

## **The National Adult Literacy Agency’s response to the Public Consultation on the Draft National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland**

**14 May 2019**

NALA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this public consultation. Our short response has two parts:

Part 1: The NALA Plain English Editing and Training Service – a social enterprise

Part 2: Our short response to the ideas in the consultation paper

## Part 1: The NALA Plain English Editing and Training Service

Plain English is a way to write and present information so that the intended reader can understand it after a single reading. It is about ethical communication.

NALA set up its Plain English Editing and Training Service in 2005. It set it up in response to employers and others contacting us for assistance to make their health and safety, financial and legal information clearer for their customers – and staff. A central goal in each of our strategic plans since then has been to **support organisations to become more literacy friendly**. One of the main ways we do this is by helping them provide information in plain English to their customers, colleagues and others. Our overall remit is to help those with literacy needs (1 in 6) and numeracy needs (1 in 4). Our plain English services improves the quality and clarity of information for **all** readers.

We provide the public sector and others with plain English editing and training services on a **fee-paying basis**. The service works with a specially convened subcommittee from our main board.

We also contribute towards the good of society in general and use the **surpluses** which emerge from our service for activities like:

- hosting conferences about the value of plain English, and
- offering subsidised training to those in the community and voluntary sector.

## An overview of our social and economic impact

Our Plain English Editing and Training Service has worked steadily to promote the quality and clarity of information to the public. We list some of the impacts of our work below.

### **1. Our work to get plain English legislation enacted**

Due to our lobbying efforts a Plain English Bill has been introduced to the Dáil early this year, and we fully expect it will become law in Ireland by the end of 2019. This law will make public information more accessible for all but particularly for those with literacy needs. This work is the culmination of years of lobbying and petitioning for plain English.

### **2. Promoting innovation and positive behaviour that also increases efficiency**

Here are just two examples of how we promote innovation and positive changes in behaviour.

**Example 1:** This year and last we partnered with leading law firm, Mason Hayes & Curran (MHC), to run national NALA Plain English Awards. These awards generate good publicity for the use of plain English in documents intended for the public, including businesses.

**Example 2:** Working with bodies like gov.ie, the Department of Health, the HSE and others to improve the clarity of communications. An example of a recent piece of work was a letter to patients asking them to cancel appointments if they did not plan to attend. The letter was tested in three hospitals and already shows a 20% increase in responses relative to the original (non-plain English letter). Cost savings are being tracked this year, but they are already significant.

### **3. Providing support to those who create jobs and provide goods and services**

We support those who create jobs and training opportunities as well as those who provide goods and services. An example of this is our work with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. This Department is committed to using plain English and we support it in developing clear consultation papers and other resources for its customers.

#### **4. Getting high-profile plain English champions**

Our re-investment of our profits from the service (and gaining of external sponsorship) helped us to host plain English conferences like:

- the 2015 Plain Language Association International conference in Dublin with high-profile plain English champions such as the European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly. It also resulted in the development of a Plain English style guide for the public service and training of hundreds of public servants;
- the 2018 plain English conference had speakers like **Attorney General Seamus Wolfe**.

#### **5. Raising awareness among our members, including those with literacy needs**

Many of our 1,000+ members are keenly interested in plain English. Many of our members are adult literacy students, tutors and organisations in the community and voluntary sector. We consult with these stakeholders about plain English and promote their awareness of their responsibility and increasingly their right to receive clear information. (The Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code for examples requires the businesses and industries it supervises to use plain English with customers.)

### **Challenges to our social enterprise**

The challenges the NALA Plain English Editing and Training Service faces are similar to those faced by other social enterprises.

## Part 2: Ideas to realise the policy objectives

Because we understand what it is to be a social enterprise and the challenges this poses, we think the 21 ideas in your consultation paper are robust.

### Building social enterprise – how we may be able to help

We believe that we can use our status as plain English experts to help support the profile, development and success of other social enterprises. We could do this by contributing to the proposed new social enterprise awareness strategy.

### Initiate social enterprises

We could contribute to the proposed social enterprise and entrepreneurship modules from a plain English perspective (and from a content perspective). Plain English is necessary in day-to-day business for clear communication with colleagues, the public, funders, contractors, and so on.

### Grow and strengthen social enterprises, and improve access to finance and funding and markets (here and abroad)

We could help to develop clear information for social enterprises. We already have [free plain English resources](#) in most of the areas listed below, and we also have experience developing templates, accessible web content and editing terms and conditions, contracts and templates.

- Financial information (A-Z Plain English Guide to financial terms which would be useful when developing business proposals, guidelines and so on)
- Legal (A-Z Plain English Guide and published legal cases where plain English was not used in Ireland and the implications of this.)
- Health and safety (Example: We have worked on safety statements.)
- Environmental information (glossary of terms available)

## Building social enterprise – how we may be able to help

Other countries increasingly require the use of Plain English in communications from businesses in contacts and elsewhere, so it would be helpful for Irish-based social enterprises to do likewise. It would be even better if they set the lead in terms of best practice in communication techniques, templates, campaigns, training and programmes. NALA's Plain English Service could help with this.

### Finally...

We hope the above has been useful and we are happy to discuss the points and questions raised. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute. We wish you well collating the feedback, and we are happy to discuss our response further.

For further questions, please contact:

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