

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Issue 62 Autumn 2005

“Speak fluent human”, says Marr

The BBC's outgoing political editor, Andrew Marr, has entered the Plain English Campaign's hall of fame as a 'Plain English Champion' for his unrelenting pursuit of straightforward political reporting and debate. In a speech to a lecture audience in Edinburgh, he criticised politicians and newspaper editors, arguing that they are “unable to communicate in simple, ordinary speech”. Well known as much for his habit of using amusing and sometimes ridiculous metaphors in his television bulletins (“as frustrating as throwing jellyfish at a wall”) as for his talent for explaining politics to the layperson, he will be sorely missed. In a parting shot to the political gallery he said that “people like me are used on TV bulletins because they (politicians) can't do it properly for themselves. There is a fundamental lack of professionalism in our politics.”



The BBC's Andrew Marr

Although Plain English Campaign are reluctant to back his call for more PR-awareness among political staff, given how much guff we put up with already, we recognise the efforts Marr has made in trying to convince those in political circles to change the way they communicate with the public. Even back in 1999, he was raging at the EU's “byzantine array of power-centres linked by codes, treaties and impenetrable jargon”, saying that “voters need straightforward answers to basic questions”. He described the last five years he has spent as BBC political editor as “frustrating....trying to translate political jargon into language that makes sense to voters”.

His book about journalism, ‘My Trade’, which was published in 2004 and has recently been released in paperback, was very well received. Written in the cool and simple style he is known for, it is an informed and often amusing account of his experiences working in the

media, revealing some of the hidden truths of how journalism works. He comes across as a genuine, witty man, who has a deep respect for the journalism of the past, lamenting that “stories about ordinary life in Britain are being pushed aside by stories about new products, new consumer trends - and brief celebrities”. One of his findings shows how long gobbledegook has been with us - as he discovers that television was once defined in law as ‘the representation by telegraph in transitory visible form of persons or objects in movement or at rest’.

Widely respected in the media for his plain reporting and cool yet incisive analysis, and adored by a legion of armchair fans - his face is even featured on cult T-shirts - Marr has left to take over the Frost programme on Sunday mornings. We hope that on such a high-profile show he will be in an even better position to cut through the rhetoric and confusing waffle that spews forth, on occasion, from the mouths of the world's leading politicians.

Inside: Plain English campaigning in Ireland and Russia, jargon guides, Prize crossword, parking schemes, and more....

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

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Confused by jargon buster

One of our favourite stories over recent weeks comes from Tasmania. It seems that in an effort to help parents understand its new 'Essential Learnings' curriculum, the Education Department has issued a 'Jargon Buster' guide. Unfortunately, many parents have said that the new jargon buster only leaves them even more confused.

Roly Sussex, a leading language expert from the University of Queensland, said, "There needs to be a jargon buster to explain what's in the 'Jargon Buster'", adding that he respects "what they're trying to do, but I'm afraid what they've come up with is a bit difficult".

He also said "If the department is

trying to convey a policy to people who are consuming it, they've got a little bit more work to do."

Peter Gutwein, the education spokesman for the opposition, said, "The explanation of terms such as 'rubric', 'formative assessment' and 'on balance judgement' are filled with language that drones on and no parent could expect to gain a significantly clearer understanding of these terms after reading the Jargon Buster."

One author and language commentator went so far as to describe the language used as "Stalinist language".

A piece from 'A Statement of Essential Learnings', reads:

'The ability to use a range of symbols to create, express and communicate meaning is essential to learning and to living productively in a complex world. Facility with language and symbolic systems provides the means to relate effectively with others, to select and evaluate personal and life options, and

to plan, adapt and enact purposeful futures with openness to learning throughout life. In an era of global communications, having creative and flexible communicative competence is fundamental to our personal, recreational and vocational opportunities.

'Increasingly, the capacity to interact critically with communications created and presented by others is crucial to making reasoned and informed choices and decisions. Being able to articulate our point of view thoughtfully and persuasively is essential to full participation in social and civic life as members of a democratic community.'

Mr Gutwein said: "I presume this highly convoluted set of words means 'learning how to read and write is important'."

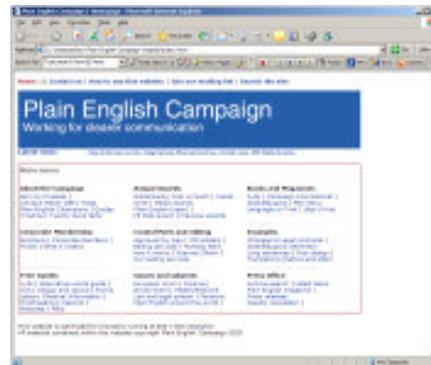
Fortunately, the Education Department has accepted the criticism and will be acting on it. We will try to make sure they do, and will of course keep you all informed of developments as soon as there are any.

Please ... no legalese

A welcome story from the United States shows that the fight against complicated legal jargon continues. Last week the Judicial Council of California announced the completion of a new set of 'plain English' directives, many replacing the originals from the 1930s, that will replace the current instructions for jurors.

It seems that jurors have had problems understanding legal jargon such as: 'a witness who is wilfully false in one aspect of his or her testimony is to be distrusted in others.' Or rather, 'once a liar, always a liar'.

Carol Corrigan, chairwoman of the Task Force on Criminal Jury Instructions and an associate justice on the 1st District Court of Appeal in San Francisco, said, "The new instructions are not meant to change the meaning of the law." She added that, "...the trick was to write instructions that were absolutely accurate but explain the concepts more directly".



Books for bedtime

Going for a late summer holiday? Stuck for something to read on the beach, or in bed? Obviously this copy of Plain English will be more than enough for you, but if you are really desperate, try one of the following.

'Blink, the power of thinking without thinking' by Malcolm Gladwell

'Who moved my cheese?' A self-help book by Spencer Johnson MD

'Kingdomality. A unique guide to using your personality to master the world around you' by R and S Silvano

www.plainenglish.co.uk

We are very pleased to bring you the news that our campaign website is currently being given a 'makeover'. Although it will of course still contain a wealth of useful resources, we are hoping to bring it a bit more up to date, as well as making it easier on the eye.

We are hoping that a 'new look' will help our renewed bid to raise awareness about the need for plain English, and the Campaign.

Many of you have contacted us over the last few months about our site, some with suggestions of how we might improve it. We hope that it will still be an essential tool for anybody looking for information about clear writing, but also that it becomes a resource of information about language in general.

We aim to launch the new site by December. In the meantime, if there are things missing from the current site that you would like to see on the new one, please let us know.

E is for easy to understand

As a trainer for Plain English Campaign I notice many things I would like to see made plainer. The silly notice next to the hand dryer in the ladies' toilets in Victoria station is one. It tells us the machine 'operates by electronic sensors' and we need to 'agitate our hands for operations to commence'. Then there was the 27-page quotation I received for a new heating boiler. And the estimate for lino which used old-fashioned business language such as 'thanking me in anticipation for my esteemed order'.

Some things just make you laugh, but some make you mad – like food labelling. It's a personal thing. I have an allergy to aspirin and am very sensitive to certain artificial food dyes, possibly some other additives too. If I have a severe reaction I get faint and dizzy, so I check the labels on all foods I eat and any medicines I take.

I get annoyed by labels in such tiny writing that you can hardly read it. But what really drives me mad is the inconsistency – why can't someone, somewhere decide what an additive must be called and stick to it? Should I avoid Green S, Acid Brilliant Green, Food Green S, Lissamine Green or C.I.44090? The answer, all of them – they're the same thing!

Personally I'm in favour of E numbers. They've had a lot of bad press over the years, but that's probably due to misunderstanding about what E numbers are. There are many additives like Green S that go by different names, including their long chemical names, which are difficult to recognise and remember. E numbers are just a way of naming additives (including natural additives, some of which have been used for centuries), in a standard way.

For example, to avoid Green S you would just watch out for E142.

Supermarkets are making an effort to offer 'healthier' products. A friend of mine came round for coffee. She's a coeliac (allergic to gluten) so she brought some gluten-free biscuits from a supermarket's 'free from' range. I was about to eat one when, out of habit, I looked at the label. It listed the artificial colouring by name. We decided it was because the supermarket didn't want to put an E number on their 'healthy' biscuits – sneaky!

With more and more people reporting allergies and food sensitivities and so many common problems such as migraine and asthma having possible links to food additives this problem touches many people's lives.

Words like 'pure' and 'fresh' are no guarantee of anything. At a hotel the other day I saw 'freshly squeezed orange juice' on the menu. Ever hopeful I pictured someone in the hotel taking an orange and squeezing it. The waitress apologetically explained that the juice came out of a bottle.

I keep a list of additives to avoid, but I prefer labels with easy-to-see messages such as 'free from artificial colours and preservatives' or 'no artificial additives'.

The labelling on organic products is often clearer and I was delighted to see that my childhood favourites, Rowntrees Fruit Gums, are now free from artificial colours. But we do need stricter controls, it shouldn't be left to individual companies to decide what consumers want to read. And the public need educating about E numbers or any new labelling system.

Until we get those controls, I'll just vote with my purse to support helpful companies. My favourite label at the moment is from 'Innocent' drinks.

They promise 'no concentrates, no GM stuff, no funny business.... and if we do you can tell our Mums'.

(Article by Jeanette Mercer, one of the Plain English Campaign training team.)

Plain English Campaign Awards



The Plain English Campaign Awards are months away, yet entries are flooding in for the best and worst examples of written and spoken English. We are still accepting entries for this year's awards. For the Plain English and Inside Write awards, please send us a copy of the document and details of any work you have done to make it suitable for the intended audience. For the Media Awards, please send us sample issues or tapes.

Our address is printed on the back page of the magazine. Please mark your envelope with the category.

For the Web Award, please e-mail us (info@plainenglish.co.uk) with the site address. Bear in mind that we normally assess the nominated sites during October each year.

You can also contact us with nominations in any of these categories, as well as the Foot in Mouth and Golden Bull categories. And don't worry - we never reveal your personal details without permission!

Letter of the month

'Thank you for writer of 24th July 2005. I just wanted to inform you that if you wanted to put grandchildren on your membership. You would loose your pension rate; membership changes too Family one adult, which is £49.50 a year. I don't know how often you take your grandchildren to visit prosperities. I just wanted you to be inform of the correct prices, that you would incur.

I do hope you continue to enjoy your membership. Your support to the Trust is very much appreciated'

(Letter from the National Trust)

Blazing the Plain English Campaign trail

Plain English Campaign has always tried to spread its message as far and wide as possible, and over the years representatives have visited the USA, Hong Kong, Australia and Africa to raise support for plain English. This year has seen two trips, to Moscow and Dublin, and we thought you might like to hear all about them.

To Russia, with love..

For the third time in four years we were invited to speak at the annual international 'Journalism and the culture of speech' conference. This year the event was held at Moscow State University on 28 and 29 April. George Maher and Peter Griffiths represented the Campaign. It was yet another wonderful opportunity for us to spread the word about good communication and plain, understandable language, and to help build a less fearful community through honesty and clarity. And it was one step closer to fulfilling the ambitions of our founder, Chrissie Maher, who has said in the past that she hopes "One day all governments, lawyers, businesses and bureaucrats will see the common sense of what we are trying to achieve, and will help ordinary people to understand official information".

Today in Russia the main international business language is English. However, the English spoken there is often colloquial, and specific to Russia, and, as a result it is not easily understandable to outsiders. In a time where business communication is increasingly universal, it is even more important that people understand the importance of plain English.

George Maher explained the importance of having a 'standard language' which can be shared and understood. Having previously been involved with the Campaign's trip to South Africa, where he saw such a positive response from the South African Government, he told the delegates "They realised that if a new law was not written clearly then translators would have to guess at what was meant, before translating it into the other official languages. This would often result in several different meanings, where actually they only needed one." He quoted the South African Minister of Justice, Mr Dullah Omah, who had said "We do not need 11 versions of gobbledygook. Any translator into an African language will tell you how she or he struggles with English that is written in a complicated and jargonistic way. Communication should be clear, simple and understandable."

George went on to talk about the aims of Plain English Campaign in detail. Although these are still very much in their infancy in Russia, his words were welcomed and his feelings shared by those attending the conference. It

marked another chapter in the Campaign's quest for worldwide plain language, its vision of all public documents being accessible to everyone. As George said in his parting words, "If someone does not understand the language of Shakespeare then it does not affect their everyday lives. They will still survive. We only concern ourselves with the information which people need to understand to take an active part in society and to be able to run their lives."

..and to Dublin's fair city

When Plain English Campaign discovered that one of its biggest clients, Irish Life, was holding an awareness week about plain English, it seemed a perfect time to make the short trip across the Irish Sea to Dublin. Irish Life have more 'Honesty Marks' than any other company in the world. The Honesty Mark, for those who don't know, shows that a document has not only reached the Crystal Mark standard of clarity but also contains no hidden 'extras'. The organisation also has to sign a declaration. The Campaign has long applauded Irish Life's efforts to make things clear for their customers, and while we were in Dublin we made sure those interviewing us knew about it. If only every company was prepared to stand up and be counted in the same way. We generated a large amount of publicity with our visit, and we were able to speak to most of Ireland's radio stations as well as receiving good coverage in the Irish Times and Independent papers. James Middleton takes up the story.

'Plain English Campaign had a splendid awareness day in Dublin. The five-man team arrived in the wake of the All Ireland hurling final - the equivalent of the FA Cup Final, Rugby League Challenge Cup and World Cup all in one. It took place on Sunday 11 September, in Croke Park, just across from the newly opened Jurys Hotel where the PEC team was staying.

Within minutes of the game ending, in a win for Cork over Galway, a fair percentage of the 81,000 crowd was heading into the hotel bar. There, lost in the enjoyable middle, was the PEC team. It could not have been a better introduction to the awareness day, giving a



Campaigners James Middleton, John Wild, Dave Smith and Ben Beer in Dublin

conversation point in every phone call the PEC team made on that glorious September Monday in Dublin. The Irish love plain English almost as much as hurling. Over the evening they chatted about everything from the hurling game to the weather to the use of language, which many in Ireland speak and write with great flair. Some of the fans were intrigued to hear that the Campaign was in Dublin to make Irish businesses a little more aware of the merits of plain English.

Before leaving New Mills, the PEC team - Peter Griffiths, company secretary; John Wild, senior spokesperson; Ben Beer and David Smith, IT and promotions; James Middleton, PR - had already made contact with many media and commercial organisations. Press releases brought a flood of phone calls before the awareness day and during it. On the Monday the team took part in 12 radio interviews, from RTE national channels to Newstalk 106 and stations in Limerick, Clare and around Greater Dublin. There were also two major articles in Irish national newspapers - a piece about insurance giant Irish Life's plain English awareness week and a full interview by well-known journalist Willie Dillon with Ben Beer.

Peter Griffiths, who was himself interviewed in one of the national broadcasts, said: "Everyone worked very hard to get the plain English message across to the people of Ireland. We had a wonderful welcome, and we feel we succeeded in our aims."

During the day, PEC representatives called on two major clients, the insurance companies Irish Life and Hibernian. The Irish Times article by Laura Slattery said Irish Life's Plain English Week publicised the Honesty Mark which the company had received for brochures, policy terms and conditions and benefit statements.

Laura wrote: "Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark is internationally recognised as a symbol of clarity. But the Honesty Mark goes further, certifying that the product documents contain no misleading information. Everything the consumer needs to know is contained in the terms and conditions."

The Irish Independent's article by Willie Dillon includes this quote: "We live in a golden age of information. But the world is still full of gobbledygook." It adds that PEC wants to point out to companies that 'tortured use of language' may be costing them money.



A visit to Hibernian's offices just out of the city centre found executives keen to adapt their documents to Plain English guidelines, as members of the visiting team explained what could be done.

All too soon the Irish day was over. Plain English came, saw - and learned. Ireland is as keen on the plain English message as any other part of these islands. The warmth of the welcome, from celebrating hurling fans to company executives and lawyers was encouraging. As Ben Beer said, after his seventh radio interview, "It's good to know that Ireland cares about language. We would like to come again to drive home the message. I think many commercial companies have definitely realised that ease of understanding can improve business and create happy customers."

Bits and pieces

New words (you couldn't make it up)

"(The council) intends to develop further initiatives to tackle **worklessness** and **financial and labour market exclusion**".

(Speech by a Borough of Lambeth councillor)

"With **metrosexuality**, it's about style, fashion, culture, and grooming for the straight male. A **metrosexual** man may be seen at an NBA game one night and an art gallery opening the next," says Ricky Montalvo, the man who wants to take **technosexuals** mainstream. "We take it one step further by adding technology. A **technosexual** man may not need to go to the NBA game because he can get highlights and scores via SMS or by browsing the web on his PDA while at the art gallery."

(from www.alternet.org)

'But the biggest area of change has been in the way we record and celebrate the lives of loved ones and it is the baby-boomers who are leading demand for more **personalised deaths**.'

(The Times, Body and Soul section)

What no heads?



Just plain daft..

The Innovations catalogue features many weird and wonderful products, but one caught our eye for its astonishing claims..

'The cup that measures... almost everything!'



'It's a simply brilliant idea. Most measuring instruments will give you an approximate guide but because sugar for instance, has less mass than rice, it's hard to be accurate, which makes following recipes a hit or miss affair. Until now, that is.'

Almost everything? Earthquakes? Tortoises? Shirtsleeves? Time?

Read it quickly...got it?

Please untick this box if you do not consent to us contacting you with further information

(from www.moneysupermarket.com)

Bad joke

Q: How many management consultants does it take to change a light bulb?

A: None. They will write a 360-page report convincing senior management that darkness is the world's best practice.

Blue Badge update

Our regular newsletter recently featured a story about the Blue Badge parking scheme for car users with disabilities. You may remember that people were being fined for displaying the badge the wrong way round, despite the fact that the card doesn't actually say which is the front and which is the back.

Following our letter to the Department for Transport, as well as similar efforts from several supporters, we can tell you that they are looking into this, and will be changing the design of the card so there is no more confusion.

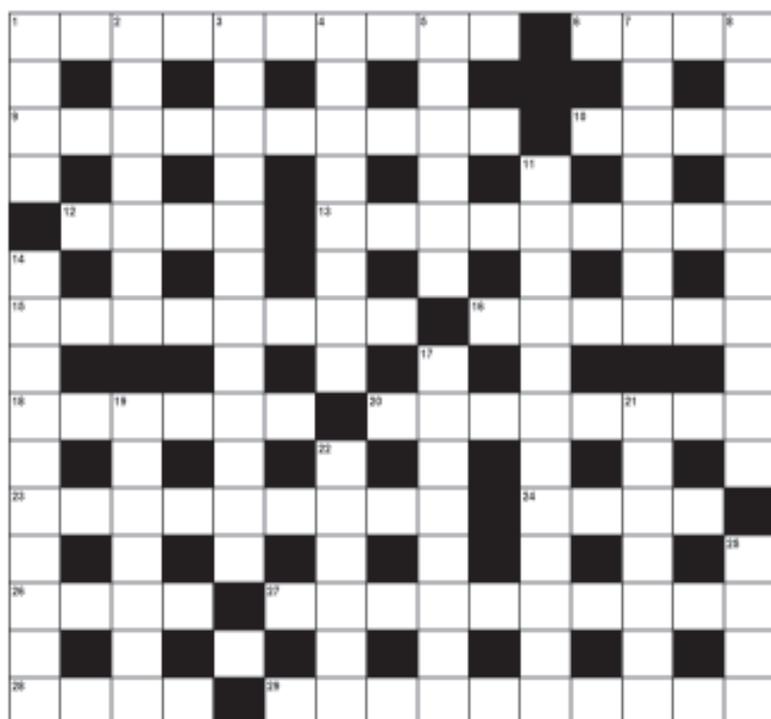
Direct debit wording

Another newsletter story has resulted in encouraging change. We found that the Direct Debit Guarantee wording, which protects consumers from mistakes being made with direct debit payments, is potentially confusing. It appears that customers can only correct mistakes if they actually contact their bank directly. That is to say, if you don't notice a mistake on your statement it is possible you will never be refunded your money, even if it is someone else's fault.

BACS Payment Schemes Limited, who are responsible for any amendments to the wording, have agreed to put forward our suggested amendment at their next members' meeting.

Get in touch

The above updates merely prove that Plain English Campaign can make a difference. If you come across anything that you find confusing or misleading because of the way it is written, please get in touch with us and we will do our best to take up the matter and try to get the wording changed.



Prize crossword

We are pleased to give you the chance to take a couple of fantastic prizes off our hands. As mentioned in the last issue of Plain English, crossword master Roy Dean has very kindly set a prize cryptic crossword for us, partly based on the history of Plain English Campaign.

Chrissie Maher will draw the winning entry on Plain English Awards Day (13 December). The winner will receive the latest CDROM version of the Oxford English Dictionary which is worth nearly £200. The next person we draw out of the hat will receive the Shorter English Dictionary on CD-ROM.

We would like to thank Roy Dean and Oxford University Press for their generosity and support.

Across

1. Equip elderly lecturer for terminal battle (10)
6. In retrospect, favourites make the pace (4)
9. Use inspiration? The best artist couldn't do this! (4,6)
10. Revolving shaft of chopper trainee installed (4)
12. Talk of fool's gold (4)
13. Meaningful study - that is a thing celebrities rejected (9)
15. Pretentious language you might work to see dry up (8)
16. Shock nearly dead with professional gibberish (6)
18. To move on runners, use insulting language (6)
20. Chaucer's tale-teller making excuse to the Queen (8)
23. Proof needed before dictator's to have children (9)
24. Payments for those correcting texts (4)
26. Half of skin infection turned completely clean (4)
27. I am felt, perhaps, to be irrelevant (10)
28. A noble king, first to last (4)
29. He makes commitments and finally carries them out (10)

Down

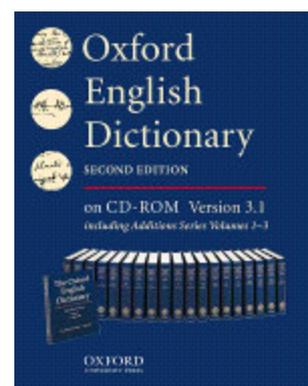
1. Tacks on cutting tool, we hear (4)
2. Note preceding a certain dance (7)
3. Words unintelligible, having swallowed unknown messy substance (12)
4. Furniture that actors find helpful (8)
5. Prompt a person to seize tiny boy (2,4)
7. Cowboy State's sound as a bell, but isn't it a threat to literacy? (7)
8. Source of laughter among rustics? (10)
11. Alight very hot from old Peruvian line (12)
14. Address that's too often misplaced (10)
17. Slash fine fabric's cost (8)
19. Theatre in capital erected by ruler (7)
21. What scribe might have given before writing in club? (7)
22. Call in with problem at beginning of week (6)
25. Speak indistinctly, making a slighting remark (4)

Completed entries

Please send completed crosswords, together with your name and address, to:

Plain English Campaign (Crossword Competition)
PO Box 3
New Mills
High Peak
SK22 4QP

The closing date is **30 November 2005**. We will contact prizewinners by post.



Training dates

Please call our training administrator Heidi Tinsley on 01663 744409 for more details, or e-mail us at info@plainenglish.co.uk.

Birmingham

- Thursday 1 December (Plain English)

Manchester

- Tuesday 6 December (Plain English)

London

- Wednesday 5 October (Grammarcheck)
- Thursday 6 October (Plain English)
- Tuesday 11 October (Report writing)
- Thursday 10 November (Writing medical information in plain English)
- Tuesday 15 November (Plain English)
- Tuesday 22 November (Plain English and forms design)
- Thursday 24 November (Advanced Grammar)
- Thursday 8 December (Plain English)

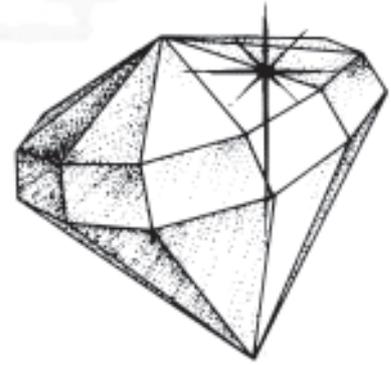
Edinburgh

- Tuesday 18 October (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 19 October (Plain English)

Belfast

- Thursday 27 October (Plain English)

**Plain English Day and Awards Ceremony
13 December 2005**



Welcome aboard!

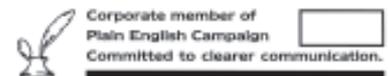
The following organisations have recently earned their first Crystal Mark

Alliance Medical Limited
Ascham Homes
AXA Insurance Limited (Ireland)
BRE
British Society for Histocompatibility and Immunogenetics
BUPA Ireland
Business Link Number
Care and Repair South Worcestershire (Festival Housing Group)
Care Record Development Board
Co-operative Development Society Ltd
Craven District Council
DETI
Direct Line
Ealing Hospital NHS Trust
Easington Primary Care Trust
Glasgow Caledonian University
Greenwich Council
Hazlemere Infants School and Nursery
Independent Reconfiguration Panel
Leeds North East Homes
Leeds South Homes
Leeds West Homes
Manor Health Centre (Dr Curran and Partners)
Mental Health Research Network (UK)
Merseyside Police Authority

National Grid plc
National Legal Services
National Screening Programme for Diabetic Retinopathy
New Technology Insurance (NTI)
Newport City Council
Northern Ireland Prison Service
Northwest Regional Development Agency
Nottingham City Homes
Nottingham Fire and Rescue Service
Oxfordshire County Council
Schwarz Pharma Limited
Scope
Soil Association
Somerset Community Housing Trust
Springboard Housing Association
Stafford Borough Council
Stannah Life Services Limited
UK Children's Cancer Study Group
UK Passport Agency
Welsh Assembly Government
West Midlands e-learning
Working Links
Yorkshire and Humber Chambers of Commerce
Yorkshire Forward

These organisations have become corporate members

Airbus UK
Alliance and Leicester plc (Communications)
Audit Commission
AXA Insurance Limited
Barclays Bank plc
Barnsley MBC (Planning and Transportation)
Bolton Metro - Environment Department
Corporation of London (Social Services)
GE Money
Genworth Financial
Hobsons Solicitors
Leicester City Council (Housing Department)
London Borough of Croydon (Benefits Department)
NHS Quality Improvement Scotland
Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust (Risk Services)
Yorkshire and Humber Chambers of Commerce



The 'Awards' issue of Plain English will be available in December