Interreg North Sea Region Like! European Regional Development Fund — EUROPEAN UNION

Municipality of Groningen, Vechta and Rotterdam

Case Study Papers

Inclusive Communication

About LIKE!

Local governments, citizens, universities and SMEs come together to co-create smarter, more efficient and more innovative services through 9 transnational pilots that cover 3 core themes:

Innovation Culture Approach

Smart Services

Digital Dashboards

SIMPLIFIED LANGUAGE IS VERY DIFFICULT

Local governments are providing services to all their citizens. In order to get in touch with their inhabitants, these municipalities are communicating in various ways, in many cases by letters. However, it often happens that these letters or the information on municipal websites is unclear, is written in complicated language, or consists of sentences which are too long. As a result, citizens do not understand what the government is asking from them, or providing them with. This also means exclusion of certain target groups. To improve understandability, the municipalities of Groningen (NL) and Vechta (GER) and Rotterdam (NL) conducted pilots to understand what could be an obstacle for citizens in understanding governmental communication. This knowledge has been used to improve public service delivery by adapting their communications to the needs of the citizens.

Relations to Workpackages

By using focus groups, these pilots show how important it is to evaluate used communication language by local governments. Communication styles can determine social inclusion by adapting their public service delivery to the needs of target groups.

Local partners

Team 'Better Letters'
Municipality of Groningen
www.gemeente.groningen.nl

Municipality of Vechta
www.vechta.de

Support of Like! team in project "Understand the letter"
Municipality of Rotterdam
www.rotterdam.nl

This Case Study Paper is produced by Christina Rasche, Esmeralde Marsman and Evite van Winkoop

Groningen: the approach

The team for Better Letters developed a three approaches project. First of all, knowledge has to be gathered. This has been done by taking municipal letters to a focus group of low-literate . The focus group shows that jargon can easily been misinterpreted, and that long sentences make a letter unreadable. The focus group helps civil servants to see how their choice of language can be misleading. Second, awareness has been created for a new way of working which changes the culture of public service delivery. Instead of sending out large amounts of letters and receiving large amounts of questions from the public, the author of the letter first sends the letter to the customer contact centre of the municipality. In that way, the employees from the contact centre can help in improving the letters based on their expertise from expected questions from the public. And last, a "Letter Doctor" has been appointed who helps writing letters in an understandable way and who gives writing tips.

Groningen: the reason

The adopted service norm within the municipality gives the right to the citizens to have access to up-to-date information in understandable language. "The citizens can therefore hold the municipal accountable if they don't understand its information" says Carine Plantinga of the team for Better Letters. In the public service delivery department of the municipality they are aiming for a high level of service delivery, but when citizens don't understand the municipal letters, the quality of service reduces. The council therefore called for action in order to counter social exclusion due to difficult language. They implemented the letter audits (colleague of the civil servant who sends a letter checks the comprehensibility of the letter), but noticed room for improvements. Member of team for Better Letters Anja Pouw explains that "citizens don't understand the complicated words the civil servants consider as standard. The inhabitants of Groningen don't know the law by heart, they don't understand all the abbreviations civil servants find logical." Therefore an outside in approach was needed.

Groningen: the result

"We notice that due to our team of Better Letters and the campaigns we held, colleagues are more easily able to ask for help." says Anja. The awareness campaign shows results, according to Carine "because colleagues develop awareness of the importance of language." Still, the project will further develop by aiming to reach even more civil servants, focus on awareness and the inclusion of external focus groups to help improving the municipal letters.

BRIEVEN-DOKTER

Vechta: the reason

The idea to incorporate simplified language came up when the municipality of Vechta relaunched the homepage and the news website of the City of Vechta. "Since the new homepage successively includes more and more online services, it is of even more importance that all citizens understand how to navigate to these services" says Christina Rasche of the municipality. This increases the public service delivery to the people.

Vechta: the approach

To realize this new approach, the municipality formulated a text, which was translated into simplified language by the 'Sprach-Werk - Simplified Language Agency' from the Andreaswerk Vechta (a provider of support services for people with a disability). People from the Andreaswerk did not only translate the text; but residents with learning and reading difficulties also checked the comprehensibility before publication.
The municipality of Vechta included the content in simplified language on their website, which applies the set of rules formulated by the German 'Netzwerk Leichte Sprache e.V'.
The objective with that is to help people who have learning or reading difficulties, impaired memory or a low level of literacy to understand how to navigate in and to certain sections of the website. In addition, content in simplified language contributes to barrier-free websites.

Vechta: the result

For now, the pilot on simplified language is completed. Christina concludes: "we think that guidance in simplified language on how to navigate in and to certain sections of the website is an important first step to make a municipal website more understandable for people with certain restrictions." However, the users might have problems understanding other texts on the website or within online services from external providers, which are not translated into simplified language. Therefore, thinking comprehensibility through to the end, the municipality would need to look on all these websites – but in practice, especially on websites from external providers, we cannot influence the contained text.

Rotterdam: the reason

In Rotterdam the ambition is that their services fit every citizen. Therefore the municipality of Rotterdam pays extra attention to the citizens who have more difficulty to read or to use their digital services. Their slogan is: "Well done for all Rotterdammers!" There are several projects to approve letters in all domains of the municipality. Sharing knowledge and ways of working is something the municipality is always looking for.

Rotterdam: the approach

In this specific project "Understand the letter" 170 letters about care and welfare were screened and 107 letters were approved together with and with support of the target group. There was a close cooperation with the Like! Project which was developing letters with pictures at the same time (another use case). The municipality shared the contacts of several NGO's who were helping to find citizens with low literacy, learning difficulties and with financial debts. They shared the way of testing: colleagues who are responsible of making the letters were part of the test team and they facilitated the test days to be well organized ánd to have fun for both citizens and employees.

Rotterdam: the result

Besides that 107 letters were approved, Rotterdam shared the learning points within the municipality. These projects which make letters comprehensible for citizens are highly underestimated. It takes a lot of time and patience to realize the letters within IT systems and the requirements from several stakeholders within the organization (e.g. the legal department). It has helped a lot that target groups were helping the municipality to understand how a good letter is written. And it is extremely important to have colleagues on board who are responsible for the letters.

Because letters are never finished; it is a continuous process. "Understand the letter" was originally meant as title for the citizen, but after these kind of projects we know that it is especially applicable for us, civil servants.

Tips for understandable communication

- Awareness within the organisation is key
- Don't focus to much on the project method. The end result is most important
- Be flexible in the organisation of the project; don't set your rules in stone
- Make the process as effective as possible. The extra steps you ask employees to take, should not take too much time.

What is easy language?

Features of simplified language are precise, uncomplicated words, short sentences, hyphenation of long words and no idioms. This is backed up with explanatory images, large fonts and generous line spacing. Examples of simplified language can be found on the website of Vechta municipality.

www.vechta.de/hilfe-in-leichter-