

Born to crusade

One woman's battle to wipe out
gobbledygook and legalese



**Plain
English
Campaign**

A CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE ON BENEFITS?

LIVERPOOL City Council have voted against publishing a leaflet that would have simplified and explained all the welfare benefits we are entitled to. Welfare benefits such as school meals, clothing grants, cheap milk, free dental treatment, are surrounded by a legal tangle of if's and but's that confuse everyone—especially old people, who most need the help.

Manchester Corporation have printed a special pamphlet explaining everything simply and telling people what they are probably entitled to claim.

But Liverpool have decided to keep you in the dark—for the sake of the measly amount it would have cost to print a small pamphlet.

But the council can afford to publish glossy brochures and advertisements telling us "Don't look now, yesterday's gone". (Ha! Hands up those

with outside toilets, no baths, no hot running water, and four kids in a bedroom).

Those public relations brochures cost thousands of pounds to produce.

But now they're telling us they haven't got enough to print a pamphlet to help the old and those in need. Must Liverpool Council always lag behind the rest of the country?

Since the price of school meals went up, 20 per cent of Liverpool schoolchildren have stopped eating meals at

school because they can't afford it. Families with four children at school have a hard enough time as it is.

It would be a good idea if the mothers of Tuebrook banded together and made sure their children got what they are entitled to.

In the next issue the Bugle will begin a series on what you are entitled to. We want everyone to claim their rights. And we'll do what the council have refused to do and simplify all the complicated jargon.

In May 1971, Chrissie Maher began her campaign for plain English by attacking the city council for its gobbledygook. As the council had refused to give people clear information about the benefits they were entitled to, she would simplify the complicated jargon.

The early years

Growing up in post-war Britain, Chrissie, like many other children, never had the chance to get a good education. In her mid-teens she eventually learnt to read and write. 'I thought that compensation was what made wallpaper peel off' explained Chrissie.

Chrissie was rescued from a life of difficulty by her first employer, Harry Deverell, who paid for her to go to night school. 'If it hadn't been for Harry, I don't think Plain English Campaign would ever have happened' recalls Chrissie.

By 1971, Chrissie was married with four children and still living in Tuebrook in Liverpool where she had grown up. By then Chrissie had realised that even her friends who were well educated seemed to be struggling to understand official information.

The biggest problem at the time seemed to be benefit forms. People who were desperately short of money were struggling to fill in the official forms which would get them financial help from the Government.

At that time the only newspapers were those produced by big businesses and written by professional journalists. Chrissie tried to get these newspapers to help her in her quest to help local people, but she had little luck.

To combat this, Chrissie and her friends founded the UK's first 'community newspaper', the 'Tuebrook Bugle'. This was at a time before the birth of desktop publishing and a great mystique still surrounded the production of newspapers.

By writing the newspaper in plain English, Chrissie and her friends were able to explain the problems faced by the people of her community and give advice about benefit forms. The incredible success of the Tuebrook Bugle led to the birth of over 50 other

community newspapers which fulfilled a similar role. (The Tuebrook Bugle continued to be published until 1979.)

In 1974, Chrissie went on to create an organisation called 'Impact Foundation'. This organisation gave Chrissie the chance to pass on the skills she had learnt to people who were keen to learn communication skills and how to produce their own newspapers. Even university students came to the foundation to learn the skills of typography and how to write in plain English.

Through her work in the community, Chrissie realised that there were many adults like her who had not had the chance to learn to read and write properly. At that time the only reading materials available for semi-literate adults were books aimed at children. To overcome this problem Chrissie launched 'The Liverpool News', the UK's first newspaper for adults with reading difficulties. 'This paper gave adults something they could read without being embarrassed' recalls Chrissie. 'It also proved to be a great way of helping people to understand the problems they were likely to encounter with the baffling language used in public information.'



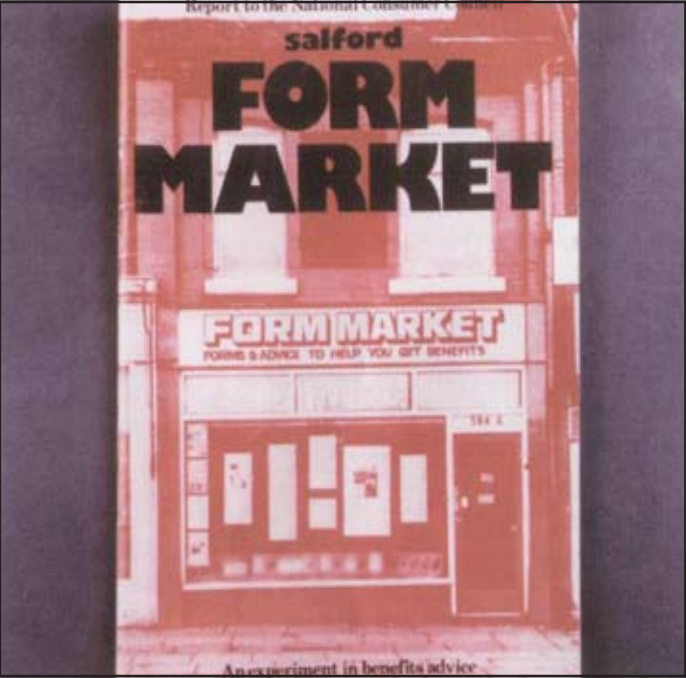
All the original editorial team of The Liverpool News. From left to right are: Mel Akers, Lou Hunt, Don Welch, Tony Hood and Chrissie Maher.



The Tuebrook Bugle team with the first issue of the newspaper in 1971.

Gathering momentum

By 1975, Chrissie's reputation as a campaigner had spread across the UK. With this in mind, the newly-formed National Consumer Council (NCC) invited her to become a member of their team of councillors to help protect the interests of consumers. With the help of the NCC, Chrissie was able to set up the 'Salford Form Market' in Greater Manchester. At the form market, Chrissie and her colleagues were able to give practical help with filling in government forms. It also gave Chrissie and her team a great knowledge of the exact problems that existed in the language and design of official forms. During her time at the form market, Chrissie tried everything in her power to enlist support for her efforts to put government forms into plain English.



One of the people who took notice was Professor David Donnison, chairman of the Supplementary Benefits Commission. David was keen to make the commission's forms easier to understand and thought that Chrissie was just the person to involve in the project. Chrissie and her team then set about preparing a set of demonstration rewrites to prove that official information could be put into plain English. These new forms won official approval, but the civil service seemed reluctant to put the plain-language versions into public use.

A time for action

By 1979, Chrissie was so dissatisfied with the speed of progress that she decided she would need to launch a national campaign to force the Government and businesses into action.

Together with her daughter, Carol, and some students, Chrissie headed for London and the Houses of Parliament. In the centre of Parliament Square, opposite the Houses of Parliament, they set up a table and started to



Shredding forms in Parliament Square to officially launch Plain English Campaign.

shred hundreds of atrocious government forms. Within minutes police officers were there to see what all the commotion was about. Surrounded by television, radio and newspaper reporters, a police officer read out a 100-word sentence that was from the 1839 Metropolitan Police Act and full of archaic legalese. Chrissie asked, 'Does that gobbledygook mean we have to go?' The police officer had made Chrissie's point as forcibly as the shredding itself. Plain English Campaign had been officially founded.

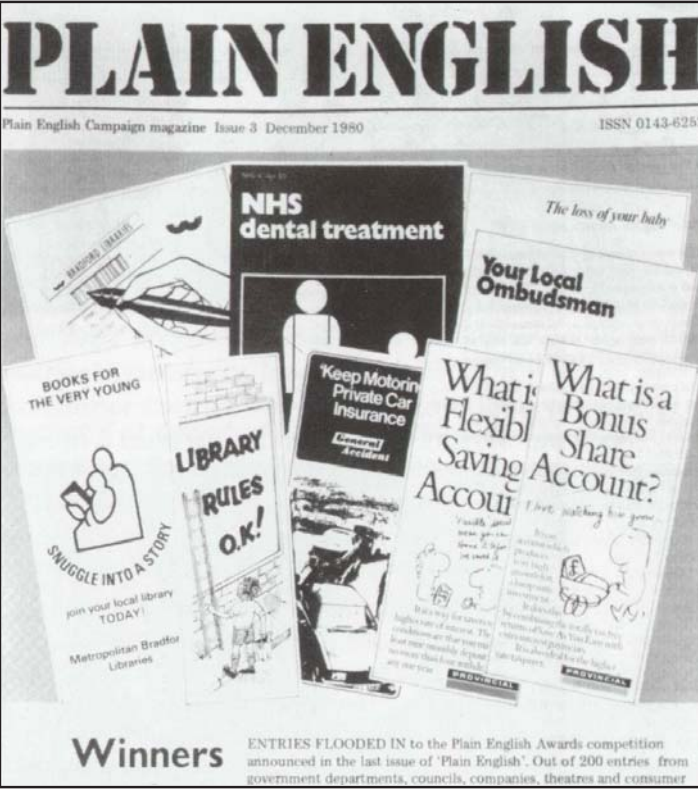
The official launch of the campaign was followed by another bizarre stunt in London. Chrissie, dressed as the Gobbledygook Monster, delivered the first copy of the campaign's magazine 'Plain English' to 10 Downing Street. 'Downing Street is not a circus' objected the man from the Metropolitan Police, but he let her through to hand in the magazine and a letter to the new Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.



Stirring up a hornet's nest

Back at home the real work began. The publicity surrounding the launch of Plain English Campaign had stirred up a great deal of activity. Many people phoned to offer their support, but the main question seemed to be 'How are you going to get government departments and big business to use plain English?'

By 1980, Chrissie had found one of the answers by staging what was to become the annual Plain English Campaign Awards. Trophies went to those organisations who had tried to communicate clearly and booby prizes went to those who had produced the most baffling public information.



The 'good' awards from the campaign became as precious as the booby prizes were unwanted. Leaders of organisations sat up and took notice when their staff were being praised in public. And the other organisations were stung into action following the arrival of their booby prizes and the adverse publicity that was generated.



Chrissie gives out tripe as booby prizes at the Plain English Campaign Awards.

A new era

Another breakthrough came a year later. Following constant pressure from the campaign, the Government decided to set up a systematic review of its communications with the public. This review was headed by Sir Derek Rayner, who had been seconded from the directorship of Marks & Spencer. With help and encouragement from Plain English Campaign, the review staff appraised over 171,000 government forms. They were able to get rid of over 36,000 forms which were outdated or useless, and to rewrite and redesign over 58,000 others. The initial savings this project produced were estimated at £15 million. Since that work began in 1982, the savings nationwide have been estimated at over £250 million. That was the cost of cumbersome bureaucracy and unclear communications. The result of this project meant that the public started to receive information which they could understand, and the Government saved many millions of pounds into the bargain.

As news of this success spread, many other organisations began to take an interest in plain English. Banks, insurance companies and health organisations all contacted the campaign to see if the concept of plain English could help them.

Chrissie quickly realised that the campaign had to be able to do more than just criticise those who wrote unclear public information. The campaign team had to be able to produce practical plain-language solutions to the problems.

For many years organisations such as banks and insurance companies had been able to get people to buy their services without anyone questioning what they were buying. Many people believed that this was the way documents had to be written and that it was the reader's own fault if they didn't understand the unfamiliar language being used. But Chrissie's campaign was beginning to change the public's attitude by placing the responsibility for poor communication with the writers. People were beginning to stand up and say 'We don't understand this, what does it mean in plain English?'

Chrissie explained, 'One of our greatest achievements has been that we have been able to prove that there is an alternative to gobbledygook and legalese. We have shown that official information and law texts can be clearly written and well designed.'

In 1983, the campaign published a report called 'Small Print' to encourage lawyers to clarify the language of consumer contracts.

Chrissie argued that people were less likely to default on contracts if they were given a chance of understanding what their responsibilities were. As well as highlighting the obscure language and poor design of consumer contracts, the campaign also offered solutions in the form of several example rewrites. These rewrites showed that consumer contracts could be written clearly and well designed without losing any of the precision that has come to be associated with the traditional style of legal drafting.

Moving up a gear

By the mid-1980s, the campaign was expanding and becoming widely recognised in the UK. While it still relied on sponsors to help pay for some of its events, the campaign was able to remain independent and funded itself by doing editing and design work for the Government and businesses.



In 1985, Chrissie was awarded the Rosemary Delbridge Memorial Trophy for her campaigning activities on the plain-English issue.

In 1985, the campaign set up a plain-English exhibition in Whitehall. The Prime Minister and several other government ministers attended the exhibition. On show were examples of clear forms and leaflets produced by government departments, together with plain-language documents from banks and insurance companies. In 1986 the exhibition moved to the Houses of Parliament to make sure that all MPs could see the campaign's message.

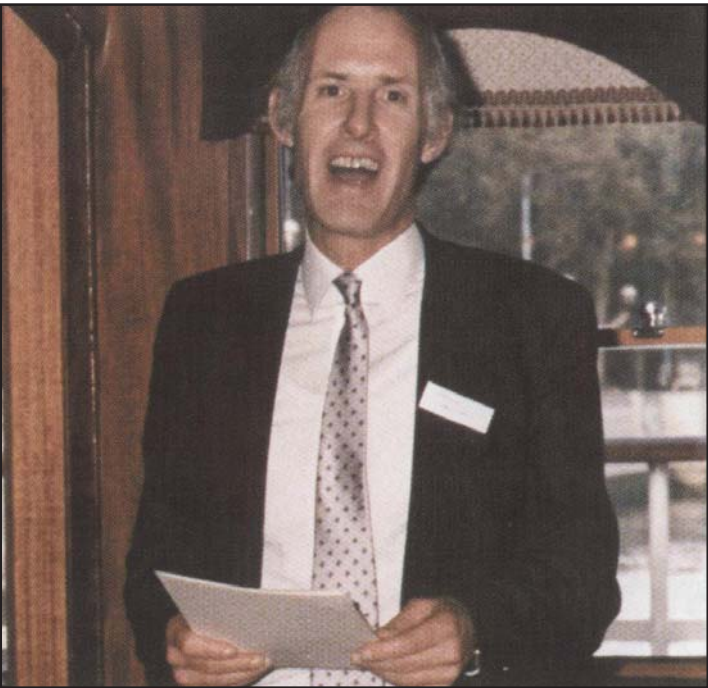


Chrissie and the Prime Minister at the exhibition in Whitehall.



The Prime Minister attending the exhibition at the Houses of Parliament.

Chrissie's attention then turned to trying to improve the information people received with their medicines. 'Even from my own experiences I realised that a lot could be done to make this information clearer. Instructions and warnings were often produced in very small print and contained unfamiliar medical jargon. Also, the messages that manufacturers provided sometimes seemed to contradict the information provided by doctors and pharmacists' explained Chrissie. As well as encouraging manufacturers, doctors and pharmacists to clarify information for the public, the campaign also funded research into the language used on drug labels.



Health Minister Tony Newton speaking at the opening of the campaign's 'Clarity of medical information' exhibition in London.

In 1987, the campaign introduced a new set of awards called the 'Inside Write Awards'. These awards were given for the clearest government documents which were intended to be read by civil servants. Chrissie recalls, 'I was convinced that if we could get civil servants to communicate clearly with each other then this was bound to improve the way they communicated with the public. These awards also recognised the tremendous efforts of civil servants to adopt the campaign's principles.'



The 1987 Inside Write Awards were presented by Michael Montague, then Chairman of the National Consumer Council. Forty-five government departments sent in a total of 102 entries to the competition.



Language on trial

Another major problem which faced Chrissie and her team was the language, structure and design of legislation and regulations. Hundreds of years of tradition had created an almost impenetrable legal language which even lawyers struggled to understand. If Acts of Parliament didn't provide a clear statement of the law, it was very difficult for lawyers to explain the law to civil servants, businesses or the public. But legal drafters faced a great dilemma. In many cases they had to explain very difficult concepts in a very precise way. Should they try to use clearer language and risk losing the legal certainty that they associated with traditional drafting? Even today, after major efforts by plain-language groups such as the campaign, this is still in dispute.



It would be fair to say that many lawyers were upset with Chrissie's campaign. They wrongly feared that Chrissie was trying to put them out of business, that the prestige of their profession would be undermined, and that adopting a plain-language approach would lead to chaos.

Chrissie argued that these fears were unfounded. 'Lawyers will always be needed to explain when everyday language can be used and which words have a specific legal meaning. In the past, lawyers have been accused of using convoluted language merely to baffle and overcharge their clients. But if lawyers adopted our principles when writing to clients and when they drafted law text, I believe that the public's perception of the legal profession would improve. Many lawyers still believe that plain-language documents are 'unsafe' but, unlike traditionally drafted legal documents, none of those that we have worked on have ever had to be presented in court for interpretation. Many lawyers also failed to realise that a plain-language approach to producing law texts involved much more than simply getting rid of archaic legal language.'

Sharing skills

By 1988, the campaign had trained thousands of people in how to write letters and reports in plain English. Training courses had been run for the Government, local councils, health authorities, banks, building societies, insurance companies, manufacturers, management consultants, computer firms, lawyers, police forces and even other pressure groups. However, as the demand for training increased, the campaign's staff simply couldn't run all the courses they were asked to. To help meet this demand, Chrissie launched 'The Plain English Course'.

This was a major pack of worksheets, guidance notes and other materials which trainers within organisations could use to train their own staff. The introduction of this course meant that far more writers were able to learn plain-English techniques.

By 1989, the campaign had reached its 10th birthday and was being consulted by nearly every major organisation in the UK. To celebrate the campaign's 10th birthday, Chrissie and her team returned to Parliament Square in London to shred some more atrocious documents.



Chrissie falls foul of the law again by shredding official documents in Parliament Square.

The meaning becomes clear

By the beginning of 1990, Chrissie realised that her campaign was well enough established to launch its seal of approval, the 'Crystal Mark'. The Crystal Mark was designed as another incentive to encourage organisations to communicate clearly with the public. Organisations could send their documents to the campaign for approval. If the campaign found that the information in a document was expressed as clearly as possible, the document would gain this coveted mark.



The Crystal Mark became firmly established as the standard all organisations aimed for when producing their information. It now appears on over 18000 different documents in the UK, the USA, Australia, Denmark, New Zealand and South Africa.



The Lord Chancellor receives his department's crystal after gaining a Crystal Mark.

Support from abroad

In June 1990, the campaign held its first international conference on plain English – a three-day event in Cambridge. The discussions, debates and presentations covered many plain-English issues, including legal language, teaching plain English and government communications. The conference attracted speakers and delegates from as far afield as Australia, Canada and the United States of America.



Chrissie greets some of the overseas delegates.

A month later Chrissie was presenting an exhibition at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. The exhibition highlighted the problems being created by unclear medical labelling.



Gopa Mitra from the Proprietary Association of Great Britain and the campaign's Chrissie Maher explained the dangers of unclear medical information to MEPs.

An international campaign

As news of Plain English Campaign's success spread, Chrissie began to receive more and more enquiries from organisations in other countries. 'Back in 1971 I thought I was dealing with a purely British problem with the English language' explained Chrissie. 'Many years later I realised that this was a worldwide problem involving many languages.' As well as dealing with enquiries from commercial organisations in other countries, Chrissie began to realise that there were many other plain-language groups around the world with similar aims to the campaign.

Luckily, the campaign had grown large enough for its staff to start spreading the message abroad, with training expeditions as far afield as Europe, Hong Kong and Australia.



The 1991 Inside Write Awards were presented by John Ward (left) of the National Consumer Council.

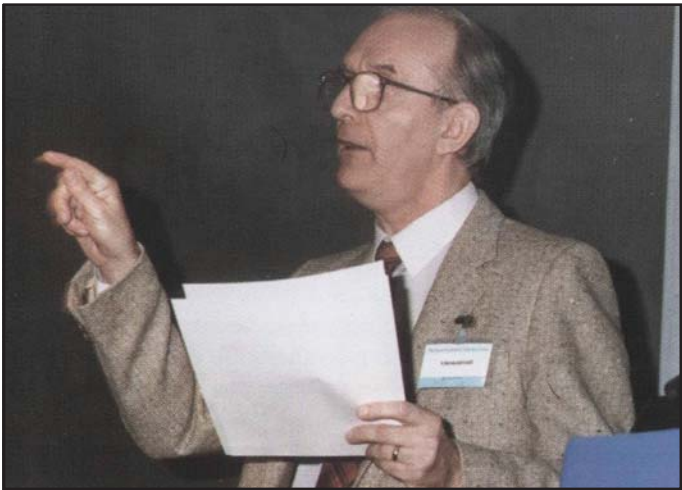
Royally recommended

The highlight of 1992 was the Inside Write Awards ceremony held at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in London. HRH The Princess Royal presented the awards and spoke with great knowledge about clear communication.



Her Royal Highness also presented certificates to graduates of the campaign's diploma course.

In May 1993, the campaign returned to the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre to hold its second international conference. The issues discussed included plain English in life assurance, pensions, document design, government communications, customer care, medical labelling and legal documents. Again, speakers and delegates came from many countries to share their experiences.



Tom McArthur, editor of the Oxford Companion to English Language, speaking at the campaign's second international conference.

Crusade for plain language reaches the USA

By 1993, the campaign had grown to become one of the biggest and most successful plain-language pressure groups in the world. With 35 full-time staff, including lawyers, language experts and document designers, Chrissie felt that the campaign was strong enough to take its fight overseas to the United States of America. So, in October 1993, Chrissie and some of her team set off on the campaigning trail to New York and Washington DC. Speaking on radio in New York, Chrissie explained how successful the campaign had been in the UK and how she hoped to encourage similar improvements in the USA. Campaigners then travelled to Washington DC to make arrangements for the next international conference to be held there the following year.



Chrissie flies the flag in New York.

1993 ended with the 14th annual Plain English Campaign Awards ceremony. This time, as well as presenting good awards and the 'Golden Bull' booby prizes, the campaign also presented a set of media awards and a 'Foot in Mouth' award. The media awards were given for the clearest television, radio and newspaper reporting. The Foot in Mouth award was given to the person responsible for the worst gaffe or case of gobbledygook recorded during a television or radio interview.



Television news presenter Trevor McDonald collects a media award on behalf of ITN's 'News at Ten' from the Rt Hon David Mellor QC, MP.

As usual, the event was reported in all the UK's major newspapers as well as on many radio programmes and on television. One of the entries that won a Golden Bull became so popular as a classic piece of gobbledygook that it even made the international press. The NHS Directorate struggled desperately to explain what a bed was by producing a 160-word definition.



Graham Burgess collects a Golden Bull on behalf of the City of Liverpool's Housing and Consumer Services Department from comedian Jack Dee.

1994 began with the announcement that Chrissie was to receive an OBE from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Chrissie admitted to being 'gobsmacked' when she found out. 'Usually it's me giving out awards to people so it made a great change to be on the receiving end' explained Chrissie.



Chrissie with her OBE in the grounds of Buckingham Palace. (Photograph: Charles Green Photography.)

Back to the lion's den

Three months later, Chrissie was back at the Houses of Parliament to host another exhibition and to meet HRH Prince Philip. The exhibition was visited by ministers and many MPs.



Mrs Valarie Strachan, Chairman of the Board of Customs and Excise, receives a Crystal Mark certificate at the campaign's exhibition in the Houses of Parliament.

In July 1994, Chrissie and the team were back at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre to celebrate National Plain English Day and the Inside Write Awards. Government departments and agencies received accolades from the campaign for the use of plain English. The campaign marked the day by launching a new book called 'Utter Drivel'. This book contains hundreds of examples of gobbledygook sent into the campaign by members of the public, as well as useful advice on how to write in plain English.



The 1994 Inside Write Awards were presented by the Rt Hon William Waldegrave MP.



In October 1994, Chrissie and the campaign team travelled to Washington DC to host their third international conference. To launch the conference, campaigners shredded examples of gobbledygook from many countries on the steps of Capitol Hill.



One of the speakers at this conference was Ministry of Justice spokeswoman Susan de Villiers (pictured below) from South Africa. Susan explained how the new Government was determined to transform the style of language being used in its official communications with the public.



Conference speakers Dr Dennis Kurzon (Israel) and Susan de Villiers (South Africa) enjoy a break with the campaign's Chrissie Maher.

Following the conference, Susan invited the campaign to bring an international team of experts to South Africa in 1995.

1994 ended with the annual Plain English Campaign Awards in London, presented by actress Pam Ferris. 'By the end of 1994 we were involved in so many different plain-language projects that I couldn't keep track of what was going on' admitted Chrissie.



Television newscaster Peter Sissons collects a media award on behalf of the BBC's 'Nine o'Clock News' team.



Jennifer Erasmus (centre) from South Africa receives her Plain English Campaign Diploma from Chrissie Maher and actress Pam Ferris.

Following pressure from the campaign, 1995 saw the introduction of two new European directives. The first dealt with the information that is provided with medicines. The directive explained that patient-information leaflets would now have to be provided with most pharmaceuticals. It also required information to be written in 'clear and understandable terms'. The second directive concerned the language used in consumer contracts. This directive was intended to put a stop to consumer contracts that were unfair, contained terms that were oppressive, or contained terms that were difficult to understand.

In March 1995, Chrissie fulfilled her promise to send an international team of experts to South Africa to help the new Government in its attempts to get rid of gobbledygook and legalese in public information. Campaigners spent two weeks talking with a wide variety of people including MPs, lawyers, academics, civil servants, consumer-group representatives and insurance company executives.

The international team included:

- Christopher Balmford from Phillips Fox Solicitors in Australia;
- Professor Shadrack Gutto, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa;
- Professor Joseph Kimble from the Thomas M Cooley Law School in the USA;
- Philip Knight, a lawyer specialising in clear legal drafting from Canada; and
- George Maher and Janet Millner from Plain English Campaign.

The Ministry of Justice also held a two-day seminar called 'Plain language – the law and the right to information'. This gave the international team the chance to meet the Government's legal experts who would be drafting the new legislation and the new constitution.



Some of the team speaking at the two-day seminar in Cape Town.



Chrissie's son, George, talking on a two-hour live radio interview in Johannesburg.

During their visit, members of the international team were asked to prepare a demonstration plain-language rewrite of the Human Rights Commission Bill that could act as a model for future South African legislation. After the visit, Chrissie was able to provide £20,000 to fund an intensive research project to test this plain-language rewrite. Chrissie was keen to show lawyers that the plain-language approach provided a more understandable statement of the law without losing legal certainty.

School-leavers get working on jargon

Chrissie's attention then turned to trying to help students combat bureaucratic language. The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit in London had published research which showed that sloppy letter-writing was costing the UK £6 billion a year as a result of mistakes, inefficiency and lost business. Following two years of research, the campaign put together a training course for schools and colleges. Chrissie realised that when young people go into their first jobs it is very tempting for them to adopt the traditional bureaucratic style of writing. She also believed that people with plain-language writing skills would find it much easier to find jobs. With growing concern over poor writing, reading and numeracy skills, this move was widely welcomed by teachers and curriculum advisers.

A new Miami sound

Following National Plain English Day and Inside Write Award celebrations in 1995, the team travelled to Miami, Florida, for its next international conference. It attracted plain-language experts from many countries.



Moira Renwick of Manweb and Sybil Law of ScottishPower on the Miami conference set.

Campaigners then travelled to Winnipeg, Manitoba, to speak at an international conference, 'Plain Language in Progress', organised by plain-language experts in Canada.



Speakers at the opening session of the 'Plain Language in Progress' conference in Canada.

The following month the team was on the campaigning trail again, visiting minsters and MPs in Ghana, West Africa, to encourage organisations there to communicate in plain language.



Campaigners visit MPs at Parliament House in Ghana's capital city, Accra.

By November 1995, the campaign team had reached San Sebastian in the Basque Country (Spain) to speak at a conference called 'Improving communication between administration and citizens'. This gave campaigners the chance to pass on their experiences to over 140 language experts from the administrative governments.



Speakers at the first session of the Basque conference.

Achievements honoured

In November 1995, Chrissie (shown below, front row, far left) was awarded an honorary Master of Arts degree from Manchester University in recognition of her contribution to improving the lives of so many people.



At about the same time, Chrissie was able to provide the Consumer Congress Trust with £20,000 funding to carry out a research project called 'Now we're talking'. The report set out a series of recommendations to encourage public-service organisations to communicate more effectively with consumers.



The year ended with the annual Plain English Campaign Awards in London. Again, organisations were given credit for producing clear, plain-language documents and Chrissie had fun chastising those organisations which produced the year's most baffling public information.



The 1995 awards were presented by singer and actress, Toyah Wilcox.

Spreading the word

1996 began with campaigners travelling back to Accra in Ghana. On their visit to Accra, campaigners came across an orphanage in the village of Akorabo. The village had no electricity or fresh water. After a request for help from the village elders, Chrissie launched an appeal to raise money to drill wells for the village. The campaign raised over £12,000 and the construction of the wells was completed in July 1996. With the help of schools and churches, the campaign was also able to send 35 boxes of clothes, shoes, toys and writing materials to the orphanage.

A tale of 17 cities

April 1996 saw the start of the first Plain English Campaign Roadshow. Over a period of seven months, campaigners visited 17 cities to spread the plain-language message. Local newspapers, radio and television covered the various events, which included chasing the Gobbledygook Monster out of town and a slogan competition for schools. Pupils from the winning schools received their prizes from well-known personalities.



Viv Lumsden of Scottish Television presents a prize to the pupils of Hillhead High School.



The Gobbledygook Monster being chased away from Grey's Monument in Newcastle.

A light at the end of the tunnel

November 1996 saw the start of a major plain-English project. Following a report from the Inland Revenue in 1995, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Rt Hon Kenneth Clarke MP, announced a project to rewrite Inland Revenue tax laws in plain English.

This ongoing project was of major importance and lightened the bureaucratic burden that was previously placed on the taxpayers of the UK. (The first legislation prepared by the Inland Revenue's Tax Law Rewrite Project was enacted as the Capital Allowances Act 2001. That act was well received and is regarded as a significant improvement on the previous legislation in terms of its clarity and user accessibility.)

Open University

In May 1997, Chrissie was pleased to attend a ceremony at Preston Guildhall to receive an honorary doctorate from the Open University.



Chrissie collects her honorary doctorate from Dr Sharon Goodman from the Open University.

Fifth international conference

The campaign's fifth international conference took place in London in July 1997. Speakers and delegates from the UK, the USA, Canada, Hong Kong, Sweden and the Basque region of Spain gathered to hear news of plain-language projects from around the world.

In most cases, we were able to look at real-life examples of how organisations had been able to apply plain-language principles to their documents. One of the highlights of the conference was a speech made by Commissioner Isaac C Hunt of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in the USA. He explained the cultural change that the SEC is trying to foster and its plans for the future.

Plain English Awards 1997



Nick Underwood collects his Foot in Mouth award from Edward Enfield at the Plain English Campaign Awards ceremony in December 1997.

Winners of the campaign's 1997 awards gathered in London to collect their booby prizes and awards from television presenter Edward Enfield.

The winner of the Foot in Mouth award for the worst gaffe in the media went to Nick Underwood of Teletubbies Marketing.

He was reported in the Daily Express as saying, 'In life, there are all colours and the Teletubbies are a reflection of that... There are no nationalities in the Teletubbies — they are techno-babies, but they are supposed to reflect life in that sense.'

New lease takes flight

March 1998 saw the launch of one of the campaign's most successful projects — to overhaul a very complex and traditional-style legal document.

British Aerospace asked us to work with their legal advisers, Clifford Chance and Allen & Overy, two of the world's biggest law firms, to create a plain-English version of their cross-border leasing contract.

By the time the final version had been approved by the campaign, it had been reduced to just 50 pages — a third of the length of the original lease.

The new lease has had some spectacular results. One of the first transactions made using the new lease was for six Airbus A320 aircraft. Normally, such a deal would take six months to complete. But with the new lease, the £120 million deal was completed in just three and a half weeks.



Chrissie and BAeAM's Senior Legal Adviser, Paul Briggs, show the 'before and after' versions of the lease.

European tour

At the beginning of 1998, we had no idea that the need for plain language would end up taking campaigners to four of the six continents within the year.

Our international travels began in May when Chrissie was asked to give lectures in Brussels and Luxembourg for the European Commission's Translation Service. They had begun their own plain-language initiative called 'Fight the FOG' to encourage their authors and translators to write more clearly. The 'Fight the FOG' campaign, timed to coincide with the UK presidency of the European Union, was part of a wider effort to improve communication between the commission and the general public.

Trying to turn the tide of gobbledygook

In June 1998, campaigners were invited to Washington DC to attend the launch of the Presidential Memorandum on plain language. Speaking at the launch, Vice President Gore explained that he and President Clinton were determined to make the Government more responsive, accessible and understandable in its communications with the public. He also explained how a huge amount of taxpayers' money was being wasted because government agencies were failing to make themselves understood.

The memorandum was developed by an inter-agency group of plain-language enthusiasts, the Plain English Network (PEN). The network, which is part of the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, also gives advice to government agencies that want to create plain-language documents.



Vice President Gore speaking at the launch of the Presidential Memorandum.



Campaigners meet US plain-language enthusiasts. Left to right: Professor Joe Kimble (Thomas M Cooley Law School), Annetta Cheek (Plain English Network), Greg Bittle (Department of Veterans Affairs), and Katherine Ardern and George Maher (Plain English Campaign).

Campaigning in South Africa

In September 1998, campaigners were on their travels again following an invitation to speak at the English Academy Conference in Johannesburg. The conference brought together many language experts from countries as varied as the UK, the USA, Australia, Bangladesh and Nigeria.



John Wild (centre) with keynote speakers Professor David Crystal (left) and Dr Tom McArthur (right).

Around the world in 28 days

In October 1998, campaigners began a journey that they will probably never get a chance to repeat. At the invitation of various organisations in different countries, campaigners George Maher and John Wild travelled around the world — literally.

Their expeditions began when they travelled to India. As part of the 50-year celebrations of the establishment of the British Council in India, Plain English Campaign was invited to run a series of seminars, workshops and press conferences in Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai and Calcutta.

The trip, which was funded by the campaign, was part of a plain-language initiative set up by the UK's Centre for Innovation in Voluntary Action (CIVA). That initiative aimed to improve the clarity of public information in India.

Spokesman for CIVA, Michael Norton OBE, commented, 'The Plain English Campaign has had a significant impact on the language of official and business language in the UK. We hope that the campaign's visit will stimulate the development of something similar in India.'

John Wild explained, 'We were very careful to stress that, although some of the public information in India seemed very tortuous and convoluted to us, we wanted the Indian people to tell us if they were of the same opinion. The last thing George and I wanted to be accused of was dictating to India what was, or was not, plain.'



Campaigners George and John with workshop delegates in Hyderabad.

From Delhi, George and John then travelled to Texas (via Tokyo, Los Angeles and Denver). There they spoke to delegates at a conference organised by the Association of Business Communication. From Texas, George and John then travelled home to complete their trip around the world.

Crusade reaches South America

In November 1998, campaigners were back on a plane, this time heading for São Paulo, Brazil, to carry out a series of seminars. Over five events in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, campaigners spoke to more than 150 lawyers and other professionals. As far as we know, this was the first time a plain-language team had visited South America.

The trip had been organised by Dominic Minett, a lawyer and a director of Lex English Languages Services based in São Paulo. Dominic was keen to find out if businesses in Brazil could benefit from adopting plain-language principles.

Their first stop was a seminar for Tozzini Freire Teixeira e Silva, the second biggest law firm in South America. At the end of the seminar, delegates explained that the general principles of communicating in plain language seem to apply just as much to the Portuguese language as to English.



Campaigners with some of the delegates from the law firm of Tozzini Freire Teixeira e Silva.

Dominic explained, 'Portuguese is well known for being flowery and overly complicated, and the difference between the spoken and written forms of the language couldn't be greater. I know that since George and John spoke at the first seminar, Tozzini Freire have invited a journalist from one of our most respected newspapers to speak on plain Portuguese, so their reaction has been very positive.'



Campaigners with delegates from Pasqualin, a law firm in Brazil.

Literacy hour

In March 1999, the campaign began a new initiative to raise the profile of plain English within the UK's education system. In response to the Education Minister's recommendations to begin a 'literacy hour', one of the campaign's qualified teachers began giving lessons in plain English to both primary- and secondary-school pupils.

Pensions made clear

In April 1999, Pensions Minister, Stephen Timms, backed Chrissie's efforts to clarify information about pensions.

The minister spoke at the launch of the campaign's new guides to pensions, which had been produced to give consumers a better understanding of the baffling terms used by the pensions industry. Caroline Instance, Chief Executive of the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority, and Stephanie Hawthorne, Editor of 'Pensions World' magazine, also spoke at the launch to endorse the new guides.



Pensions Minister Stephen Timms at the launch of the campaign's pension guides.

Latin terms get the death sentence

April 1999 also saw one of the biggest shake-ups of the century for the civil justice system in England and Wales.

Based on Lord Woolf's 1996 report, 'Access to Justice', the reforms revolutionised the way cases in the civil courts are conducted. They also swept away Latin phrases and much of the centuries-old legal language.

The changes were designed to cut delays, complexity and the cost of litigation. This should result in making our civil justice system more accessible to the general public.

The changes, part of the 'big bang' in civil legal procedure, were being driven through by the Lord Chancellor's Department. A spokesman for the department explained, 'It has been obvious for some years that our legal system is too slow, too expensive and too complicated for most people to use. People can't afford to go to court, and people who do get their day in court can't understand what the judges and lawyers are saying. So we've tried to make things cheaper, clearer and faster.'

Chrissie commented at the time, 'This may be our greatest victory yet. For every success we've had, we were always told that it was a shame you'll never sort out the lawyers. Well, maybe we have now. The last stronghold of gobbledygook is starting to crumble.'

Training in Brussels

July 1999 saw our campaigners back in Brussels to run training courses for the EC Translation Service. John Wild explained, 'The delegates were all qualified trainers in their own right but they wanted to make sure that they understood all the principles of plain language and would not be missing any topics out when they ran their own training courses.'



Plain English Campaign's John Wild with members of the EC's Translation Service.

Los Angeles Conference 1999

In November 1999, George and John were back in the USA to speak at the Association of Business Communicators' conference, this time in Los Angeles. The association has about 1300 members who are mostly language teachers and trainers in effective business communication.



John with conference delegates Jone Rhymer, Paula Pomerence and Iris Varner.

Plain language in progress

By February 2000, campaigners were off again to attend the Plain Language In Progress Conference in Houston. The conference was organised by the international Plain Language Consultants Network. It brought together experts from Canada, the USA, the UK, Sweden, South Africa and Australia. There, our representatives met all the 'usual suspects' — the ever-present Professor Joe Kimble from America, Professor Peter Butt from Australia, and barrister Phil Knight from Canada. These are the type of people who never give up, tirelessly promoting plain language wherever they go.

The day after George and John arrived home from Houston they were off again. This time to Helsinki. Plain English Campaign had been invited to speak at a plain-Finnish conference organised by journalist Maria Osterlund to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the plain-language newspaper she works for.

Pioneers honoured

In April 2000, plain-English campaigner Chrissie Maher, disability-rights campaigner Lord Alfred Morris of Manchester, and World Wide Web creator Tim Berners-Lee were named 'Information Pioneers of the Century' by the UK's National Information Forum. The ceremony was held at the House of Lords and the awards were presented by Glenys Kinnock MEP.



Chrissie collects her award from Glenys Kinnock MEP.

Championing the cause

As part of our Crystal Clear Day celebrations, which were held in Manchester in June 2000, we announced the first seven 'Plain English Champions'. These are people from different walks of life who have made a great personal contribution to pushing back the barriers that face plain-language campaigners.



Professor Joe Kimble collects his award from Plain English Campaign's Chrissie Maher.

Down under

July 2000 saw George and John setting off halfway across the world to Australia and New Zealand.

They had been invited to Australia to address the Canberra Society of Editors. There was a lot of media interest in the visit. After doing various television and newspaper interviews, George and John headed out to New Zealand.

The campaign had been invited to New Zealand just to give some presentations, but the interest in plain language turned out to be incredible. George and John ended up doing a whole series of television, radio and newspaper interviews on top of their original schedule.

From New Zealand they then headed back to Australia. The purpose of that second visit was twofold — we had been invited to give a presentation to Microsoft, Australia, about the benefits of plain English, and we also wanted to arrange a meeting with three Australian lawyers who are prominent in the global plain-language movement. They were Christopher Balmford, Professor Peter Butt, and Robert Eagleson.

In just one year, George and John had visited five countries and travelled over 54,000 miles.

Plain English Campaign visit Russia

Chrissie's worldwide battle against jargon and legalese reached new territory in April 2002 when the campaign became the first plain-language group to be invited to Russia.

George Maher and John Wild spoke at a major journalism and linguistics conference organised by Moscow State University.

The trip, which was funded by the campaign, gave George and John the chance to explain the need for plain language — whether it be English, French, Portuguese or Russian.

Conference organiser, Irene Alexandrova, explained, 'One of our biggest problems is that modern Russian usage is losing its ability to meet the communication needs of the different sections of our society. Also, in this new era of international English, it is important that the style of language is as clear as possible. Plain English Campaign has made a valuable contribution to making this a reality.'

Plain language in Canada

In September 2002, the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) held its fourth conference in Toronto. Campaigners George Maher and John Wild were there to explain the history of Plain English Campaign and the progress that was being made in the UK. The conference included 50 speakers from eight countries.

Moscow University

In April 2003, George and John returned to Moscow to speak at the Moscow State University's international conference, 'Journalism and the culture of speech'.

Founded in 1775, Moscow State University is the oldest university in Russia. The journalism faculty has over 2200 students, and around 15,000 graduates are now working in the media industry.

Parliamentary Select Committee

In March 2004, the campaign's participation in public activities involving plain English reached new heights when we were invited to appear in front of the Parliamentary Select Committee on open government, chaired by the Leader of the House, Peter Haine. We were asked for our opinions on the standard of communication between Parliament and the general public, and to make our recommendations to improve them.

Antwerp Conference 2005

February 2005 saw campaign staff on their travels again, this time to speak at a conference in Belgium. The conference was organised by the staff of 'Wablieft', the Flemish easy-to-read newspaper for people with reading difficulties. The conference was also attended by representatives of other plain-language groups from Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Holland.

They were keen to hear about the history of the campaign and how we had grown to become one of the largest plain-language groups in the world.

The aims of the conference were to create a partnership between the plain-language groups in European countries and to expand national centres that provide information for people with reading difficulties.

Conference organiser, Karine Nicolay, explained, 'We are working on starting a 'plain language centre' in Flanders and found out about Plain English Campaign and their years of experience in writing plain and easy-to-read language.'

Rather than having to start from scratch, we asked PEC to join us at our conference and teach us all the do's and don'ts of writing plain language and organising a successful Flemish centre. All participants of the conference are planning to start plain-language campaigns in their countries. They all appreciated the presentation of PEC very much because they found it highly informative but also very enjoyable.'



Delegates at the Antwerp Conference.

Words of support

In the summer of 2006, several leading politicians confirmed their support for the campaign and the use of plain English. Conservative leader, David Cameron MP, said, 'All politicians are guilty of slipping into jargon — and all of us deserve scrutiny from the Plain English Campaign. Complicated sets of initials, official jargon, bureaucracies that overcomplicate things to boost their own importance — all of these things help to build barriers between government and people.' He also congratulated us on all we have achieved to date.

Sir Menzies Campbell, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, said, 'The hard work of the Plain English Campaign to draw attention to this significant issue has been paramount in the improving English standards.'

We also received messages of support from broadcaster Andrew Marr, and the First Minister of Scotland, Jack McConnell. Mr McConnell said, 'Plain English Campaign has been quick to remind us of the importance of straightforward language. Keep up the good work.' Former Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy also sent a message, saying, 'The English language is without doubt one of our most cherished national and international resources. It is functional and fulfilling in equal measure. We need to keep it that way in the political discourse of our national life.'

Korean TV visits the UK



In August 2007, two journalists from a Korean television station put Plain English Campaign under close scrutiny for two days.

The two journalists, accompanied by a translator for Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, were making a documentary on how the campaign's work has increased the use of plain language in public life. They interviewed Chrissie on how campaigning for documents which are easy to understand has helped many thousands of people to lead more straightforward lives.

Frankfurt

In October 2007, Plain English Campaign, along with our European plain-language partners (Grundtvig), met other plain-language organisations from across Europe to discuss 'easy-to-read' programmes. The meeting was in Frankfurt's new Stadtbucherei (public library).



Delegates and students in Frankfurt.

When in Rome

The campaign extended its international activities considerably in 2007. We were asked to bid for a contract to run a series of plain-English training courses for a United Nations agency, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), in Rome. Chrissie said, 'Even though we were up against stiff international competition, IFAD decided to award us the contract because of our experience in training delegates who have English as their second language.'

Our trainer, John Wild, ran a demonstration course in June, followed by a series of training courses in October and November. All the courses were well received.



John Wild (pictured at the front) with some of the trainees in Rome.

The Small Print Bill

Plain English Campaign went to the House of Commons on Monday 17 November 2008 to voice our support for Nick Palmer's Small Print Bill.

If the bill becomes law, it will mean that there is a minimum size for the print used in:

- terms and conditions;
- advertisements; and
- contracts to supply goods and services.

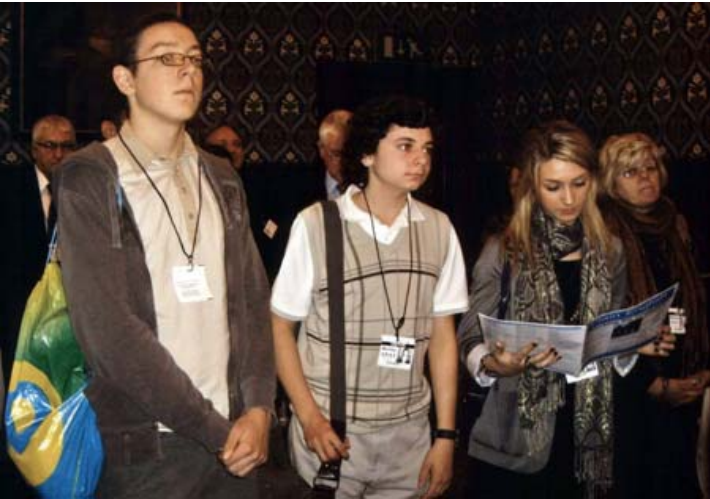
Peter Rodney, our plain-English barrister, who writes legislation for the Government of Gibraltar, opened the event. He introduced the speakers, TV presenter Matthew Parris, and journalist Nicholas Jones.

Matthew gave a penetrating insight into how small print can confuse and mislead people. He gave many examples from the worlds of politics and industry, and the listeners were enthralled. Nick followed with his own outlook on how politicians, lawyers, the media and many others use 'spin'.



Plain-English barrister Peter Rodney viewing our exhibition.

We invited the audience to ask questions and they came thick and fast. Peter, Matthew and Nicholas answered the questions with honesty and passion, and the answers led to more and more questions. One question was 'Why isn't the Government supporting this bill?'



Some of the schoolchildren and students at our exhibition.

20 children representing the Liverpool Schools' Parliament were in the audience to question MPs and our speakers. In the break they were shown the exhibition displaying Plain English Campaign's story in pictures. They were shown its roots in the poverty and deprivation of wartime Liverpool through to its worldwide impact today. It was a dramatic display of how someone with enough determination, like Chrissie, can overcome the most dire circumstances to make a real difference to people's lives.

Liverpool European Capital of Culture 2008

In 2008, as part of the Liverpool European Capital of Culture celebrations, the Lord Mayor, Steve Rotheram, was our guest of honour at a reception to launch the Plain English Campaign exhibition at Liverpool Town Hall. The comprehensive exhibition covered almost 40 years of campaigning, from the days of the Tuebrook Bugle to our present activities.



Kofu Owusu, Chrissie, Lucy van Amerongen, Lord Mayor Steve Rotheram and John Barnes cut the Plain English Campaign cake.



Chrissie pictured with Lord Mayor, Steve Rotheram, at Liverpool Town Hall.

The arrival of Liverpool's Lord Mayor, Councillor Steve Rotheram, reminded visitors what a prestigious event this was. His speech acknowledged the personal contributions of Chrissie and other fellow 'scousers' who had helped the campaign to grow.

Another shining star to come out of Liverpool was John Barnes, ex-footballer for Liverpool and England and now coach to Jamaica's national team.

His easy-going manner and brilliant speech kept the event firmly 'grassroots'.

Lucy van Amerongen, author of 'The A-Z of Teen Talk', attended the event to show that even the younger generation is interested in getting their message across.

To round off, we were given a debut performance by Kofu Owusu, a young Liverpoolian musician who had been commissioned to write a rap about the sentiments of plain English.

'Born to Crusade' commemorates the campaigning spirit of an ordinary working-class mother who came from Liverpool, England, to take on the world. In 1971, Chrissie Maher asked a simple question – 'Why isn't the public given a chance to understand public information?'



'To keep them in the dark.'
'To stop them claiming what is rightfully theirs.' **'To stop them interfering in things they wouldn't understand.'**

Chrissie got many answers but none that she could justify to the people of her community. Many before her must have asked the same question but given up hope of changing anything when faced with the huge task of taking on governments and big businesses. Maybe out of blissful ignorance, or with nothing to lose, Chrissie thought she'd try.

From her first attempts to help people, to the present day where she runs an international campaign, Chrissie has had a burning ambition: 'Let us try to put people in control of their own lives. Give them a chance to understand their rights and responsibilities, and let them understand what is being done in their name.'

As Tom McArthur, editor of the Oxford Companion to the English Language, explained, 'In all the history of the language, there has never been such a powerful grass-roots movement to influence it as the Plain English Campaign, and Chrissie is the one who got it going.'

Plain English Campaign – working for clearer communication
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