



Citizens Advice Sedgemoor

READ ALL ABOUT IT

Summary

In a year long survey, more than half (53%) of our clients reported having some degree of difficulty with “official correspondence” – in terms of reading, writing, numbers and/or IT literacy. More than one in eight (13.81%) reported difficulty in all three areas. More than a quarter (27.82%) of clients reported some degree of difficulty with reading and/or writing.



12% of respondents had been diagnosed as dyslexic.

One twelfth of respondents said that these problems were the cause of their visit to us for help.



What Could be Done About It ?

- We encourage clients to improve their skills. And we want to reassure those affected that they are not alone, and it is OK to ask for help.
- We encourage those who write official letters to think of the audience – to consider alternative forms or supplementary ways of communication: to telephone instead/as well.
- We commend the work of the Plain English Campaign and we urge writers to write in simple and direct language, using short sentences and avoiding long words. The campaign is against “gobbledygook, jargon and misleading public information.” Key points from their guidance are:

- Keep sentences short (15 to 20 words)
- Prefer active verbs
- Use ‘you’ and ‘we’
- Use words that are appropriate for the reader
- Don’t be afraid to give instructions
- Avoid nominalisations (e.g. we ‘discussed the matter’ is easier to read than ‘We had a discussion about the matter’)
- Use lists where appropriate.

The Benefits of Doing Something

- Improving the skills of individuals is likely to bring them massive benefits in all parts of their lives. Not least in their ability to handle “official correspondence”.
- Improving literacy (and numeracy and IT literacy) is likely to have a positive effect on the economy locally and nationally.
- As individuals improve their skills and increase their abilities, and/or as organisations respond to the problem as they send “official correspondence” this is likely to have a positive effect on an individual’s financial capability.
- The welfare benefits system relies on “official correspondence” – and on the ability of the recipient to handle it. Improving this relationship seems likely to yield a massive improvement in efficiency. For example, we think that a massive reduction in sanctions would follow a more empathetic approach to correspondence.
- The tax system also relies on “official correspondence” – and again on the ability of the recipient to handle it. Improving this relationship seems likely to yield a major improvement in efficiency here too.

