

Plain English

The voice of Plain English Campaign

Issue 81 2013

NHS report in poor health

Graham Stringer, MP for Blackley and Broughton, has rightly savaged NHS Greater Manchester's hideous and gobbledygook-ridden 'Healthier Together: Strategic Direction Case' document.



Mr Stringer (pictured above) describes the paper as "tripe dissolved in twaddle" and goes on to deride it as "the most incomprehensible, opaque and jargon-ridden document I have read in the last 30 years."

He adds: "The person who wrote it should be sent on a plain English course immediately, unless of course the whole intention was to keep secret the intent to make cuts."

Perhaps this is the case?

After casting our eyes over the paper, we can only agree with Mr Stringer's findings.

The document is atrociously reliant on jargon and 'in house' impenetrable waffle and is in dire need of a serious rewrite.

The paper aims to be part of a "...wider review of Health and Social care in Greater Manchester aimed at saving and improving thousands of lives every year."

How will it do this? Here's just one of the examples: "Recap the goals and objectives of the programme which will result in a recommendation on the future shape of health and social care services in Greater Manchester. This will lead to a public consultation exercise on the proposals which will be undertaken collectively, on behalf of the wider system, by local Clinical Commissioning Groups."

Otherwise known as: "Speak to the public about how we can improve."

Worse still is the following: "There will be some financial considerations around the transition, including the need for some capital investment in estates where needed and the release of estates where they are not fit for purpose as well as double running costs as we seamlessly switch from old to new ways of working. Some pump priming will be needed to make this happen, but this will be offset by the longer term financial savings."

Otherwise known as... meaningless drivel. There has presumably been a lot of time and money spent on the report, all of which was completely wasted. The people of Manchester deserve far better: hopefully the NHS will redraft the paper, as it's currently very poorly indeed.

Plain English Campaign - working for clearer communication
PO Box 3, New Mills, High Peak, Derbyshire, SK22 4QP
Phone: 01663 744409
Fax: 01663 747038
Email: info@plainenglish.co.uk

Website: www.plainenglish.co.uk



The Bankruptcy Advice Service (BAS) have produced 'The Definitive Plain English Guide to Bankruptcy 2013'.

BAS, unfortunately as badly needed now as ever, have launched the guide as a vital resource for those either on the financial cliff edge or already toppling over.

Bankruptcy is a last resort nobody wants to face but, if these economically fraught times have meant bankruptcy is an unavoidable nightmare for some, the ordeal will be that much easier to understand thanks to the excellent BAS guide.

The guide, at 26 pages long, runs through everything you might want to know about bankruptcy, systematically answering all the questions you may have and clearing a path through the potentially complex areas involved.

Tim McGarrity, of the Bankruptcy Advice Service, explains further. "In the past people have had to use pamphlets, leaflets and research online to try and piece together

Planning jargon

Ahmed Adullah contacted us about confusing dealings with Brecon Beacons National Park Authority. The authority, which presides over some of the nicest parts of the UK, has offered up a not so pretty example of communication.

Mr Adullah admits he "made the mistake" of building an extension without permission. He could be forgiven for expecting a slightly more fathomable ticking off than the following example.

"Following my site inspection a breach of planning control has been identified which consists of the unauthorised engineering and operational development for the excavation of land for the extension to patio area, culvert of watercourse and installation of free standing light columns."

information as to whether bankruptcy may be suitable for them. The BAS Bankruptcy Guide is also supported by videos and articles, which can be accessed for free via our website. In short, we're looking to help people understand what solutions may be open to them in order for them to be able to make more informed decisions."

As the BAS website puts it: "The Bankruptcy Advice Service will look at all the options available to you. If alternatives to bankruptcy exist these will be fully and simply explained, allowing you to take control of your debts and make the best decision for your financial future, if bankruptcy is the best option then they can hold your hand through the whole process."

The guide itself is comprehensive and well structured, with the following five bulleted questions on the opening page. What is bankruptcy? How to declare bankruptcy? How much does it cost to go bankrupt? What does being bankrupt mean? How long does bankruptcy last?

The guide then breaks down each aspect of bankruptcy in clear, concise language and answers every conceivable question on the subject. It's a fantastic aid and can only help those unfortunate thousands having to declare themselves insolvent.

The rest of the letter is as nonsensical as the above and is far too long. Even the part of the letter that should say: "If you don't get rid of the extension and return the ground to its previous state" becomes the following.

"Failure to remedy the breach of planning control within the timescale provided is likely to result in the Authority considering the expediency of commencing formal enforcement action."

"They might as well've sent me a reply that said 'Computer says no'," suggests Mr Adullah.

A nice thought, but that would be far too self-mocking and simplistic. When will organisations (and councils, who should be the last perpetrators of this kind of thing, and yet always seem to be among the worst offenders) stop insisting on communicating with the public in such impenetrable terms?

Game over for hidden charges

Hidden charges and escalating subscriptions are not a new problem. There have been many recent cases of irate customers querying the dubious practice of purchases buried within an otherwise free or single-fee game and, indeed, supposedly free apps (applications) and games being anything but.

You may, for example, download an app or a game and find, some way down the line, mysterious charges on your phone bill. Somewhat less mysteriously, the chances are that it's an unscrupulous company coining it on the sly, with purposefully poor and misleading terms and conditions being used as a feeble justification.

And, as the following example illustrates, there's a serious and sneaky tendency for certain game and app providers to hide often outrageous charges behind unclear disclaimers.

Jane Sutton wrote to us with a fairly typical example of the issue. She was understandably unhappy at having paid an amount that had not been emphasised. She wrote to Microsoft Xbox Support, who took a defensive line, as those using such money-making techniques tend to do, before agreeing to pay the ill-gotten sums back.

Jane reasonably described the following statement – “Your membership auto-renews to a monthly membership at the then-current price (subject to change), unless cancelled” – as vague and beyond the understanding of those likely to be interested in the product, under 18s.

As mentioned, the matter in question was settled amicably enough, but only after Jane's complaint-led investigation into the matter – all needless had the original guideline been clear enough to avoid confusion. As Jane herself points out:

“It is clear that this offer is aimed at enticing Xbox users to what may initially be considered a money saving offer. It is also obvious that Xbox has been relying on consumers not cancelling after the two month period. I believe many Xbox users would not understand the small print and its implications.”

“This offer entitles you to two months subscription to Xbox live for £2.00, after that you will be debited £5.99 per month unless you cancel your subscription. Please be aware that the monthly amount may increase and will be taken from your account each month without prior notification, as you have agreed to this in our terms and conditions.”

Much better, we have to agree, but what are the chances of Microsoft adopting this improvement?

Perhaps even sneakier is the ploy of charging for ‘in-game’ features, within games clearly tailored for children who do not have a hope of understanding any disclaimers or terms and conditions. Grace Walker clicked ‘buy now’ during a game of My Little Pony to the tune of £900 (69.99 per ‘gem’!). Mum Catherine, who was eventually given a refund after much complaining, was less than amused, correctly describing the games as a “con”.

Similarly, Theo Rowland-Fry, eight years old, had fun buying virtual doughnuts on the family iPad ‘The Simpsons: Tapped Out’ game. Parents Nick and Lisa had distinctly less fun weighing up a £1000 bill for the privilege. Mr Rowland-Fry suggested it was far too simple for children, who couldn't be expected to know any better, to run up enormous bills.

“Theo is only just eight and has no real concept of the monetary value attached.”

“If you buy something on Amazon you have to agree to pay for it, enter additional information to pay and then get a confirmation email so you can keep track. With the iPad it seems to be a free-for-all. I appreciate children are the target audience but it is not right and there needs to be specific controls in place to stop this from happening.”

Mr Rowland-Fry is correct to say it isn't right, but this is worse than poor terms and conditions or a deceptive disclaimer. This is the shameful manipulation of children into accumulating silent charges on a product their parents haven't a clue about.

Many firms still failing to eat humble PPI

The mis-sold PPI (payment protection insurance) disaster may be being redressed, but there are other serious knock-on consumer issues to consider.

As well as responding to those who have complained, culpable firms have been getting in touch with other customers who have been mis-sold PPI.

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) provided guidance on this issue in 2012 on the timeframes for complaints and what consumers needed to do to receive the right response from firms in the wrong. This guidance provided clear steps that both consumers and firms needed to follow regarding mis-sold products.

The EU also proposed a 'Key Information Document' (KID) which would accompany any product and would be a concise and clear explanation of its benefits and relevance. Which? magazine, however, recently ran a story detailing the fact that bank staff 'feel pressured into selling unsuitable products...regardless of product suitability'.

"Our survey reveals the stark realities of the sales culture that still exists at the heart of the banking industry," says Peter Vicary-Smith, Chief Executive of Which?.

"Senior bankers say the culture is changing, but this shows it just isn't filtering through to staff on the frontline who remain under real pressure to put sales before service, even after incentives are taken away." The FSA guidance is obviously a useful initiative.

However, it could be moot if other, similarly unsuitable products are sold to unsuspecting or badly informed customers.

There's no guarantee that any consumer-friendly guidelines will be followed, a fact upon which we at Plain English Campaign need to keep a vigilant eye.

We feel it's crucially important that clear guidance is standard with any future financial products to avoid an inevitable repeat of the mis-sold PPI fiasco.



Peter Vicary-Smith, Chief Executive of Which

Similarly, the same level of clarity is needed regarding customer contact letters, which should provide customers with all relevant information.

Management speak: the gibberish continues

We know it's a familiar tale, but office managers will insist on rolling out the same old nonsense. Yet another survey, this time courtesy of the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM), suggests (we already knew) that nearly a quarter of office workers consider some examples of management speak to be a "pointless irritation".

"Thinking outside the box" is once again the least-liked example, and a lot of other old favourites - "going forward"; "let's touch base" - make their usual appearances.

There is no need or justification for such warped communication: but on it, and cliquy nonsense-speak, goes.

SAIT clearly

The opening page of the SAIT website prompts us at the Campaign to suggest the coinage of a new term: garbledygook.

SAIT are an Indian company that, well, let them explain.

"We provide the someone services to our clients and thus they do not hit to pass indication in searching resumes."

Sounds interesting.

"We are proverbial to move intelligent and effective services and most importantly at highly rivalrous prices."

Go on.

"Our legitimate skillfulness refer period of noesis thus are competent to engage the sanctioned help."

Excellent. Where do I sign? Oh sorry. Carry on.

"Providing Skilled Solutions: Hefty realm and specialised skilfulness in our India markets helps us to significantly deepen our plus to our customers."

Join the queue for the hefty realm all those wanting their plus deepened...

Seriously for a moment, we have no idea what SAIT are offering, and nor, surely, would anyone unfamiliar with the company, based on this garbledygook translation, which reads a little like William Burroughs. Presumably this is not the intention for a (we think) consultancy company dealing in "...application development services, consulting, maintenance, quality assurance, business process outsourcing, and infrastructure services."

There are glimmers of clarity in here...but the surreal (computer generated?) soon returns.

"HR consultants in India are deed busier than ever. The reasonableness is unproblematic. Soldier companies are gradually realizing that to move up with the homicidal contention, they pauperization to engage the first fill to work for them."

We'll respectfully leave out the four-letter word that makes a startling appearance at one point. Anyway, do check out the website and let them know by all means.

"We gift be many than fortunate to fulfill your queries that you can netmail us at enquiry@SAIT.co.uk."

'Plain vanilla'

In a welcome if belated move, government ministers have drawn up plans to bring in no-frills savings accounts which are free of complex terms and confusing interest rates.

The kitemarked "plain vanilla" products are a direct response to recent outrage regarding mis-sold products and general customer unease about bank accountability and conduct.

The products include new easy-access savings accounts, a 30-day notice savings account and fixed-term life assurance. The accounts will keep the same rate at all times for all customers who want to use them, regardless of the time the account is held.

Carol Sergeant, former Chief Risk Officer at Lloyd's Banking Group, who led the Government review, said, "We have known for a long time that being able to manage your finances effectively leads to increased well-being and a better quality of life, at every given level of income.

"I hope the simple financial products initiative will make it easier for people to understand and compare the key financial products they need and make good choices with confidence. It is now really important to make the recommendations a reality."

Those using the new accounts will know exactly what they're getting at all times, unlike many customers enticed to other, deceptive alternatives with initially attractive interest rates that soon drop to virtually zero.

Jargon outbreak

Already famous for their stereotypically illegible handwriting, many doctors also speak just as unclearly, according to a new report.

The Medical and Dental Defence Union (MDDUS) suggest that 20% of all 2012 medical contacts relating to patient complaints about GPs being unclear.

MDDUS cautioned doctors to make sure medication directives (instructions on how to take medication) remained free of jargon and medical terminology and quoted recent research from London South University suggesting 43% of 16-to-65-year-olds cannot "effectively understand and use everyday health information."

Kenco and Plain English Campaign spill the beans on kidspeak

Are you a parent struggling to decipher your child, be it verbally, or during text message exchanges?

Kenco have teamed up with Plain English Campaign to publish a handy hotlist of eleven terms that may enlighten you a little as to what on earth they're going on about during their conversations.

If you CBA (don't really want to bother) and think it's all a waste of time as YOLO (you only live once) then fair enough.

But for those mums and dads oblivious as to what "butters" means or what "cray" might refer to, the list is potentially very useful.

LOL - Laugh out loud

Cray - Crazy

ROFL - Roll on the floor laughing

Sick - Great

Dope - Really good

YOLO - You only live once

Bare - Lots of

Butters - Good looking

Fo sho - For sure

CBA - Don't really want to bother

Biscuit tin - Inadequate car

If a person cannot make decisions about their health due to poor medical communication, something is surely amiss. Dr John Holden, joint head of the MDDUS medical division, agrees. "Doctors should remember that patients aren't always familiar with medical jargon. Advice regarding medication can be particularly confusing for patients. At the end of a consultation, a summary of any instructions given, whether it be treatment options or how often to take medication, may minimise errors."

It's annoying enough when garbled information leads to confusion regarding things such as parking meters and instructions for televisions and appliances. It gets a lot more serious when medical guidelines are unclear. A person's health is not something that should be affected, potentially very seriously, by misinterpretation or poor language.



Social media fosters a lot of these terms, and text messages are rife with shortcut acronyms and abbreviations. It's understandable, from the point of view of kids conversing online or via mobile phones, that they have their own unique mode of communication.

At the same time, parents can be forgiven for being at least curious as to what a lot of these terms mean.

It may be useful to realise, if your car is referred to as a "biscuit tin", that your "wheels" aren't considered particularly "dope".

You may not think too many of these faddish terms are all that "sick", and you may have "bare" reservations about yet more of these terms emerging, but at least you'll be in the know.

Zzzzzed.... cars



Protecting our communities together

Warwickshire Police are the latest high-profile gobbledygook offender up for a Golden Bull award. Their series of management mission statements – published by their “Enabling Services Directorate” (whatever that might be) – have drawn justifiable criticism for being utter nonsense.

The documents are of a type immediately familiar to the Campaign: very thin repetitions of largely pointless information – feeble jargon-heavy directives full of “outcome focused” items, the introduction to which suggests the following:

“The focus of the Enabling Services Directorate is to maximise the delivery of operational activity by ensuring that we are a forward looking force that actively creates and delivers change, whilst ensuring that we are an efficient and effective force operating to the highest standard.”

The apostrofe

Taking the history of grammar into its own hands, a Devon local authority has decided to dispense with the apostrophe.

In a move as dumbed-down and confusing as it is risible, Mid-Devon District Council wants to prevent any “confusion” by getting rid of a crucial distinguishing grammatical tool.

So, instead of keeping to centuries of hard-won differential sense, let alone expecting people to learn a very basic and useful language tool, the council has done away with the apostrophe altogether.

Not that there haven't been hints elsewhere that the humble apostrophe was becoming a pesky bore: Waterstones (no longer Waterstone's) got rid of theirs (to make it no longer look like theirs) and Sainsbury's do not

Someone, somewhere within the ranks of Warwickshire Police realises that what that means (possibly) is this: “We want to improve.” Snappier, but doesn't sound nearly as exciting, does it?

The “Enabling Services Directorate” also replaces “crime” throughout with “harm”, which is criminal.

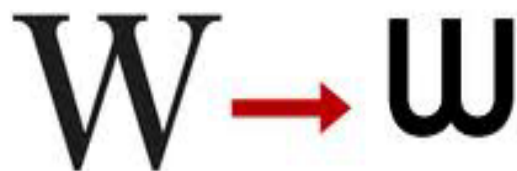
If you've had your windows taken out, your house ransacked and your telly stolen, you might consider ‘harm’ to be a fairly mild term to attribute to your ordeal.

The documents are similarly obscure elsewhere and picking examples is too easy: in other words, it's an unnecessarily complex mess. And it's another example of bureaucratic obscurity holding sway when perfectly simple explanations would've been very easy to use instead.

Commenting on their being collared for their clunky communication, a Warwickshire Police spokesman suggested they “...welcome feedback on our communications.” They went on to point out that the document, despite being made freely available online, was “intended for an internal audience”.

Hard to imagine anyone, anywhere making head or tail of any of it.

use it as part of their web address. Indeed, the internet, in particular regarding social media, and mobile phones are at the foot of the potential apostrophe demise.



Waterstone's waterstones.com

We now await another council-led leap into dark. What next? Prhps n vwls? Wll, f t mks thgs sr..

(Postscript: Mid-Devon District Council may now overturn the decision to ban the apostrophe after council leader Peter Hare-Scott suggested he “wasn't happy about using English that was incorrect” so the pointless farce rumbles on.)

Letters in our mailbox



Steve Jenner, our intrepid radio voice, has been busy fielding questions on Mid-Devon District Council's bizarre clampdown on apostrophes. Two bemused plain English supporters wrote to us to voice their anger at the move.

Dear Mr. Jenner:

I grow exceedingly tired of continuously hearing rhetoric from some politicians in the United Kingdom about lowering the English language standards and dropping the important apostrophe which changes the meaning of the word. British people should respect themselves and set examples for the rest of the world.

Dear Mr. Jenner:

It is ridiculous to waste money making new street signs leaving out the apostrophe. For goodness sake, put the apostrophe back in so the sign makes sense.

I have just bought a National Trust book written by Caroline Taggart, entitled, *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English*. I suggest those who have removed the apostrophe in road signs read it, and note the apostrophe in *Queen's*.

Please ask the councils to read the book. *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* by Lynne Truss, and study the chapter that starts on page 35, *The Tractable Apostrophe*.

The apostrophe should be put back in any road signs where it was taken out. To not do so, is unacceptable.

Loss in translation

Councils who waste taxpayers' millions on unnecessary translation have been heavily criticised by a senior government minister.

There is a suggestion that councils may have misunderstood equality directives. Pickles, in reiterating that councils must adhere to such directives, emphasised the point that "...this is not a legal duty to translate documents into foreign languages."

Communities and Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles ridiculed the amounts spent on translation services and bemoaned a culture that could spend £600 on translating a glossy magazine into Urdu for a single complainant.

Pickles went on to say that those unable to speak English could instead refer to 'easy read versions of documents and use pictures instead of translation' and added that his department would be "practising what we preach" with English-only leaflets as part of a "Fire Kills" safety education campaign.

He went on to heavily criticise what he sees as a money-frittering reluctance to simply provide documents in plain English, which would "...promote cohesion and better community relations. And it will help councils make sensible savings, at a time when every bit of the public sector needs to do its bit to pay off the deficit left by the last administration."

Surely, if all the documents in question were produced to plain-English standards in the first place, this might not be such an issue.

"Stopping the automatic use of translation and interpretation services into foreign languages will provide further incentive for all migrant communities to learn English, which is the basis for an individual's ability to progress in British society."

Yes, we need to promote our language, culture and integration, but if we can't expect someone with English as their first language to understand a document, we should not expect those with English as a second and third language to be able to understand it either.

We need easy-to-understand English documents as the foundation for all information in the public domain.