

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

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Hammer blow falls on local council jargon

The Local Government Association is proving a valuable ally of Plain English Campaign in the fight against jargon. The association, which represents councils across England, has announced a list of words and phrases it wants to have banned from local government and all public-sector documents.

Their choice of words does not surprise us. The list of 100 horrors includes 'predictors of beaconicity', 'performance network', 'risk based', 'resource allocation', 'strategic overarching' and 'coterminous'.

The writer of this piece had never heard of 'coterminous', which means sharing a boundary. Some colleagues did know the meaning, but they agreed it was not plain English.

Sir Simon Milton, Chairman of the Local Government Association, said: "Plain English Day," (a name given by some people to Plain English Campaign's awards day), "is a timely reminder for all of us that we cannot, must not and should not hide behind impenetrable jargon and phrases.

"We do not pretend to be perfect, but as this list shows, we are striving to make sure that people get the chance to understand what services we provide.

"Why do we have 'coterminous, stakeholder engagement' when we could just 'talk to people' instead? Councils have a duty, not only to provide value for money to local people, but also to tell people what they get for the tax they pay. People would be furious if they had no idea of



Association chairman, Sir Simon Milton

what services their cash was paying for and how they could get to use them. Councils provide more than 800 different services from archaeology to zoology. It is absolutely vital that residents are told how to access services, from claiming council tax discounts and how older people can get a lift to the shops, to telling people how they can get their old fridges picked up or how to report criminals who fly tip."

Sir Simon added that if councils explain their services in plain English, people will understand how local issues affect them. It will also mean they are more likely to turn out and vote.

He said: "Unless information is given to people to explain why their council matters, then local democracy will be threatened with extinction."

Don't forget the awards!

This year's Plain English Campaign Awards will take place at The Brewery in London on 9 December. You can start getting your entries or nominations in now, to make the 2008 awards as successful as the 2007 awards. As usual, Plain English Campaign has only one rule. This rule states that we cannot give an award to any document, paper, agreement or other material that we have helped with.

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Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

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Plain English training in Italy

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 Maher 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, which were well received.



John Wild (centre) with some of the plain English students in Rome

IFAD now hope to work with us to organise further courses in 2008.

John said: "We have a lot of expertise in teaching plain English to a multinational audience. We have run training courses all over the world, including India, Holland, Israel,

Ghana, Belgium, Germany, and South Africa. And devoting a lot of our time to spreading the plain English cause globally is working. Inspired by our success, new plain language groups have sprung up in countries such as Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands."

Your Majesty is misunderstood

Many English speakers might be upset at the prospect of no longer being able to understand The Queen's Speech in Parliament. Imagine if much of the speech meant little to them because oversimplification had caused various shades of meaning to be lost. And if the meaning was further obscured by cliches, words borrowed from other languages, long sentences and difficult words.

Luckily, it has not happened and plain language prevails. But some Dutch academics are concerned that the annual address delivered to the Dutch Parliament by Queen Beatrix suffers from the faults we mentioned.

The style of the speeches has been criticised for some years, particularly between 1982 and 1994 when they were written by Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers.



Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands

By 2006, a language bureau reported that an estimated seven million Dutch adults were hardly able to understand what Queen Beatrix read.

For the past two years, Radio Netherlands Worldwide (RNW) has been rewriting the speech into plain

language. But even the simplified versions have been interpreted in several ways.

The academics stress that anyone writing a text must take into account the receiver's level of knowledge. Otherwise, simplification can become patronising.

Linguist Jan Renkema says: "Condescending explanation, for example, does not suit a text as old and essential as the constitution."

Some Dutch linguists stress that plain language requires more than just avoiding jargon or long sentences.

These are principles well understood and widely used by Plain English Campaign, and it is good to know that supporters in the Netherlands are taking notice.

Lenny presents our awards for good – and bad – English

Plain English Campaign supporters are celebrating the success of the 'best ever' awards ceremony.

Around 400 guests attended the event. They were treated to a brilliant presentation from top comedian and TV personality Lenny Henry and the campaign's John Wild. Award winners from leading national and international media organisations rubbed shoulders with government officials and company representatives.

Highlights from the ceremony included an acceptance speech from top BBC Radio Devon presenter Judi Spiers. Judi delivered her speech in broad 'Devonian' to huge applause. But apart from the massive reception for host Lenny Henry, the biggest cheer of the ceremony was reserved for International Media Award winner Bruce Hill, of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Flying in from Australia to receive his award, he ripped into jargon pedlars and gobbledygook gabblers without mercy. But he did so with typical Australian good humour.

Lenny Henry delighted his many fans at the awards by signing autographs and appearing in photographs, long after the ceremony was over.

The story of the Golden Bull winners and the award of the 'Foot in Mouth Award' to Steve McClaren went worldwide. Newspapers and radio stations in New York, China, Canada, South Africa and Australia took up the story along with the biggest names in the UK media, reaching a possible maximum radio and TV audience of around 26 million.



Lenny Henry pictured with one of the Inside Write winners at our awards

There was a record number of 'hits' on the campaign website in 24 hours. (The address is www.plainenglish.co.uk.)

According to our press officer Steve Jenner, this is only part of the success: "The Steve McClaren story may have grabbed the headlines. But importantly, it gave us an opportunity to highlight the good work of the Inside Write and Plain English Award winners.

"These are often government departments, companies and not-for-profit organisations who are rightly criticised when things go wrong.

"Unfortunately, these departments are rarely praised for the good things they do. It is a positive aspect of our work that we're able to praise the work of these organisations before millions of people."

Plain English Campaign Award winners 2007

'Plain English' category (for the year's clearest documents)

- Liverpool Housing Trust for their 'Pictorial Tenancy Agreement'
- Stockport Women's Aid for their 'Advice booklet'
- CO-Awareness for their 'Carbon Monoxide Poisoning' leaflet
- The Prostate Cancer Charity for two information booklets
- Alistair McIntosh for 'A guide to surveyors' jargon'
- Chancery Group for the 'Cephalon employee benefits' booklet

Inside Write category (for clear internal government documents)

- Defence, Science and Technology Laboratory (MOD) for the 'Distil' newspaper
- Department for Children, Schools and Families for 'feedback' magazine
- National School of Government for their 'Joining the Civil Service' handbook
- Forestry Commission for the 'Operational Guidance Booklets'
- DVLA for 'Licence' magazine
- Driving Standards Agency for the 'Make a difference conferences 2007' booklet

We would like to say 'well done' to all the above winners of this year's awards.



Plain English Awards 2007

Media Awards

The Sun (Best National Newspaper)

Western Morning News (Best Regional Newspaper)

Panorama (Best National Television)

Anglia TV Local News West (Best Regional Television)

BBC Radio 5 Live Midday News (Best National Radio)

BBC Radio Devon (Best Regional Radio)

Bruce Hill, ABC, for 'Pacific Beat' (International Award – Australia)

Web Award



Osborne Award

Teletext

Plain English Diplomas

- Mags Paterson
- Jenny Copland
- Sarah Wilkie
- Alison Muceku
- Simon Stevens
- Adrian Ainsworth
- Michael McEnery
- Mairi Urquhart
- Claire Hider
- Jennifer Byrom
- Sara Hurst
- Clive Smith
- Alan Jackson
- Neville Harwood
- Heather Jacklin

Golden Bull winners

Fastway Couriers

for the terms and conditions on their website

'The Carrier shall not be liable for injury or damage to or destruction or loss of the Goods or any other property arising out of or incidental to or in connection with or occurring during the provision of the Services or for the mis-delivery or non-delivery of the Goods and whether or not caused or contributed to by the default (including negligence) of the Carrier or any agent, servant or officer of the Carrier or any other person entitled to the benefit of these conditions.'

Translink (NI Railways)

for a sign at Coleraine station

'Every Autumn a combination of leaves on the line, atmospheric conditions and prevailing damp conditions lead to low adhesion between the rail head and the wheel which causes services to be delayed or even cancelled. NI Railways are committed to minimising service delays, where we can, by implementing a comprehensive low adhesion action programme.'

Virgin Trains for a letter about problems booking online

'Moving forwards, we as Virgin Trains are looking to take ownership of the flow in question to apply our pricing structure, thus resulting in this journey search appearing in the

new category-matrix format. The pricing of this particular flow is an issue going back to 1996 and it is not something that we can change until January 2008 at the earliest. I hope this makes the situation clear.'

Warwickshire Children, Young People and Families Division

for minutes from a meeting

'Geoff flagged up that changes will be made to the ways in which the partnerships are assessed this year. The APA will assess all partnership arrangements affecting children, young people and families. In the past the APA was not as important as the JAR but this will be reversed. The JAR is no longer being scored: the scores for the CPA will be the APA score so the score we are given as a result of the APA this year will count to the JAR next year so we need to ensure the best possible APA.'

This year's APA will focus on a review of our CYPP. All current forms of assessment will disappear in 2009 when the CAA (Comprehensive Area Assessment) will be introduced.'

BAA

for a sign at Gatwick airport



UKTV's Mary Collins accepts the Golden Bull award, with full marks for bravery!

UKTV for a press release announcing the launch of its new television channel, Dave

'With a brief to establish Dave as the home of witty banter and as a refuge from the everyday, the award-winning Red Bee's innovative and original creative juxtaposes traditional weekend retreat imagery with contemporary talent from the channel's key content in a humorous and irreverent way to represent the channel's key brand values.'

Nestlé for a 'Project News' report

'Green Sauces are an important product group for Buitoni Pesto Basilico. Their quality and flavour profile are enhanced by the basil used in production. However, Buitoni faced sensory profile reproducibility problems due to heterogeneous raw material, challenging the production of uniform quality.'

Buzz phrases in the workplace

Few things are as irritating as the jargon of a modern workplace. But what do our everyday office buzz phrases really mean?

Knife-and-fork it

To 'knife-and-fork' a problem means to deal with it bit by bit. You may also have heard the term to 'eat your own dog food' (sample your own products) or 'eat some reality sandwich' (be realistic).

Touch base

In the workplace, managers and executives say 'let's touch base', instead of 'let's get in touch', presumably when they're working towards a 'goal'.

Push the envelope

In aeronautics, the term 'flight envelope', which has been used since the Second World War, describes the upper and lower limits of speed and manoeuvrability at which it is safe to fly. By 'pushing the envelope', test pilots could determine how far planes could go.

By 1978 the phrase was in use in print and was picked up and turned into jargon.

Run it up the flagpole

or 'let's run it up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes it' means, simply, to present an idea and see whether it receives a good reaction.

USP

This is a marketing term that means 'unique selling point' or 'unique selling proposition' referring to successful products that had unique attractions to consumers – so much so that they would switch to it from their brand of choice.

Blue-sky thinking

This means coming up with new ideas, and was a favourite of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who employed Lord Birt as a sort of full-time notable blue-sky-thinker.

The phrase is well known in the United States of America and well used in the United Kingdom and can relate to the opening up of your mind in discussion – as wide in fact as the 'blue sky'.

Paradigm shift

When standards shift because of a new invention, it is called a 'paradigm shift'.

A perfect example of a paradigm shift was the invention of the car which got rid of virtually all horse-drawn vehicles. The analogue television will soon be a casualty with digital television taking over.

We totally disagree with the use of buzzwords either in or out of the workplace. In the workplace, they may exclude new employees who have difficulty settling into new jobs without being bothered by verbal puzzles.

Outside the workplace this type of jargon excludes even more people and is unacceptable. It can make people feel stupid if they are unable to understand conversations because they don't know what the buzzwords mean. Surely the deliberate use of jargon to exclude anyone is not acceptable.

Buzzwords or jargon phrases rarely mean what the words say. And our basic message is 'always say what you mean'.

Chapter by chapter

I have been asked a number of times over the years to write something about my life, especially the early years. Don't ask me why, because I feel that a lot of children of my generation had an even worse time of it than I did.

I have now managed to complete the first chapter. If you wish to read it, you can find it on the web (www.plainenglish.co.uk) by selecting 'Chrissie's Story'. I would be interested in your comments – good or bad, but constructive please. This first chapter describes my memories of childhood poverty, including scavenging for food and being given cinders for Christmas. There were awful experiences at school (when I found the courage to go) and an outburst in a church. Being the family's spokesperson in a pawnbroker's shop was another familiar scene. Oh yes, and there were the living nightmares in the local air-raid shelter. As the story unfolds in later chapters, I will describe how these childhood experiences led to fights about benefits claims – and, in time, the formation of Plain English Campaign. **Chrissie Maher**



This photograph was taken just after the end of World War II. Pictured are some of my brothers and my mother. I'm on the far left in the latest hairdo and outfit.



“People must have a fair chance to understand the documents put before them. Otherwise they cannot tell you what they really think.”

Susan Kramer, MP for Richmond Park, brought the document to the Campaign’s attention. Chrissie Maher is quite clear about what she feels the Government ought to do. “I am calling on the Department of Transport to withdraw and redraft this document.”

Heathrow document does not take off

The consultation period is from 14 November 2007 to 27 February 2008.

Plain English Campaign founder Chrissie Maher has branded as ‘atrocious’ the consultation document on the plans to expand Heathrow. She has called for the summary document to be scrapped.

Chrissie points a finger at consultations that insulted rather than consulted. “We’ve seen this time and time again – local councils and government departments are always launching ‘consultations’. But they are not real consultations because they write them in such a way that most people are unable to take part.

Whatever the outcome, the Government, and in particular the Department of Transport, do not emerge with credit from this affair. We can only hope that in future the Government will remember what consultations are supposed to be for.

The document called ‘Adding Capacity at Heathrow Airport’ has the word ‘Summary’ printed on the cover. The cover invites people to ‘find out more and register your views’ and has a ‘response form’ stapled inside. It has Crown Copyright and is the work of the Department of Transport.

“After all these years of our campaigning, the Government should realise it can’t treat people with the contempt shown in the past.

If they bear this in mind when designing consultations, people will spend less time working out what they are supposed to do and more time giving an opinion. It will only feed current feelings of cynicism about the Government if people feel it is doing this on purpose.

Chrissie Maher said the document takes away human rights. “No ordinary person with an interest in the plans to expand Heathrow could be expected to read and understand this.”

“Unfortunately, once again we see more proof that this is not always the case. We are not ‘taking sides’ in the debate, but it is so important that in a democracy, consultations are genuine.

In Prime Minister’s Question Time (16 January), Ms Kramer urged the Government to withdraw the document. In reply Mr Brown said : “The consultation is there for the public to involve themselves in” and “I hope people will vigorously join the consultation.”

Residents fobbed off with jargon from Number Ten

The people of Bidborough in Kent, threatened with having their local post office closed, had many concerns. They would have difficulty using public transport to another post office, would find limited parking at the new location, and so on.

This reply, on headed notepaper from 10 Downing Street, is signed S Caine, of the Direct Communications Unit.

‘compensated post office closures within the defined access criteria’, and ‘numeric access criteria’.

Two residents wrote to the Prime Minister outlining the local problems in detail, and have sent us a copy of the reply.

The 523-word letter makes no mention of Bidborough Post Office. Residents are fobbed off with jargon such as ‘clearly defined minimum access criteria to safeguard rural, deprived urban and remote coverage’, ‘innovative outreach location’, ‘ensuring sustainability’,

Try telling all that to anyone in Bidborough who is worrying about where their next postage stamp is coming from.

Their post office closed in January just before residents received a reply from Downing Street.

Training dates for 2008 (open courses)

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

London (Thistle Euston)

Tuesday 12 February (Plain English)
 Thursday 14 February (Advanced grammar)
 Tuesday 18 March (Plain English)
 Tuesday 22 April (Grammarcheck)
 Wednesday 23 April (Plain English)
 Tuesday 20 May (Writing for websites)
 Thursday 22 May (Plain English)
 Tuesday 17 June (Advanced grammar)
 Tuesday 24 June (Plain English)
 Tuesday 15 July (Grammarcheck)
 Wednesday 16 July (Plain English)
 Tuesday 12 August (Plain English)
 Thursday 18 September (Plain English)
 Tuesday 23 September (Writing reports)
 Tuesday 30 September (Writing for websites)
 Thursday 2 October (Writing forms)
 Wednesday 15 October (Grammarcheck)
 Thursday 16 October (Plain English)
 Thursday 30 October (Advanced grammar)
 Tuesday 4 November (Writing medical information)
 Wednesday 12 November (Plain English)
 Thursday 11 December (Plain English)

Manchester (Thistle Hotel)

Tuesday 15 April (Plain English)
 Tuesday 10 June (Plain English)
 Wednesday 13 August (Plain English)
 Wednesday 22 October (Grammarcheck)
 Thursday 23 October (Plain English)
 Thursday 4 December (Plain English)

Glasgow

Wednesday 25 June (Plain English)

Birmingham (Thistle Birmingham City)

Tuesday 18 March (Grammarcheck)
 Wednesday 19 March (Plain English)
 Tuesday 16 September (Grammarcheck)
 Wednesday 17 September (Plain English)

Edinburgh (Thistle Hotel)

Wednesday 26 March (Grammarcheck)
 Thursday 27 March (Plain English)
 Wednesday 8 October (Grammarcheck)
 Thursday 9 October (Plain English)

Belfast (Europa Hotel)

Dates to be confirmed

Dublin (Jurys Inn Parnell Street)

Thursday 15 May (Plain English)

Welcome aboard!

The following organisations have recently gained their first Crystal Marks.

Hazell Carr plc
 Assurant Solutions
 Bethnal Green and Victoria Park Housing Association
 Circle Anglia
 Hanover Housing Association
 Sutton Housing Partnership
 South Northamptonshire Council
 Scotland Office
 Maldon District Council
 Burns-Anderson PLC
 Trusted Advisor Limited
 Stevenage Homes Limited

New Crystal Mark holders (continued)

Amlin Underwriting Services Limited
 BPS (Recruitment Services)
 Capita Hartshead
 Yell Limited
 Shepherds Friendly Society
 Easington District Council
 East Lindsey District Council

The following organisations have recently become Corporate Members.

East Lindsey District Council
 HSBC Bank
 Ministry of Justice
 Caversham Finance (Brighthouse Stores)
 AIB Group (UK) PLC
 City of Durham Council
 turn2us
 Stevenage Homes
 Assurant Solutions
 Philip Parkinson Homecare Limited
 Midcounties Co-op
 Cottsway Housing Association
 Department of Health

We will be there

Liverpool has been made European City of Culture 2008. Plain English Campaign will be there in August to present a number of workshops in the Town Hall. There will also be an exhibition showing how the principles of Plain English Campaign began in Liverpool and developed to the present day. More details will follow in the next issue of this magazine.

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

Nearly 16,000 documents now carry our Crystal Mark as a sign of clarity.

We will not allow the Crystal Mark to appear on any document unless the intended audience can understand and act on it.

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.