

# Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

May 2008 Issue 72

## Checking the small print

MPs supporting a Private Members' Bill to ban small print in contracts and advertisements will have to wait months for its second reading.

The bill is sponsored by Dr Nick Palmer, MP for Broxtowe in Nottinghamshire. His supporters were hoping for a second reading on Friday March 14 but the reading was delayed by other House of Commons business. Now the supporters must wait, including the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Age Concern, Help the Aged and the Trading Standards Institute.

We liaised with Dr Palmer during the bill's preparation and are fully convinced that its aims are worthwhile.

It asks the Secretary of State to:

- 'make regulations about the minimum size of text used in terms and conditions in advertisements and contracts relating to provision of goods and services;
- set requirements for different types and parts of advertisements, documents and contracts; and
- consult any organisations he considers appropriate.'

By 'advertisements' the bill means only those in publications or those displayed on websites.



**Dan Scorer of the Royal National Institute of Blind People (left) with Dr Nick Palmer and Steve Jenner**

House of Commons staff told us that various Fridays have been allocated for Private Members' Bill readings and the Small Print Bill is not next in line. Its reading could be as late as October and even then we must remember that Private Members' Bills rarely become law.

Plain English Campaign Press Officer Steve Jenner, who worked with Dr Palmer on the drafting of the bill, said: "The scourge of small print has made life a misery for many people over the years." Nick Palmer believes small print is being used to hide unwelcome terms and conditions.

Many people cannot read it because it is so small and defeats their visual abilities. Many people do not read it, although they have adequate sight, simply because it is so unpleasant and difficult to comprehend easily.

Steve Jenner said: "Print size undoubtedly makes a difference to the readability of a document. If law forced companies to use larger print as this bill demands, they would have to re-edit much of the text. Either that, or hand out 'terms and conditions' documents which would be far too long."

Seaford MP Norman Baker has co-sponsored the bill. It would not ban the use of small print altogether, but would make sure that any print under a specified size would not be binding or have any legal effect.

Mr Baker said: "I am very pleased to have been able to lend my backing to this bill, which would ensure that customers are much more easily able to be aware of the terms and conditions of any agreement they are entering into.

"Consumers deserve protection against such manipulation in the small print and this is why I am very pleased to have been able to co-sponsor this bill."

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication

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# Making sense of the war of words

Plain English Campaign supporters are praising government plans to change family court language and procedures.

The 'co-respondent' — the person who has sex with someone else's husband or wife — will become the 'second respondent' (the first respondent being the straying spouse). A 'decree nisi' will become a 'conditional order'. The final 'decree absolute' will become 'the divorce order'. All levels of family court will use the same terms and code of practice.

Campaign spokesperson Steve Jenner said: "Justice Minister Bridget Prentice says the new proposals will make it easier for people to follow what is said in court. We certainly hope this will be the case, although 'respondent' still needs some thought.

"Often procedures in court are painful for family members. Clear language can't take away the pain of circumstances, but it can help take away the confusion. The recent improvements to the Coroners Bill



**Justice Minister Bridget Prentice** are a case in point. Courts can be daunting places without having to suffer confusion and misunderstanding as well."

## Plain truth on police language

In a recent press release about the use of jargon in our police authorities, Inspector Simon Hepworth of West Yorkshire Police (pictured right) praised Plain English Campaign for 'highlighting the confusing words and phrases we pump out in public'. He went on to give his own views about the meaningless phrases that are used automatically by himself and his colleagues. It happens even though the language causes frustration amongst themselves.

Plain English Campaign sympathise with the unnecessary pressures these police officers must feel. They already do a demanding job, and then are faced with terms like 'outputting products' and 'having visions' as reported by Inspector Hepworth in Jane's Police Review. He continues: "Few people want to admit they do not understand." This is common in offices where jargon is used, whether in government or business. Important information and critical knowledge are sacrificed when people use pointless waffle to be part of the team, to impress their superiors, or at worst, to mask the real facts.



Suffolk Police were quick to react to the media exposure by changing some job titles. Greater Manchester Police, who have previously worked with Plain English Campaign, made it clear they wanted to make more improvements. However, there will always be those who make life difficult for themselves as well as the people who need the police. Norfolk Police are using the word 'criming'. This is not a word that is familiar to the public and is not in any of our dictionaries.

So thank you Inspector Hepworth for your stand against jargon amongst our police forces. As you write, '... I shall stick to the Kiss principle: keep it simple, stupid!'

## Nominations welcome now

Plain English Campaign staff and supporters always have a good time at our annual awards ceremonies. Gobbledygook is ridiculed and crystal-clear documents are rewarded. This year's ceremony is to be on 9 December in London.

If we receive a lot of nominations now, the easier it will be to choose the very best examples of plain English and the worst examples of jargon and gobbledygook. Plain English Campaign has only one rule: We cannot give an award to any document, paper, agreement or other material that we have helped prepare.

The categories are:

- Plain English (for clearer English);
- Golden Bull (for gobbledygook);
- Inside Write (for clear internal government documents);
- our Media Awards; and
- the Web Awards.

Please send written nominations to Awards, Plain English Campaign, PO Box 3, New Mills, High Peak, Derbyshire, SK22 4QP.

# Mr Brown needs some English lessons

Labour MP Jon Cruddas has said that if Gordon Brown and his ministers want to reconnect with working class voters they must begin talking ‘fluent human’.

He said this when the weekend papers were giving masses of coverage to Boris Johnson’s election as Mayor of London and what they said was Mr Brown’s ‘mauling’ in the local council elections.

The Daily Mirror was quick to list examples of political jargon which is often misunderstood.

For example:

- ‘social justice’ means ‘helping the poor’;
- ‘social mobility’ means ‘making sure the working classes are not stuck at the bottom of the ladder’; and
- ‘stakeholder engagement’ means ‘getting people interested in politics’.

Mr Cruddas said: “The danger is that even people like David Cameron and Boris Johnson are getting more emotional connection than us despite their old Etonian past. That is worrying.”

Now here’s a message from us to Mr Brown and all politicians. We should not need journalists to explain what you say. Speak and write plainly and simply using words we can understand immediately.

## Ditch ‘dreadful’ euphemisms says the Justice Secretary

(\*Euphemisms : Words or phrases that soften the message, or are less direct to avoid offending.)

In our Plain English magazine (issue 71), we commended the Local Government Association for announcing a list of words and phrases which it would like to see banned in local government.

In the following month, we were just as pleased to hear Justice Secretary Jack Straw (pictured right) condemn euphemisms in the public services. At The Guardian’s criminal justice summit the Justice Secretary said the system needed to ditch ‘dreadful’ language that created barriers

between public services and the tax-paying public.

“There is still a good case for looking at what terms we use so that they are immediately intelligible to the public.

“Probation officers now routinely talk of the criminals they are dealing with as ‘offenders’, which was what they are, and not the euphemistic nonsense of ‘clients’, when the client is the victim and the tax-paying public.

“The use of euphemism across government, particularly but not exclusively in the fields of social services, is dreadful because it acts as a barrier between the public and those who pay our salaries.”



Jack Straw said: “‘Unpaid work’ does accurately describe what offenders have to do, but maybe if we added that this was ‘community payback’ that purpose would be even clearer.”

## This is fine with us if it suits your pals

We don’t usually criticise the language of academics so long as they are talking among themselves. Clearly they should not be taken to task for talking to their learned colleagues in language they are all able to understand.

In other words, academic writers and speakers cannot be criticised for using words which may be completely obscure to the non-academic population. That is, providing that their

words, shared and understood in the lecture theatre or university staff room for example, remain their own jargon.

Only attempts to use the words in communication with the public would provoke ridicule from Plain English Campaign.

Here is an example of the kind of understanding that academics share. It is a sentence selected from a paper by Christoph Saur of the Department

of Language and Communication, University of Groningen, Holland: “Most epideictic addresses turn out to be ‘hybrid’ texts because they combine an orientation towards (rhetorical-political) persuasion with an impetus to new ‘expressions’ which henceforward may be used in order to link socio-cultural practices with personal-political experiences.”

Absolutely fine, sir. So long as you are just talking to some academic friends.

# Plain English Campaign g



Chrissie Maher was still deeply engrossed in her work with the editorial and production team of the Liverpool News. Then towards the middle of the 1970s she received an invitation which was to add another dimension to her fight for the rights of ordinary people.

The National Consumer Council had heard about her campaigning and invited her to join them as a member.

Chrissie soon presented a winning idea to one of the council meetings in London. At that time many people had little idea of which benefits they could claim. Yet the responsibility for claiming was theirs. Her idea was: Why not take the benefits to the consumer in the high street?

The idea received sponsorship from the Consumer Council and ALRA (the Adult Literacy Resource Agency).

The concrete result was that Chrissie assembled and managed a team to open the Form Market in a converted shop in Higher Broughton, Salford, the city next to Manchester.

Chrissie would still be carrying on the skills developed on The Tuebrook Bugle, Impact (Independent Media Printing and Communication Trust) and the Liverpool News. Those skills were used to combat official language, gobbledegook and jargon and help people to understand how to claim their rights. But at the Form Market she would have the backing of the National Consumer Council and ALRA.

The part of Higher Broughton where the Form Market was opened was blighted by unemployment, low incomes and poor housing.

The arrival of the Form Market must have astonished local people.

They were used to spending their limited money in the nearby fruit and vegetable shop, a baker's, a grocery, a newsagent's and a second-hand furniture store. Now here was a shop called Form Market whose aim was to help them get money!

Beneath the name Form Market, the shop-front lettering included signs saying 'Rate rebates?', 'Free school meals?' and 'Supplementary benefits?'

The window displayed what the Form Market offered help with: forms, leaflets, and details of entitlements. The display was regularly changed to feature different benefits, adjustments in benefits, and new benefits.

The shop soon became vital to the Broughton community.

Chrissie and her colleagues developed the Form Market to offer people various services including:

- a supply of the forms they needed to claim benefits;
- help with filling them in;
- advice on all the benefits they could claim;
- help with phone calls and written enquiries;
- assistance with written statements; and
- representation by Form Market staff at tribunals and other hearings.

Every one of these services proved invaluable to local residents.

Many of these local people had poor literacy skills. But to claim any kind of benefit, they needed to understand and fill in forms. They also needed to be able to express themselves clearly during phone calls.

# rew from grass-roots level

Yet the forms they were faced with were poorly written, badly designed and asked puzzling questions. They were not written in everyday English but often used 'posh' phrases such as 'in receipt of' instead of 'getting', 'reside' for 'live' and 'persons' for 'people'. Sometimes such differences were so puzzling that they made people give up applying for benefits.

The forms often used forbidding phrases and sometimes shortened sentences which really needed their original full length to remain clear. Plain English Campaign, which grew from early initiatives such as the Form Market, is fully in favour of short sentences but only if their meaning remains clear.

Up to the foundation of the Form Market, the Government had shown little interest in simplifying their leaflets and forms. But during 1976, the Government and the vigilant Form Market staff came to agree that the Supplementary Benefits system was too complicated for either public or administrators to understand.

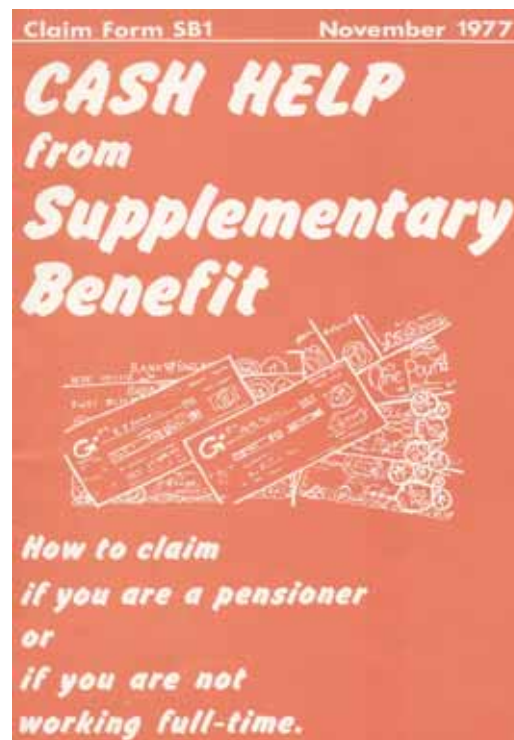
The Form Market and the Supplementary Benefits Commission talked over a period of six months about the readability of some of the forms involved in the claims process. Eventually, at the Commission's invitation, the Form Market staff simplified and redesigned the SBI form. This was used by senior citizens and many others to claim benefit.

The new form (the cover is pictured, right) was written in beautifully simple language. Here is a sample paragraph: 'Supplementary benefit is a weekly cash payment. It is for people who are entitled to more money than they are getting now. It can also top up other money you get now.'



Television presenter Bob Greaves opens the Form Market (1976) with some of the people of Salford

This covers retirement pensions, part-time earnings or a pension from your firm.' Compared with most of the forms of that time, which were riddled with gobbledygook, this clear style was revolutionary.



The Form Market staff made similar improvements to a number of other claim forms, again at the invitation of the Government. Chrissie drew much on that experience of redesigning

forms with Impact Foundation, for Liverpool City Council and other public bodies.

Typically, Chrissie threw herself heart and soul into the work. With her small team she worked wonders in helping a great many people and their families to be better off.

Although some progress was made in the improvement of the forms and leaflets, notably the SBI form, Chrissie became increasingly frustrated by the Government's general lack of progress in updating all of them.

Chrissie kept asking herself: Why did she and her Form Market colleagues still have to spend so much time helping people understand the forms? Why weren't they written in plain English in the first place?

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

# Please doctor, no rash of funny words

Doctors are being urged to choose their words carefully when they can be overheard by their patients. Medical jargon based on Latin and Greek could alarm patients who are already suffering enough with their illnesses. Dr Melinda Lyons pleads in *The Lancet* medical journal for the medical profession to abandon their jargon. She wants medical language modernised because the old terms spread confusion and anxiety among patients, and the confusion could put them at risk.

Dr Lyons, from Cambridge University Department of Engineering, wrote in

*The Lancet*: 'Many medical terms originate as far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC but are used to name 21<sup>st</sup> century high-tech concepts used in noisy, stressful and time-limited situations. Because the limited vocabulary of dead languages is recycled within the same classical structure, there are many look-alike and sound-alike terms.'

Here are some examples:

Tachy (fast); brachy (slow); inter (between); intra (within); super or supra (above); sub or sur (below); hypo (low); or hyper (high). Imagine what a patient might feel when they

hear: "This patient has a tachy heartbeat." Dr Lyons points out that unfamiliar words like these could be even more puzzling and alarming if said by a doctor with an unfamiliar accent, or written in poor handwriting on prescriptions. She wants to see medical language brought up to date and simplified by removing "archaic risk-prone terms".

Dr Lyons said: "The healthcare profession has previously poured scorn on a move away from classical terminology as 'dumbing down'. There is no justification for the continued use of vocabulary that adds ambiguous jargon to the training and day-to-day work of health professionals." We applaud Dr Lyons' stand on this matter. Surely clear language is rarely so important as when a doctor is giving information to a patient.

# Moira makes good with clarity



**Moira Renwick at the degree award ceremony**

Our Plain English Campaign (PEC) editors get immense satisfaction from editing documents into plain English. And people who have gained our Diploma in plain English get the same sense of pleasure when writing or editing for their own organisations.

We are delighted to tell you that one of our Diploma holders, Moira Renwick,

has just been awarded a BSc in Mathematics by the Open University.

Moira left Blessed Ambrose Barlow's School in Tuebrook, Liverpool aged 16 with just a handful of CSE's. Moira lived in Tuebrook and was one of the people who helped to start and then run the Tuebrook Bugle. This was the country's first newspaper for a local community and it helped people to express their worries about all sorts of local issues such as rubbish removal, faulty drains and sewers, demolition of homes and so on. The Bugle was written in plain English, so that readers were sure to understand the issues. It was one of the foundations on which Plain English Campaign was later built.

In 1996 Moira enrolled on PEC's Diploma Course in Plain English and gained the Diploma in 1997.

She enjoyed the course so much that she later decided to continue her education with a degree course.

Moira worked full time for Scottish Power so her studying would have to be done in the evenings and at weekends. The solution was to enrol with the Open University.

The degree course was in statistics but she decided to switch to mathematics. She said: "I really enjoyed mathematics because of its exactness. A result is either right or wrong. There is nothing 'wishy washy' about it. It's a bit like writing plain English".

Her BSc (Open) Degree was granted in December last year and the awards ceremony was in Dublin this April.

Moira is now studying for a Certificate in Contemporary Science and hopes to complete a BA after that. The plan seems to sit beautifully with that original Tuebrook Bugle policy of doing your best to understand and express the truth – with perfect clarity.

# Come on presidential candidates, keep it simple

According to a report on PR Newswire from New York, there is a lady there who supports similar interests to Plain English Campaign. Irene Etzkorn runs a 'simplification practice' in the strategic branding company Siegel+Gale.

The news service says she helps clients clarify and simplify their interaction service with customers. This description is not, perhaps, as straightforward as saying that she helps clients express themselves in plain English. But we are delighted to hear of her efforts.

And we are even more pleased to report that targets of her efforts include presidential candidates. She wants them to strip the business of government of mystery. Bravo!

Ms Etzkorn is quoted as telling the news service: "Clarifying and simplifying one's every interaction with customers is a powerful competitive advantage."

Now she is calling for the presidential candidates to do the same thing. In fact, she states that clarity is an opportunity overlooked by each of the candidates, "and it could provide a tremendous political advantage to the candidate who embraces it first".

That simple idea might be considered to be political dynamite. Ms Etzkorn is saying that plain English could win the election! This is not, in fact, a novel idea to us. Yet the fact that the principle of clarity is being recommended at the top levels of American government is good news indeed. It is another expression of the ideas about clarity that we have been quoting throughout our history.

Ms Etzkorn told the news service: "Despite the fact that each of the presidential candidates is desperately seeking a point of distinction, they are all missing one relevant and appealing promise: making the government truly more accessible to its citizens. A call for clarity is a powerful message that would resonate with voters."

Irene Etzkorn says: "Ironically, the message of streamlining and clarifying government works well for any of the candidates."

It looks for all the world as though Ms Etzkorn has read every word of all the Plain English magazines. If she were to do so now, she would surely be a supporter of all our ideas.

Here is one of her quotes to the news service: "The candidates



**Ms Irene Etzkorn, Simplification Practice Advisor**

should also stop letting corporate America hide behind complexity at the expense of the consumer. The most educated of us do not understand our insurance policies, annuities, warranties, contracts, phone bills and credit card statements. Is there anyone who knows what their wireless phone contract means?

"It is time for one of the candidates to recognise a truly human value: simplicity."



## Plain English Campaign welcomes Marie Clair

It's all change in Plain English Campaign Press Office. We have a new Press Officer, Marie Clair (pictured left with Steve Jenner). Marie has a background in marketing in the business and voluntary sectors. This includes ten years working with Orange, the mobile telecoms company. Marie also has a broad interest

in literacy, having spent time teaching children and adults in the inner London schools. She is a music fan and enjoys playing guitar. Amongst various broadcasting interests she is an established voice-over artist.

Steve Jenner is extending his broadcasting involvements but will continue as a media consultant for the Campaign.

## Training dates for 2008 (open courses)

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

### London (Thistle Euston)

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 10 June (Plain English)  
 Wednesday 13 August (Plain English)  
 Wednesday 17/18 September (Diploma course)  
 Wednesday 22 October (Grammarcheck)  
 Thursday 23 October (Plain English)  
 Thursday 4 December (Plain English)

### Birmingham (Thistle Birmingham City)

Tuesday 16 September (Grammarcheck)  
 Wednesday 17 September (Plain English)

### Edinburgh (Thistle Hotel)

Wednesday 8 October (Grammarcheck)  
 Thursday 9 October (Plain English)

### Belfast (Europa Hotel)

Tuesday 14 October (Plain English)

## Campaign boosts the City of Culture

Plain English Campaign will visit Liverpool in October, during the City of Culture celebrations, putting on an exhibition and offering training workshops on plain English. These events will both be in Liverpool Town Hall from 20 to 24 October inclusive.

The exhibition will celebrate the Campaign's roots in the Tuebrook district of the city. The two-hour training workshops, for both school-leavers and adults, will give introductory courses on plain English. There will be certificates for people taking part. The Campaign is providing all the workshops free of charge.

The Lord Mayor of Liverpool is among important guests who have been invited to attend a launch event.

## New Crystal Mark holders

Northern Bank  
 Lancashire County Council  
 Ulster Bank  
 The Compensation Agency (NI)  
 NHS Scotland  
 EastendHomes Limited  
 South Staffordshire Housing Association  
 CO Awareness  
 Cogent Solicitors  
 Passenger Focus  
 YMCA England  
 Essex Police  
 East of England Regional Assembly (EERA)  
 Ufi Learn Direct Sheffield  
 East Durham Homes  
 Amphia Hospital (European Oncology Nursing Society)  
 Equality Commission NI  
 Patcham House School

## New Silver Crystal Mark holders (25 or more)

Anchor Trust  
 Dundee City Council  
 Nottingham City Homes  
 Ulster Bank  
 Allied Irish Bank  
 DVLA

## New Gold Crystal Mark holders (50 or more)

Berneslai Homes  
 Child Support Agency

## New Corporate Members

Birmingham City Council - Adult and Communities Directorate  
 Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care  
 EastendHomes Limited  
 Southeastern - Customer Services  
 HM Inspectorate of Education  
 London Health Observatory  
 NHS National Services Scotland  
 Paradigm Housing Group  
 South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive  
 Eagle Star Life Assurance (Ireland)  
 Prospects Learning Services  
 Nationwide Building Society  
 Community Housing Group

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

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