

Spotlight on... language

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The Considerate Constructors Scheme's 'Spotlight on...' initiative focuses on different areas associated with improving the image of construction, and raises awareness among registered sites, companies and suppliers about the issues and how to help.

Spotlight on... language

‘Spotlight on... language’ focuses on inappropriate, offensive and foul language used in the construction industry and how it could cause offence to both those working on site and anyone passing-by.

The Scheme often receives complaints from members of the public who have been unfortunate to have experienced inconsiderate behaviour in some form by those working in construction. However, sometimes those working in construction also witness or are subjected to unacceptable conduct and turn to the Scheme for help.

One such recent example was from an operative who heard offensive language on a daily basis but felt that to challenge every instance would lead to confrontation several times in any one day. It is unfortunate that this is not an isolated incident but indicative of a problem that has yet to be fully addressed.

Most organisations will have policies, procedures and company values in place that detail their expectations with regard to employee behaviour and conduct, including the use of inappropriate, offensive and foul language. These will express that all employees are treated fairly and without discrimination, as well as with respect and dignity. However, while these policies and values are firmly embedded in offices, they often do not filter through to site level. The Scheme’s

research has identified that many company policies focus on the impact that inappropriate language can have on the public rather than the effect it can also have on the workforce.

It is vitally important that this message is cascaded throughout the company and particularly at site level, where site management staff are responsible for implementing these rules over a large, diverse workforce and often over an extensive site area.

The Government’s **Construction 2025** strategy sets out a clear vision of where the industry should be by 2025, stating that people are one of the key factors in ensuring future growth. The vision is for the industry to be known for attracting and retaining a diverse group of multi-talented people, but the report stresses that the workforce needs to be much more diverse if it is to meet the challenges of the future. It is therefore essential that everyone working in the industry understands the effect that using inappropriate, offensive and foul language can have on the image of the industry, and as a consequence, its ability to attract the very best talent.



Facts and figures

A CITB survey conducted in 2014 and answered by over 500 construction professionals, revealed that sexist, racist, and homophobic language is not simply a problem on sites and in the construction industry as a whole, but is unfortunately quite prevalent.

The survey discovered that:

- 61% had heard sexist language at work in the past year, and 14% said they heard it once a week or more

- More than half (53%) of respondents had heard racist language at work in the past 12 months and 14% claimed to have heard racist language at least once a week
- Almost half (48%) of workers had heard homophobic language in the past year, while 13% had heard it at least once a week
- 51% reported hearing ageist language in the past 12 months, with 11% claiming to hear it once a week or more.

Law and legislation

The use of inappropriate language is often included as part of the larger topic of equality and diversity which is covered under legislation.

The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in the wider society through its aim to promote equal rights for everyone. This includes the use of inappropriate language which may cause offence or upset.

The Government has detailed types of discrimination and how these can arise, especially in the workplace. The website also lists what you can do if you think you have been unfairly discriminated against.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has written a series of guides to explain employee's rights and equality laws under The Equality Act 2010. The website also provides links to further information in respect to guidance for workers and employers.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission also provides a number of ideas and content for equality training, as well as providing further links on your responsibilities as an employer.

The Equality Duty is a duty on public bodies and others carrying out public functions. It ensures that organisations consider the needs of all individuals in their day to day work.



External resources

Please see the following resources for guidance on dealing with the issue of offensive and inappropriate language in the workplace:

- **Acas** provide information, advice, training, conciliation and other services for employers and employees to help prevent or resolve workplace problems. Amongst the various topics Acas cover, they provide information on inappropriate language used with regards to **sexual orientation** and **religion**.
- **ThinkB4YouSpeak** is an American campaign aimed at students and parents; its website has useful tips for anyone who would like to eliminate negative language about lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people. Over half of all students report hearing homophobic remarks at school but offensive remarks also occur in the workplace.
- Cardiff University's 2011 report '**Insight into ill-treatment in the workplace**' summarises the findings of a national study into ill-treatment in the workplace. The report provides an authoritative account of workplace ill-treatment patterns, causes and solutions. Page 31 details the ill-treatment of a young woman who was subjected to bad language.
- The **Equality and Human Rights Commission** published their report '**Equality and Diversity: Good practice for the construction sector**' in 2011. Pages 11 and 22 discuss contractors' efforts to eradicate inappropriate language.
- **National Equality Framework**, which was developed to help UK organisations identify what should be included in their equality policies and practices.
- The **National Centre for Diversity** is a leading provider of equality and diversity solutions working with public, private and voluntary sectors. It offers advice and training for employers on diversity issues.
- **Stonewall**, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender charity, offers support on homophobic bullying in the workplace through its campaign **No Bystanders** which provides useful literature to download on bullying and abuse.

Equality and Diversity

There are a number of organisations which provide advice and guidance around equality and diversity, which will also include the use of language:

- **Committed 2 Equality** (C2E) was founded seven years before The Equality Act 2010 to deliver practical solutions for organisations to make a real difference with issues of equality and diversity in the workplace.
 - C2E are founder members of the **AESP**



What is currently being done in the industry?

There are various organisations offering specific guidance to the industry in relation to dealing with inappropriate or offensive language in the workplace.

- The **CITB Be Fair Accreditation Framework** is an industry specific standard which provides a structure for employers to address fairness, inclusion and respect within their organisations. It is aimed at creating environments where employees feel valued and supported and promotes public recognition of quality organisations. It targets different industry sectors and assigns companies accreditation according to the standards they should be achieving.
 - The CITB has produced a sample toolbox talk entitled ‘**Fairness, Inclusion and Respect: Acceptable Language.**’
- The Scheme’s **Code of Considerate Practice** consists of five sections, two of which, Community and Workforce, have particular regard for how the site or company is dealing with equality and diversity, which includes using appropriate language. The Scheme was asked to present to the Highways Agency and UKCG who were both interested to understand how equality and diversity is addressed through the Code of Considerate Practice
- **Constructing Excellence**, the member-led organisation promoting positive change to industry performance, has produced Respect for People Toolkits, for members to access. The toolkits can be used to support companies perform in key areas such as equality and diversity.
- The **Lighthouse Club** provides emergency financial assistance, welfare and wellbeing advice and emotional and legal support to the construction industry workforce and their families in times of hardship and stress.
- **Supply Chain Sustainability School** have a

section on their website dedicated to Fairness, Inclusion and Respect, including the **FIR Toolkit** for employers and the **FIR Commitment** for contractors to sign up to.

– The FIR Toolkit includes a sample **toolbox talk** on the topic, with an accompanying video.

In the media

There have also been a number of articles written in the press surrounding the use of language in the workplace which have included comments from the Scheme:

- The **Guardian** wrote an article which warned of employers allowing employees the use of obscenities, which includes a quote from the Scheme’s Chief Executive Edward Hardy
- The **BBC** questioned whether swearing at work was a help or a hindrance, with the former Scheme Director Nigel Marks providing a comment.



Examples of best practice

The Scheme aims to improve the image of construction through sharing best practice with the industry. Below are a number of best practice examples that have been witnessed by the Scheme's Monitors on their visits or submitted directly by registered sites, companies and suppliers:



- The company's equality and diversity policy was posted around site so operatives understood the basics that were expected of them
- The site delivered toolbox talks on the company's policies.
- The appointment of a site equality and diversity champion ensured operatives understood the practical implications of the issue.
- Notices to promote awareness of stress, bullying and organisations which support those affected by depression and suicide e.g. CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) were displayed around site.
- The contractor issued an email at the start of the project to all operatives, subcontractors, architect/engineers etc., attaching copies of the company's policy statements on equality, diversity, harassment and bullying. These policies have since formed part of the company's induction.
- Specific staff training on equality and diversity was included as part of a training matrix.
- Talks were given by foreign nationals to the workforce to explain their culture and raise awareness of differences.
- The company runs a series of 'behavioural change' seminars which include CCS requirements to their supply chain and all operatives on their sites – of which all are required to sign up to these policies.
- The company appointed and trained a mental health first aider to watch for behaviour changes in staff such as stress, anxiety and depression. The first aider was the first point of contact and referred cases to doctors/ professional help where required, as well as providing confidential support and counselling on site.

To view all Best Practice Hub entries relating to the 'Spotlight on... language' campaign click [here](#).

Case studies

The industry has acknowledged and reacted to the issue of language and behaviour for some time now. Read the following case studies to see how contractors are confronting offensive language in the workplace:



Bolt and Heeks supply an Ethical Code of Conduct to all new employees so that they understand what is expected of them when working for the organisation.

Click [here](#) to view the code.

The company has also developed a document which advises operatives of how they are expected to behave when visiting schools.

Click [here](#) to view the Bolt and Heeks' site rules.



Crossrail have put in place a number of measures to deal with inappropriate language and behaviour.

Click [here](#) for more information.



Kier Construction (Northern) have a Zero Tolerance Policy which is enforced on all Kier Construction (Northern) sites, which addresses threatening or violent behaviour.

Click [here](#) for more information.

What can you do?

As highlighted by the CITB, the industry's workforce is diversifying, and will continue to do so, which means it becomes increasingly important that people are aware of what language they are using when communicating with colleagues and the public.



The construction industry needs to start to address what is clearly still a real problem. All sites, companies and suppliers should ensure their businesses adhere to the Equality Act and understand the rights and responsibilities contained in the Act. Other ways to tackle inappropriate language include:

1. **Sites must have clear policies on such activity so that no-one can be under any illusion that this kind of language will be tolerated.**

Whether people are working in an office environment or on site, companies need to ensure that there are clear guidelines regarding what language may be deemed inappropriate or offensive. These need to be properly and formally communicated and it should not be assumed that people will always behave in an acceptable way.

2. **Sites need to be proactive in educating and informing those who work on site so that everyone understands what is and isn't acceptable, and importantly, why this is the case.**

Training and toolbox talks are effective tools in helping people understand how using inappropriate, offensive and foul language can impact on others and cause serious distress. Various posters and other resources are available and can be displayed in changing rooms, canteens and in other areas of the site.

3. **Site managers must create a culture where anyone subjected to this kind of language is able to come forward and know they will be taken seriously and that appropriate action will take place.**



Management need to lead by example and have an open door policy so that when instances of inappropriate, offensive and foul language occur, it can be dealt with promptly and correctly. Offending parties need to be educated on what is unacceptable and why, so that they can learn from their mistakes. Ultimately, action must be taken with those who continue to use inappropriate, offensive and foul language.

The Government's vision for the industry is that by 2025, the UK construction industry will lead the world but the key to achieving this goal is people. The industry needs to attract a diverse workforce through demonstrating a commitment to equality, which includes people communicating with others with the same respect that they expect themselves.

As well as the information above, it is also advised to use the resources provided in this campaign, which offer a plentiful amount of resources from other organisations and companies that cover the full spectrum of the topic.

However, though the Scheme has been able to identify a number of resources and support services available

to the industry regarding inappropriate language, it is clear that this is seen as a fairly small issue within the matter of equality and diversity. Little guidance is available to companies which solely focuses on bad language and how to avoid any issues in the first instance.

Research suggests that language is seen as something that everyone should be naturally aware of and therefore there is little in the way of practical help to inform and educate people of what is and is not acceptable.

If the industry is to eradicate inappropriate, offensive and foul language used on construction sites across the UK, more guidance and support will certainly be of great benefit and very much welcomed.

The Scheme will continue to update this campaign as new initiatives and case studies are identified.

If you would like to share your efforts in addressing offensive language, please contact the Scheme by emailing enquiries@ccsbestpractice.org.uk