



PPMA DIVERSITY NETWORK

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Harshbir Sangha
Specific Duties – Policy review
Government Equalities Office
Zone J9, 9th Floor, Eland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU

Dear Sir

Policy Review Document on Specific Duties Regulations

The following response is on behalf of the Diversity Network of the Public Sector People Managers' Association (PPMA). PPMA has broadened its membership from its original base in local government into the wider public sector. The Diversity Network is composed of senior and experienced HR and diversity practitioners, and is charged by the Association with developing advice to its members on equality and diversity issues and with responding to consultation on such issues. We seek to work with the Local Government Employers, LG Improvement & Development, the Commission, EFA and Stonewall to ensure a broad approach to equality and diversity issues.

We welcome the continued emphasis on achieving equality outcomes rather than requiring adherence to processes. The aspiration to reduce bureaucracy is also welcomed.

With regard to the detailed changes proposed in the draft regulations we understand that for the smallest public bodies there may be situations where a single equality objective may be appropriate, but in larger bodies we would expect a number of objectives relating to both employment and service delivery issues. We would however be content for this to be dealt with through guidance provided this expectation is made explicit. Such guidance must make clear that recognising the demands on small public bodies and setting the minimum of a single objective should not be taken as affirming a minimalist approach to the setting of equality objectives.

Similarly we support the removal of detailed specification of the information that should be published. Clearly for many public bodies it will be sensible for them to publish the sort of information that was referred to in the earlier draft regulations as this will be part of the reports to decision makers proposing the objectives. However guidance, rather than prescription by regulation which might lead to "a box ticking" approach, is sensible. As in our response to the earlier consultation we would wish to emphasise the importance of the

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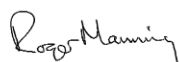
guidance issued on the specific and the general duties, and the Codes of Practice that are developed. This guidance will be critical for those who are responsible for keeping equality as a mainstream issue in public bodies to know what are the expectations on them. It is important that the letter of the guidance matches the spirit of the regulations.

The removal of the requirement on public authorities to consider such matters as may be specified by a Minister of Crown is supported. The thrust of the revisions to the legislation are to reduce bureaucracy and for all public bodies to adopt policies which match local priorities. A bureaucratic method for prescribing what public bodies should take into account is counter to this approach. However we have not challenged this approach in the past because there is some force in the view that central government should have the long stop of such a power of prescription. In the past governments of whatever hue have been reluctant to surrender such a power. We recognise that, in reality, there will be issues where the policies of central government will inevitably impinge on the way in which public bodies approach issues of equality and there will be many ways in which government through guidance and influence can achieve the same effect as the clause that has been removed.

In welcoming light touch regulation we would still wish to see clarity on the way in which public bodies are held to account, and while this particular area of activity will not be of primary significance, it should be taken into account in the current review of the role of the EHRC. We are not certain that at present there are sufficiently robust networks in place in many localities to enable an informed response to the equality plans of public bodies, particularly if the expectation is that this will just be based on the publication of information. We do not see this capacity being built up in local communities for some time yet.

While appreciating the imperatives for reacting quickly to a last minute political rethink, I feel we must make the point that the timescale for responding to the policy review was very difficult for any organisation which might have wished to consult broadly with its members before responding.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Roger Manning".

Roger Manning
On behalf of PPMA Diversity Network