



Plain Language Assessment

Document owner: Tweed Shire Council

Document title: Website

Certification level: Gold

Date of assessment: July 2021

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Background

In late June 2021, Tweed Shire Council launched its new website on the OpenCities platform. The new website adopts a searchable, customer-focused architecture. It prioritises accessibility, plain English and usability.

The website redevelopment project began in late 2019, with the project plan endorsed by Council's executive team and the Director Corporate Services taking the role of project sponsor. A dedicated website project team was established to manage the work.

The website project team used a consultative approach to review the site's 530 pages, restructure the site in response to users' needs, and rewrite the site's content using plain English principles. Managers nominated a project champion to work with the website team and keep staff informed with the project's progress. The project's vision was to 'significantly enhance the online customer experience and make it easy for residents, businesses and visitors to find exactly what they're looking for regardless of location, age, ability or technology' (from the Website Customer Experience Improvement Project documentation for Council). The project plan highlighted the need for a customer-centric approach, high levels of accessibility, and a commitment to plain language.

At the time of the launch in June 2021, most of the site had been rewritten following plain English principles, and the overall site had been reduced to 350 pages. Plain English editing and page review remains a work in progress.

Initial research (relevant for Silver accreditation)

Assessment

The user and stakeholder research conducted by Tweed Shire Council for its website redevelopment meets the requirements for Silver PlainLanguagePro accreditation. Tweed Shire Council actively sought input from users and stakeholders and incorporated research findings into its website development.

Internal content review

Council's initial research began with an internal review with content owners, stakeholders and the customer services team. The website team adopted a flexible approach to content review and editing to meet the needs of different teams within Council.

As part of the review, the website team considered:

- Common problems and questions encountered by content owners
- Common questions addressed by the customer services team
- The internal database used by the customer services team
- Related content available online.

Content owners were fully involved in the review and plain English editing.

Website analytics review

Prior to conducting research with users, the website team used analytical tools to review the old site:

- Google Analytics and Search Console were used to understand the page traffic, issues with access, common search terms, rankings of various pages, and the time users typically spent on each page. The results of this review were used to inform decisions about search terms and page titles (for example, the page 'Resource Recovery Centre' was renamed 'Tip and resource recovery')
- Hotjar, a heat mapping tool, was used to identify how visitors engaged with key pages, and where they scrolled and clicked.

Website comparison

The website team reviewed the websites of 10 councils of similar size and complexity to Tweed Shire Council, to understand and compare their website structure and usability.

User research

The website team conducted initial research with website users:

- A public survey ran from 3–25 June 2020, using the Hotjar Poll tool. The survey received 796 responses, equating to 4.8% of website users during the survey period. The survey revealed that 60% of residents used the site to look for information about a Council service, and nearly 50% of businesses were using the site to find information about planning and building requirements. More than 50% of respondents said they had no difficulties using the existing site. More than 33% of respondents agreed that information was difficult to find or unavailable. The overall rating of the site indicated that serious improvements were needed.
- An internal staff survey ran from 6–17 July 2020. The survey was completed by 77 staff members. More than half of respondents used the site every day, mostly for finding information or providing information to customers. The overall rating of the site indicated that serious improvements were needed. Many respondents suggested that information was difficult to find, and suggested the site needed a simple search tool.

The survey results supported the initial research findings and informed the website team's approach to developing the new site.

Conclusions from initial research

Initial research confirmed that Tweed Shire Council's existing site had an ad hoc structure with no clear categories. Users found the site difficult to navigate and the search tool did not function as expected. Much of the content was held in multiple locations because the search and linking functions were not successful.

The old website's navigation was so poor that the customer service team maintained detailed notes about where to find relevant information.

Plain language writing and editing (relevant for Bronze accreditation)

Assessment

The textual components of plain language are successfully applied within the new Tweed Shire Council website and meet the requirements for Bronze PlainLanguagePro accreditation. Tweed Shire Council developed a robust process to review and rewrite every part of its website according to the principles of plain language.

Tweed Shire Council understands that plain language is always a work in progress, and has processes in place to consistently review and update the site's content. Each content owner works with a member of the communication team to review any text intended for the website.

Audience

Tweed Shire Council's website has a broad, varied audience with different needs and different levels of knowledge. The website team conducted research with external users (Tweed residents), internal users (Council staff), councillors, content owners, the customer services team, and other stakeholders before they started to rewrite and restructure the site. The new structure is based on user analytics, common search terms, and user feedback.

Purpose

The website's purpose is to put customers' needs first. Council's vision for the site is that anyone should be able to find and understand the information they're looking for. To achieve this, the site is designed to support all aspects of Council's interaction with the community, with content structured in a way that reflects customers' questions not Council's business units.

Content

The website content was substantially rewritten to simplify the text and make it more user focused. The tone is approachable and friendly, yet authoritative.

The site's content review was conducted over 18 months, with the website team working closely with content owners to update and simplify the text. Content revision was closely linked to the questions and problems that users and staff identified in the site. Finalised text was uploaded into the old site in stages to support an ongoing cycle of updating, feedback, and review. This allowed the text to be tested in a live site before the new site was launched.

The content review continues to be a work in progress. To date, the website team has focused most attention on higher-traffic pages.

Complexity of overall site

The overall structure of the website has been simplified and aligned with the terms most commonly used for searching. The new structure aims to cluster content in a way that makes sense to users, not a structure that reflects Council's business units.

The number of pages on the site has been reduced from 530 to around 350. In many cases, the website team amalgamated pages and introduced new jump-downs with reduced repetition and links to key content. Users' interactions with these amalgamated pages will be a particular focus of ongoing review.

Complexity of content

The website team worked closely with content owners to review and simplify the content and combine pages where possible. The text was rewritten following the principles of plain English.

The website team offered plain English training to content owners and Council's communication staff. The centralised content management system ensures that all website content is reviewed by communication staff before it is uploaded to the site.

Some parts of local council websites are mandated by the state government and the Office of Local Government, and the content of these sections is outside of Tweed Shire Council's control. The website team has integrated this content into their site as seamlessly as possible.

Structure

The new website prioritises the information users seek most frequently through jump-to buttons at the top of each page. The site uses headings and subheadings to structure content and support easy navigation.

In most cases, headings clearly link to the text that follows and introductory text provides an introduction to the details that follow. The website team will continue to strengthen the links between headings and content throughout the site.

Tone

The new website is written in a plain, conversational, professional tone. It is simultaneously friendly and authoritative, in a style that suits a local council. The site is written to suit a wide range of users.

The site is written on the assumption that users will come to the site with specific questions, and aims to provide clear information without unnecessary background or spin.

For example, the old site had a page titled 'How to get Development, Building and Environmental Health Advice' that began with:

The Planning and Building section provides a comprehensive range of information on the full development life cycle, with excellent, easy to use web services, such as the Property Enquiry/DA Tracker search (great for gaining customised information and mapping layers for individual properties or localities), and the DA Tracker which monitors the progress and provides the plans/documentation of all development applications received since 1 July 2009.

The new site has a page titled 'Development Advice and Enquiries' that begins with this text:

Planning and building processes are complex. This page will help you find the right advice and information for your development. You may wish to engage the services of a professional consultant.

Paragraphs

To encourage fast navigation, the website uses short paragraphs. Many paragraphs contain just one sentence. Headings and subheadings are used to cluster content and help users navigate through the content quickly.

Sentence structure and word choice

The website uses short sentences and active voice. Parts of the site use a 'you' voice. Words are plain and simple, while doing justice to the depth of the content. To date, the website pages with the highest traffic (such as rates and parking fines) have received the closest editorial attention. Plain English rewriting is a permanent work in progress, with all text reviewed by communication staff prior to uploading. All content is reviewed against a plain English checklist as part of the editorial review.

Punctuation within sentences is minimised in the text. In places, this has resulted in sentences missing structurally useful commas between introductory phrases and the sentence's subject. This problem will be addressed as part of the website's ongoing review.

Graphic devices and navigation

Tweed Shire Council's new website uses accordions to cluster some parts of the content. Usability research suggests that accordions can be a useful device for clustering content when users need to see a full overview before reading detail. Accordions are also useful on sites that users access regularly, because they support fast navigation amongst users who are familiar with the site. However, accordions can present usability problems, particularly for users who are not familiar with their structure and for people who use screen magnifiers. Tweed's website team are aware of the benefits and limitations of accordions, and plan to monitor their use carefully. Accordions will be gradually replaced with simple text wherever possible.

Tweed Shire Council's website makes extensive use of local photographs for both visual appeal and to support the content. Text is never placed over images. Accessibility is supported with meaningful file names and textual descriptions.

Where appropriate, diagrams and maps are used to add simple interactivity to the website. The rates page is a good example of this: it includes an annotated rates notice that links to clear explanations of the seven parts of Tweed Shire Council's rates notices.

User testing (relevant for Gold accreditation)

Assessment

The user testing conducted by Tweed Shire Council for its website redevelopment meets the requirements for Gold PlainLanguagePro accreditation. Tweed Shire Council actively sought feedback from users and stakeholders and improved the website based on user feedback. Council is committed to ongoing testing and improvement.

Internal testing and feedback

While the website redevelopment was underway, the website team organised feedback sessions with the managers of each department to agree on the proposed website structure and identified changes. Regular updates to managers and project champions, and information provided to all staff via the intranet, helped to ensure that staff were informed and engaged with the project. Staff were invited to provide feedback as the project progressed.

In May 2021, the website team conducted user acceptance testing with the customer service team, using scenarios to encourage participants to use the website and respond to inquiries. The testing showed that the team were able to successfully navigate the website to handle inquiries. The testing picked up the need for additional links between pages and suggested some improved plain language explanations.

In June 2021, the pre-live website was made available to all staff for testing. Council's weekly staff newsletter was used to recruit participants, who were invited to give informal feedback about the site.

External testing and feedback

While the website build was underway, the website team met with Council's Equal Access Advisory Committee to seek feedback about problems with the old site and issues relevant to building accessible websites. In June 2021, a website testing session was held with members of the Equal Access Advisory Committee. As a result of this testing, adjustments were made to the site, including improvements to the navigation and search.

In June 2021, the website team conducted user acceptance testing through a business community forum and a focus group with residents (recruited via Council's community engagement portal). The testing used worksheet scenarios and invited users to find relevant information across the website. The website team observed how users accessed the site, then participated in a group debriefing session. The testing revealed that users generally

found the site easy to navigate (and a clear improvement on the old site). The testing led to further improvements to the content and search terms.

Ongoing research and improvements

Tweed Shire Council's new website went live in late June 2021. The website team has an ongoing program to gather feedback from staff, particularly managers and project champions, and will use this feedback for ongoing improvements.

A full accessibility audit of the site is currently underway. An initial summary from the auditor, the Centre for Accessibility, includes: 'Overall, the website is in a very good place – in fact I'd say it's one of the best we've audited with the identified issues relatively straightforward to address'.

A public survey is planned for August 2021 to seek further input and feedback. The results of this survey will be compared with results from the 2020 survey.

Examples

Excerpt from old website: Pensioner Rebates

If you hold a pensioner concession card or veterans affairs gold card (stamped with Total and Permanent Incapacitation (TPI) or Extreme Disablement Adjustment (EDA)), and own and reside in the rated property, then you may be eligible for a rebate on your general rates, as well as your water, sewerage and domestic waste management charges.

This rebate may be automatically applied and will be reflected on your notice. Pensioner rebates are applied to rates and charges on eligible properties at the time of levying the rate in July of each year. Additional adjustments are processed throughout the year.

The full pensioner rebate (100% eligibility per annum) is \$425.00. This includes a rebate off ordinary rates, charges and consumption and is broken down as follows:

- An annual rebate of \$250.00 off the ordinary rate is applied to residential or farmland rated properties (includes garbage charges).
- Where service charges are applicable, a rebate of \$87.50 is available off the sewer access charge.
- Where service charges are applicable, a rebate of \$87.50 is available off the water access charge.
- As the full rebate of \$87.50 is received off the water access charge, there is no longer a reduction available for water consumption.

Eligibility

To be eligible for a pension reduction on rates and water consumption charges:

- The applicant must be the holder of a pensioner concession card or Department of Veteran's Affairs gold card (has to be stamped with TPI or EDA). Further criteria may apply for War Widows (Pension Concession card required - please contact the [Department of Veterans Affairs \(external link\)](#) for Pension Card eligibility). Note: Seniors Card or Health Care Cards are not sufficient.
- The applicant must be the owner, part owner or life tenant of the property (proof of life tenancy under a Will must be provided)
- The property must be the applicant's principal place of residency as shown on their concession card.

Excerpt from new website: Pensioner Rebates

If you hold a Pensioner Concession Card or Veteran Gold Card and own and live in the rated property, you may be eligible for a rebate.

Rebates are available for:

- general rates
- water and sewerage
- household waste management charges

The full pensioner rebate is \$425.

Am I eligible for a pensioner rebate?

[site includes sample cards]

- You must hold a Pensioner Concession Card or Veteran Gold Card (stamped with TPI or EDA). Note: Seniors Cards and Health Care Cards are not eligible.
- For War Widows a pension concession card is required. Contact the Department of Veterans Affairs for pension card eligibility.
- You must be the owner, part owner or life tenant of the property (proof of life tenancy under a Will must be provided).
- The property must be your principal place of residency, as shown on your concession card.

How do I apply for a rebate?

- Complete the online form
- or
- Apply in person at one of Council's customer service centres (**bring your pension or veterans concession card with you**)

How is the rebate calculated?

- An annual rebate of \$250 is applied to residential or farmland rated properties (includes waste collection).
- A rebate of \$87.50 is available off your sewer access charge, if applicable.
- A rebate of \$87.50 is available off your water access charge, if applicable. (As you now receive the full rebate off your water access charge, you can no longer receive a reduction for your water consumption.)

Pensioner rebates are calculated each year and are included on your annual rates notice in July. Any adjustments are made during the year.

Once you have applied to Council the rebate is automatically applied in future years. It will appear on your notice if you remain eligible. If you move to a new property you must reapply for the rebate.

Excerpt from old website: Camping and Caravan Parks

Camping in parks and reserves is NOT permitted in the Tweed Shire. Campers who choose to disregard any related signage could be fined by Council's Compliance Officers.

At its meeting of 17 September 2015, Council resolved to approve a new management plan for Bruce Chick Park, located off the Tweed Valley Way, Stotts Park. The new management plan involves the cessation of a longstanding practice of overnight camping, in preference for a more limited stopping and rest area for travellers.

This decision follows extensive community consultation and investigation of the site conditions, environmental constraints and heritage of the area, including its original intended purpose as envisaged by Bruce Chick. Whilst Council was keen to explore the potential of establishing an RV friendly primitive camping facility at this site, it became evident through the site investigations that such a use would unreasonably conflict with the environmental values of the site as well incur a significant recurrent cost to the ratepayer by way of management and sewerage at the site and other site facilities.

Tweed Shire Council is very supportive of finding suitable alternative sites to seek to tap into the RV friendly campervan market.

To this end Council has been consulting with local industry groups, Destination Tweed, the CMCA and community associations to get their feedback and input into suitable alternative sites that are capable of achieving compliance standards, with an emphasis on finding sites in the Tweed hinterland villages such as Burringbar, Uki and Tyalgum.

Council has also supported the Murwillumbah Showground Trust over the past 12 months in assisting them to seek approval through Crown Lands to utilise that site. The Showground Trust has recently received approval from Council for a primitive camping ground to provide 23 sites for RV Friendly vehicles. This also has the added advantage of supporting a local Society/ Trust/ Community Group whilst also not incurring a cost to the ratepayer of management or maintenance of the site. With its close proximity to town, local businesses are also likely to benefit.

There are 31 quality caravan parks in the Tweed Shire that provide a full range of products and services, including the seven parks operated by [Tweed Holiday Parks \(external link\)](#).

There are no public campervan dump points in the Tweed. Campervan drivers are required to enter caravan parks in the Tweed Shire that contain dump point facilities, most parks only allow paying guests to utilise these facilities.

Excerpt from new website: Camping and Caravan Parks

The Tweed is a great place to go camping. There's a range of options, from waterfront cabins and luxury glamping to powered and unpowered RV and tent sites.

Tweed Holiday Parks

Our 7 spectacular holiday parks are situated on or near a beach, river or tidal creek. Located from Tweed Heads to Pottsville, each park is a stone's throw from the water's edge offering a tranquil space to unwind and recharge.

See [Tweed Holiday Parks](#)

Murwillumbah Showground

Murwillumbah Showground is available for short term camping. Bookings are essential.

See [Murwillumbah Showground](#)

Dump points

There are no public dump points in the Tweed. Most caravan parks allow paying guests to use their dump points.

Prohibited camping and parking

Camping or overnight stays in parks and reserves is not allowed.

Overnight camping in some coastal areas is also prohibited, with no parking between 11 pm and 5 am. This includes areas in Cabarita Beach, Chinderah, Fingal Head, Hastings Point, Kingscliff, Pottsville and Tweed Heads.

Rangers and police patrol these areas, including early morning and at night. On the spot fines are issued to anyone ignoring these restrictions.

See [Overnight prohibited parking zones](#)

To report illegal camping or parking please complete the report a problem online form below or call us on [02 6670 2400](#).

Excerpt from old website: Microchipping

The NSW State Government requires microchipping and lifetime registration for all dogs and cats as part of the [Companion Animals Act \(external link\)](#).

A microchip is about the size of a grain of rice. It consists of a tiny computer chip housed in a type of glass made to be compatible with living tissue. The microchip is implanted between the dog's shoulder blades under the skin with a needle and special syringe. The process is similar to getting a shot. Little to no pain is experienced - most dogs do not seem to even feel it being implanted.

Once in place, the microchip can be detected immediately with a hand-held device that uses radio waves to read the chip. This device scans the microchip and then displays a unique alphanumeric code. Once the microchip is in place, the details must be registered on the [NSW Pet Registry \(external link\)](#). Then, the dog can be traced back to the owner if found.

If you are an owner with a new cat or dog that you have bought or that has been given to you, you must ensure the animal is microchipped. Once your animal is microchipped you are then required to have it lifetime registered at the age of six months old. Lifetime registration is compulsory for all cats and dogs in the state of NSW, which are bought, sold, given as gifts or have transferred ownership on or after 1 July 1999. This can be done at Council's Customer Service Centre. For further information on the Companion Animals legislation, visit the NSW Office of Local Government's [Dogs and Cats web page \(external link\)](#).

Dog Owners

All dogs born after 1st July 1999, or where the ownership of the dog changes after 1st July 1999, must be microchipped then registered for life at six months of age.

Puppies must be microchipped by 12 weeks of age or before change of ownership. They must be registered for life by six months of age.

Cat Owners

Cats owned prior to 1st July 1999 do not have to be registered for life, however all cats must by law be identifiable by a collar, tag or microchip. Cats sold or given away after 1st July 1999 must be microchipped and registered for life.

Kittens born after 1st July 1999 should be microchipped by 12 weeks or before change of ownership. They must be registered for life by 6 months of age.

All cats that are impounded must be microchipped and registered for life prior to release.

Excerpt from new website: Microchipping

If you're the owner of a new cat or dog you must make sure your pet is microchipped.

By law all dogs and cats must be microchipped by the age of 12 weeks (or when sold or given away, whichever comes first). Penalties apply if you fail to microchip your pet by 12 weeks of age.

Not sure if your pet is microchipped?

Make an appointment with your vet who will scan your pet. If no microchip is found, the vet can implant one and add the details to the [NSW Pet Registry](#).

If a microchip is found, the vet will give you a verification form with your pet's microchip number.

Once your pet is microchipped and entered on the [NSW Pet Registry](#), you can create an online profile to 'claim' your pet. You can then pay your pet's lifetime registration online.

How is a microchip implanted?

A very small computer chip is implanted under the skin of your pet, usually around the shoulder. The microchip contains a 15-digit number which is added to the [NSW Pet Registry](#).

The microchip number is linked to your name and contact details, so your pet can be easily returned if it is lost or stolen.

Is your pet microchipped but you don't have the number?

Make an appointment with your vet. The vet will scan your pet and give you a verification form with your pet's microchip number. Then [contact us](#) to see if the microchip number is on the [NSW Pet Registry](#).