

Good results using plain language

10 examples from the Norwegian state administration and municipalities

- ❖ Better care and municipal finances using plain language
- ❖ Understood on the first try
- ❖ From four difficult laws to one clear law
- ❖ Fewer complaints and inquiries using a clearly worded commuter guide
- ❖ Time, money and annoyances spared through plain language
- ❖ Plain language is a natural part of operations
- ❖ Consultation letter in plain language saved time for both sender and recipients
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- ❖ Fewer inquiries and more satisfied residents in Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg
- ❖ A clearer annual fee led to more satisfied users

Good results using plain language

Plain language helps renew, simplify and improve the public sector. Here, Difi presents ten examples of how plain language has had good results for residents, the state and municipalities. The agencies have written the texts themselves, on Difi's request. The examples show that plain language can lead to different types of effects, in different areas and in relation to different target groups.

To highlight the effects of the work on plain language, we recommend setting clear goals and measuring the work both internally and externally. This may be done through baseline assessments, impact assessments, user surveys and logging inquiries and complaints.

Use the experiences of others

Far more agencies than the ones presented here have implemented important measures that have had an impact. We hope that the ten examples we have selected can be both useful and inspirational – because plain language pays off. In the years ahead, we hope that more and more agencies can document valuable results and effects and share them with us and others.

Thank you to the ten agencies that have contributed to this collection of examples!

If you want to read more about the ten examples, you can find longer versions of all of them on difi.no and klarspråk.no.

This document is a translation of the Norwegian pamphlet «Klart språk gir resultater – 10 eksempler fra stat og kommune».

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The Norwegian Gaming and Foundation Authority **Understood on the first try**

The Norwegian Gaming and Foundation Authority has seen clear effects from its work on plain language. For instance, measurements in 2015 show that about 80 per cent of users think that the Authority uses a plain and clear language in its written communication, and the plain language culture within the Authority has been significantly enhanced.

The Norwegian Gaming and Foundation Authority set an ambitious goal for its plain language project: "Everything our employees write must be understood on the first try." Three measurements from 2011, 2012 and 2015 now show that they have generally achieved this target.

In 2011, the Norwegian Gaming and Foundation Authority needed to make its language clearer and simpler on its new website, which was to be introduced that autumn. Case processing and letter templates often used passive language and a bureaucratic style, often including long sentences and paragraphs.

With the Director at the forefront, the management supported a plain language project that started in April 2011. The Department of Communications was in charge of preparing and leading the work. A new language profile and plain language poster were ready for use after the 2011 summer holidays. We then started to review more than 100 letter templates. Along the way, we also did a complete revision of the language and contents of our new website.

The plain language project formally ended in the middle of December 2011. The plain language project subsequently entered an operational phase in which responsibility for the work on plain language is incorporated into the regular organisational hierarchy, with a starting point in a shared language policy, annual reviews of the language status, a common language day and information about the language style and language policy for all new hires. We also award a language prize each year to honour staff who make a special effort in this regard.

Results and effects

1. We asked about language in larger user surveys in 2011, 2012 and 2015. In 2015, about 80 per cent of those surveyed responded that they think the Norwegian Gaming and Foundation Authority uses a plain and clear language in its written communication. This is a notable increase over 2011 and 2012.
2. We measured attitudes to plain language among our staff in 2011, 2012 and 2015. In general, findings show that the plain language culture has become significantly stronger in several areas since 2011. For instance, most staff members have found that legal and plain language can be combined, and in 2015, 96 per cent of staff responded that plain language is a democratic right.
3. We measured the number of telephone inquiries and emails from users in some teams in 2011 and 2012. The findings show that the number of telephone inquiries and the duration of the conversation with the users dropped by about 30 per cent in one year.

We expected that it would be challenging to maintain interest and efforts internally after the responsibility for plain language was distributed in the regular organisational hierarchy. However, the figures have nevertheless remained high, with a slight positive trend. This suggests that plain language has become part of the way we work.

What we learnt

The language project started when the Authority had a concrete and acute need for a shared and good language on its new website, and the project was therefore not part of the annual plans. We experienced quite a bit of frustration about "yet another project" that competed for time and resources. The lesson we learnt is that these efforts are most successful when notice is given well in advance, when they are incorporated into annual plans and when they have project members who can work independently and effectively.

We did not take long from the time we decided to focus on plain language and to the project was underway. Thus we did not measure staff attitudes before the project started, which we should ideally have done. In other words, the benchmarking took place after the work on plain language had started. The first measurement therefore likely shows better attitudes than it would have if we had measured before the work was underway. This means that the changes in our plain language culture from 2011 to 2015 is probably greater than our figures show.

Skedsmo municipality

Better care and municipal finances using plain language

The work on plain language was an important cause of the halving of the time assisted living units stand empty in Skedsmo municipality. The work led to the municipality improving its written information, removing unnecessary letters and forms, changing terms and tightening the work process, thereby making it more efficient.

One effect of the plain language project in Skedsmo municipality is the halving of the time between one resident moving out of an assisted living unit and another resident moving in. Previously, it took three to six months from the time an assisted living unit became available and until a new resident moved in. Now, this takes about five weeks. The short wait time leads to improved health, more satisfied users and next of kin, and significant savings for the municipality in its elderly care.

The clear language project started in 2014, when the municipality began reviewing area by area in order to implement plain language in our communication with municipal residents and others. To establish a plain language culture in the municipality, we run plain language courses for all staff who are responsible for providing information or work directly with information.

One of the first plain language projects chosen aimed to improve the information given in connection with the allocation of and move into assisted living facilities. As a consequence of the review, we saw that the routines for readying units and moving a new resident in could be made more efficient and shorter. Reducing wait times is important for several reasons:

- Research shows that most people want to stay in their own homes for as long as possible. In an assisted living facility, many elderly people can manage on their own for a long time, with less assistance and services than in a nursing home – in line with most people's wishes.
- A place in a nursing home costs about one million kroner a year, which is about five times the cost of an assisted living unit. With increasing numbers of elderly people, finding cheaper ways to offer care services is crucial for the finances of Norwegian municipalities.
- When the units are empty, the municipality loses rent and staff are not used appropriately.

Achieved a shared worldview and removed the silos

Skedsmo municipality decided to established a shared project that was to look at the entire workflow from the time an application for an assisted living unit was received and until a new tenant moved in. All units with responsibility for different parts of the assisted living process, including the NAV office, met for a joint work session to look at letters and forms. The participants got an eye-opener. They quickly agreed about where the problem was, and that they needed to collaborate more closely to make the process more efficient. Previously, the various departments only had an overview of their own tasks and deliverables. The process meant that everyone became more

aware and accountable for the entire system around the allocation and move-in routines.

The work on plain language led to changes in the work process

The analysis of the letters and forms that the various departments in the municipality were sending out also uncovered a gap between the information recipients received and the information they should have received at various stages of the process. In other words, the work on plain language led to the municipality improving the written information, removing unnecessary letters and forms, changing terms and tightening the work process, thereby making it more efficient.

Wait times reduced from 3-6 months to about 5 weeks

The most important impact of the work is that residents who needed an assisted living unit previously had to wait from three months and up to six months from the time a unit became available and to they could move in. Many parts of the process have been improved and made more efficient. The total wait time has now been reduced to about five weeks.

Managers with authority led the way

The project was headed by two middle-managers with the authority to make necessary changes and use the resources required. This made it possible to coordinate the necessary interdisciplinary initiatives and to make quick decisions that would otherwise have to be made within the organisational hierarchy.

User testing crucial to the result

A general rule for the plain language project in Skedsmo is that all texts and processes must be tested by users. Feedback from the users provides everyone with a shared and indisputable picture of how the target group perceives the information from the municipality. This means that the group does not have develop unsubstantiated opinions about the texts, but can move straight to the task of improving them, which in turns contributes to a good atmosphere for the work.

Challenging to involve staff well enough

Staff in the service offices and staff who process cases and write decisions felt that they were insufficiently included in the project. Skedsmo municipality is learning from this and making changes.

Ministry of Defence

From four difficult laws to one clear law

In the proposal for a new defence act, the Ministry of Defence has combined four acts in one, reduced 139 sections to 69, made the language less bureaucratic and made the legal language more accessible. Surveys show that the work on plain language does not lead to less precision or correctness in the text of the act.

The Compulsory Military Service Act, the Home Guard Act, the Military Personnel Act and the Conscientious Objector Act have been due for revision for a long time. Studies show that many people find the current texts of the acts to be complicated, diffuse and difficult to access. A survey also showed that the Compulsory Military Service Act and the Home Guard Act are rarely used. Case officers have instead developed detailed guides for the application of the acts. Those who are subject to compulsory military service use different sources when they need information about the act. The language of the Compulsory Military Service Act and the Home Guard Act is inward-looking and creates distance, for example with unclear references to information not included in the acts.

The work on the acts is part of the project "Plain legal language" that is part of the Government focus area "A simpler everyday life for the general public". The project aims to formulate four selected acts in a plain and understandable language and to test a new form of work in the legislative process.

The Ministry of Defence has organised the work as a project. The working group of eight people consisted of personnel from the Ministry of Defence and from the Armed Forces, and the Ministry of Justice and Preparedness participated to safeguard the Conscientious Objector Act. The work started in April 2014 and a proposal for a new act was submitted for consultation in June 2015.

Documented improvements

The Ministry of Defence has carried out extensive proof-reading of the new defence act. Studies show that while the current acts are seen as old-fashioned and not user-friendly, youth from the 1997 generation, their parents, and military personnel respond that the new act

- is easy to navigate
- uses a plain, correct and precise language
- has headings that clarify, a good structure and a logical division of chapters
- enables both people with and without legal training to understand the legal language

Reduces the distance between the public administration and the people

The feedback also shows no conflict between plain language and the precision or correctness of the text of the act. The work on the act therefore sends an important signal: when more people can understand the law, the distance between the legislator and the people is shortened. Those covered by the law understand what they are reading, and it is easier for the authorities to explain the act.

Room for improvement

Though we have received very good feedback on the proposal for a new defence act, a survey shows that the act can still improve further. For example, some difficult words and sentences remain, and some sections leave too much room for interpretation. The Ministry of Defence uses the input in its work on the White Paper what will be submitted to the Storting in the spring of 2016 and in the preparatory works for the act.

What we have learnt

The work showed that it is important to agree on a shared platform about language and legal technicalities before the work starts. It was also crucial that management and the project group understood that plain language was a key goal for the work – and what this entailed. The work was more time-consuming than we thought, and we had to extend the project in order to achieve our goal. We also learnt that interdisciplinary work and the involvement of the users of the act is positive but time-consuming.

Why we succeeded

- participation in the "Plain legal language" project gave us the push we needed
- political attention was being paid to the project
- we succeeded in finding a shared understanding of the importance of the work on plain legal language
- we had a close and good cooperation with the Language Council of Norway and the legal department in the Ministry of Justice and Preparedness
- we carried out evaluations during the project to find the most effective form of work
- user groups from the public administration have participated in the work: this has contributed to a better understanding of the work and a willingness to change

The Norwegian Tax Administration

Fewer complaints and inquiries with a commuter guide in plain language

Many people struggled to understand the tax rules related to commuting. An online commuter guide in plain language helped users understand their rights and obligations, and reduced the number of appeals by 40 per cent. The number that was not granted the deduction for commuting also declined by 40 per cent.

Commuting involves two sets of rules that users perceived as one. Among other things, the concepts used in the acts turned out to be confusing. For example, legally a "commuter" is something other than what the user believes. "Commuting" and "work travel" have two different sets of rules and three different items that must be filled in in different combinations in the tax return. Many people therefore used the wrong rates, listed the wrong rate in the wrong line item and reported the wrong figures. The result was that many people did not receive deductions they were entitled to, or were given deductions they were not entitled to. Reporting errors also meant extra work for the Norwegian Tax Administration, for instance due to more questions, longer case processing times and more appeals.

Involvement provided valuable input

To solve this challenge, we needed information about the actual rules, the errors users make, what they appeal on and complain about, etc. We organised workshops with the front line and the specialist department that works on determining the tax. This provided an invaluable understanding of user needs, the rules and the process. We discovered that we could solve the need for information by creating one guide and two calculators. The work on the commuter guide took about three years in total, including preliminary analyses, content development, analyses and impact assessments.

We did usability testing of the content by posting a survey on the beta.skatteetaten.no blog, among other things. We received more than 400 responses and many comments that helped us better formulate the questions and answers. We also did a user test with six users in our testlab.

In the actual tax return period, we had a preparedness system and corrected errors as we received notice of these from the users. We created a special feedback form for the guide and the two calculators. We also developed an inquiry function so that we could get continuous feedback on whether the explanations we had created for the terms were good enough. After the tax return period, we entered a new analytic phase in which we measured the effects of the actions we had taken and made the necessary changes.

Results and effects

Analyses and surveys documented that the work had had an effect for both users and the Tax Administration:

- The number that was not allowed the deduction for commuting declined by more than 40 per cent.
- The number of appeals over disallowed deductions declined by 40 per cent.
- Traffic on skatteetaten.no on the commuter topic increased by more than 200 per cent.
- More people in the most important and growing target groups used the commuter line item correctly.
- The number of inquiries to the Tax Administration declined. This means that we have better enabled users to independently find out what their rights and obligations are.
- It became simpler and less time-consuming for the Tax Administration to help users on the topic of commuting, as everyone could be referred to skatteetaten.no/pendler.
- The Tax Administration received fewer "easy" questions and more complex questions by telephone, which means that users were more able to solve easy tasks by themselves online.

The Tax Administration also saw other desirable effects that we cannot document in numbers:

- The Tax Administration gained better and valuable documentation of usage patterns in the entire process from its website, telephone inquiries, in-person inquiries, email and the tax return in Altinn, to be used in case processing.
- We have documented that the work method has worked and had the desired effect.
- The understanding within the organisation of how to work on plain language, universal design and online communication has improved.

What we learnt

This was groundbreaking work for the Tax Administration. The thorough preparatory work, in which we gathered documentation of user needs, challenges and costs for the Administration, was useful when we needed to argue for the resources to develop the service. That we agreed about goals, the principles for the content and the work process early on was also crucial. We also see that it was important that we ordered the necessary analyses both before and after, so that we could measure the impact and make adjustments along the way. The work showed that it is possible to communicate complex rules to large and complex groups while also meeting universal design and plain language requirements. We also learnt that it is possible to get results across disciplinary communities and decision-making levels.

The Norwegian Public Roads Administration

Time, money and annoyances spared through plain language

A clearer letter from the Norwegian Public Roads Administration (NPRA) spares recipients for time and annoyances, according to studies the NPRA conducted following a plain language review of three standard letters about vehicles. The NPRA also saw positive effects internally. The new reminder notice "Have you forgotten the EU inspection?" led to a 40 per cent decline in inquiries about the EU inspection.

The NPRA started to work systematically on plain language in 2010. The communications staff initiated the project: communications staff were finding it difficult to get acceptance for the use of general terms rather than technical terms in their communication with users. From 2011-2012, the work was organised as a project, headed by the communications staff and with participants from several departments. From the very start, the project was anchored with the Director General, who was one of the most important spokespersons for the plain language project. The purpose of the project was to improve written communication in line with the state communication policy and ensure that the NPRA appeared as an open and user-friendly agency.

Measuring the work on plain language

To measure the effect of the work on plain language, the NPRA also studied whether recipients of the letter about the EU inspection and the re-registration of cars understood what to do when they received the letter. The survey of actual recipients of the letter was conducted by telephone in the evening, in 13 sessions over the course of 8 months. We also measured changes in the number of inquiries about EU inspections made to the information service and the traffic stations.

Documented effects for recipients

The result of the survey concluded that a clearer letter from NPRA spares time and annoyances for recipients. Nearly 40 per cent of recipients previously used three minutes or more to understand the letters. Users now reported that they spent significantly shorter time to understand the content. The survey showed that the average reader who received the new EU letter spent 40 per cent less time to understand what they needed to do, as compared to recipients of the old letter. They identified the information relevant to their situation more easily, and they understood what the NPRA wanted them to do. The combined time saved for the 300,000 recipients of the three letters corresponds to nearly 90 weeks.

Documented effects for the NPRA

The new letter about the EU inspection generated 40 per cent fewer inquiries than the old letter. Rewriting the letter in plain and clear language has thus saved the agency significant time and money. More people than previously fulfil their obligations because the NPRA explains their rights, obligations and options more clearly. The good results also enhanced staff motivation within the NPRA.

A close interdisciplinary collaboration was necessary to create permanent change. Interdisciplinary collaboration with a clear division of responsibility and good grounding in management were important success factors for the good results from our work on plain language.

Measurements were challenging but necessary to document effects

Measuring effects at the scale we did requires a lot of resources and is best suited for texts with a lot of recipients. It is nevertheless necessary to document the work, both to show its importance and to motivate specialists to continue to work on plain language. We also learnt that it is crucial to listen to recipients of the texts – and that the truth is somewhere between what the user and the specialist believe. Compromises are therefore necessary.

Ask users along the way and ensure a broad involvement

To get good texts, listening to recipients of the texts was essential. We found that the truth was somewhere in between what the user believed and what the specialist believed. Compromises are absolutely necessary. We dare say that the effects of the plain language review of the three letters would not have been as good if we had not user tested the letters in focus groups along the way. The results would also not have been as good if the specialist departments that "owned" the various texts had not participated in the revision.

Ministry of Children and Equality

Plain language is a natural part of operations

When the Ministry used language labs as a tool to improve the language in a consultation letter, it received clearer feedback. A survey among readers of the consultation letter showed that they found the tone of the text more open and inclusive than previously. It also showed that a plain language did not make the letter any less legally precise.

The Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion wanted to survey readers of a consultation letter that had been revised in a plain language lab. Would a consultation letter in plain language provide added value compared to the consultation letter the Ministry usually wrote? Would the Ministry receive more responses? Would the responses also be clearer? The Ministry wanted these and other questions answered.

The survey was conducted among different types of organisations and it used qualitative interviews.

The consultation letter became more accessible and understandable for the agencies being consulted

The results of the survey showed several clear and corresponding findings across the different types of respondent organisations. This meant that the Ministry could be confident that the responses had some transferable value beyond the five agencies that were interviewed.

The agencies being consulted clearly saw that the letter had been subject to a plain language review. They had noticed that:

- The letter had a structure and language that helped recipients adopt a position on the proposals. All participants in the survey found the consultation letter to be accessible and understandable.
- The clearest groundbreaking work was perceived to be the Ministry's highlighting and specification of what it wanted from the agencies being consulted.
- At the same time, the structure and language of the letter made the reading easier and more efficient.
- The letter was written in an active voice and easily accessible language that shifted between explaining and justifying.
- Chapter headings were phrased as questions, and this made the text approachable and gave the reader important directions if the reader had precisely these questions.

What did the Ministry find most helpful about the consultation letter?

The Ministry found that putting emphasis on the preparation of a plain-language consultation letter resulted in more responses that went straight to the point. The consultation responses had clearly been influenced by the plain language in the

letter, and the good structure of the letter helped recipients be structured in their responses. This helped the Ministry when it assessed the responses.

Plain language begets plain language, and a good structure helps recipients be clear and structured in their responses. Plain language thus helps both the sender and recipient be more efficient. The need for plain language will be even greater in more controversial and large-scale consultations with more complex results. The Ministry also confirmed that plain language does not need to be at the expense of legal precision, or the other way around.

Plain language in consultation letters can help democracy

There are at least two ways in which plain language in consultation letters can help democracy: the threshold for submitting a response is lowered, and it is easier for the agencies consulted to distribute the letter or its response to their subsidiary units. A plain-language consultation letter can influence the adoption of plain language in the agencies being consulted.

Plain language work within permanent structures and work methods

One of the important goals in the work on plain language has been to establish permanent structures and work methods to support plain language work in the organisation. The language labs are an example of a work method the Ministry has retained as a permanent feature. The goal is for all larger texts to be processed in a language lab run by the internal language service.

In 2014, the Ministry won the Plain Language Prize.

The Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund

Plain language – a natural part of operations

For the Fund, plain language has become a natural part of operations, and it is crucial in maintaining our relationship with more than one million customers. Increasing numbers of customers are more satisfied: in 2015, the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund achieved 80 out of 100 points in Difi's population survey for the question "How easy or difficult is it to understand the contents of letters/email from the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund?"

The Fund has worked on plain language in an organised manner since 2000. The first language project resulted in the book "Bedre språk i Lånekassen" ("Better language in the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund"). Since then, we have had a separate plain language project and developed a language style. We have reviewed most standard letters, created a letter team, conducted measurements, and introduced an interdisciplinary check in which a language expert assesses texts in letters and on the website. We also offer language training for all new hires. In 2009, the Fund won the Plain Language Prize, and plain language is now a natural part of its operations.

The Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund is focused on communicating plainly and clearly, both to safeguard customer rights and to maintain efficient operations. We have more than one million active customers who must be offered good services. A high degree of automation in case processing has been one of our central goals. We want the customers to be able to help themselves online as much as possible, and to use digital solutions rather than paper-based solutions. Clear communication is our best tool in achieving this goal.

Satisfied customers

Customers are satisfied with letters from us, even though they in many instances receive letters about complex schemes. A user survey from 2011 showed that our ability to respond in an understandable manner to written inquiries was important to customers' overall satisfaction, and in 2015 we achieved 80 out of 100 points in Difi's population survey for the question "How easy or difficult is it to understand the contents of letters/email from the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund?"

Plain language + IT = true

We have been through an extensive modernisation project in the past decade, and are now at the forefront of automated case processing. Between 60 and 70 per cent of all decisions on stipends/loans are processed automatically – which means that no case officer looks at the case – and for some types of cases the degree of automation is at 100 per cent. In our experience, it is challenging to create good letters for automated case processing. Doing so is especially difficult if the systems have been developed without considering that decisions must not only be correct but also be communicated clearly. "Plain language lobbyists" are therefore needed early on in the process when IT systems are to be developed.

Plain language is contagious

We work on improvements on many fronts, so the effect of the work on plain language cannot be separated out. However, there is no doubt that we benefit from having put this work into a good system through the way in which we organise it.

Most texts that we produce centrally (i.e. standard text for letters, website text and campaign texts) go through a plain language review. It is in practice not possible to review all texts written by case officers and customer representatives, but plain language infects these texts as well. A style has been set by the standard texts that is then carried over into non-standard text in letters and emails.

Furthermore, we are in daily conversations with our customers through our customer service centre and social media. We listen to the feedback we receive and make continuous improvements in our texts.

Dedicated individuals with a supportive leadership

The drivers in our language projects have been a case officer with special linguistic skills and staff in other departments who saw the connections between the language we use and customer inquiries. These staff members have been the core of the work, but they have also had good support in management, which has been attentive to needs for resources for the work on plain language.

Norwegian Customs

A clearer annual fee led to more satisfied users and fewer reminder notices

Systematic work on plain language in Norwegian Customs led to a decline in the proportion of reminder notices for annual fees. Our measurements show that more users now understand and receive the information they need about the annual fee. As many as 92 per cent of recipients understand the response immediately. Furthermore, more staff members than previously are satisfied with the style Norwegian Customs writes in.

Prior to the plain language project, there was no explicit awareness about language, and the agency did not have a shared language style. Many texts by Norwegian Customs were written in a formal and legal language. The texts were cumbersome and passive, with a lot of technical terminology and legal references, and user feedback said that the texts were difficult to understand.

Each year, Norwegian Customs sends out 3.6 million primary claims, 300,000 reminder notices and 150,000 decisions to remove plates. The annual fee office responds to about 150,000 inquiries by telephone and email each year. The annual fee affects a large share of the population, and it was therefore an obvious place to start the work on plain language. The plain language project has therefore covered the annual fee topic.

The plain language project developed language guidelines and a checklist that provided a basis from which to rewrite our texts. We then re-wrote 39 invoice texts, one information letter, 40 standard emails and 13 website texts.

More people understand and receive the information they need

We did thorough measurements of the language related to the annual fee, both before and after the project. We first did a baseline measurement that reviewed statistics on inquiries, claims and reminder notices. This was followed by a user survey conducted by email to the people who had been in contact with the annual fee office, and an internal survey among case officers. We repeated the survey after the new texts were in use. We also analysed statistics on the number of reminder notices and inquiries.

The results showed a positive development, in that external users are more likely to understand and receive the information they need. Internally, we saw that staff were more satisfied with the style in which Norwegian Customs writes. The number of general telephone inquiries from the general public to the annual fee office has declined slightly, but systematic errors in the invoicing routines for the annual fee led to many unnecessary inquiries. The number of reminder notices for annual fee claims has declined somewhat. Plain language is one of multiple factors.

According to the external survey, users have become more satisfied with the information from Norwegian Customs. With regard to Norwegian Customs' case officers and their satisfaction with the case processing there is still some way to go, but more officers than before believe that plain language is important. The immediate

effect of the work on plain language was that departments that were not part of the project became alert to the need for plain language and initiated courses in their specialist departments.

Internal involvement and anchoring were crucial

Without management support, it would not have been possible to implement the project, especially as it required resources from across the organisation. It was also important to involve the front line, which is in direct contact with users and know what users are asking.

The main conclusions after the plain language project are that

- more users understand the contents of Norwegian Customs' emails and receive the information they need
- more staff members are satisfied with Norwegian Customs' writing style, but they do not find it easy to write in plain language

Through this project, we also learnt that

- it takes time to change a language culture
- work on plain language requires resources and should be clarified in annual plans
- a close collaboration with the front line and specialist departments is necessary
- plain language must be followed up on continuously

Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg municipalities

Fewer inquiries and more satisfied residents in Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg

Significantly more satisfied recipients and fewer inquiries to the municipalities in order to get help to understand the language. This is the result of the work the Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg municipalities have done together to use plainer language in letters from the children and youth sections.

As neighbouring municipalities, Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg found it natural to collaborate on improving the texts from the children and youth sections in both municipalities. We therefore chose to focus on some of the texts that are sent out to large numbers of recipients and that caused the most inquiries to the customer service centre and specialist department due to an unclear language. The work led to a dramatic decline in the number of inquiries to the service centre.

We worked in groups, both with each other's texts and separately in each municipality on our own texts. One part of the methodology was to think about who the recipients of the letters were and what information they needed. In the work on the texts, we asked ourselves questions such as:

- Who is the message meant for?
- What is the message?
- What is most important?
- What can be removed or rewritten?
- How can the text be made easier to read?
- Which words and concepts does the recipient know?
- Is there anything we can do to simplify the process for the user?
- What *must* be there for a decision to be legally sound?

User testing provided clear and important responses

Both municipalities tested the original texts and the improved versions with selected target groups. We did this using simple questionnaire surveys that we created and implemented ourselves. The target groups first read the original text and gave their opinion about it in the questionnaire. The results gave us a clear response that the texts were not sufficiently understandable, what needed to be improved and what the recipients wanted to know. It was useful to communicate with the recipients of the letters and get first-hand feedback about how they experience the content, what they understand and which words and expressions they find difficult. Similarly, it is a good confirmation that the language work has had an effect and that the texts have improved when the same target group is significantly more satisfied with the revised letters.

Letters written in plain language led to fewer inquiries and more satisfied residents

The responses to the questionnaire survey show that recipients are significantly more satisfied with the improved versions of the texts. This is further confirmed by the

number of inquiries to the service centre having declined dramatically and immediately. For example, Sarpsborg municipality changed its imprecise text in the automatic response to emails about the allocation of nursery spots. This led to about 250 fewer inquiries to the service centre and specialists.

Time savings for municipal staff as well

In the questionnaires, recipients have clearly expressed that they are significantly more satisfied with the new texts. Staff now spend less time explaining the contents of these specific texts and see that the work on the language has been beneficial.

What we learnt

- **Anchoring in municipal leadership, mid-level managers and specialist staff.**

The language work had to have high priority and we needed to create a shared understanding that it was important, that work was to be undertaken, and that all parties would benefit.

- **Collaboration and sharing led to added value**

Both Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad municipality have benefited a great deal from working together, including by getting feedback on each other's texts. We have opened doors for each other within each municipality by being able to say "this is how they do it in Sarpsborg" and "this is how they do it in Fredrikstad".

- **Both the technical details and the language were important**

It was important to combine expertise in the childhood and youth field and the communications field in order to get correct texts that were easy to read.

- **Limited time was the main challenge**

One main challenge may be for all participants to have enough time. If we had more time, and preferably more resources, we could have gathered the childhood and youth departments in both Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg municipalities for a joint session on plain language and exchanges of experience.

NAV

Better NAV letters after tailored training

NAV's internal plain language training made four out of five case officers more positive to writing plainly and clearly. Just as many find the NAV letter standard to be useful, and that the letters become better when using the standard. Two out of three say they write better following the training.

The plain language project in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration ran from 2011 to 2013. The most important project deliverable was "This is how we write letters in NAV", which is a letter standard that describes how letters from NAV shall be written. The standard provides guidelines for structure, language, legal references, contact information and information about the right of appeal. New letters about parental benefits, the disability reform, old-age pensions, unemployment benefits, notifications and car benefits are among the letters that have been rewritten in accordance with the standard.

Training is crucial to good results

We selected NAV Administration case officers as a central target group for 2015, and tailored the training for this group. To chart the effect, we conducted an email survey in which we contacted 22 managers and key personnel who received training over the course of the year. The survey generally shows good results from the training:

- Overall, participants in the training in plain language and the use of NAV's letter standard have found that the programme worked well (13 of 17). More than half found that it worked very well.
- 14 of 17 participants (82 per cent) found the NAV letter standard to be useful.
- Nearly 8 of 10 are more positive to writing plainly and clearly.
- Nearly all find plain language to be useful, and a clear majority find that they to a large extent have changed their knowledge, attitude, motivation and behaviour after the training.

Effects for users

In 2014, we included a question about letters in the individual user survey for the first time. We asked: "Think about the last letter you received from NAV. How easy or difficult did you think it was to understand the language in this letter?" A total of 4,055 individuals said they had received a letter from us. As many as 70 per cent of those asked this question thought that it was easy or very easy to understand the language in the last letter they received from NAV. Eight of ten of the persons asked this question (81 per cent) responded in the positive end of the scale (4-6).

Incomprehensible letters create additional work for users and NAV

Of those who did not understand the letter, 26 per cent responded that they "called NAV", 13 per cent said that they "went to their NAV office in person" and 4 per cent said that they "sent an email". In other words, incomprehensible letters lead to more

work, higher expenses and dissatisfied users. No one wants this. We have a shared responsibility for using public funds in a more appropriate manner.

Anchoring in management and enthusiast were key

A good anchoring at the top is a necessary pre-condition, but it is just as important to have a keen enthusiast in the communications staff who produces the online learning tools and travel around with engaging presentations and workshops. Commitment and enthusiasm is contagious!

The training was perceived as relevant

We required the online training programme to be completed before we visited with the presentation and workshop. This probably contributed to quite a high number of staff completing the online training programme. We will continue with our "tour" of NAV Administration, as we believe both NAV's letters and the letter standard improve as a result. The work on the texts actually in use make an impact and becomes a new practice and behaviour.

We should have done it earlier

The letter standard was adopted in 2013. We informed the organisation of this through the hierarchy, with supplementary information on the internal website. However, we found that this was insufficient. More must be done to implement plain language and the letter standard in the farthest reaches of an organisation as large as NAV. Extra training in and introductions of the standard should also have been done at the time, like those we do when we have new case processing systems and routines. Plain language must permeate in the entire organisation.