

Inclusive Language Guide

Supporting best practice in Healthcare Improvement
Scotland Communications

November 2021

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1. Introduction

The words we choose when we write and speak are powerful. Careless use of language can cause offence and imply that we are making assumptions about people. Inclusive language is respectful and helps us to value people for who they are. We should be aware of the language we use and the impact it has. It is about more than just knowing a list of acceptable words. This guide aims to give you confidence in using inclusive language when communicating and create a more inclusive environment for everyone. The guide will:

- support your conversations, whether they are spoken or written
- provide a standard way to express concepts, spell words and format phrases
- ensure consistent use of language in Healthcare Improvement Scotland publications and communications
- encourage productive conversations about inclusivity
- increase confidence across the organisation in how to talk about a range of equality related topics

It is important to remember when using this guide that there is not always one correct term to use - there is usually more than one way of saying something. If you have concerns about language that others are using, you can:

1. Speak to your line manager to try and resolve any issues
2. Contact our Equality and Diversity Advisor Rosie Tyler-Greig at rosie.tyler-greig@nhs.scot or 07929025815
3. Contact HR on his.hrunit@nhs.scot
4. Contact a Staff Side representative.
5. Use Healthcare Improvement Scotland's Whistleblowing Policy.

Document review

This guide has been created in collaboration with Healthcare Improvement Scotland's Equality and Diversity Working Group and staff equality networks. It will be reviewed and updated every 6 months, or more often if required. If you have any queries, comments or suggestions, please contact his.contactpublicinvolvement@nhs.scot

What to do if you use the wrong language

This document is a guide, not a policy, and everyone makes mistakes. Recognise and own your mistake. Apologise and correct yourself if you use the wrong language. Move on from your mistake and seek out further training or guidance if needed.

2. How to speak about protected characteristics

2.1 Age

General Principles

- Avoid referring to someone's age, unless it is relevant to what you are writing about
- Be accurate about who you are referring to. For example, 'people over 70' is different from 'people aged 70 and over'

Terms

We use	Meaning	We don't use
Babies	People aged 1 year and under.	
Children	People aged 12 years and under.	Kids
Young people	People aged between 12 and 17 years and, in some cases, up to the age of 26.	Teenagers / Teens
Adults	Anyone over the age of 18 years.	
Older people	People over the age of 65.	Old people The aged

2.2 Disability

General Principles

- ‘Disabled people’ is the term advocated by and used within the UK Disabled People's Movement. The term is associated with the [Social Model of Disability](#) which says disability arises because society is not designed to accommodate people who have impairments. The term ‘people with disabilities’ has been rejected because it sits within the ‘medical model’, which says people are disabled by their impairment or difference which should be ‘fixed’ by medical interventions.
- When speaking about **specific** disabilities you should put the person first. This avoids defining people in relation to their disability and prevents dehumanising labels being attached to entire groups of people. For example, use ‘people with cancer’ instead of ‘cancer patients’.
- Not all people who are protected by the Equality Act under ‘[disability](#)’ would describe themselves as disabled. Avoid descriptors that assume Deaf people, autistic people and people with long-term conditions are disabled.

Terms – Disability in general

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
Disabled (person / people)	A person or people who have impairment/s or differences which are not fully accommodated in society and who experience barriers in their daily lives.	When referring to people who are disabled per the Equality Act 2010 definition or who have self-identified as disabled during an involvement or engagement activity.	<p>People / person with a disability - this has been rejected by the UK Disabled People's Movement in the UK in favour of ‘disabled people’.</p> <p>The disabled – this term is dehumanising as it identifies a group in terms of their (possibly very diverse) impairments or differences.</p> <p>Handicapped – this is generally regarded as offensive given the historical association with defectiveness, incapacity, dependency and inability to succeed</p>

			in a competitive environment. Physically / mentally challenged – these terms are limited and have not been accepted by UK disabled people’s groups.
Non-disabled person / people	Not disabled	When describing differences between disabled people and non-disabled people.	Able bodied – this implies that disabled people are not active individuals with control over their own lives, so ‘non-disabled’ is preferable.
Unpaid carer/s	Unpaid carers provide care and support to family members, friends or neighbours. The people they care for may be affected by disability, physical or mental ill-health, frailty or substance misuse.	When describing someone who supports a disabled person, older person or someone affected by physical or mental ill-health, frailty or substance misuse with aspects of their daily living, and where doing so is not their formal paid job.	Carer – without appropriate qualification, the term may be confused with members of the social care workforce.

Terms - Deafness and hearing impairment

We use	Meaning	Context	We don’t use
Deaf person / people Deaf users of British Sign Language	Those born with no hearing may use ‘Deaf’ with a capital D. Many Deaf people whose first language is British Sign language (BSL) consider	When speaking about people who use British Sign Language or who are part of the Deaf Community. Although protected by the Equality Act, many BSL users	deaf or deafened - specific terms related to hearing loss.

	themselves part of 'the Deaf community'.	consider their identity primarily as part of a minority language group.	
People who are deafened, or People who have an acquired profound hearing loss (APHL)	People who were born able to hear but become severely deaf after learning to speak.	When talking specifically about this group.	Any of the other described terms.
People who are hard of hearing	People with mild to moderate hearing loss, who find hearing aids helpful.	When talking specifically about this group.	Any of the other described terms.
Deafblind people / person	People with a dual sensory impairment who may have some hearing loss and some sight loss. A person can be born with deafblindness or experience dual sensory impairment to varying degrees later in life.	When talking specifically about this group.	Any of the other described terms.

Terms - Learning disability

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
Person / people with a Learning Disability	Someone who experiences difficulties learning new things in any area of life. A learning disability may affect the way someone	When speaking specifically about people with a learning disability.	Special needs – we all have different, specific needs, and designating the needs of disabled people as 'special' may be seen as patronising.

	<p>understands information and how they communicate. They can have difficulty understanding new or complex information, learning new skills or coping independently.</p>		
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Terms - Autism

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
<p>Autistic people or People on the autism spectrum, or X is autistic</p>	<p>Anyone with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) - a lifelong developmental condition which affects (in very different ways) how people communicate and interact with the world.</p>	<p>When specifically talking about people or groups who have Autism Spectrum Disorder.</p>	<p>People with autism – autism is not an illness, but a form of neuro-divergence. Being autistic does not mean that someone has an illness or disease.</p> <p>High-/low-functioning – functioning labels are hierarchical and inaccurate as function can be transient depending on context.</p> <p>Asperger's – this is no longer used as a diagnosis and has negative historical associations.</p>

2.3 Gender Reassignment

General Principles

- Use ‘transgender’ or ‘trans’ as an umbrella term to describe people whose current gender identity differs from the sex they were registered with at birth. Some, but not all, trans people want to transition socially or medically or both.
- A trans woman is someone who was registered male at birth and now identifies as a woman. A trans man is someone who was registered female at birth and now identifies as a man. Although we make these differentiations, we should simply use ‘woman’ or ‘man’ and leave out the word trans, unless it is relevant.
- If you don’t know someone’s gender or you are speaking hypothetically, use the pronouns they/their/theirs.
- Use gender neutral terminology where possible. For example, say ‘Chair’ or ‘Chairperson’ instead of ‘Chairman’.

Terms

We use	Meaning	Context	We don’t use
Gender identity	What an individual experiences as their innate sense of themselves as a man, a woman or as having a non-binary gender.	Only when referring explicitly to how people understand their gender.	Gender expression – people may express their gender through their name, pronouns, clothing, behaviour, voice, and/or body characteristics. Gender identity is unseen and self-declared, although people will typically try to align their gender identity with their gender expression.
Trans / transgender person /people	Anyone whose gender identity differs from the sex they were registered at birth. This includes, but is not limited to, trans	When referring to a person or people who share the protected characteristic of	Transsexual - this is considered outdated and can be used to draw unhelpful distinctions

	men, trans women and non-binary people.	Gender Reassignment.	<p>between trans people.</p> <p>A transgender – defining a person by their gender reassignment is inappropriate.</p> <p>Transgendered - as above. This moves the term away from being an adjective and makes it a defining noun.</p> <p>Born a man/woman –inappropriate and disrespectful.</p> <p>Cross-dresser - while some people may identify with this, it is entirely distinct to being trans.</p>
Person with a transgender history	Someone who identifies as a man or woman but was assigned a different sex at birth. This is increasingly used by people to acknowledge a ‘trans past’.	In most cases we can describe general services, services for men and services for women. You should avoid specifying ‘trans women’ and ‘trans men’ unless a transgender history is of specific relevance. For example, “Some trans men and non-binary people also require access to breast and cervical	As above

		screening programmes”.	
Transitioning	The steps a trans person may take to live in the gender with which they identify.	When describing the steps available / being taken for someone to confirm their gender.	<p>Sex change - Transitioning does not always include physical changes. It can include things such as telling friends and family, dressing differently, and changing official documents</p> <p>Pre-op / post-op- Not all trans people want to, or can afford to, transition medically, so avoid overemphasising surgery when discussing the process of transition.</p>
Gender confirmation surgery, or Gender confirmation treatment	Each trans person’s transition will involve different things. This could include surgeries, hormone treatment and therapeutic interventions.	When specifically talking about these elements of a person’s transition.	As above
Cis / Cisgender	Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. Cisgender has its origin in the Latin-derived prefix cis-, meaning ‘on this side	When specifically comparing the needs of trans people with the needs of people who are not trans and writing for an LGBT+ audience, where this term is best understood.	

	of', which is the opposite of trans-, meaning 'across from' or 'on the other side of'.	For example, "In this case, the needs of transgender people will differ from the needs of cisgender people."	
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2.4 Pregnancy and Maternity

General Principles

- It is important to acknowledge that this characteristic predominantly protects women, while opening up our language to be inclusive of people with different gender identities who also experience pregnancy and maternity, such as trans men and non-binary people.

Terms

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
Women and birthing people	People who are pregnant or who recently gave birth.	When referring to people who share the protected characteristic of pregnancy and maternity. When naming the beneficiaries of work which affects prenatal, perinatal and post-natal care.	Mum/s or mother/s - unless referencing a specific person or group.
Parent/s	The parent(s), including primary parent, of (a) child/ren.	When referring to a potentially diverse group who share the protected characteristic of pregnancy and maternity, and we cannot be sure that	As above.

		everyone in the group we are speaking about identifies as a woman or mum/mother.	
Birth parent / parent who gave birth Women who gave birth Breast-feeding parent /breast-feeding woman	Person or people who gave birth.	<p>When we cannot be specific about their gender identity/ies, we are speaking about a diverse group or we know they do not identify as women.</p> <p>When it is possible and / or important to be specific.</p> <p>As above, use judgement as to the referent person or group.</p>	As above.

2.5 Race

General Principles

- Understand the difference between race, ethnicity and nationality: race describes physical traits and focuses on colour, whereas ethnicity refers to cultural identification and nationality is a legal identification of a person in international law
- Only refer to race and ethnicity when it is relevant to the content
- Remember that everyone has race, colour, ethnicity and nationality and everyone's identity goes beyond these factors
- Avoid generalising ethnic groups, as there is significant diversity between all ethnic groups. Be specific to the extent this is possible

- Do not overuse or misuse terms. For example, using ‘minority ethnic group’ when only referring to Black blood or organ donors
- Order ethnic groups alphabetically in lists, with Other, and occasionally Unknown, as the final category. Our unconscious bias can lead us to begin lists with the dominant group.

Terms

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
Minority ethnic (groups / people / employees / communities)	<p>People / groups / employees / communities who share an ethnicity which is not the majority ethnicity in Scotland.</p> <p>This includes minority white groups such as gypsy travellers.</p> <p>Aim to specify groups where you can. For example, “We are particularly under-represented in relation to Black African and Black Caribbean employees”.</p>	<p>When describing people or a group in relation to the protected characteristic of ‘race’.</p> <p>Where a group /people do not identify as White Scottish / British / Irish.</p>	<p>Ethnic minority/ies - In recent years the term ‘minority ethnic’ has come to be preferred to ‘ethnic minority’ because it stresses that everyone belongs to an ethnic group. It places the emphasis on the <i>minority</i> rather than the ethnicity. Ethnicity is not in itself a disadvantage.</p> <p>Non-white –this defines groups in relation to the white majority.</p> <p>BME or BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) – these terms are widely used but are used inconsistently.</p> <p>Coloured - ‘people of colour’ is often accepted as a way of defining visible minorities, however.</p>
People with a mixed ethnic background	<p>People with mixed ethnic heritage.</p>	<p>When referring specifically to people or groups with mixed ethnic heritage.</p>	Mixed race

Visible minority	All ethnic minorities excluding all white groups.	When referring to minoritised groups that are non-white.	As above
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2.6 Religion or belief

General Principles

- A person's identity goes beyond religion, but everyone has beliefs and values about the world they experience
- Only refer to someone's faith or religion if it's relevant to the content
- People may identify as having a particular faith but may not actively practise their religion or use a place of worship to express their faith so it's important not to make assumptions with the language that we use
- Take into account the customs and practices associated with particular beliefs but avoid stereotyping or making assumptions.
- When creating content for the general public, use 'place of worship' and 'faith leader'. When creating content for a particular religion, use the appropriate place of worship and faith leader such as 'temple' and 'Priest' for the Hindu faith.
- Try to avoid words and phrases that have links with faith and religion, such as 'Christian name'. In this example, we would say 'full name' to reduce confusion and acknowledges that people have different beliefs

Terms

There are no specific terms to offer in this section, but we do provide some guiding principles for when you are communicating about religion or religious groups.

- Use a capital letter when describing particular religions (e.g. Hinduism, Christianity), a person who practices a religion (e.g. Jew, Muslim), a religious title (e.g. Iman, Rabbi) , a religious text (e.g Torah, Quran), religious holidays (e.g. Christmas, Eid) and individual places of worship (e.g. St Pauls and St George's Church in Edinburgh).
- Use a lower case letter for the general word 'religion' and for other general terms such as 'the local mosque', 'faith', 'fatwa', 'haram', 'kosher'.

2.7 Sex and Gender

General Principles

- Use gender-neutral language where possible. For example, use chair or chairperson instead of chairman, and when referring to groups of people, use ‘Hello everybody’ instead of ‘Hello guys’.
- Refer to people and groups as they refer to themselves – e.g. using female (she/her), male (he/him) or non-binary (they/them) pronouns. If in doubt, ask about the terms people use.
- Consider whether you mean ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ and use the most appropriate term.

Terms

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
Sex	<p>Whether someone is female, intersex or male. There are different aspects to a person's sex:</p> <p>Biological - determined by a person's anatomy, which is produced by a combination of their chromosomal, hormonal, genital and gonadal characteristics, and their interactions.</p> <p>Legal - typically their sex registered at birth, although for a trans person with a Gender Recognition Certificate their legal sex is their acquired sex.</p> <p>Self-defined - a person's innate sense</p>	<p>When referring to the target groups for sex- specific treatment or pathways.</p> <p>When describing sex-specific risk factors that could lead to mistakes in medical interventions or pathways.</p> <p>When referencing data gathered or measures taken specifically to ensure equality of access or outcome for people who share a sex.</p>	Gender – related, but focussed on social identity.

	of whether they are female or male		
Gender	Gender refers to our internal sense of who we are and how we see and describe ourselves in relation to norms, roles and relationships founded in social mores, laws, processes and policies that are based on labels of masculinity and femininity. Someone may see themselves as a man, a woman or as having a non-binary gender.	When discussing social identity instead of sex. When attempting to capture or illustrate differences between the experiences of men, women and non-binary people. When conducting equality monitoring for public or staff involvement activities.	Sex – related, but more linked to a person’s anatomy.

2.8 Sexual Orientation

General Principles

- People of different generations may use different language to define their sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, queer is a term reclaimed by the LGBT+ community; however, some people may see this as a slur
- Do not use phrases that imply sexual orientation is a lifestyle choice
- ‘LGBT+’ should refer to a community and not an individual. For example, ‘the LGBT+ community’ and not ‘a person who is LGBT+’ or ‘an LGBT+ woman’. Be specific about that person’s identity

Terms

We use	Meaning	Context	We don’t use
People / groups with a minority sexual orientation	A group protected under the ‘sexual orientation’ characteristic of the Equality Act. This can include, lesbians, gay people, bi/bisexual	When describing people or groups who do not identify as heterosexual.	LGBT+ - a broader category which includes transgender people, who are protected under a separate characteristic of the Equality Act (gender

	people, asexual people etc.		reassignment) and may have distinct needs. Queer (unless self-identified) - while reclaimed by the community, some people may regard this as a slur.
Ace spectrum / Aro spectrum	Umbrella terms used to describe the wide group of people who experience a lack of, varying, or occasional experiences of romantic and/or sexual attraction, including a lack of attraction.	When specifically referring to this group.	Non-sexual – A lack of sexual activity should be assumed.
Bi or Bisexual	An umbrella term used to describe a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender.	When specifically referring to this group.	
Gay	Refers to a man who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards men. Also a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality - some women define themselves as gay rather than lesbian. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.	When specifically referring to this group.	Homosexual

Lesbian	Refers to a woman who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women. Some non-binary people may also identify with this term.	When specifically referring to this group.	
Men who have sex with men (MSM)	An umbrella term that refers to men who have sex with men but who may not identify as being gay or bisexual. This term is often used in healthcare settings to identify the right treatment or information for an individual.	When specifically referring to this group.	Gay – it is important that we respect the terms people use for themselves. Bisexual – as above Homosexual – as above
Women who have sex with women (WSW)	As above, an umbrella term that refers to women who have sex with women but who may not identify as being gay, lesbian or bisexual.	When specifically referring to this group.	Lesbian As above

3. How to speak about other characteristics

3.1 Care experience

Terms

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
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Care experienced person / people	Anyone who has been or is currently in care or from a looked after background at any stage of their life, no matter how short.	When discussing engagement with or the specific healthcare needs of care experienced people. When talking about Healthcare Improvement Scotland's Corporate Parenting Duty .	LAAC (Looked After and Accommodated) - The acronym can be used by professionals but there are cases where it is not properly explained to the young person. It sounds like the word 'lack' and can reinforce negative self-perceptions (e.g. the young person believes they are lacking something).
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3.2 Poverty

General Principles

- Use 'people first' language – that is, language that references the person first and before specific challenges they experience.
- Avoid language that makes value judgements or assumptions, e.g. calling someone vulnerable or needy.

Terms

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
People experiencing poverty	Anyone who lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living.	When referring to people or groups who are recognised or identify themselves as experiencing socio-economic deprivation.	Poor Needy Vulnerable
People with lived experience of poverty	Anyone who has, at some point in their lives, lacked the financial resources for a minimum standard of living.	When referring to people or groups who are recognised or who identify themselves as having experienced socio-	As above

		economic deprivation.	
Socio-economic deprivation	Disadvantage in terms of access and control over economic, material or social resources and opportunities.	When describing our work in relation to the principles of the Fairer Scotland Duty.	As above

3.3 Homelessness

General Principles

- Use ‘people first’ language – that is, language that references the person first and before specific challenges they experience.
- Avoid language that makes value judgements or assumptions, e.g. calling someone vulnerable or needy.

Terms

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
Person / People experiencing homelessness	Anyone who does not have a home where they and their household can live together, or who has no right to stay where they are, or for whom it is not reasonable to stay in their home, or who lives in a motorhome or houseboat they cannot park/moor, or lives in overcrowded accommodation that is detrimental to their health and wellbeing,	Talking about a person or groups who are believed to be homeless.	The homeless Homeless people Any derogatory term

	or who cannot access their home.		
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3.4 Substance Dependence

General Principles

- Use ‘people first’ language – that is, language that references the person first and before specific challenges or disorders they experience.
- Avoid language that makes value judgements or assumptions, e.g. calling someone vulnerable or needy, or saying they are ‘misusing’ or ‘abusing’ a substance.
- Be as specific as possible. The Scottish Drugs Forum offers a really comprehensive [guide](#) to language in this area. We have highlighted key aspects below, and please consult the SDF if you need further information or advice.

Terms

We use	Meaning	Context	We don't use
Person / people with a substance problem Person / people with a substance dependency, or	Anyone experiencing an addiction. Substance use disorder occurs when the use of alcohol or drugs impairs your health or how you function in your daily life.	When speaking specifically about this group	Addict Alcoholic Any informal or derogatory terms / slurs
Person / people with problem drug / alcohol use	A person or group using drugs or alcohol in a problematic way (specify which, or use ‘substance’ instead).	When speaking specifically about a group.	As above
Substance, or All substances	Psychoactive substance/s.	When speaking about psychoactive substances.	Drink Other casual terms

Substances including alcohol	Psychoactive substance/s, including alcohol (which is also a psychoactive substance)	When referring to polysubstance use (using more than one psychoactive substance) where alcohol is involved.	An audience may regard alcohol use as normal or a 'given' or not significant. In some discussions of drug related deaths the role of alcohol in polysubstance drug overdose sometimes needs to be made clear.
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4. Sources that informed this document

- [Data collection and publication guidance Sex Gender Identity Trans Status \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)
- [DEEP-Guide-Language.pdf \(dementivoices.org.uk\)](http://dementivoices.org.uk)
- [Our statement on sex and gender reassignment: legal protections and language | Equality and Human Rights Commission \(equalityhumanrights.com\)](http://equalityhumanrights.com)
- Four Pillars of Deafness - [deafscotland – the lead organisation for deaf issues in Scotland](http://deafscotland.org.uk)
- NHS Blood and Transplant (September 2021) *Inclusive Language Guide*
- [Moving-Beyond-People-First-Language.pdf \(sdf.org.uk\)](http://sdf.org.uk)
- [The Social Model of Disability - Inclusion Scotland](http://inclusion.scotland)
- [Words Matter - Terms to Use and Avoid When Talking About Addiction | National Institute on Drug Abuse \(NIDA\)](http://nida.org)
- [Substance Misuse \(nhslothian.scot\)](http://nhslothian.scot)
- [List of LGBTQ+ terms \(stonewall.org.uk\)](http://stonewall.org.uk)
- Healthcare Improvement Scotland (November 2021) *Workplace Transgender Equality Guidance*

5. Is something missing?

We are committed to continuously improving our approach to and representation of equality issues. If there is terminology you use as part of your work and you think it should be reflected in this guide and is currently missing or differently framed, please let our Public Involvement Team know on his.contactpublicinvolvement@nhs.scot

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You can read and download this document from our website.
We are happy to consider requests for other languages or formats.
Please contact our Equality and Diversity Advisor on 0141 225 6999
or email his.contactpublicinvolvement@nhs.scot

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