

Plain English

The magazine of Plain English Campaign - Issue 42 (October 1999)



1979-1999
20 years of Plain English Campaign

(Picture shows Chrissie Maher (right) at the launch of Plain English Campaign in July 1979)

Friends in high places

Plain English Campaign's founder director Chrissie Maher has given the thumbs up to the latest Government reshuffle.

Stephen Timms, who launched our pension guides, leaves his Department of Social Security post to become Financial Secretary at the Treasury. He is replaced by the former Minister for food, Jeff Rooker.

'It's a shame that the nature of politics means that ministers keep changing jobs,' Chrissie said. 'Having four different people responsible for pensions since the election doesn't help the drive for simplification.'

'But at least having a committed plain English supporter like Mr Timms in the Treasury should mean the financial services markets will lose a little waffle.'

'And we couldn't have hoped for a better plain English enthusiast in pensions than Jeff Rooker. One of his opponents once accused him of talking like an ordinary person, which sounds like the ultimate compliment to me!'



Stephen Timms... promotion

Plain English - the healthy option

An industry-wide guide to Private Medical Insurance (PMI) has earned the coveted Crystal Mark.

Every consumer who begins looking at PMI will get the eight-page guide from whichever company they deal with. It explains the rights and choices available to PMI buyers.

As well as explaining what is and is not usually covered by medical insurance, the guide even explains why the cost of cover tends to rise by more than the rate of inflation.

Plain English Campaign editors worked with the Association of British Insurers until the document met the Crystal Mark standard.

Chrissie Maher, founder director of Plain English Campaign, said the guide was a fine example of consumers and industry working together:

'Because so many firms have agreed to use the guide, the consumer gets real choice. Once the man in the street can understand PMI, their choice comes down to who offers the best deal for them, not who has the best sales technique.'

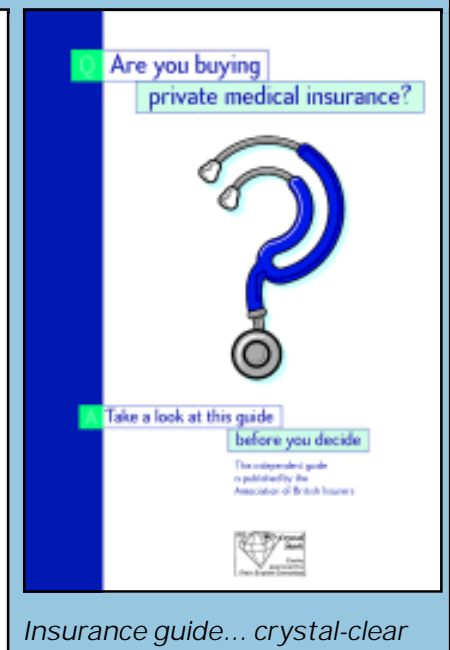
The guide is part of an ongoing programme between Plain English Campaign and the industry to make PMI clearer. Future plans include working together on common, clear definitions so that customers can easily compare schemes.

Windego show the way to go

There's no copying the Crystal Mark, but one firm is proving that plain English can be used again and again and again.

Photocopier suppliers Windego have earned the Crystal Mark for all their service contracts, a traditional area of confusion for buyers.

They have committed to 'not enter into any agreements until it is clear to all concerned what rights and responsibilities are involved.'



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The story so far...

In the last 20 years, we have taken many steps towards our dream of a waffle-free world. Throughout this magazine, we present a special look back at the history of Plain English Campaign. This includes Chrissie Maher's personal work before our formal launch in 1979.

1971

- Chrissie Maher launches the 'Tuebrook Bugle', Britain's first community newspaper. The 'Bugle' is written by local people in their own style. Its success inspires many other groups to publish their own newspaper.

1974

- Chrissie launches Impact Foundation, a community group to teach typography and print skills to ordinary people. It prints the 'Liverpool News', Britain's first newspaper for adults with learning disabilities. Impact produced many other publications, including the simplification of forms for Liverpool City Council. This is the first example of plain English editing.

Plain English pretenders

'Gobbledygook in disguise is the biggest threat to plain English today.'

That was the unexpected announcement made by Plain English Campaign's founder director, Chrissie Maher, on our 20th anniversary (26 July).

'It's been creeping up for the last few years and, although I've tried to live with it, the time has come to speak out', Chrissie said. 'The Gobbledygook monster may be battered and bruised, but he's making a comeback under the veil of plain language.'

'People are starting to realise that simply saying something is in plain English is a lot easier than actually doing the job properly. One problem with this is that it devalues our hard work. We're sick and tired of organisations using the words 'plain English' to pass off twaddle that they don't dare to put up against the Crystal Mark challenge.'

'But we've been around long enough to take care of ourselves. What's far more important is how this affects ordinary people. When you read something that claims to be in 'plain language' or 'plain English', and then you can't understand it, you are left feeling humiliated and powerless. If you can't understand information, you can't make informed decisions.'

'My message to organisations is crystal clear', Chrissie explained. 'If you don't care about customers



making informed decisions, then go ahead and ignore plain English – but have the guts to say so. Just please don't say you use plain English unless you test your documents on the public **before** sending them to the printers.

'I've given 20 years of my life to plain English, and it chokes me up to see the struggle sold out like this. But this isn't about me, it's about the public – and they deserve better.'

Named and shamed:

- The Financial Services Authority:** 'They've come up with a series of 'plain language' leaflets which have 'won an award', but the only testing they seem to have done was after publishing them. No wonder 'The Scotsman' described one leaflet as 'pompous' and 'not plain English'.'

- Government CAT standards:** 'The voluntary Government standards for the new Individual Savings Accounts say providers must be committed to using plain English. Yet anyone can say they meet these standards, without testing their documents. It seems like plain English is less important than your art department coming up with a pretty 'catmark' logo.'

- PC Advisor Magazine:** 'Their slogan is 'Expert Advice in plain English.' They asked us to endorse their magazine, and we turned them down because it just wasn't good enough. The only computer magazine we recommend, *Computeractive*, truly cares about plain English – which might be why its sales figures wipe the floor with PC Advisor's.'

- Virgin Direct:** 'They made such a big deal of their 'jargon-free' products that we took a look ourselves – and their literature is nowhere near Crystal Mark standard. Still, at least the public had their say. Last year, Scottish Widows, whose pensions brochure earned the Crystal Mark, sold 129,000 pensions. Virgin managed just 15,000. They've found out the hard way that testing a document after it's published is too late.'

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- Chrissie is invited to join the National Consumer Council, and creates the Salford Form Market, a one-stop advice shop to help ordinary people claim benefits. While running the Form Market, Chrissie notes the misery caused by needlessly complicated forms. She helps rewrite a series of forms for the Supplementary Benefit Commission, but the Government is slow to pick up the message.

1979

- Outraged at the lack of progress on plain English, Chrissie officially launches Plain English Campaign by shredding gobbledygook on Parliament Square, Westminster. A passing policeman reads out the entire Riot Act and is infamously asked 'does that gobbledygook mean we have to go?'

- Dressed as the Gobbledygook Monster, Chrissie delivers the first issue of 'Plain English' magazine to 10 Downing Street.

1980

- Plain English Campaign launches a professional editing service to provide enough funding to keep itself entirely independent.

- The first Plain English awards see six organisations rewarded for their use of plain English, and 100 organisations collect booby prizes for gobbledygook – the first Golden Bulls.

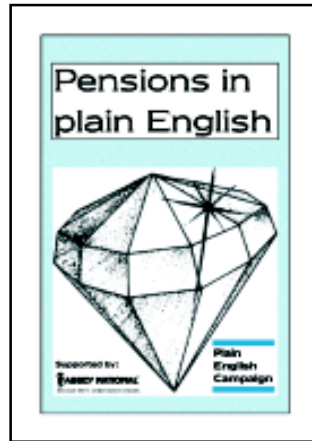
Plain English pension guides hit the high street

Now it's not just internet users who can get pensions information in plain English. Our introductory booklet, 'Pensions in Plain English', is now available for free from any branch of Abbey National.

Plain English Campaign spokesman John Lister explained why the guide is now available as a printed booklet:

'We've been swamped by people who want to read the guide and, while we've helped many of them find local access to the web, we do realise that many others have no internet access.

'Abbey National have already proved their commitment to plain English in pensions, so we were delighted when they asked if they could put our booklet into all their branches.



'Naturally you don't have to be an Abbey customer to get a free copy of our pension guide.'

Hugo Thorman, pensions director at Abbey National, said:

'Pensions in plain English removes the jargon and aims to make pensions more accessible to everybody – something we at Abbey National are totally committed to.'

Our detailed glossary of pension terms, 'The A to Z of pensions', is still available from our website (www.plainenglish.co.uk).

As the A to Z is intended for reference rather than cover-to-cover reading, it will not go into print immediately.

The internet version can be instantly updated as new pension terms develop, and firms continue to agree common definitions.

Home is where the mark is

The plain English home is here! Thanks to some of the Crystal Marks earned during 1999, it is now possible to move into a new house without fear of the Gobbledygook Monster.

A waffle-busting house buyer could now:

- have their prospective home checked by BBG Surveyors (the new name for Black Horse) and get a Crystal Marked 'SecureMove' report;
- check their rights under the Mortgage Code in the Crystal Marked Council of Mortgage Lenders' leaflet 'You and Your Mortgage';
- read up on buildings insurance, contents insurance and mortgage payment protection in a series of Crystal Marked leaflets from the Association of British Insurers;
- get a Crystal Marked quotation contract from the Federation of Master Builders;
- have double glazing and a conservatory fitted by Coldseal Windows under their Crystal Marked contract;
- heat their home with British Gas, whose revised terms and conditions were Crystal Marked; and
- power the house with Norweb or Scottish Power, whose conditions for electricity supply are – you guessed it – Crystal Marked.



The Gobbledygook Monster... not house trained

Founder director Chrissie Maher said: 'The Crystal Mark is clearly the only sign of clarity that matters. I think it's so successful because companies know that a document cannot carry the Crystal Mark without being properly tested on the public.

'We always say people should never sign a document unless they can understand it, and now they can set up home without once facing the gobbledygook monster.'

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1981

- The Government responds to Plain English Campaign by setting up a review under Sir Derek Rayner. With the Campaign's help, the review rewrites 58,000 forms, making immediate savings of £15 million.

1983

- Plain English Campaign publishes 'Small Print', a report on the gobbledygook used in contracts. The report includes several examples of how a contract can be rewritten in plain English.

1984

- 'Gobbledygook' is the Campaign's first published collection of waffle.
- The Cabinet Office distributes 1700 copies of 'The word is... Plain English', a guide to clear writing for civil servants.

1987

- Plain English has become so successful throughout the Civil Service that the Campaign introduces the 'Inside Write' awards, given solely for internal government communication.

Web of truth

'Plain English' magazine has joined our other publications on the internet.

We put the last issue of the magazine on our website (www.plainenglish.co.uk/magazine.html) so that jargon-busters around the world can read it without having to wait for the post.

In the first two weeks of being on-line, the magazine was downloaded in Germany, the United States, Finland, Denmark, Hungary, Hong Kong, Egypt, New Zealand and India.



On-line... hitting the small screen

'We've always posted the magazine around the world,' founder director Chrissie Maher explained. 'But we've been amazed at how far-flung the new audience is.'

The magazine has been reproduced in a special format that shows the pages in full colour with the same pictures and design as the printed version. This can be saved to disk or printed out. Readers need a common piece of software called

'Acrobat Reader' to view the magazine but, as Chrissie said, this doesn't mean only computer experts can take advantage:

'We put together complete step by step instructions so that anyone can get a free copy of the software straight from the web and read the magazine.'

'Then we tested those instructions on the biggest technophobe we know - me!'

Chrissie was quick to point out that this isn't the end of 'Plain English' as we know it:

'The printed edition will always be there for anyone to get for free - after all it's our shop window. But for someone who remembers selling my own newspaper from door to door in Liverpool, it's mindblowing to think that somebody in Outer Mongolia could decide to read our magazine at 3 in the morning, and print their own copy in a matter of minutes.'

And justice for all...

Plain English supporters across the country have given a crystal-clear message of support to the civil court reforms.

As part of April's complete overhaul of the civil system, courts across England and Wales now use plain English in place of Latin or legalese.

We wrote to 2000 of our volunteers and asked them to spend an hour in a local courtroom to see if the new procedures make the law easier to follow. The vast majority said they had few difficulties keeping track of cases.

One lawyer told us the reforms had done far more than simply replace

certain terms - the new procedures have led to a change in attitudes. Another lawyer was honest enough to admit that his colleagues were delighted to realise plain English could save money!

Plain English Campaign spokesman John Lister said he hoped the reforms would be followed elsewhere:

'This has been a massive step forward, but we need to keep up the fight in Scotland and in the criminal courts. If people can't understand their rights and responsibilities, there is no justice.'



Lord Irvine... reforms

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1988

- A new pack, 'The Plain English Course', allows companies to train themselves in plain English for the first time.

1989

- By its 10th anniversary, Plain English Campaign is being consulted by the majority of major organisations in the country.

1990

- Plain English Campaign launches its Crystal Mark scheme, the only standard of clarity that gives the ordinary public the final say.

- The first plain English international conference is held in Cambridge.

- The plain English voice is heard as the European Commission drops plans to put all medical labelling on a separate leaflet, rather than on the medicine packet.

1992

- The new one year long 'Plain English Diploma' course is launched, allowing companies to have a plain English expert in their company. The first graduate, Terry Denman, now works for the Campaign as a trainer.

- The new corporate membership scheme allows organisations to show their company-wide commitment to plain English.

Open to all : a day in the crystal-clear classroom

Plain English Campaign runs hundreds of training courses each year, but one of the most popular is our regular open course. It's a one-day introduction to plain English writing, giving a taster of how crystal-clear communication works. But what exactly happens on the course, and how do the delegates see the day? 'Plain English' sent John Lister along to take a look.

'Join Plain English Campaign and see the world', they said. 'Rio, New Delhi, Miami...' No mention of Manchester on a Thursday morning. Still, at least I've had an easy journey, unlike one visitor who left Gateshead at 5 am. Now that's what I call a commitment to plain English!

To set the scene, our trainer John Dwyer asks everyone to introduce themselves and explain what they hope to get from the course. As tends to happen on the open course, a wide range of industries are represented, from councils and health trusts to a major bank and an engineering firm.

Most of the delegates are either working on projects to rewrite customer information, or are using the day as a taster to see if plain English can help their organisation. Andrew, from a north-west council, gets the first laugh of the day when he reveals he is '...part of the 'best value support team' - but I've no idea what that means in plain English!'

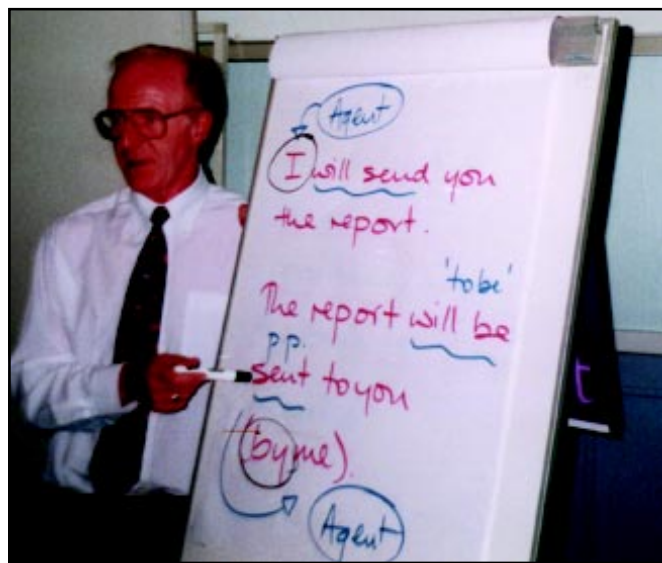
Each trainer has his own way of introducing the course. After running through how Plain English Campaign works, self-confessed 'language anorak' John talks about how the teaching of grammar in our schools has developed. At least one delegate admits to having flashbacks to the days of adverbs and adjectives.

The first practical exercise sees the delegates take a page from a real holiday brochure and try to work out how much a particular holiday costs. (This is similar to the way Plain English Campaign tests documents on the public as part of the Crystal Mark process.)

This part of the course is called 'Is the information as clear as possible?' Needless to say, it isn't. The 15 people in the room come up with 11 different answers. Only Esther, from a major bank, gets the correct figure. As John explains, 'we're all reasonably intelligent people, so the information cannot be clear enough.'

Next is a 163-word sentence from a government notice explaining... well... nobody is quite sure. 'I've read this about 250 times,' John admits, 'and I still don't know what it means!'

It soon becomes clear that John is preaching to the converted on the dangers of gobbledygook, so he moves on to shattering the 'false rules' of grammar. As he explains, many of these are needless restrictions: 'I feel like people are having to write with handcuffs on.'



John Dwyer... getting active about passive verbs

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1993

- Chrissie leads campaigners on a crusade to the United States, protesting in New York and Washington D.C.
- Perhaps the most famous Golden Bull award sees the NHS 'rewarded' for its 229 word definition of 'a bed'.

1994

- 'Utter Drivel', the sequel to 'Gobbledygook', brings together another collection of baffling public information.
- Chrissie is awarded the OBE for her lifetime's campaigning.

1995

- After intense lobbying by Plain English Campaign, an EC directive declares that any term in a consumer contract can only be enforced if it is written in 'plain and intelligible language.'
- Plain English Campaign funds an international team of experts visiting South Africa to advise the new Government on plain English. The team helps draft a plain English version of the Human Rights Commission Bill, proving that legalese is unnecessary.

1996

- 'Into the Light' earns the first ever Crystal Mark for a Bible. The book is a plain English version of the Contemporary English Bible.

One such myth is that a sentence cannot begin with a conjunction such as 'And', 'Because' or 'But'. Though most of the delegates accept John's explanation that such sentences are perfectly acceptable, there is still some reluctance. Ian, from a telecommunications company, explains that 'even now, listening to you saying we can start a sentence with 'And', I can hear my schoolteacher telling me not to. I just can't imagine myself starting a sentence with 'And'.'

John reassures everyone that what they learn on the course are merely guidelines, and that there is no need to follow advice that makes them feel uncomfortable. He explains that the most important point about plain English is to make your writing more human, as if you were talking directly to the reader.

Anne, from an engineering firm, explains that this doesn't always come naturally: 'I've had it drummed into me that you don't write the same way as you speak. The crazy thing is that when we send an e-mail, that's exactly what we do.' As the course breaks for lunch, the group concludes that traditional ways of writing aren't always the most appropriate or effective.

After a few baffling extracts from Golden Bull history give the afternoon session a light-hearted start, the course moves on to passive sentences. John explains that, although the differences between active and passive sentences are somewhat technical, there is a simple way to spot the passive voice: 'In a passive sentence, there usually isn't a human being in sight.' Engineer Adrian is not afraid to admit that his industry tends to use the passive voice to avoid implying any individual responsibility.

During the next topic, developing style guides for letters to customers, hospital trust worker Kay says that systems can often get in the way of common sense: 'It's the environment we work in. I sometimes get reports sent back if they aren't in the bureaucratic style. But with letters, we're writing for the patients, not the management. When they disagreed, I took some of our material out and tested in the community to see what really works.'

Normally the course would finish with a practical exercise, re-writing a letter using plain English. With today's group so enthusiastic, time is running short, so John decides to go straight to explaining Plain English Campaign's rewrite suggestions. He then finishes the day by running through some basic grammar. Although we run a dedicated 'Grammarcheck' course, John covers punctuation on the open course when he thinks it would be useful.

20 years of plain English... 20 years of plain English...

- The Campaign publishes 'Language on Trial', a crystal-clear argument against legal jargon. The book is so well received that the Campaign begins specialised plain English courses for lawyers.

1998

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

1999

- Possibly the Campaign's finest hour comes as the Lord Chancellor's reforms of the legal system see Latin and legal jargon banished from England's civil courts.



Helping hand... John gives some crystal-clear advice

John's explanation of apostrophes seems to go down well. Ann reveals that: 'I've always had trouble with apostrophes, but you've made it much simpler. I'm wondering what I've been confused about!'

There's also a moment of humour when John points to the word 'women' on a list and asks: 'How do we make these possessive?'

'Marry them!', one bright spark replies.

As the course ends, and one lucky delegate wins a Plain English Campaign pencil case, it seems everyone has found the course genuinely useful. One visitor reveals to John that a female colleague had been very sceptical about the course beforehand, yet she was one of the most active participants during the day. The feedback forms, where delegates can give their opinions anonymously, are all positive. One person is clearly still excited by the prospect of splitting infinitives:

'I will now boldly write leaflets with confidence.'

According to John, although the content is the same, every course he teaches is different: 'You get a different group of people every day, and you have to go with the crowd. The worst courses are where everybody is quiet. Sometimes you do a course in an office and everybody clams up because the managing director is in the room.'

The open course is only ever meant to be an introduction to plain English. Although people attending the course will naturally have at least some interest in the subject before coming along, it seems the day is often inspirational as well as informative. As one delegate wrote after the course:

'I need to follow this up - what next? Is there anything else I can do?'

Appetite whetted?

For more details of our training courses, including the open course, please call Helen Mayo on 01663 744409.

Plain English

Coming soon:

Tuesday 19 October: Open course (London)

Wednesday 17 November: Open course (Manchester)

Wednesday 8 December: Plain English Campaign Awards (The

Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, London)

Thursday 16 December: Open course (London)

Thursday 13 January: Grammarcheck course (London)

Congratulations

The following organisations have all earned their first Crystal Mark during 1999:

A: Aberdeen City Council
Acorn Mobility Services Limited

Alliance Pharmaceuticals Limited

B: Bank of Ireland Mortgages

Bank One

Basildon Community Housing Association

Bates Healthcom

Bedfordshire County Council

Blackpool Borough Council

Blick UK Limited

Bridgend County Borough Council

C: Canalside Housing Partnership

Central Recruitment

Cherwell District Council

Coldseal Limited

Colonial First State Investments

Colonnade Direct

Compass Underwriting Limited

Consumers' Association

Co-operative Insurance Society

D: Daewoo Electronics (UK) Limited

David Lloyd Leisure Limited

Dealwise Limited

Dixons Group

Dover District Council

E: East Devon District Council

East Thames Housing Group

Education and Youth

Endeavour Housing Association

Essex County Council

F: Federation of Master Builders

Fleming Pooled Pensions

Forest Heath District Council

Friends Provident

G: Greenwich Hospital

H: Halfords Limited

Hiscox Syndicates Limited

I: Immigration Appellate Authority

Independent Financial Advice Association (IFA)

Inner London Magistrates' Courts Service

Interaction Marketing and Public Relations Limited

ITT London & Edinburgh

J: Jersey Health Promotion Unit

L: Lanarkshire Housing Association

London and Quadrant Bexley Housing Association

Lyons Davidson

M: Mercury Provident

MHC Business Support Limited

Money Advice Trust

Moray Council

N: National Eczema Society

Newcastle Under Lyme Borough Council

Newry and Mourne Health and Social Services Trust

Northern Electric and Gas Limited

Northern Ireland Electricity plc

North Shropshire District Council

North Wiltshire District Council

P: Philips

P & O European Ferries

Protection One (UK) plc

R: Renfrewshire Council

Richard Hale School

Rossendale Borough Council

Rossendale C B Limited

Royal London Mutual Insurance Society Limited

S: Scottish Borders Enterprise

South Derbyshire District Council

Southend on Sea Borough Council

South Oxfordshire Housing Association

Sunworld Limited

Swale Borough Council

T: Tayside Police

Trade Union Congress

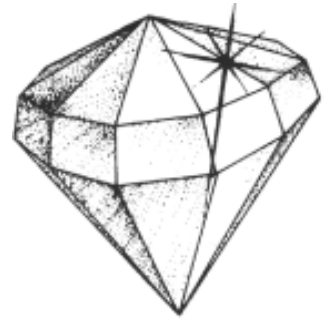
U: UCAS

W: Wellmeadow Nursing Home

William M Mercer

Wolverhampton MBC

Y: York Place Company Services Limited



Plain English Premiership

The top ten Crystal Mark holders (as of this issue):

- 1: **Railway Pensions Management (95 Crystal Marks)**
- 2: **London Borough of Camden (73)**
- 2: **Department for Education and Employment (73)**
- 4: **Pearl Assurance (70)**
- 5: **Axa Sun Life (68)**
- 6: **London Borough of Hackney (66)**
- 7: **London Borough of Southwark (64)**
- 8: **Midlands Electricity Board (57)**
- 9: **Norweb (55)**
- 10: **London Borough of Richmond upon Thames (45)**

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