



**Access**  
Easy English

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Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

To the Australian Government Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

Re: Design, scope, cost-benefit analysis, contracts awarded and implementation associated  
with the Better Management of the Social Welfare System initiative

To provide a context for my submission, the following information is provided.

- I am a Speech Pathologist with 29 years experience supporting clients with Complex Communication Needs and their families, in the development of supports for them, individually, in school, day placement and in the community;
- I am an internationally recognised expert in the development and writing of Easy English which is the process of writing information for people with low and/or non functional literacy;
- I have provided training to organisations in the development and use of Easy English. These have included government and non government staff (Boards of Management to front of house staff), community neighbourhood houses, teachers, lawyers, doctors, other health practitioners, advocates, retailers to name a few.

- I own and operate my own business, developing, training and building awareness of Easy English. I also provide specialist supports for people with Complex Communication Needs. My website is [www.accesseasyenglish.com.au](http://www.accesseasyenglish.com.au)

My submission addresses, in particular,

- a. the impact of Government automated debt collection processes upon the aged, families with young children, students, people with disability and jobseekers and any others affected by the process;
- b.
- c.
- d. the adequacy of Centrelink complaint and review processes, including advice or direction given to Centrelink staff regarding the management of customer queries or complaints;
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.
- j.
- k. any other related matters.

## Terms of reference

- a. the impact of Government automated debt collection processes upon the aged, families with young children, students, people with disability and jobseekers and any others affected by the process;

## Access to meaningful written information for people with low literacy

In 2013 the latest adult literacy data was released, The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Literacy Competencies.(PIAAC)<sup>1</sup> The data identified 44% or 7.3 million adult Australians has **non functional literacy**, which means these Australians have difficulty accessing most day to day written information in the public domain. This is the broad literacy data statistics. The research also demonstrates people with non functional literacy have poorer financial management, a higher incidence of interaction and recidivism in the justice system, higher prevalence of health issues and poorer health outcomes, poorer awareness regarding emergency services issues, higher workplace safety issues, and many other aspects of their day to day living. In addition there is a high correlation between low literacy/non functional literacy and poor wages and low socio economic status. It could be surmised that many people who need to interact with CentreLink, and its agencies are more likely than the general population to have non functional literacy.

People with low literacy/non functional literacy can and are the 'man or woman in the street' one's neighbour, work colleague or friend, or it may be the person with a diagnosed disability from lifelong disabilities such as Down Syndrome to Acquired Disabilities such as car accident, or stroke. People from the Deaf community and people with a hearing impairment are overrepresented in this cohort, as are people with poor educational attainment. In addition people who are time poor or highly stressed show higher levels of non functional literacy, often people needing to access the Social Welfare system.

People with low literacy/non functional literacy are also overrepresented among those living with a mental health issues, the unemployed, and underemployed, the homeless and the disabled. People with English as a second language, as well as people from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background are also significantly overrepresented in this data.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au) #4228.

In addition, the 2013 ABS data investigated both **numerical literacy** and **problem solving literacy in technology** based environments (on-line). Both these significant areas of reading in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, demonstrated even greater levels of non-functional skills and abilities.

**Non functional numerical literacy** in the Australian environment was interpreted at **52%**. Numerical literacy involves the interpretation of numbers, time, appointments and quantities to name a few needs in this area. This is critical literacy for the correct administration in areas such as meeting attendance, planning and time management, adherence to conditions in CentreLink letters, to name a few.

**Non functional problem solving literacy in technology based** information (use of online information) in the Australian environment was interpreted at

- **14% opted out** of the tasks altogether;
- an additional total of **over 62% being non functional** in use of technology for problem solving and information gathering.

This is significant with regard to accessing services, locating resources, completing online forms, phone apps or other technology. Additional research from Canada has also shown even those with higher computer literacy skills, are predominantly more capable in the social media sphere, compared with researching information, completing forms, and accessing services online, which is what is required in the current Digital/Computer Economy.

Furthermore research from the CSIRO in 2015<sup>2</sup> identified 1 in 5 households do **not** have access to the internet. Once again these people are the more vulnerable in our communities, from lower socio-economic groups, the aging and CALD communities.

My work with people with low literacy/ non functional literacy has demonstrated again and again the value of information being written in Easy English. These adults are able to read and understand particular issues of import to themselves, and gain insight into how the information relates to themselves when it is written in Easy English. Significant barriers to information and life choice outcomes are removed. Consequently more meaningful decisions are made and acted upon.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://publications.csiro.au/rpr/download?pid=csiro:EP1312215&dsid=DS1>

It must be noted, people with low literacy/non functional literacy are a significant cohort of people who are vulnerable and will not “reach out” for the support and assistance they need. Family members and support staff are additionally vulnerable when faced with large amounts of written information, and then other factors such as being time poor, and stressed. These influential members of an individual’s support network also benefit highly from having written information provided in a more accessible manner. In addition, people who live with other variable issues, such as, mental health issues, are known to often have variable functional literacy, due to the variable nature of their coping and management strategies.

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015<sup>3</sup> is also critical data to consider. If 20 % of all 14-15 year old students in mainstream schools have non functional literacy, how do they access the information around them in a meaningful way? Using Easy English processes allow more students to have a greater grasp of the requirements of a task or information required of them.

To gain responses from all members of our community, documents such as this Australian Government senate enquiry should be available in Easy English also.

- Under the UNCRP, 2006 it states written information should be provided in a way so that the person can access it meaningfully, in the same time frame as the original document.
- People with limited or non functional literacy take longer to read information, understand what it means for them and take more time to develop a response, and then put it together.
- In addition, as noted earlier with the higher incidence of non functional computer based literacy, how do people with non functional literacy locate and find this information?
- Many people who would be clients of CentreLink would be unable to respond to this enquiry.

Below are a number of recent examples of work I have completed in Easy English, which will give you a greater understating of how information should be written. I have been doing this work for over 12 years, and these current documents have been well tested in the community. There are many other examples of information written in Easy English for all spheres of relevance. There are also numerous examples, particularly from the UK and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf>

some from the USA, of documents written for social inclusion, participation and advocacy and information on the law. Examples from the UK and USA can be provided upon request.

Recent examples developed by Access Easy English include:

1. **Your Guide to Survival** Country Fire Authority <http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/about/easy-english-versions/>
2. Training support package **NSW Boarding Houses New Laws and Rules 2013**.  
Book 1- 4. See attached 1 book (Book 4) Rights.
3. **Think Safe Act Safe**. A document for men leaving court with an Intervention Order;  
See attached. Integrated Family violence Partnership.
4. **Voices against Violence, Book 7**. Report on research completed in Victoria about  
Women with Disabilities, the prevalence and issues with regard to Violence.  
<http://wdv.org.au/documents/Voices%20Agaist%20Violence%20Paper%20Seven%20Easy%20English%20Summary%20%28PDF%203MB%29.pdf>
5. **Quality of Support Review DHHS VIC**  
<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/funded-agency-channel/about-service-agreements/incident-reporting/human-services> Scroll down the page to the Quality of  
Support heading.
6. **Police Powers in NSW**. NSW Legal Aid.  
<http://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/publications/factsheets-and-resources> Key Word  
Search. 'Police powers'

Any written information can be developed into Easy English from letters, to statements and requests for information, forms, websites, support plans, Powerpoint, facts and fact sheets to training packages and government enquiries.

## Terms of reference

- d. the adequacy of Centrelink complaint and review processes, including advice or direction given to Centrelink staff regarding the management of customer queries or complaints;

In my work with government departments and government funded organisations, I am constantly confronted with the lack of awareness of the UN Convention on the Rights of Person with a Disability, 2006, by staff, and its implications for people who need to access written information from the government, and government funded organisations. In addition, I will often talk with clients who require information written in Easy English about this UN Convention, and what it should mean for them regarding their right to access written information in a way they can read and understand. Unfortunately, CentreLink complaints processes and forms are not presented in a way these particular clients can use, to raise their concerns about access to written information.

Australia was one of the first signatures to the UN Convention on the Rights of Person with a Disability(2006). I developed the original and consequent Australian guidelines for writing in Easy English. These are regularly refereed, by organisations that use Easy English in their communications with clients, families and the public. I also regularly present papers at National and International conferences on this topic. Attached is my latest publication, Basterfield and Starford (2014) Plain Language for Access to Democracy and Citizenship. Clarity. 72 (2).

I regularly run training for staff; all have clients who need to interact with CentreLink. Every training there are comments about how their clients cannot access CentreLink in a meaningful way, or they are unable support their clients to access CentreLink effectively. It creates high levels of additional stress for these clients, and their support staff.

Often complaints are about the nature of written material, and the lack of ease to access the information. CentreLink appears to assume there is immediate access for clients to the internet, (most often **not** the case when they live in shared accommodation) or even a mobile phone, with an ability to use it for written information (texts and Apps). Most people with limited or non functional literacy, have difficulty reading and interpreting any texts or Apps on a phone. It also assumes these people on low incomes can afford (i) a current and expensive phone and (ii) have the funds to have a plan with good amounts of internet

connection. CenteLink staff may direct clients to the computers in the CentreLink offices, however, this also assumes these people are able to use the computer effectively (note earlier p.4 of this submission - 76% of adults have non functional computer literacy). Once again, an additional stressor, for clients accessing CentreLink.

### **Terms of reference**

k. any other related matters

## **Communication for people with Complex Communication Needs**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2013 stated “The number of Australians with disability remained steady at 18.5 per cent of the population or 4.2 million people.<sup>4</sup> Of these, 1.4 million Australians had a profound or severe limitation affecting their mobility, self-care or communication.”<sup>5</sup> Speech Pathology Australia states 13,000 Australians use electronic communication aids to communicate.<sup>6</sup>

With these damning statistics the needs of people with disability, but most particularly those with communication difficulties, and complex communication difficulties needs to be addressed. These people are often the most vulnerable in our community, many requiring particular advocacy to assist them to speak up, or be supported in speaking up for themselves. Some people have Complex Communication Needs due to lifelong disabilities such as Cerebral Palsy or Autism, others from acquired disabilities such as car accident, or mental health issues. Others again have specific language difficulties, developmental delay, pragmatic or social issues. Their Rights need to be addressed.

Some people with Complex Communication Needs can eventually use literacy, to communicate, eg: a voice output device, where they can use word predict, and other features to create individualised messages for any situation. However, significant numbers of people use predominantly images to communicate, others use signing or Key Word Sign.<sup>7</sup> Others again use less formal means of communication such as their gestures and behaviour and people knowing them, well to communicate. Irrespective of the person's means of communication, their messages need to be heard.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://search.abs.gov.au> #4228 2013,2016

<sup>5</sup> [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au) #4430

<sup>6</sup> [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)

<sup>7</sup> [www.keywordsignvictoria.org](http://www.keywordsignvictoria.org)



Barriers can be subtle, but many times the barriers to access to communication and Rights is obvious. Subtle barriers can include:

- Not allowing time for the person to communicate;
- CentreLink staff being unaware of how to communicate with someone who does not talk. This may be because workers have never met someone who communicates in this way before;
- Talking to the support worker, rather than the person with the communication difficulty;
- Dismissing changes in behaviour as being insignificant;
- Dismissing communication unless it is done using speech;
- Specific topic language/images/objects/signs may not be available to the person as part of their communication system – these need to be provided as part of the preparation for a conversation on the persons needs and rights.

Less subtle barriers can include:

- Lack of knowledge of Key Word Sign and Gesture;
- Lack of training by all staff involved in how to communicate with people with little or no speech;
- Not using the person's communication system.

## **Future improvements**

### **Addressed against the Terms of Reference**

- a. The availability of easily accessible Easy English information on CentreLink services;
  - hard copy forms and letters must be available
  - re-development of an Easy English website to better meet the needs of people who are challenged by the current CentreLink/DHS website

d. Complaints processes to be available in Easy English at all CentreLink offices, in printed form.

- k. Develop training for all CentreLink/DHS staff, on communication awareness, communicating with people with complex communication needs, and basic communication strategies.

This needs to be delivered by specialist Speech Pathologists, experienced and skilled in the area of Augmentative and Alternative Communication, preferably in conjunction with people with Complex Communication Needs.

### **a & d**

A whole of CentreLink/DHS approach to Accessible Information, in particular, Easy English.

This includes:-

- a. Forms;
- b. Fact sheets;
- c. Letters to Clients;
- d. Rights and Complaints;
- e. Reports;
- f. Enquiries;
- g. Training material and advocacy materials;
- h. Access to websites;
- i. Printed material available in key locations.

**Priorities include:**

1. Contract to have priority critical public domain documents developed into Easy English.  
This also provides a template for Best Practise Easy English for future development.
2. Training for staff in Regional and Head offices and agencies to learn to develop key documents and proforma's in Easy English, including why this is necessary.

With my expert knowledge in Easy English, I would be interested in pursuing further dialogue with the 2017 Australian Government Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs regarding the implementation associated with the Better Management of the Social Welfare System initiative about how to implement Easy English.

I would be pleased to share my expert skills and knowledge about communicating with people with Complex Communication Needs with this Review to improve the outcomes for people with Complex Communication Needs as they CentreLink.

I thank you for this opportunity to submit comment to this Senate enquiry.

*Cathy Basterfield*

Cathy Basterfield

Speech Pathologist

Owner, Access Easy English.

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