

# 10 DEI phrases I don't use any more

## And what I say instead



### Foreword

#### Language is never neutral.

In equality, diversity and inclusion work, the words we choose do more than describe reality — they shape it. They signal who holds power, who is centred, who is blamed, and who is protected. Over time, certain phrases become comfortable. They circulate in boardrooms, policies, strategy documents and conference panels. They sound progressive. They feel safe. But safety for institutions is not the same as justice for people.

This blog is not about semantics. It is about systems.

Too often, organisational language softens responsibility:

- Communities become “hard to reach”.
- Representation becomes “a diverse panel”.
- Inequality becomes “a journey”.
- Structural exclusion becomes “meritocracy”.

The result? Vague language. Vague accountability. Minimal change.

Working within the framework of the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty requires more than aspiration. It requires specificity. It requires measurable outcomes. It requires naming power, not avoiding it.

Retiring these phrases is not about political correctness. It is about precision. It is about moving from comfort to clarity. It is about designing differently rather than describing differently.

Because when the language shifts, the expectations shift.

And when expectations shift, systems begin to move.



# 10 DEI Phrases I Don't Use Anymore — And What I Say Instead

Language shapes culture.

If the words are vague, the action usually is too.

As someone who works within the framework of the **Equality Act 2010** and the Public Sector Equality Duty, I've learned that clarity matters. Precision matters. Accountability matters.

Here are 10 phrases I've retired — and what I use instead.

## 1. “Hard to reach communities”

### Why it's a problem:


They're not hard to reach. You're just not reaching them.


This phrase subtly blames communities for institutional disengagement. It ignores power, history, trust, and structural exclusion.

### Say this instead:

- “Communities we have not built trust with”
- “Groups structurally excluded from our services”
- “Communities we have not designed access for”

### Example:

 “We struggle to engage hard-to-reach ethnically diverse people.”

 “Our engagement model does not work for ethnically diverse communities. We need to redesign access and gain their trust.”



## 2. “We had a diverse panel”

**Why it’s a problem:** Representation on a stage isn’t the same as power in the system.


One event photo does not equal systemic inclusion.

### **Say this instead:**

- “We are diversifying decision-making spaces”
- “We have changed who holds budget and influence”
- “We are building leadership pathways”

### **Example:**

 “Look how diverse our conference panel was.”

 “Two of our panellists now sit on our advisory board with voting power.”

### 3. “Culture fit”

#### Why it’s a problem:

Usually code for comfort and similarity.

It often protects sameness and penalises difference.

#### Say this instead:

- “Values alignment”
- “Contribution to team culture”
- “Adds perspective we don’t currently have”

#### Example:

✗ “They weren’t the right culture fit.”

✓ “We prioritised candidates who demonstrated collaborative decision-making and accountability.”

## 4. “Underrepresented groups”

### Why it’s a problem:

Underrepresented where? By whom? Compared to what data?

Without context, it’s meaningless.

### Say this instead:

- “Black women are underrepresented in senior leadership in our organisation”
- “Disabled staff are 2% of our workforce but 18% of the local population”

Be specific. Name the gap.



## 5. “Giving them a voice”

### Why it’s a problem:

They already have a voice. The issue is who’s listening.

This phrase centres the institution as benevolent gatekeeper.

### Say this instead:

- “We are removing barriers to participation”
- “We are acting on lived experience feedback”
- “We are redistributing decision-making power”

### Example:

✗ “We’re giving ethnically diverse young people a voice.”

✓ “Young people co-designed this policy and hold us accountable for delivery.”

## 6. “Unconscious bias training will fix it”

### Why it’s a problem:

Awareness without accountability changes nothing.

Research shows that bias training alone rarely changes structural outcomes.

### Say this instead:

- “We have changed our recruitment scoring system”
- “We anonymise shortlisting”
- “We publish pay gap data annually”

Structural redesign > awareness workshop.



## 7. “Best person for the job”

### Why it’s a problem:

Based on which criteria? Designed by who? Measured how?  
Merit is not neutral. It reflects what systems reward.

### Say this instead:

- “The candidate who met the published criteria”
- “The candidate with the strongest evidence against the scoring matrix”
- “The candidate whose skills match our strategic need”

Transparency protects fairness.



## 8. “We’re on a journey”

**Why it’s a problem:** If you’ve been “on a journey” for 10 years, it’s not a journey. It’s avoidance. Journeys have milestones.

**Say this instead:**

- “We have three measurable equity targets this year”
- “We will report progress publicly in March”
- “We missed this target and here’s why”

Accountability beats metaphor.

## 9. “Meritocracy”

**Why it’s a problem:** In unequal systems, meritocracy is often mythology.

If access to education, networks, safety, and opportunity are unequal, outcomes won’t be neutral.

**Say this instead:**

- “We aim for fair opportunity”
- “We are reducing structural barriers”
- “We measure outcomes by protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010”

## 10. “We treat everyone the same”

**Why it’s a problem:** That’s equality theatre.

Equity is responsive, not identical.

The **Equality Act 2010** recognises reasonable adjustments for a reason. Fairness sometimes requires difference.

**Say this instead:**

- “We apply equitable approaches”
- “We make reasonable adjustments”
- “We tailor support to need”

**Example:**

✘ “Everyone gets the same deadline.”

✔ “We apply reasonable adjustments where disability impacts working patterns.”

## **Bonus: “Diverse hire” If you know, you know.**

One hire ≠ systemic change.

One person ≠ representation.

One appointment ≠ culture shift.

This phrase reduces a human being to a category.

### **Say this instead:**

- “We are diversifying our workforce pipeline”
- “We are embedding inclusive recruitment practice”
- “We have improved representation at middle management level by 12%”

People are not diversity strategy.



## The Pattern

When language is:

- Vague
- Passive
- Non-specific
- Blame-shifting
- Comfort-protecting

It usually signals shallow change.

When language is:


- Specific
- Data-driven
- Power-aware
- Outcome-focused
- Accountable

It signals structural intent.

Be specific.

Name the power.

Design differently.

 **YOUR TURN:** What's the one DEI phrase you can't stand — and what would you replace it with?

## Conclusion

The phrases in this blog are not “bad” because they offend. They are problematic because they obscure. They:

- Blur responsibility
- Protect comfort
- Dilute accountability
- Centre institutions instead of people
- Describe change without demanding it

If equality work is to be credible, language must be aligned to action. That means:

- Naming the specific inequity
- Identifying who holds power
- Publishing measurable targets
- Designing structural interventions
- Reporting transparently on progress

Anything less is narrative without redesign.

The Equality Act 2010 is not a metaphor. It is legislation.

Equity is not identical treatment. It is responsive fairness.

Representation is not optics. It is power.

So, the invitation is simple:

Audit your language.

Replace vagueness with specificity.

Replace metaphor with metrics.

Replace comfort with accountability.

Because culture is shaped by what we repeatedly say — and what we repeatedly tolerate.

Be specific.

Name the power.

Design differently.

And if there's a phrase you've retired, add it to the list.







Equality and Diversity UK

**Training ♦ Resources ♦ Network**  
**[info@equalityanddiversity.co.uk](mailto:info@equalityanddiversity.co.uk)**

**0161 763 4783**