

Language Matters

Equality, diversity and inclusion in
the homelessness sector

Introduction

About the resource

Everyone experiencing homelessness should be able to access support that meets their needs. It is essential for the homelessness sector to consider equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in all aspects of service provision and delivery. This resource looks at language, why it matters, how it can both hinder and enhance EDI practices and highlights top tips for practitioners.

Who this is for

This is a practice resource and will be most relevant and helpful to frontline managers and practitioners of homelessness services.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Glossary

Below are some of the key terms to be aware of while reading this document:

Equality: At its core equality means fairness. Equality focusses on ensuring people are not treated less favourably than others because of their protected characteristics and other characteristics linked to oppression, discrimination and disadvantage, for example class, accent/dialect or educational attainment.

Equity: Giving people what they need, proportionate to their own circumstances.

Equality of opportunity: Ensuring those who are disadvantaged have **access** to the same and fair opportunities as their peers.

Diversity: Recognising, respecting and celebrating each other's differences. A diverse environment is one with a wide range of backgrounds and mindsets.

Inclusion: Creating an environment where everyone feels welcomed and valued. Awareness of unconscious bias and a focus on active inclusion are key tenets of creating inclusive services.

Intersectionality: The interconnected nature of social categorisations - such as race, class, disability, sexual orientation, and gender - as they apply to a given individual or group, creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

Implicit or unconscious bias describes attitudes and stereotypes a person may be unaware they hold and that unwittingly affect their understanding, actions and decisions.

Conscious inclusion describes an intentional and deliberate effort to ensure that everyone's unique perspectives, experiences, and contributions are recognised, respected, and valued. It involves creating an environment where everyone feels they belong, and where they can fully participate and achieve their full potential.

Why language matters

Inclusive language is communication that avoids using words, expressions or assumptions that would stereotype, demean or exclude people. For example, gendered language is language that has a bias towards a particular gender identity. It may attribute good or bad traits to that gender identity. For example, the phrase "don't be such a girl" is often used to attribute weak behaviours or beliefs to female gender identity.

Language is ever evolving and changing, and it is not possible to always know how to approach an individual or a topic – that's OK! It is not about being right or wrong but recognising that language does matter, and that making thoughtful choices can have a significant impact for everyone.

Remember:

- Some words can hold relevance to different people, so if unsure, ask and if challenged, respond with curiosity and without judgement.
- Some words which once may have held offence can be reclaimed or reappropriated by the groups they were initially targeted toward.
- People being supported may choose to use different words or terms to describe themselves that others, including staff, might find offensive.

"Access to and application of language is central to grounded confidence, walking alongside one another, and story stewardship" Brene Brown

People who are marginalised often face additional barriers to accessing the services and support they need. Being intentional about EDI practices can help to address these barriers.

Language, Power, Trauma

Language can empower people accessing support.

A key tenet of trauma informed practice is a focus on empowerment and redressing power imbalances.

Language is a means of power, and as a tool it can be used to both **hold** onto power and enable a **shift** to share power. Using inclusive language is part of a trauma informed approach.

Individual experiences of trauma may be rooted in experiences of inequality and discrimination. At the very least marginalised people's experiences of trauma will be affected by and intersect with their experiences of discrimination/exclusion. This can take on many forms, for example violence connected to sexuality or gender identity, persecution because of religious beliefs or abuse related to racial profiling.

As with any trauma-informed practice, it is not necessary to know about the trauma someone has experienced, but it is important to hold in mind how traumatic experiences attached to experiences of discrimination impact an individual's ability to feel in control in their lives.

Inclusive language in practice

"I raise up my voice — not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back." Malala Yousafzai

Language can affect how safe or unsafe a person feels in a certain setting, and whether they feel heard, seen, and understood. This in turn will affect whether someone is or isn't able to engage with a service or setting and consequently someone's experiences of homelessness.

Undermining EDI practices

Terms such as 'politically correct' and 'woke' can be used to demonise attempts to use inclusive language. These terms downplay the power of language and belittle any attempts to understand and respect individuals and groups who have been marginalised.

As mentioned above, using inclusive language is not about being always right or always wrong but recognising that language does matter, and that making thoughtful choices can have a significant impact for everyone.

- Using language that reinforces stereotypes shows a lack of curiosity about the individual and undermines a person-centred approach.
- Language that patronises or reduces people's experiences will push an individual away. For example, saying that a young person is 'just hormonal' trivialises their feelings and lived experience.



- Common phrases that generalise or homogenise people into groups can be exclusionary. For example, a phrase such as 'ladies and gentlemen' which does not acknowledge people who identify as non-binary.

Enhancing EDI practices¹

Language can go beyond simply not being exclusionary, to being actively inclusive of those who are marginalised, disadvantaged or discriminated against. Language is an integral part of building relationships with others. It is a powerful tool for frontline workers and can help to create safety and trust for people accessing services.

Acknowledging diversity and conveying respect to all people

Equitable practice acknowledges diversity and recognises that we don't all start from the same place. Actively acknowledging diversity is important so that adjustments to practice can be made to address imbalances.

When first meeting someone, ask how they like to be referred to and this could include the name they most prefer (it could be a nickname or adapted version of the name on a referral form), the pronunciation of their name (this may be different to assumptions in a written version) and the pronouns they prefer (for example he, she or they).

Proactively use welcoming words, phrases and expressions

There are many ways to make a service more welcoming, particularly thinking about taking a psychologically informed approach. In relation to language, some ideas might include:

- A mural with welcome in different languages
- Information available in different languages
- Access to interpreting services
- Learning one or two key words and phrases to welcome an individual to the service where English is not their first language

Challenging conscious and unconscious biases

Everybody holds both conscious and unconscious biases. Being aware of our own biases can focus attention on both the language we use and the language we hear.

For example, it may have become common vernacular to say something is 'so gay' when referring to something negative. This language may be tolerated by some as 'harmless' but challenging and changing could be a sign to an LGBTQ+ member of staff or a person being supported that the service is mindful of its language and won't tolerate discrimination.

¹ <https://equality.leeds.ac.uk/support-and-resources/inclusive-language-guidance/>

The challenge can be gentle and kind rather than critical and shaming...to a person being supported we could say 'we don't use 'gay' in that context in this service as it sounds negative'.

Avoiding assumptions that may exclude

The information shared about someone may lead to assumptions being made about them, for example, based on their name or age. These assumptions could have implications about how a support worker approaches the individual. To limit these assumptions, services could:

- Invest in unconscious bias training and help staff to become more aware of the assumptions they make and how to mitigate this.
- Limit the amount of information needed at referral to help open conversations of curiosity and get to know the individual in a more person-centred way.
- When meeting a new person, take a pause to reflect on any assumptions that may have been made.

Respecting people's privacy to share information about themselves how and when they feel comfortable doing so

Asking someone to provide very detailed personal information can hinder inclusive practices. At the point of referral or first meeting with a service, it is common for an individual to be asked for wide ranging information - from offending history to health. Someone's disability or long-term health condition could be sensitive, and they may wish it to remain private. Inclusive practices allow people to tell their story with the words they choose and at a time that suits them.

Don't be afraid of getting things wrong. Learning from mistakes is part of enhancing EDI practices.

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

Homeless Link

Minories House
2-5 Minories
London
EC3N 1BJ

www.homeless.org.uk
@HomelessLink

**Let's End Homelessness
Together**

