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Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Governance and Administration Committee
Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Whakahaerenga

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Plain Language Act Repeal Bill

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Presented to the House of Representatives
by Camilla Belich, Chairperson

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Plain Language Act Repeal Bill

Recommendation

The Governance and Administration Committee has examined the Plain Language Act Repeal Bill and recommends by majority that it be passed without amendment.

About the bill

The Plain Language Act Repeal Bill is a Government bill. It would repeal the Plain Language Act 2022. The effects of the repeal would include:

- agencies would no longer be required to have a formally designated plain language officer
- agencies would no longer be required to report to the Public Service Commission on their compliance with the Act
- the commission would no longer have to issue its guidance on compliance with the Act.¹

About the Plain Language Act

The Plain Language Act, a member's bill in the name of Rachel Boyack MP, came into force in April 2023.² It aims to ensure that public service agencies and Crown agents communicate with the public in a way that is appropriate to their intended audiences and is clear, concise, and well organised.

The Act requires agencies to take reasonable steps to ensure they use plain language in documents intended for the public. It also requires each public service agency and Crown agent to appoint a plain language officer, usually an existing employee. These officers are responsible for educating employees about the Act, dealing with feedback from the public about the agency's compliance with the Act, and ensuring that the agency complies with the Act. Agencies must also report, to the public service commission, annually on how they comply with the Act.

While we all support the aim of making government communications accessible, most of us do not think that legislation is the most appropriate means of achieving this. A majority of us believe that plain language requirements can be implemented through flexible guidance from the Public Service Commission rather than through legislation.

¹ The information is published on the [Public Service Commission's website](#).

² The Plain Language Bill departmental report can be found on the [Parliament website](#). The Governance and Administration Committee for the 53rd Parliament's report can be found on the [Parliament website](#).

Legislative scrutiny

As part of our consideration of the bill, we have examined its consistency with principles of legislative quality. We note that, as a repeal bill, this bill does not have significant legislative design elements.

Submissions received on the bill

We received written submissions from 1,652 groups and individuals. We heard 56 oral submissions on the bill. Of the 1,652 submitters, 1,586 were opposed, five supported the bill, and 61 did not state whether they supported or opposed. A full summary of the submissions is available in the departmental report prepared by our advisers and published on the Parliament website.³ We thank submitters for sharing their views on the bill.

Many submitters told us that plain language is useful and important, regardless of whether they supported or opposed the bill. Those who opposed the bill focused on what might happen if plain language was used less—or stopped being used altogether—particularly on how they believe that could affect the public's access to information. They also shared their views on the benefits of the current law and what might happen if it were repealed. A few submitters questioned whether legislation is needed to ensure that plain language is used in government. We agree with submitters that the public service and government should communicate in ways that are clear, concise, and easy to understand.

Is legislation the correct tool?

We acknowledge the need for accessible government communications. A major factor in our discussion on this bill was whether legislation is the most effective way to promote plain language, or whether non-legislative approaches could be just as effective.

While we all agree on the importance of the public service communicating in plain language, the majority of us consider that legislation is not the most effective way to promote its use. Few submitters could give us concrete examples of the benefits of the Plain Language Act. Some noted that positive changes had occurred before the Act came into force. The commission only collects data on agencies' compliance with the administrative requirements of the Act. It therefore does not have evidence to determine whether the Act has had an effect on the use of plain language in the public service.

Most of us think that legislation tends to be more costly to implement and less adaptable to unforeseen challenges than non-legislative approaches, which can be adjusted more easily. We expect that repealing the Act would not prevent agencies from continuing their efforts to improve plain language. We expect the public service will continue to work towards the increased use of plain language in its communications with the public.

We note that legislation comparable to the Plain Language Act does not exist in comparable jurisdictions like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Instead, each jurisdiction uses style guides or manuals as core resources for government writing. If the bill passes, we

³ The Plain Language Repeal Bill departmental report can be found on the [Parliament website](#).

encourage the Public Service Commission to provide guidance to the public service on the use of plain language.

Concerns about the effect of repealing the Plain Language Act

A few of us are concerned that repealing the Act could be seen as the Government diminishing the importance of plain language. Many submitters suggested that repeal would signal that clarity, accessibility, and inclusion are not priorities. Some of us are concerned that agencies may have less incentive to invest resources in activities related to plain language. Most of us believe that there will be no negative impact by passing this bill.

We note that plain language officers under the Act have taken on these responsibilities alongside their main roles. Some agencies had already developed plain language training and programmes before the Act came into force. Agencies used a range of training approaches, including online modules (some developed in-house and others purchased), group workshops, tailored advice, and drop-in support from in-house experts. It is our expectation that public sector agencies continue the use of plain language. Most of us heard evidence of significant efficiency gains from the use of plain language.

Accessibility of information

We agree that using plain language helps people better understand key information—such as their rights, responsibilities, and obligations—across government and in areas like insurance and legal documents. When communication is clear, individuals are more likely to understand what is expected, follow instructions accurately, and act with confidence.

Plain language can make it easier for people to get the help they need and understand what is happening. Some submitters said that if the Government stops using plain language, it could create more barriers or lead to worse outcomes for these groups.

Government agencies told us that they would continue to use plain language, which we would expect. We note that some groups may face greater challenges when information is unclear or complex.

Monitoring of government agencies

With the potential removal of the Act, agencies would no longer be required to report to the commission. We considered alternative ways to monitor whether they are following best practice in plain language. One option open to all members is to include written questions about plain language in annual reviews.

Our conclusion

We recommend that the bill be passed without amendment.

We all agree that plain language is important and all government agencies should make it a consistent expectation in their style guides. However, most of us do not think that legislation is the most effective way to achieve this.

If the bill is enacted, public service agencies should still aim to use plain language so that official material is accessible to the public.

The vast majority of submitters opposed repealing the Act. However, their suggestions for alternative approaches were aimed at improving the current Act, and are therefore outside the scope of the present bill. Most of us do not recommend any amendment to the bill.

New Zealand Labour Party differing view

The Labour Party is disappointed that the Government is repealing the Plain Language Act; an Act that has already shown to make a positive difference in how government agencies communicate with the public. Advice provided to the committee clearly showed that agencies had taken several actions to improve their use of Plain Language, because of the Act. Agencies have provided training to those responsible for content creation and included specialised training for those who write legal content. Some agencies have established peer review systems to check that content adheres to the Plain Language guidelines, while others have updated their style guides and content review checklists. One agency commented in advice to the committee that “we happily support this act and its requirements. We’re really seeing the value it adds for our people and the New Zealand public.”

Despite claims, the introduction of the Act did not lead to an increase in public servants. Instead, existing public servants had Plain Language Officer duties as part of their existing roles. Evidence was provided to the Select Committee showing that these Plain Language Officers had positively championed the use of Plain Language and accessibility within their agencies.

The government has also claimed that the reporting requirements are a waste of time and money. Labour disagrees. Accountability to Ministers and to the public through Parliament is an important mechanism for ensuring agencies are complying with the Act and communicating as effectively and clearly as possible with the public.

The committee heard evidence that the use of Plain Language saves time and money for organisations. For example, redesigning forms to reduce error rates can save significant time for members of the public and agencies. The repeal of the Act will make communicating with the public more expensive and waste more time for people trying to understand their entitlements and obligations.

Despite overwhelming evidence that the Plain Language Act has made a positive difference in the lives of New Zealanders and agreeing with the substantive objective and purpose of the legislation, the Government has chosen to waste Parliament’s time through the repeal of this Act. We would like to acknowledge the large number of submissions the committee received (1,667 submissions) and the high number who supported keeping this Act in legislation (1,586 submitters). We join submitters and advocates who are frustrated and confused as to why the Government has chosen to ignore the strong support from submitters for retaining the Act, especially for those with disabilities and accessibility needs. This is deeply disappointing move by the current Government that takes the country backwards in relation to equity and accessibility.

We note that some submitters said that if the Government stops using plain language, it could create more barriers or lead to worse outcomes for these groups. They highlighted that plain language is especially important for:

- disabled people
- Māori
- Pacific peoples
- ethnic communities
- migrants
- people who speak English as a second language
- people with different levels of literacy, education, or cognitive ability
- people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or neurodivergent
- those engaging with mental health services
- people with limited internet access
- older people
- people who are under pressure or short on time.

Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand differing view

The proposed repeal of the Plain Language Act 2022 represents a serious assault on accessibility, transparency, and democratic engagement. Far from being a minor bureaucratic tweak, this legislation was a useful tool in ensuring government communications are clear, inclusive, and equitable. Repealing the Act sends the wrong message and will disproportionately harm those already navigating barriers—people with disabilities, those learning English, older New Zealanders, and low-income families.

According to a thorough analysis by OpenAccess, public submissions to the Select Committee revealed we have a landslide of opposition—**96% of submissions were against the repeal**. Out of 1,657 total submissions, only nine supported the repeal. That amounts to **1,598 submissions opposing** it.

Ignoring this near-unanimous public feedback undermines democratic principles and trust in government. While the Act was so recent and some monitoring inconclusive, these are reasons to improve monitoring, not reject the commitment to Plain Language and leave it up to the whims of agencies and departments.

Support from the Disability Community

People First NZ, a Disabled Persons Organisation led by people with learning disabilities, warned that repealing the Act would make government communications “**too complicated and inaccessible**.” One member asked poignantly, “Why do you (government) want to go back to the system where we don’t understand what’s going on?”

Similarly, **IHC** described the repeal as “**a major step backward for the disabled community**,” highlighting that plain language helps people with intellectual disabilities understand crucial information. Members of their Easy Read Advisory Group put it simply, “Don’t change it, it needs to be plain language.”

Social Services & Communication Experts in Agreement

NZCCSS (New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services) underscored how complex language contributes to marginalisation. They documented heartbreaking cases—individuals ending up homeless because they couldn’t understand welfare forms, low-wage workers

missing out on essential rights, older people feeling isolated—all because bureaucratic language was a barrier.

WriteMark Plain English Awards Trust emphasised that the Act promoted **effective, efficient, and cost-effective government** writing. They recounted public complaints—people missing deadlines, misunderstandings that led to lost benefits—all rooted in poor communication. In contrast, good plain-language documents save time, reduce stress, and build public trust.

And communications professionals at the **Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ)** strongly opposed the repeal, stating that clear, accessible writing strengthens public accountability and engagement, and offers “undeniable financial value” in tight fiscal times.

The Green Party Position

The Green Party rejects the notion that the Plain language is bureaucratic red tape. Communication is the lifeline between government and the governed. It determines who can participate, understand, and act. Removing the obligation for government agencies to write clearly will not save money—it will sow confusion, erode trust, and disproportionately disenfranchise vulnerable communities. Writing Plain English encourages officials to really examine business processes to make them easy to explain.

We must listen to the **1,598 New Zealanders who told Parliament “keep it”**, not the nine who said otherwise. We must trust our communities to speak—and to be heard. And we must maintain clear, accessible government as a democratic and human right.

The Green Party opposes this repeal. We must **strengthen** not abandon clear communication.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The Plain Language Act Repeal Bill was referred to the committee on 1 April 2025. We called for submissions with a closing date of 14 May 2025. We received and considered submissions from 1,652 interested groups and individuals. We heard oral evidence from 56 submitters.

We received advice on the bill from the Public Service Commission. The Office of the Clerk provided advice on the bill's legislative quality. The Parliamentary Counsel Office was available to assist with legal drafting.

Committee members

Camilla Belich (Chairperson)
Tim Costley
Andy Foster
Hon Melissa Lee
Stuart Smith (until 9 April 2025)
Lemauga Lydia Sosene
Tom Rutherford (from 9 April 2025)
Celia Wade-Brown

Rachel Boyack participated in our consideration of this bill.

Related resources

The documents that we received as advice and evidence are available on the [Parliament website](#).