

# The Language of Equality

A general consensus exists as to whether the terms below are acceptable or unacceptable in the UK. Some individuals may choose to self-identify in ways which are different to the general consensus and they have a right to do this. However, terms which are deemed to be generally unacceptable should not be used within a workplace setting.

The acceptability of terminology differs depending on the country in question and so different rules apply in different countries in the world. This terminology document is related to the UK.

All language changes over time, and therefore acceptable and unacceptable terminology will also change. It is important to regularly update ourselves to make sure that we are using the most acceptable terms. If you are unsure it is worth speaking to people to find out how they would prefer to be identified.

*Warning - There are some terms which are considered offensive which have been included in this list for clarity and to explain why they should not be used.*

**Black: (acceptable)** The most accepted term in current use for people of African and/or Caribbean descent.

**Coloured (unacceptable):** A term which is used indiscriminately to describe anybody who is not White. This term is not one which has been used by people to identify themselves, but one which has been ascribed by others. It is considered unacceptable due to this and its historical connection with racist attitudes and behaviours.

**People of Colour (acceptable)** A term, which originated in the United States of America, which is increasing in use in the UK to describe the experiences of people who are not of European heritage. It is often used to describe common experiences of systemic racism.

**Paki (unacceptable):** This has been used as a term of abuse for many years. It is extremely offensive no matter how, when and why people say it, and should not be used. For a lot of people, the term stands for racism, hatred and conflict. A common argument is that the term is just an abbreviation of Pakistani and is therefore acceptable; however, because of the way the word has been and is still used, it is a damaging and hurtful term. The term also tends to be used generally for Asian people, irrespective of their national origins, such as Indian or Bangladeshi people.

**Asian (acceptable but use with caution):** Geographically confusing since it ought to include the Chinese, but in common usage it does not. Probably for this reason 'South Asian' has been increasingly used to refer to those

originating in the Indian sub-continent, who come from several distinct regions in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. For a while it was generally accepted by the people concerned, unless used in a context where the many differences between 'Asian' groups ought to be recognised, in which case it would be taken for ignorance at least. Many people often prefer identification by country, for example Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani. Some British born people with Asian heritage may use British Asian.

**Ethnic(s) (unacceptable):** A completely meaningless term, though widely used. It denies any ethnicity of white majorities and has patronising nuances of simplicity and primitiveness when applied as an adjective to handbags, clothing and art.

**Ethnic Minority Group (acceptable):** Technically accurate and can be used for all such groups or a particular one. The sequence *minority ethnic group* is often preferred as it keeps the words 'ethnic' and 'group' together to stress that everyone has ethnicity, but some ethnic groups are minorities. English residents in Wales are a minority ethnic group, as are Welsh residents in England.

**Half Caste (unacceptable):** An old-fashioned term used to describe someone of dual heritage. Caste derives from a Latin word meaning pure. Calling a person half caste implies that they are 'half pure' and fails to recognise their full identity.

**Mixed Race (acceptable):** An acceptable term, however, 'race' is problematic - the idea that people can be neatly divided into different races has been used in the past to justify the extremely poor treatment of one group of people by another. Since the advent of genetics, it has been proven that people cannot be divided into groups in this way and that there is only one race - the human race. With this in mind, some people reject the term 'mixed race' and instead use other terms such as 'mixed heritage' or 'dual heritage'.

**Gypsy (acceptable but use with caution):** There are many different Traveller communities and many would not describe themselves as Gypsies. English Gypsies and Scottish Gypsy / Travellers are distinct ethnic groups and must be distinguished from Irish Travellers, New Travellers, Show and Fairground people, Boat people and Roma. The term originated in the 1600's in the mistaken belief that the Romany nomadic people to whom it was applied were originally Egyptian, when they were actually of north Indian descent. Gypsy, Roma and Travellers or GRT is a shorthand umbrella term that can be used when referring generically to all of the different Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

**Pikey (unacceptable):** It is an extremely offensive term used against Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. The term first appeared in common usage in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and is derived from the word 'turnpike', a device traditionally used to collect toll from roads which Travellers often used.

**Handicapped (unacceptable):** Many disabled people regard 'handicapped' as offensive because of its strong historical associations with mental defectiveness, permanent incapacity and dependency. It also suggests an inability to succeed in a competitive environment.

**Disabled People (acceptable):** This term is advocated by the British Council of Disabled People's Organisations and the Disabled People's Movement. It recognises that people are disabled more by their society than by their impairment. Since the emergence of the disability rights movement, use of this term has come to signify solidarity with the collective identity.

**People with disabilities (acceptable):** This term has historically been considered positive, because it emphasises people with impairments are first and foremost people. However, while it is unlikely to cause actual offence, it has been rejected by the Disabled People's Movement in the UK.

**The disabled (unacceptable):** Using terms like 'the disabled' tend to dehumanise people, identifying people in terms of their condition. They group together people who have no connection with each other, other than that they share a condition. If it is necessary to refer to a condition it is better to say, for example, 'people with a hearing impairment' or 'people with a visual impairment.'

<b>Unacceptable</b>	<b>Acceptable</b>
Affliction, handicap	Impairment, condition, disorder, difficulty
Spastics, epileptics: <i>this term can dehumanise people, identifying them only in terms of their impairment. These are medically imposed labels which serve to stigmatise people.</i>	People with cerebral palsy, people with epilepsy
Mental handicap, mental age of	Learning difficulties, learning disabilities, learning-disabled, severe or profound learning difficulties
Victim of, crippled by, suffering from, afflicted by	Person who has, person with
Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair	Wheelchair user, uses a wheelchair, has impaired mobility
The deaf	Deaf, partially deaf, profoundly deaf
The blind, visually challenged	Blind or partially sighted person, person with little or no sight, visual impairment
Dumb	Person with a speech difficulty, person with non-verbal communication, person who uses verbal communication

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**Sexual Orientation:** A term that describes a person based on who they are emotionally and physically attracted to, regardless of whether a person act on this attraction. It is inappropriate to use the term 'sexual preference', as sexual orientation is not considered a choice.

**Gay (acceptable):** The term 'gay' is acceptable when describing the sexual orientation of both men and women; however, it is more commonly used to describe men. In recent years the term has been used to describe something as bad or rubbish, or is used to insult somebody, regardless of their sexual orientation. When the word 'gay' is used in a pejorative way it implies that being gay is wrong or negative, which contributes to homophobia and can cause a lot of harm.

**Lesbian (acceptable):** The term 'lesbian' is used to describe women who are emotionally and physically attracted to other women. However, caution is needed as some women may prefer to describe themselves as gay rather than lesbian. If you are talking to an individual, and you need to refer to their sexual orientation, but are unsure, it is best to ask politely what word the person prefers, making certain that they are comfortable with you using that word.

**Homosexual (unacceptable):** There is a clinical history to the word 'homosexual', which has been used by anti-gay campaigners to suggest that gay people are somehow diseased or psychologically and emotionally disordered. Use of the word 'gay' is preferred.

**Bisexual/Bi:** An emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender or sex

**Asexual:** A lack of sexual attraction to others

**Queer (proceed with caution):** An old derogatory slang word for describing lesbians, bisexual people and gay men. Unacceptable for general use, but the word has been reclaimed in more recent years by (some of) the LGBT community and some academics to include anyone whose sexual orientation or gender identity doesn't fit with societal norms.

**Heterosexism:** The belief that heterosexuality is normal and the norm.

**Heteronormativity:** The sociocultural conditions that allow heterosexist and/or homophobic attitudes to exist.

**Biological sex (acceptable):** The categorisation of people based on hormones, chromosomes and genitalia. Two sexes, male or female, are most

common, however sex is not binary and there are people who exhibit a combination of male and female sex characteristics. Sex is listed on a person's birth certificate.

**Intersex (acceptable):** Where a person is born with a combination of male and female biological characteristics, such as hormones, chromosomes or genitalia.

**Assigned sex (acceptable):** Used by some as an alternative to "biological sex". For example, "assigned male at birth" or "assigned female at birth". This acknowledges that someone (often a doctor) has assigned a label to that person based on their genitalia.

**Gender (acceptable):** A social construct in that children learn how to behave in a manner typically associated with their assigned sex. This can include roles, clothes, emotional behaviours, and interests.

**Gender Identity (acceptable):** Concerns someone's internal sense of their own gender, either man, woman or some other gender, this may or may not align with their assigned sex.

**'The girls in admin' (unacceptable):** Adult women should be referred to as women not girls. There is no set age at which a girl becomes a woman, but a reasonable guide is that after 16 years of age a person is no longer a girl but rather a woman. Generally, no offence will be intended, but we should obviously not refer to adults as if they were children.

It is unnecessary (and bad practice) to add modifiers to a profession, for example, lady doctor or woman psychiatrist. This implies that the rightful owners of the profession are male and that it is an oddity for a woman to own this role. Similarly, such modifiers should not be applied to roles occupied by men, such as male nurse, male secretary.

Terms which sexualise, infantilise e.g. baby, or put women on a pedestal e.g. princess, are unacceptable in a professional workplace environment, despite common use outside the workplace.

Care should be taken at all times to use gender-neutral terms, instead of gender-specific terms. The following list might help:

<b>Gender-specific Terms</b>	<b>Gender-neutral Terms</b>
Businessman/woman	<b>Business person, manager, cutive</b>
Delivery Man	<b>Delivery clerk, courier</b>
Layman	<b>Lay person</b>
Miss, Mrs	<b>Ms (unless a specific preference been stated)</b>

Spokesman/woman	<b>Spokesperson, representative</b>
Workman	<b>Worker, operative, trades pe</b>
Cleaning Lady	<b>Cleaner</b>
Best man for the job	<b>Best person for the job</b>
Manpower	<b>Jobs, staffing, human resour our force, personnel, workers, -kforce</b>
'manning the desk'	<b>'Staffing the desk'</b>

**Trans/transgender (acceptable):** An umbrella term for people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they are assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms defined below. Use the descriptive term preferred by the person. Many transgender people are prescribed hormones by their doctors to bring their bodies into alignment with their gender identity. Some undergo surgery as well. But not all transgender people can or will take these steps, and a transgender identity is not exclusively dependent upon physical appearance or medical procedures. Although trans/transgender is an umbrella term it is now most commonly used to describe someone who wants to make a permanent transition and not people such as crossdressers who do not wish to permanently change their gender.

**Transsexual (proceed with caution):** An older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities. Still preferred by some people in the trans community who have permanently changed - or seek to change - their bodies through medical interventions, including, but not limited to, hormones and/or surgeries. The word transsexual is usually used to describe someone who transitions from male to female or vice versa, and therefore does not include people who identify as some other gender or as no gender.

Unlike transgender, transsexual is not an umbrella term. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and prefer the word transgender. It is best to ask which term a person prefers.

**Cisgender (acceptable):** Used to describe people whose biological sex is aligned with their gender identity. Cis-" is a Latin prefix meaning "on the same side as," and is therefore an antonym of "trans-."

**Non-Binary (acceptable):** Used by some people who experience their gender identity as falling outside the categories of man and woman. Many people believe that there are only two genders, however gender isn't binary. Some may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman, as a combination of both or as wholly different from these terms.



**Transphobia:** A range of negative attitudes and feelings towards transgender people or people perceived to be transgender.

**Transition (acceptable):** Transitioning is not often a one-step procedure; it can be a complex process that occurs over a long period of time. Transitioning can include some or all of the following personal, medical, and legal steps: telling one's family, friends, and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and one or more types of surgery. The exact steps involved in transition vary from person to person. **Avoid the phrase "sex change" as transitioning doesn't necessarily have to involve changing ones "sex" or surgery of any sort. By using the phrase "sex change" it implies that a person's transition is not legitimate if it does not involve change of biological sex.**

**Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) (acceptable):** Also called Gender Confirmation Surgery (GCS) or Gender Reassignment Surgery (GRS). Refers to doctor-supervised surgical interventions and can be only one small part of transition or not part of transition at all (see transition above). **Avoid the phrase "sex change operation" and referring to someone as being "pre-op" or "post-op" as not all transgender people choose to, or can afford to, undergo medical surgeries and referring to people as such suggests that their transition is not legitimate because they have not undergone surgery.**

**Cross-dresser (acceptable):** While anyone may wear clothes associated with a different sex, the term cross-dresser is typically used to refer to men who occasionally wear clothes, makeup, and accessories stereotypically associated with women. This activity can be a form of self-expression, fetish or entertainment. Cross-dressers do not usually wish to permanently change their sex or live full-time as women, however there have been cases where people have realised their wish to do so through cross-dressing. **Replaces the term "transvestite". Avoid the word "transvestite", unless someone specifically self- identifies that way as it has been used as a derogatory term to insult people in the LGBT+ community.**

**Drag Queen (acceptable):** (type of cross-dressing) A person who usually dresses in hyper-feminized or gender non-conforming clothing, and often acts with exaggerated femininity and in feminine gender roles which for the purpose of entertainment. While drag is very much associated with gay men and gay culture, there are drag artists of all sexualities. Other drag performers include drag kings, women who perform in male roles and attire; faux queens, who are women who dress in an exaggerated style to emulate drag queens; and faux kings, who are men who dress to impersonate drag kings. **Just like Cross-dressing being a drag queen/king is not an indication that that person's gender identity is not aligned with their assigned sex.**

**Gender Non-Conforming (acceptable):** Used to describe some people whose gender expression is different from stereotypical expectations of masculinity and femininity. Please note that not all gender non-conforming people identify as transgender nor are all transgender people gender non-conforming (for example a transgender woman who dresses in a feminine way).

**Gender conformity (acceptable):** The belief that people's gender should conform to their sex (i.e. that men should behave in a masculine way, females in a feminine way) which reinforces gender stereotypes and negative attitudes toward people who do not conform.

**Harassment because of sex:** Any unwanted conduct by an individual which has the purpose or effect of violating their dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment because of their sex. This is prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.

**Sexual harassment:** Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, or used as a basis for employment decisions, or has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment (Equality Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) definition). This is prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.

***"I maintain that this struggle with language has to be worth it...how can it not be right to watch what we say and avoid offence, or to address people and describe them in terms they find acceptable? If education is not the place to observe and reflect upon language I am not sure where it could be done" C Gaine (2005)***

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