

Inclusive Terminology Guide

Practical guidance for respectful, accessible and inclusive communication.

The words we use shape belonging

Language has power. It influences how people feel, participate and experience their place in the world. This guide supports thoughtful choices without letting fear of getting it wrong stop the conversation.

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Ask	Follow	Focus	Learn	Notice
Do not assume	people's lead	on the person	from mistakes	Impact matters

Listen. Learn. Be respectful. Inclusive communication is everyone's responsibility.

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Accessibility note

Headings, plain language, short sections and high-contrast tables are used throughout. The page numbers in this contents list correspond to this edition.

1 How to use this guide

A practical reference, not a list of labels

Inclusive language is not fixed. Meanings, preferences and accepted terms can change over time and between individuals or communities. Use this guide as a starting point, then follow the language a person uses for themselves.

Why inclusive language matters

- It helps people feel respected, recognised and able to participate.
- It reduces avoidable barriers, stereotypes and assumptions.
- It supports clearer communication by focusing on relevant information.
- It strengthens belonging by recognising that people have multiple, intersecting identities.

Five golden rules

1. **Ask, do not assume.** If you are unsure, ask respectfully which term or form of address a person prefers.
2. **Follow people's lead.** Use the language and terms people use for themselves.
3. **Focus on the person.** Mention an identity or characteristic only when it is relevant.
4. **Learn from mistakes.** Apologise, correct the wording and move on.
5. **Intent matters, and impact matters too.** Consider how words may be received as well as what you meant.

When terminology differs

There can be different views within the same community. Respect self-identification and avoid correcting a person's own terminology. Tone and context are as important as the words chosen.

2 Quick guide: do and do not

A summary for everyday communication

Do

- Ask rather than assume.
- Use people's chosen names, pronouns and descriptions.
- Ask preference of *identity-first language (see page 6), such as "Disabled person", or person-first language, such as "person with a disability").
- Describe the access need, barrier or situation accurately.
- Use "we" and "us" where a shared experience is meant.
- Consider intersectionality and context.
- Correct mistakes without making the conversation about yourself.

Do not

- Use labels as shorthand for a person or group.
- Use "normal" as the opposite of a characteristic or condition.
- Use language of tragedy, burden, decline or dependency unless it is the individual's own wording and relevant.
- Make assumptions about capability, behaviour, finances, education, family, health or aspirations.
- Use collective labels such as "the elderly", "the disabled" or "the poor".
- Turn an identity into a joke, metaphor or negative figure of speech.

✓ Recommended	× Terms to avoid
• Disabled people / person with a disability	• The disabled / handicapped
• Neurodivergent person	• Normal / abnormal
• Accessible toilets and lifts	• Disabled toilets and lifts
• Older people / people aged 60+	• Old people / the elderly
• People experiencing poverty	• The poor / deprived people
• People from a working-class background	• Low class / underclass
• Welcome everyone	• Ladies and gentlemen

3 Prejudice, discrimination and intersectionality

Understand how language connects to inclusion

- Prejudice is a negative opinion or attitude formed without sufficient knowledge, fact or reason.
- Discrimination is unfair treatment.
- Exclusion can occur when people are left out or denied opportunities.

Inclusive practice aims to replace these patterns with respect, fairness, understanding, belonging and participation.

Protected characteristics

The Equality Act 2010 identifies nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is the concept that different aspects of a person's identity - such as race, gender, class, and sexuality - overlap and interact to create unique systems of discrimination, disadvantage, or privilege. Consider the whole person and the way policies, services and language may affect people differently.

Inclusive language in practice

Avoid	This policy is age-neutral, so it affects everyone equally.
Use	Review the policy for different impacts across age and other intersecting characteristics.
Why: The same wording or process can create different barriers.	
Avoid	We treat everyone exactly the same.
Use	We aim for fairness and make reasonable adjustments or targeted changes where barriers differ.
Why: Equality of treatment does not always produce equality of access.	
Avoid	That group is vulnerable.
Use	The group may face specific barriers in [context]. The response will address those barriers.

Why: Name the context and avoid presenting vulnerability as an inherent trait

4 Disability, health and accessibility

Describe people and access needs respectfully

Preferences can differ. Some people prefer *identity-first language, such as “Disabled person”, while others prefer person-first language, such as “person with a disability”. Follow the individual’s lead.

✓ Recommended	× Terms to avoid
• Disabled person / disabled people	• The disabled; handicapped; crippled
• Person with a disability or impairment	• Able-bodied; normal person
• Non-disabled person	• Wheelchair-bound / confined to a chair
• Wheelchair or mobility-scooter user	• Midget
• Person of short stature / person with restricted growth	• Sufferer; victim; afflicted by
• Has / lives with [condition]	• Disabled toilet / lift
• Accessible toilet / lift	• The blind; the deaf
• Blind people / visually impaired person	• Brain damaged
• Deaf people / hearing impaired person	

Inclusive language in practice

Avoid	Able-bodied people enjoy seeing the disabled join their club.
Use	Disabled and non-disabled people are actively encouraged to join the club.

Why: The revised sentence uses parallel language and focuses on participation.

Avoid	The new entrance is for wheelchair-bound visitors.
Use	The new step-free entrance is available to wheelchair users and anyone who needs it.

Why: The revised wording focuses on access and avoids language of confinement.

Avoid	She suffers from a long-term condition.
Use	She lives with a long-term condition.

Why: Use neutral wording unless the person describes their experience differently.

Avoid negative metaphors

Avoid phrases that associate impairments with negative behaviour, for example “deaf to our pleas” or “blind drunk”.

5 Neurodiversity

Different, not less

Neurodiversity relates to differences in how human brains work and process information. “Neurodivergent” describes an individual whose ways of learning or working differ from societal expectations. “Neurodiverse” describes a group that includes different neurotypes.

✓ Recommended	✗ Terms to avoid
• Neurodivergent / neurotypical	• Normal / abnormal
• Neurodivergent trait	• Disorder as a general label for the person
• High / low support needs	• High-functioning / low-functioning
• Autistic person or person with autism, according to preference	• Suffering from autism / ADHD
• Person with ADHD	• A dyslexic
• Person with dyslexia	• Everyone is a little bit autistic
• Sensory overload / sensory needs	

Inclusive language in practice

Avoid	Sam is high-functioning, so no adjustments are needed.
Use	Ask Sam what adjustments or support would be useful.
Why: Support needs can vary by task, environment and time.	
Avoid	The instructions are simple, so everyone should understand them.
Use	The instructions are available in written, visual and step-by-step formats.
Why: Offer options rather than assuming one format works for everyone.	
Avoid	Taylor is suffering from ADHD.
Use	Taylor has ADHD and has asked for written follow-up notes.
Why: Focus on the person’s stated need rather than making a judgement.	

Supportive practice

- Be flexible and reduce unnecessary sensory load.
- Avoid assumptions and stereotypes.
- Recognise that masking can be a response to pressure to fit social expectations.
- Use clear structure, explicit instructions and more than one communication format where possible.

6 Age

Capability is individual, not determined by age

Age does not determine capability, technology use, leadership, independence or ambition. Avoid generalisations about any age group and only mention age when it is relevant.

✓ Recommended	× Terms To Avoid
Older people	Old people (ask the audience if possible. A partner organisation SAND suggests Older and Old as defining terms of age)
People aged 60+, 70+ or 80+, when a precise age is relevant	The elderly, unless specifically referring to extreme age or frailty and the term is appropriate
- Children and young people - People of all ages - We / us, where a shared experience is meant	- Youths - They / them as distancing group labels - Young and vibrant team
A person who needs support with [specific task]	Mature workforce
	Frail / dependent as assumed characteristics

Language do's

- Use a specific age range when data or eligibility requires precision.
- Describe the individual need or adjustment rather than attributing it to age.
- Use an ordinary adult tone unless an individual requests a different communication approach.
- Include age-diverse examples and imagery without stereotyping roles.

Language to avoid

- Do not talk automatically in negative terms of decline or dependency.
- Do not assume that an older person needs help, or that a younger person lacks experience.
- Do not automatically speak loudly or slowly unless you know what the individual requires.

- Do not use age in recruitment unless it is objectively relevant.

Inclusive language in practice

Avoid	We need a young and vibrant team.
Use	We are looking for an energetic, collaborative team with the skills to deliver the project.

Why: Describe the qualities needed rather than using age as a proxy.

Avoid	The elderly may struggle to complete the online form.
Use	People who need support with the online form can contact the team by phone or in person.

Why: Name the barrier and provide options without assuming who will need them.

Avoid	The youth will use the new facility.
Use	Children and young people helped shape the new facility.

Why: Use respectful, specific language and recognise participation.

Avoid	At your age, would you rather someone set this up for you?
Use	Would you like support setting this up, or would you prefer to do it independently?

Why: Offer choice without assuming capability.

Remember	Age is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. Inclusive practice should avoid disadvantages and stereotyping at every age.
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7 Poverty and financial hardship

Describe circumstances, not people as a problem

Poverty means not having enough money to meet what society considers a minimum standard of living. Use language that describes the situation a person is experiencing. Avoid making poverty sound like a personal failing or fixed identity.

✓ Recommended	× Terms to avoid
• People experiencing poverty	• The poor
• People on a low income	• Deprived people
• People experiencing financial hardship	• Vulnerable people as a blanket label
• People who cannot afford [specific cost]	• Hard-working families, when it implies others do not work hard
• Households with limited financial resources	• Scroungers
• Cost is a barrier	• Handouts
• Free / low-cost support, where accurate	• Lifestyle choice
	• The needy

Language do's

- Be specific about the barrier, such as transport cost, equipment cost or digital access.
- Use temporary, situation-based language where appropriate: “experiencing financial hardship”.
- Explain eligibility and support clearly without judgement.
- Protect dignity and privacy. Ask only for financial information that is relevant and necessary.

Language to avoid

- Do not frame poverty as a moral failing, lack of effort or lifestyle choice.
- Do not use “vulnerable” without naming the specific risk or barrier.
- Do not divide people into “deserving” and “undeserving” groups.
- Do not assume that people on a low income have the same experiences, choices or needs.

Inclusive language in practice

Avoid	Free sessions are available for deprived families.
Use	Free sessions are available for families who may otherwise be unable to afford the cost.

Why: The revised wording names the financial barrier and avoids labelling families.

Avoid	We give handouts to the needy.
Use	We provide grants to people experiencing financial hardship.

Why: Describe the support accurately and respectfully.

Avoid	Low participation is a lifestyle choice.
Use	Cost, transport, caring responsibilities and access may affect participation. Ask communities which barriers matter locally.

Why: Avoid blaming people and focus on identifying barriers.

Avoid	Hard-working families can apply for support.
Use	Families who meet the eligibility criteria can apply for support.

Why: Eligibility should be described directly, not through a value judgement.

8 Social class

Recognise complexity, context and self-identification

Today's understanding of social class goes beyond occupation or income alone. Social class can be shaped by wealth, education, housing, profession, upbringing, location, accent, cultural interests and social opportunities. These factors can influence identity, experience and a person's place within society.

Does class matter?

- Social class can shape opportunities and life outcomes, including education, health, employment and life expectancy.
- Classism can create stereotypes, bias, discrimination and barriers for people and communities.
- Social class is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, although its relationship with inequality and inclusion is widely discussed.
- Class intersects with race, gender, disability and other identities. Consider the whole person rather than one characteristic in isolation.

✓ Recommended	× Terms to avoid
• People from a working-class background • People from a lower socio-economic background, when this technical description is accurate	• Low class / lower class as a judgement about a person • Underclass
• People experiencing socio-economic disadvantage • People from a low-income household, when income is the relevant measure • First-generation university student, when self-described and relevant	• Chav • Uneducated • Common / rough
• The term a person chooses for their own background	• Posh as a dismissive label
	• Classless

	• Disadvantaged people as a fixed identity
	• Defining class by income or occupation alone

Language do's

- Recognise that social class is complex and shaped by many factors.
- Respect how individuals identify and describe their own background.
- Only discuss social class when it is relevant and necessary.
- Consider how social class intersects with race, gender, disability and other identities.
- Use respectful, empathetic and inclusive language.

Language to avoid

- Do not define social class by income or occupation alone.
- Avoid judgmental, stigmatising or offensive language.
- Do not make assumptions or stereotypes based on social class.
- Do not generalise or dismiss people's related experiences.
- Do not treat accent, postcode, education or cultural interests as proof of ability or fit.

Inclusive language in practice

Avoid	Applicants from lower-class backgrounds may lack polish.
Use	Make recruitment criteria explicit and assess evidence against the requirements of the role.

Why: Avoid turning class-coded expectations into assumptions about competence.

Avoid	She does not sound professional.
Use	The presentation was clear. For this role, assess the content against the agreed communication criteria.

Why: Accent is not a reliable measure of professionalism or ability.

Avoid	They come from a deprived area.
Use	They live in an area that has experienced long-term underinvestment.

Why: Describe the structural context rather than labelling people or places.

Avoid	He is an unlikely leader because of his background.
Use	Assess leadership through relevant skills, behaviours and outcomes.

Why: Do not use social background as a proxy for potential.

Avoid	Our programme helps disadvantaged people.
Use	Our programme works with people experiencing barriers linked to income, transport and access to opportunity.

Why: Name the barriers where known and avoid a fixed label.

9 Sex, gender and gender identity

Use accurate terms and do not assume

Sex, gender, gender identity and gender expression are distinct concepts. Use a person's correct name and pronouns, and do not assume gender from appearance, voice, role or relationship.

✓ Recommended	× Terms to avoid
• Trans person / transgender person • Assigned female / male at birth, when relevant • They / them / theirs when pronouns are unknown	• A transgender • Born female / born male as a substitute for assigned at birth • Assuming she / he
• The name and pronouns a person uses	• Previous names unless the person explicitly asks for them to be used
• Gender-neutral language such as “everyone”, “colleagues” or “parents and carers”	• Ladies and gentlemen as a default greeting

Inclusive language in practice

Avoid	Welcome, ladies and gentlemen.
Use	Welcome everyone.
Why: A neutral greeting includes people of all genders.	
Avoid	What are his or her contact details?
Use	What are their contact details?
Why: Using they or their avoids an unnecessary assumption.	
Avoid	What was your real name?
Use	What name should I use?
Why: A person's current name is the person's real name.	

Pronouns

If a mistake happens, apologise, correct the wording and continue. Avoid prolonged explanations that shift attention onto the person.

10 LGBTQI+ terminology

Use precise language and respect self-identification

LGBTQI+ is an umbrella acronym that can include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex and other identities. Do not assume that one acronym or term suits every person or context.

Recommended practice

- Use the term a person or community uses for itself.
- Use “sexual orientation” rather than “sexual preference”.
- Recognise that gender identity and sexual orientation are different.
- Use “partner” where a person has not specified another term.
- Use “LGBTQI+ people” rather than turning the acronym into a noun.

Terms requiring care

- “Queer” is used positively by some people but may be experienced as offensive by others. Use it for an individual only when that person uses it.
- Avoid outdated or medicalising language. Check current guidance and individual preference.
- Avoid acronyms in public-facing communication if the intended audience may not understand them. Spell out terms when clarity is needed.

Inclusive language in practice

Avoid The LGBTQs use the centre on Tuesdays.

Use LGBTQI+ community members use the centre on Tuesdays.

Why: Refer to people, not an acronym as a collective noun.

Avoid Is that your friend?

Use Is that your partner?

Why: Use a neutral term unless the person has used another description.

Avoid Everyone is straight unless they say otherwise.

Use Do not assume anyone’s sexual orientation.

Why: Heterosexuality should not be treated as the default.

11 Ethnicity and race

Be specific, current and led by people's preferences

Use precise terms that are relevant to the context and understood by the audience. Broad collective labels can hide important differences, so be as specific as the information and purpose allow.

✓ Recommended	✗ Terms to avoid
• People of Colour, where the group uses this term • Global Ethnic Majority, where appropriate to the context	• Ethnic / ethnic people • Non-white as a default description
• Racialised / marginalised groups	• BAME as a catch-all
• Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, when the acronym is understood and appropriate	• Coloured
• East and South East Asian, when accurate • A specific ethnic or national identity chosen by the person	• Oriental • Half-caste • Assuming identity from name, appearance, accent or nationality

Inclusive language in practice

Avoid	We need more ethnic people at the event.
Use	We want the event to be inclusive of people from all ethnic backgrounds. We will work with local communities to identify barriers to participation.
Why: Avoid treating people as a category and focus on inclusive practice.	
Avoid	Non-white communities were consulted.
Use	The report names the communities consulted and records their distinct feedback.

Why: Specificity improves clarity and avoids defining people by what they are not.

Be audience-aware

Some umbrella terms are useful in policy or data contexts but may not be how individuals describe themselves. Explain acronyms and avoid using different experiences in one category.

13 Glossary and further resources

Short definitions and sources of information

Term	Plain-Language Description
Neurodiversity	Differences in the ways human brains work and process information.
Neurodivergent	A person whose ways of learning or working differ from societal expectations.
Neurotypical	A person whose brain generally functions and processes information in ways society expects.
Intersectionality	The concept that different parts of who you are combine to shape how the world treats you.
Gender identity	A person's internal and individual experience of gender.
Gender expression	How a person expresses gender externally, which may include appearance, speech or mannerisms.
Accessible	Designed or adapted so that people with a range of access needs can use or participate.
Classism	Stereotyping, bias or discrimination linked to perceived social class.
Poverty	Not having enough money to meet what society considers a minimum standard of living.
Socio-economic disadvantage	Barriers linked to social and economic circumstances; use only when accurate and relevant.

Sources of information:

- Active Lincolnshire: Inclusive Language Guide
- Active Dorset: Communications and Language Guide
- Reach Out by Community Resource and Embrace: Inclusive Marketing Guide 2025 and Inclusion leaflet
- Shropshire Educational Psychology Service Telford and Wrekin Educational Psychology Service: Neuro-Affirming Language Guide

Energize STW Inclusive Terminology Guide | Updated September 2026

- Activity Alliance: disability language in sport and inclusive communications
- Sport Wales: Inclusive Language Guide
- LEAP Sports: LGBTI Terminology Guide
- The English Federation of Disability Sport: Access for all, inclusive communications guide

Before you publish

You can use this checklist for documents, campaigns, forms, events, social media and everyday communications.

- ☐ Have we asked rather than assumed?
- ☐ Is every identity or characteristic mentioned relevant?
- ☐ Have we used the terms people use for themselves?
- ☐ Have we described barriers and support accurately?
- ☐ Have we removed labels, stereotypes and negative metaphors?
- ☐ Does the wording work across age, disability, race, gender, class and other intersecting identities?
- ☐ Are acronyms explained and examples easy to understand?
- ☐ Is the format accessible, with headings, plain language and meaningful links or alt text?
- ☐ Have people with relevant lived experience had an opportunity to review the content?
- ☐ If we made a mistake, have we corrected it clearly and proportionately?

One final principle

Inclusive language is about respect, fairness and understanding. Do not let fear of saying the wrong thing stop the conversation. Listen, learn, correct and continue.

Review cycle

Terminology changes. We will review this guide annually, involve people with lived experience, and update examples when language or organisational practice changes.

