A Plain English Guide to Social Services
With an estimated one in four adults having literacy difficulties, agencies dealing with the public face particular challenges in ensuring that people can understand and use their services. One step in the right direction is to use plain English. This Guide to Social Services, from the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), explains the most common terms in plain English. It does not offer strict legal definitions, but it does aim to help you understand the most common phrases you might hear or read. For full details, please contact the relevant public service organisation.

NALA plans to update this guide online to ensure that it maintains its relevance. If you have any suggestions for additions please email them to info@nala.ie. All figures mentioned in this guide are current at time of publication, September 2010.

The Social Inclusion Division, Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs supports this project as part of its funding initiative for the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010.
abstinence
The free choice to avoid doing or taking something such as alcohol or drugs.

adjacent rate
The level of maintenance grant that is available to a student (if they qualify) when their home address is within 24 kilometres of the college or university they plan to attend. Other factors, such as family income and the number of other dependants, affect how much of the grant the student actually receives.

administration
Operating or managing a programme or scheme or doing paperwork to keep records.

agenda
A list of things to be done, for example items to discuss at a meeting.

applicable
Applying to something, for example ‘applicable conditions’ mean the conditions that apply to something.

There are no terms starting with the letter B.

certification
A process to confirm something about a person or organisation, usually through some form of exam, for example that a person has learned a particular subject or gained a set of skills to work in a particular occupation.

Community Childcare Subvention Scheme
A scheme that contributes to the cost of childcare where the parents are claiming a social welfare payment.

child dependant
For many – though not all - social welfare schemes, a child up to age 18 who normally lives with and is being supported by an adult or a child up to the age of 22 who is in full-time education by day at a recognised school, college or university. Different rules apply to different social welfare schemes.

Childcare Education and Training Scheme
A scheme that contributes to the cost of childcare where the parents are doing a training course in their local VEC or with FAS.

clarification
A statement that clarifies something by explaining it.

community policing
A system set up by An Garda Síochána under which a Garda is responsible for policing a particular area such as a housing estate or small village. The Garda works to build up good relationships with the residents to help them tackle and prevent crime.
continuum of care
A range of services and supports that a person may receive to address their different needs as they age or, for example, to help them deal with different stages of an illness or recovery from addiction.

contributory payment
A social welfare payment that depends on how many pay-related social insurance (PRSI) contributions a person has made in a certain period.

cooling-off period
A period of time during which a person can change their mind about a contract, for example for a service, and cancel it without paying any penalties. The length of the period depends on the service. If a person cancels, they will still need to pay any bills they run up.

credits
PRSI contributions that are recorded for a person when they are absent from work due to illness and cannot pay their own PRSI. They help keep a person’s record of social insurance contributions up-to-date to help them qualify for social welfare payments and benefits in the future.

custody
The day-to-day care and upbringing of children who are under age 18. Usually one parent is granted custody following separation or divorce hearings, but sometimes parents can have joint custody and arrange for the children to spend an equal amount of time with each of them.

data
For this guide, the personal information such as name, date of birth, address and so on that people give to Government bodies, phone, gas or electricity companies or insurance providers to receive a service.

developmental
Relating to a child’s growth and development, for example how they feel or think (developmental psychology) or whether there are any difficulties in how they speak or move (developmental delays).

differential rent
Rent for local authority housing that is based on the tenants’ income rather than a fixed rate for the property. Tenants apply to pay differential rent and the local authority decides how much rent they should pay, depending on their household’s total income, the number of children in full-time education and so on.

direct payment
A secure and confidential method of lodging a social welfare payment directly into a person’s bank, building society, post office or credit union account using electronic fund transfer (EFT).

Domiciliary Care Allowance
A monthly payment from the Department of Social Protection to a carer of a child who is so disabled that the help they need with day-to-day tasks is far beyond what another child of the same age would need. The child must be likely to need this level of care and attention for at least 12 months.
Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme
A scheme introduced by the Government in April 2009 under which children aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months can attend a pre-school for one year free of charge.

equity
For this guide, the value of a property that you own after paying a mortgage. If a property is worth less than the mortgage that remains to be paid, a person is in ‘negative equity’.

exempted development
Works that a person or organisation may carry out without needing planning permission, as long as the works meet the conditions in the Planning Regulations 2001. Examples include building house extensions of a certain size, laying electrical cables, installing satellite dishes, providing post boxes and so on, once the Regulations are obeyed.

forum
A public meeting or a gathering for discussion. It can be a physical gathering in the same place or a gathering over the internet, for example on message boards.

functional need
The support a person needs to carry out a basic function such as walking, washing, eating or communicating.

grantee
A person or organisation that receives property or receives funding.

grantor
A person or organisation that transfers property to another person or organisation or that gives funding.

guardian ad litem
Literally ‘guardian at law’, an independent, experienced and qualified person who is appointed by the court to speak up for the best interests of the child during separation or divorce hearings.

habitual residence condition
A condition that people must meet, regardless of where they live, to receive certain social welfare payments. Simply put, the condition means that a person must show they have a proven close link to Ireland. See ‘habitual residence’.
habitual residence, habitually resident
Under Irish and European law, habitual residence depends on the following factors:
• your main centre of interest, based on facts such as:
  - whether you own or lease a home here,
  - where your close family members live,
  - whether you belong to social or professional associations here, and
  - any other evidence or activities indicating a settled residence in Ireland
• the length and continuity of your residence in Ireland or other parts of the Common Travel Area (which is Ireland, Great Britain, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man)
• the length of and reason for any absence from Ireland
• the nature and pattern of your employment, if any
• your future intention to live in the Republic of Ireland as it appears from the evidence.

half-child rate
Short-hand for ‘half the Increase for a Qualified Child’. If a person is claiming a social welfare payment, they will get only a half-child rate (instead of the full rate) if their spouse or partner has a weekly income of more than €310 or has a social welfare payment in their own right. See also ‘Increase for a Qualified Child’.

harm reduction
A set of policies and practical steps designed to reduce the harm linked to drug use and other high-risk activities without seeking to stop the activity.

impair
Harm or damage

income threshold
An amount of income that acts as a cut off point. Someone earning more than this amount may be required to pay higher taxes or be entitled to fewer benefits from the Government or local authority. For example, most people earning more than the income threshold of €15,028 a year or €289 a week must pay an income levy.

Increase for a Qualified Adult (IQA)
An additional amount paid to a person who receives certain social welfare payments to cover the cost of supporting an adult who depends on them. See also qualified adult.

Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC)
An additional amount paid to a person receiving certain social welfare payments to cover the cost of supporting a child dependant. See also child dependant.

interim
Temporary

There are no terms starting with the letter J.

There are no terms starting with the letter K.
link (on website)
An image, a word or phrase on a website that a person can click to go to another part of the same website or to a different site.

maladministration
Literally, poor or failed administration, which occurs when a public body fails to do something it should have done, does something in the wrong way or does something it should not have done. Under the Ombudsman Act 1980 maladministration is an action that was or might have been:
- taken without proper authority,
- taken on irrelevant grounds,
- the result of negligence or carelessness,
- based on incorrect or incomplete information,
- improperly discriminatory,
- based on an undesirable administrative practice, or
- otherwise contrary to fair or sound administration.

mandatory
Something that must be done because the law requires it. For example, if a person is found guilty of murder, the judge gives them a mandatory sentence of life in prison.

means
Any income, property (besides a family home) or other asset that could bring in money or provide an income.

means test
A way of working out the value of a person’s means by considering the value of their investments and property, any savings and any cash-in-hand or money in a current account.

minor
In Ireland, a person under the age of 18 who does not yet have the same legal rights as adults, for example to vote, to sit on a jury or to drink alcohol.

municipal
Something that belongs to or comes from a city, town or village such as a swimming pool, library or art gallery.

municipal waste
Household waste, street waste and small-scale waste from businesses such as paper and packaging.

National Drugs Strategy
The Government’s long-term plan to minimise drug use in Ireland. It is based on five main activities: reducing the supply of drugs, preventing drug use, treating and rehabilitating addicts and conducting research on drugs and drug use.

next of kin
Someone who is a close relative or who is married to you. The next of kin has certain rights, for example in relation to a person’s medical care and information.
non-adjacent rate
The level of maintenance grant that is available to a student (if they qualify) when their home address is more than 24 kilometres from the college or university they plan to attend. Other factors, such as family income and the number of other dependants, affect how much of the grant the student actually receives.

non-contributory payment
Known as social assistance, a social welfare payment that is based on a person’s means as verified by a means test.

There are no terms starting with the letter O.

policy
A principle or rule to guide decisions and achieve certain goals. It can apply to a person, an organisation or the Government.

precedent
A decision or an action that creates a principle or rule that can be followed if the same situation arises again. Many court cases set legal precedents, which can be used in later, similar court cases.

primacy
The state of being most important or first in rank. For example, the Irish Constitution recognises the primacy of EU law, meaning that if there is any conflict between Irish laws and current EU laws, the EU laws must be followed.

provisional
Something that is arranged for now but may be changed later, for example a provisional date for a meeting.

qualification
Evidence of knowledge, skill or expertise in a certain subject; also, a statement that can limit the meaning of another, broader statement.

qualified adult
A person’s spouse or partner who is completely or mainly maintained by them, or, if the person is single, widowed, divorced or separated and has children, someone aged 16 or over who minds the children, lives with the person and is being maintained by them.
ratification
A formal approval of an agreement, usually one made between countries. For example, in Ireland, we ratify international agreements by either voting for them in parliament or passing them in a referendum.

rebuttal
An argument (with evidence) that is presented to contradict or cancel out evidence from an opposing person or group.

reckonable earnings
Earnings on which a person pays pay related social insurance (PRSI). The reckonable earnings are what is left from a person’s total earnings after they make pension contributions and any payment into a permanent health insurance scheme recognised by the Revenue Commissioners. Total earnings can include salary, wages, fees, commissions, bonuses, Christmas boxes, overtime, pay during sickness, holiday pay or pay instead of holidays and the value of a benefit-in-kind (such as a car).

registration
The act of signing up, enrolling in something or applying for a licence and, if necessary, providing supporting documents. For example, people register to vote, certain foreign nationals must register at their local Garda station and doctors must register with the Medical Council to be allowed to work in Ireland.

Rehabilitative Earnings Disregard
The amount of money a person may earn from rehabilitative work (work to help them recover from an injury) without it being taken into account when checking if they qualify for Rent Supplement.

representation
Having a person or group stand in for another person or group or speaking with authority on their behalf. For example, the Irish public have representation in the Dail through the TDs they elect.

reserved functions
Functions or duties that are carried out by the elected councillors of a local authority. The functions are defined in law and usually relate to the direction of the authority rather than its day-to-day running. Examples of reserved functions include agreeing the authority’s annual budget, development plan and bye-laws (laws for the area covered by the authority).

retention permission
A type of planning permission that is given for a structure after it is built. If granted, the permission allows the person to ‘retain’ (keep) the structure even though they did not apply for permission before the building started.

retrofitting
Adding new technology or features to something that has existed for a while, for example installing a modern gas boiler in an older house.

retrospective
Literally, ‘looking back’. In public service terms, new rules or procedures can be retrospective, meaning that they apply to situations that existed before they were introduced.
return post
A phrase meaning that someone will send a reply in the post very soon or expects a reply in the post very soon.

scheme of letting priorities
A guide that local authorities use to help them decide how to house tenants. Each authority considers who has the greatest need for housing and gives points to each person or household based on different factors, for example whether they are homeless, live in unsafe or overcrowded accommodation or have poor health. Those with the most points are generally housed first.

social insurance
A Government insurance plan that is paid for through taxes and PRSI contributions and compensates people for loss of income due to old age, unemployment, disability, illness or maternity, for example.

standing charge
A fixed amount that a person pays to a supplier of a service to cover its running costs. The amount is separate to the cost of actually using the service. For example, a person pays for the amount of gas they use every two months but may also need to pay a standing charge to cover the gas supplier’s costs.

statute barred
A legal action that can no longer be taken or will be dismissed because the time limit for taking it (as stated in a statute, or law) has passed. For example, the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 to 2007 allow someone five weeks to object to an application for planning permission. If a person objects after this time, their objection is statute barred.

substantial compliance
Obeying the essential conditions of a contract or set of procedures even if other, less important, requirements have not been met.

strategy
A detailed and carefully considered plan of action to achieve something. For example, an organisation may have a strategy of working with partners to achieve their goals.

terms of reference
Details of an activity such as its purpose, its goals, the main things that will be done and the schedule for doing them. Terms of reference are often agreed at the start of an activity, for example a project or the work of a committee.

third party
A person or organisation that is not one of two people or groups in a relationship. For example, if a person is dealing with an organisation on a particular matter, any other person or organisation is a third party.
**underlying entitlement**
In social welfare terms, a person’s right to receive a payment because they meet its conditions even if they receive – or wish to receive - another social welfare payment. For example, anyone wishing to claim a training allowance under the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) must, among other things, have an underlying entitlement to Jobseeker’s Allowance or Jobseeker’s Benefit.

**universal payment**
A social welfare payment or benefit that a person receives no matter how many PRSI contributions they have made or the level of their means. Examples include Child Benefit and Free Travel.

There are no terms starting with the letters V, W, X, Y and Z.

**Common abbreviations and acronyms**

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<td>RAS</td>
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What is NALA?

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA was established in 1980 and has campaigned since then for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland. NALA’s mission is to make sure people with literacy difficulties can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs.