

# Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

July 2009 Issue 74

# 30



## years of campaigning around the world

30 years ago Plain English Campaign started its fight against jargon and gobbledegook in public information. 30 years on, we are still fighting it, although now it has become a worldwide problem. Many thousands of people now understand why it is a constant battle to keep language under control, otherwise the 'small print', as it is often called, will creep back in. This can create misery for people in all sorts of situations.

The achievement of crystal-clear communication rests with every individual, all over the world, who refuses to accept unnecessary jargon and pursues the goals of clarity and honesty.

To celebrate our 30 years of campaigning we have chosen to use the World Wide Web instead of the traditional re-enactment of the shredding of jargon-filled government documents, outside the Houses of Parliament. We are asking people

all over the world to fight against jargon by visiting the new campaigning website at [www.global-shred.com](http://www.global-shred.com).

Plain English Campaign has trained thousands of people in the use of plain English. The benefits can be seen right away.

- Clearer information
- Faster response times
- Better understanding
- Easier communication between people

Since 1979 the use of plain English has become an industry in its own right. The media has played a large part in the cause of plain English. Without radio, television and the press it would have taken much longer to establish. People from all walks of life have woken up to the fact that plain English is easier to understand than jargon. And when forms, documents and agreements are published in plain English, everybody benefits.



Chrissie Maher campaigning in America in 1993.

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# Our worldwide campaign

**1979** The launch of Plain English Campaign outside the Houses of Parliament with the first shredding event in the UK.

**1990** We present an exhibition to highlight the problems caused by unclear medical information at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

**1993** We visit New York and Washington DC to raise support for the campaign.

**1994** We host our third international conference in the USA.

**1995** We receive an invitation from the South African government to visit and review official public communications.

We continue our African journey to Ghana, West Africa for a meeting with MPs at Parliament.

We deliver presentations in the Basque Country in Spain for a Government conference on improving communication between administration and citizens.

We host our fourth international conference in Miami, USA.

**1996** We visit Ghana again for a community project for water wells.

**1998** We travel to Europe to support the Fight the Fog Campaign.

Campaigners John Wild and George Maher visit five continents in 80 days as part of a worldwide series of seminars and workshops.

**2002** The Plain Language Association holds its fourth conference in Toronto, Canada, where campaigners John Wild and George Maher speak to delegates from eight countries.

**2002** Plain English Campaign becomes the first plain language group to be invited to Russia, to speak at a major linguistics and journalism conference in Moscow.

**2004** We provide expert witness and written evidence on matters of communication for the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons in the UK.

**2005** We visit Ireland to raise awareness and make a continuing impact on the government and finance sectors.

We join the Grundtvig project – a network which links different plain language organisations from around Europe.

Grundtvig participants visit Plain English Campaign offices in the UK.

We attend a second conference presentation at Moscow State University.

**2006** We revisit Russia for a third conference presentation at Moscow State University and training of student journalists.

**2007** We make fourth visit to the Moscow State University for a presentation to the media sector on language standards.

A Korean film crew visit our offices for a feature on English in Korea.

**2008** We receive a surprise visit from Korean University students wanting to become plain English trainers at our UK office.

A German film crew visit Plain English Campaign offices for a feature on signs.

A Canadian television company arrive to film our annual awards in London.



**2009** This year we are back in both Houses of Parliament to provide evidence for public inquiries into how Parliament and government offices communicate with the public. We hope to voice the opinions of the public and provide input to the plans for parliamentary reform.

By celebrating our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the launch of the campaigning website [www.global-shred.com](http://www.global-shred.com) we hope to raise the voices of supporters of clear communications worldwide.

# Ploddledygook under arrest by Scottish Police

Dumfries and Galloway Constabulary have received a pat on the back from Plain English Campaign for stressing the need for plain language. Chrissie Maher, OBE and founder of the campaign, added her voice to support the proposal made at the 2009 Scottish Police Federation (SPF) Annual Conference for a return to plain English.

Chrissie says, “It was a police officer reading me the Riot Act in Parliament Square that launched Plain English Campaign 30 years ago. We were there to confront MPs when we shredded piles of documents filled with government gobbledygook. And there was this policeman talking a load of jargon, that I could only guess meant that we should clear off!”

‘Ploddledygook’ is what the campaign now call the mixture of management speak and traditional policespeak that only serves to create a barrier of mystery and confusion. The Dumfries and Galloway Constabulary’s proposal in Scotland highlighted the fact that it is not just the public that have to suffer this unnecessary jargon. Employees struggle silently in many organisations where language that is used out of context is used just to make old ideas seem new, or introduce thinking which is not easily understood.

Rab Milligan (pictured) is from the Dumfries and Galloway Constabulary, and has been Vice Chairman of the Scottish Police Federation since 2002.

Mr Milligan raised the importance of plain English in his speech at the Annual Conference 2009. “Why should we campaign for plain English in police publications? Let me quote three examples and you can judge for yourselves.”



- “The strategy may impact on the direction of various planned developments in the short term as there are inconsistencies between these and the long term requirements of the service. It is the intention that the strategy should evolve and be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect emerging issues and changes ultimately becoming a core part of an overarching policing strategy.”
- “Command and control management will become increasingly out of tune with the needs of a workforce seeking scope for initiative and involvement in the total leadership of our service.”
- “This document creates a transparent method of discharging our obligations to staff and public alike whilst establishing a framework that allows the safest possible execution of an inherently dangerous duty.”

He said, “I think that you can see what I’m getting at. These are just some of the examples I could have quoted. We have all heard that very particular brand of the English language being used in certain police circles and it is my view that all it does is confuse and that it adds no substance to the matter being discussed.”

Plain English Campaign reported that it sees, and I quote: “... many examples of police forces being customer-led, having mission statements and pointlessly stating the blindingly obvious. This also extends to job titles where one force has a ‘Director of Knowledge Architecture’.

The police do a great job but we know what police officers are and what they do. They don’t need to waste time calling us customers or telling us we are their focus or what their mission is.”

Rab then gave a few examples from his force’s incident management system.

- “PC Ross has attended at the hospital however was unable to take a statement as he had been given two strong pain killers and was drifting in and out of consciousness.”
- “Reporting female driver of a yellow Mini Cooper came out of a farm on the wrong side of the road then sped off. Caller got a fright and had new born twins within the vehicle.”
- “Bravo 24 (call sign for an area car) have been out drinking all day and have come home and had a disagreement. Have now kissed and made up.”

To rapturous applause, Rab borrowed a plea from Plain English Campaign to stop using ploddledygook.

The motion was the only one at the conference in the Scottish Borders to receive unanimous support from delegates.

Inspector Alistair Tait, of Central Scotland Police, said “Any move towards clearer communications would be welcome. When I first joined the service based in Thurso, it was like learning a new language. It was easier learning Gaelic.”

The SPF represents police officers throughout the country and has about 16,000 members.

# Did jargon cause th

Many of us will have watched the recent Channel 4 documentary on 'Dispatches – How the banks went bust' with feelings of helplessness, disbelief and frustration.

The comments made by the financial experts contributing to the programme were like Plain English Campaign's predictions over the past 30 years. But there was little satisfaction for us in knowing that language had been exploited and misused to such an extent as to contribute to the economic disaster being felt on a worldwide scale.

As individuals, we fight to varying degrees with the daily jargon and gobbledegook in our mail, our workplaces, even our entertainment. As a civilisation built on sophisticated commerce and communications, we believe the experts, in whatever field, know what they are doing. Whether we like it or even agree with it, the leadership from our government, the judgement of the finance industry, and the discoveries of our medical providers have all been accepted and trusted by the public. For the most part, we, the public, believe what we are told – whether we understand it or not – and we place our trust in the leaders and experts who have achieved their positions because at least they do understand. Or perhaps they don't?

This extract from the book 'Cityboy – Beer and Loathing in the Square Mile' by Geraint Anderson, is a real-life demonstration of the extent to which language is used to control people, power and politics.

"... At one point I overheard this clearly intimidated individual make the terrible mistake of asking Hugo 'What exactly is it that you do?'

Hugo leaned back in his chair with an ever-widening smug smile on his face and proceeded to begin a five-minute spiel, braying loudly and loving the sound of his own voice. I listened to his explanation and hardly understood what he said myself – and even at that stage, I had a vague idea what it was we did. Instead of saying quite simply that we analyse companies and explain to investors whether we believe the company's shares are going to go up or down, he went into a long convoluted load of nonsense using every conceivable specialist terminology possible. His little speech went something like this: 'Enterprise value blah, blah, blah, return on equity etc, etc, etc, earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation ... economic value added ... cash flow, return on investment and so forth'..."



**Geraint Anderson, author of the book 'Cityboy – Beer and Loathing in the Square Mile'**

"...This whole experience made me reflect on how we in the City use arcane language and peculiar terminology to confuse those who don't earn as much as us (i.e. pretty much everyone). It makes us sound like

we're doing something extraordinarily complicated and technically unfathomable and keeps our potential detractors in the dark. We are a much harder target if the 'common man' feels intimidated by our complex world and doesn't even understand what we do. We push around bits of paper. That's what we do. That's all we do."

Geraint is a strong supporter of clear communications. He was one of the UK's top four brokers before his revelations about the 'financial philanderings' saw him wave goodbye to the Square Mile.

Jon Moulton of Alchemy Partners, another highly respected financial figure, contributed this comment to the documentary.

"Much of the structured finance world was actually home-grown here. UK banks got involved with things they couldn't measure, couldn't control, didn't understand. Some got into very sexy, almost incomprehensible contracts. Synthetic mezzanine CLO squareds? Not sure I know what it is either but I promise you that some of the banks have them."

Jon Moulton, whose opinions show signs of him being a Plain English Campaigner, goes on to tell how he was asked to explain 'CLOs' at an emergency meeting at the Bank of England when the vulnerability and complexity of the risk management system could no longer be denied.

"...trying to explain CLOs to some very senior people at the Bank of England. Using the back of a menu to actually explain it to them."

CLOs or CDOs were the 'magic' investment products created by the

# ne 'Credit Crunch'?

finance gurus. These collateralised loan obligations or debt obligations, formed the basis for the credit debt pyramid that grew into the volcano of recession. Here is the high-level thinking for CDOs.

“Basically, the pricing of a synthetic CDO tranche that takes losses from K1 to K2 (with  $0 \leq K1 < K2 \leq 1$ ) of the reference portfolio works in the same way as the pricing of a 3 credit default swap. Let's assume that  $0 \leq t0 < \dots < tn$  (1) denote the spread”. (The Normal Inverse Gaussian Distribution for Synthetic CDO Pricing - Anna Kalemanova Bernd Schmid Ralf Werner)

We accept this is the specialist terminology for a particular group of expertise. But at some point that shorthand needs to translate into a language that can be communicated and understood by brokers, investors and the rest of the financiers.

Neil Smith, the Chief Investment officer at Corham Capital explained:

“Simple fact is that things had become so complicated that only those people directly involved with the creation of these products knew what they were. CDO guys had every sales trick in the book. I mean it was the classic salesman techniques. If they hadn't been selling CDOs they would have been selling second-hand cars. Their whole strategy was to make people feel silly if they didn't understand the product. Everybody I came into contact with wanted to be invested in this market because it was deemed to be no risk – not low risk, but NO risk!”

Neil Smith describes Corham Capital as 'an investment firm focusing on corporate-finance advice and alternative investment management'.

That's three financiers talking plain English on one page. In our interview Neil added: “I do hate the kind of linguistic crucifixion that is rife in the financial services industry so I applaud the campaign.”



**Neil Smith, the Chief Investment Officer at Corham Capital.**

Well, the campaign applauds you for speaking out, Neil. It is the blind faith in the words of others, fuelled by egos, greed and the delusions of success that has led to the global trillions of debt. This is how the credit crunch looks to us:

CDOs + poor communications + unscrupulous intentions = £601.9 billion = UK debt

The World Debt Clock in New York is to have two additional digits added to allow the clock to track debt up to a quadrillion. It sounds more like 'Alice in Wonderland' every day.

We are not pretending that a plain English definition of CDOs would have saved us from recession. Complex information, instruction, processes or legislation is created gradually, so it can be dissected. In doing that, the

structure is better understood and communicated. This is the plain English attempt for defining what is at the heart of CDOs - let us know what you think.

Collateralised debt, obligations (CDOs) are commitments to repay debts which are secured on assets.

And here is our glossary to explain the words within the name.

Collateralise: to pledge assets as security for a debt, such as a loan.

Debt: money owed by a person or organisation to some other person or organisation.

Obligation: a commitment to repay a debt.

Using jargon and gobbledeygook is a perfect smokescreen for a lack of knowledge, unclear thinking and defective information. The resulting ambiguity and confusion provides a breeding ground for lies, exaggerations, misinterpretations and a convenient hiding place for trouble.

The reputations of CDOs have been tarnished by those bankers who in their ignorance of the products or their desire to exploit the 'golden egg', created a mixed bag of good and bad products. The result was complicated and confused thinking.

The bankers are under the spotlight now, but there is no part of private – or public – sector activity that is not affected by unclear communications.

Black holes, climate change, polar melts – these are disasters over which our society has relatively little control. Being gobbled up by our own gobbledeygook is something everyone can act upon today and everyday.

# When did it start?

Campaigning for plain English is not a new idea. In fact it is not even a recent idea. The fight for plain English has been going on for hundreds of years.

More than 2000 years ago Hippocrates said: "The chief virtue that language can have is clearness, and nothing detracts from it so much as the use of unfamiliar words."



Almost 70 years ago Winston Churchill said: "Broadly speaking, the short words are the best, and the old words best of all".

Chrissie Maher understood these words and was one of the first people to forcefully campaign for the use of plain English in modern public life.

Her campaigning started more than 40 years ago in the late 1960s. At this time she was bringing up four children. And, without much money coming into the house she was forced to claim benefits. These benefits were for essentials like clothing and shoes for the children. However, there were the usual complex forms to complete.

She had tried to fill in the forms but even then they were too difficult to understand. At the time, Chrissie hadn't heard the terms 'gobbledygook' and 'jargon' but, these forms were full of them. At the end of the form was a place to sign to say you understood the questions and that you would be prosecuted if you had not given the correct information.

This bit was always in plain English even if the rest of the form was not. Very often, because of the fear of prosecution people did not sign the forms. This meant they did not get the benefits they were entitled to and the children did not get the clothes they so desperately needed.

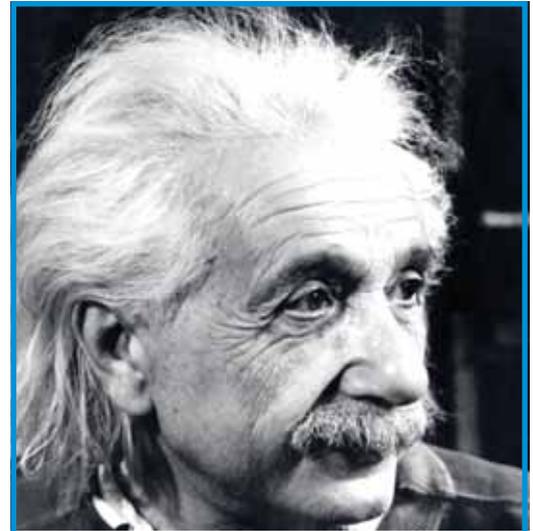
Chrissie often wondered if using this kind of language was a deliberate ploy to prevent people claiming and therefore saving the councils' money. This infuriated Chrissie and set her on the 'plain-English road'. But, she soon realised that getting mad about an injustice did not solve the problem. After some years involving herself in the local community, Chrissie decided to try and understand how the establishment worked.

As well as starting various community projects, such as the Tuebrook Bugle, she found herself being asked to join various types of committee. Some, such as Liverpool Council for Voluntary Service (LCVS), had links with the city council. Although she learned a lot about how these committees worked, she began to understand that she was only a token working-class woman invited to give credibility to those groups. Having said that, there were some people at the time that showed an interest in Chrissie and gave her some good advice.

But Chrissie still found it hard to get funding for some of the community projects that people in the local area wanted. People were still raising money through jumble sales and small local events. They found that you could not build a community centre on the goodwill of the people alone.

There needed to be funding from those people who held the purse strings, not only in government, but also from organisations like The Arts Council and private trusts.

## Other famous quotes



"Most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple, and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone." — Albert Einstein



"Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say 'infinitely' when you mean 'very'; otherwise you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite." — CS Lewis



"Clear writing from your government is a civil right." — Former American Vice President Al Gore in 1998



In 1979, Chrissie and her colleagues shredded lots of jargon-filled Government documents in Parliament Square. And, thanks to plenty of media attention Plain English Campaign was born.

Chrissie had been let down so many times in her efforts to secure funding for her local group that she knew she had to do something about it. One of the big problems at that time was the lack of facilities and a place for people to learn the skills she had been taught. It is also worth remembering that there were no home computers in the early seventies so producing any sort of quality publication needed to be done by a system called letterpress. Later, lithography became a more popular way of doing it but even then you needed some drawing-board knowledge and the ability to cut and paste your own material.

Chrissie eventually found a building with the help of the John Moores Foundation. It was in Liverpool city centre and she set up the self-help organisation called Impact (Independent Media Printing and Communications Trust). During her time at the Stonycroft Community Group Chrissie had done small commercial jobs to help the group and supplement the costs of the Tuebrook Bugle. She decided to use her new skills to help support Impact.

Impact was set up to earn money to pay people with the necessary skills to teach the community at large. Schools, community groups, tenants' groups and church groups, all came to Impact and were taught for free. They learnt about communications, layout and design, and printing techniques. It was a great success.

A few years later Chrissie started the Form Market in Salford with the help of the National Consumer Council. When the funding for this project finished, she decided to start Plain English Campaign. There was no funding available so Chrissie decided to continue what she had been doing for the last decade. She would again carry out commercial work and use the profits to pay for campaigning. Chrissie and her colleagues worked hard at creating a profit so Plain English Campaign could survive.

But even into the late 1980s, Plain English Campaign owed more than £100,000 to the bank and the Government.

The bank had been contacting Chrissie about this debt for quite some time. They even phoned her during Christmas week in 1989 threatening to evict her unless she paid a large amount off what was owed. Chrissie had stood as guarantor for Plain English Campaign for many years. She had put her home up as collateral and the bank was now putting pressure on her to repay the debt. She managed to stall them at this point by borrowing money from elsewhere. It wasn't until the middle of the 1990s that Plain English Campaign really became solvent.

We have campaigned in many different ways since we became Plain English Campaign in 1979 and have helped many different causes. One project was the rewriting of The South African Human Rights Commission Act 1995. We gave the writers £20,000 to complete the project. For another project in Africa we raised £12,000 to drill water wells in Ghana. When people are thirsty they cannot focus on learning. Towards the end of 1995 Plain English Campaign provided another £20,000 to the Consumer Congress Trust. This was 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.

More recently we re-visited our roots in Liverpool for their European Capital of Culture 2008 celebrations. During the week we were in Liverpool, we gave free plain English training to adults, young people and even some Liverpool councillors. There were free exhibitions and plain English presentations in the Town Hall and at some Liverpool schools. These were all hugely successful and well attended events.

## 'Expertise on tap and not on top'?

Chrissie eventually realised that although she and her friends spent countless hours filling in forms and writing reports, they found it difficult to secure funding. Other projects, run by academics, always seemed to get the money. This was because they understood the jargon and were able to fill the forms in correctly. In some cases the funding they got was for salaries for themselves to administer these projects. They would then use the local people, whose idea it probably was, to complete the job for them.

'Expertise on tap and not on top' was one of the slogans that had been created to convince the grassroots communities that these experts were there to help. However, some of them who could not get their own way at that time would leave the project. They would take their expertise with them. And when they went for another job, their application would then look much better because of their connection with the project.

## Training dates for 2009 (open courses)

For more details, email us at [info@plainenglish.co.uk](mailto:info@plainenglish.co.uk), or phone our training administrator, Terri-Louise Schabel, on 01663 744409.

### Thistle Euston Hotel (London)

Thursday 16 July (Plain English)  
Wednesday 12 August (Plain English)  
Tuesday 15 September (Plain English)  
Wednesday 14 October (Plain English)  
Thursday 12 November (Plain English)  
Tuesday 8 December (Plain English)

### Thistle Hotel (Manchester)

Thursday 13 August (Plain English)  
Thursday 22 October (Plain English)  
Tuesday 8 December (Plain English)

### Thistle Hotel (Birmingham City)

Thursday 17 September (Plain English)

### Thistle Hotel (Edinburgh)

Thursday 8 October (Plain English)

### Europa Hotel (Belfast)

Tuesday 6 October (Plain English)

## New corporate members

Ofsted  
Ministry of Defence  
The Villages Housing Association  
Paternoster  
Powys County Council  
Fundraising Standards Board  
University of Oxford  
Lewisham PCT  
Greenwich Teaching PCT –  
Communications Department  
Astrellas Pharma Limited  
NHS Somerset  
Shepherds Bush Housing Group  
Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service  
The Abbeyfield Society  
Scottish Water Authority  
The Ombudsman for Estate Agents  
Co Ltd  
Business and Enterprise North East  
The Care Quality Commission  
Family Fund  
UK Mediation

## New corporate members (continued)

Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals  
NHS Trust Tenant Services Authority

## New Silver Crystal Mark holders (with 25 Crystal Marks)

Connecting for Health  
Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society  
Capita Hartshead  
Poplar HARCA  
Stockport MBC

## New Gold Crystal Mark holders (with 50 Crystal Marks)

Manchester City Council  
The Moray Council  
Nationwide Building Society  
Velindre NHS Trust

## New Platinum Crystal Mark holders (with 100 Crystal Marks)

Alliance & Leicester plc

## New Crystal Mark holders

Lewisham Homes  
Care for the Family  
EAT  
Community Housing Group  
Cumbernauld Housing Partnership  
Limited  
Paradigm Housing Group  
Communications Trust  
Morton Fraser LLP  
RSPCA  
Angioma Alliance UK  
Dunedin Canmore Housing Association  
Sandwell Homes

## New Crystal Mark holders(continued)

Lenwell Property Management and Letting  
Trimedia  
University of Hull  
Virgin Active Health Clubs Limited  
National Audit Office  
Police Complaints Commissioner for Scotland  
Combined Insurance  
Golley Slater LLP  
National Trust  
South Eastern HSC Trust  
CE Electric  
Tenants Services Authority  
Worcester Community Housing  
National Fluoride Information Centre  
NHS Blood and Transplant Urology  
Informed Decision Making Project (Addenbrooke's Hospital)  
The Supply Group Limited

## The new compact plain English course

This course caters for people in a hurry.

We know that many people would like to go to one of our one-day training courses but lack the time to commit a full day.

So, we have taken some of the parts of the one-day course and put them into a three-hour session. In that time you will learn the basics of plain English, and you will take away the same workbook we give to delegates on our full one-day course.

The price for up to 12 delegates is £795+VAT.

For more details contact Plain English Campaign on 01663 744409.

## Help the public to understand your documents – with a Crystal Mark

More than 18,300 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 email [info@plainenglish.co.uk](mailto:info@plainenglish.co.uk), or phone Tony Maher on 01663 744409.**