

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Summer 2007 Issue 69

Just the business!

Campaigns urging the use of plain English and common sense have given hope to thousands of Britain's small businesses. For years, members of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) have struggled with jargon in official documents and forms. Many spend up to 28 hours a month on the most boring aspect of their business life – filling in forms.

Following a government consultation, the FSB has called for procedures for settling disputes to be overhauled. The FSB wants clear guidelines, written in plain English and free of legal jargon.

John Walker, FSB's policy chairman, said: "Long-winded disputes are immensely

damaging for small businesses. We welcome the initiative to reform the system of dispute resolution."

The FSB is Britain's biggest business organisation, with over 200,000 members. Press officer Simon Briault – a self-confessed fan of plain English – said filling in forms is an overwhelming problem for those members.

Another burden is 'gold plated regulations' – the phrase used to describe EU regulations which are sometimes extended or brought in early when being introduced into UK law. The FSB has also campaigned against the complexity and jargon in recent regulations.

The Government's own Hampton review of 2005 noted that the last national regulator to win a Plain English Campaign award was Companies House in 1992.

But there is hope. Gordon Brown, in his 'curtain raiser' to the Queen's Speech promised an Employment Simplification Bill. FSB has 'high hopes from that. We like to think our campaigning will get it through.'

Simon Briault added: "If it simplifies the law, that is progress." He also spoke of the close work with ministers. John Hutton, the former pensions secretary is now the Secretary for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. "After speaking at our last conference, we think he has us on his radar."



Plain English pioneer Harriet at the top

Congratulations to Harriet Harman (pictured right), a plain-language pioneer when she introduced plain English into a Parliamentary draft bill on coroners' courts. Harriet, pictured with guest presenter Mary Nightingale at our last Plain English Campaign Awards, is now at the

heart of government. She is Leader of the House of Commons and Lord Privy Seal, as well as Minister for Women and chair of the Labour Party. Harriet once said: "Plain English is about democracy, about the fact that the public should be able to understand their own laws."

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

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Muffin tops and celebutantes

Every year, new words go into the dictionaries. This year's crop, in Collins English Dictionary, includes WAGS – the footballers' wives and girlfriends. Most people had never heard of the acronym that didn't become a word until last year's World Cup.

But what about muffin top? Is this a word that will last? According to the definition, it is that roll of flesh visible above tight trousers or skirts and supposedly like the upper part of a muffin. Girls who wear 'size zero' – another new phrase – do not have muffin tops. But some 'celebutantes' – also new to the dictionary – might have them.

Concern over the environment has also brought in new phrases such as 'carbon offsetting' and 'season creep'.

Meanwhile, Tesco has produced a slang guide so that older staff can understand the words used by many of their young colleagues. To older people, 'getting caned' used to mean six of the best from the headmaster – to the young it is doing things to excess.

Other Tesco definitions include the following.

- Buggin – to act crazily
- Bad – good
- Slammin – pleasing to the eye
- Safe blood – brilliant, my brotha
- Talk to the hand – I'm not listening.

What do you think of these and similar new words? Will they last? Are there other words that should be in dictionaries? E-mail us at pecpressoffice@aol.com with your views.

To all who 'literally exploded'

Those who flooded the Daily Telegraph with infuriating phrases now have their own 'bible'. The paper has brought out a book, called *She Literally Exploded*, with hundreds of examples of irritating sayings.

The list includes some of the newer irritants and the cynical meanings behind the words.

Your call is important to us. Inherently untrue, since the message is delivered by a machine.

End of story. Used as a self-contained sentence, with

no verb, in an attempt to shore up an opinion.

Raft of measures. 'The government announced a raft of measures to tackle child poverty.'

Saving the planet. Remembering to turn off your laptop before driving to the supermarket.

The 'do' words. 'Let's do lunch some time soon.' 'I don't do smiling.' 'I so don't do Shakespeare.'

Tipping point. Formerly turning point.



Logo is loaded with complicated jargon

While many journalists, design critics and sports fans are still trying to make their mind up about whether they like the logo for Olympics 2012, Plain English Campaign is just as puzzled by the logo's official description.

A news release issued for London 2012 describes the logo as 'dynamic, modern and flexible, reflecting a brand savvy world where people, especially young people, no longer relate to static logos but respond to a dynamic brand that works with new technology and across traditional and new media networks.'

So where does that leave us, asks Chrissie Maher, founder of Plain English Campaign. "What does that description mean, in plain English?"

"We are supposed to get involved and excited about the Olympics, but how can we when they isolate us with this jargon?"

The paragraph will be among favourites to win one of Plain English Campaign's Golden Bull awards in December, presented for gobbledygook, silly statements and writing which is full of jargon.

There are also awards for crystal clear documents. Send us an e-mail at info@plainenglish.co.uk to give us your nominations for either or both awards.

What do you mean, Melissa?



Melissa Mean and
the Glasgow skyline



Glasgow engulfed by gobbledygook of the future

Glasgow people are still scratching their heads – and counting the cost – after jargon appeared in a report on the future of Scotland’s biggest city.

Glasgow City Council and other local organisations funded a report by Demos, the independent think tank, on life in Glasgow in 2020 and onwards. The project took nearly two years.

Melissa Mean, who runs the cities programme at Demos, spent 18 months interviewing over 5,000 people from Glasgow. She enjoyed the experience and called it ‘a privilege to work in the city’.

The report got a stinging response from the city council. ‘Meaningless nonsense’ a spokesperson said – ‘nothing less than an insult to the many Glaswegians who gave up their time to take part’.

At some meetings, the public were invited to make a wish for Glasgow. Wish cards were bound into a wishbook – ‘an

indestructible totem that will live for centuries’.

This was just the start of some extraordinary gobbledygook. In the report Melissa wrote: ‘In terms of new ideas to sustain the urban renaissance, our cities are running on empty. The cultural arms race of mainstream regeneration policy has become formulaic, and is delivering diminishing returns.’

Earlier, when criticising the council for blinkered vision she used phrases such as ‘step change and transformation’, ‘world-class city’ and ‘one voice, one vision’.

Melissa also described the council’s use of ‘jargon-laden language by a spidery organogram of organisations, in a web of strategy documents and conference speeches’.

She told us: “The official future is a set of implicit assumptions which constrain a city’s parameters for innovation and decision-making.

Demos recommends assemblies of hope – networks of individuals shaping the city’s future, with space for everyone from alchemists to imagineers.”

The word ‘imagineers’, she said, was a quote from a meeting of entrepreneurs.

Cambridge-educated Melissa said she was not dispirited by the criticism. It is a long-term project, with 20 copies of the report in every library in Glasgow.

Bits and pieces

Actress Maureen Lipman received an award from Listening Books for being an example of how to use the English language ‘for fun as well as learning’. She told an audience at the Hay-on-Wye Book Festival: “They say awards are like haemorrhoids – sooner or later every bum gets one!”

From the days of the



The Tuebrook Bugle team with the first issue of the newspaper in 1971. Chrissie is second from the left.

Liverpool, the European City of Culture 2008

Next year, Liverpool becomes the European City of Culture. We are hoping to play a role in this great event because the roots of Plain English Campaign and its founder Chrissie Maher are in Liverpool. The Tuebrook Bugle, one of the first community newspapers, and the Liverpool News, Britain's first newspaper for people with reading difficulties, were set up by Chrissie during the 1970s. Here is a flavour of the Bugle years. We will be looking at the Liverpool News in a later edition of this magazine.

Even 36 years later, the freshness, the innocence and the 'can do' enthusiasm still bounce off the pages of the Tuebrook Bugle. The slogan said 'Written by the people, for the people'.

Based in a poor area of the city, the Tuebrook Bugle began to criticise the establishment and the many other organisations blighting this community. The newspaper promoted ideas about social justice, educational opportunities and fairness for ordinary people. Anyone who was not doing their job properly or who took advantage of this part of Liverpool was fiercely criticised.

These were some of the headlines in the first edition.

- Our homes are in the balance
- Phew! What a stink
- It pays to protest

'Who owns the Tuebrook Bugle?' was another headline. Under it there was a description of the editorial team. The team held weekly meetings to discuss local events and to choose stories and photographs for the next edition. During their work on the newspaper, the team found a lot of problems were caused by

misunderstanding and a lack of communication. The need for plain English was obvious even then.

The Bugle covered many aspects of life in Tuebrook including:

- school places and playgrounds;
- drains and sewers;
- the future of streets threatened with demolition; and
- rubbish dumps.

After a while, the name of the newspaper was shortened to 'The Bugle'. This was because other people in surrounding districts wanted to get involved.

The Bugle was more than just a voice for Tuebrook. Because it was so successful, it encouraged lots of other community groups to publish their own newspapers. What began in a small house in Liverpool eventually went worldwide. There were subscribers in places as far away as Canada, New Zealand, Australia and so on.

Bugle...

A look back on the earlier days of jargon and gibberish

The date at the top of the Tuebrook Bugle's front page, shown on the right, is May 1971.

The main story in this issue of The Bugle was 'A Conspiracy of Silence on Benefits?' This story was one of my first campaigns for the use of plain English.

Liverpool City Council at that time had voted against publishing a leaflet which would have clearly told the people what benefits they were entitled to.

The council were using jargon, gobbledegook and gibberish to betray the people. The Bugle never let them forget that. Nor, many years later, did Plain English Campaign let any authority get away with any gobbledegook.

Filling in forms is difficult even if you can find time to answer complicated questions. When you have four kids pulling at your arms at a council office's counter, the task becomes almost impossible. As a young mum, in the days before the Tuebrook Bugle, I found that filling in forms made me want to scream.

A few years later I went on, as part of another group called 'Impact', to simplify and redesign the first attempt at a multi-purpose benefit form for the council.

We produced the form with the co-operation of Area 'D', then part of the city council's housing

department. This area management office was based in Victoria Street in Liverpool city centre. The city council had come to realise that easier forms could save them time and money. Less time was spent by the people filling in the forms and also by the council staff who were processing them.

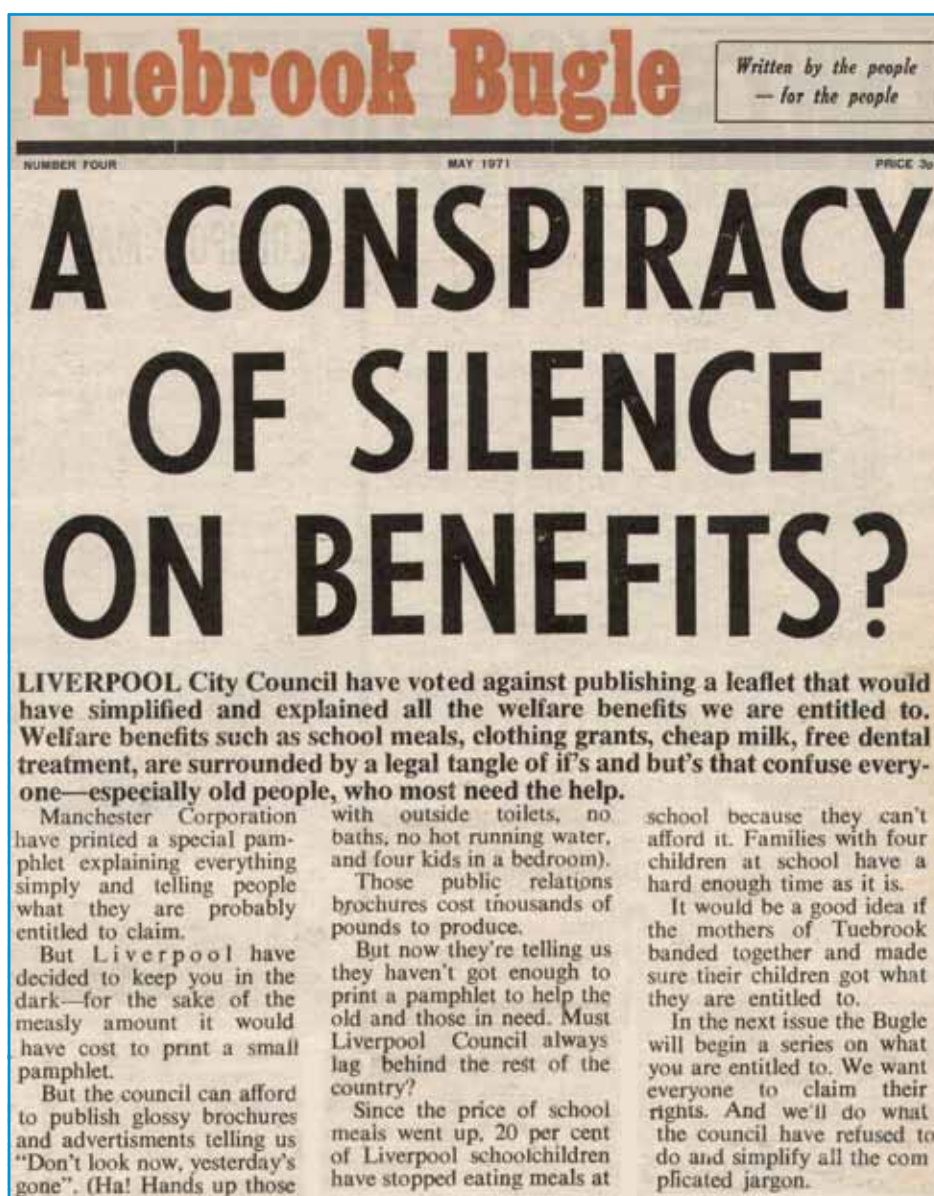
Since those early days, Plain English Campaign has worked with the council on many occasions to help them improve the clarity of their documents.

And these days it's not just paper documents. Increasingly, organisations are using their websites as a way of

communicating with the public, and Liverpool City Council is no exception. From the start they have been determined that their website should be as clear as possible. So they asked us to run a series of courses for council employees who contribute to the website.

Plain English Campaign trainer John Wild, who has been running these courses for the council, said: 'It's a sign of the times that our "Writing for Websites" courses are becoming increasingly popular. And it's good to see that a large, forward-looking council like Liverpool is committed to making their website as clear and accessible as possible.'

Chrissie Maher



Sliding into gibberish with Sligo lingo



The river running through the town of Sligo

Gobbledygook knows no boundaries. In the beautiful city of Sligo, in the far west of Ireland, gobbledygook is alive and well. Well it is in the rates office of Sligo Borough Council.

We are grateful to the lively Sligo Weekender for highlighting a startling example of baffling jargon sent out to a ratepayer. The Bits and Pieces column printed the following part of the letter, including the rambling opening sentence.

‘As to the increase in your rates demand from year to year, this relates to the fact that your premises is availing of a sliding scheme for rates payments, this means that in addition to the

change in multiplier for each year (previously called the rate in the pound) which usually is between 3% and 5% your premises will not be billed for its total bill as the sliding scheme allows for a 10% increase each year of 10 years, when the full rates bill will be served.

‘Please find attached a spreadsheet for your base amount to show you the increase, as the scheme on your premises started in 2000 – it will finish in 2009 with 2010 the first year that your full rates demand will issue. Hoping this clarifies the situation for you.’

Journalist Brian McCue, who edits the Bits and Pieces column in the Weekender, says readers drop

examples of gibberish into the office from time to time. He counted the words in the opening sentence of the council letter. It amounted to 91 words (including the percentage signs as a word). So far, no reader has produced a longer sentence from the local council. Sligo Council’s explanation of a ‘sliding scheme’ is in the running for a Golden Bull award from us.

We gave Sligo town clerk, John McNabola, an opportunity to defend his council. The response from a colleague, delegated to reply to us, almost wins another award.

‘In response to your recent e-mail, please note the following. This correspondence was issued to a customer who would have continuous involvement in a scheme of Rates Remission pertaining to his premises. The Scheme in question, which applied to designated areas, provided rates relief on a sliding scale over a 10-year period which increases annually to reach full liability in year 10. The person to whom this letter was issued was spoken to directly in this matter. Regards, Mary.’

Jargon hits pension hopes

Jargon in financial documents is being blamed for millions of people in Britain not saving enough for their retirement.

A recent survey by the insurer Aviva shows that a quarter of people in this country do not understand basic financial products such as pensions and annuities.

In 2006, the Government issued official statistics which estimated that 12 million people were not

saving enough to enjoy a comfortable retirement. Aviva’s survey reveals that a lack of financial knowledge, combined with jargon in financial publications and websites, is at the root of the problem. Of those surveyed 32% said they had delayed planning for their retirement because of pensions jargon.

Former economic secretary to the Treasury, Ed Balls, whose new Cabinet role includes families, said: “Jargon puts people off or

they end up buying something that is not right for them.”

Teresa Perchard, director of policy at Citizens Advice, said: “People need the confidence and ability to budget, borrow and save effectively. Providing advice and teaching financial skills really does work as our bureaux have seen people improve their money management skills and confidence significantly.”

Visit our website at plainenglishcampaign.co.uk to see our useful guide on pension terms.



Some of the delegates at the Copenhagen meeting

Plain language throughout Europe

By Peter Griffiths of Plain English Campaign, who attended the latest meeting with our European plain-language partners in Copenhagen.

Host Susannah Pedersen of Overblik, a Danish newspaper, welcomed everyone and explained that our main objective was to plan producing the test version of a European 'easy-to-read' newspaper.

Here is a summary of what our partners have been doing.

Denmark Overblik is developing an easy-to-read newspaper which will be available over the internet. Readers will pay a yearly licence fee of about £60 for one computer. Difficult words are explained at a click. There are online exercises and games such as Scrabble.

Holland Ralf Beekveldt of Eenvoudig Communiceren (EC) said there were many people with

reading difficulties among the unemployed. To help people back to work, Ralf's company produces easy-to-read newspapers. EC also produces pamphlets about the Dutch way of life for immigrants, who have to pass a test about life in Holland as well as learning Dutch.

Sweden Mats Ahlsen said their organisation, 8Sidor, was co-operating in 15 to 20 projects. It produces news on the internet, distributed to mobile phones and computers. Users can 'bookmark' where they have got to and carry on reading later (compare this with using an MP3 player where you always have to start from the beginning).

Finland Maria Osterlund of LL-Bladet told us about their website. It concentrates on plain Finnish and plain Swedish, but has information about alternative ways of communicating, such as sign language. Their printed newspaper is for sale, but is also available free over the internet. Teachers like the internet version because pupils with physical difficulties can turn the pages on screen.

Belgium Karine Nicolay of the newspaper Wablieft, said adult education in Belgium was being restructured, with education

centres combined and budgets cut. This was creating uncertainty. Wablieft is providing a rewriting and training service. It has also provided editing and writing services, and made awards to two government ministers.

The partners discussed the test version of the European newspaper. Each country would supply articles about climate change. These would be sent to Maria in Helsinki for editing and then forwarded to Plain English Campaign for checks and corrections.

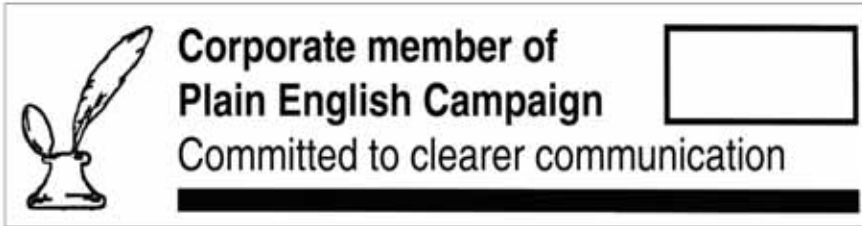
We talked about the gains for the partners. Everyone agreed that many useful ideas had been exchanged and brought into use. There was regret that Norway had withdrawn from the partnership.

Rintze Bulstra, project leader of the Dutch Crystal Clear Forms section of the Ministry of General Affairs, joined the meeting. From 1 September, all government forms must be in plain language and also be crystal clear. There will be a 'light touch' while people get used to the idea.

For Plain English Campaign, I explained how documents which carry the Crystal Mark are tested, and that if they fail they are recalled or amended at the next reprint. Most Crystal Marked documents are aimed at the general public and have to be easily understood.

But the Crystal Mark can be gained for the most complex documents, so long as they are clear for the intended audience. For example, the Crystal Mark appears on a British Aerospace aircraft operating lease and on the audit regulations of the Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Are you making sense?



Corporate membership of Plain English Campaign is the ideal way to make it clear to your customers, and to your staff, that your organisation is committed to clear communication. Through your unique membership logo, your customers will be reminded of this every time they read your documents. For more information on the scheme and its benefits, visit www.plainenglish.uk/corporate.htm or phone Tony Maher on 01663 744409.

Welcome aboard!
The following organisations have recently gained their first Crystal Mark.

- Bank of Ireland (NI)
- Brighthouse Stores/Caversham Finance Ltd
- Daily Mail and General Trust (DMGT Pensions)
- Filton College
- Imperial College London
- King's Meadow Primary School
- Birmingham Women's Health Care NHS Trust
- McCann Erickson Healthcare Groupama Insurances
- HM Treasury
- Abbeyfield UK
- Look Ahead Housing and Care
- University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust
- Reed in Partnership

New Silver Crystal Mark holders

- Gentoo Group Ltd

New Gold Crystal Mark holders

- Leeds City Council
- The Environment Agency

New corporate members

- H & F Homes Limited
- Bank of Ireland
- ICICI Bank

Training dates for 2007 (open courses)

For more details, e-mail us at info@plainenglish.co.uk or phone our training administrator, Heidi Selkirk, on 01663 744409.

Manchester

- Tuesday 18 September (Advanced grammar)
- Tuesday 23 October (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 24 October (Plain English)
- Wednesday 5 December (Plain English)

Belfast

- Tuesday 30 October (Plain English)

Birmingham

- Tuesday 11 September (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 12 September (Plain English)

Edinburgh

- Tuesday 9 October (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 10 October (Plain English)

London

- Thursday 20 September (Plain English)
- Tuesday 25 September (Report-writing course)
- Thursday 27 September (Writing for websites)
- Tuesday 2 October (Plain English and forms design)
- Tuesday 16 October (Grammarcheck)
- Wednesday 17 October (Plain English)
- Tuesday 6 November (Writing medical information)
- Thursday 15 November (Plain English)
- Wednesday 28 November (Plain English)
- Thursday 29 November (Advanced grammar)
- Tuesday 11 December (Plain English)

Help the public to understand your documents - with a Crystal Mark

More than 15,000 documents now carry our Crystal Mark as a sign of clarity.

We will not allow the Crystal Mark to appear on any document unless our testing shows it can be read, understood and acted upon by the intended audience.

If you have a document you would like us to look at, and would like a quote for the work please e-mail info@plainenglish.co.uk or phone Tony Maher on 01663 744409.