

Use of Language when referring to people with disabilities

Use of language is important to foster inclusive attitudes towards people with disabilities. This can be achieved by applying the following:

Good Practice:

- Always put the person first not the disability, for example use phrasing such as “people with disability”, “a person with a hearing impairment”
- When necessary, refer to a person as having a (specified) disability, for example 'has cerebral palsy'. Phrases such as 'suffers from', 'stricken with' or 'victim of' should not be used.

Positive communication:

- Speak directly to the person, not to their support person.
- Don't make the person's disability an exclusive topic of conversation, but don't be afraid to refer to it if necessary.
- Ask the person if they have any specific requirements, such as 'can you hear clearly here?' or 'is the table low enough to write on?' Most people are prepared to explain their requirements.
- Avoid phrases that imply a stereotyped view of people with disabilities such as 'it must be terrible for you' (the person may not regard their disability as a great tragedy) or 'aren't you wonderful' if the person performs some everyday activity.
- Speak naturally and use words like 'look' and 'see' for example to a person who is blind. Blind people understand the concepts and use the words themselves.

Some words and phrases to avoid:

- Avoid referring to people by categories: 'the blind', 'the disabled'. People may have similar disabilities, but we are all unique individuals.
- Avoid negative words and phrases that demean people with disabilities, such as unfit, defective, incapacitated or handicapped.
- Avoid expressions that imply restriction, such as 'wheelchair-bound'. A wheelchair is an aid to mobility. It is better to say 'uses a wheelchair' or 'is a wheelchair user'.
- Avoid silly euphemisms such as 'intellectually challenged' or 'differently abled'. Most people with disabilities do not like them. It is better to say 'person with a disability'.