

Delivering a literacy friendly policing service

NALA submission to the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, January 2018

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) welcomes the opportunity to offer our views to the Commission on the future of policing on delivering a literacy friendly policing service.

Recent research¹ shows that one in six Irish adults (521,550 people) find reading and understanding everyday texts difficult: for example, reading a leaflet, bus timetable or medicine instructions. One in four (754,000 people) has difficulties in real world maths, from basic addition and subtraction to calculating averages. The survey also looks at problem solving in technology-rich environments and 42% of Irish adults score at or below Level 1.

These unmet adult literacy and numeracy needs are a key concern for Ireland as they have devastating consequences for individuals, families, communities, society and the economy. In particular people with literacy and numeracy needs find it more challenging to engage fully with public services, such as Intreo, health services and An Garda Síochána. They may struggle with filling in a form, reading a leaflet or communicating with confidence.

Poor literacy skills can also result in people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. A study of literacy skills in prisons in Ireland noted that “there is a considerable body of evidence showing that poor literacy skills restrict a range of life-choices (particularly employment), and thus become a pre-disposing factor in criminal activities.”²

Therefore increased awareness of literacy issues of adults is essential for An Garda Síochána and delivering a service that takes account of literacy issues in dealing with members of the public.

Becoming a literacy friendly policing service

We need our policing service to be literacy friendly. This means removing literacy barriers to accessing services and being able to participate fully in them. In everyday terms, a literacy friendly service enables those with literacy, numeracy and language difficulties.

- access its services,
- communicate effectively with it, in different ways, and
- be treated fairly and equally regardless of their literacy, numeracy or language needs.

¹ Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2012 [Survey](#) Results for Ireland: CSO, Dublin

² The [Prison Adult Literacy Survey](#): Results And Implications: Irish Prison Service (2013)

Part of becoming literacy friendly is to raise the literacy awareness of staff. Literacy awareness training is a feature in many public bodies to increase awareness and improve their knowledge and capacity to communicate effectively with the public. Another element is plain English.

Plain English is about ethical communication

More and more regulatory bodies are using plain English as they see it is about ethical communication and they also see its effectiveness and benefits. NALA works with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the public sector reform agenda and the role that plain English can play. The Department recently produced a [Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service](#).

Many state organisations work with NALA to achieve the NALA's Plain English Mark – a quality mark for documents that achieve international plain language standards. To learn more, please visit www.simplyput.ie

Some examples of work in plain English include:

1. The Policing Authority of Ireland used some plain English guidelines in drafting its Code of Ethics and trained its staff in plain English writing and design matters.
2. The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) produced two documents in plain English – [‘The Role of the DPP’](#) and [‘Going to Court as a Witness’](#) – which helped the public better understand this information.
3. The Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) produced the resource [‘Know your Rights: Criminal Justice and Garda Powers’](#) in plain English.

The Policing service and plain English

The policing service is one of the most important services in our country and NALA believes all your communications (verbal, written and web based) for the public should be in plain English. We also believe that all police officers should have literacy awareness and plain English training from day one and as part of their continuous professional development.

More opportunities to use plain English

The policing service will increasingly use technology and police at local level will likely have mobile offices where they can record the details of crimes and so on at the scene. These recording templates (likely on phone Apps) and other documents should be edited in plain English.

Editing is about making the words accessible (using ‘high-frequency words’) **and** also improving the structure and layout of information so that it is clearer on all platforms and in hard copy. Clear information

and processes for citizens will improve transparency and result in cost savings. For example, using an example from the Arizona's Department of Revenue, they found that when they rewrote one letter in plain English, it received about 11,000 fewer phone calls than in the previous year. Plain English helped improve efficiency and staff morale, as employees were no longer answering the same questions repeatedly. Our experience working with clients shows that these cost savings are regular and we are doing more systematic research to document the precise results.

The new EU data protection laws (General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)) coming on stream this year mention plain language several times and this too is a significant issue in this consultation. This is especially important when you consider issues of consent particularly for those adults in Ireland who have literacy or numeracy needs (1 in 4 and 1 in 6 respectively) and also for people whose first language is not English.

To finish, NALA would be happy to support the evolving policing service to ensure it delivers a literacy friendly service therefore making it accessible for all individuals regardless of literacy and numeracy needs.

Further information

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