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Inclusive language guide

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Introduction

Using language, both verbally and written, that is as inclusive as possible is a key part of creating a welcoming environment for everyone. This guide contains general principles, some specific examples and tips to challenge where needed. It is important to remember that language is always evolving, varies across cultures and individual perspectives and that people hold different opinions so there isn't a single 'right' answer. Remember that not all communication is verbal, and look at the person that you are speaking to to see if there are physical indicators that might help you, or to gauge how people are reacting to what you are saying.

Using incorrect or outdated language can perpetuate, contribute to, or cause bias, prejudice and discrimination. It can also be used to justify or worsen existing inequalities rather than working towards eliminating or reducing them. We can all make a commitment to speak to each other with a positive intent and if we aren't sure, ask!

This guide is intended to support our staff in feeling confident in the language that they use when talking to and about colleagues and residents and to improve communication. We have had feedback from staff that they are nervous about saying the wrong thing. Maya Angelou has worded this best - *"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."*

Feedback on, or suggested updates to this guide are always welcome. Our staff networks are a valuable resource and they have fed into this guide. The most important thing is for us all to consider the impact of our language and be willing to learn and adapt - a change in the language that we use may feel like a minor thing for us, but may well make a big difference to help others feel included.

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This guide is only one of a series of tools that we have as part of our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) programme - you can also access our Allyship Guides (add link), our Active Bystander guide and contact our staff networks as well as our EDI learning programme.

This guide covers the nine 'protected characteristics' set out in the Equality Act 2010. They are: race; sex; gender reassignment; sexual orientation; age; disability; marriage and civil partnerships; pregnancy and maternity; religion or belief. We also have a carers' network and carer's scheme to support those with wider caring responsibilities, which will touch on a number of the characteristics. When speaking to colleagues or residents, please use language that is understandable and inclusive by someone who isn't familiar with local authority jargon or department structure.

Language can cause hurt and offence when discussing other personal attributes such as: hair colour and style; weight; height; financial situation; dress sense/style; social background; dietary choices and hobbies and interests as a few examples. A good starting point is to think: 'How would I feel if someone said this to me?'

Race and ethnicity

Race and ethnicity are often regarded as the same thing – both are terms used to describe individuals and groups of people. While there can be overlap between the two terms, it is helpful to understand the difference and how this impacts on inclusive language. 'Race' is often used to group people on the basis of shared physical traits, particularly skin colour and hair texture, and a shared ancestry or historical experience as a result. 'Ethnicity' is more frequently chosen by the individual and linked to cultural expression. The term is used to describe shared cultural or national identity, such as language, nationality, religious expression and other customs.

As a principle that applies to all ‘protected characteristics’, we only refer to people by their race or ethnicity if it’s relevant to the information we are communicating. In those cases we recommend using the following:

- Broad ethnicity: Black, Asian and White, written in uppercase
- Specific ethnicity: Black African, Chinese, Indian, White British, written in uppercase
- ‘Minority ethnic group’, rather than ‘minority group’
- BAME is often used as an acronym for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, used to refer to all ethnic groups except the White British Group. The acronym is problematic as it can offer an assumption that all non-White people exist as a homogenous group without appreciation of the uniqueness of individual races and ethnicities. In Sutton, where we use the term we spell out the initials B.A.M.E (**not** using it as a word as in ‘Bame’ to rhyme with ‘name’) to be clear that it is recognised that this is a broad and diverse group of people and not a descriptive term in its own right. If you are using this term, 'B.A.M.E communities' rather than 'BAME community' or 'BAME People' underlines the fact that we are talking about different communities rather than a single homogenous group. Most councils still use the term ‘BAME’, but agree context is important and sometimes use it combined with gypsy / travellers or white minority ethnic groups to highlight broader institutionalised inequalities.
- 'People of colour' or 'person of colour' is an accepted term in the US, which is also used occasionally in the UK.
- Do not use the term ‘Coloured’ - this word recalls a time when casual racism was part of life and, in the United States, when there was segregation.
- Do not use the term ‘Half caste’ - this suggests something flawed - ‘dual heritage’ or ‘mixed parentage’

is considered more positive and inclusive.

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Sex

Sex is the biological characteristic that is assigned by the doctor present at birth while gender is a set of characteristics that is defined primarily by traits assigned by society, which can change.

When referring to men and women, we have all grown up with gender-based assumptions in our life that can be reflected in the workplace without noticing. Be aware of making assumptions in the language applied to men and women, as this can also affect the perception of how our staff are performing. For example, stereotypical female traits of being supportive, showing warmth and helping the team and for men, getting the job done, taking charge and being independent. It is important to reflect what each staff member has achieved as related to their role and objectives rather than reinforcing stereotypes.

Please also be aware of using gendered language that may exclude colleagues - for example talk about our ‘workforce’, not ‘manpower’. We provide ‘cover’ or ‘staff’, rather than ‘man’ our services. A meeting has a ‘chair’, not ‘chairman’. Avoid using language that promotes stereotypes, for example saying ‘man up’, ‘guys’, or referring to a woman as ‘emotional’, ‘difficult’, or ‘bossy’.

It is also important to understand the differences in life experiences that gender can create based on the expectations of society, culture, feelings of safety or an expectation of a particular way of behaving.

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Gender identity and gender reassignment

Gender identity is the personal sense of one's own gender. Gender identity can correlate with a person's assigned sex or can differ from it.

- Cisgender: People whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth.
- Transgender (or Trans): People whose gender identity does not match, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.
- Non-binary: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely.

Gender reassignment describes the process when an individual feels that his or her gender at birth does not match their gender identity and has either undergone, intends to undergo or is currently undergoing gender reassignment (medical and surgical treatment to alter the body) OR intends to live permanently in a different gender from their gender at birth. 'Transition' refers to the process and/or the period of time during which gender reassignment occurs (with or without medical intervention).

In English, whether we realise it or not, we often use pronouns to describe people. When speaking about an individual , these pronouns can have a gender implied. People can also make assumptions about the gender of another person based on the person's appearance or name. These assumptions aren't always correct, and in order to avoid mistakes, it is becoming increasingly common for people to add their preferred pronouns to their email footer. This means that each individual has the power and the choice to set out how they are referred to - whether he/him, she/her or they/their.

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Using someone's correct personal pronouns is a way to show them respect and create an inclusive environment. All staff are invited to add their own pronouns to their email footer. The more common this is, the easier our colleagues will find it to share their pronouns.

The language around sex and gender identity is evolving constantly and it is important to understand the difference between them. Where it is not clear what, if any, gendered pronouns or nouns are appropriate for an individual, ask and respect their wishes.

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Sexual orientation

When talking about sexuality, we use the term ‘sexual orientation’, not ‘sexual preference’. We mention sexuality only where and when it is relevant to the context. For example, recruitment initiatives designed to increase applications from individuals belonging to sexual or gender minorities, for example lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or any of the other LGBT+ orientations a person may identify with. Bear in mind that the LGBT+ acronym covers people with a range of sexual orientations and, as a result, this is not automatically a homogenous group.

Do not assume a person’s sexuality when talking about personal relationships. You can refer in a neutral way through the use of non-gendered terms. For example, ask someone if they have a ‘partner’ instead of boy/girlfriend, husband or wife.

If in doubt, ask someone their preferred term and respect their wishes. Some individuals may now use terms to describe themselves, whereas the same term may offend an individual from the same community. The aim should be to make everyone feel included, not ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Age

It is important when referring to colleagues, or when advertising a job role to only include age if it is relevant, for example, with initiatives that are only available for a particular age group(s). Don’t use age as a means to describe an individual or group where it is not relevant, such as asking for a specific length of experience, referring to a ‘mature workforce’ or ‘young and vibrant team’. Actively avoid ageist terms such as ‘elderly’, ‘OAPs’, ‘pensioners’ or ‘youngsters’.

It is also important to reflect on different experiences that our workforce and residents will have lived based on the decades that they grew up in - the internet became more readily available in the mid-nineties, so colleagues growing up since then will have experienced the impact of social media from a young age. We can all learn from each other and appreciative enquiry is helpful in doing that.

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Disability

Language should not define a person or group according to their disabilities or conditions. It is more appropriate to use language that focuses on their abilities, rather than limitations. Where you offer help or assistance, ask what help is needed rather than for details of a person's disability.

Use 'person first' terminology in language. For example, say 'people with disabilities' as opposed to 'disabled people' or 'the disabled'. Avoid phrases that suggest victimhood when speaking about disability, e.g. 'afflicted by', 'victim of', or 'suffers from'. Instead, say 'somebody lives with a condition (for instance Dementia), or simply 'somebody is hearing/visually impaired'. Mental health diagnoses like bipolar or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) are conditions with serious impacts so don't use them to describe everyday behaviours. Also, the majority of people with a disability are not wheelchair users, so be mindful of the images and icons you use in written documents. Be aware of non-visible 'hidden' disabilities such as diabetes or chronic fatigue, as well as 'neuro-diversity', which describes people with conditions such as dyslexia, aspergers, and autism for example. Where you can, use an image specific to the disability you're discussing unless discussing disability in general where it is best to use the widely accepted wheelchair symbol.

- When talking or writing, use terms such as: 'Person with a disability'; 'People living with cancer'; 'People with diabetes'; 'Wheelchair user'
- When talking about facilities, talk about: 'Accessible toilets'
- Do not use terms such as: 'Diabetics'; 'Wheelchair-bound'; 'Suffering from cancer'; 'Victim of dementia' or 'Able-bodied'; Phrases or terms that make light of disabilities like 'blind/deaf to (something)', 'lame'.
- Although the proportion of people with a disability in work is lower when compared to the whole population, do not assume somebody with a disability is not working.

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Mental health

Everyone has mental health and the ways in which we experience it are unique to each of us. Again, using person-centred language reflects this sensitivity and avoids positive or negative labelling. The way that people are described should not define them by a condition.

- When talking or writing, use terms such as: 'Mental health conditions'; 'Mental health problems'; 'People with anxiety'; 'A person with depression'; 'A person with a mental health condition'
- Do not use terms such as: 'Mentally ill'; 'mad'; 'crazy'; or 'bonkers'.

Marriage and civil partnerships

Marriage and civil partnership means someone who is legally married or in a civil partnership. Marriage and civil partnership can either be between a man and a woman, or between partners of the same sex. Our staff must not be discriminated against in employment because they are married or in a civil partnership.

An example is that you should not ask a prospective employee if they are married or in a civil partnership in a job interview. Regardless of the reason behind the questions and what your views are, this line of questioning can amount to discrimination as it may imply that you think, for example, a married person is more reliable and committed than a single person, or that a married woman might be planning to have a baby.

When discussing relationships with colleagues, particularly if you do not know them very well, do not assume that they are married or single and try to use terms like 'partner' rather than husband or wife, or Ms rather than Mrs or Miss for a woman. Please be aware that some people may use Mx as a title for those who do not identify as being of a particular gender, or

for people who simply don't want to be identified by gender. This is pronounced to sound like mix or mux.

Pregnancy and maternity

Considerations around this characteristic should also be considered in relation to the sections around sex and marriage in this guide. Pregnancy refers to being pregnant or expecting a baby. Maternity refers to the period after the birth, and is linked to maternity leave in the employment context. In the non-work context, protection against maternity discrimination is for 26 weeks after giving birth, and this includes treating someone unfavourably because they are breastfeeding. Adoption leave covers the same time period. Paternity leave is taken when a partner's having a baby, adopting a child or having a baby through a surrogacy arrangement. Shared parental leave is when partners share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay in the first year after their child is born or placed with their family.

It is important to make an effort to communicate with all staff members on maternity, adoption or shared parental leave to keep them informed about what is happening in the workplace and to discuss their return to work with them, to help them with the adjustment of looking after a baby/child while working. It is also important to avoid making assumptions about how committed they are to their job and how keen they are to progress their careers as the parent of a young family.

Managers will need to bear in mind the schedule of parents with young children when booking meetings. Good communication will help to establish what works for the whole team when scheduling meetings - please be aware of commitments for all parents and carers around school drop-off and pick-up and respect childcare commitments.

Those with wider caring responsibilities

There is a legal obligation to respect and support those with caring responsibilities. Employers cannot treat carers less favourably than other people who do not have caring

responsibilities. The Equality Act 2010 protects a person who experiences discrimination because they are associated with someone who has a disability. For example, it would be unlawful if the partner of someone who has cancer was refused a career opportunity because of concerns that they would be unable to give sufficient attention to the job). It also allows reasonable adjustments to be requested for caring responsibilities. There is also a right to a 'reasonable' amount of unpaid time off work for unplanned caring responsibilities.

There is also a human element and a need for us all to show awareness and improve understanding of issues facing those who are juggling work whilst also caring for a disabled family member, or someone seriously ill, plus those issues facing working parents. Again, good communication by managers with their teams will help to support our carers.

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Religion or belief

While religions have their origins in certain parts of the world, it would be incorrect to assume people whose ethnicity originates from those countries observe the same religion or any religion. Similarly, a person's religious belief cannot be assumed by their name.

The extent to which followers of different religions observe or express their faith is personal to them and we do not condone challenging individuals on their faith or lack of.

Only refer to people's religion if it's relevant to the information being communicated. In those cases, use the following guidelines:

- Say 'First name, forename or given name', not 'Christian name'
- Names of religions and religious groups take an upper case
- Groups of individuals from the same religion should be referred to as a community, such as members of the Muslim community or Jewish people

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Practical guide to inclusivity

'Language' is not just spoken or written.

- It can include body language such as eye contact or hand gestures; this can give away what you are thinking, or give an impression that you are expressing a view even if you are trying to use inclusive language, for example rolling your eyes.
- Any images used must be respectful - avoid depicting certain groups in a stereotypical way, make sure we reflect the diversity of our organisation and borough, and represent communities in inclusive ways.

Being inclusive and accessible in your communication

- Use language that is clear and easy to read - the onus is on the communicator to use words, expressions and phrases that will be understood - not to show how educated or official you are.
- Not everyone will have learnt English as a first language or have grown up in the UK. Avoid communication that relies heavily on cultural references that not everyone may understand. You may even find the person you are talking to speaks an additional language that could help with other residents you are trying to communicate with.
- Be aware of and consider the impact of using expletives in a professional working environment.
- There is no 'one size fits all approach' to communication. You will need to consider who you are speaking to, the tone and formality of the situation in communication with colleagues and residents. Do not refer to groups of people who are not present in a derogatory way.
- In meetings, aim to hear every attendee's voice. If appropriate, ask individuals who haven't spoken for their view or invite them to comment.

Take some time to think before you speak...

- Have I put myself in the other person's shoes and considered the impact?
- How can I help others to be confident and inclusive in their choice of language?

- Can I use positive reinforcement/ micro-affirmations to ensure inclusivity in my language?
- Am I confident that what I'm about to say won't cause offence?
- Have I assumed because someone is laughing along they are ok with it?

Challenging inappropriate behaviour or language

It can be difficult if someone uses language that is not in line with the principles set out in this document. You will need to choose how and when you challenge this in a way that works for you. In an uncomfortable situation, the only person you can control is yourself (how you react, how you manage your own emotions and how you communicate). Often people's behaviour may be directed to you but may not be about you. They may be articulating their own discomfort or problems, although this does not make it feel any less uncomfortable. In addition to this section, which gives sources of follow-up support, our 'Active bystander' and 'Uncomfortable conversations' learning offers advice and tips.

Immediate challenge

Decide whether you would like to challenge in the moment, in which case, the following phrases may be helpful:

- "Stop!" When you tell a person who is being rude towards you to stop, sometimes they actually do!
- Or you can try saying "I'm feeling very uncomfortable with this conversation. I want to work with you/help you/talk about this, but I can't do it like this".
- Or you can say, "I really want to talk to you, but I can't work or think while you're ….".
- Or you could say, "This language is not OK because…"
- Or "These terms haven't been used since the seventies/are really outdated. Now we say…"
- Or "We don't do that around here, we do this…"
- Or "Is everything alright? I am concerned about …. because…."
- Or you might want to take it offline: "Could we please have a private chat? I've noticed… that different times when you ask me to do something you say it with (reflect

back words and tone and say whether it is in front of others). When this happens... I feel .... What I'd like is...".

If, on reflection, you wish you had said something or now wish to say something, you could go back to the individual and ask for a mutually convenient time to talk or contact one of the follow-up sources of support listed at the end of this guide.

When having a conversation to challenge:

- Keep calm: Express yourself in a direct and clear way. Don't retaliate by using threatening language or behaviour.
- Be specific: Providing details will help to keep the conversation on track. Be very clear when describing the situation, reflecting back what you have heard.
- Explain how the situation has impacted others: Put the situation in perspective by clearly outlining the impact the behaviour is having on those around them. Often people don't consider how others are affected by their behaviour. So, addressing this head-on can sometimes help people see the consequences of their ways.
- Ask how they feel: Give the other person an opportunity to think and talk about how the situation makes them feel. Aim for direct answers and get clarification if they aren't making sense. By getting them to talk about it, they have the opportunity to communicate their point of view. Understanding this will help you learn how to work with them.
- Take time to think about what you want to achieve from the conversation and what you are looking for in the conversation: Are you asking for an apology? A recognition that inappropriate language has been used? What will help you both move on together? Might this change as you have a conversation?

Follow-up sources of support are available from:

- Your manager
- A colleague
- Staff networks
- Domestic abuse champions
- HR
- Your trade union representative
- Employee Assistance Programme (EAP): Workplace Options is a confidential, independent, expert provider of employee support services paid for by the Council to help you balance your work, family and personal life. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year by phone, email, online and via instant messaging. Their experts can provide practical information, fact sheets and packs, referrals to services in your local area and short-term counselling.
  Workplace Options is available to all London Borough of Sutton employees and their immediate family household members. If you wish to speak to someone in confidence, whether work or personal, just call Freephone 0800 243 45 or www.workplaceoptions.com (Username: Sutton, Password: Employee)