

GET CURIOUS ABOUT THE LANGUAGE OF SOCIAL CARE

Findings & guidance from positive language workshops

March 2026



InclusionNorth

Creating a Culture of Positive Language in Social Care

Introduction

In social care, the words we use matter. They shape how we see people and how we work with them.

But too often, the language used in and about social care sounds nothing like the way we speak at home with our families or when chatting with friends. It can become technical, abstract, or full of labels. Words that quietly place people into boxes that are hard to step out of.

This graphic by Dr Pen Mendonça for Gloriously Ordinary Language¹, 'Words That Make Us Go Hmmm', shows examples of words that can feel harmful in the context of care. It includes categories such as:

- **Blaming words** (e.g., challenging, non-compliant, vulnerable)
- **Silly words** (e.g., personal care)
- **Them-and-us words** (e.g., service user, professional, client, case)

Would you use this language around your kitchen table?

WORDS THAT MAKE US GO Hmmm...

BLAMING WORDS	SILLY WORDS	SORTING OFFICE WORDS	DECEPTIVE WORDS	THEM & US WORDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• COMPLEX• VULNERABLE• HARD TO REACH• NON-COMPLIANT• CHALLENGING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ACCESSING THE COMMUNITY• PERSONAL CARE• ACTIVITIES OF DAILY LIVING• TOILETING• MOBILISING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SIGNPOSTING• PATHWAY• PLACEMENT• ASSESSMENT• TRANSITION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• INDEPENDENT• PREVENTION• SAFE• COMMUNITY• CARE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• CLIENT• SERVICE USER• PROFESSIONAL• CASE• CUSTOMER

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These words aren't "bad" on their own, but they can subtly shape attitudes, influence decisions, or create distance between people.

This is particularly true around the language used to describe disabled people.

Workshops to explore language

Across three workshops, we brought together people who use social care services and professionals from across Newcastle. Together, we explored everyday language and the ways it can help or hinder people's lives.

We examined the 'Gloriously Ordinary Language' modelⁱⁱ and talked about "words that make us go hmmm..." - terms, phrases, and labels that might seem harmless but can subtly shape expectations or create power imbalances. We also heard how people sometimes adopt system language simply to "fit in" or be taken seriously.

Labels and their impact

People reflected on labels they've been given that are sometimes helpful, sometimes harmful.

We heard that:

- Labels can reduce people to a single characteristic.
- Disabled people are labelled far more often than non-disabled people.
- Some labels stick for life, shaping how others see and treat someone.

This matters because labels influence expectations, opportunities, and relationships, often quietly and unintentionally.

The problem with acronyms

Acronyms were pinpointed as particularly problematic, with consensus from our group that their use should be limited wherever possible.

They were described as confusing, excluding, and sometimes dehumanising - for both professionals and people using services.

Acronyms rarely save meaningful time and often create unnecessary distance and power imbalance. When written down, but particularly when spoken allowed.

As a group, we fully advise people to limit their use.

Not about policing language but getting curious

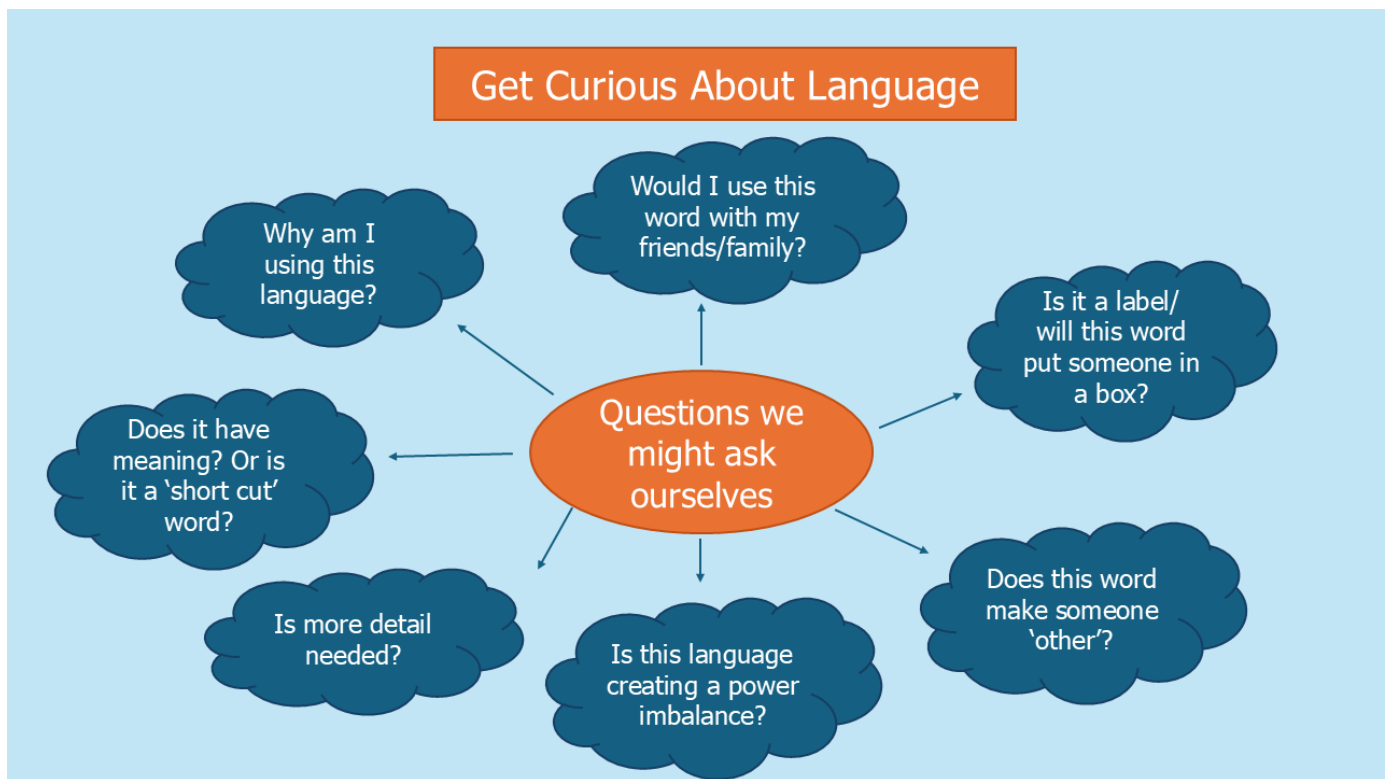
To create a culture of positive language isn't about policing language or banning certain words. It's about context, awareness, and curiosity.

Instead of telling people what they "should" or "shouldn't" say, we invite everyone to cultivate curiosity.

We developed a set of questions to help us pause and think about the language we use:

- Why am I using this word?
- Would I use it with family or friends?
- Is it a label? Does it put someone in a box?
- Does it create a "them and us" dynamic?
- Does it reinforce a power imbalance?
- Does it mean anything? Or is it shorthand?
- Does it need more detail to feel human?

The mind map we created below demonstrates our thinking and the questions we might ask. We encourage you to use it whilst starting to get curious, both for yourself and as a team.



How language shapes culture and thinking

One of the strongest insights from the workshops was that language doesn't just represent what we think, it actively influences what we think, how we behave, and the culture we create around us.

The culture of social care is partly formed through the words, phrases and shorthand we use every day. Over time, these words can shape expectations about people, define what we think is "possible," or subtly reinforce power imbalances.

When certain terms are used repeatedly, such as "non-compliant, challenging, service user, or acronyms like LD", they can unintentionally position people as problems to be managed rather than individuals with

rich identities, preferences and potential. This can cause real harm. For example:

- **Blaming or risk-focused terms** can make people appear difficult or dangerous, affecting how teams approach them and narrowing their opportunities.
- **System shorthand** can distance professionals from the human reality of someone's life, reducing people to labels like "case" or "client."
- **Acronyms** can depersonalise or exclude people, especially when individuals with learning disabilities have shared that terms like "LD" feel disrespectful when spoken aloud.
- **Lifelong labels** can shape how someone is perceived long after the original context, such as being remembered primarily for one childhood incident or characteristic.

This is why curiosity about language is so important: our words can quietly limit people, or they can open new possibilities.

By examining how we speak and what we write, we are also choosing the kind of culture we build. One that is more human, respectful and hopeful.

How to start to change the culture of language in social care?

The Curiosity Ripple Effect

The way to create a culture of respectful language begins with each of us.

Curiosity grows ripple-style, from the inside out:

1. **Start with yourself**
Notice your own language — including your assumptions.
2. **Explore with your team**
Playfully and without judgement

3. **Extend to your organisation and partners**

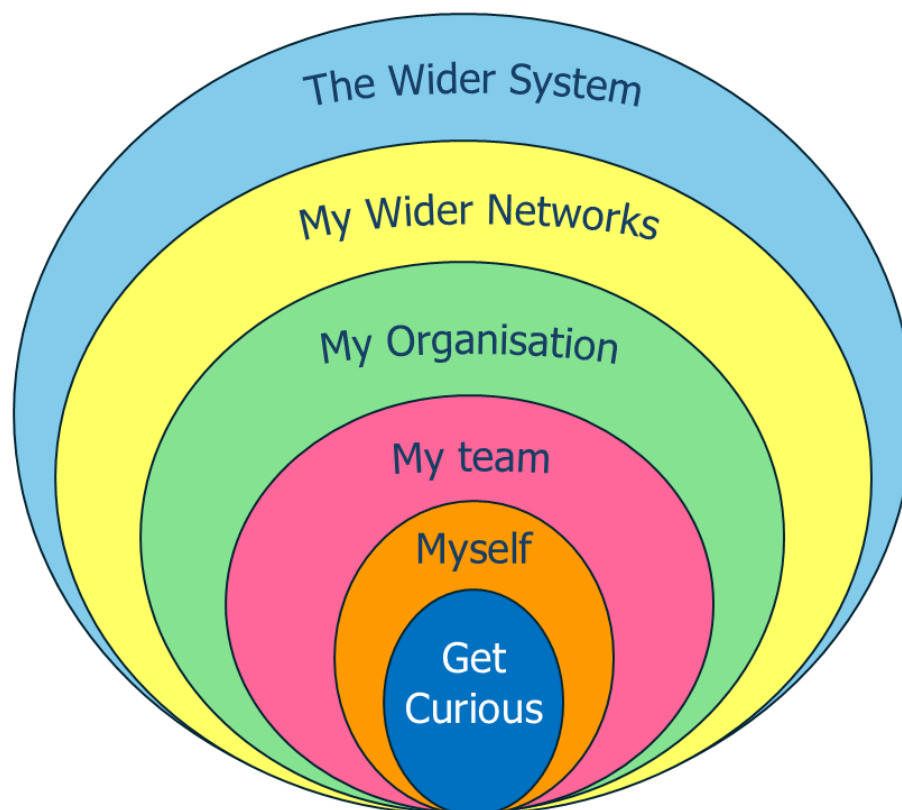
Create shared reflection spaces.

4. **Influence the wider system**

Model language that is human, ordinary and hopeful.

Culture change works best when challenges are respectful, well-timed, and often one-to-one rather than public.

The Curiosity Ripple Effect Diagram:



How to respectfully challenge the language used by others?

- Start by getting curious yourself, asking the questions highlighted in our mind map and then moving to explore this with people around you.
- You can use the curiosity ripple effect diagram to influence who you work on this with next.
- Get playful about how you do it both for yourself and in groups.

- If you need to challenge someone, do so respectfully and invite them to look at this document – to start getting curious themselves.
- Explore specifically the use of acronyms in your organisations – promote their misuse more widely in the hope you influence wider change.

Our aim

We want the language of social care to reflect real lives, real people, and real possibilities, and to limit the harm that words can sometimes cause.

We invite you to get curious, notice the language around you, and explore what becomes possible when our words start to shift.

And as our workshop participants reminded us, curiosity isn't just for social care, it's something society can embrace, from early education to everyday community interactions.

ⁱ Words that make us go hmmm' graphic by Dr Pen Mendonca for Gloriously Ordinary Language

ⁱⁱ Gloriously Ordinary Language, Tricia Nicoll & Bryony Shannon:

<https://www.gloriouslyordinarylanguage.co.uk/>