plan" on the Hub.

14. Action plan for the future

This is a plan for how you personally will communicate with others; so the actions should be things you will do yourself. Messages are always more genuine when they come from you personally rather than cascaded on your behalf.

Add the channels you plan to use e.g. team email, video blog, team away-day etc, and reminders of topics you know will be coming up in future e.g. appraisals, flu jabs, office move, Jenny's retirement etc.

Year					
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
April					
May					
June					

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
July					
August					
September					

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
October					
November					
December					

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
January					
February					
March					

Review and redo: A copy of this planner is on the Hub, keyword search "IC plan".

Notes

A guide to team communications

Notes

Was this useful?

We'd like to hear feedback on this guide, good or bad, so we can improve future editions. Please send any comments to **communications@clch.nhs.uk** or contact your division's communications lead via the Hub (keyword search "comms lead").

www.clch.nhs.uk