

**“The sloppiness of language  
enables others to have foolish  
thoughts” (GEORGE ORWELL)**

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# Diversity in Diction Equality in Action

A guide to the appropriate use of language

## Foreword

Sometimes those whose language has been challenged have claimed that they did not know they were causing offence or that it was just part of everyday banter. Others have expressed uncertainty about the use of language around equality issues particularly as language has evolved. Surprisingly there is no comprehensive guidance from the three commissions responsible for overseeing the implementation of current anti-discrimination law.

Recent high profile cases have demonstrated the need to reaffirm that language that threatens the dignity of others cannot be tolerated.



**If we are truly to demonstrate respect, understanding and fairness, tackle discrimination and exclusion, we need to ensure that the language we use is consistent with those intentions.**



This means not only avoiding words and phrases that offend, but also using language which is inclusive of others. We expect everyone to respect the views and feelings of others, and to

use language that neither offends nor excludes, intentionally or otherwise.

There are varying views both within the trade union movement and society generally about the importance of language as an equality issue. The important point is to be sensitive to the issues, and the possible offence that language can cause. We believe that equal opportunities will be strengthened and easier to achieve if we carefully examine the language we use and the way that we use it, ensuring we treat people as individuals, not merely as members of groups.



This guide will help identify terminology which is broadly acceptable and which promotes best practice and professionalism. The information contained in this guide is intended to help avoid the unintentional offence caused by unthinking use of language and to improve relationships across the whole of our communities.

Getting it right sends an important message about our awareness of equality issues, our respect for individual differences and preferences and our true commitment to an inclusive society.

This guide does not seek to be definitive. There may be disagreement about its content and relevance. The debate will be welcome and hopefully help us towards a common understanding about the use of language.

# 1

## Introduction

**Communication takes many forms. The words we use should give a clear message to everyone we deal with that we value diversity and respect individual differences. Communication is not just about words, however, and we should also ensure that our tone of voice, our demeanour and our body language conveys the same message of inclusiveness.**

All communication has an impact on the recipient, and may be remembered for a very long time. The language used, and the tone in which it is delivered, can have an effect on the recipient's perception of the service and may be repeated to other people. The use of discriminatory, prejudicial or exclusive language whether intentional or not may suggest insensitivity to individual needs and a lack of professionalism and encourages the exclusion, devaluing and stereotyping of groups or individuals. Discriminatory or exclusionary language may impact upon many different groups, identified, for example, by age, disability, gender, race, colour, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

It is important to understand that we may all use discriminatory, prejudicial or exclusive language on occasion. Being challenged about our use of

inappropriate language does not necessarily mean that we are being accused of being racist, sexist, homophobic, and the like. What it does mean is that we need to re-examine our choice of words and be more sensitive to the potential to cause offence to others through the words and phrases we use.

We realise that it may be difficult for some people to learn not to use certain words and phrases which have become part of their everyday vocabulary through their common usage over a period of time. It can be difficult to develop new habits of speech and writing, but it is vital that we achieve this if we are to provide an appropriate and professional service to the public we seek to serve and create a truly inclusive environment in which we can all work free from harassment and discrimination.

**The words we use should give a clear message...**

**...to everyone we deal with that we value diversity...**

**...and respect individual differences.**

We understand that most people want to avoid causing offence, and this guide will help by showing where care is needed. It is not the intention of this guide to condemn people for their innocent use of inappropriate language. However, it is important to acknowledge that words and phrases may be offensive even if they do appear in a dictionary or have been in usage for many years.

**The use of language which creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment constitutes harassment and unlawful discrimination and consequently the deliberate or repeated use of such language may be regarded as gross misconduct.**

The term “political correctness” is often used as an excuse, a criticism or an accusation by people unwilling or unable to take responsibility for their actions. We are not seeking to achieve political correctness. We do want to achieve professional appropriateness.

This guide takes a very broad view of language and its potential impact on employment and customer service. Each section highlights specific issues but there are a number of general points to remember:-

- **This is a guide only and individual wishes should be respected.**
- **Language is naturally dynamic, and is constantly evolving and changing, so this guide will be subject to regular review.**
- **Words and phrases can go in or out of common usage, leaving people unsure about what is acceptable. This means that we all need to be aware of the potential unwittingly to cause offence and to be prepared to acknowledge when we get things wrong.**
- **Negative images about people or groups are often conveyed and reinforced through humour and “office banter”. Poking fun at a particular group may not be intended to be offensive, but may cause offence nevertheless and in any case does little to help promote a positive approach to diversity or a professional image.**

We should always consider whether it is necessary or appropriate to use labels to describe people and we must be also careful not to patronise people by undermining their individuality through reference to our own:-

- “I don’t think of you as being disabled”
- “some of my friends are gay”
- “your being black isn’t a problem for me”
- “you’re just like one of the lads”
- “I’ve promoted the cause of black people more than anyone else I know”
- “I remember when I was young”
- “You might not want to do that at your age”



All communication has an impact on the recipient, and may be remembered for a very long time.

# 2

## Sex and Language

**Sex discrimination is the differential treatment of people on the basis of gender. Discrimination on such grounds is actionable under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975.**

The Act applies equally to men and women, and any guidance on the issue must do likewise. However, there is a predominance of terminology which excludes or degrades women. We should promote positive images of both women and men, internally and externally. This is very difficult if women are excluded by the language used.

Language should reflect the visibility of women both as employees and as service - users to ensure that their contribution is recognised and their service needs identified and met. The way we use language often gives an impression that women do not exist.

### **Gender Neutral Language**

The English language appears to have evolved on the assumption that the world is male. We refer to “the man in the street”, or “manning the phones”, and talk about the “tax man”, “layman’s terms”, “as every schoolboy knows” and so on. Our laws refer to the male gender only, as much of our public language has done until recently. This approach

can make women and their contribution to society seem invisible.

With a little thought and imagination it is easy to ensure that the language we use is not gender specific. Ensure the female gender is not excluded in any reference to people in general. Use “he or she” and “his or her” when referring to no-one in particular. In many cases the text can be rephrased so that it avoids reference to either gender. For example, references to “he” or “she” can be avoided by using the plural “they”, “manning the phones” can be replaced by “staffing” or “covering the phones”, and “manpower planning” by “staff”, “workforce” or “human resource planning”.

Many job titles or roles which are traditionally identified in male terms have better alternatives which are not specific to either gender.

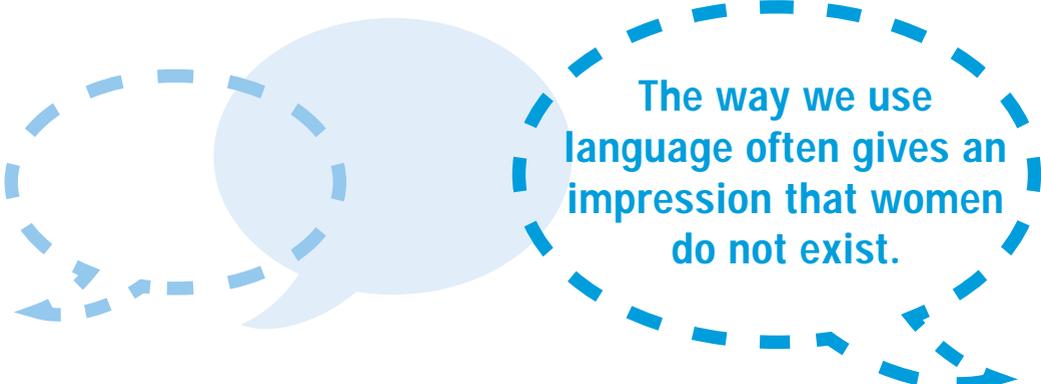


For example, you should use:-

- **police officer for policeman**
- **chair or chairperson for chairman**
- **spokesperson for spokesman**
- **firefighter for fireman**
- **supervisor for foreman**
- **workers for workmen**
- **headteacher for headmaster or headmistress**
- **school student/pupil for schoolboy/schoolgirl**
- **postal worker for postman**
- **actor for actress**

As the number of women in the workplace has increased, an unfortunate convention has developed which adds for example, “lady”, “woman” or “female” to the name of a profession. This implies that the rightful owners of the title are male and that a woman in these roles is something of an oddity and needs to be specifically identified. For example:-

- **lady doctor**
- **woman judge**



The way we use language often gives an impression that women do not exist.

It is also important that such modifiers are not applied to roles occupied by men, such as:-

- male nurse
- male secretary

Simply using the job title is sufficient. If for some reason it is important to identify the gender of the person, following the job title with his or her name will be enough in most cases.

### **Devaluing Terminology**

As with much of language, the terms available to refer to women carry far more overtones and suggestive meanings than those for referring to men. The use of trivialising or degrading expressions is not appropriate.

For example, there are particular issues around the use of “girl”. Adult females should be referred to as women not girls. There is no set age at which a girl becomes a woman, but a reasonable guide is that after 16 she is no longer a “girl”, but rather a “young woman”.

However, adult women are often referred to as “girls” as in “the girls in the office”, for example. Generally no offence will be intended, but we should obviously not refer to adults as if they were children.

The term “lady” is not universally accepted and should not generally be used. The terms “love”, “dear” and “pet” may be considered offensive by some people, especially women, and should not be used. Although perhaps intended as terms of endearment, and sometimes a result of regional language differences, they may serve to devalue and/or trivialise women and men.



## Forms of Address

The term “Ms” has been labelled as the invention of the feminist movement. However, there is evidence of its use dating back to the seventeenth century, when “Miss” was only used to refer to female children. Today, use of “Ms” by women has become widespread as a preferred title which does not focus on whether someone is married or not.

However, while many women now use “Ms”, others still use “Miss” or “Mrs”. If a woman’s preference is known, it is courteous to respect her preference. If it is not known, the simplest solution is to ask.

It is common for first names to be used when addressing women, in circumstances where men would be addressed by their titles. It is important that the same conventions are followed for both genders. Thus we would refer to “Mr Khan and Ms Taylor” rather than “Mr Khan and Karen Taylor” and to “Councillor Peter Jackson and Councillor Susan Jackson” rather than “Councillor Jackson and Councillor Mrs Jackson”.

A related issue is the salutation used in letters. “Dear Sir” is often considered appropriate when

addressing a person not known to the writer. However, it is discourteous and inconsiderate when the recipient is a woman, because of the implied assumption that her role will be occupied by a man. The solution is simple. “Dear Sir or Madam” (or vice versa) is in very common usage.

### **Lifestyle Assumptions**

It should not be assumed that anyone is necessarily in a relationship at all, in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, or that they are married. If a person is known to be married, “husband” or “wife” is acceptable. If it is not known whether somebody is married, referring to their “partner” is a more appropriate alternative.

Neither should it be assumed that women necessarily have caring responsibilities for children, nor indeed that men don't.

### **Transsexual, Transgendered (Trans)**

A transgendered or transsexual person is someone with a condition called “gender dysphoria”, which means the physical sex characteristics they were born with are wrong for them. Most transgendered people wish to live as a member of the gender with which they identify and they are entitled to do so by law.

For example, if a person who was born female has had her birth sex reassigned as male, then he must be treated and referred to as a man from the moment that he first indicates that he is intending to start “transitioning” (i.e. living in what is for him the correct gender). Transitioning may or may not involve hormonal and, or surgical treatment. Note that a transgendered person who does not have hormone therapy or surgery is still fully protected in their new gender under Sex Discrimination law.

It is important that we should behave courteously and sensitively towards anyone undergoing gender reassignment and that our use of language is guided by the wishes of the person concerned.

# 3

## Race, Colour, Nationality and Ethnicity and Language

Racial discrimination is prejudicial treatment of people on the grounds of race, colour, nationality or ethnic origin. Racially discriminatory behaviour by anyone serves to reinforce prejudicial attitudes amongst others. It also undermines the confidence of the community, particularly black and minority ethnic (BME) people, in our commitment to provide an appropriate and professional service to everyone.

Language is an important expression of and pre-cursor to behaviour. Inappropriate use of language may be regarded as an indication of the insincerity of our commitment to eliminating racial discrimination and promoting good race relations. Few would condone the use of racially abusive words, but language with negative racial connotations also needs to be challenged because its usage can help to reinforce and perpetuate inaccurate racial stereotypes.

### **Ethnicity**

Everyone has an ethnic identity based on shared geography, cultural tradition, language or religion. Using the phrase “people of ethnic origin” suggests that only some groups are “ethnic” and this is

clearly untrue. The expression “ethnic” or “ethnics” used in isolation to refer either to individuals or to sections of the community is unacceptable. The term “minority ethnic” is a more suitable alternative.

Grouping people by ethnic background may not always be useful and can lead to misunderstanding. There are, of course, cultural similarities between some groups of people, but there are likely to be as many, if not more, differences. Making assumptions about an individual’s needs on the basis of their ethnic and cultural background may cause problems, because in addition to potential stereotyping, assumptions can result in a failure to address needs appropriately and effectively.

In circumstances where it is necessary to refer to someone’s race or ethnicity, and you are uncertain about the terminology to use, ask them how they wish to be described.



**Language with  
negative racial  
connotations  
also needs to be  
challenged**

## **Black**

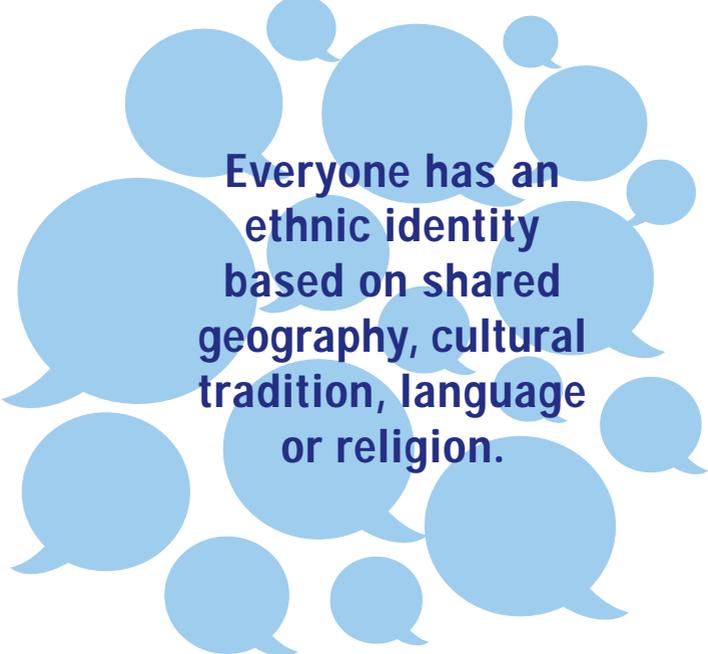
The term “Black” is often used in a political sense to include all people who share a common experience of discrimination because of their race, colour, nationality or ethnic origin. Others take “Black” more literally to mean someone with very dark skin. Some people of Asian background find the term offensive when applied to them, while other people will not wish to be called “Black” because of its political connotations.

In most cases there is no objection to “Black” being used as a description, but it should be as an adjective: “a Black person” or “the Black community”, not as a noun as in “Blacks” or “there’s another Black”.

## **Asian**

It is generally appropriate to use the term “Asian” or “British Asian”. However there may be circumstances where it might not be acceptable to make broad references to groups, or to identify people together as Asian.

Asia is a vast continent, incorporating many countries, so the term “Asian” is not very specific. People of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin, for example, may prefer to be referred to as such rather than by the broad term “Asian”. On the



**Everyone has an ethnic identity based on shared geography, cultural tradition, language or religion.**

other hand, “South East Asian” may be a more appropriate term to describe Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese people, all of whom may prefer to be identified separately.

### **West Indian, Afro-Caribbean, African Caribbean**

The term “West Indian” was used in this country as an all-encompassing phrase to describe first generation settlers from the Caribbean. It is an historical term and although still used in some circumstances (for example, the West Indian Cricket Team) in most contexts it is inappropriate and may be found offensive.

Both “Afro-Caribbean” and “African-Caribbean” are used in official documentation to refer to Black

people. However, they may well be offensive to people who were born in Britain. The term “Afro-Caribbean” is generally now deemed to be unacceptable even though it continues to be in fairly common usage. The term “African-Caribbean” may be used, but only when referring to specific geographical origins. Otherwise, “Black” is a more appropriate term to use.

### **Mixed Ethnicity, Mixed Race, Dual/Mixed Parentage/Heritage**

These terms describe people who are of mixed ethnic origin. Some people may prefer to identify themselves as “Black” or “White” or according to their cultural or ethnic origins, rather than some sort of mixture. When describing or recording ethnicity, “mixed ethnicity”, “mixed ethnic group” or “mixed ethnic origin” are the most appropriate terms and should be used in place of “half caste” which should be avoided. There are varied opinions about the acceptability of “mixed race” and “dual/mixed parentage/heritage”. They are not inappropriate as such, but are less well accepted and may offend some people.

### **Non-Visible Minority Ethnic Groups**

There are many groups which fall under this heading, a few of the most obvious where inappropriate language is often used have been

identified. It is unacceptable to use terms such as “Paddy”, or “Mick” to refer to Irish people or “Taff” for Welsh or “Jock” for people from Scotland. It must be stressed that this does not mean that individuals may not choose to answer to these names. Likewise, “Yidds” is an unacceptable term to describe Jewish people, while terms like “Spick”, “Dago”, “Argies”, “Krauts” and Wop” are also unacceptable.

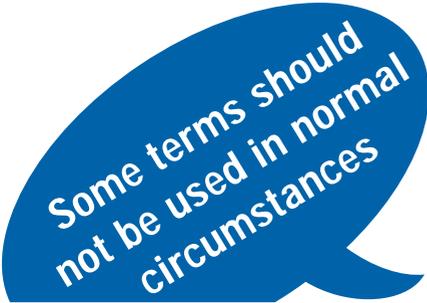
### **Gypsies and Travellers**

Of the 200,000 to 300,000 travellers in England, by far the largest group are Romany Gypsies, who have been in England since the early 16th century. Romany Gypsies and Irish travellers, who have been travelling in England as a distinct social group since the 1800s, are each recognised

in law as separate racial groups. It is inappropriate to refer to Gypsies or travellers as “Gippos”, “tinkers” or “pikies”.

### **Immigrants**

This term is commonly applied to people from ethnic minorities. They are rarely if ever used to describe those white migrants who relocate with their jobs or businesses.



Some terms should not be used in normal circumstances



People can be correctly described as immigrants, if they have just moved from another country. However, people from many different minority ethnic groups have been settled in the UK for long periods, and most were born here. The term can therefore be misleading and inaccurate, and should be avoided.

The term “migrant worker” is enshrined in European law to denote anyone who is working in a country other than their country of origin. However, the terms “migrant” and “economic migrant” are often used inaccurately to describe asylum seekers and should not be used in this way.

### **Unacceptable Terminology**

The following are terms which have highly racist overtones. Historically, they originate from outdated social theories about Black people, are extremely offensive and should not be used in normal circumstances:-

- **Negro**
- **Nigger**
- **Coon**
- **Wog**

## **Paki**

Although an abbreviation of “Pakistani”, this term has for many years been used as a term of abuse. It is therefore extremely offensive and should not be used. The term also tends to be used generally for Asian people, irrespective of their national origins, such as Indian or Bangladeshi. There are other similar abbreviated terms for national or ethnic origins, for example “Chinky” and “Itie” which are intentionally derogatory and should not be used.

## **Coloured**

Historically “coloured” has been used to emphasise not only the difference, but the unequal status of people from minority ethnic backgrounds in relation to white people. “Coloured” was also used by the South African apartheid regime to classify those who were neither “Black” nor “White”. None of us are “colourless” and the concept of “coloured” is rather meaningless. This term should not be used.

In the United States the term “people of color” (American spelling) has become quite commonplace. However, this is not generally accepted in Britain for similar reasons to the term “coloured”.

## Non-white

Referring to “non-whites” classifies people only by their exclusion from the “white” group and should be avoided. It is better to refer to the specific ethnic group if known, or to “people from minority ethnic groups” or “people from minority ethnic backgrounds”.

## Language and its Connotations

Many words and phrases, whilst not offensive in themselves, carry heavy negative connotations. It is therefore important to avoid certain terms which use “black” to portray negativity. Terms such as:-

- **black sheep of the family**
- **blacklist**
- **black mark**
- **black looks**

have no direct link to skin colour, but potentially serve to reinforce a negative view of all things black.

Equally certain terms imply a negative image of “black” by reinforcing the positive aspects of “white”. For example, in the context of being above suspicion the phrase “whiter than white” is often used. “Purer than pure” or “cleaner than clean” are alternatives which do not infer that anything other than white should be regarded with suspicion.

Similarly the term “play the white man” implies that neither Black people nor women are fair and honest. “Play the game” or “be fair” are more neutral alternatives.

However, it is perfectly acceptable to use “black” to describe colour as in:-

- **black bin bag**
- **black shoes**
- **blackboard**
- **there it is in black and white**
- **do you take your tea/coffee black or white?**

# 4

## Disability and Language

**The language and terminology generally used for disability and to describe disabled people communicates an overwhelmingly negative message. It is important that we use language to communicate a more positive image of disability.**

Both potential and existing disabled employees need to know that their skills and abilities are valued. For service providers, the language used should convey a respect for the rights of disabled people. It is important to inspire confidence that people's needs are properly understood and will be met in a way which affords independence and dignity.

Awareness of disability issues is slowly improving in Britain, including the use of more appropriate language, but there is still confusion over the best way of referring to disabled people. It is also important to remember that everyone is an individual and care should be taken when "labelling" or making assumptions about an individual's abilities or disabilities. We should take care not to assume that everyone from a particular group or with the same medical condition is the same.

Indeed some people may not even consider themselves to be disabled. For example, a

Deaf person using British Sign Language may regard this as a linguistic issue rather than one of disability.

The following section explains some of the background and nuances of some terms currently in use.

### **Disabled People**

This term is advocated by the British Council of Disabled People's Organisations and the Disabled People's Movement. It recognises that people are disabled more by society than by their impairment. Since the emergence of the disability rights movement, use of this term has come to signify solidarity with the collective identity.

### **People with Disabilities**

This term has historically been considered positive, because it emphasises people with impairments are first and foremost people. However, while it is unlikely to cause actual offence, it has been rejected by the Disabled People's Movement in the UK.



Care should be taken when "labelling" or making assumptions about an individual's abilities or disabilities.

## **The Social Dimension of Disability**

The Disabled People's Movement prefer the term "Disabled People" as this reflects an understanding that functional limitations arising from disabled people's impairments do not inevitably restrict their ability to participate fully in society. It is environmental factors (such as the structure of a building, or an organisation's practices), which restrict a disabled individual's ability to participate fully in society. Society, therefore, "disables" the individual and it is as important to consider which aspects of an organisation's or body's activities create difficulties for a disabled person as it is to understand the particular nature of an individual's impairment.

## **Handicapped**

Many disabled people regard "handicapped" as offensive because of its strong historical associations with mental defectiveness, permanent incapacity and dependency. It also suggests inability to succeed in a competitive environment.

## **People with Special Needs**

In most cases there is generally nothing particularly “special” about disabled people’s needs. We all have different, specific needs. However society has not equipped itself to accommodate everybody’s needs as a matter of course, so alternative provision often has to be made. This phrase may offend some people as it may be perceived as patronising.

## **The Disabled, the Blind, the Deaf**

Using terms like “the disabled” and “the blind” tends to dehumanise people, identifying them in terms of their physical condition. They group together people who have no connection with each other, other than that they share a physical condition. If it is necessary to refer to a physical condition it is better to say, for example, “people with a hearing impairment” or “people with a visual impairment”.

## **An Arthritic, an Epileptic, a Diabetic**

A person is not an impairment. Using this kind of label again tends to dehumanise people by implying that a medical condition is the single most significant fact about someone. If it is relevant

to refer to a medical condition it is better to say “a person with epilepsy” or “people who have diabetes”, for example.

### **Deafness**

People who use equipment to improve their hearing (e.g. hearing aids or amplifiers) are known as “people with hearing loss”. People who lose their hearing completely, especially in adult life, are “deafened” or “deaf”.

**It is important to inspire confidence that people’s needs are properly understood and will be met in a way which affords independence and dignity.**

People who are born with no hearing and who use British Sign Language are “Deaf” with a capital “D”. Deaf people are a community in their own right. They have their own culture and most do NOT consider themselves as disabled or as having a disability. However, because of their communication support needs their rights are protected under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

### **Dumb**

The word “dumb” has acquired associations with a lack of intelligence so should be avoided. If someone is unable to speak then it is preferable to use the term “people with a speech difficulty” or “people with non verbal communication” or “people who use verbal communication aids”.

### **Mental Handicap**

The reasons for avoiding the term “handicap” are explained above. Some people also confuse mental disability with mental illness. It is preferable to use the term “people with learning difficulties”. People with learning difficulties do not have mental health problems as a consequence of their disability, although they are as prone to mental illness as anyone else.

## **Mental Illness**

Some people confuse learning difficulty with mental illness which can affect anyone irrespective of ability. Mental illness can take many forms and there are several terms which might be used, such as referring to someone as having a “psychological”, “emotional” or “behavioural difficulty”.

People can suffer stigma from their experience of emotional and mental health. More acceptable terms are “people who use mental health services” or “people who experience emotional/mental distress”. Words such as “mad”, “crazy”, “brainstorm”, “mental”, and “loony” can cause offence.

## **Other Common Phrases**

Many words and phrases commonly used in relation to disability create a view of disabled people as helpless, dependent and limited, such as “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair-bound”. If wheelchairs are restrictive, it is because we live in an environment built for non-users of wheelchairs. An effective and accurate alternative term is wheelchair-user.

It is also common for words and phrases to be used to refer to disabling conditions which imply that a great deal of pain and suffering is involved, for example:-

- **crippled by polio**
- **afflicted with epilepsy**
- **suffering from spina bifida.**

These emotive terms emphasise the supposedly tragic nature of a disability and identify the individual solely through his or her physical condition. This portrayal of a person as a victim, crippled, afflicted and suffering, is more likely to inspire pity than confidence. Some disabled people will suffer as a consequence of their disability, but this is not necessarily always the case. If you have to refer to a person's condition at all, it is far better to use neutral terms such as “had”, “has”, or “with”. For example: she had polio, he has epilepsy, or she is a person with spina bifida.

### **Alternative Terminology**

Be careful with new terminology. For example, “physically challenged” has been suggested to replace “disabled”. This spawned a string of spoof terms such as “chronologically challenged” and “vertically challenged”. These terms are not accepted or advocated by disabled people's groups in Britain, and should be avoided.

## Unacceptable Terminology

Terms of abuse in language have origins in negative perceptions of disability. Their use contributes to the negative image of disability prevalent in society, and should not be used. For example:-

- **cretin**
- **spastic**
- **cripple**
- **Mongol**

These were originally medical terms but their meaning has now been greatly devalued. We are generally more sensitive today in avoiding use of such words to describe disabled people, but they have not yet disappeared.

# 5

## Sexual Orientation and Language

**Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people are excluded by language and behaviour which assumes everyone is heterosexual. We all need to be aware that what we say or write may be heard or read by some one of same-sex orientation. We therefore need to use language which is inclusive and will not cause offence.**

There are many words and phrases that are used to refer to sexual orientation in derogatory ways. To avoid any misunderstanding people should stick to using the words lesbian, gay or bisexual, even though they may hear LGB people choosing to speak about themselves differently. Care is needed however. Some women, for instance, may refer to themselves as gay women rather than as lesbians. If you are dealing with an individual, and you need to refer to their sexual orientation, but are unsure, the best guide is to ask politely what word the person prefers and make certain that they are comfortable having this referred to before going any further.

### **Including Women**

On the whole, the word gay can be taken as referring to both men and women, as in the Gay Olympics. However, it is more commonly used to describe

men than women. We have already said that inappropriate use of language can make women less visible than men. Referring only to “gay people” or the “gay community” may have that effect.

When referring to lesbians, bisexual people and gay men, do not use phrases which imply that sexual orientation is a choice. Avoid stereotyping and the use of words that have negative connotations.

### **Bisexuality**

Bisexuality is unlikely to raise any particular considerations for employment or service delivery other than those which affect gay men or lesbians. However, it is important to be aware that people who are bisexual may not wish to be presumed heterosexual, any more than do lesbians or gay men.

### **Homosexual**

People of different generations may use different language to define their sexual orientation. For example, some older people may define themselves as homosexual rather than gay or lesbian. However the word homosexual is rarely used by younger LGB people to describe themselves, and is often seen as derogatory.

# 6

## Religion and Belief and Language

Being sensitive to fellow human beings is fundamental to civilisation. Not everyone defines his or her identity in terms of a religion but all human beings have beliefs and values. The accurate use of language in these aspects of human experience is one way of demonstrating respect for the beliefs of others. We live in a pluralistic society and the principles of inclusion need to govern our speech if we are to promote a sense of well being for all, regardless of their personal decisions about religion.

### **Belief Neutral Language**

For many hundreds of years Britain has welcomed people from many different religions. It is a simple but important mark of respect for others if we use language that is appropriate to them. For example, to ask a Jewish or Muslim person their Christian name makes no sense, but is also highly disrespectful of their beliefs. The use of the terms “forename” or “first name” prevents any misunderstanding and acknowledges that people have different beliefs.

Equally “going to Church” is a specifically Christian practice. Members of other faith communities may use a particular place of worship; for example, the communal place of worship for Jews is the synagogue, for Muslims it is the mosque. However, many others may practise their faith individually or with others in other places, including their own homes.

The use of the Gregorian calendar is widespread, but the terms BC and AD are based upon Christianity. This has led some to adopt the practice of using the initials BCE (before the Common Era) and CE (the Common Era). Some religions also

**Not everyone defines his or her identity in terms of a religion but all human beings have beliefs and values.**



have their own way of numbering the years for religious purposes, but adopt the numbering of the Gregorian calendar for ease of communication with others.

There is much diversity within all the religious denominations and it is almost impossible to assume that all members of a faith community hold similar views or practise in the same way. A good rule of thumb is to think always of “some” rather than “all” members of a particular faith group.

It is important to avoid stereotyping and making assumptions. For example, just as some may describe themselves as Christian on official forms, but not be active in a worshipping community, so some Jews may not be observant within the synagogue or in the home and some who have been born Muslims may not now practise at the mosque.

An understanding of religious issues will enable the use of appropriate terms. For a brief summary of the key beliefs and practices of members of faith communities, see [A Guide to Religion and Culture](#) published by Devon County Council and available at [www.devon.gov.uk](http://www.devon.gov.uk)

Spelling of terms from each of the principal religions can be puzzling. Many of these religions

use different languages (and alphabets) so the spelling of terms specific to a particular religion may vary. Not all letters in an alphabet have a direct equivalent in English and where equivalents have to be created, variations in the English spelling occur. In education, a glossary that was compiled by each of the faith communities was agreed and can be found at [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk). It is recommended that spellings used in that glossary be adopted.

Some words and phrases that have their origins in religions have crept into common usage and are often used in an inappropriate or vulgar way. The inappropriate use of names which are held to be sacred may cause offence to some people so should be avoided.

# Age and Language

**The old and the young often have different perceptions and values, but we are all members of the same society and have the right to be treated professionally.**

The media sometimes portrays young people as beautiful, glamorous and capable, and others as rebellious, unreliable, dissolute and perhaps even criminal, while older people are more often portrayed as conservative, crotchety, helpless and vulnerable. These stereotypes inevitably affect attitudes and expectations of both young and old.

## **Age Neutral Terminology**

Being old in British society carries connotations of being worn out and of little further use. It is even used as a term of abuse.

For example the following terms may offend some people:-

- **granddad, grandma**
- **old fool**
- **old codger**
- **old dear**
- **geriatric**
- **deary or dearie**
- **old biddy**
- **just like an old woman**

Clearly we should not make assumptions about the value of people based on their age. Where it is necessary to make reference to age, it is better



**The old and the young often have different perceptions and values...**



**...but we are all members of the same society.**

to use neutral terms such as “older people” when referring to people. For example:-

- **services for older people**
- **elderly relatives**
- **elders (this term is often used amongst BME communities)**
- **older workers**

Just as language evolves so too do social formalities. Addressing older people, particularly women, by their forename before being invited to do so may run counter to the social norms with which they grew up and so should be avoided.

Equally “youth” has connotations of inexperience, impetuosity, and unreliability or even dishonesty and addressing someone as “boy” or “girl” or referring to the “new boy/girl” may cause offence. Again if it is necessary to make reference to a person’s age it is better to use the neutral “young people” rather than terms such as:-

- **child**
- **kid**
- **youth**
- **youngster**

## Acknowledgments

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## Contacts

For further information about equality discrimination issues please contact your union representative or the appropriate organisation below:

*In the South West contact:*

- **Equality South West**

East Reach House, East Reach,  
Taunton TA1 3EN. Tel: 0182 325 0831  
[www.equalitysouthwest.org.uk](http://www.equalitysouthwest.org.uk)

*In Wales contact:*

- **EOC Wales**

Windsor House, Windsor Lane,  
Cardiff CF10 3GE. Tel: 029 2034 3552.  
[www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk)

- **CRE Wales**

CRE Wales, 3rd floor, Capital Tower,  
Greyfriars Road, Cardiff CF10 3AG.  
Tel 029 2072 9200 Fax 029 2072 9220  
[www.cre.gov.uk](http://www.cre.gov.uk)

- **DRC**

Telephone: 0845 762 2633

Textphone: 0845 762 2644

(You can speak to an operator at any time between 8am and 8pm, Monday to Friday)

Fax: 0845 777 8878

Post: DRC Helpline, FREEPOST MID02164,  
Stratford upon Avon, CV37 9BR

[www.drc-gb.org](http://www.drc-gb.org)

- **Stonewall Cymru**

[www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)

- **ACAS**

[www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

- **Age Concern**

[www.ageconcern.org.uk](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk)

£1.50

### Unison South West

Unison House  
The Crescent  
Taunton  
Somerset TA1 4DU

Tel: 01823 288031  
Fax: 01823 336013  
[www.unison.org.uk](http://www.unison.org.uk)



### Equality South West

East Reach House  
East Reach  
Taunton  
Somerset TA1 3EN

Tel: 01823 250831  
[www.equalitysouthwest.org.uk](http://www.equalitysouthwest.org.uk)



### Unison Devon County Branch

[www.devoncountyunison.org.uk](http://www.devoncountyunison.org.uk)

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### South West TUC

Church House  
Church Road  
Filton  
Bristol BS34 7BD

Tel: 0117 947 0521  
Fax: 0117 947 0523

[www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)



### Wales TUC Cymru

Transport House  
1 Cathedral Road  
Cardiff  
CF11 9SD

Tel: 029 2034 7010  
Fax: 029 2022 1940

[www.wtuc.org.uk](http://www.wtuc.org.uk)



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