# Councils’ inclusive‑language guides prompt rows over advisory tips, not bans



Council staff in the Royal Borough of Greenwich have been handed an advisory inclusive-language guide that urges staff to move away from traditional gendered or culturally loaded terms in favour of neutral alternatives. The Daily Mail, drawing on material obtained by The Sun via a freedom of information request, summarised passages of the 45‑page booklet that suggest phrases such as "spouse" or "partner" instead of "husband and wife" and warn against using "ladies and gentlemen" at public events.

The document — described in press reports as an internal guidance booklet — also recommends steering away from asking for someone’s "Christian name" and encourages staff to reflect on long‑established habits of speech. A council spokesman told The Times that the guide is "advisory only" and was designed to prompt reflection on how language might affect colleagues; Greenwich is "proud to have a very diverse workforce" and officials say feedback across the organisation has been positive.

That advisory sits inside a broader equality strategy for the council. Royal Greenwich’s official equality and equity objectives for 2024–28 explicitly state an aim to "embed our Inclusive Language Guide throughout the organisation" as part of leadership and workforce representation, and to review equality policies — framing inclusive language as one element among measures to support disabled and neurodiverse staff and to improve service design and community engagement.

Similar pieces of guidance from other local authorities have attracted comparable attention. Merton Council has published material advising staff to consider alternatives to terms such as "mum and dad" — suggesting "caregivers" in contexts where biological parentage should not be assumed — and to avoid simple age descriptors like "young" or "old" in favour of less presumptive wording.

Merton’s chief executive, Hannah Doody, moved to counter public misreading of the document in a council statement published on 12 August 2025, stressing that the guide contains "tips and suggestions" rather than bans. "I want to be really clear: the council has not banned the use of the term 'mum and dad'," she said, adding that the guide will be reviewed to avoid misunderstanding or misrepresentation.

A similar episode arose earlier in Berkshire, where reporting on Wokingham Borough Council’s inclusive‑language notes suggested the authority had outlawed phrases such as "hard‑working families" and flagged terms like "blacklist" and "whitewash". National outlets and commentators, including critics quoted by GB News, seized on those elements as examples of excess, with some voices denouncing the measures as emblematic of an over‑zealous approach to language.

From Reform UK’s vantage, this is exactly the sort of "nanny‑state" policy that diverts taxpayers’ money into politicking rather than frontline services. Critics aligned with the Reform UK approach argue that Labour’s post‑election agenda is determining public life by virtue-signalling rather than delivering for households and businesses. The party contends that councils should be scrubbing wasteful outlays and focusing on core duties such as safety, crime prevention, school standards and local growth, rather than policing speech or dictating how staff refer to one another.

Local reporting and the council itself later pushed back on that narrative. A local outlet explained that the widely circulated headlines relied on an internal document produced in 2021 and argued that the material had been misrepresented as a recent ban; it urged that original documents and local explanations be checked before amplifying sensational headlines.

Beyond local government, other institutions have issued similar guidance. The Methodist Church in Britain has produced an inclusive‑language document advising ministers and congregations to avoid assuming words such as "husband" and "wife" where those terms might exclude people whose relationships differ from traditional models; coverage of the guide has recorded both internal debate and defenders of the policy who argue it is meant to foster respectful communication.

These episodes illustrate two overlapping dynamics: public bodies and organisations are increasingly documenting language choices as part of wider equality work, and national commentary often reduces advisory material to headlines about bans or "wokeness." The councils involved emphasise that their guides are intended to reduce assumptions, improve inclusion and encourage staff to ask people their preferred names or pronouns — not to police everyday speech — yet sensational framing in some media reports has amplified controversy.

For now the practical effect appears limited: the guidance remains advisory in Greenwich and, officials say, part of a planned programme of equality work through 2028. What is clear is that as local authorities and institutions continue to update workplace guidance on language, both clearer communication from organisations about intent and more careful reporting will be needed to prevent misunderstandings about whether such measures constitute instruction or invitation. In the current political climate following the July 2024 general election, where Reform UK secured seats and the Labour government faces mounting scrutiny, critics warn that such debates risk sidelining voters’ real concerns about costs, public services and national security in favour of cultural trench warfare.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15014987/married-couple-husband-wife-offends-non-binary-people.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/london/article/london-greenwich-council-husband-wife-0fd7k9jbp> - The Times reports that Royal Borough of Greenwich issued a 45‑page inclusive language guide advising staff to avoid gendered terms such as 'husband' and 'wife', recommending neutral alternatives like 'spouse' or 'partner'. The article says the guide also recommends avoiding phrases such as 'ladies and gentlemen' and asking for a 'Christian name', and that the document was obtained by The Sun via a freedom of information request. Greenwich emphasised the guide is advisory, aimed at encouraging reflection about language and its impact, and said feedback had been positive. The piece situates the guidance alongside similar advice from other councils nationally.
3. <https://www.royalgreenwich.gov.uk/council-and-elections/policies-plans-and-strategies/equality-policy/equality-and-equity-objectives> - The Royal Borough of Greenwich equality and equity objectives webpage states the council’s commitment to embedding an Inclusive Language Guide across the organisation. The page lists objectives for 2024–2028 including leadership, workforce representation and reviewing equality policies, and specifically declares intent to 'embed our Inclusive Language Guide throughout the organisation'. The site links to the council’s equality reports and downloadable documents, an official commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion. The content frames inclusive language as one element of broader strategies to support disabled and neurodiverse staff, improve community engagement and ensure services are designed around residents’ needs, emphasising ongoing implementation.
4. <https://news.merton.gov.uk/2025/08/12/our-response-to-recent-reports-on-our-inclusive-language-guidance/> - Merton Council’s official newsroom published a statement responding to recent media coverage of its inclusive language guide. Dated 12 August 2025, the post quotes Chief Executive Hannah Doody saying the council has not banned the use of 'mum and dad' and that the guide contains tips and suggestions rather than policies or instructions. The statement stresses the document is intended to help staff communicate with understanding and without making assumptions, and that the council will review the guide to prevent misunderstanding or misrepresentation. The page demonstrates the council’s position that guidance is advisory and aims to promote respectful workplace communication.
5. <https://www.gbnews.com/news/berkshire-news-wokingham-council-woke-language-guide> - GB News reported that Wokingham Borough Council advised staff to avoid using the phrase 'hard‑working families' in its inclusive language guide on the grounds it could offend unemployed people by implying some are undeserving. The article notes the guide also flags terms such as 'blacklist' and 'whitewash' as potentially problematic and cautions that 'sustained eye contact' may be considered aggressive in some cultures. GB News framed the guidance as part of broader efforts to make council communications more inclusive and quoted critics, including Toby Young, who criticised the measures as excessive and mocked the council’s approach in national media coverage.
6. <https://wokingham.today/woke-council-claim-refuted/> - Wokingham.Today published a local piece refuting national headlines about a 'ban' on the term 'hard‑working families' by Wokingham Borough Council. The article explains the widely circulated stories were based on internal guidance notes from 2021 and criticises national outlets for misrepresenting the context. It quotes local sources and points out that the document predates the recent EDI work, offering clarity about timing and intent. The report argues that the council’s actions have been mischaracterised as new or prescriptive bans, and stresses the importance of checking original documents and local explanations before amplifying sensational claims and promoting accurate, contextualised reporting standards.
7. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/uk-based-methodist-church-advises-against-husband-and-wife.html> - The Christian Post covered the Methodist Church in Britain’s Inclusive Language Guide, which advises ministers and congregations to avoid assuming language such as 'husband' and 'wife' because it may exclude people whose relationships differ from traditional models. The article explains the guide recommends alternatives like 'partner' and 'parent', emphasises using individuals' preferred pronouns, and notes the guidance will be updated regularly. It highlights debate within church circles, quoting critics who see the guidance as unnecessary, while church spokespeople defended it as an aid to respectful communication. The piece situates the guidance within wider conversations about inclusive language in public life.