

Administrative language in the UK: 18 months in Pikestaff features [slide 1]

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Plain language in the UK: introduction [slide 2]

In the UK, there is no dedicated plain-language function in central government, although some departments do have employees with some responsibility for plain language. These people's titles vary greatly, and it's hard to know exactly how many there are. For example, the Department of Health has a Head of Health Literacy, and the Forms Unit of HM Revenue & Customs has a Head of Usability. The situation is similar in local government.

In the private sector, a number of businesses provide plain-language services. The best known are probably Plain Language Commission (PLC) and Plain English Campaign (PEC). [slide 3] PLC is run by Martin Cutts, who conceived and co-founded PEC in 1979 and was a partner there until 1988. Being an associate of PLC, I am more familiar with its work, which includes:

- editing and accrediting documents (with the Clear English Standard) and websites (as Winning Websites)
- running courses on writing skills – face-to-face and by distance learning
- sponsoring Clear English India, Kolkata, and investing in Português Claro
- acting as an agent for StyleWriter – the Plain English Editor
- producing a monthly newsletter, *Pikestaff*.

When we launched our newsletter in January 2007, a few readers asked: 'Why *Pikestaff*?' Well, in British English, something's said to be 'as plain as a pikestaff', the pole that pedlars used to carry their pack. So a pikestaff was probably considered plain because it was just a big stick. Another plausible explanation is that pilgrims carried one to announce plainly their devotion.

Pikestaff has a circulation of about 2,000 and is proving popular among customers and others interested in plain language. It's free of charge, and doesn't kill trees, as we produce it in electronic form only. In this presentation, I'm going to use some headlines – covering both good and bad news stories – from *Pikestaff*'s 18-month history to illustrate recent UK developments in national and local government. You can view all back copies of *Pikestaff* on our website (<http://www.clearest.co.uk>, and click on 'Newsletter'). And you can read about earlier developments, going back to 1979, in our booklet 'Twenty-five years of battling gobbledegook' – it's on our website, under 'Books', and I've brought some copies with me.

National government

We can look at national government language in 2 categories: the language of politicians and that of administrative bodies.

Politicians [slide 4]

Politicians have a reputation – mostly well deserved – for using long-winded and pompous language. I keep a file of newspaper cuttings as ideas for future issues of *Pikestaff* and the 'politics' section is bulging. Here are 3 stories we have included.

Aural wallpaper (*Pikestaff* 10, November 2007)

One star of the 'Plain English Awards scandal' [more on this later], Harriet Harman MP (Leader of the House of Commons and deputy leader of the Labour Party) featured recently on Radio 4's *Today* programme. Announcing her wish to review the formal language of parliament and use 'plain English', she read out some traditional rhubarb about 'proroguing parliament'...

Parliament remains wedded to silly language: Lords debates seem to consist almost entirely of people saying, 'My noble Lady will be pleased to hear..' and 'Noble Lords will want to join me in paying tribute...'. Commons debates, meanwhile, are littered with such formulas as 'My learned and right honourable friend the member for Yawnsville', and 'Honourable and right honourable members will wish to know that...'. The main purpose of these phrases seems to be to give the speaker time to think.

Twelve lords a-drivelling (*Pikestaff* 11, December 2007)

...Rosemary Behan has now spoken out against MP-speak in *The Times*: 'Please can we stop "moving forward" and "actively reaching out"? Can we, instead, "resolve to build a consensus" on one thing that really matters? Can we start speaking English?'

Perhaps the 3rd Baron Lord Selsdon can shed some light on the problem. The *Daily Mail* of 5 December reports that in the House of Lords he announced that, through deep research, he had put his fellow peers into 4 categories: 'Bought their way in, wormed their way in, screwed their way in – and "How did they get in?"

There may also be a few – just a few – who waffled their way in.

Which profession prevails in piffle production prowess? (*Pikestaff* 14, March 2008)

...politicians...are commonly associated with long-winded language. For example, the Risk and Regulation Advisory Council's web page reports that Gordon Brown has 'committed to taking the Better Regulation agenda to a new level by focusing upstream at where policy-making engages with risk'...

[Source: <http://www.berr.gov.uk/about/economics-statistics/rrac/index.html>]

This is bad enough, but there are times when politicians' unclear language isn't a result just of habit or of trying to sound clever: there are some who want to soften or cloak the truth with euphemisms – sometimes called 'doublespeak'.

Sadly, the current Labour government has earned itself a reputation for failing to be straight with the public. The best-known examples are probably the:

- Iraq war – when the government's justification for getting involved depended on the false claim that the regime had weapons of mass reduction
- Lisbon treaty – which the government claimed was only an amending document and so didn't require the referendum they'd promised in their manifesto.

Because of this dishonesty – of which there are almost weekly occurrences on a smaller scale – we actually wouldn't want the government to announce it supported plain language, as this would discredit plain language as we see it. In our view, plain language shouldn't be about just the language itself – anyone can lie in short sentences that use familiar words and active verbs. Essential to true plain language is honesty: a commitment to plain dealing as well as plain words. And so until politicians can promise to be straight with the public, we'd rather they didn't promise to use plain language.

As an aside – but still on the theme of dishonesty – here's a short article that explains where you can read more about the Plain English Awards scandal, and Harman's role in this.

Tangled web award (*Pikestaff* 10, November 2007)

So reads a headline to a piece in *Private Eye* (6 December 2007), based on Martin Cutts' article, 'Plain English Awards scandal', which we announced in *Pikestaff* 8. The piece reveals the £600,000 worth of commercial connections between the event's promoter and several of the winners. You can read Martin's article at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/PlainEnglishAwardsScandal.pdf>.

Administrative bodies [slide 5]

So people often don't understand politicians, but ironically politicians don't always understand their civil servants either, as these 2 news stories revealed.

Scottish English impacted by mandarin dialogue (*Pikestaff 3*, March 2007)

The Scottish Executive's civil servants have baffled and frustrated Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), according to *The Scotsman*, after a Holyrood committee couldn't understand one of their statements: 'We are also developing a more robust dialogue with key partners around the health of system and the impact of policy and refocusing the approach used to measure improvement locally and related support for benchmarking.'

Brian Monteith, the independent MSP who convenes the audit committee, said the wording left members puzzled. Margaret Smith, a Liberal Democrat MSP, said she hadn't understood the document and added: 'We should introduce an audit committee award for complete gobbledegook. That doesn't mean anything to me, and I doubt very much to ordinary members of the public.'

The Scotsman quoted our spokesman as saying: 'There's no reason why they have to write in this fashion. People must be well qualified and highly paid to write like that. We have to persuade them they don't need to use high-flown language. It's as if they have a list of buzz words that it's compulsory to use. They're just trying to impress other people in their department and the ministers who look at their work, but nowadays people are more likely to laugh at them instead.'

[Source: *The Scotsman*, 14 February 2007:
<http://news.scotsman.com/scotland.cfm?id=238762007>]

Memorandum of misunderstanding (*Pikestaff 7*, July 2007)

John McFall, MP for West Dunbartonshire and chair of the Treasury Select Committee, has described a memorandum of understanding on the income-tax treatment of venture capital and private equity as a 'memorandum of incomprehensibility'.

You can see this document at

http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/shareschemes/bvca_and_fb2003_carried_interest.pdf (warning: could induce drowsiness). We managed to stay awake long enough to work out its readability score. Clocking up a spectacular grade level of 17 (meaning it's roughly for a British reading age of 22 – higher than graduate level), the memo opens with a 50-word sentence:

'This memorandum describes a typical venture capital/private equity ("VC") limited partnership fund structure and sets out guidelines agreed by the BVCA [that's the British Venture Capital Association – but it doesn't tell you this] and Inland Revenue on the application of the provisions introduced by Schedule 22, Finance Act 2003, to a carried interest in a limited partnership fund structured in this way.'

Mr McFall has called for the memorandum, a crucial document, to be explained to him and his committee, preferably before they make their recommendations in October. If his 16-strong committee of MPs can't understand it, who can?

[Source: Radio 4's Today programme, 3 July and 30 July 2007:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/>]

[slide 6] But much worse is when the public misunderstands something really important, like a ballot paper, as this sorry tale of the Scottish elections shows.

Form-design fiasco gives spoils to Scot Nats (*Pikestaff 5*, May 2007)

The forms used in the recent Scottish elections have been heavily criticized after over 140,000 ballot papers (almost 3.5%) were rejected as 'spoiled' – a higher rate than the 2% in the Palm Beach County debacle that saw George W Bush elected to the White House in 2000.

Voters had to fill in 2 forms but these were poorly worded and designed. In one form, voters were supposed to put a cross for one candidate in each of 2 columns. The first column was for a proportional representation vote for a party list. The second column was for a first-past-the-post constituency member of parliament. The small-print headings said all this. But many voters either didn't read the headings or misread them. They thought the 2 columns formed one continuous list, and put both their crosses in one column, spoiling their papers.

The other form, for the local council elections, used a different system – a single transferable vote. So voters were supposed to put numbers alongside up to 8 candidates in their chosen order. Many (you guessed it) used the method they were familiar with and that they may have just used on the other form, marking a cross or sometimes several crosses in the boxes. So these papers were also spoiled. You can see both forms and read about the problems at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/05/05/nfiasco105.xml>.

It's not as if the Scottish Executive wasn't warned of the impending disaster. Though it claims to have consumer-tested an early version of the papers, it went ahead with what proved to be a flawed design. *The Scotsman* said: 'A draft of the paper was circulated to experts who insisted that it was entirely unacceptable. Aberdeen City Council warned that the paper "would lead to confusion". Both Capability Scotland, which represents disabled people, and the Electoral Reform Society said the paper should be increased in size, to avoid confusion. South Ayrshire Council said the paper was "unnecessarily complex" and would "be confusing for voters".'

In *The Times*, columnist Melanie Reid wrote: 'What is now crystal clear is that the poorer and more ill-educated the voters were, the more likely they were to put the wrong marks in the wrong places, and unwittingly invalidate their forms.' She points to the high rate of spoiled papers in the most deprived areas of Glasgow compared with more affluent areas. 'The ill-designed ballot papers disgracefully disenfranchised those who are already the most powerless and voiceless in society.'

As the Scottish National party won the election by only a single seat from the Scottish Labour party, the huge number of spoiled papers has almost certainly meant the country will get a government it doesn't want and that in several constituencies the wrong people have been elected. Legal challenges may result.

[Sources: *The Telegraph*, 5 May 2007; *The Scotsman*, 6 May 2007; *The Times*, 7 May 2007; and the BBC News website: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6637387.stm>]

That poor language and design had contributed to these problems was confirmed by the Electoral Commission's review, published later in 2007.

Scottish voters 'treated as an afterthought' (*Pikestaff* 10, November 2007)

In *Pikestaff* 5, we reported that the ballot papers used in the Scottish parliamentary and local government elections on 5 May had been heavily criticized after 147,000 of them were rejected as spoiled. In some constituencies, rejected ballots outstripped the victorious party's majority. The final result gave the Scottish National Party (SNP) a historic but slender (one-seat) lead over Labour.

As a result, the Electoral Commission set up a review, led by Ron Gould (a Canadian elections expert), to independently report on the administration of both elections. Public consultation closed in August, and the final report was published in October, just after *Pikestaff* 9 was put to bed. The review team found, among other problems, 2 that relate clearly to plain language:

- 4% of parliamentary ballots cast were spoiled because voters were confused by a new ballot paper. *The Guardian* reports: 'He [Gould] said the Electoral Commission [itself] had been "very much remiss" in ignoring a study of the new ballot paper before the election, which found that 4% of voters – a figure identical to the level of spoilt papers – were too confused to correctly use it.'

- Voters were unfairly influenced by the naming and positioning of candidates on ballot papers. Parties had been allowed to use non-party titles to 'sloganize' their campaigns, for example the SNP put 'Alex Salmond for first minister'. And alphabetical listing of candidates and parties led to bias in favour of names higher up the list. The Zacs and Zaras among *Pikestaff* readers will be pleased to hear that in future, candidate and party lists will be randomized.

The SNP is now working towards its goal of an independent Scotland. So it's quite possible that the United Kingdom will be broken up because of a bungled official form. Shades of Florida's 'butterfly' ballot paper that handed the 2000 US election to GW Bush.

You can read the full report at

<http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/elections/scotelectionsreview.cfm>.

[Source: *The Guardian*, 24 October 2007]

[slide 7] Nor does the public necessarily have a much better chance of understanding primary law or secondary law (regulations), as our research director, Martin Cutts, pointed out in a presentation at Laws for Citizens, a Nordic-Baltic seminar on clear legal language, organized by Sweden's justice ministry.

News from Plain Language Commission (*Pikestaff* 17, June 2008)

...Martin's paper, 'How to make laws easier to read and understand'

(<http://www.clearest.co.uk/index.php?id=34>), commented on the clarity of recent UK laws and suggested ways of clarifying the law...

He described a UK statutory instrument designed to restrict farmwork in parts of the Peak Park as 'short but almost entirely in legal jargon: ghastly sub-English like "being satisfied that it is expedient", "hereafter mentioned", "comprised in a national park", "hereby", "said land", "hereto", and "pursuant to". Martin added: 'I believe that legal writers can do better than this. The UK is making progress with primary law. But all legislators – especially MPs and government ministers – need to think much more about their audience.' He also criticized the sheer volume of law that had been enacted in the last 14 years: 172,000 pages of it, or about 12,200 pages a year. 'Neither the authorities nor the people can cope with such a flood of new regulations.'

[slide 8] With all this bad news, you're probably thinking by now that language is pretty dire in UK administration, with no-one understanding very much of what anyone else says or writes. But *Pikestaff* has covered plenty of good-news stories too. For example, on law, we announced encouraging progress on the citizen's summary project.

Progress for citizen's summary project (*Pikestaff* 16, May 2008)

In the first edition of *Lucid Law* in 1994, Martin Cutts called for a citizen's summary to go with every Act of Parliament. In relation to European law, he repeated this in 2001 in *Clarifying Eurolaw*, and again in 2002 in a follow-up booklet, *Clarifying EC Regulations*, co-written with Emma Wagner. Emma, who helped start the Fight the FOG campaign (<http://europa.eu.int/comm/translation/en/ftfog>), has continued to champion the citizen's summary project, with her former colleague Tim Martin.

So we were delighted to hear this month that the Secretary General of the European Commission had written to all directors-general and heads of service announcing that 'for 2008, all submissions to inter-service consultation for strategic and priority initiatives in the Work Programme' should be accompanied by a citizen's summary.

Limited to 2 pages, the summaries must use language that's 'extremely simple and clear, and the writer should take the standpoint that the reader could be any citizen, without specific knowledge on the subject matter. All summaries should follow a common structure, based on the '5 W rule':

- why the proposal is needed
- what the proposal is and its benefits
- who in the EU will benefit and why
- where and how the proposal will be applied
- when the proposal will take effect.

[Thanks to Emma Wagner for sending us this information]

And in another bid to improve the clarity of law, a tax working party has proposed an Office of Tax Simplification, if the Conservatives win the next general election.

Tory working group proposes tax simplification office (*Pikestaff* 18, July 2008)

The report of a tax working party headed by former chancellor of the exchequer Lord (Geoffrey) Howe is recommending that the next Conservative government (if ever there is one) should radically change the way that new tax law is drawn up. *Making taxes simpler* suggests establishing an Office of Tax Simplification, staffed by HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) and academics, as well as 'individuals from the tax professions to provide expertise and a fresh perspective'.

The working party was set up last year by the shadow chancellor, George Osborne, to take forward the recommendations of the Forsyth Tax Reform Commission on the making of tax law. The Chartered Institute of Taxation (CIOT) has commented that the report has addressed 2 of its major concerns: simplification of the tax system and detailed consultation.

[Source: Accounting Web, 4 July 2008: <http://www.accountingweb.co.uk/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=185784&d=1025&h=1019&f=1026>]

In further uplifting news, we sought help for a Nick Palmer, a Nottinghamshire MP who's trying to tackle small print.

Help needed for Small Print Bill (he's the bloke with the magnifying glass) (*Pikestaff* 17, July 2008)

Pikestaff 15 reported that Nottinghamshire MP Nick Palmer was putting forward a Small Print Bill in the Commons to 'make requirements regarding the minimum size of print in certain documents, including those relating to advertising and contracts; and for connected purposes'. At its first reading, he said:

'The Bill's objective is simple: it is not to impose any additional regulations on the content of terms and conditions in advertisements or contracts, but to ensure that customers are reasonably able to read what they say. It is easy to say "Let the buyer beware", but if the buyer cannot read the contract, how is he or she supposed to beware?'

The MP has since met a Minister from the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, to see whether small print could be tackled as part of the new EU directive on consumer protection. Palmer tells us that the Minister expressed sympathy and willingness to look at concrete cases that have eluded the existing rules, to see whether they need to be changed.

Palmer is therefore looking for examples of people losing money through small print and having no legal remedy. If you know of any case studies that would help, please let us know and we'll pass them on to him.

[Source: <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/smallprint.html>]

And the same month, we reported a poorly-titled but well-intentioned investigation order that came into effect in Northern Ireland in July this year. It's expected to come to the rest of the UK later.

Northern Ireland Personal Current Account Banking Market Investigation Order

(Pikestaff 17, July 2008)

Here in the UK we may not yet have a plain-language law but we're still making progress, if only in breaking records for the number of modifiers: a whopping 8 words describe 'Order' in the title above. (We'd usually recommend no more than 2 or – at a push – 3 modifiers per noun in documents we edit. So we think it'd be clearer to call it: Investigation Order on the Market for Personal Current Bank Accounts in Northern Ireland.)

In May 2005, following a *Which?* super-complaint, the Office of Fair Trading asked the Competition Commission to investigate and report on the supply by banks of personal current accounts (PCAs) in Northern Ireland. The Commission concluded that there were 3 features of this market that prevented, restricted or distorted competition:

- (a) banks have unduly complex charging structures and practices;
- (b) banks do not fully or sufficiently explain their charging structures and practices; and
- (c) customers generally do not actively search for alternative PCAs or switch bank.

The Commission's report goes on to recommend a range of remedies, including:

Remedy (a): Easy-to-understand terminology and descriptions of PCA services.

Banks operating in Northern Ireland must satisfy the BCSB [Banking Code Standards Board] that all information provided to customers when choosing a PCA, when opening a PCA, on statements, and when pre-notified of charges and interest payments, is easy to understand.

The banks must ensure that all such communications are:

- (i) certified by an independent organization specializing in plain English; or
- (ii) otherwise tested with customers and found to be easily understandable.

As a result, the Northern Ireland PCA Banking Market Investigation Order comes into force in Northern Ireland on 1 July this year. It is expected to come to the mainland later. So if you work for a bank, do get in touch – we may be just the independent organization specializing in plain English that you're looking for, and we're already working with several high-street banks to help them comply.

You can read the original report at http://www.competition-commission.org.uk/rep_pub/reports/2007/fulltext/527.pdf, and the investigation order at http://www.offt.gov.uk/shared_offt/monopolies/NI-PCA-banking-IO.pdf.

[slide 9] In health, a scheme to accredit organizations producing patient information is being developed.

Health check for patient information *(Pikestaff 4, April 2007)*

When searching for health and social care information, people can quickly be swamped by booklets, leaflets and website texts of varying quality from many organizations.

A voluntary accreditation scheme to reassure people that such information is from dependable sources is being planned by the Department of Health. The scheme will accredit producers of information in the public, not-for-profit and commercial sectors. Martin Cutts of Plain Language Commission has been invited to join a 15-strong expert working group that will be developing standards for the scheme.

Unlike our Clear English Standard, the scheme will accredit information producers rather than the information itself. So we'll be pleased to work with accredited bodies to offer them and their readers the further assurance that the information itself has passed a rigorous check of clarity, grammar and layout.

[Source: Department of Health website:

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Policyandguidance/PatientChoice/Choice/BetterInformationChoicesHealth/DH_4123086]

We later published an appeal from the Department of Health for organizations to test the draft standard developed. This phase has now started, using 40 organizations spanning the voluntary, commercial and public sectors.

Also in the health field, the Patient Information Forum supports organizations producing information for patients, carers, and their families. Martin Cutts was invited to speak at its annual conference earlier this year.

Martin Cutts runs masterclasses for health professionals (*Pikestaff 14*, March 2008)

The Patient Information Forum recently organized its third annual conference, entitled 'Producing Effective Information for Patients: The Key Issues'. Our research director, Martin Cutts, presented 2 masterclasses on achieving clarity in health information through the written word. They attracted some 90 people. Martin covered 3 topics:

- What do we know about our readers? In this section, Martin looked at reading abilities, and people's familiarity with health words. He used examples from our new *Plain English Lexicon*, featured as *Pikestaff 13's* linguistic link, showing that laypeople may not understand many health words, or (worse still) misunderstand some: as Martin notes for 'stool', 'Could be unhappy consequences if confused with what is sat upon.'
- What can help readers' comprehension? For this, Martin drew upon our *15 Tips on Writing Plain English*, which you can read on our website at <http://clearest.co.uk/files/15TopTips.pdf>.
- What can hinder readers' comprehension? The group looked at examples from 2 patient information leaflets: one whose ailing English had been rewritten clearly and another that was in great need of the same treatment.

[slide 10] Looking at our own customer base gives further cause for celebration, as the:

- Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman (PHSO) rewrote the principles with which bodies in its jurisdiction – UK government departments and their agencies, and the NHS in England – should follow to deliver good administration and good customer service
- Financial Services Authority (the UK's money watchdog), one of our corporate members and the first holder of our gold Winning Website standard (for its Moneymadeclear website), continues to encourage organizations to communicate clearly with their customers.

Ombudsman publishes plainer principles (*Pikestaff 5*, May 2007)

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) has just published the *Principles of Good Administration*. The Principles are broad statements of what the Ombudsman, Ann Abraham, believes that bodies within her jurisdiction should be doing 'to deliver good administration and good customer service'.

Publication follows a 3-month consultation on a draft set of Principles that 58 respondents reviewed. They generally welcomed the Principles but some wanted the document checked for plain English.

Lesley Bainsfair, Policy Adviser for the PHSO, turned to us for help. 'We are really delighted. It's been good to work with Plain Language Commission and we are grateful for their thoughtful suggestions; the document is much better as a result of their involvement.'

We've awarded the final document our Clear English Standard. 'The Standard is awarded only to documents that meet strict criteria including good structure, style, grammar and layout,' said Martin Cutts, research director. 'It's been a pleasure to work with a group of people who are so committed to meeting the needs of their audience.'

You can see full details of the consultation and the final document at http://www.ombudsman.org.uk/improving_services/good_administration/index.html.

Money watchdog studies clarity of pension 'wake-up' packs (*Pikestaff 18*, July 2008)

The quality of the literature issued to pension customers as they approach retirement age – often called 'wake-up' packs – is under scrutiny by the Financial Services Authority (FSA). In a speech at the Institute of Economic Affairs and Marketforce, Sarah Wilson, FSA Director and Insurance Sector Leader, said:

'Importantly, we found that more than 60% of the 'wake-up' packs sent by 55 insurance companies provide information that complied with our Principles and rules – that is it was clear and enabled customers to make informed decisions about their retirement options. However, a disappointing 40% of the wake-up packs we reviewed failed to meet regulatory requirements.'

Combine this with research suggesting a gap of around 20% between the top and bottom annuity rates (not including enhanced and impaired annuity rates), and the potential for customer detriment is evident.

The FSA, a corporate member of ours, will publish the full results shortly, and we'll be reporting on these in *Pikestaff 19*.

[Source: http://www.fsa.gov.uk/pages/Library/Communication/Speeches/2008/0515_sw.shtml]

Thanks to Sarah Hunter and Adam Richards-Gray at the FSA for passing us this link.]

Showing their commitment to plain language, various government organizations have become corporate members of Plain Language Commission, including national bodies (such as the Information Commissioner's Office, Financial Services Compensation Scheme, and Department for Work and Pensions) and local councils (Bromley Council and Hampshire County Council).

Local government [slide 11]

In local government, the situation is similar to that in national government – a mixture of good and bad news. Here's an example of a local council showing its commitment to clear communication.

Stockport clears up its communications (*Pikestaff 2*, February 2007)

Research showed that better council communications made Stockport residents happier with its services. So Stockport Council declared October 2006 'Communications Month' – a campaign aimed at helping all employees to become better communicators. One initiative, Junk the Jargon, invited employees to put forward the senseless phrases, terminology and unexplained abbreviations they would like banished from council publications and websites. A top ten of the most 'popular' suggestions was compiled, featuring classics like 'thinking outside the box' and 'horizon scanning'. The corporate marketing team has since cleared the council's internet and intranet sites of the jargon collected.

Other activities included a Low Email Day, and raising awareness of internal training courses on writing letters and presenting information effectively. The campaign improved employees' communication skills, and the council is now working hard to make sure clearer communications stay at the heart of all it does.

[Source: Many thanks to Tim Green, Internal Communications Co-ordinator at Stockport Council, for sending us this news.]

But we also covered the story of a council that seems to have no regrets about its incomprehensible writing.

Eh, they don't 'alf talk funny up north (*Pikestaff 1*, January 2007)

It takes a peculiar kind of heroism to stand up in a meeting and say a report is 'incomprehensible to any normal person'. But that's what Cllr Alan Wilkinson of Barnard Castle did when his local parish council was discussing Teesdale District Council's 'sustainability appraisal scoping report for the local development framework core strategy'. Cllr Wilkinson pointed out that its reference to 'involuntary exclusion from the world of work' meant nothing more than 'unemployment'.

Cllr Wilkinson, a retired schoolteacher, said: 'Nobody talks like this; nobody reads books written like this. Frankly it's a turn-off, and it's not surprising that we're having trouble attracting new members.'

Cllr David Wright agreed that the problem was widespread: 'It simply isn't plain English, and if nobody tells them [Teesdale Council], then they will keep on publishing reports like this.'

But Cllr Newton Wood, who sits on both councils, stoutly defended the authors: 'This is just the way council reports are written, and if you want to be a councillor then you need to understand that. If you go to France, they speak French. Here in the council, we speak like this.'

[Source: Teesdale Mercury, 23 November 2006
<http://www.teesdalemercury.co.uk/teesdale-news/story,1182.html>]

[slide 12] Perhaps it was councils like this that inspired the Local Government Association (LGA) to publish its 'non-word' list early this year. This listed 100 words that the LGA suggested public bodies should avoid if they want to communicate effectively.

Call for transparency to supersede coterminosity verbosity (*Pikestaff* 12, January 2008)
The Local Government Association (LGA), a cross-party organization representing councils in England, has published a 'non-word' list. Sent to councils across the country, the list comprises 100 words that all public-sector bodies should avoid when telling people about the work they do and the services they provide. Words include 'bottom-up', 'cascading', 'coterminosity', 'empowerment', 'incentivising', 'multidisciplinary' and 'visionary'.

LGA chair Sir Simon Milton said: 'Without explaining what a council does in proper English then local people will fail to understand its relevance to them or why they should bother to turn out and vote. Unless information is given to people to explain why their council matters then local democracy will be threatened with extinction.'

The LGA emphasizes that the list is 'a bit of fun that gets people thinking about how they use language'. You can read all 100 words at <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=7701430>. If you scroll down, you can read people's comments, and, at the bottom, the LGA's responses. The site also links to the LGA's useful plain-English web resource...

[Source: LGA news release: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=41517>]

[slide 13] The list provoked a range of reactions, as you'll see from the website of the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA), which hosted a discussion on this. In his conclusion, Paul Ireland, Managing Editor of IDeA wrote:

'...whatever the context, it's important to know who your audience is, know how you want them to respond, and then put yourself in their place when deciding what language to use.'

If we can get this message through to all administrative bodies in the UK – and, you never know, even to politicians – then we'll be well on the way to ensuring they communicate clearly with the public they serve.

[slide 14] If you'd like to subscribe to *Pikestaff* to follow the progress of these news stories, and to hear about new developments in the UK, please visit our website at <http://www.clearest.co.uk> and click on 'Newsletter'.