



How the London Borough of Sutton is Winning the War of Words

By Ruth Appleton – Employee Development Manager

Changing our Culture

Sutton Council prides itself on green policies—caring for the environment, cutting out waste, offering value to the community. But like most councils in Britain, we have problems when we write. Our Members constantly complain there are too many long, complicated, dull committee reports. They are right. Last year we produced 1,300,000 sheets of paper in committee reports alone.

We are changing our culture, our way of working and how we write. Our first step was to discover just how good or bad our writing style had become and to set a benchmark to see how much we could improve.

Audit Highlights the Problem

We asked Editor Software to run a style audit of a representative sample of council documents. The audit showed what everyone suspected—we were not the best writers in the world.

After the audit, a pilot group of 60 people went through *Editor Software's training course* and used the *StyleWriter* software.

The pilot has been so successful, we turned to *StyleWriter* when we decided to tackle committee report writing. Nick Wright and Rose Tilley of Editor Software, designed and delivered a training course on writing reports, with a key section on writing summaries. Every senior departmental manager, including the Chief Executive, attended the training.

They all came away with a new-found enthusiasm for clear writing and the tools and knowledge to put it into practice.

New Style Reports

In reforming the way we write committee reports, Editor Software came up with some useful ideas. We had a written a guide to committee report format, content and style. Rather than having this printed and given to every report writer, Editor Software placed this information as help screens in Word and *StyleWriter*. If any report writer needs information on a specific council aim or priority, how to write a summary or see the recommended layout of a report, it's only a click of a mouse away. Today we have a 250-user licence to use *StyleWriter*. We plan to use the program to tackle letter writing and internal communications.

Councils can Improve Standards

For any other council wanting to improve writing standards, we learnt some valuable lessons.

- Fewer than one in twenty people write in clear English.
- You must invest the time and money in plain English to reap the rewards.
- Training alone is not enough—you have to back it up with *StyleWriter*.
- Senior managers must adopt plain English, attend training courses and use the software so they can lead by example.