

The Highland Council

Community Safety, Public Engagement and Equalities Committee 13 June 2013

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| Agenda item | 13 |
| Report number | CPE 27/13 |

Committed to clearer communications by becoming corporate members of Plain English Campaign.

Report by the Chief Executive

Summary

We have made a commitment to provide information to the public "...in clear language, to Plain English Campaign's 'Crystal Mark' standard". This aim is set out in the 'Programme for The Highland Council' in the section 'Working together to empower our communities'. To take this commitment forward, we are recommending that members approve our application for corporate membership of Plain English Campaign. PEC has checked, edited and approved this report.

1. Background

1.1 Plain English Campaign has been helping councils and businesses to improve the clarity of communications since 1979. Their services include editing documents and training people to write in plain English so they can produce documents which are easier for their intended audience to understand.

Launched in 1990, The Crystal Mark is the Campaign's seal of approval for the clarity of a document. It now appears on more than 21,000 different documents in the UK, the USA, Australia, Denmark, New Zealand and South Africa. It is the only internationally recognised mark of its kind.

To gain a Crystal Mark, a document must be as clear as possible.

A document must:

- use everyday English;
- be consistent and correctly use punctuation and grammar;
- use an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words;
- contain plenty of active rather than passive verbs;
- explain technical terms;
- use lists to break up large chunks of text;
- use personal references like 'we' and 'you' instead of 'the applicant' or 'the council';
- have clear helpful headings, which stand out from the text; and
- use a good type size and a clear typeface.

The process of applying for a Crystal Mark is as follows.

- We send our document to the campaign, who check it and let us know if it is up to Crystal Mark standard.

- If the document is up to the necessary standard, the campaign will send us a Crystal Mark application form.
- If the document is not up to the necessary standard, the campaign will send us an estimate of the cost of any editing needed.
- Once we have accepted the editing estimate, the campaign will edit our document so that it meets Crystal Mark standard.
- If we want to go ahead and get the Crystal Mark, we must send our revised draft, including their suggestions and any of our amendments, back to them for them to check. This may then involve a process of negotiation.
- When the campaign has agreed our document is up to Crystal Mark standard, they will send us our individually numbered Crystal Mark to use on the document.

2. Corporate membership of Plain English Campaign

There are a number of types of corporate membership – from full membership (for the whole council) to single department membership (for a single council department). If we decided to go with the latter option, we are recommending that the Public Relations Office acts as the single department taking membership.

By becoming a corporate member of Plain English Campaign, we can put the corporate membership logo on all our documents. This doesn't mean that our documents have become clear overnight. Membership shows the public that we understand the need for clear communication and that we are in the process of improving our documents.

As a corporate member we will benefit from significant reductions in costs.

Corporate membership for a single department within the council would cost approximately £2,000 for the first year and £1,000 each year after this.

This would entitle us to the following benefits.

- Free Crystal Marks for documents that reach Crystal Mark standard. (The usual price of a Crystal Mark is £500 + VAT.)
- A corporate membership logo that we can place on any of our documents without having to send them to Plain English Campaign.
- A reduction in editing charges of up to 25%.
 - The editing charge depends on the length and complexity of the document. For example, a document with a high legal content will be more expensive to edit than a marketing brochure. Guideline prices are £65 + VAT for each A4 page of about 500 words, with a minimum charge of £150 + VAT.
- One free place on any open course during the year (worth £285).
- For all other training requirements:
 - open courses reduced from £285 to £210;
 - online courses reduced from £100 to £25; and
 - in-house courses reduced by £100.

3. Costs for one-off Crystal Marks

There is a fee for the Crystal Mark unless we become a corporate member.

- a. In the first year, we could only apply for two large documents (at £500 each) and five small documents (at £200 each) to be Crystal Marked.
- b. For all following years, we could only apply for one large document (at £500) and two small documents (at £200 each) to be Crystal Marked.

The fee allows the Campaign to edit, for free, any subsequent minor changes to any Crystal Marked document.

If documents are not up to Crystal Mark standard, we do still have to pay editing fees.

4. Council documents to be Crystal Marked

We will give priority to documents, such as the yearly council tax leaflet that we send to every household in the Highlands, the annual council newspaper setting out our performance, the quarterly tenants' newsletter and leaflets explaining welfare reform and benefit information. A corporate document that would benefit from a Crystal Mark is, for example, one that sets out the conditions for the Community Challenge Fund.

5. Training

- 5.1 We currently use plain English principles and guidance in our Effective Business Writing course. Public Relations staff are familiar with the style Plain English Campaign recommend, and use plain English principles when writing corporate documents. The staff who would most benefit from training are those who:

- write reports for council meetings;
- take minutes of meetings; and
- provide advice and information to the public.

Any face-to-face training would focus on staff who have a specialist role in producing information and advice to the public. We feel that using online courses would be of significant benefit to all staff and, in a later phase of this strategy, we can investigate the costs of adding Plain English online courses to our 'My Online Learning'.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Being a corporate member of Plain English Campaign will demonstrate a real commitment to Plain English. Plus we would save a significant amount of money if we wanted to use their services, as well as the savings created by producing clearer information which our customers can act on after the first reading. We are recommending that the Public Relations Office applies for single department corporate membership of Plain English Campaign on behalf of all council services.

7. Implications

7.1 Resources

Achieving the Plain English Campaign Crystal Mark for our publications has resource implications in terms of the cost of membership. The cost will be met from the Chief Executive's Service budget.

There will also be extra costs in training staff, who are involved in writing and producing reports and publications. Individual services will meet these costs.

Equal opportunities

Using plain English can help remove barriers for those with low literacy levels and for those whose first language is not English.

There are no legal, climate-change or risk implications arising from this report.

Recommendations

1. The Public Relations Office applies for single-department corporate membership of Plain English Campaign on behalf of all council services.
2. The Public Relations team will identify those members of staff who would most benefit from plain English training and then organise a local training session. They will also aim to extend training using online courses.
3. In the future the Public Relations Manager will report back to the Community Safety, Public Engagement and Equalities Committee on the progress of Plain English across the council.

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References:

["Working Together for the Highlands – A Programme for The Highland Council" 2012-2017](#)

The Plain English Campaign: <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>