



2017

IRELAND GOVERNMENT

WEBSITE CLARITY INDEX



VisibleThread
Clarity Index

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The VisibleThread Clarity Index, Ireland Gov. – 2017

Executive Summary

In March 2016, VisibleThread analysed the web pages of 26 Irish Government websites based upon clarity of written content. Findings suggested that copy on Irish Government websites needed improvement. Government agencies that use clear, concise and well-organized writing engage better. When citizens can understand communication, agencies enjoy increased trust and revenues.

In our 2016 paper, we cited the Irish Public Service Reform Plan of 2014-2016, which mandated:

“The Public Service must simplify the language that it uses when communicating with service users. There must be a stronger focus on, and a commitment to, the use of plain language right across the Public Service so that application forms and information are more easily understood, thus improving the experience of the customer and reducing the requirement for repeated contact.”¹

It is now 2017. VisibleThread has created a comparative index to measure just how well the Irish Government has upheld this mandate. The index is of 26 Irish Government agency websites based on clarity of written content. We measured up to 100 pages on each website, across these four dimensions:

- [Readability](#) – How readable is the content?
- [Passive Language](#) – Active Language communicates clearly. What proportion of sentences is passive?
- [Long Sentences](#) – What proportion of all sentences are too long?
- [Word Complexity Density](#) – Complex words make web pages hard to understand.

What did we find?

Analysis suggests that there is not a statistically significant improvement from 2016 to 2017. Any gains are marginal, but at least trend in the desired direction. The Index notes a 1 point improvement in average Readability. While we see some progress, the Republic is most likely not achieving the desired benefits outlined in the Reform Plan. According to the [National Adult Literacy Agency](#) less than one-quarter of the population reads at professional work levels. Agencies need to consider their population and create clear copy to more efficiently engage. A more detailed analysis appears below in this report.

Key Findings

Clear Language:

The following guideline definitions will help you understand the information we present in the Key Findings section:

- Readability – a score of 50 is ideal, approximately an 8th grade reading level.
- Passive language – 4% or less is ideal.
- Long Sentences – 5% or less across all content is ideal.
- Complex language density – complex words/total words*100

You can find detailed definitions of ranking criteria in the Methodology section.

Overall Leaders

The [National Children’s Hospital](#) maintained its #1 ranking for the second year in a row. [An Post](#) improved to #2, up from #4 in the 2016 rankings. Both agencies scored higher across all Index categories, appearing in the top third of all measures. The National Children’s Hospital was the only agency we measured that achieved a target Readability Score (63). An Post improved their ranking by scoring well on core metrics such as Readability (#3), Passive Language (#4) and Complexity (#4).

The [Office of Government Procurement](#), moved up 12 spots to rank #3 in our 2017 Index. It was the only indexed agency to achieve target levels of Passive Voice. The agency also exceeded acceptable Readability targets with a score of 51.

[Department of the Taoiseach](#) (4th), and [The Courts Services of Ireland](#) (5th) rounded out the Top 5 spots in the 2017 Index. Both agencies scored relatively higher than peers for readability. The Court Services was ranked second in both Readability and Complexity.

VisibleThread™ Clarity Index			Ireland Government – 2017										Num Words	YoY Change	2016 Rank
			Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex				
Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	YoY Change	2016 Rank			
1	National Childrens Hospital	http://thenationalchildrenshospital.ie	4.25	63	1	8%	6	15%	1	2.15	9	7306	0	1	
2	An Post	http://www.anpost.ie/AnPost/	4.5	55	3	6%	4	20%	7	1.77	4	56294	2	4	
3	Office of Government Procurement	http://www.procurement.ie	4.75	51	7	3%	1	18%	4	2.03	7	14122	12	15	
4	Dept of the Taoiseach	http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/	6.5	53	4	7%	5	21%	9	2.10	8	40893	2	6	
5	The Courts Service of Ireland	http://www.courts.ie	10.25	56	2	12%	17	28%	20	1.39	2	51570	-3	2	

[Transport Infrastructure Ireland](#) improved the most in our 2017 findings. The agency moved up 16 spots in the rankings. Content on this website was relatively free of passive voice (5%) and ranked 1st overall for limited use of complex words. Barring a relatively poor score for use of long sentences (, the agency would have likely moved into the Top 5 agencies in the 2017 Index.

Notable Mentions

Agencies that maintained Readability levels below college levels: Outside of the Top 5 ranked agencies, only five other agencies achieved Readability scores above 50. Copy at this level is accessible to most of the Irish population. With fewer than half of Irish citizens achieving college degrees, these agencies are more likely to engage citizenry than their peers who offer more complex content.

- [Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht \(50\)](http://www.failteireland.ie)
- [The Office of the Revenue Commissioners \(52\)](http://tiii.ie)
- [Department of Social Protection \(52\)](http://www.dcsa.gov.ie/)
- [Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine \(50\)](http://www.hse.ie)
- [Failte Ireland \(50\)](http://www.failteireland.ie)

VisibleThread™ Clarity Index			Ireland Government – 2017												
		http://	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words	YoY Change	2016 Rank
			Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank				
6	Failte Ireland	http://www.failteireland.ie	10.5	50	8	12%	14	26%	17	1.69	3	59911	-2	4	
7	Transport Infrastructure Ireland	http://tiii.ie	11	45	15	5%	2	35%	26	0.99	1	34613	16	23	
8	Dept of Children and Youth Affairs	http://www.dcsa.gov.ie/	12	44	18	12%	13	20%	5	2.77	12	29221	14	22	
8	Health Services Executive	http://www.hse.ie	12	48	12	11%	10	18%	3	3.56	23	33965	5	13	
10	Dublin City Council	http://www.dublincity.ie	12.25	47	13	11%	12	20%	6	3.19	18	30923	-3	7	
10	Dept of Agriculture Food and the Marine	http://www.ahg.gov.ie/	12.25	50	8	12%	16	23%	11	2.81	14	35033	7	17	

Worst Performers:

This year’s index classifies 7 websites as Worst Performers:

- [Department of Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation \(20th\)](https://www.djei.ie)
- [Department of Finance \(22nd\)](http://www.justice.ie/)
- [Department of Defence \(22nd\)](http://www.defence.ie/)
- [Department of Justice and Equality \(20th\)](http://www.justice.ie/)
- [Central Bank \(24th\)](http://www.centralbank.ie)
- [Department of Transportation, Tourism, and Sport \(25th\)](http://www.dttas.ie/)
- [Department of Public Expenditure and Reform \(26th\)](http://www.per.gov.ie/)

VisibleThread™ Clarity Index			Ireland Government – 2017												
		http://	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words	YoY Change	2016 Rank
			Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank				
20	Dept of Jobs Enterprise and Innovation	https://www.djei.ie	18.5	41	23	10%	8	27%	18	4.59	25	44564	-7	13	
20	Dept of Justice and Equality	http://www.justice.ie/	18.5	37	26	11%	9	23%	13	5.88	26	30717	5	25	
22	Dept of Finance	http://www.finance.gov.ie/	19.25	45	15	13%	20	29%	21	3.37	21	28873	-14	8	
22	Dept of Defence	http://www.defence.ie/	19.25	39	24	12%	18	32%	24	2.53	11	157581	2	24	
24	Central Bank	http://www.centralbank.ie	20.5	42	21	13%	21	26%	16	4.36	24	42599	NA	NA	
25	Dept of Transport Tourism and Sport	http://www.dttas.ie/	21.25	43	19	14%	24	30%	22	3.36	20	23390	-9	16	
26	Dept of Public Expenditure and Reform	http://www.per.gov.ie/	23.25	39	24	15%	25	33%	25	3.24	19	55245	-5	21	

Except for the Central Bank – which was not in the 2016 index – 4 of the 6 websites in this category dropped at least 5 points from last year. The Department of Finance dropped a full 14 points, falling from #8 to #22.

Factors making these the worst performers were:

- Poor readability ratings: With an average score of 40.8, copy on these websites would be very difficult to read for any individual without college education.
- Long, complex sentences: These websites average 28% use of Long Sentences. This practice adds to complexity, making text difficult for the reader to understand. For example, the Department of Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation ranked 25th in Complexity and 18th in Long Sentences due to content like this:

“By signing the form the Person who will make the offer of employment/ Employer /Connected Person or EEA Contractor is committing to comply with a list of declarations specified on the application form which includes, inter alia, notifying the Department if there are any changes to its details, undertaking to check within reason that all of the information to be provided about future employment permit applications and submitted to the Department under the Trusted Partner Initiative are true and correct, asserting that the person in receipt of a permit will receive the remuneration promised and be employed in the capacity stated on the employment permit application form.”

Complexity had the greatest impact on Readability scores for this group of agencies.

- High levels of passive language – An average of 12.5% of sentences in this group contained passive language. This is a slight improvement over the 14% usage by low performers in 2016. It is still 8% higher than the recommended level for readers to effectively engage the material. Passive language is difficult to understand for those with lower reading levels.

The Department of Transportation, Tourism, and Sport and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform were the two worst performers of the group. Neither had a ranking higher than 19 for any measure. Both agencies took steps back from 2016, falling from 16th and 21st place to 25th and 26th. They average 31% Long Sentence Use, and Readability of 41.

Takeaways:

1. Wide variability between best and worst performers

With this index being a comparison of performance to 2016, agencies were grouped into three categories: Top Performers, Notable Mentions, and Worst Performers. While there is a wide variability between the top and bottom of the rankings, there is a middle group that could make significant improvements through focused effort.

- There were 5 agencies considered as Top Performers in this year’s index. They have an average Clear Writing Index score of 6 and a Readability of 55.6. Four of the 5 agencies are consistent top performers, ranking in the Top 6 of the 2016 index.
- Notable Mentions were classified based strictly on achieving a Readability Score above 50, but not qualifying as a Top 5 overall agency. There are strengths and weaknesses within this group. But having a 50+ Readability baseline is a solid foundation for improvement
- Worst performers averaged a Clear Writing score of 20, 14 points higher than the leaders of the pack. With a few minor exceptions, they all fall in the bottom half of every metric. The list was expanded

slightly to reflect the significant drop in rankings for several of these agencies. It is indicative of a lack of focus on clear writing principles.

2. **Those in the middle of the pack can make dramatic improvements**

14 of the 26 indexed agencies have Clear Writing Index scores that fall between 10.5 and 15.25. These rankings will improve with attention to certain metrics.

For instance, the Department of Social Protection ranks 13th overall and ranked #5 in Readability and #2 in Long Sentence Use. But, it ranks #22 in both Passive Use and Complexity. Addressing these two areas will create a better experience for their readers and improve their overall rankings.

3. **Complex content can be clear**

The Courts Service (#2 in Complexity) is an agency concerned with legal matters. Juxtapose with the Department of Justice and Equality's site (26th), it's clear that content dedicated to legal topics doesn't have to present in a complex manner.

4. **Agencies dealing with economics and jobs need to improve**

Websites for the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, The Central Bank, and the Department of Finance all rank near the bottom of the index. Better presentation leads to better engagement and improved confidence. Agencies that are responsible for shepherding economic growth and opportunity in Ireland owe the public more.

Detailed Results Tables

We show the full detailed tables below.

We color-code, green to red, each score in the Index. Green indicates best, red indicates worst. Color-coding helps us to understand sites where one or two specific scores may be dragging down the overall ranking. The 2016 rankings and percentage change are indicated in the final column. Flagging specific areas (for instance, passive language) pinpoints areas for improvement.

VisibleThread™ Clarity Index			Ireland Government – 2017													
Rank	Name	URL	Num Pages	Clear Writing		Readability		Passive		Long		Complex		Num Words	YoY Change	2016 Rank
				Index	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank				
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4	Dept of the Taoiseach	http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/	100	6.5	53	4	7%	5	21%	9	2.10	8	40893	2	6	
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7	Transport Infrastructure Ireland	http://tiii.ie	100	11	45	15	5%	2	35%	26	0.99	1	34613	16	23	
8	Dept of Children and Youth Affairs	http://www.dcy.gov.ie/	100	12	44	18	12%	13	20%	5	2.77	12	29221	14	22	
8	Health Services Executive	http://www.hse.ie	103	12	48	12	11%	10	18%	3	3.56	23	33965	5	13	
10	Dublin City Council	http://www.dublincity.ie	100	12.25	47	13	11%	12	20%	6	3.19	18	30923	-3	7	
10	Dept of Agriculture Food and the Marine	http://www.ahg.gov.ie/	100	12.25	50	8	12%	16	23%	11	2.81	14	35033	7	17	
12	Dept of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht	http://www.ahg.gov.ie/	100	12.5	50	8	12%	15	23%	12	2.82	15	35224	-4	8	
13	Dept of Social Protection	https://www.welfare.ie	100	12.75	52	5	13%	22	17%	2	3.39	22	48784	6	19	
13	The Office of the Revenue Commissioners	http://www.revenue.ie	100	12.75	52	5	14%	23	22%	10	2.80	13	46149	-2	11	
13	Dept of Environment Community and Local Government	http://www.environment.ie/	100	12.75	43	19	10%	7	25%	15	2.19	10	23338	13	26	
16	Dept of Health	http://health.gov.ie/	100	13.75	45	15	11%	11	30%	23	1.89	6	46594	2	18	
16	Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade	https://www.dfa.ie	100	13.75	42	21	6%	3	25%	14	2.97	17	30768	-6	10	
18	Dept of Education and Skills	http://www.education.ie/	100	14.25	46	14	12%	19	21%	8	2.91	16	28016	-15	3	
18	An Garda Síochána	http://www.garda.ie	100	15.25	49	11	16%	26	28%	19	1.81	5	51791	-7	12	
20	Dept of Jobs Enterprise and Innovation	https://www.djei.ie	100	15.5	41	23	10%	8	27%	18	4.59	25	44564	-7	13	
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Methodology – what are the metrics?

- We analyzed the sites on February 4, 2016.
- We scanned up to 100 pages of content using automated crawling techniques. In some cases, we found less than 100 pages, so we included the page count and word count for each agency.
- We crawled starting from the publicly available URL.
- Certain pages within the sample of 100 contain non-textual content (e.g.: videos). We omitted these pages from our scan.

We calculated the index based on 4 metrics. Each metric contributes equally to the final score. The metrics are:

Metric	Formula
1. Readability	
Readability ranges from 1 to 100. 100 is the top mark. If communicating with citizens, aim for at least 50. This is based on the Flesch Reading Ease index.	$(206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{Average Sentence Length}) - (84.6 \times \text{Average Syllables per Word}))$
2. Passive Language	
The % rating is the proportion of sentences with a passive construction. Passive language is where the subject acted upon appears before the verb. For example: "Quality is monitored" vs. "We monitor quality" If you use active voice, you will increase clarity & strength. You will also flush out the 'actor', i.e. who did the action?	$(\text{Passive Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$
3. Long Sentences	
The % rating is the proportion of sentences that are longer than 25 words. Long sentences mask multiple concepts. Splitting up these sentences will result in a clearer message.	$(\text{Long Sentences} / \text{Total Sentences} * 100)$

4. Complex Word Density

The density rating is the proportion of complex words relative to the total word count. This scan looks for complex words/phrases based on Federal Guidelines. See <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/wordsuggestions/simplewords.cfm> for the list scanned. Replacing complex words with simpler words helps your readers concentrate on your content.

(Complex Words/Total Words * 100)

About VisibleThread

VisibleThread helps executives in large organizations govern content quality with less cost and risk. Sales and marketing teams in diverse industries use our technology to improve many functions, including proposal development, contract review and brand audits. Our software finds brand compliance, poor readability and other issues in websites and documents. Unlike consumer-grade analysis tools, VisibleThread processes hundreds of documents and web pages in minutes. Fueled with greater organizational intelligence, customers drive efficiency and reduce cost across their organizations. For more information, visit www.visiblethread.com

For questions or if you want a specific sector index:

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