Introduction

The Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) is the international association for plain-language professionals that promotes clear communication in any language. Our growing network includes plain-language advocates, professionals, and organizations.

Our history

PLAIN began more than 20 years ago as an informal network of plain language consultants. Its core activities have included a biennial conference, an email discussion group and a website. Over the years, it has also produced newsletters and contributed papers and guest editors for several editions of the journal Clarity.

In 2015, PLAIN presented its 10th international conference in Dublin, Ireland. Much has changed since our first event in Winnipeg, Canada in 1995. In those 20 years, communication has moved from the word processor and the web to mobile technology with social media. Plain language methods have evolved alongside this technology. A new generation of plain language practitioners has emerged, and more countries are adopting plain language across more languages and supporting it with new laws.

This document

The PLAIN Board has reviewed the current status of our organization and how it should evolve. Our starting point is the release of this consultation draft of PLAIN 2020, a strategic plan for the organization for the five years from 2016-2020.

The plan sets out our track record, challenges and future goals in six areas:
1 Membership
2 Conference
3 Communication
4 Publications
5 Professional development
6 Finance and governance.

Your say

We have drafted this consultation version of the plan as a starting point for setting our future direction. This means we want to hear from members and others about the proposed new directions before we finalize our goals. We will revise the consultation draft in line with what our members want.

Please give us your feedback by 30 October 2015 in one of the following ways.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Non-members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online survey</strong></td>
<td><a href="https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ZWMzXZ8">https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ZWMzXZ8</a></td>
<td><a href="https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/WBKKW69">https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/WBKKW69</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct email</strong></td>
<td><a href="mailto:plainboard710@gmail.com">plainboard710@gmail.com</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:plainboard710@gmail.com">plainboard710@gmail.com</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In preparing this plan, it has become clear just how much a modest number of individuals have been able to achieve over 20 years. Our final plan will confirm the goals for the next five years, but also set us up for the next 20.
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## Introduction

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Proposed goals for 2016-2020

1. Membership

1. Confirm through a survey what current and additional membership benefits PLAIN should offer.
2. Double membership over the next three years and work toward 1,000 members by 2020.
3. Create a tiered membership to better target benefits for professional practitioners and public supporters.
4. Collaborate with other plain language organizations by offering mutual membership benefits.
5. Double membership from non-English speaking countries from 15% to 30% of members to become more truly international.

2. Conference

6. Take increasing ownership of our biennial conference and standardize the processes for organizing the location, program, promotion and sponsorship.
7. Double the participants that attend our conference from 200-300 to 400-600 per event by 2020.
8. Consider running other events in the years between conferences.
9. Make some conference papers public, but offer extra information to members as part of their membership benefits.

3. Communication

10. Continue to upgrade the PLAIN website so that it better meets the needs of users, targeting both professional members and the broader community.
11. While keeping the Yahoo Forum as an archive, migrate the discussion group to a more contemporary medium that attracts a wider audience.
12. Review options for ongoing engagement with members, such as through e-newsletters and social media.

4. Publications

13. Publish PLAIN’s own online and/or hard copy journal.
14. Develop a series of ‘occasional papers’ to promote debate and research about plain language.
15. Consider funding books or e-books through crowd sourcing.

5. Professional Development

16. Develop and promote our website membership listing and use of our logo.
17. Continue to collaborate internationally in developing the plain language profession.
18. Extend our awards program to provide further peer-based recognition of plain language practitioners and organizations.
19. Develop an advocacy program supporting plain language in member countries.
20. Develop a training program to provide professional development for members.
21. Explore the feasibility of a certification scheme for professional members.
6. Finance and governance

22 Increase the Board’s policy focus and reduce operational responsibilities.
23 Professionalize operations, with paid staff operating from an office and working to standard procedures and an annual plan and budget.
24 Greatly increase annual budget to at least $100k through increased membership, sponsorship and income generated by our activities.

This document

For each of the six areas in this plan, we will begin by listing the above goals and then discuss our:
• Track record
• Current challenges
• Future actions.

Under ‘Track record’, we capture something of PLAIN’s early history, but in many cases focus on our more immediate achievements over the last 5 years.

Under the ‘Current challenges’ sections, we outline some of the key issues that we are facing.

The ‘Future actions’ section then sets out the more specific tasks to achieve our goals, and where possible set some specific targets and timelines for working toward them.

The end of each section lists some questions that members can consider before then taking the online survey or sending us their feedback about this consultation draft by email. With this feedback, we will then revise this document and release a final strategic plan.
1. Membership

1.1 Proposed goals

1. Confirm through a survey what current and additional membership benefits PLAIN should offer.
2. Double membership over the next three years and work toward 1,000 members by 2020.
3. Create a tiered membership to better target benefits for professional practitioners and public supporters.
4. Collaborate with other plain language organizations by offering mutual membership benefits.
5. Double membership from non-English speaking countries from 15% to 30% of members to become more truly international.

1.2 Track record

PLAIN began in 1993, when Cheryl Stephens and Kate Harrison Whiteside established the Plain Language Consultant’s Network to strengthen the communication between plain language practitioners. This network evolved into the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN). Because PLAIN emerged initially as an informal network, its formal membership has always been modest. However, in recent years it has experienced a steady growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total members</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Organizations</th>
<th>Individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Membership tends to increase in the year we hold a conference and can then drop slightly in a non-conference year. But the overall trend over the last 6 years was a gradual increase of around 8% a year. If this trend were to continue, membership would grow by around 50% every 5 years, and would reach around 300-350 by 2020.

1.3 Current challenges

Increasing our membership

Given our modest membership, PLAIN has achieved an enormous amount each year. The first question we must consider is whether we want to grow beyond the status quo.
We could decide to maintain the current rate of growth and continue with much the same set of activities as we now offer. This would largely mean:

- a website
- a biennial conference with some papers published in an issue of *Clarity*
- An electronic discussion group and other social media activity.

However, the current Board proposes to greatly increase the scope of PLAIN’s activities over the next five years in line with a strategic plan. To do so, we will need to significantly increase membership to generate the resources to deliver a wider range of services to members.

**Becoming more truly international**

A major opportunity to increase our membership will be to reach more countries and more language groups.

At first glance, the representation of 21 countries on our membership list looks impressive. The reality is that 10 of these countries have only 1 or 2 members and that 84% of our members come from countries with English as their main official language.

To extend our influence, we will need to find ways of overcoming language and country barriers to become a more truly international association.

### 1.4 Future actions

**Survey members**

Our first step must be to clarify with current members what benefits they see from their membership and what further benefits they would support. We have developed an online survey to confirm what members and potential members want us to work towards in the years ahead.

There are some general questions about the proposed directions at the end of each chapter in this consultation draft. Members can use these to think about their responses before taking the survey at the link provided below. Or they can email us directly at plaintreasurer@gmail.com.

**Promote membership**

With our plan in place, we can then promote our revised mix of member benefits through:

- **social media**: LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook, coordinated by a Board member responsible for social media activity
- **journals and organizations**: with advertisements in professional journals and a presence at relevant conferences
- **traditional media**: television, radio and newspapers.

**Revise membership categories**

Another way to promote membership will be through categories targeting benefits to different members:

- professional memberships for plain language practitioners
- advocate membership for other interested professionals or members of the public
- organizational memberships including corporations, non-profits and government agencies.

A full professional membership would enjoy the widest range of benefits, including access to more information, training and (potentially) certification.
A less expensive advocates membership would come with a narrower range of benefits and draw in people who wish to support plain language but do not need support for their own professional development.

Organizational membership would enable organizations to support PLAIN and receive a mix of benefits available to other member categories.

Under our constitution, all members have equal voting rights and this would not change. But we can tailor membership benefits to different groups to improve our services.

**Collaborate with other organizations**

There is also overlap between the memberships of closely related plain language organizations such as PLAIN and Clarity (the association promoting plain legal language). Some members belong to both organizations, while others tend to be regular members of one. Others also belong to editing, information design, technical writing or usability organizations such as the International Institute of Information Design (IIID), the Usability Experience Professionals Association (UXPA) and the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

While one option for the future might be to consider joint memberships with other organizations, this is likely to be difficult to administer and may not be feasible under our current constitution. However, this does not prevent PLAIN from exploring mutual benefits, such as providing discounts to members of other organizations for conferences.

**Become a more multilingual and international organization**

To become more international, we need to start by recruiting Board members from more non-English speaking countries to help bridge the language and country barriers. Although PLAIN operates in English and will continue to do so, there is no reason it cannot increasingly foster plain language activities in a wider range of languages.

We should also consider models such as appointing country representatives so that a local member becomes responsible for promoting membership and activities in their own country as well as linking to the organization’s own events and activities.

Our proposed target is to double non-English speaking members as a proportion of total memberships from the current 15% to at least 30%. Given our target to double total membership, this represents a fourfold growth in the members who come from non-English speaking countries.

**Questions for members to consider**

- Do you support PLAIN growing in size and in the range of activities it offers?
- What are the main benefits you receive from your PLAIN membership?
- What further benefits would you like to receive from PLAIN?
- In what ways do you believe PLAIN needs to change/improve?
- What annual membership fee would you pay for a more extensive range of benefits?
- Do you support having different membership categories (professional, advocate, organization)?
2. Conference

2.1 Proposed goals

1. Take increasing ownership of our biennial conference and standardize the processes for organizing the location, program, promotion and sponsorship.

2. Double the number of participants that attend our conference from 200-300 to 400-600 per event by 2020.

3. Consider running other events in the years between conferences.

4. Make some conference papers public, but offer extra information to members as part of their membership benefits.

2.2 Track record

Conference history

Undoubtedly, PLAIN’s most successful achievement has been to mount 10 international conferences almost every two years since 1995. While the early events were all held in North America, since 2007 only one has been in North America, with three in Europe and one in Australia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Winnipeg, Canada</td>
<td>More than just language</td>
<td>Est. 90</td>
<td>Est. 10-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Calgary, Canada</td>
<td>Language that works!</td>
<td>Not recorded</td>
<td>Not recorded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Houston, United States</td>
<td>Plain language in progress</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Toronto, Canada</td>
<td>At the heart of communication</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Washington, United States</td>
<td>Adding up the benefits</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Amsterdam, the Netherlands</td>
<td>It’s not what you write. It’s what they understand</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>Raising the standard</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Stockholm, Sweden</td>
<td>Establishing the framework for plain language</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Vancouver, Canada</td>
<td>Plain language advances</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Dublin, Ireland</td>
<td>Clear language, greater efficiency and effectiveness</td>
<td>Over 200*</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Final numbers not confirmed when this consultation draft completed.

Conference benefits

Our conferences have been very important for members to connect, share information and boost their professional knowledge and experience. These events have also contributed significantly to the development of plain language as a profession.

But conference reports from our local partner organizations have also mapped the positive role the events have had in raising awareness of plain language in their host country, such as through high profile participation of government ministers and extensive coverage in the media.
2.3 Current challenges

Striking the right balance of ownership

A major challenge in mounting these events has been PLAIN’s resource constraints. Our solution for most conferences has been to rely on local host organizations to take responsibility for running the event. This meant the local organizations had liability for any financial loss. While this protected PLAIN, it lessened the control we had over each event.

Only since 2009 has PLAIN financially contributed at a significant level to the conference and formalised its relationship with the local organiser through a written contract. Since then, we have taken increased ownership in shaping the program and will continue to do so in the future. For the first time in 2013, PLAIN formally shared conference responsibilities and received a financial return from the conference. In addition to a small profit, we also received extra income from new members.

Our challenge will be to strike the best balance of ownership and control while recognising that we will always need to work with a local partner to run a conference in a variety of countries.

Standardising conference organization

A related challenge in the current arrangements has been limited standardisation of conference organization from one event to the next.

Each conference organiser has largely needed to start from scratch in building a contact database, programming sessions, deciding on sponsorship structures and setting a timetable and administrative processes. There is no standard or ‘template’ or toolkit that captures the experience of past conference organisers in a systematic way.

The conveners of one conference often rely on direct contact with previous organisers in learning about how previous events were run as much as from PLAIN. This reduces efficiency and the effectiveness of conference organization.

Generating more intellectual capital

Our other challenge will be to generate more benefits from our conference by using the intellectual capital each event produces more fully.

At the moment, a few selected papers from the conference are included in an edition of the journal Clarity, which is published by a different organization. Some of the local conference organisers also place conference presentations on an ongoing website after the event.

Part of increasing our ownership of the conference would be to integrate and better co-ordinate this material to the benefit of our members in particular and to the broader public or academic institutions. This could also be an area of exclusive benefit to members that would help to boost our membership base.

We also have scope to strengthen the intellectual capital we generate through further events in between our major biennial conference.
2.4 Future actions

Increase ownership and activities
For the Dublin conference in 2015, PLAIN took a greater role in programming and financing the event. We will continue to increase our commitment in supporting local partners organising our major conference, with a view to increasing the activities of the program.

Our goal will also be to double the size of our biennial event from the 200-300 participant range to 400-600 participants by 2020, in line with our growing membership.

Develop a conference template or toolkit
To succeed in taking greater ownership, PLAIN will need to standardise the steps involved in organising a conference. It could provide a standard template or toolkit to conference organisers, including aspects such as:
• sponsorship model and documents
• promotion (data base)
• programming structure (session types, contacts)
• conference administration (correspondence, chairing, presentation materials)
• reporting and evaluation.

Present extra events
Starting in 2016, PLAIN should also establish an event in non-conference years. This would not (at least initially) be of the size of the biennial conference, and could be an electronic event or a series of individual mini-conferences or seminars in a number of locations.

Over time, we may then move towards an annual major conference. But initially, we would organise some kind of event in non-conference years to maintain our presence and provide further benefits to members.

Publish more of the conference proceedings
We will also start to make more use of the materials that our events are already generating. This will begin by reviewing and consolidating the materials from past conferences to make them more readily accessible.

A dedicated section of our own website would provide links to conference sites that are self-contained, such as the Stockholm 2011 conference site. But for earlier events, we will seek to bring papers and materials onto a single platform, either on our own site or linked to our site.

Managing conference material will enable PLAIN to extract more value from past activities and provide a valuable resource to members in the future.

For future conferences, we would look at making more of the papers and presentations available through a mixture of PowerPoint, video or document files. Some would be available generally and some only to members. Of course, all material we make available would be with the permission of presenters and copyright owners.

Section 4 of this plan on publication discusses this area further.
Questions for members to consider

- Do you support increasing the size and range of activities in our biennial conference?
- What have you found of most value in PLAIN conferences you have attended?
- What can PLAIN most improve about its major conference?
- Do you agree PLAIN should organize other events, such as seminars or webinars, in the year between its biennial conference?
- What format do you think other events should take?
- Would you travel to attend conferences?
- How do you think PLAIN should make previous conference materials accessible?
3. Communication

3.1 Proposed goals

1. Continue to upgrade the PLAIN website so that it better meets the needs of users, targeting both professional members and the broader community.

2. While keeping the Yahoo Forum as an archive, migrate the discussion group to a more contemporary medium that attracts a wider audience.

3. Review options for ongoing engagement with members, such as through e-newsletters and social media.

3.2 Track record

The two most common ways that PLAIN has communicated with its members have been its website and listserv discussion group.

Listserv

PLAIN established an email discussion group in November 2001 using the Yahoo groups platform. This was the year before LinkedIn launched, three years ahead of Facebook and five years before Twitter.

The listserv proved to be a mainstay activity of PLAIN for the next decade, providing an invaluable resource for members and non-members to discuss issues, ask questions and engage in debate.

The track record in recent years has been as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of members</th>
<th>Active members</th>
<th>Number of messages per year</th>
<th>Cumulative messages on archive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>594 subscribers</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1,750</td>
<td>11,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>646 subscribers</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>2,300</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>185 members</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>16,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>177 members</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>18,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>226 members</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>19,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>208 members</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>Around 20,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2011, PLAIN restricted access of the forum to members after a 3-month trial period. It also reviewed the email addresses of its 646 subscribers and found that more than 250 were in fact obsolete addresses.

So while the drop in ‘subscribers’ from 2010 to 2011 seems significant, it in fact reflected a more accurate count. The number of forum participants and messages represents a more reliable figure of activity. Here, we have witnessed a sharp decline in 2014 that needs some consideration.
Website

PLAIN’s other major activity has been its website, which has provided member information, general materials about plain language and information about its conferences.

The website underwent a major redesign in 2008, when the membership listing was converted to a database rather than through manual recoding. In 2012, we again refreshed the site and its content. PLAIN has again relaunched its website in 2015 in time for the Dublin conference, with significantly updated design and content. The new site is also mobile responsive and set up to gather statistics about usage.

Social media

PLAIN established the Twitter account @PLAIN_Lang_Int in July 2011 in the wake of the Stockholm conference in June of that year. Its activity since then has been:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tweets</th>
<th>Retweeted</th>
<th>Favorited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 (June)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This track record in many ways mirrors other areas in that it increased in conference years, particularly surrounding the event, but then drops off in non-conference years. However, in 2015, there has been a concerted effort to increase activity and post more regularly. The account is attracting 2-3 new followers per day and had 533 followers in June 2015.

A positive feature of the account has been a high ratio of retweets and favourites, meaning that PLAIN tweets gain greater circulation than their initial reach.

While the overall reach of the account remains modest, it is similar to that of Clarity (established on Twitter October 2010: 186 tweets, 426 followers). But it has potential to grow considerably.

3.3 Current challenges

Updating and maintaining the website

Even if PLAIN members decide not to proceed with all proposed elements in this consultation draft of our strategic plan, a website will continue to be a core part of PLAIN’s activity.

The main challenge we face is the same as it has been all along: having sufficient resources for a volunteer member or Board member to regularly update the site to make it current, engaging and interactive.

PLAIN has also been solving the technical aspects of the website to maximise functionality but make the site accessible for volunteer administrators to update it without having advanced IT skills or requiring external assistance.
Migrating the listserv

While the Yahoo listserv was innovative at the time PLAIN established it, there has been a virtual revolution in social media in the last decade and the platform is no longer attracting the engagement it once did.

Our greatest challenge will be in choosing the right platform to fulfil the same function as the listserv. The main options would include LinkedIn and Facebook, but we should also consider future developments to maximise the time that the chosen platform remains viable.

Another challenge will be that we have 14 years of posts to the Yahoo listserv and some 20,000 individual messages. These are a great record of some lively and valuable discussions between members, capturing many of the issues that plain language has wrestled with over a crucial time in its development. There are also valuable insights and answers from professional to questions posed on a wide range of topics.

While moving the discussion group to another platform, we need to find some way to preserve this material and make it accessible to members who may want to search for a particular topic. As plain language evolves, this may also prove to be a valuable archive for future researchers.

3.4 Future actions

Strengthen our social media presence

With our limited resources, we should continue to focus on Twitter as our primary social media platform. We already have a presence on this platform and it is growing steadily.

Over the next five years, we should also explore other social media platforms, such as:

- LinkedIn
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- YouTube.

The initial step will be to survey members about their social media preferences to help us decide which other platforms to move into and what kind of information they might want to post or receive. For example, it may be that we establish a YouTube presence for presentations about plain language from conferences or other events.

Migrate the forum

The Yahoo forum has now clearly passed its best years as a platform with the rise of other social media options. There are two key decisions we need to make:

- what alternative platform to adopt
- what to do to preserve the archives and make them accessible.

As with social media, our first step should be to survey members about which platform they would prefer and whether it should be a closed or open group. For example, the Editor’s Association in Canada operates a very successful Facebook page, but it also has a more restricted ‘backroom’. The LinkedIn group Plain Language Advocates has attracted much of the discussion that typically occurred in the PLAIN Forum, and it has a much larger membership.
The key question will be what distinguishes a PLAIN discussion list, regardless of platform. It might be that it is a member only platform or has a particular focus. It might seek to be more international and cross language in its content. A starting point will be to gauge what members support.

The next question is whether to continue the existing email forum. In many respects, this is the easiest option for those that wish to retain this function to contact other members. It would also enable members to access the existing archive of discussion, which dates back many years.

If we were to shut down the Yahoo forum, we would need to preserve this archive and ensure that it remains accessible. That could prove to be a complex exercise technically and it would need to be handled carefully to manage privacy concerns. This simplest alternative is to retain the Yahoo forum and archive but move more of our discussions to other social media platforms.

**Improve the website**

Much of the groundwork for the website has already been done in 2015, so the site will be an effective platform for the next five years.

With the new infrastructure and design in place, the focus over this strategic plan will be on content. We can strengthen the site through new or revised content such as:

- regular updates on the Home page
- links to social media feeds
- improved membership page and listing
- updated resources and links
- inclusion of extra resources from previous conferences
- expansion into publications discussed in section 4 following.

**Boost member engagement**

The final area to consider is whether a more regular communication with members would be of value, such as through a newsletter. Again, the main challenge in doing so is the resources required to write this material when the time commitment of Board members is already challenged.

It would be worth surveying members about whether a newsletter would be of value or whether they feel there would be sufficient engagement through social media and the upgraded website.

**Questions for members to consider**

- How do you currently receive information from PLAIN and what means would you prefer to receive information in the future?
- What information or functions would you like to see on the PLAIN website?
- If PLAIN were to move its discussion group from the current Yahoo forum, what platform do you think it should move to? (Facebook, LinkedIn or others)
- To preserve the archive of previous forum discussions, should PLAIN retain the existing Yahoo group or preserve the content in some other way?
- Do you agree that PLAIN should continue its focus on Twitter as a means of sharing information, or should it participate in other social media channels such as Facebook or YouTube?
- What value do you see in receiving a regular newsletter on top of social media contact?
4. **Publications**

4.1 **Proposed goals**

1. Publish PLAIN’s own online and/or hard copy journal.
2. Develop a series of ‘occasional papers’ to promote debate and research about plain language.
3. Consider funding books or e-books through sponsorship or crowd sourcing.

4.2 **Track record**

Despite facilitating considerable intellectual capital over its 20-year history, PLAIN has a modest track record in publications.

**Clarity journal**

Our main outlet for publication has been to contribute to special ‘PLAIN conference’ issues of the journal *Clarity*, which is published by the international association promoting plain legal language. These issues of the journal have been:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Related conference</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Guest editor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Washington, 2005</td>
<td>55, May 2006</td>
<td>Dr Annetta Cheek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Amsterdam, 2007</td>
<td>59, May 2008</td>
<td>Christine Mowat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Sydney, 2009</td>
<td>62, November 2009</td>
<td>Dr Neil James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Vancouver, 2013</td>
<td>72, November 2014</td>
<td>Dr Deborah Bosley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship with Clarity has been valuable and mutually beneficial. However, if PLAIN is to grow and offer more benefits to members, taking control of the publication of its conference materials will need to be part of future planning.

4.3 **Current challenges**

**Generating the resources for publication**

At our current level of income, PLAIN will not be able to increase its publication activities. Even to take ownership of a biennial set of ‘conference papers’ would incur costs in editing, design, printing and distribution. This is why it has been of mutual benefit to PLAIN and Clarity to publish a selection of papers in Clarity’s journal.

So our first challenge is finding the money for publications.
Making the most of our expertise

On the other hand, if we solve this financial hurdle, we are well placed to publish a wide range of quality materials related to our activities.

The most obvious source will be from our conference, as currently only a few papers are published in Clarity and presentations made available on the conference websites. There is no reason that a more comprehensive set of proceedings cannot be generated from each event.

PLAIN could also act as a conduit to publication for its members through publication of a journal and series of occasional papers that does not solely rely on its conference. We would need to review the channel (hard copy or electronic) and format (journal, proceedings, papers) as a first step.

4.4 Future actions

Publish a PLAIN journal

The first major step proposed by this plan is to publish an annual or biennial journal, drawing from articles and presentations by members. This would provide a dual benefit for members in providing them with more sophisticated information about their field as journal readers and an opportunity for their own professional development as contributing authors.

The journal could be funded through a combination of:

- conference fees
- membership fees
- subscription fees
- sponsorships
- advertising.

We could begin with a first issue based on conference papers emerging from the PLAIN 2015 conference in Dublin, likely to be published in 2016. Depending on resources, that might then become an annual or biennial publication, with a view to moving to annual publication by 2020.

It is likely that the journal would be solely electronic, perhaps with the option for a hard copy version at an extra cost for those that wish to receive one.

Consider a series of occasional papers

A journal would focus on articles of 3,000-5,000 words, with some shorter information pieces about developments in the profession.

But if PLAIN is to increase its leadership role, it might also consider a series of longer publications with the scope to explore research topics and greater length: 6,000-12,000 words. These need not be tied to a particular period of issue but emerge as finding and other resources are available.

While several of our members have published article and book length works about plain language, there would be value in fostering works in between these lengths to strengthen the skills and knowledge base of our members and the status of plain language as a discipline.

Occasional papers may also be another way to promote plain language in languages other than English. While it would be difficult to publish a journal in a range of languages, PLAIN may be able to foster publication of texts about plain language for different language communities.
Assess the feasibility for a book publishing program

Of course, the most challenging option for publication would be to facilitate full length works of 40,000-60,000 words and above. These might be general works about plain language, perhaps related to any training programs that PLAIN develops.

Here it is more likely that PLAIN would need to work in tandem with existing book publishers, such as academic publishers that work with professional and academic associations in publishing conference proceedings.

But it may be feasible to raise sufficient resources for a book length work through crowdsourcing sites such as Pozible or dedicated book publication sites such as Unbound.

Questions for members to consider

- Do you support PLAIN establishing its own journal?
- Do you support PLAIN publishing a series of occasional papers on plain language?
- Should future PLAIN publications be mostly online or a mixture of e-publishing and hard copy?
- What do you think would be the best way to fund a publishing program?
- Do you have any suggestions for the content and types of publications PLAIN should pursue?
- What type of publications would you value as a member?
5. Professional development

5.1 Proposed goals

1. Develop and promote our website membership listing and use of our logo.
2. Continue to collaborate internationally in developing the plain language profession.
3. Extend our awards program to provide further peer-based recognition of plain language practitioners and organizations.
4. Develop an advocacy program supporting plain language in member countries.
5. Develop a training program to provide professional development for members.
6. Explore the feasibility of a certification scheme for professional members.

5.2 Track record

Web listing

One of PLAIN’s longstanding benefits to members has been a listing on our website. This provides a useful contact point for members wishing to contact each other and for anyone looking for a plain language practitioner in a particular region.

In recent years, we have not actively promoted this benefit, either to members or to those who may be seeking a plain language practitioner. There is further potential to develop this area as a member directory to help practitioners seeking professional opportunities.

International developments

PLAIN has always been engaged internationally with other organizations. The most common example is our longstanding collaborations over our conferences. We commonly work with Clarity by promoting its events and providing content for its journal. We have co-hosted events with a range of organizations such as the Center for Plain Language and the Plain English Foundation, and supported initiatives such as International Plain Language Day.

At the 2007 PLAIN conference in Amsterdam, a plenary session explored formalising this kind of cooperation to advance plain language as a profession. This led to the formation of the International Plain Language Working Group (IPLWG), with membership from PLAIN, Clarity, the Center for Plain Language and a further six individuals from different countries and languages.

The working group published an options paper on strengthening the profession through:

- a common definition
- plain language standards
- research
- training
- certification
- institutional structures
- advocacy.
The PLAIN conference in 2011 devoted several sessions to these areas and PLAIN formally surveyed its members to help inform the working group’s efforts. PLAIN remains an active member of the working group, which is looking at formalising an international federation.

One initiative to emerge from IPWL discussions was the IC Clear project, which developed a first university curriculum and qualification for plain language in Europe. Several PLAIN members contributed to the project and PLAIN itself served as a consulting organization.

However, this strategic plan represents an opportunity for PLAIN to consider pursuing directly some of the measures explored in the 2010 options paper, particularly in training and certification.

**Awards**

PLAIN began to publicly recognise the outstanding contribution of senior practitioners in our field in 2007 at the Amsterdam conference with two ‘international achievement’ awards. This was later renamed the Christine Mowat Award in honour of PLAIN’s longstanding President.

The awards we have presented to date include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Conference</th>
<th>Recipients</th>
<th>Award</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 2007 | Amsterdam  | Joe Kimble, United States  
                   Mark Adler, United Kingdom | International Achievement Award |
| 2009 | Sydney     | Robert Eagleson and Peter Butt (joint award), Australia  
                   Christine Mowat, Canada | International Achievement Award |
| 2012 | Stockholm  | Barbro Ehrenberg-Sundin | Christine Mowat Award |
| 2013 | Vancouver  | Cheryl Stephens, Canada  
                   Kate Harrison Whiteside, Canada | Founders Award |
|      |            | Martin Cutts, United Kingdom | Christine Mowat Award |

### 5.3 Current challenges

**Developing options for training**

The most immediate way that PLAIN could extend its contribution to professional development would be to provide training to members. However, there are two major obstacles we would need to overcome: resources and intellectual property.

We may be able to raise enough funds to develop, for example, online training courses and recoup some or all of the costs through fees from members who took such courses. The major issue is who would develop materials on behalf of PLAIN and where the intellectual property would be vested.

A related issue would be what language we provided training in. It is likely that we would be restricted to English, at least initially. But we would need to consider how we might service other members, either directly or by collaborating with organizations in particular countries.

**Considering certification**

Beyond training, there is also significant potential for PLAIN to become the body that takes on certification for plain language practitioners, something that the International Plain Language Working Group has labelled as ‘down the track’ because of the issues it presents.
The survey of PLAIN members on the options paper in 2011 revealed strongly held yet differing views about certification, so there would not be universal support for moving in this direction. As with training, there is the question of who would develop and oversee the certification process, and how it would be funded.

Comparable organizations such as the societies of editors already have certification schemes, but they are working with a much larger membership base. Others, such as the Society for Technical Communication, have wrestled with certification on and off for decades.

Any action that PLAIN takes in this direction would need to be slow and cautious.

## 5.4 Future actions

### Develop the web listing, logo use and member directory

The easiest initial action to foster the professional status of members is to make more of our membership listing and logo. As the organization grows, there will be increasing value in being a member—particularly if we establish a ‘professional’ member category.

We would upgrade the membership listing but also actively promote it as a means of finding a plain language practitioner, much as the Society of Editors in Australia release a ‘Membership Directory’. This includes extra information about the type of work that a practitioner is available for and something briefly about their skills and experience. Members could elect whether to provide this extra information and may pay an extra fee for this benefit.

Other professional organizations also allow members to display the organization logo to indicate that the practitioner is a recognised member. This is usually done under a licence in line with set conditions. While these would need careful consideration, this is a standard practice for many organizations and one PLAIN ought to introduce.

### Expand an awards program

There is also an opportunity to expand our awards to bring greater recognition to plain language practitioners and organizations. At the moment, our biennial awards tend to be given to a senior practitioner to recognise a significant contribution to the profession. We could add an organization award and perhaps other categories.

At the other end of the scale, PLAIN could develop a comprehensive award program at an international level much as the WriteMark Awards (New Zealand) and ClearMark Awards (United States) do. But this would require significant resources that are likely beyond this five-year plan. A more modest increase in our awards program is a realistic target.

### Strengthen international advocacy

Another area to continue will be our contribution to the International Plain Language Working Group and any formal federation it evolves into. Our membership in these bodies will continue.

However, PLAIN in the next five years is looking to play more of a leadership role in promoting plain language in countries that are still pioneering it. This is in line with the strategic direction to increase membership from countries and languages other than English.

For example, we could prioritise holding conferences in countries that are relatively new to plain language as a means to help increase awareness and encourage adoption. This has worked even in countries such as Australia when the PLAIN conference was held in Sydney, and it will certainly give plain language a push in Ireland.
Provide training for members

Providing training for members could be a major focus for PLAIN in the next five years. We should do so firstly by exploring ways to collaborate with existing initiatives, such as the IC Clear curriculum or the courses being offered at Simon Fraser University in Canada.

Another option would be to develop some of our own materials, or to supplement available courses by running webinars and offering other blended learning programs.

The starting point would be to survey members about the kind of training they are interested in and the ways they would prefer to access it. It may be that we simply extend our conference programs with dedicated professional development workshops at varying levels. It may be we add some webinars throughout the year rather than set up a dedicated online course. We might also set up a mentorship scheme so that emerging practitioners can benefit from the experience of others.

But if our member survey confirms there is an appetite for training, this would become a major benefit for members and a means to help us grow in the years ahead.

Explore options for certification

The most ambitious area to consider is whether PLAIN fully takes up the mantle as a professional association and offers formal certification for its members. It could do so alone or perhaps reciprocally with national bodies (such as in Sweden) where certification is already in place.

This is a large task and would almost certainly take us beyond the five years of this strategic plan. But it is a long-term goal we ought to assess.

As with other areas of this plan, a survey of members about certification would be our starting point. If there is enough support, we can then review the systems and methods available for certification, and research the experience of organization such as the Institute of Professional Editors (Australia) or the Society of Technical Communication (United States).

Questions for members to consider

- Do you agree with PLAIN expanding its member listing into a directory?
- Do you support making available the use of its logo to members?
- Do you support PLAIN expanding its current award program?
- Do you support PLAIN expanding its efforts at an international level to promote plain language?
- Would you participate in dedicated training events if PLAIN were to offer them?
- What kind of training would be of use to you and what ways would you like to receive it (online, webinar, face-to-face)?
- Do you agree that PLAIN should explore offering certification of plain language practitioners?
6. Governance and finance

6.1 Proposed goals

1. Increase the Board’s policy focus and reduce operational responsibilities.
2. Professionalize operations, with paid staff operating from an office and working to standard procedures and an annual plan and budget.
3. Greatly increase annual budget to at least $100k through increased membership, sponsorship and income generated by our activities.

6.2 Track record

Although not visible to most members, in recent years PLAIN’s organizational structure and governance has been subject to considerable work, which has laid the foundations for the future.

Legal entity

One of our most important achievements has been establishing PLAIN as a legal entity incorporated in Canada. There are considerable challenges in establishing a formal entity that operates internationally.

PLAIN became incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in 2008. To do this, we clarified our objectives, and decided on a structure for membership and decision making. These were reflected in PLAIN’s articles of incorporation and governing by-law.

Incorporation provided the foundation for PLAIN to grow, to recruit established plain-language professionals to serve as directors, to seek funding for programs, and to develop into a strong international organization. And it was a great way to celebrate the organization’s 15th anniversary.

At the 2009 AGM in Sydney, PLAIN members elected the first Board under the new by-laws. The by-laws were further amended at the 2011 Stockholm AGM to strengthen continuity in Board membership. The 2010 and 2012 AGMs and Board elections were online, enabling members from all over the world to take part.

Standing committees

To streamline its work, the PLAIN Board established a structure of standing committees in 2013, including committees for the Conference, Communication, Governance and Membership. Each committee was chaired by a Board member but able to bring in other members.

Updated by-laws

In 2012, the Canadian government passed a new law requiring all existing not-for-profit organizations to completely revise their by-laws within two years to conform to the new law. This required intensive review of the legal requirements before rewriting PLAIN’s articles of incorporation and by-law. The revised documents were approved by members at the 2014 AGM, held in Toronto, and accepted by the Canadian government.
Careful financial management

An important achievement over the past 20 years has been PLAIN’s careful management of its modest finances, as the following table summarises.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Net assets at start of period</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Spending</th>
<th>Net result</th>
<th>Net assets at end of period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>$10,116</td>
<td>$3,417</td>
<td>$3,570</td>
<td>($153)</td>
<td>$9,963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>$9,963</td>
<td>$6,327</td>
<td>$13,311</td>
<td>($6,984)</td>
<td>$2,979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>$2,979</td>
<td>$6,214</td>
<td>$4,025</td>
<td>$2,189</td>
<td>$5,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>$5,168</td>
<td>$14,505</td>
<td>$11,567</td>
<td>$2,938</td>
<td>$8,594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>$8,594</td>
<td>$10,730</td>
<td>$4,819</td>
<td>$5,911</td>
<td>$14,017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>$14,015</td>
<td>$45,232</td>
<td>$48,115</td>
<td>($2,883)</td>
<td>$12,135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>$12,135</td>
<td>$15,665</td>
<td>$7,380</td>
<td>$8,285</td>
<td>$20,475</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From 2009, when PLAIN began to contribute financially to its conference, its expenses tended to exceed income in the conference year. However, it recovered in the year following the conference. In spite of these ups and downs, PLAIN’s net assets have continued to grow modestly over time.

Since 2008 when PLAIN was incorporated, the Board has engaged an auditor to conduct a financial review and report to our members each year. PLAIN is not legally obliged to do this because its annual budget is small. However, the Board chooses to have an annual review to assure our members that PLAIN’s financial management is sound and transparent.

6.3 Current challenges

Evolving the Board focus

PLAIN’s Board of Directors is made up of experienced plain-language professionals from a number of countries. Board members serve as volunteers and are responsible for all aspects of the organization’s operations.

While Board members are generous with their time, they are all busy people. It can be difficult for volunteers to manage large projects, like designing a new website or keeping it up-to-date. It may also be difficult for volunteers who don’t have specialized knowledge to manage projects that require legal drafting, marketing, IT, or other specialized skills.

The Board has sometimes been successful in finding members who can provide support in some of these areas – and we appreciate the efforts of all volunteers. But members’ time can also be constrained.

PLAIN’s financial resources have grown enough to allow the organization to contract professionals for short-term projects, such as redesigning the web site, and reviewing the revised by-law. Our challenge is to find the resources to allow PLAIN Board members to step back from hands-on responsibility and focus more on the policy direction and oversight of the organization.

Developing procedures and planning

To complete the process that started with updating the by-law, PLAIN also needs to develop policies and procedures to ensure decision making is consistent and transparent.
The current information for new Board members comes from the Government of Canada website. An information package tailored to PLAIN would help brief Board members about what is expected.

We also need to ensure that members who take part in the email forum or use the PLAIN web site have information about PLAIN’s policies on privacy, use of information on the web site, forum etiquette, and similar issues.

In the past, PLAIN’s annual activities have been limited and low-cost. However, as we move towards a more professional organization with a variety of activities that require professional expertise, we need to formalise our planning and set clear priorities for spending.

**Increasing our income**

PLAIN’s ability to take on new activities and provide additional benefits for members is constrained by our modest annual income and our reliance on volunteers. We need to identify opportunities to increase our income through such things as – sponsorship, increased membership and/or increased fees, seeking grants for specific projects, or crowd sourcing. Increased income would allow us to move towards a more professional structure.

### 6.4 Future actions

**Increase annual income**

A first priority will be to increase and diversify PLAIN’s income over the next 5 years. Our target is to reach around $100,000 Canadian. This would come from 3 main sources:

- increased membership
- sponsorship
- income generated by activities.

**Move towards a professional structure**

As finances allow, PLAIN would be able to hire professionals for its core activities, including:

- updating the website
- developing training opportunities
- communicating regularly with members
- developing research and funding opportunities.

The Board can then work at a more strategic level to:

- identify priorities to strengthen the organization and better serve members
- develop a strategy to fund and implement these activities.

As the organization grows, we will need to develop the policies and procedures to guide the Board in making consistent and transparent decisions. These would include information packs for incoming Board members. But we should also ensure that members have accurate and up-to-date information about PLAIN’s policies, such as using the web site and social media.
Questions for members to consider

- Do you support PLAIN moving towards paid staff and an office, with the Board’s role becoming less operational and more policy focused?

- Do you agree that PLAIN should work toward increasing its income towards $100,000 Canadian a year over the next 5 years?

- What suggestions do you have for strengthening PLAIN’s governance and management?