

Adult Social Care language guide



In our Adult Social Care practice framework, we say that we know the language we use matters.

We also say we use plain, respectful and kind language.



The language we use matters because it shows people how we think and feel, and shapes how other people think and feel too.



We don't always think about the true meaning or impact of the words we use at work, or why we use them.

We might use certain words because other people around us use them too, or because we have been taught to use them.

Often these are not words we would use outside of work, with our own family and friends.



If we don't think about our language, we may use words that confuse, hurt, blame or exclude people.

We might use words that make it sound like people are different to us or are not human beings.

We may also use words to describe how we work that don't fit with the other ambitions and values in our practice framework.



This guide is not about policing language or banning words

It aims to help us think about the words we use so we can feel confident that we are using plain, respectful and kind language.

This will also help us to embed our practice principles of hope, connection, relationships, inclusion, flexibility and rights.

Remember: if you're communicating directly with people, always check the language they are comfortable using.

If you feel you need to challenge someone's language, always be respectful and pick the right moment for a conversation.

It can be helpful to describe the impact of different terms on the way people think and behave. Hopefully this guide will help.



Communicating about people



People who require assistance to live good lives are equal, unique human beings with gifts and potential.

Everyone has the right to choice and control over their lives and any support they require to live the lives they choose to lead.

People also have the right to be included in and part of communities.

Our language should reflect this.

Avoid language that suggests people are different to 'us'



For example: 'the elderly', 'the disabled', 'the homeless', 'the vulnerable', 'the over 70s', 'those with...', 'those who...'

This language divides people into 'them' and 'us'. It suggests some people ('them') are different and inferior, and that they don't belong.

It also implies people in the 'other' group are all the same, rather than unique human beings.

Where possible refer to 'we all' or 'all of us'. Talk about people, not 'the...' or 'those...' for example 'older people', 'disabled people'.

Avoid language that implies people need to be 'looked after', or are 'just' passive recipients of services



For example: 'cared for person', 'customers', 'clients', 'people who need care', 'people who use services', 'service users' 'the cared for', 'those with care needs', 'users', 'vulnerable people'

This language implies people need to be 'protected' or 'cared for'. This suggests people are helpless and a 'burden'.

It stops us from seeing people as equal citizens with strengths, who have a right to be included in, and part of, communities.

It can also mean we don't think about external things that make people dependent and vulnerable, like policies and attitudes.

This language describes people in terms of their relationship with services, rather than as human beings. It describes a passive relationship, suggesting people have no control over their support.

It makes us think about care and support in terms of services rather than relationships, and divides people into 'carers' and 'the cared for' or 'providers' and 'consumers'. This can mean we don't think about people 'giving' as well as 'getting' support.

Refer to 'people', 'people who require support', 'people who access support' or 'people who draw on support' instead.

Communicating about people



Avoid language that suggests people are not human

For example: talking about people as 'cases' or 'referrals'.

This language is dehumanising. Dehumanising language suggests people are not human beings.

Use everyday language to talk with and about people. For example, 'people I'm supporting' not 'my cases'



Avoid language that implies people 'belong' to us

For example: 'my cases', 'my client', 'our customers', 'our service users', 'our residents', 'our most vulnerable'

This language makes it sound like people belong to us. It implies we have some ownership or control over people and reinforces an unequal power dynamic.

Use 'people', 'citizens', 'residents', 'people we support', 'people we serve' instead.



Avoid language that suggests people don't live ordinary lives

For example: 'accessing the community', 'activities of daily living', 'mobilising', 'outcomes', 'placements', 'special needs', 'toileting'

This language implies that people who require support live different lives and have different, or 'special' needs, rather than every day, human needs, and the right to live equal, ordinary lives.

This means we don't always focus on people having the support they require to live a good life, in the place they call home, with the people and things they love, doing the things that matter to them. And we don't challenge or remove the barriers people face to living ordinary lives.

Use everyday language instead, like eating and drinking, or going out.



Avoid language that implies people who access social care are ill

For example: 'patients', 'beds', 'care home beds'

Referring to 'patients' and 'beds' reinforces stereotypes of older and disabled people as unwell or 'invalids'. This language suggests people draw on care and support because they are poorly and need to stay in bed, rather than to live good lives. It also blurs the distinction between health care and social care.

Communicating in and about social care



Good social care supports us to live in the place we call home with the people and things that we love, in communities where we look out for one another, doing the things that matter to us. Lots of people don't know what social care is, so it might be more helpful to talk about 'supporting people to live good lives' or 'promoting people's wellbeing'.



Avoid talking about care and support as a destination

Phrases like 'going in to care', 'getting care' and 'getting a service' imply care is a destination and the end goal of our work with people, rather than something that supports people to live a good life.

This means we can focus on people 'getting a service' rather than what matters most to people and the support they require to achieve good lives.



Avoid references to social care as an industry or a system

For example: 'pathway', 'journey', 'placement', 'screening', 'referral' 'the social care industry', 'the care industry', 'the care process' and 'the care system'

In our practice framework we say that we make and maintain meaningful connections and build relationships, but these phrases associate care and support with transactions and processes. They also describe our role as processing people through a system.



Avoid language that implies social care is a cost to society

Focus on the value of social care to society and to the economy rather than the 'cost of social care'.



Avoid language that implies that social care is broken

Using language like 'broken' and 'crisis' and talking about 'fixing social care' focuses on what's wrong.

It's more helpful to focus on what's working well, and how further investment or reform could build on this.

Communicating in and about social care



Talk about people living in a place they call home

Avoid language like 'placement', 'setting', 'unit', 'facility', 'scheme', 'care setting', 'bed', 'bedded care facility'

Our purpose is to support people to live in a place they call home. This language suggests the places people live are not 'home'.

If we don't feel comfortable referring to somewhere as a person's home, it's unlikely they will call it home either.

And referring to people being 'placed in' implies that someone else has made a decision to 'place' people somewhere, not that they have chosen to move to a new home.



Avoid language that blames people

For example: 'hard to reach', 'difficult to engage', 'challenging', 'challenging behaviour', 'difficult', 'non-compliant'

This language suggests there is something wrong with a person or group of people, or with the way they are behaving.

It is defensive language and can prevent us from understanding what people are communicating. It can stop us from thinking about what has happened to people or is happening around them.

It also ignores the barriers we put in place which can mean we are 'hard to reach' and 'challenging'.



Avoid language that implies fighting and battles

For example: 'frontline workers', 'the frontline', 'duty', 'in the field', 'engagement', 'officers', 'army of carers', 'heroes'

This language of battles implies opposing sides and defensive practice rather than trusted, equal relationships and connections, and honest conversations.



If you have any comments or questions about this guide, please contact:

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You can also read Bryony's blogs about language at <https://rewritingsocialcare.blog/>

Quick guide: words to avoid and words to use instead

 Avoid or use with caution	 Use instead
Accessing the community	Use everyday language like going out, meeting friends, shopping, going to the cinema...
Case / Cases My case / Our cases	Person / People Person I'm working with / People we support
Cared for person Clients Customers People who use services Service users The cared for Users	People Citizens People we serve People we support People accessing social care People drawing on support
Challenging behaviour	Use language that describes what the person is communicating (e.g. distress, anger, sadness)
Difficult to engage Hard to reach Non-compliant	Don't use. Consider what this says about our practice rather than blaming people.
Frontline	People working directly with...
Going into care Getting care Getting a service	Moving to a new home Drawing on support to live good lives
Placed in	Moved to
Services Social care industry Social care services Social care system	Support Care and support Social care Adult social care
Those who... / Those with...	People who... / People with...
Vulnerable people The vulnerable Our most vulnerable	Don't use 'vulnerable' as a blanket label'. If you feel you need to use the term vulnerable, make sure it's clear who the term applies to, why people are vulnerable and what to.