Cumberland Council

Cumberland Council's Inclusive Language Guide 2026/2027

cumberland.gov.uk

Introduction

Purpose of this guide

This guide will help Cumberland Council staff ensure they use language that creates a welcoming environment and fosters a sense of belonging, in line with our vision and values.

We hope this guide will help you communicate more confidently with colleagues, residents, and partners. If you aren't sure what language/pronunciation is appropriate, please ask your audience or seek further guidance as detailed in Appendices 2 and 3. Where you feel changes are needed, please let us know.

This guide encourages an approach that pays attention to and reflects the way we use language. We must acknowledge language can have real world effects, potentially stigmatising residents or communities, increasing trauma or affecting our reputation. Being reflective, responsive, and open about our approach to language is a way to build trust, avoid assumptions and communicate with care and attention.

There are two levels to considering our language use:

Individual: how we speak to and about specific residents and each other; how people like to be spoken to and how they wish their lives to be understood and described.

Systemic: how our systems, forms, reports etc describe communities or groups; how we record information about communities, cultural identities and experiences.

Best practice

This guide focuses on using language that treats our residents, customers and staff with respect and consideration. The information in this document is meant to act as a guide and a set of general principles. We urge you to use your judgement and consider context and circumstances.

Language should be checked against the Plain English Guide **How to write in plain English**.

We can't all know everything about all cultures or identities, and when we encounter something new or unfamiliar, we may worry about the right thing to say. Fear of saying the wrong thing can get in the way of clear communication or mean we avoid discussing something sensitive.

This could result in a person's needs not being properly met or might even make someone feel we are uncomfortable dealing with them. It's ok to acknowledge when we don't know something. If we do get something wrong, we apologise and apply the learning for the future.

What is considered appropriate also evolves and changes over time. As language changes, some terms can become outdated, or even derogatory. Using outdated words can perpetuate discrimination. Some words have their origins in a time of enslavement and colonisation.

At Cumberland Council, we are working to advance equality and inclusion. You may not agree with every point made, however, this guide is based on research and staff feedback on what is generally considered to be inclusive and acceptable. We need to remain adaptable and open to changing our language in the future.

The framing of language is important and should be used objectively. Some words can lend emphasis, and objectivity is lost, such as always, completely, definitely, never, obviously.

Equality Act 2010 - The Equality Act identifies nine Protected Characteristics. Under the act, it is unlawful to treat people differently or discriminate against them due to their Protected

Characteristic. This guide focuses on the nine Protected Characteristics plus Care Experienced which Cumberland Council committed to formally adopt as a protected characteristic. We want people to reflect and think beyond the law to ensure we are inclusive and meet our equality objectives.

Language can also cause significant 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 always to think: 'How would I feel if someone said this to me?'

Language is fluid and constantly evolving. When changes occur, there can be a period where they might not be universally accepted - but that shouldn't deter us from using language that represents our community members who rely on it to describe themselves.

General principles

Use language that reinforces how we value the diverse communities that live in Cumberland. Not everyone will have learnt English as a first language or have the same cultural references.

The onus is on the communicator to use words and expressions that are inclusive and accessible. Avoid language that excludes or 'others' people. See Appendix 1.

In this context, think about language from the perspective of communities rather than institutions or services. Institutional barriers mean some communities are 'seldom heard', not 'hard to reach'.

Consider the ways in which we communicate. Is it clear, or do we need to create alternative documents or use different media to ensure information can be accessed by different people - avoiding the 'one size fits all' approach?

Remember

- In 2024, the OECD published data from its survey suggesting that 18% (1 in 6) adults in England had literacy levels at or below Level 1, that which is associated with the skills expected of a 5–7-year-old. **What do adult literacy levels mean? | National Literacy Trust**
- English may not be someone's first language.
- Disability may mean people require a larger font or are using accessibility readers to read information.
- Neurodiversity may mean that the person has processing difficulties.

Accessible communication formats - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Use language that is positive and empowering. For example, many people who use wheelchairs find the term 'wheelchair bound' negative and potentially offensive - it implies they are limited by their wheelchair, rather than it being an accessibility tool. 'Wheelchair user' better reflects how a wheelchair assists someone with a mobility impairment, rather than restricts them.

Use language that avoids assumptions and generalisations, especially in general communication.

Listen, learn and ask open questions that allow perspectives and experiences to be shared in a manner comfortable for all.

Be mindful of unintentional microaggressions that stem from assumptions.

- Comments such as ‘that community would never agree’ makes assumptions that everyone in one community is of the same opinion.
- Use gender-neutral language like ‘everyone’, participants’, audience’ etc, instead of ‘ladies and gentlemen’ when addressing groups.

Language does not just mean the words we use. It can include body language, such as eye contact or hand gestures.

Body language is 55 per cent of how we communicate, and can convey negative messages to others, either consciously (for example eye rolling) or unconsciously (for example yawning).

Equally, some neurodiverse people may show body language which can seem dismissive (for example not making eye contact, or fidgeting). Being aware of these non-verbal communication cues can help us be better communicators.

Mention gender, ethnicity, disability or sexuality only if it is relevant in context. This avoids any reinforcing of a stereotype or prejudice.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to communicating with colleagues and residents.

Taking a respectful approach means trying to understand the spectrum of diverse views and being responsive to feedback and open to change.

Information on accessible communication formats can be found in Appendix 2.

Protected Characteristics

Care Experience

National research shows Care Experienced individuals experience disparities compared to people who have never been cared for. Cumberland Council has made a commitment to formally adopting Care Experience as a protected characteristic.

Our Children and Family Wellbeing service has developed a ‘Show you care, use language that cares’ guide. Please take the time to read this helpful resource **Language that Cares PDF**.

Age

Age discrimination can be experienced by anyone, at any age.

Write about older/younger people in a way that affords respect and dignity and avoids stereotyping.

Avoid language that implies reduced status linked to age or implies that people have less to offer due to being elderly or very young.

Rather than ‘a young and vibrant team/a mature workforce’

How about ‘an experienced team’

If referring to younger/older people, it can be useful to specifically define the group - for example people ‘under 30’ or ‘over 80’.

Consider the accessibility of the information you are sharing – are the font size and colour right for people with vision challenges? Should it be available as a printed document rather than exclusively online?

Ageist language litters our vocabulary, and we use ageist language without even realising it.

One of the biggest obstacles we face when it comes to embracing later life is the negative way we think and talk about it. See the Centre for Ageing Better’s Guide to talking about ageing and older age. **Challenging-ageism-guide-talking-ageing-older-age.pdf (ageing-better.org.uk)** and The Alzheimer’s Society’s **Positive Language Guide**.

Disability

The social model of disability says it is the barriers in society - such as inaccessible buildings or people’s attitudes - that create disability, and by removing those you overcome the disability.

Language should focus, where possible, on the barriers created by society. For example, using the term ‘disabled people’ is more aligned to the social model than saying ‘people with disabilities.’

Language should not define a person according to their disabilities or conditions. Turning adjectives into nouns (for example ‘the disabled’) can undervalue the person.

Ask the community or person what works best for them. For example, autistic/deaf people may prefer ‘autistic person’, or ‘deaf person’ to ‘a person with autism’ or ‘a person with a hearing impairment’. They may see autism or deafness as an identity rather than a characteristic.

Where assistance is required, ask what is needed rather than for details of the disability.

A useful guide: **Inclusive language: words to use and avoid when writing about disability - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)**

Sex, gender identity and gender reassignment

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

The Equality Act defines sex as “A man or a woman”. When referring to the protected characteristics of the 2010 Equality Act ‘sex’ rather than ‘gender’ is used.

‘Gender’ in place of ‘sex’ is more inclusive of those who are intersex, non-binary and transgender and can be used in most contexts.

Gendered language that may exclude colleagues – for example, use ‘workforce’, rather than ‘manpower’. A meeting has a ‘chair’, not ‘a chairman’.

Avoid language that promotes gendered stereotypes, for example ‘man up’, ‘guys’, or referring to a woman as ‘emotional’ or ‘bossy’.

If titles are required, check why they are needed and ensure systems can cater for individual usage. Some cultures use no titles, some people prefer not to use Mr/Miss/Mrs/Ms and may prefer Mx.

Gender neutral pronouns such as ‘they’, and ‘them’, work well in general communications to a wide audience, or where the person’s gender or pronouns are not known.

Be aware that not everyone identifies as either male or female. In formal correspondence, ‘Dear Sir or Madam’ is still used when names are not known. It is possible to find alternatives

which are inclusive of all genders. Examples are ‘Dear colleagues’, ‘Dear partners’, ‘Dear council tax payer’, etc.

When creating forms, offer an option to select non-binary rather than male or female, and provide an ‘other’ box to ensure that culturally specific terms (such as hijra or two-spirit) can be used too. Avoid having questions or sections specific to people of a certain gender.

It is good practice to ask people what pronouns they use and, if you get it wrong, acknowledge, thank and learn from the person correcting you.

When writing that someone is trans, writing that they “identify as a woman” or “identify as a trans woman” can be perceived as a microaggression. A better way of writing this would be “she is a trans woman”. Please note that many trans community members do not want or need their trans status referencing.

Trans is an adjective, so when talking about individuals, ‘trans man’ and ‘trans woman’ would be two words.

‘Trans’ is not short for ‘transition’, although some trans people may undertake a transition process which may be social, medical or both. The term ‘sex change’ is largely considered an outdated term and should be avoided.

Preferred pronouns - the word ‘preferred’ is unnecessary. When writing what a person’s gendered pronouns are, writing “their pronouns are they/them” would be accurate. ‘Preferred’ suggests using a person’s correct pronouns is optional. Using people’s accurate pronouns is simply respectful, in the same way as using their correct name would be. Cumberland’s employees have the right to be known by the gender pronouns they are most comfortable with.

Recording pronouns - forms and recording databases should have the option to record pronouns.

Sexual orientation

Heteronormative, Heteronormativity. This describes cultural and social practices which support the notion that heterosexuality is the only legitimate sexual orientation. To fight discrimination, we need to acknowledge heteronormativity, which is connected to sexual orientation expected norms.

To challenge our unconscious bias, it’s important to understand how heteronormativity exists in our policies and practices, and in our everyday language.

The LGBTQIA+ acronym covers people with a range of sexual orientations as well as gender identity and is not automatically a homogenous group. When referring to a particular group,it is important to be specific.

Use non-gendered language to be welcoming of all relationships and families. The aim is always to make everyone feel included. For example, use ‘partner’ instead of ‘husband’ or ‘wife’.

Marriage and civil partnership

Marriage and civil partnership refer to 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. The language used should not assume people are married or single.

Terms like ‘partner’ are more appropriate than husband or wife.

Marriage below the age of 18 is a forced marriage since The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022. Sixteen and 17-year-olds can no longer marry, or have a civil partnership, even if they have parental consent.

Race and ethnicity

See Language Guide provided by **NHS Race Health Observatory**

Race and ethnicity are often regarded as the same thing – both are social constructs, terms used to describe individuals and groups of people.

The term ‘ethnicity’ is used to refer to the sense of identity that derives from shared cultural characteristics such as language, religion, history or geographical location

‘Race’ is a social construct made to justify racism. Some people believe that ‘race’ is a problematic term and would prefer to speak about their specific ethnic background and/or nationality. So, it’s important that rather than generalise and use homogenous terms, you describe people as they wish to be described.

We should seek to use language which reflects a global or post-colonial perspective. For example, ‘East Asia’ or ‘Southeast Asian’ and not ‘Oriental’.

Where possible, use specific identifies and specific issues. Only use collective terminology where there is a legitimate need to do so. See UK government list of ethnic groups

Using collective terminology can mask the realities or needs of specific communities.
Some minority communities feel excluded when the term global majority is used.

The term ‘Asian’ can be appropriate when the exact ethnic origin of the person is unknown or as a collective reference but, where possible, state the specific country/region.

- Southeast Asian (for example Singapore or Indonesia),
- Far East Asian (for example China, Japan or Korea),
- East African Asian (for example Uganda or Tanzania)
- South Asian (for example Bangladesh, India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka).

There is a move to stop using colour coding, which can be seen as a colonial relic. Instead of ‘black’ we should use ‘African’ or ‘African Caribbean’. For some, however, the term ‘Black’ is a political term and is used by those fighting racism and injustice as a term of empowerment and positive self-identity.

UK government writing style is not to capitalise ethnic groups such as black or white unless the group’s name includes a geographic place – for example, ‘Asian’.

‘People of colour’. This is intended to denote a sense of solidarity between communities historically and currently oppressed and marginalised in systems. However, some people are offended by this term, so it is important to use terms they are more comfortable with. Ask them how they identify their ethnicity, rather than assume based on our categories.

BAME stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic. ‘Minority Ethnic’ refers to those people/groups other than the white British majority, including ‘other white’ groups. The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities **recommended that the government stop using the term BAME**.

This is reflected in guidance here: **Writing about ethnicity - GOV.UK (ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk)**

The term ‘multi-racial’ should only be used in relation to diverse communities.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller is used to describe a range of ethnic groups with nomadic ways of life who are protected under the Equality Act as ethnic groups. The term ‘Traveller’ can also encompass groups that travel who are seen as making a lifestyle choice, rather than being a protected ethnic group – examples are ‘New Travellers’, ‘Boaters’ and ‘Showmen’.

British and English should be used in an inclusive sense to refer to all ethnic groups and not to denote white people.

Do not use:

Coloured - this is a racist word derived from a historic definition.

Half caste - this is racist word which suggests something flawed.

Religion and Belief

Respectful language is needed to describe someone’s religion or belief.

Customs and practices of a religion should not be trivialised, for example by referring to religious clothing as ‘costumes.’

Use ‘first name’ or ‘forename’ rather than referencing a religion such as ‘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.

Pregnancy and maternity

Be mindful and respectful of how we speak about pregnancy, miscarriage and abortion.

This can be a very traumatising question, and assumptions should not be made. In data collection, we should only ask questions where data is needed. Also, consider how you can support those possibly traumatised by your questions.

Trans men and non-binary people may also be people who become pregnant. Phrases such as expectant mothers may reinforce gender stereotypes.

Appendix 1 Glossary

Cis gender A word used to describe people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

Colonialism The domination and exploitation of one country and/or a group of people by another through different forms of violence.

Deadnaming Is a term that describes calling a trans person by the name they used pre-transition. While some trans people might not change their name or might not mind a reference to their former name, other trans people may find it upsetting. Sometimes our software or IT systems may deadname people inadvertently, or our systems may not be set up to record someone changing their name or pronouns. Ensuring that our systems can record people's name and gender accurately is vital to ensure we're meeting trans residents' needs and complying with Equality Law.

Queer Queer is an identity, an umbrella term, and often considered a movement, for sexual and gender minorities, and individuals who fall outside of and/or reject the cultural norms around sexuality, gender identity, and/or gender expression. **Queer - LGBTQIA**

Gender Identity Is the personal sense of one's gender.

Gender Non-conforming (GNC)

People who are 'gender nonconforming' sometimes abbreviated to 'GNC', may dress or act in a way which doesn't conform to their culture or society's expectations of gender roles and/or gender expression. Trans, non-binary and cis people can all be gender non-conforming; being gender non-conforming does not mean someone is transgender; therefore, 'gender non-conforming' should not be used in place of 'transgender'.

Gender reassignment

The term used in the Equality Act 2010 to describe the protected characteristic of transgender people, and means "proposing to undergo, undergoing or having undergone a process to reassign your sex". Such a 'process' can include for example, a name change, changing your pronouns, or changing how you dress. A transgender person does not need to have undergone any medical treatment or surgery to be protected from gender reassignment discrimination.

Geriatric Used in a health context for older person, this sounds negative in general use.

Intersex Describes people who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not meet with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female.

LGBTQIA+ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual plus. The plus' represents other minority sexual orientations and gender identities, such as Agender or Pansexual.

Neurodivergent Neurodivergent is a term used to describe individuals whose brains process, learn or behave differently from what we may consider 'typical'. It may be used by those with formal diagnoses like dyslexia, ADHD or those on the autism spectrum, to describe themselves and their needs.

Neurodiverse A neurodiverse group, community or organisation includes, accepts and celebrates people with a variety of different ways of thinking, processing and learning. A person cannot be neurodiverse. **see more details**

Neurotypical Neurotypical is used to describe those who are not neurodivergent. Neurotypical is a better description than 'normal' since no one's brain is entirely 'normal'.

Non-binary (also written as nonbinary)

Is an umbrella term for a person who does not identify as only male or only female, or who may identify as both, or as neither. 'Non-binary' can be someone's gender identity, or they may be genderqueer, demigender, agender or another identity under the non-binary umbrella.

Othering Is treating individuals and groups as different and inferior, viewing them as a threat to a favoured group. Othering can be reinforced by language that manipulates and dehumanises people with the aim of marginalisation.

Personal pronouns Are often assumed according to the person's apparent gender - ie 'he' and 'him' for men and 'she' or 'her' for women. Non-binary people may use personal pronouns such as xe, ze and sie. 'They' is the most used.

Systemic racism Is a way of expressing the way racial inequality can be embedded into our systems, policies and practices, reproducing inequality rather than tackling it.

Trans, Transgender Are umbrella terms used to describe someone who presents themselves in a gender that differs from the one that they were assigned at birth.

Transexual Is an older word for 'transgender' that appears in legislation. However, it tends to be seen as a more medicalised term and is best avoided.

White privilege Is the advantage having white skin gives an individual. White privilege does not mean white people do not have disadvantages - it references the absence of racial discrimination on an institutional or societal basis. Having white privilege and recognising it is not racist.

Be aware that not all white bodied people have white privilege in the same ways, and consider Gypsy, Roma and Travellers and Jewish people who also experience racism.

Examples

Age

Rather than...	How about using...
A young and vibrant workforce A mature workforce	An experienced team
The elderly, the old or pensioners	Only use if relevant
The young/The youth	Only use if relevant

Disability

Rather than...	How about using...
The disabled	Person/People with a disability/disabilities
Normal, healthy, able-bodied	People without disabilities
Disabled toilets/lifts	Accessible toilets/lifts
Wheelchair bound, confined to chair	Wheelchair users
Cancer or dementia sufferers	People living with cancer or dementia
A schizophrenic	Person with schizophrenia
Challenging, special	Person with a learning difference.

Sex, gender and gender identity and gender reassignment

Rather than...	How about using...
Welcome ladies and gentlemen	Welcome everyone
Both genders/opposite sex	All genders
Boyfriend, wife, husband	Partner, spouse
Cleaning ladies, firemen	Cleaners, firefighters
Assuming she, her, hers and he, him, his	They, them, theirs
A female scientist/ A male nurse	A scientist/ A nurse
Using LGBTQIA+ if you are only talking about gender or gender identity Using straight as the opposite of LGBTQIA+ (transgender people can be any sexual orientation, including straight)	Using LGBTQIA+ only when referring to both sexual orientation and gender identity-based communities
A transgender	Trans(gender) people/person
Female-bodied or male-bodied born female or male	Assigned male/female at birth

Sexual orientation

Rather than...	How about using...
Sexual preference/Lifestyle choice	Sexual orientation
Mother or Father	Parents/Caregivers
The young/The youth	Only use if relevant
Using LGBTQIA+ if you are only talking about gender or gender identity Using straight as the opposite of LGBTQIA+ (transgender people can be any sexual orientation, including straight)	Using LGBTQIA+ only when referring to both sexual orientation and gender identity-based communities

Race, ethnicity and nationality

Rather than...	How about using...
Asians	Asian people
The Asian doctor	The doctor
Coloured	People of colour
BAME/BME	People/Students/Staff of colour
Using LGBTQIA+ if you are only talking about gender or gender identity Using straight as the opposite of LGBTQIA+ (transgender people can be any sexual orientation, including straight)	Using LGBTQIA+ only when referring to both sexual orientation and gender identity-based communities
Other (when using categories)	Using a defined and reported category from this group, especially when reporting on racial and ethnic categories.
Illegal migrant/illegal immigrants	Person/people seeking asylum Refugee(s) Migrant(s) Or, refer to the individual's actual immigration status if relevant and known.
Small boat migrant/boat people/ channel migrant	Person seeking asylum Refugee Resident Or individual, unless method of travel is directly relevant to the discussion.
Unnecessarily highlighting someone's asylum, refugee or migrant status	Refer to the person's role, experience or situation, and only include immigration status when relevant to the context.

Remember: Avoid defining people solely by their immigration or asylum status. Use accurate and respectful language and only refer to a person's migration status where it is relevant to the matter being discussed.

Religion or belief

Rather than...	How about using...
Christian name	First name, given name
Surname	Family name
Muslims	Muslim community
Jews	Jewish community

Appendix 2 - Other Useful Guides

- **Language - SEND and Inclusion**
- **British Medical Association Guidance to inclusive language in the workplace**
- **Gov Uk guidance on language to use and avoid when writing about disability**
- **GOV UK guidance on portraying disability**
- **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/portraying-disability**
- **National Institute for Health Care Excellence style guide for talking about people**
- **https://www.nice.org.uk/corporate/ecd1/chapter/talking-about-people#deaf-**

If your service has a language guide that you would like to add, please send to **lynsey.crosthwaite@cumberland.gov.uk**

Appendix 3 - Support available

Follow-up sources of support are available from:

- Your manager
- A colleague
- Staff networks
- HR
- Your trade union representative

Grievance and bullying procedure **Grievance, bullying and harassment | Cumberland Council**

Appendix 4 - Updates

We will review this document annually as a minimum. What is most important is that this document is inclusive and fit for purpose. If at any time you want to suggest changes and amendments, please email **lynsey.crosthwaite@cumberland.gov.uk**