# Taking Steps
## to be a Literacy Friendly Local Authority

Showcasing South Dublin County Council
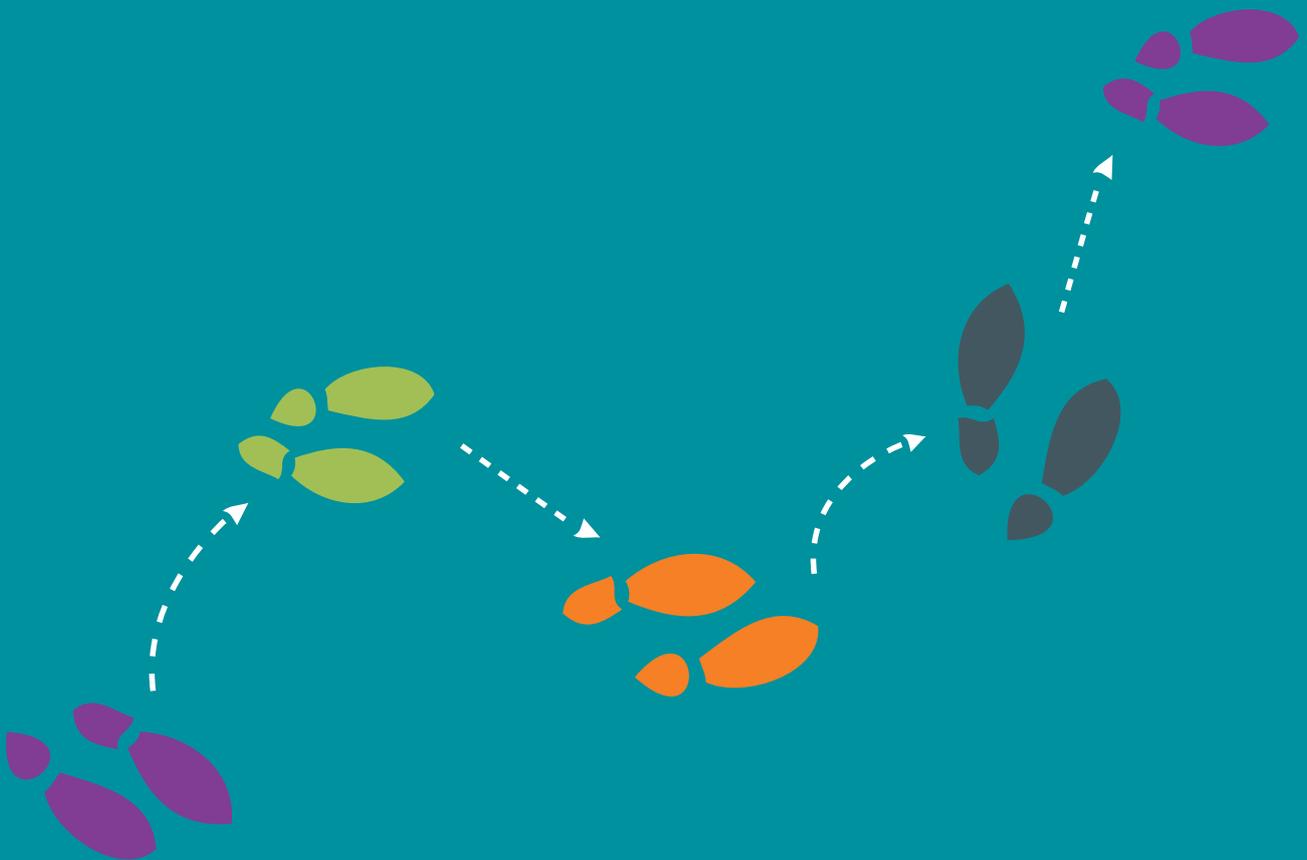
Comhairle Contae
Átha Cliath Theas
**South Dublin County Council**

# NALA

**National Adult Literacy Agency**
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

# Contents
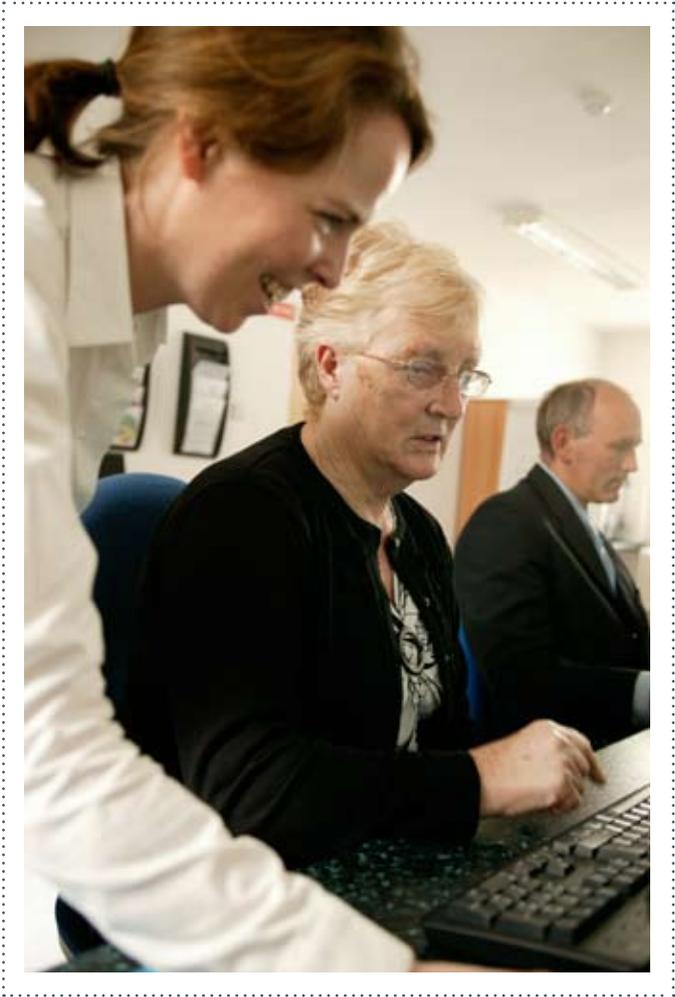
# 1. Background to the SDCC Audit

South Dublin County Council's (SDCC) commitment to provide high quality services, that are accessible and inclusive, is reflected in the core principles of its Corporate Plan 2010-2014.[1] It has a number of policies and procedures in place to support the delivery of accessible services, for example, a commitment to provide clear and accessible information through its Customer Service Action Plan and Citizens Charter. [2]

In addition it continues to identify new ways and initiatives to make further progress. This includes taking steps to become a literacy-friendly local authority. SDCC's Social Inclusion Unit contacted the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) to work with them on this. This initiative was informed by the fact that 1 in 4 Irish people have literacy difficulties (IALS survey 1997).[3] This can cause problems in many aspects of their lives including accessing public services.

SDCC is the first local authority to work with NALA to develop this literacy-friendly approach. SDCC and NALA agreed to conduct a literacy audit as the initial step in becoming a literacy-friendly organisation. A literacy audit helps identify any potential literacy-related barriers to customers and staff.

This is a summary report of the full audit report. It identifies existing good practice in SDCC and actions to strengthen SDCC as a literacy-friendly Local Authority.

1   http://issuu.com/sdublincoco/docs/corp_plan_english
2   http://www.sdublincoco.ie/viewdocument.aspx?id=9940513b-fca8-441b-8984-9fe5011902b4
3   http://www.nala.ie/resources/international-adult-literacy-survey-results-ireland

## 2. Rationale and Benefits to Local Authorities (and other organisations) of becoming Literacy-friendly

The two main reasons for any organisation to become involved in a process to become a literacy-friendly organisation are:

- to ensure that the people who use their services can understand their communications and access their services without literacy being a barrier,

- to ensure that staff are supported to address any literacy needs they may have in carrying out their jobs and to support them to progress within the organisation.

It is possible that the following could be happening in any organisation:

- losing current and potential customers because of complicated literature and procedures,

- losing money because of time spent dealing with misunderstandings, mistakes or complaints,

- excluding some customers from fair access to opportunities and services because of unnecessary literacy barriers,

- limiting staff potential as some grapple with literacy difficulties.

Literacy difficulties have individual consequences but also carry economic costs to organisations. Becoming literacy-friendly is a progressive move which **potentially improves access and use of services.** It can also result in cost savings as **less staff time is spent dealing with misunderstandings and complaints**.

SDCC has shown great vision in taking the first steps to becoming a literacy-friendly local authority. The focus in the SDCC literacy audit is on accessibility of communications and services to its customers. It already has an education programme in place for staff which includes opportunities for literacy development.

"SDCC has shown *great vision* in taking the first steps to becoming a literacy-friendly local authority."

# 3. Becoming Literacy-friendly - 5 Steps

## What is a literacy-friendly organisation?

A literacy-friendly organisation encourages commitment, in all parts of the organisation and among all levels of staff, to remove literacy-related barriers to access, participation and achievement.

In everyday terms, a literacy-friendly organisation enables customers with literacy difficulties to:
- access its services,
- communicate effectively with it, and
- take part in processes which shape the organisation's policies, procedures or services.

It also enables staff with literacy difficulties to:
- apply for positions for which they are suited,
- be included in staff consultations,
- understand and apply internal policies and procedures, and
- receive effective training to help them carry out their jobs to the best of their ability.

Being a literacy-friendly organisation involves an ongoing commitment to review, adapt and implement policies and procedures which ensure there are no literacy-related barriers to customers or staff.

## What is a literacy audit?

A literacy audit reviews an organisation's overall **policies and procedures**, its **communications** and **staff training and development practices**. It also includes the development of action plans. The next stage in the process is implementing the action plans and reviewing their effectiveness.

**NALA supports organisations in following a five-step process[4] to address literacy issues. These steps are:**

**Step 1: Hold an initial planning session**

- Identify stakeholders in the organisation
- Explore key issues in literacy and how they affect your organisation

**Step 2: Carry out a literacy audit**

- Policies and procedures
- Communications
- Staff training and development

**Step 3: Draw up action plans**

- Policies and procedures
- Communications
- Staff training and development

**Step 4: Implement action plans**

**Step 5: Monitor and evaluate actions**

**A literacy audit looks at:**

- What you already do to support people who have difficulties with reading and/or writing; and
- What you could do better to support people who have difficulties with reading and/or writing.

4    http://www.nala.ie/resources/right-start-guide-supporting-staff-and-connecting-customers

# 4. The Literacy Audit in SDCC

SDCC decided to do the audit in three sections of the Council; Customer Care, Libraries and Corporate Services[5]. The audit followed the 5 step approach. Two action plans are included in this summary report and implementation of some of the actions is already underway.

The audit took place over 7 months and in a number of phases:

## Phase 1: Planning

- A number of planning meetings with the Social Inclusion Unit to agree a process
- A planning meeting with key staff from the three sections

## Phase 2: Doing the literacy audit

- Meetings with and shadowing staff from the three sections
- Identifying and reviewing relevant material

## Phase 3: Writing the report

- Writing up of literacy audit and action plans (submitted to SDCC for feedback)
- Writing of final report including agreed action plans
- Writing of summary report, submitted to SDCC for final feedback
- Writing of final summary report.

5  Higher Education Grants and Register of Electors

In SDCC, phases 1 and 2 took place between January and April 2012. The report drafting and redrafting phase took place during May-August 2012. This included a round of feedback meetings with representatives from each of the three sections of SDCC involved in the audit process. A meeting with the Social Inclusion Team took place in August to agree the final draft of the audit report and summary.

There will an ongoing review and evaluation process within SDCC to oversee the implementation of the action plans. An internal oversight group has been established and the initial review session will take place in March 2013.

# 5. Existing Good Practice in SDCC

The audit process identified many examples of good practice in SDCC relevant to its being a literacy-friendly organisation. Some examples are outlined below under the headings of Customer Care and Library. These sections were the main focus of the audit. The Customer Care Service deals with all services provided by SDCC, therefore the examples are also relevant to the wider Corporate Services Section.

The audit included a review of policies and procedures, examples of good practice from both aspects are outlined.

## Customer Care policies and procedures

### Policies

SDCC has a Customer Service Action Plan and Citizens Charter which outlines policy. The Charter outlines a number of Quality Service Standards including one on accessible information:

- Provide information that is clear, timely, complete, accurate, available at defined points of contact, and meets the requirements of people with specific access or support needs.
- Continue the drive for easily understood forms, information leaflets and procedures.

### Procedures

- Customer Care Service offers customers a wide range of communication options including: face to face; telephone; online; in writing and so on. Where reading and writing is involved, customer care staff offer assistance when possible and where appropriate,
- Customer Care Centres at Tallaght and Clondalkin provide a frontline service for all SDCC services. The centres are open from 9am - 5pm daily and are staffed by qualified customer care staff who provide information and advice,
- Communication needs of customers, whose first language is not English, are catered for through the provision of a translation service and use of SDCC staff with specific language skills,

- Customer Care Page on the SDCC website includes an accessible Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section,

- Clear guidance about making a complaint is outlined on the website. This gives a good choice of options for making a complaint including in person or having a friend or relative do so on your behalf,

- Use of a very good Customer Contact System, which staff fill in when they deal with any customer.

## Library policies and procedures

### Policies

South Dublin County Libraries have policies on supporting literacy development amongst adults and children in South Dublin as well as policies on the provision of accessible information and services to its customers. These are evidenced in commitments outlined in the 'South Dublin County Libraries Development Plan 2007-2011'[6] as follows:

- Continue to support adult literacy programmes,

- Identify informal and return to learning initiatives and resource and support these as appropriate,

- Develop a Family Learning Programme targeted at parents of young children to improve learning outcomes for all,

- Introduce Family Learning and Family literacy projects to foster literacy amongst parent(s) and children,

- Identify and work to eliminate barriers to accessing services for people using those services,

- Take an active approach in providing information that is clear, timely and accurate, is available at all points of contact and meets the requirements of people with specific needs.

6    http://tinyurl.com/SDLPlan2007 -

## Procedures

These policies are implemented in a number of ways including:

1. Provision of pro-active literacy initiatives, for example Ready2Read. This is an early literacy programme currently running in pre-schools and libraries in the South Dublin County Council area. The programme runs for six weeks and involves both children and parents/guardians.

2. Use of several types of assistive technologies including Kurzweil software for assistance with the written word.

3. Availability of TTRS (Touch Type Read Spell) - a software offered by libraries for adults and children with learning/reading difficulties. This is used on a one-to-one basis with library staff.

4. Introduction to PC training for customers as well as digital literacy classes for different groups.

5. Implementation of a protocol for accessible publications, that is, try to use plain English in all written material.

6. Library staff who generate documents and input material on the website were trained in the production of accessible material in 2010.
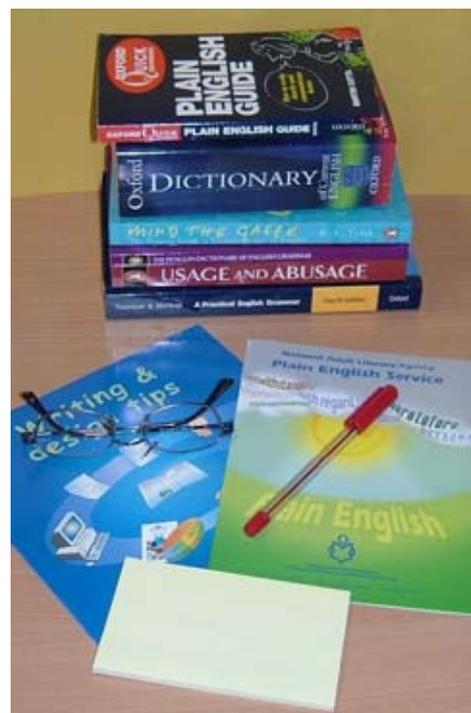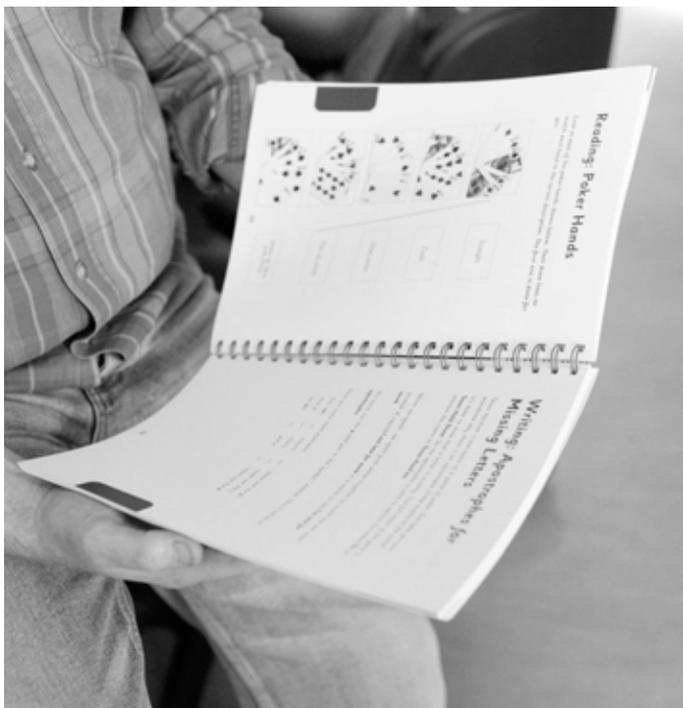
# 6. Strengthening SDCC as a Literacy Friendly Local Authority

## Key actions to be implemented by SDCC

As well as identifying the examples of good practice outlined above, the audit process also identified actions which would further strengthen SDCC as a literacy-friendly local authority. These have been agreed and are set out below in two action plans, one for the Wider Organisation and the Customer Care Service and the other for the Library Service. These plans represent a very positive outcome from the audit process.

The first plan includes both the wider organisation (including corporate services) and the customer care services; this recognises the importance of a whole organisation approach to being literacy-friendly. The Customer Care Service deals with customers who are accessing the range of SDCC services. Customer Care staff may have to deal with literacy-related barriers associated with procedures and documents generated elsewhere in the organisation. In addition, the audit highlighted that SDCC staff often have to spend time explaining complicated procedures and documents generated outside of SDCC, in particular, those generated within Government Departments. One of the actions in the plan below reflects this finding.

"the audit process also identified actions which would **further strengthen** SDCC as a literacy-friendly local authority."

## Action Plan - Wider Organisation and Customer Care Service

1. **Review implementation of the Council's Policy** which states 'we will endeavour to use simple and clear language in all forms and leaflets'.

   **Ensure all new Council generated forms**, leaflets and public information are Plain English proofed by a current staff member who is trained in Plain English.

2. **Individual Departments to request input** from Disability Liaision Officer when new forms and leaflets are being written and designed.

3. **Consider including a formal commitment to being literacy-friendly** when reviewing or developing a new Customer Service Action Plan and Citizen Charter. This will embed literacy-friendly policy within the Council's Customer Service Policy.

4. **Ensure that the South Dublin County Council website** content is reviewed from a plain English perspective and also to ensure ease of access and navigation.

   NALA's plain English website[7] could be helpful in this regard.

5. **Review of current Office Procedures Manual** and inclusion of guidelines for staff on dealing with customers with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

   The NALA resource Right from the Start[8] (P14-P17) could be helpful in this regard.

6. **Review navigation issues including:**
   - Larger and better placed signage for the Payments Office and Ticket Machine.
   - Positioning and use of visuals for Toilets and Café.

7    http://www.simplyput.ie/
8    http://www.nala.ie/resources/right-start-guide-supporting-staff-and-connecting-customers

7. **Staff Training and Development**
   - NALA to provide guidelines in dealing with customers with literacy difficulties for use at induction of Customer Care staff.
   - Include Literacy Awareness Training (LAT) in annual refresher training for all Customer Care staff.
   - Develop a procedure for dealing with customers with literacy difficulties in conjunction with the LAT. This to be included in office procedures manual.
   - Provide Literacy Awareness Training for all Council staff in conjunction with Social Inclusion Officer as part of Social Inclusion Week.

8. **Customer Feedback**
   Identify internal methods to get feedback. Include at least one method not dependent on reading and writing, for example, Social Inclusion staff to get verbal feedback from a sample of customers on a twice yearly basis. Include questions on accessibility of written and verbal communications.

9. **Support NALA in influencing relevant government** departments, (in particular Department of Environment, Community and Local Government) to adopt a plain English policy at departmental level and to ensure all relevant forms and procedures are accessible and written in plain English.

## Action Plan - Library

1.  **Include a literacy-friendly commitment** in the new 5 year Library Development Plan

2.  **Continue to support people** who may not be comfortable with using self-service options; taking advantage of staff time freed up by use of the self-service option for all customers.
    **Introduce the newer 'more friendly' self-service system** (which is now used in Clondalkin), to other County Libraries when feasible. This uses less text, larger writing, and smoother workflow.

3.  **Continue to ensure all information,** forms and leaflets are written in plain English, including online information (outside of the constraints currently imposed by Library System Management (LMS) Software).

4.  **Ensure suitably trained staff generate or 'proof' all written material.**

5.  **When new LMS identified** ensure online registration form is literacy-friendly.

6.  **Revise current rules and regulations section** of the online registration part of the website.

7.  **Navigation of the libraries**-review the use of signs and visuals when a refit or upgrade of individual libraries is being carried out.

8. **Staff Training and Development**

   Organise customised Literacy Awareness Training (LAT) with a specific focus on dealing with the public who many have literacy and/or English language needs. Run as 2 x 2 hour afternoon sessions to include all staff.

   Include 'how to deal with customers with reading or writing needs' in the Library Assistant Training Checklist.

   Review whether there is a need for a refresher plain English training for specific staff.

   When reviewing staff Personal Development Plan (PDPs) – consider how they are dealing with the literacy and numeracy demands of the job.

9. **Customer Feedback** - ensure that people with literacy difficulties are facilitated to participate in customer feedback processes, in particular focus groups.

# 7. NALA's Recommendations Based on SDCC's Literacy Audit

## Implementing and Reviewing the Actions Plans

- Senior Management Team to commit to the full implementation and review of the actions plans.

- Put in place and resource a small literacy-friendly oversight group to ensure the process of SDCC's becoming a literacy-friendly organisation, is progressed and ultimately achieved and maintained.

- Review the implementation of the current actions plans (within a year) and develop plans for the next stage of becoming literacy-friendly.

## Embedding and Spreading the Literacy-friendly Approach within SDCC

- Spread the approach to all sections of SDCC by sharing the lessons from the literacy audit with all sections. This will contribute to the development of a literacy-friendly perspective throughout the organisation and to the achievement of the ultimate aim of SDCC being a literacy-friendly organisation.

- When reviewing or developing a new Customer Service Action Plan and Citizen Charter include a commitment to being literacy-friendly.

- Ensure new initiatives are literacy-friendly and that communications relating to them are plain English proofed.

- Further develop customer feedback mechanisms and include methods accessible to those with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

## Supporting Staff Training and Development

- Ensure all staff receive general LAT and more tailored LAT for those who deal with customers in specific areas, for example, Customer Care Services and Libraries.

- Include literacy awareness in staff induction and ongoing staff training and development.

- Ensure staff are able to generate written communications including for the website in plain English and designate specific trained staff to proof all public documents.

## Spreading the Approach to Central Government and other Local Authorities

- Support NALA in influencing relevant government departments especially the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government to adopt departmental literacy-friendly policies and procedures including the use of plain English.

- Act as a model of good practice to other Local Authorities and promote the literacy-friendly approach to other Local Authorities.

EUROPEAN UNION
STRUCTURAL FUNDS

NDP
National Development Plan

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NALA
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