



UKMA news

The newsletter of the UK Metric Association
campaigning for a single rational system of measurement

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Focus On People's Concerns! - Science Council

Diana Garnham, Chief Executive of the Science Council, has advised UKMA campaigners to identify their different audiences and to break down the message into bite-sized pieces to address the concerns of each group directly. We should always be asking

- What are people saying?
- What is the problem?
- What inhibits action?

In a talk to the 2006 Annual Conference, she drew on a lifetime spent campaigning on a variety of issues, from being a protester against Cruise Missiles at Greenham Common to

her work with the Medical Research Council and in campaigning to influence legislation on human cloning.

Responding to criticism of the Science Council's reluctance to support openly UKMA's statement in support of completing the metric changeover, Diana pointed out that the Board has 31 members representing autonomous scientific organisations, and it requires unanimity for action. The Board does not oppose the aims of the statement, but it considers it too general on a subject which does not concern them directly, and is not an issue for them. Scientific research is entirely metric, and the Board sees no business case for the Council to commit resources to the implementation of the four proposals in the 'Statement'.

But with metrication in science, she said, there is a good story to tell young people – "Scientists got on with it; now it is done. Why don't you join us and enjoy the benefits?"

Scientists and young people both like the simplicity and logic of the metric system, and we can play to this. Meanwhile, there are

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Showing Us The Way



There's at least one local authority which isn't squeamish about setting an example.

The council in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, gives metric distances on its footpath and cycle route signs. The local populace don't feel deprived of their heritage.

Many of them do feel, however, that their rightful place is in Lancashire. This is a pet issue for some of the metric-resisters, and maybe they would be more gainfully occupied in pursuing that!

What is a Blog?

Following our last annual conference it was decided to investigate the use of a blog to supplement the web site and other initiatives. In this short article we look at what a blog is, how it differs from other means of publishing over the internet, and how it may help us.

The term 'blog' is a contraction of "web log". Its purpose is to give its owner a voice on any topic of interest, and to receive feedback. It is entirely web based, but differs from other web based discussion forums in that the topics can only originate from the owner and responses are only published at the discretion of the owner.

There are many internet companies hosting blogs and offering it as a free service. In this way anyone can set up a blog without setting up a web site or application of their own.

From the perspective of UKMA, a blog offers the opportunity for us to tap into the opinions and perspectives of the "silent majority" on metrication issues. Whilst we are bound to receive hostile feedback from opponents of metrication (which we are not obliged to, and will not, publish) we hope to reach a wider audience, especially young people, who may share our views (or not as the case may be) on the current situation.

Phil Hall

Weighty Words

Appendix 4 (*Weights, Measures and Notation*) of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* currently bears the title *British and American, with Metric Equivalents*.

John Jones raised this inaccuracy with the Oxford University Press, and gained a small victory.

Catherine Soanes, the project manager for OUP's English Dictionaries and Thesauruses, says:

We think that your suggestion of changing the word British to Imperial in the subheading of Appendix 4 of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (eleventh edition) is a good and valid one. We shall implement it when the dictionary is next reprinted.

Focus on people's concerns

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other fields where there is a story to tell.

In cooking, for example, the food writers' web site puts metric in a very positive light; and both topics become attractive to young people.

There are often benefits to breaking down the audience for a campaign and tailoring the message to each group.

Diana cited her own campaigning on cloning, felt to be a turn off for the public, who tend to perceive scientists as untrustworthy. So she focused public campaigning on the issues that concerned the general public.

For MPs, whose postbags overflowed with letters opposed to cloning, it was necessary to deal with those particular arguments.

Science journalists needed yet another approach, concentrating on the science involved.

To deal with this segmented audience, the World-Wide Web is often better than the printer.

Some essential ideas to bear in mind while campaigning are:

- Break down the topic into bite-sized pieces for the different audiences.
- Find other pegs on which to hang the issue, for example pick up on someone else's success.
- Find friends in journalism – all science writers have problems with their editors, and none will want to give up their space to you. But, they may be happy to use your story in their space.
- Avoid negative campaigns (unlike the Greens who have now learned their mistake - they who always said "don't"; you should say "do").
- Exploit divisions, for example both meteorology and marine science have a young/old divide.

Derek Pollard

Little Things Mean Allotments



While many local authorities use metric impeccably in high-profile areas like planning control, the allotments people cling tenaciously to the venerable old rod-pole-or-perch.

Many authorities give their allotment sizes in rods – actually when they say 'rods' they mean 'square rods' just to make things even more baffling.

The rod is, of course, a 'natural' measure because it's the width of the pole to which a team of two oxen were yoked for ploughing. A pair of working oxen is, of course, a common sight in the allotments of England...

Is the allotments section of your local authority still stuck in the Middle Ages? Drop them a line and let them know what you think!

Metric for Health

Two stories concerning schoolchildren in the news this summer.

One is that schools have failed to meet performance targets in mathematics. Another is one that goes on and on – that of the rise in obesity amongst young people.

The government are anxious to get us to take an interest in our health. One important element of this is to get to know our Body Mass Index (BMI), so that we know our ideal weight (which we can control) for our height.

It's a simple enough formula in sensible units, of course – the square of your height in metres divided by your weight in kilograms. But try doing that in feet and inches, pounds and stones!

The National Curriculum still insists on including old units – no wonder the targets don't get met, with confusion reigning!!

PHEW! What a scorcher!

And nobody likes it hotter than newspaper sub-editors and the presenters of breakfast television shows.

These people behave reasonably sensibly for most of the year when dealing with the weather. And then, when summer comes along, they seem to get caught out. Hot weather in July? Whatever next!

Hot weather also makes them reach for the old Fahrenheit temperatures. After all, 100 degrees makes so much more impressive a headline than a number in the mid-thirties.

The trouble is, the weather becomes the subject for a frivolous competition instead of what it's supposed to be, a public service that can sometimes, especially in the extreme conditions we are talking about, be a matter of life and death.

And that's exactly what confusing different units can mean – and it's all too clear sometimes that pundits confuse their Celsius with their Fahrenheit. 100 degrees? It's enough to make your blood boil...

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Bangers in a Mash

Arthur Coppock has been giving the folks at the Ludlow Sausage Company a tough time.

After he reported them to Shropshire Trading Standards for giving prices per pound on their website, they have revised their pricing to give metric priority.

So all their prices are now quoted per 0.454 kg.

Well, it's a start...

Smartgroups to Google

As many of our members will now be aware we changed over from Smartgroups to Google groups for our internet discussion forum.

This change was prompted by a deterioration of the response times of the Smartgroups message handling facility which was a key element of communication for most of our members.

It took a long while to resolve this because the change would inevitably be disruptive and it was important to identify a satisfactory long term alternative that met our needs for security, privacy, varying preferences of individuals, and management control.

Since we have been using Google the response time has been virtually immediate.

So how do the two facilities compare overall?

Firstly, it has to be said that Google groups is not as comprehensive as Smartgroups in terms of the range of facilities. Google lacks document and image sharing, voting and event calendars. However these latter features are not too difficult to implement by other means using our own web site with a members only section. In any case we have only really used the document and image sharing facility to date.

In conclusion the change to Google has been a worthwhile move with most of our members adopting it without any problems.

Phil Hall

Membership

Since the last newsletter was published, we have welcomed the following new members:

- Daniel Campion
- Timothy Faltermeyer,
- Tancred Fergus,
- Jessica Grimm,
- John Howard,
- Ken Light
- Rosalind Mitchell
- Martin Page
- Tony Wilson

Britain's Most Confusing Road Sign?



The Daily Mail has been inviting readers to send pictures of mind-boggling signs to roadsigns@dailymail.co.uk

We think this old favourite – with four different units displayed – would qualify. Except, perhaps, for the very helpful reminder of where you end up if you get it wrong!

This newsletter was produced and edited by me, Rosalind Mitchell.

If you have any comments, or suggestions for inclusion in future editions, please let me know at mitchellrc@btinternet.com

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