



13/5/25

Re: Balance Aotearoa submission on the proposed repeal of the Plain Language Act (2022)

Tēnā koutou

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed repeal of the Plain Language Act (2022).

Balance Aotearoa

Balance Aotearoa provides high quality mental health and addiction peer support, advocacy, consultancy, and education that enables people to improve their relationships and wellbeing.

Nationally, we work as consultants and advisors on human rights for disabled people and act as an amplification of the voice of people who are experienced or experiencing distress. We represent “persons with psychosocial disability” on the Disabled Persons Organisations’ Coalition, and the Independent Monitoring Mechanism, advising the government and monitoring the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Our contracts fund us to serve those with significant mental/emotional distress and addiction struggles who live in the community (both urban and rural setting) and those who find themselves in acute psychiatric and forensic inpatient settings. We also employ peer support staff that work within the Hapai Mauri Tangata crisis co-response team working alongside police to respond to mental health call outs. We have an open-door policy and accept anyone who identifies themselves as needing support. We are working towards opening a new crisis café in the next few months to bridge the gap in service provision during weekends, within Whanganui.

Our peer support service kaupapa is summarised as “enabling tāngata whai ora to create and maintain a life worth living”. Balance Aotearoa (formerly known as Balance Whanganui) has operated since the mid 1990's and has its origins in mutual self-help support groups for people experiencing mood disorders. We now focus



upon people who experience any form of mental distress and run a range of engaging, holistic recovery focused groups as well as seeing people one-to-one.

We have a strong team of 12 peer support workers. All staff are qualified by experience as we all have lived experience of mental/emotional distress and/or addiction. To guide their practice as peer support workers, all will have participated in a peer support training program that meets the peer support competencies advocated by Te Pou. In addition, all of our team have a Level 4 Mental Health Support qualification or are working towards this.

We have developed a Kaupapa Māori peer support framework with our Kaumatua Kori Hemi from Ratana, guiding us with Mātauranga and Te Ao Māori wisdom and practices when working with people in our community. We also work with the understanding of our community in relation to Te Awa Tupua.

Nō te kawa ora a 'Tupua te Kawa' hei taura here nā Te Awa Tupua me ōna tāngata ki te kawa nō tawhito rangi. - The natural law and value system of Te Awa Tupua, which binds the people to the River and the River to the people

Ko te Awa te mātāpuna o te ora - The river is the source of spiritual and physical sustenance, in this we understand that Te Awa Tupua is a spiritual and physical entity that supports and sustains both the life and natural resources within the Whanganui River and the health and well-being of the iwi, hapū, and other communities of the River.

E rere kau mai te Awa nui mai i te Kāhui Maunga ki Tangaroa - The great River flows from the mountains to the sea. Te Awa Tupua is an indivisible and living whole from the mountains to the sea, incorporating the Whanganui River and all of its physical and metaphysical elements.

Ko au te Awa, ko te Awa ko au - I am the River and the River is me. The iwi and hapū of the Whanganui River have an inalienable connection with, and responsibility to, Te Awa Tupua and its health and well-being.

Ngā manga iti, ngā manga nui e honohono kau ana, ka tupu hei Awa Tupua - The small and large streams that flow into one another and form one River. Te Awa Tupua is a singular entity comprised of many elements and communities, working



collaboratively for the common purpose of the health and well-being of Te Awa Tupua.

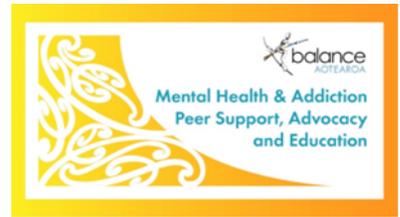
We meet people where they are at and work with them in whatever way they find most helpful. All our work is guided by our tāngata whai ora, as we form intentional peer relationships exploring together ways to wellbeing and empowerment. We steer away from being the experts, and avoid rescuing, correcting and advising, instead we aim to listen and understand, to share our experience as relevant, offer hope and model healthy relationships. Peer support can happen in any environment when people are willing to connect and engage. We are about building healthy communities for ALL people.

Our submission

We are writing this submission on the proposed repeal of the Plain Language Act as a Disabled Persons Organisation and on behalf of our membership of tāngata mātau-ā-wheako and tāngata whai ora (people with living experience of mental distress and addiction, and those seeking wellbeing). Included in our membership are people from all walks of life who also benefit from plain language – Autistic, neurodiverse and Deaf people, people with low literacy levels or with English as a second language, older people and people with learning disability.

We are worried about the proposed repeal of this Act. It is already so hard to get information on proposed changes that affect us and to understand what services and supports we can access. Information is power and only having hard to understand information is like gate-keeping information about what people are entitled to. For example, people experiencing mental distress or crises desperately need information in plain language to understand what is happening to them, what choices and rights they have, and how to ask for help or make a complaint. Health entities have consistently not made accessible information available to people in distress, and we have little faith that they will start to do so without being mandated.

Aotearoa New Zealand is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and as such, has obligations to provide accessible information so that Disabled people can get the Rights they are entitled to, like being able to participate in government processes and our democracy (article 29). We know that without this Act, access to information will be worse again (like it was before the Act was in place). Having this Act means we are more likely to find information that we can understand and have our say on important issues. We can



use it to remind agencies (which we still have to do constantly) that their Ministry-speak documents and diagrams are not accessible for anyone who is not a civil servant.

By saying that having this Act and designated plain language officers in government agencies (to teach civil servants how to make plain language information – which many don't know how to do) is a “waste of money”, this is saying that communicating with and including Disabled people is not important. We constitute 24 percent of the population of Aotearoa, and in an ageing society such as Aotearoa New Zealand, we will be a group increasing in size and proportion, not decreasing. The Government should be taking steps to account for this, not dismissing it, and us.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Ngā mihi,

Alexia Black

National Chairperson
Board of Trustees
Balance Aotearoa