

The Highland Council
Community Safety, Public Engagement and Equalities
Committee – 1 October 2014

Agenda Item	9
Report No	CPE 30/14

Plain English

Report by the Corporate Communications Manager

Summary

To provide an update on progress against the commitment to provide information to the public in clear language, to the 'Crystal Mark' plain English standard.

To provide a proposal for embedding this standard in all The Highland Council's communications.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Highland Council's Programme "Working together for the Highlands 2012 – 2017" has a commitment that: "The Council will provide information to the public in clear language, to the 'Crystal Mark' plain English standard."

2. Progress to date

2.1 Membership

The Council took out Corporate Membership of the Plain English Campaign in June 2013 at the initial cost of £2,000. The subsequent annual membership charge is £1,000 each year. Organisations do not need to be members to use Plain English services, but the main benefits of membership are a reduction in training and editing charges. This includes ten free online training courses each year and a 20% discount on Crystal Mark editing charges. Membership was renewed in September 2014.

2.2 Training

The Council has 20 online free Plain English training course places available (10 from 2013-14 and 10 for 2014-15). These places will be allocated to relevant staff across Council Services and the Corporate Communications Team. A list of staff who would deliver most benefit from training is currently being identified. The free training places will be booked and training completed by December 2014.

- 2.3 Membership includes a discount for any further on-line courses which may also be purchased by service units during the year, if budget is identified (£25 per course).

- 2.4 The Corporate Communications Manager and Senior Corporate Communications Officer are already trained in Plain English writing and proof reading. They will update their training through the latest online course.

- 2.5 The Council's Learning and Development Service covers Plain English in their Effective Business Writing course and in training on Preparing and Presenting Committee Reports. Links to the Plain English website are provided from their e-Learning on Committee Reports and also e-learning on Presentation Skills.
- 2.6 The Corporate Communications Office provides information to staff on Plain English through the council's Intranet on the A-Z [Plain English](#), [Corporate Communications](#) and [Graphic Design](#) pages.

3. Corporate Graphic Design and crystal marking costs

- 3.1 The Corporate Communications Office has embedded the need to consider Plain English into the booking process for graphic design services. Staff requesting graphic design must consider applying for Plain English Crystal Mark Status for their documents. The cost of Crystal Mark editing lies with the Council Service publishing each document.
- 3.2 The cost of crystal marking quotes, have varied so far, from around £150 up to £900 depending on the size of document. This can build in a considerable delay in the proofing and production process for documents.
- 3.3 As a corporate Plain English member, the council is entitled to apply the "Committed to clearer communication" Plain English logo to any of its corporate publications.



- 3.4 This has been applied to a number of documents including:
- Annual Performance Newspaper Supplement, Dec 2013
 - Council Tax Booklet 2014/15
 - European Election Leaflet
 - European Election Count Booklet
 - Essential Guide to benefits, money advice, energy advice and other support 2014/15
 - Referendum Count Booklet
 - Learning & Development Newsletters – Spring & Summer 2014
 - Highland Tenant Update Newsletters – Spring & Summer 2014
 - Housing Report Card
 - Community Challenge Fund Leaflet
 - Highland Commonwealth Games Legacy Plan 2014-17
 - Local Government Pension Scheme: Active Members Newsletter
 - Local Government Pension Scheme: Deferred Members Newsletter

- 3.5 Crystal Mark status has been awarded to the following small documents:

Publications	Editing Cost
Winter Services - Inverness	
Winter Services - Lochaber	
Winter Services - Badenoch & Strathspey	
Winter Services - Caithness & North Sutherland	
Winter Services - Nairn	
Winter Services - Skye & Lochalsh	
Winter Services - South Sutherland & Easter Ross	
Winter Services - Wester Ross & Black Isle	£150.00
Dial-a-bus - Nairn	
Dial-a-bus - Kinlochbervie	
Dial-a-bus - Assynt	
Dial-a-bus - Dornoch	
Dial-a-bus - Ardgay-Lairg-Rosehall	
Dial-a-bus - Portree	
Dial-a-bus - Grantown	
Dial-a-bus - Fearn	
Dial-a-bus - North Sutherland	
Dial-a-bus - Durness	
Dial-a-bus - Ardrross	
Dial-a-bus - Tain-Nigg	
Dial-a-bus - Stromeferry-Kyle	£300.00
Winter Payments Scheme	£250.00
Mortgage Debt Leaflet	£150.00
Highland Council Tax Bill (reverse page)	£190.00
Total editing costs (to date)	£1040.00

4. Proposal

- 4.1 It is proposed that training is undertaken during the course of this year's membership. However, due to the costs and time delays in the crystal marking process, it is proposed that no further documents will be crystal marked.
- 4.2 The commitment to communicating in plain English will continue through training and corporate standards. Membership enables us to use the "Committed to clearer communication" Plain English logo on all our publications.
- 4.3 There is already a large amount of free information and training on the plain English website.
- 4.4 Membership will be reviewed in 2015.

5. Implications

- 5.1 **Resource:** Membership costs £1000 per year, but there are considerable resource implications, both financial and staff time, in continuing to crystal mark documents, or to train staff beyond the 20 free places.

- 5.2 **Equalities:** Improving access to information through the provision of information in an easy to understand format is important for many groups of service users. Commitment to staff training and publicising corporate standards will benefit a wider range of publications and information materials, including reports and planning documents.
- 5.3 **Gaelic:** The Corporate Communications Office has had assurance from the Plain English Campaign that the Council's policy on the [use of Gaelic in council publications](#) is acceptable within the Crystal Marking of documents.
- 5.4 There are no Legal; Climate Change/Carbon Clever; Risk and Rural implications.

Recommendation

To note the progress made to date.

To note the commitment to embedding staff training and corporate standards, in place of use of resource for crystal marking specific publications.

Designation: Corporate Communications Manager

Date: 12 September 2014

Author: Ruth Cleland

Background Papers:

References:

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

Community Safety, Public Engagement and Equalities Committee, 13 June 2013
Report number CPE 27/13: ["Committed to clearer communications by becoming corporate members of Plain English Campaign."](#)

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

News Release 14 June 2013: [Council commits to clearer communications.](#)