

PLAIN LANGUAGE REVIEW: UPDATE REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2013, Council adopted the Plain Language Policy. The Policy requires that:
“The City will conduct a plain language review every two years and report the results to The Standing Policy Committee on Utilities and Corporate Services.”

Customer Service & Communications (CSC) has coordinated the plain language policy awareness, training and conducted the plain language review process.

The 2015 Plain Language Review has a modified scope compared to the 2012/13 audit. It includes content created for internal and external audiences, new communication channel content, such as the Calgary City News blog, and removed traditional communications that are no longer used.

ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Standing Policy Committee on Utilities and Corporate Services receive this report on the Plain Language Review 2015 for information.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION / POLICY

On May 27, 2013, Council adopted The City’s Plain Language Policy. The Policy states that
“The City will conduct a plain language review every two years and report the results to The Standing Policy Committee on Utilities and Corporate Services.”

BACKGROUND

In June 2011, Council approved a Notice of Motion regarding the creation of a plain language policy. The Notice of Motion directed Administration “to undertake a review of the language used in reference to City programs, committees, facilities, and projects, and create a plain language policy that would enable The City of Calgary to communicate clearly and effectively with Calgarians.”

In 2012, Customer Service and Communications (CSC) coordinated the City’s first plain language review. This first review was part of CSC’s research and development of a draft plain language policy.

The 2012 audit results showed that a majority of City documents:

- were written at a Grade 11 level
- were written in third person
- had sentences averaging 19 words
- used many technical words and acronyms
- included many words the public could not be expected to understand

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- longer documents did not have enough headings
- technical or legal jargon was found in the headings and subheadings

On May 27, 2013, Council adopted the Plain Language Policy. The Policy requires the completion of a plain language review every two years, and that a report of the results go to the Standing Policy Committee on Utilities and Corporate Services.

INVESTIGATION: ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

Customer Service and Communications (CSC) delivered an awareness and education program that supports the Plain Language Policy. CSC collaborated with internal stakeholders to provide training that meets the needs of diverse employees. CSC continues to advocate for the use of plain language and building a plain language practice. Plain language practices include the use of simple design elements and writing to meet the audience's needs.

Stakeholder Engagement, Research and Communication

Engagement

Internal and external engagement was conducted as part of the policy development process in 2012 and 2013. Since the adoption of the Policy, focus has been on awareness, education, and adoption of plain language standards.

Research

To ensure a non-biased audit of practices, Wordsmith Associates Communications Consultants Inc. conducted the 2015 Plain Language Review. A Calgary company, Wordsmith has been in business for over 30 years and has worked with public and private sector clients. The firm provides plain language audits and expertise in the practice.

In 2015, the scope of the review was expanded and updated. The emphasis was shifted from grade level and literacy, to readability. Readability is the ease with which a reader can understand text. The review included content written for external and internal audiences. Also included was content that is important to The City's reputation and relationship with the public, such as reports about public engagement processes. Attachment 1 provides an overview of findings including Wordsmith's review and other research conducted.

Communication

Customer Service & Communications has used internal electronic channels, face-to-face training and staff forums to raise internal awareness of the Policy and the benefits of plain language.

Strategic Alignment

The following policies and guiding documents are aligned with and contribute to the Plain Language Policy and Review:

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- Council Priority, “a well-run city”
- Leadership Strategic Plan, “...a philosophy of trust, communication and participation and an overall ‘Citizen First’ orientation”
- Transparency and Accountability Policy
- Accessibility Policy
- Welcoming Community Policy
- Fair Calgary Policy
- Senior Age Friendly Strategy

Social, Environmental, Economic (External)

Increasing the overall accessibility of information promotes understanding, a sense of belonging and increases public engagement. Plain language may result in an increase in initial comprehension, which can contribute to a reduction in things such as follow-up correspondence and phone calls. This can result in cost savings.

Plain language is linked to social inclusion, which is an indicator of physical and mental health. The more included an individual feels in their community, the more likely they are to report good or stable physical and mental health. People are less likely to feel included if they are unable to understand the information they need to take part in civic life. Social exclusion is one of the fourteen social determinants of health listed by the Canadian Public Health Association.

Other governments recognize the criticality of plain language to advance their services. Manitoba’s poverty reduction and social inclusion strategy speaks to the need to use plain language as a way to “improve access, accountability and communication between government and the public.” As part of its inclusive language guidelines, the HR Council of Canada recommends avoiding the use of “jargon, slang, idiomatic expressions or colloquialisms” in workplace communications.

The use of plain language is one tool that can be used to address the gap in communication needs identified in the 2014 Citizen Satisfaction Survey:

“...overall satisfaction with the quality of City information and communications sees a significant 4 percentage point drop from 87% in 2013 to 83% in 2014...”.

A plain language approach to communications is consistent with being an inclusive city. Plain language can contribute to more citizens becoming active, community participants. Plain language means increased access to City information, programs, services and public participation opportunities.

Financial Capacity

Current and Future Operating Budget:

The plain language program received one-time funding of \$10,000 to conduct the review. No funds exist to extend the program or to conduct a future review.

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Current and Future Capital Budget:

Funding from the Capital Budget for CSC was approved in 2014. There are no capital budget requests in this report. Administration expects there to be ongoing corporate requests for training and support. CSC will address those requests on a case-by-case basis.

Risk Assessment

Plain language reviews require funding to secure third-party expertise. The City does not have funds allocated for future reviews.

REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION(S):

Customer Service & Communications (CSC) continues to lead the Corporation's awareness and adoption of plain language practice, in support of the Plain Language Policy.

ATTACHMENT(S)

Attachment 1: Plain Language Review Overview of Findings
Attachment 2: Plain Language Review Wordsmith's Summary Report
Attachment 3: Plain Language Review Survey