

# Pupils see through the Internet Crystal

Poor English rife on sites claimed to be 'crystal clear'

By Martin Cutts  
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**Plenty of business and government websites are well written and easy to use, but others fall short of professional standards because their grammar, expression and spelling are poor.**

**To help raise standards, we began our Winning Website accreditation scheme a few years ago. Other companies have followed suit with their own schemes.**

**As part of their coursework, some secondary-school children are being directed to look for websites bearing plain-English accreditation marks like ours and use them to find examples of good business writing.**

**Recently a teacher contacted us to express surprise at the errors his pupils had noticed when studying sites accredited with the Internet Crystal Mark. We decided to take a look, and this article describes what we found.**

Financial note for readers outside the UK: the British pound sterling is worth about US\$2 or 1.5 euro.

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# 1 SUMMARY

## Error-strewn websites dubbed 'crystal clear'

### Crystal-marked websites full of mistakes

Websites bearing the Internet Crystal Mark logo – which supposedly certifies they are written in plain English – are often unclear and riddled with spelling and punctuation errors, our investigation has found.

Decision-makers in business and government are spending a total of at least £125,000 a year getting the Internet Crystal Mark for their websites. The Internet Crystal Mark is issued by Plain English Campaign Limited (PEC), a well-known company in the plain-language field that often presents itself as a pressure group.

Far from being crystal-clear examples of impeccable English – as PEC staff tell prospective customers – many PEC-accredited websites are error strewn, with nonsensical sentences, bad grammar, officialese, unexplained jargon and feeble punctuation. These failings litter the sites – almost every PEC-accredited site we examined had blunders that were impossible to miss.

### Examples of poor English we found

PEC makes great claims for the Internet Crystal Mark, saying the logo will 'prove to the public that you are willing to do everything practical to make your site crystal clear'. The logo itself proclaims 'Website approved by Plain English Campaign', making it a clear endorsement of the clarity and good English of every accredited site.

Of PEC's Crystal Mark for printed documents, PEC's website says: 'Only our Crystal Mark will be accepted by the public as a guarantee of a document's clarity.'

The similarity between the 2 logos strongly implies that the Internet Crystal Mark is covered by the same clarity guarantee. But even a cursory look at PEC's accredited websites shows this guarantee to be meaningless. Here are a few examples of the poor or obscure English we found after only a few minutes' inspection:

- We also provide a list of frequently asked questions about mortgages and the mortgage market included to cover some areas not addressed by our guides. And our mortgage calculator and mortgage repayment tables for consumers wishing to calculate their mortgage costs.
- Low income, brothers and sisters at the same school, single sex or denominational preference do not in themselves account for an exceptional factor.
- The online HR service beproStaff has ramped up the quality of our HR and employment law compliance and has protected us against potentially thousands of pounds of litigation issues.
- The following original (photo-copies are not acceptable) documents need to be produced documents are:
- No Frequently Asked Questions where found for Leisure and Culture topic.
- Kitchen and Bathroom Post installation  
The most frequently asked questions and answers relating kitchen and bathroom replacement programme after the installation.
- You may be too embarrassed, worried or confused to talk to anyone close to you. But don't worry, all our Personal Advisers are happy to help you either see one in school or visit your local Connexions centre and make an appointment.
- An application can be downloading by clicking on the link below.
- Kitchen and Bathroom Snagging This topic is for internal use to log snagging from sign off.
- Transport can be provided if requested, it is often seen as an integral part of the service provision.
- We have 3 walk-in reception receptions if you would like to contact us in person.

- If you have a severe or long term mental health difficulty we offer on-going help in the community, working closely with all persons relevant to the individual to ensure that the appropriate interventions are offered.
- If, however, your total estate is likely to be worth more than £285,000 (bearing in mind that the taxman values everything on death, including your house, house contents, bank accounts, life policy proceeds and so on), steps will need to be taken if you wish to ensure that your children don't lose 40% of everything above the tax free sum.
- Do I need Building Regulation Approval to construct a detached garage.  
No, provided they contain no sleeping accommodation...
- If you have a disability you may have special housing requirements that help make life easier.

Many of those examples were still present 5 months after we first checked the sites, belying PEC's claim of regular monitoring. Yet PEC trades heavily on its claims of honesty and integrity. As well as the Crystal Mark, it runs an Honesty Mark scheme enabling companies to self-certify the 'honesty' of their consumer contracts (like insurance policies) and add a logo to them that includes, bizarrely, a halo. PEC demands that all political parties declare their election manifestoes 'honest' and upbraids those that don't. It sells courses on writing skills and uses the news media and its own website to condemn other people's supposedly bad and unclear English. So there's something seriously wrong when it gives its seal of approval, the Internet Crystal Mark, to websites whose English is so poor.

This article exposes a scheme that gives the public a highly misleading impression of what plain English is. Awarding a clarity logo to these websites is tantamount to lying.

### **Public deception fostered by high-profile endorsements**

Whatever the reason for the problem, the upshot is the same: the public is being deceived that PEC-accredited websites represent a high standard of clarity and good English. This deception is fostered by PEC's prominent use on its website and in its brochures of endorsements from such people as Prince Charles, Tony Blair (the former UK prime minister), Menzies Campbell (leader, UK Liberal Democrat party) – most of whom don't seem to realize that PEC is a private company.

### **Why not stay silent?**

Some people say we shouldn't publish articles like this. They argue it's bad for the standing of plain-language professionals, who should all be pulling together against the great enemy, obscurity. And they say it's bad business to criticize your rivals. But there's now the absurd situation of teachers directing secondary-school children towards PEC-accredited websites in order to find examples of excellent business writing, then complaining to us when the English is poor. It does not seem right to stay silent about that.

## **2 Grandiose claims for the Internet Crystal Mark**

PEC, a company that often gives journalists and the public the impression it's a pressure group, makes great claims for websites to which it gives its seal of approval, the Internet Crystal Mark. PEC's website says: 'Our Internet Crystal Mark logo is the ideal way to show that you are committed to plain English throughout your site. By joining the scheme, you will prove to the public that you are willing to do everything practical to make your site crystal clear.'

So this is unequivocal – by paying for and displaying PEC's logo, customers are doing 'everything practical' to make their websites 'crystal clear'. The come-on continues: 'Here is what the scheme offers you and your site visitors. We will examine the content, design and layout of your site.'

This is less clear, because it says only that PEC will 'examine' the site without promising to do anything as a result. Later in the website, PEC says it will charge £150 for a 'report'. This implies that PEC will suggest improvements to the site.

The website goes on: 'You can have one free place at the Plain English Campaign training course of your choice. You will be able to use an individually numbered logo on your site, and you will be listed on Plain English Campaign's site, showing the world that you are committed to plain English.'

As all these statements added up to a muddle, we got a mystery shopper to phone PEC and check whether its spoken explanations would make more sense. PEC's main websites contact said: 'If the site reaches our plain-English standards, you can put the logo on. We monitor your site from time to time to make sure you're maintaining the standards. We look at the language, the navigation and the design. If it's written in impeccable plain English but the links don't work, then it's no good. We look at whether it's in plain English, using similar criteria to the Crystal Mark scheme [for printed documents].'

PEC's press spokesman was more circumspect: 'We wouldn't edit the text. We'll review the site. Provided there's an obvious commitment to plain English, we'll give it the logo. You wouldn't have to get anything edited by us [before using the logo]. If you want to use the logo there's a subscription and we monitor the site every 3 months or so. If there's problems, people tell us.'

So one PEC person says the company will repeatedly 'look at' and 'monitor' the site, declaring that the site must 'reach our plain-English standards', while another says there just needs to be 'an obvious commitment' to plain English, without explaining how PEC judges that. (A payment for the logo seems to help.)

Of the Crystal Mark for printed documents, which according to PEC's main websites contact is based on 'similar criteria' to the Internet Crystal Mark, PEC makes big claims:

- 'Nearly 1500 organisations know that only our Crystal Mark will be accepted by the public as a guarantee of a document's clarity. This is because we will not give the Crystal Mark to any document unless it can be read, understood and acted upon by the intended audience.'
- 'The Crystal Mark has become widely recognised as a guarantee that a document has been written and designed as clearly as possible.'

Note that the word 'guarantee' is used twice. PEC sells its Crystal Mark – and by clear implication its close relative the Internet Crystal Mark – as a guarantee of clarity. The Internet Crystal Mark logo includes the crystal-clear wording 'Website approved by Plain English Campaign'.

We have already exposed as worthless the Crystal Mark guarantee for printed documents – see 'Paying the price for crystal balls' on <http://www.clearest.co.uk>.

### **3 Cost of the Internet Crystal Mark**

PEC's website sets out prices for the Internet Crystal Mark: 'If you join the scheme, you will pay £1,500 + VAT for the first year and £750 + VAT for each year after that. There is a reduced rate for small organisations... If you are one of our corporate members, there is no charge for the first year, and we will only charge you £250 + VAT for each year after that. (This discounted rate does not include the free training place.) There is a non-refundable fee of £150 + VAT for us assessing your site and providing a report.'

The Internet Crystal Mark is a major source of PEC's income. Its website lists about 85 accredited sites, meaning the company takes at least £125,000 from accreditations initially and £60,000 a year from renewals. PEC's corporate members may get their

website accreditation free in the first year and pay only £300 a year afterwards, but a corporate member such as a local council will pay £6,000 for its first year of corporate membership and £3,000 for each subsequent year.

## 4 The reality behind the claims

Even well-maintained websites will have a few errors and bits of nonsense, especially big sites that their owners regularly change. **So no site can ever be perfect; everyone accepts that.** But when we started to check PEC-accredited sites – which are supposedly guaranteed to meet the company's high standards – we didn't have to look far to find error-strewn pages, nonsense, bad grammar, officialese, unexplained jargon and feeble punctuation. The problems were ubiquitous – almost every page of every PEC-approved site we examined had obvious blunders. Most of the sites looked unedited and unchecked; there was little evidence of plain-English principles being applied. It looked as if any old tosh would do, as long as the site owners had been prepared to stump up the price of the logo.

PEC-approved sites are supposed to be top notch. No ifs, no buts. They are getting PEC's seal of approval – the top badge from a body that has claimed to be leading the international plain-English movement.

## 5 The other West Lothian question: how clear is the council's website?

The PEC-accredited website of West Lothian Council is typical. The site has been strewn with officialese, jargon and errors throughout the 5 months since we first checked it, belying PEC's claim to monitor sites 'every 3 months or so'.

Readers find misspellings like 'discrimincation' in several places before reaching this piece about, apparently, installing posts in West Lothian homes:

- Kitchen and Bathroom Post installation  
The most frequently asked questions and answers relating kitchen and bathroom replacement programme after the installation.

Assuming that a domestic pole-dancing epidemic hasn't broken out in Scotland, why would the people of Lothian want posts installed in their kitchens and bathrooms?

Both the heading and the text beneath it are meaningless. Then comes this sentence:

- Kitchen and Bathroom Snagging This topic is for internal use to log snagging from sign off.

And no-one bothered to punctuate this question properly:

- Question:  
I have lost my key fob how do I get a replacement?

The famous 'West Lothian question' has baffled many politicians over the years, but this West Lothian Council question is just as obscure:

- Question:  
Working in partnership with other agencies

That's supposed to be a question? The questions continue:

- Question:  
How will we know if we are achieving equality?  
Answer:  
All our policies are reviewed regularly. We will examine our policies to make sure that they are not operating in a way that may discriminate or disadvantage any particular group.

But 'discriminate... any particular group' is nonsense – presumably the word 'against' is missing. Pedants may also notice that an even more important word is missing – 'unlawful' or 'unfair'. The text should say '...unlawfully discriminate against' because only unlawful discrimination is, er, unlawful. Without discrimination – choosing between things or people – very little would happen anywhere in local government.

Here are a few more of the feeble pieces on West Lothian's website. The high-flown

language, misspellings and incorrect punctuation are all as shown on the website and are italicized here:

- National conditions of service for teachers set a normal maximum number of 33 pupils for *single year stage classes* in primary school. Recent government policy to reduce class sizes at *P1-3 to 30 in single stage classes* has also to be taken into account. The ongoing commercial and economic development in West Lothian and the *attendant population growth* are *significant factors, which impact on school rolls*.  
Local authorities have to place this in the *context* of existing and proposed housing development within a *school's* catchment area; the availability of accommodation within each locality and *individual establishment*; and the fact that class sizes revert to 33 at *P4*.
- If you feel that the *issues relating to the formation and functioning of composite classes* in the school your child attends have not been fully explained to you, you may wish to raise this matter with the School Board where *further methods of communication* may be with the Head Teacher. Should you have further questions *regarding the education provision* for your child/children you should contact the Head Teacher of the school.
- Question:  
When will I be informed if my child is to be in a *composite class*?  
Answer:  
The Head Teacher will inform you as to the class your child will be in as soon as he/she has *finalised the class organisation* for the school. Normally this would be in mid June, *however circumstances may arise where the Head Teacher will have to adjust the classroom organisation to accomodate an unexpected intake of pupils*.
- If you find a dead swan, goose or duck or three or more *dead wild, or garden birds* together in the same place, please report this to Defra on Tel: 08459 33 55 77 *you should not touch or handle the dead bird*.  
If the dead bird is a *single, small garden, or wild bird* then you do not need to call Defra, you should either leave it alone or follow the *guidelines* for disposal in normal household waste.

The rot goes to the top in West Lothian. Here is one of the jargon- and error-strewn pieces posted on the website in February 2007 and still there, unedited, 5 months later. It includes quotations from an education chief who spouts fluent officialese:

- Audit Scotland has release performance indicators for schools in West Lothian for the period 2003 to 2004.  
Speaking about indicators one and two – occupancy levels in primary and secondary schools, Moira Niven, head of education (development) and cultural services, said: "The relatively high school occupancy levels in West Lothian are due an increase in the number of pupils which has been sustained for some years."  
During the period of the report West Lothian is well above the national average with 21.2 percent of schools with more than 101 percent occupancy.  
"Further roll growth is anticipated and school extensions are planned through the council's second Public Private Partnership project to meet these requirements. Certain schools have also experienced very high levels of occupation due to parental placement requests.  
"Further planned housing development in West Lothian will require additional school infrastructure to meet population requirements and this is being taken forward through contributions by housing developers," added Moira Niven.

West Lothian boasts of being Council of the Year 2006 in the Local Government Chronicle Awards. The judges seem to have missed the website. Or maybe they just saw PEC's logo and thought: 'If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for us.'

## 6 APPENDIX

### How good and plain is the English on other PEC-accredited sites?

These notes pick out only the main points from some of the sites we examined. We rechecked most of the extracts shown here 5 months after first seeing them. Many of the same problems were still present. PEC claims to monitor its approved sites 'every 3 months or so'.

#### Trafford Housing Trust – too trusting by far?

Trafford Housing Trust's home page – the most prominent page on its site and the

starting point for most visitors – contains numerous basic errors as well as a largely random use of initial capitals. At Christmas 2006 the home page included these 2 sentences of badly punctuated nonsense (we've changed the tenant's name):

- Trafford tenant Ivor Robinson can prove he that he knows more about housing than most. Thanks to Trafford Housing Trust's tenant involvement initiative, Pathways.

An article about Mr Robinson's achievements says:

- Ivor gained a distinction on his Level 3 Course which is credited to the Chartered Institute of Housing.

This is nonsense because the course can't be 'credited to the Institute'. Presumably it means 'accredited by the Institute'.

The site's tenuous grasp of punctuation is evident everywhere:

- We have already completed work to the value of £40 million, since transfer in 2005, this work has included [...]
- Welcome to our website, please use the links on the left to navigate through our site.

The website's latest home page (June 2007) includes the error-strewn headings 'Choiced Based Lettings', 'Older Peoples Service', 'Feedback from our customrs', and 'Complaints & Complements'. Without irony, the home page also carries the heading 'Need help with communication?'.

## Council A – officialese, errors and drivell

On Council A's PEC-accredited site, a list of the circumstances that could enable children to get help with travel-to-school costs uses unexplained jargon:

- Low income, brothers and sisters at the same school, single sex or denominational preference do not in themselves account for an exceptional factor.

'Single sex or denominational preference' may mean little to the average reader. But the phrase 'account for an exceptional factor' is worse. It's not close to being English, let alone plain English. And why write things like this in the passive voice:

- Exceptional factors such as bullying or domestic violence which might prevent your child from attending the nearest available school will be taken into consideration.

Just start it with: 'We'll consider...' – it's not difficult. The piece goes on:

- In this case, a professional such as a doctor, social worker or religious leader must support your applications, in writing.

But the parent is making only one application, so why suddenly start talking about 'applications'? And would any decent editor let this next sentence pass untouched?:

- If your child has a medical condition or physical disability which makes it difficult for him or her to walk to school, you will need to supply us with a medical report and a clear idea of how far your child can walk.

That could easily have been split into 2 sentences:

- Has your child a medical condition or physical disability that makes walking to school difficult? If so, you'll need to give us a medical report and tell us how far your child can walk.

The site includes much officialese, full of unnecessary negatives and passive-voice verbs:

- No assistance with travelling expenses is normally offered to pupils aged over 16 unless they have a statement of special education needs, attend a special school and live more than three miles from the school.

It doesn't take much time or skill to convert that into plainer English, though guesswork is needed to decide what 'over 16' means:

- Normally, we can help to pay the travel expenses of pupils aged 16 and over **only** if they have a statement of special educational needs, attend a special school and live more than three miles from the school.

There are plenty of grammatical errors too, for example in the section about free school meals, where 'they' doesn't refer to anything:

- The meal is worth £1.40 a day at nursery, primary and special schools and £1.30 at secondary schools. They are paid as tickets or tokens at secondary school.

Another piece says:

- In the borough, the environmental protection team act as advisers to the directorate of strategic planning and on land contamination issues affecting new developments. It carries extensive assessments on ground gases and soil investigations before approving planning permission.'

How does the team 'carry' extensive assessments – in a truck? It just doesn't make sense. And the team can't 'approve planning permission[s]'. You can 'approve' an application, but you 'give' a permission. In any case, do staff advisers really give planning permission, which is usually the role of councillors? And it's poor grammar to use 'team' as both singular and plural in the same paragraph.

### **Connexions South Central – lesbian sons and other odd connections**

On the PEC-accredited Connexions South Central website, there's incoherence and unexplained jargon on most pages. That's even more of a problem because many of the readers are said to have learning difficulties:

- If you're a young person with learning difficulties or difficulties the 4US website has widget publications to download and the Trans-active website goes through a transition interview with a Connexions PA.

What's meant by 'learning difficulties or difficulties'? Then 'widget' needs a capital letter and an explanation. In any case, given that the site is linked to 'Widgit Publications', it's likely that 'widget' is a misspelling. And what's a 'transition interview with a Connexions PA'? It goes on:

- Your social life may well resolve around your friends and what you do together.

This is nonsense: presumably 'resolve' should be 'revolve'. Then, about sex, it says:

- You may be too embarrassed, worried or confused to talk to anyone close to you. But don't worry, all our Personal Advisers are happy to help you either see one in school or visit your local Connexions centre and make an appointment.

As it's written, 'see one' is meaningless and 'either' is misplaced – it sounds as if these personal advisers can help you visit a Connexions centre. If any readers can be bothered to disentangle this mess, they'll eventually realize there should be a full stop after 'help you', and a new sentence starting at 'Either'. It's been in this state for 5 months. Then comes the strange phenomenon of 'lesbian sons':

- Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays... is a national voluntary organisation dedicated to supporting parents and their lesbian, gay and bisexual sons and daughters.

It goes on:

- Moving out of home to stay with friends, to rent or even buying a house is a big change in your life which can be exciting...

The grammar is broken here – it should say either '...to stay with friends, to rent or even to buy a house is a big change in your life, which can be exciting...'. Next comes more nonsense:

- If you have a disability you may have special housing requirements that help make life easier.

How will having special housing requirements make your life easier? Finally, there are misspellings and unnecessary apostrophes, for example:

- Visit Homeless UK – use the advanced search facility to find accomodation in your local area.
- The local council's have a duty to help with emergency accommodation...

### **Essex County Council – undertaking to be unclear**

On this PEC-accredited site, the punctuation is often wrong. The result is absurdities like 'publicity engineering' and 'heartbreak pain':

- Education, training, publicity engineering and enforcement all have a role to play in casualty reduction.
- For each casualty there is an accompanying tale of heartbreak pain, misery and shattered lives.

The following 58-word sentence could easily have been split into 2 or 3, with hyphens

added to form the attributive adjectives 'police-led' and 'conflict-free':

- Formerly known as "Responsible Rider" in Essex, BikeSafe is a Police led initiative, run in a number of different police force areas nationally that seeks to engage and educate motorcyclists in a safe, professional and conflict free environment, encouraging them to seek out further training to hone their skills and abilities and create a genuine desire to learn.

A mispunctuated and misleading heading says 'County district and undertakers contacts'. In fact it's not about burial and cremation services, but about 'statutory undertakers' – like gas, electricity and water companies. A clearer heading would have been 'How to contact the Highways Agency and utility companies working in Essex'.

The current text continues (with its faulty capitalization of 'utility'):

- Should you be a utility company, developer or member of the public seeking information regarding which Utility companies service any particular Essex district, then this site should help.

Rewritten in plain English to give more and clearer information, this would say:

Use this site to find out which utility companies serve each district of Essex and to get details of the Highways Agency.

## **Council B – English in anguish**

Council B's site has so many random capital letters it doesn't seem to have been checked by anybody with a reasonable standard of literacy:

- Please telephone the Civil Partnership Registrar to make an Appointment to give a Legal Notice.'

The section on civil partnerships states:

- The following original (photo-copies are not acceptable) documents need to be produced documents are [...]:

Apostrophes are often used wrongly or omitted, as here:

- If you have been divorced, a decree nisi absolute bearing the courts original stamp or decree of dissolution of civil partnership.

The term 'decree nisi absolute' seems to be nonsense – legal dictionaries don't recognize it. Chunks of text are slapped on the site with little thought of structuring them in a reader-friendly way. For example, the section on the cost of forming a civil partnership says:

- You will each be charged £30.00 when you give notice (non-refundable).

Additionally:

Signing of Civil Partnership Schedule will cost £40.00 payable on the day of the signing, plus £3.50 for each certificate purchased on the day.

Signing of Civil Partnership Schedule on approved premises will incur a fee to the proprietors of the premises, and a fee for the attendance of the Registration Officers is

- £180.00\* Monday – Saturday
- £270.00\* Sunday and Bank Holidays

\* payable no less than 2 weeks before the event plus £3.50 for each certificate purchased on the day.

Please note subsequent certificates are £7.00

Apparently, this ill-structured mess is 'crystal clear' and shows 'that you are committed to plain English throughout your site'.

## **Adult Learning Inspectorate – where the uninspected deteriorates**

Even the Adult Learning Inspectorate's home page, on a PEC-accredited site, can't get its apostrophes right, boasting a quick link to:

- Chief Inspectors annual report.

That error was present for more than 8 weeks. The Adult Learning Inspectorate is a government agency. It inspects adult education. This includes literacy. The website says it 'aims to be a world class quality assessment business'. Maybe hyphens and apostrophes aren't part of being world class any more.

## In Essex, a thurrockly bad case of officialese

Thurrock Council's PEC-accredited website uses officialese that would be perfect for a course on how not to write English of any kind, plain or otherwise. Random initial capitals litter the site and misspellings like 'Our committment to Carers' are commonplace. Apostrophes are omitted as if they haven't been invented, while examples of substandard writing abound:

- The person assessing the service will be encouraged to become involved in a range of activities. There is a charge for lunch and any refreshments provided throughout the day. Trained staff will assist with all personal care if it is required. In some cases transport can be provided.

Yet the person is not 'assessing' (ie 'evaluating') the service, but 'accessing' it – in plain English, using it. The paragraph uses mainly impersonal passive-voice verbs whereas good writing practice recommends more active-voice verbs and personal words like 'we' and 'you'.

- The Short Break Service provides respite care on Saturdays and Sundays at the Thurrock Carers Centre. Your relative or friend can be brought along to the Centre any time between 9:00am and 4:00pm. Arrangements for this service can be made in advance...

Active-voice verbs would be far better: 'You can bring your relative or friend along to the centre any time between 9am and 4pm. You can arrange this service in advance.'

- If you have a severe or long term mental health difficulty we offer on-going help in the community, working closely with all persons relevant to the individual to ensure that the appropriate interventions are offered. In this case a contact person (care coordinator) in the team will arrange a regular review of the care plan to ensure that it is still relevant and that you receive a package of care to meet your immediate and long term mental health needs.

At 35 and 45 words, those sentences are too long especially as the ideas are so simple. 'Persons relevant to the individual' is pure officialese.

- Transport can be provided if requested, it is often seen as an integral part of the service provision.

That comma is wrong – it should be a full stop or semicolon; this is basic stuff.

- Where appropriate carers are signposted or referred to other agencies to ensure that specialist help is sought.

The punctuation here is also wrong and could give the wrong meaning – it should start 'Where appropriate, carers are...'. And again it's written in the impersonal passive when it would be easier to understand in the active, such as 'To ensure that carers seek specialist help, we refer or point them to other agencies.'

- If your needs are not met by mental health services, or you do not meet our eligibility criteria, then you will be offered alternative options and sign-posted to other resources. If eligible, then your case will be discussed with the Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) in order for it to be allocated.

Most of that uses the impersonal passive when it should be active, according to plain-English principles.

- Sometimes there are individuals whose lives can become so chaotic and complex (this may include relationship and housing difficulties) that there is a severe impact on their ability to remain mentally well, and they tend to disengage from services. The assertive outreach team work with these individuals who find it hard to engage and who may require a lot of input over a long period of time.

This is jargonistic and written impersonally with phrases like 'these individuals'. It would be much clearer to use 'you' because the information is for service users. For example: 'Sometimes you may feel your life has become so chaotic and complicated (perhaps with relationship and housing problems) that it's hard to keep on top of things or see your way through. You may feel that getting help is too difficult or that no-one's any use to you. But our outreach team can help, and they'll work with you for as long as you need.'

- How we can help? Referrals to our service come from a variety of sources but are all dealt with initially through the duty officer, who is a qualified professional available at all times when the offices are open, to provide an information and advice service on mental health

matters. At this stage you may be referred onto another more appropriate service or you may be offered an assessment of mental health and social care needs by a member of the team.

The first sentence ends with a question mark but isn't a question. Again, the style is mainly impersonal, with passive-voice verbs. There would be much more use of 'we' and active-voice verbs if the authors were applying plain-English principles.

- Social Care staff have been seconded from Thurrock Council into South Essex Partnership NHS Trust to further fully integrate our multi-disciplinary Community Mental Health Team based at Grays Hall. All our staff work together to provide the best possible service to users of our services and their families. The staff group consists of Consultant Psychiatrists, Community Mental Health Nurses, Social Workers, Occupational Therapists, Psychologists, Community Support Workers and administrative staff. We also work in partnership with other disciplines, agencies and carers to ensure that the service we offer is holistic and comprehensive.

This is full of social-care jargon like 'further fully integrate our multi-disciplinary...' and 'holistic and comprehensive'. It seems not to have undergone any plain-English editing and is a far cry from PEC's criterion of 'showing a clear commitment to plain English'.

- Psychiatry involves the difficult task of disentangling symptoms and illness to provide a treatment plan to improve a persons mental well-being. It is important to take as broad a view as possible of the things that might be damaging to any individual service users mental health and find ways of improving their circumstances.

The waffle and missing apostrophes suggest that any plain-English monitoring has been ineffective. The site also states:

- We also provide benefits information to the general public through our Benefits Helpline. As part of our work, we seek to influence policies that directly impact upon those living on low incomes within the Borough. We pursue these objectives using the following methods:

A plain-language rewrite might say: 'Our Benefits Helpline can help you claim any extra cash you are entitled to. We also try to change government policy so that local people on low incomes can get more money. We do this in the following ways:'

### **Council C – where brown-bin options drive the culture of care**

Council C's PEC-accredited website over-complicates its explanation of the virtues of home composting:

- Composting waste for subsequent use in the garden is also encouraged and composters will remain available for purchase at a heavily subsidised cost. Further information is available on composting garden waste and purchasing a compost bin.

Translated into plain English, this might say: 'Please compost your waste for use in the garden. Ask us for details of how to do it. And buy a compost bin from us – we've heavily subsidised the cost.'

The site continues:

- The brown bin option should be useful for those with bigger gardens or simply for those that want the convenience of a reusable container.

Why not use plain English? Perhaps this:

- If you have a big garden or prefer a re-usable container, ask us for a brown bin.

Proofreading errors abound, like the repeated word in this sentence:

- We have 3 walk-in reception receptions if you would like to contact us in person.

There's also plenty of absurd management-speak:

Our vision for social care and sustainable communities involves:

- Enabling quality services within a robust performance management system and quality framework
- Integrating services to put service users at the heart of our enterprise
- Empowering service users to become involved in the planning of their care, the management of their homes and supported to live the lives they want
- Working in constructive partnerships with the National Health Service, Education, the voluntary sector and other stakeholders to ensure greater integration of services and the provision of seamless care

- Citizens have fair access to information and services, and eligibility criteria for services is well understood and transparent
- Driving forward a culture of care that engages with the hearts and minds, as well as the budgets of all those involved

That list has at least 3 errors amid the jargon: (a) the third point ('Empowering...') is grammatically wrong, so the writing is meaningless; (b) the fifth point ('Citizens...') doesn't connect to the lead-in or platform statement, so the statement is nonsense; (c) in the same point, 'criteria' is plural but the verb is singular, which is clearly wrong. Worse, though, is that only people with a tin ear and a warped sense of humour could write – or give an accolade to – the final point:

- Driving forward a culture of care that engages with the hearts and minds, as well as the budgets of all those involved

### **Pesticide Safety Directorate – crop protection without crap detection**

The Pesticide Safety Directorate has a PEC-accredited site that uses words like 'Efficacy' without any explanation in its glossary:

- The Efficacy guidelines contain information additional to the general guidance in the redrafted registration handbook (now renamed the Data Requirements Handbook). In many cases they have been developed in collaboration with the Crop Protection Association (CPA) through the Efficacy working group. They are arranged in a number of sections

For 'arrange', read 'arranged'. The site goes on:

- If evidence does emerge concerning the safety of a particular product then the approval of that product can be reviewed and could result in its approval being restricted or even revoked.

This appears to mean that if evidence shows a product is safe, its approval could be revoked – which is plainly nonsense. Even worse, 'could result' has no proper subject, so the sentence is meaningless. The site is also full of officialese and weird capitalization like this:

- **Communication Of Enforcement Action Taken By PSD/Defra**  
In accordance with the Enforcement Concordat, those being investigated will be given as much warning as possible of any intended enforcement action. Normally this will be in the form of a letter setting out the action to be taken, with time provided for representations to be made, including, where appropriate, the opportunity to meet with PSD staff. Any representations are fully considered before a final decision is made. However, in those cases where immediate enforcement action is necessary, an explanation of why such action was required will be given at the time and confirmed in writing.

Yet PSD boasts:

- The Plain English Campaign works to ensure that public information is written in Plain English. Plain English is language that the intended audience can understand and act upon from a single reading. This means the Plain English Campaign have examined the contents, design and layout of our site and are satisfied that it meets their high standards for quality and readability. The Internet Crystal Mark is a recognised symbol of clarity. This recognises PSD's commitment to Plain English communication throughout the website. The Plain English Campaign will continue to review our website on a regular basis and provide us with on-going suggestions for improvement.

'Satisfied' is misspelt. Why does 'Plain English' take a capital p (twice)? 'Plain English Campaign' is made the subject of both the singular verb 'works' and the plural verb 'have'. Why is 'on-going' hyphenated? It is hard to imagine who is checking this stuff.

### **Law firm D – where there's a Will, there's a highway, road or street**

The PEC-approved website of this law firm is stuffed with legal-speak. 'Death' is called 'demise', 'evidenced' is used for 'shown', and 'minded' is used for 'want'. Long sentences crawl across the site:

- If, however, your total estate is likely to be worth more than £285,000 (bearing in mind that the taxman values everything on death, including your house, house contents, bank accounts, life policy proceeds and so on), steps will need to be taken if you wish to ensure that your children don't lose 40% of everything above the tax free sum.

That's a 60-word sentence (complete with obligatory typo) which could easily have

been split because the ideas are very simple. Plain-language guidelines suggest 15–20 words for this kind of writing. The phrase 'steps will need to be taken if you wish to ensure that your children don't lose 40%' is pure officialese for 'you should act now otherwise your children could lose 40%'. Several sentences would be perfect material for courses on how not to write legal English:

- If your total estate at death is likely to be worth less than this then no Inheritance Tax planning measures need be taken by you (although you should still make sure that your affairs are in order in all other respects) since no tax will be payable.
- In most cases, particularly where the total estate at death falls between £285,000 and £570,000, all that needs to be done in order to eliminate the potential tax liability is to have tax efficient Wills prepared for you and your spouse.

Which is not at all clear but may mean, in plainer English: 'If your estate on death is worth £285,000–570,000, we can usually help you avoid paying any inheritance tax. We do this by preparing tax-efficient Wills for you and your spouse.'

The firm gives advice about Alzheimer's disease but can't spell or punctuate the illness: 'Alzeihmers Question of Law' says one heading. Parts of the site could have been lifted straight from an old-fashioned lawyer's phrasebook, with solicitors and accountants described as 'professional persons' (in plain English, that's 'professionals' or 'professional people'). About buying a home, it says:

- Subject to the valuer's judgement, a visual inspection is to be carried out of so much of the exterior and interior of the property as is accessible to the valuer without undue difficulty.

This could mean anything, but a possible plain-language rewrite would be: 'It's for valuers to decide what they inspect. But they'll always look at all parts of the inside and outside of the property that they can see or get into safely and easily.' The site goes on, incoherently:

- It [the inspection] is normally carried out to the direct instructions of the lender but where it is instructed privately, the general terms are incorporated as though the report were being prepared for a lender.

### **Council of Mortgage Lenders – where the English deserves interest**

The Council of Mortgage Lenders' PEC-approved site should have a well-written consumer information section – after all, it's only a few paragraphs long. But its sentence construction and grammar are woeful:

- We also provide a list of frequently asked questions about mortgages and the mortgage market included to cover some areas not addressed by our guides. And our mortgage calculator and mortgage repayment tables for consumers wishing to calculate their mortgage costs.

Then it follows up with a run-on sentence in which the comma is wrong:

- The CML is not a regulator for the mortgage industry, we cannot take complaints regarding the conduct of our members.

And here is the first sentence of the site's 'Policy' section:

- We help develop mortgage lending policy by responding to initiatives from Government, regulators and other bodies and by promoting its own policies and objectives.

Which is clearly bad because 'its' is wrong – it should say 'our', otherwise the Council of Mortgage Lenders appears to be promoting government policy.

### **Council E – the site's a nightmayor**

Seeker of crystal clarity may alight on the PEC-accredited website of council E. But it's not long before they find the usual mix of random initial capitals and absent apostrophes:

- Q Where can I find information about the mayors chain and badge?  
A The Chain and Badge is the outward sign of the office of the Lord Mayor. The Chain is worn within the City when performing official civic functions, important ceremonial occasions and also as appropriate at other times, e.g. opening Conferences, Fetes, new businesses. It is also worn (at Lord Mayor's discretion) when paying visits to Schools, Churches and the Emergency Services, etc.

Question for grammar buffs: what is the phrase 'important ceremonial occasions' connected with? The answer is nothing – it's impossible to 'perform an occasion' so the statement is meaningless. And how does the 'Chain' perform official civic functions?

### **Northamptonshire Police: easily led into verbal offences**

Every decent editor knows that the past tense of 'lead' is 'led'. But on the PEC-accredited site of Northamptonshire Police, that fact has, er, led to errors on numerous pages including this:

- The Safer Community Team for Daventry South is lead by Sergeant Dave Gellatly. The area covered by the team includes the Town Centre, the Grange and the Southbrook area of town.

So that reads: 'The area ... includes ... the Southbrook area.' And then there are proofreading mistakes that legal eagles really shouldn't miss:

- We are currently working with local people to find out what matter most to you in the area where you live.
- We need your help. If you have any concerns our any information about crime or anti-social behaviour in your neighbourhood, please talk to us.

### **Council F – 'remunerative work' site praised for 'plain english' [sic]**

On this site, errors lie abundantly like rotten apples. This one appears several times and has been present for 5 months:

- No Frequently Asked Questions where found for Leisure and Culture topic.

Even in the education section there are missing apostrophes, as here:

- Children will only get the best from their time at school when they have confidence in the school they attend and the schools ability to deal with problems, concerns and difficulties.

The editors have also allowed the following wording to appear:

- To work out your Housing Benefit, the council will look at: [...] your circumstances, such as your age, the ages and size of your family, whether you or any of your family are disabled, and whether anyone who lives with you could help with the rent.

The phrase 'we will look at ... the ages and size of your family' is not English: a family does not have 'ages'. The site repeatedly speaks of 'remunerative work' (that's 'paid work' in plain English) and manages to confuse the functions of apostrophes and commas in *Job Seeker,s Allowance*. Even on the page where the council boasts about its award from PEC, it blunders:

- The website has been singled out for praise in the annual SOCITM report for its use of plain english.

So that's English with a lower-case e? And there's no explanation of SOCITM.

### **Council G – blocked drains and murky answers**

Council G's PEC-accredited site boasts the now-familiar crop of errors. The question-and-answer section starts:

- My drain is blocked, can the Council please unblock it?

Well, no we can't, but we could change that comma to a full stop. And while we're doing that, we could alter (twice) 'licenced drivers' to the correct spelling, which, in British English, is 'licensed drivers'. Then we could have a look at the next sentence and correct it too:

- An application can be downloading by clicking on the link below.

And then we could attend to the following question (even though it lacks a question mark):

- Do I need Building Regulation Approval to construct a detached garage.

To which the site's answer is:

- No, provided they contain no sleeping accommodation...

In this weird world of sub-English, basics like subject-verb agreement seem entirely optional.

### **Business Link for London – connecting to HR jargon issues**

The Business Link for London website includes numerous PEC-approved punctuation and spelling errors, as well as jargon like 'addressing their HR issues' and 'ramped up the quality of our HR...compliance':

- N1 Creative – who were already using Business Link for London's mentoring service – asked for help in addressing their HR issues.
- The online HR service beproStaff has ramped up the quality of our HR and employment law compliance and has protected us against potentially thousands of pounds of litigation issues.

Presumably the final hideous clause is meant to say: '...thousands of pounds in litigation costs'.

### **Commission for Social Care Inspection – quiztime for proofreaders**

This PEC-accredited site has multiple errors. Can you spot the mistakes in these sentences?

- 1** Inspectors are continually impressed by the homes huge notice board of multi-coloured posters.
- 2** The posters are written in large, easy-to-read letters, that show the week's activities.
- 3** Communication problems between staff and residents seems to be a real stumbling block and not just in the language that is used.
- 4** The residents also need help in deciding what they should be eating but, at thsi home, there is no advice on healthy eating.
- 5** Children believe their family will keep them safe, but only people like teachers or social workers should access information about them, says two new reports.
- 6** Go to the Children's Right's Director's website.

*Answers* **1** homes = home's **2** Omit the comma after 'letters', and 'that' should be 'and' **3** 'seems' = 'seem' **4** 'thsi' = 'this' **5** 'says' = 'say', and the sentence is meaningless anyway **6** Right's = Rights.

The Commission for Social Care Inspection is a big, government-funded body, not some roadside stall selling sweets and ices. So why is its website, like so many in this survey, littered with juvenile blunders?

## **7 Your opportunity to comment**

If you'd like to comment on this article, please do so. Email Martin Cutts at [mail@clearest.co.uk](mailto:mail@clearest.co.uk). We'll not publish your comments without your explicit permission.