

Addressing Stigma: Language Guide

A TOOLKIT TO SUPPORT
THE NOTTINGHAM CITY
DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH
ANNUAL REPORT 2024/25



Nottingham
City Council

“... it is crucial for the language we use to be positive, empowering and free from negative connotations.”



Language is powerful; it can be used to inspire and influence, to build communities and boost self-esteem, but it can also be harmful to individuals and the communities we are supporting. When working with people who experience health inequalities, it is crucial for the language we use to be positive, empowering and free from negative connotations.

Public Health teams in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire aim to promote ‘person-first’ language and are dedicated to engagement with people and communities to understand how they perceive the language that we use so that we can develop ourselves, our colleagues and our workforce. By listening to our communities, we strive to reduce stigma through language.

This language guide is part of a toolkit developed to address stigma and support the objectives of the Director of Public Health’s Annual Report 2024/25 for Nottingham. It is a glossary of preferred terms used by Public Health, that have been suggested by people with lived and living experience or staff from specialist organisations or based on research. The preferred ‘try to use’ terms are listed as the alternatives to phrases that may be heard elsewhere, including sometimes by people with lived or living experience themselves, the advice to staff is to not assume and to remember to always check first.

There are two sections to the guide – terms relevant to our public health thematic areas and terms for describing population groups or people with protected characteristics.

As a dynamic document, we will continuously reflect on our practices and incorporate feedback from citizens. We welcome feedback and suggestions from other partners on how they use the guide and how it can be improved.

Some people may find some of these phrases difficult or triggering to read. Local support services can be found on www.asklion.co.uk or www.nottshelpyourself.org.uk, or a Google search for the term may include a wider range of national organisations.

For comments or questions, please contact public.health@nottinghamcity.gov.uk.

PUBLIC HEALTH THEMATIC AREAS

Instead of...	Try to use...	Rationale
ALCOHOL AND DRUGS		
Alcoholic	Person who drinks alcohol problematically Person who is dependent on alcohol	<i>Using person-first language allows the person to exist outside of their alcohol use. Note: some support fellowships will use 'alcoholic' to describe members. It should not be assumed that people are ok with you using this</i>
Drug/alcohol user/ misuser Addict	Person who uses alcohol/ drugs	<i>These phrases remove the 'person' from the focus – the 'person' is defined by their substance use. Instead, using person-first language allows people to exist beyond their alcohol or drug use</i>
Substance misuse or abuse	Substance use Alcohol and drug use	<i>This phrase suggests that people using drugs and/or alcohol are at fault, which can add stigma. 'Misuse' and 'abuse' are phrases which hold connotations of wrongdoing</i>
DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE		
Child pornography	Child abuse images or videos	<i>Pornography is created by consenting adults; children cannot consent to creating indecent images. Any images or photos of adults that are obtained or shared without consent are classified under 'image-based sexual abuse'</i>
Domestic violence	Domestic abuse	<i>Using 'abuse' and not 'violence' acknowledges that domestic abuse is not just physical. 'Abuse' is inclusive of financial, sexual and psychological control and abuse</i>
Revenge porn	Image-based sexual abuse	<i>Using 'revenge' gives the false impression that the survivor has done something wrong and deserves the abuse. Nobody ever deserves sexual violence</i>
Sexual violence or abuse victim	Survivor of sexual violence or abuse	<i>'Victim' holds connotations of weakness, vulnerability and powerlessness. The term 'survivor' is used to give back power and autonomy to people and show that they can have a life beyond their abuse</i>

Instead of...	Try to use...	Rationale
GAMBLING		
Gambling addict / problem gambler	Person with a gambling problem	<i>This avoids medicalisation and exacerbating stigma. It places the problem with gambling not in the person, and is inclusive of everyone who experiences harm because of their own or someone else's gambling</i>
	Gambling-related harm	<i>An umbrella term for all adverse effects of gambling</i>
	Gambling problem	<i>A situation where a person continues to gamble despite negative consequences</i>
MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION		
Committed / completed suicide	Took their life They died by suicide	<i>This is an outdated phrase from when suicide was considered a crime (as somebody might 'commit' theft. It suggests that the person who has died is to blame which adds stigma</i>
Mentally ill	Have mental illness / mental health problems	<i>Using person-first language acknowledges that a person is not defined by their condition. It is something that they have, not something that they are Wherever possible and appropriate use term for specific condition rather than a generic term</i>
Serious mental illness	Severe Mental Illness	<i>SMI (Severe Mental Illness) is often used as an abbreviation. Severe refers to a spectrum of mental ill-health (mild, moderate, severe). All mental health problems are potentially serious. It is misleading to infer that mental health can be categorised as serious / not serious</i>
Suffering from mental illness	Living with / experiences mental illness	<i>Terms like "suffering from" implies that a person cannot lead a happy and fulfilling life whilst living with mental illness</i>
They are bipolar/ schizophrenic, etc.	They have bipolar/ schizophrenia, etc.	<i>This approach to language puts the person before the diagnosis, reinforcing that the condition is just one aspect of their life, not their whole identity</i>

POPULATION GROUPS OR PEOPLE WITH PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS

Instead of...	Try to use...	Rationale
AGE		
Elderly	Older person / people	<i>We try to use respectful and inclusive language for older individuals to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and to recognise their experiences and contributions to Nottinghamshire and their local communities</i>
Person with dementia	Person living with dementia	<i>Person-first language respects the individuality of people by acknowledging that they live with a condition, rather than being labelled by it</i>
Frail	Person at high risk of adverse outcomes, admission to hospital or the need for long-term care	<i>Person-first language emphasises that individuals are more than their diagnoses – it highlights that a condition is something they experience, not their identity</i>
ETHNICITY		
Black and Minority Ethnic / Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BME/BAME)	Wherever possible, use specific ethnicities/ethnic group descriptions. If this is not possible, use 'Ethnic Minority Group'	<i>Government has moved away from the term 'BAME' as the merging of ethnic minority groups does not represent disparities across each community and can exclude groups not specified within the term, e.g., 'mixed' or 'other white'</i>
SEEKING ASYLUM		
Asylum seeker	Person seeking asylum	<i>Using person-first language acknowledges that a person is not defined by their condition. It is a characteristic that they have, not something that they are</i>

Instead of...	Try to use...	Rationale
NEURODIVERSITY		
Adult/person with autism	Autistic person Person on the autism spectrum	<i>Many autistic people see autism as a part of who they are. Research shows there isn't a single term accepted by everyone. 'Autistic' and 'on the autism spectrum' were the preferred terms among most autistic adults and families</i>
Children with autism	Children on the autism spectrum	<i>There is less agreement about how to describe children. Many autism organisations, particularly those focused on children and young people, use the terms 'with autism' or 'on the autism spectrum'</i>
Suffering from autism Mild, severe, disorder Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Disease	Autistic On the autism spectrum Autism as a condition or disability	<i>Phrases and words like 'suffering from autism' and 'severe' often cause strong reactions from autistic people. Many feel this devalues who they are or says that there is something wrong with them. Talking about the autism spectrum is an easy way around this. Condition or disability are also widely used, including by autism charities, but some autistic people don't like them</i>
SEX AND GENDER		
Preferred pronouns	Personal pronouns	<i>Pronouns (such as he/him, she/her, they/them) are used for people to identify their gender (or lack of). These pronouns are not 'preferred' as this suggests they are optional</i>
Sex change	Gender affirming / confirmation surgery	<i>We use this to acknowledge that the surgery is allowing a person to have the physical anatomy that matches their gender</i>
Sex/Gender	Sex = biological classification of a person (male, female, or intersex) Gender = a social construct that is defined by individuals (man/ women/ non-binary/ gender fluid, etc.)	<i>Sex is assigned at birth and may be different to a person's gender. It is important to differentiate between sex and gender to ensure people are able to express their identity</i>

Developed by Nottingham City Public Health Team

This Language Guide supports the Nottingham City Director of Public Health's Annual Report 2024/25 and is accompanied by an Organisational Handbook.

All documents are available to download from:

[**www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/information-for-residents/health-and-social-care/public-health/**](https://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/information-for-residents/health-and-social-care/public-health/)



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