Plain Language Bill
Member’s Bill

Explanatory note

General policy statement
The US Congress passed the Plain Writing Act of 2010 on 13 October, 2010. This requires the US Federal Government to write all new publications, forms, and publicly distributed documents in a “clear, concise, well-organized” manner that follows the best practices of plain language writing. The purpose of the Plain Writing Act 2010 is to improve the effectiveness and accountability of federal agencies by promoting clear government communication that the public can understand and use.

This Bill promotes the use of plain English in official documents and websites. Comprehensible information from government organisations is a basic democratic right. Plain English must become the standard for all official public and private communication in New Zealand. This Bill requires the New Zealand Government to start making that happen.

Clause by clause analysis

Clause 1 is the Title provision.
Clause 2 provides for the Bill to come into force on the day after the date on which it receives the Royal assent.
Clause 3 sets out the purpose of the Bill.
Clause 4 is the interpretation clause.
Clause 5 sets out the responsibilities of government organisations.
Clause 6 provides that government organisation heads shall report to the State Services Commissioner on achieving their responsibilities under the Bill.
Clause 7 provides reporting requirements for the State Services Commissioner and the Minister on compliance with the Bill.
Clause 8 provides plain language guidelines to be followed by government organisations.

Clause 9 provides that Te Ture mō Te Reo Māori 2016/the Māori Language Act 2016 and the New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006 are not affected by this Bill.
Michael Wood

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The Parliament of New Zealand enacts as follows:

1 Title
This Act is the Plain Language Act 2017.

2 Commencement
This Act comes into force on the day after the date on which it receives the Royal assent.

3 Purpose
The purpose of this Act is to improve the effectiveness and accountability of New Zealand government organisations by requiring them to communicate clearly with the public.

4 Interpretation
In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires,—
document means any document issued by an agency to the public and includes documents on paper, on websites, or in any other electronic form

plain language means language that the intended readers can easily understand and use after 1 reading because it is clear, concise, and well-organised, and follows recognised guidelines of plain language writing

government organisation
(a) means—
   (i) an organisation named in Part 2 of Schedule 1 of the Ombudsmen Act 1975; and
   (ii) an organisation named in Schedule 1 of the Official Information Act 1982; and
(b) includes—
   (i) the Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives:
   (ii) an intelligence organisation

Minister means the Minister for State Services.

5 Responsibilities of government organisations
Within 12 months after this Act becomes law, each government organisation must use plain language in any covered document issued or substantially revised after the day on which this Act becomes law.

6 Reports to State Services Commissioner
Submission dates
(1) The State Services Commissioner must notify each agency of the submission dates for each report listed in subsections (2) and (3).

Initial report
(2) Within 6 months after this Act becomes law, all organisation heads must report to the State Services Commissioner on how the organisation plans to meet the following objectives:
   (a) appointing a senior official to be responsible for fulfilling the requirements of this Act:
   (b) informing all organisation staff what this Act requires of them:
   (c) making sure all staff are trained in plain language writing:
   (d) informing all staff which plain language guidelines they must follow:
   (e) making sure the agency continues to comply with the requirements of this Act.

Ongoing reports
(3) For the first 2 years after this Act becomes law, organisation heads must report annually to the State Services Commissioner on how the organisation complies
with section 5. After that, organisation heads must provide a similar report once every 2 years.

7 Reports to House of Representatives

(1) The State Services Commissioner must report annually to the Minister on the compliance by government organisations with section 5, and may make recommendations to the Minister on plain language guidelines and best practices.

(2) Within 20 working days of receiving the annual report of the State Services Commissioner referred to in subsection (1), the Minister must send a copy of the State Services Commissioner’s report to the House of Representatives.

8 Plain language guidelines

An organisation may develop and use its own plain language guidelines, as long as they are consistent with the definition of plain language in section 4.

Examples
The Plain English Writing Guide, published by the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management

New Zealand Plain English Awards criteria for documents and websites, published by the WriteMark Plain English Awards Trust

9 Other enactments not affected

Nothing in this Act affects Te Ture mō Te Reo Māori 2016/the Māori Language Act 2016 or the New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006.