

Changing the Story of Social Care: Let's Talk About Language

About This Guide

Some of the words used in social care can feel confusing, outdated or even negative.

That is why we worked together with local people to notice the language that does not feel right and to explore clearer, more human ways to say what we really mean. Whether that is in everyday conversations, support plans or other written records.

This guide is here to help anyone working in or around social care to pause, reflect and be curious about the words they use. It is not about getting language perfect, but about starting conversations and supporting a future where everyone feels respected, valued and understood.

This guide encourages us all to speak and write in ways that are **honest, clear** and **kind**.

Language is always changing, and the more we explore the words we use, the more our thinking grows. We will keep this guide under review and we would love to keep learning together. If you have suggestions, questions or examples to share, please email us at Communications@Optalis.org or GetInvolved@Wokingham.gov.uk.



Words Matter

The language we use in social care shapes how people are treated. It can help people live full lives or get in the way of good support. Words can make someone feel safe, included and valued or they can leave someone feeling left out, labelled or like they don't matter.

Using Everyday Language

The words we use should make sense to everyone. That means avoiding jargon and writing the way that people actually speak.

Examples:

Instead of: "James requires support with personal care and dressing tasks."

Say: **"James needs help to brush his teeth, have a shower and get dressed. He likes to wear jeans and a t-shirt."**

Instead of: "Kevin finds community environments overwhelming unless quiet and familiar."

Say: **"Noisy spaces make Kevin anxious. He feels calmer in quiet areas."**

Why Words Matter

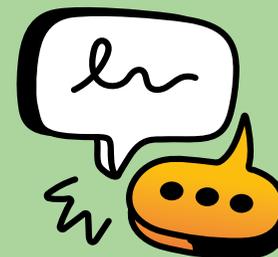
Some words we use about people who draw on care and support can make people feel helpless, suggest a power imbalance, sound impersonal or not really tell us much about the person.



"Some words used by professionals are confusing or feel scary for families."



"We should avoid using the label "vulnerable", because anyone can be vulnerable depending on the time or situation. It is better to describe what makes the person unsafe and why, rather than applying a broad label."



"Simple words help me because English is not my first language"

Be Curious

Take time to think about the words we use and the meaning behind them. For example, the word respite, is defined as “a break from something difficult or unpleasant.” Caring for a family member may not always be easy, but this definition might suggest that the person is the problem. That’s why we prefer to say “short breaks” as way to describe the support offered to families.

This isn’t about right words and wrong words. It’s about pausing to reflect on what certain words and phrases reflect and reinforce.

While creating this guide, we spent time exploring different ways of using language, and we’ve shared some of those ideas here. These aren’t intended as substitutions or replacements, but as a way of showing our thinking.

There are many more words we discussed than we could include here, and we’ve listed some so you can explore and get curious for yourself.

Instead of	Try saying
Service Users/Customers/ Clients/Our Guys	Always use the person’s name or you could say ‘people we support’
Personal care	Getting ready / Looking after myself/ Describe the actual tasks
Community access	Going out/Name the place or activity
Transfers	How I get around in my house, how I get up and down stairs, how do I get out and about, How I get where you want to go
Mobility	Moving around
Refused care/non-compliant	Said no to support today/ Chose not to
Challenging behaviour	Showed distress or was upset/ describe what the person is doing and why
Discharged/Closure	Moved on or left the service
Placement	Home or Support Setting
Crisis/Contingency Planning	Planning for Change
Suffers with...	Living with...



"Saying 'suffering with...' rather than 'living with...' sets low expectations for the person. It implies a lesser quality of life and suggests a person cannot live well."

"Some colleagues think using the exact language of the Care Act is essential when assessing a person's needs and seeking funding. What budget managers are looking to understand is the person's story; technical and medical information does not tell us the whole picture. We want to know how they live their life and the impact, in their own words"



Other Words That Made Us Go 'Hmm...'

What do you think about multi-disciplinary? capacity? advocacy? vulnerable? promote independence? Can you think of any others?

Describing How a Person is Supported

When we define people by their support needs or labels it reduces them to tasks. Using phrases like "bedbound," "toilet Carol," or "feed John" places the focus on the support activity instead of the person, which can feel dehumanising and disrespectful. Language, such as "Sangeeta is assisted from her bed" or "help John with his meal" emphasises dignity and choice. It reminds us that support is something we do with a person, not who that person is.

We can still talk about difficult situations clearly and factually without using negative or judgmental language. For example:

"When Tom gets upset, he might throw items. He will tell you he is not happy and may start shouting. It is important to give Tom space and remove any objects he could throw."

This way, we stay honest about what happens while keeping the language respectful.



First or Third Person?

Writing “I like...” in a person’s records can feel personal, but if the person did not write or say it themselves it could seem false. Instead, say things like:

- Nita likes...
- Nita says...
- Nita may...

This still centres the person without pretending to be them.

Being Clear About Responsibilities

Words can either help us take responsibility or hide it behind confusion. Using lots of jargon or ‘system language’ can make things seem too complicated or unclear. We want to be clear and honest so everyone knows who is responsible and what will happen.

“Words can have different meanings to different people and also in different cultures”

“The word ‘non-compliant’ sounds like the person is in prison; it gives the impression of ‘you have to follow my rules.’”

Avoid Acronyms and Abbreviations

They may feel quicker or more professional, but they can cause confusion and leave people on the outside. When we use acronyms and abbreviations, we may unintentionally hold power through language, making it harder for others to fully understand the information being shared.

What About Medical Information?

Medical advice should stay clear and correct. We do not rewrite it. But we can link to the official information and explain what it means. This keeps everyone safe.

Example:

“Josh needs you to follow his PEG (Percutaneous Endoscopic Gastrostomy) feeding plan from the nurse, this is how he has his food and drinks and medication.”



Do We Rely Too Much on the Word Support?

We noticed that we say support a lot but sometimes a simpler word is clearer and can describe how the person prefers to be helped:

Vague	Clear
Supporting with mobility	Helping Sam move around his home safely
Providing emotional support	Spending time listening to Ayla and what is troubling her
Support with medication	Reminding Pat to take her tablets



How To Kindly Challenge Unclear or Unkind Words:

Ask for clarity:

“Can you explain what you mean?”

“I’m not sure I understand, could you say that another way?”

Suggest another way:

“Could we say it like this? It might be clearer/kinder.”

Explain the impact:

“That word might upset or confuse someone. What if we said...”

Make it a team habit:

Agree to gently flag unclear or unkind words in meetings.

Suggest more human, clear alternatives together.

“We use the word “carer” a lot, but what do we really mean? Paid carers, friends, family, different, but all valuable.”

Final Thoughts

We may not always get it right but it's important we try. We want to create a culture where people feel respected, understood, and valued. That starts with the words we use.

So, ask yourself:



Is this clear?



Is this kind?



Does this sound like something I would want said about me or someone I care about?

"Sometimes we're expected to use certain words by regulators like the CQC or when working with health services or funders. But where possible, we will always choose words that reflect our values and the way we work."

"When we talk about 'filling voids,' it's easy to detach from the reality that this is about a person's home and relationships. Instead of seeing it as a task to complete, we should view it as an opportunity to help someone find a happy home where they can belong."



Shaped by Your Ideas

This guide was created with the help of many people. We would like to thank the local people and groups for their time, ideas and support. Your input played an important role in shaping this guide, and we are grateful for your contributions.



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Get in touch

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