Tell it like it is

When it comes to things that matter to them – like their own health and care, or a loved one's – people want the full story.

There is a difference between being sensitive and playing down or hiding less palatable information.

Issues about poor communication tend to stem from people not understanding what they're told, being given conflicting messages or feeling something is being hidden from them.

If you're a health and care provider, people expect you to have the full facts – or at least to be open about anything that's not so black and white. You want your audience to believe that you are a credible source of information. Your communication is more likely to have the desired effect if they trust what you say.

- Put things clearly. Use Plain English and avoid jargon or complex language that could mask important information.
- Assume that people will not read all the information. Put it in manageable chunks that readers can easily skim, and flag up the most important points.
- Aim to leave no obvious questions unanswered. You can't always cover everything, or second guess what individuals will want to know, but you've probably got a pretty good idea what queries people are likely to have.
- Be honest. If there's a good reason you can't provide certain information, or go into detail, say so.
- Don't fudge issues like funding; be transparent wherever possible. There should be well thought out reasons for your organisation's actions and decisions (to explain a change in services for instance, or why there's a shortage of resources in a particular area) that you can tell people.
- Spell out consequences of not taking action or not changing behaviour – if you want people to change, you need to say why this is a good thing for both them and others (including your organisation).
- It helps if you can provide credible evidence – like directing people to wider research and factual data – especially if information may be unpalatable.