

Introduction

Lambeth Council looks to the public sector Equality Duty to provide a legal framework which encourages us to mainstream effective equality practices while at the same time, being transparent enough to ensure that our customers, communities and partners can understand how we make and why we reach decisions.

Lambeth Council is committed to improving the lives of all our residents and customers. We are doing this through mainstreaming equalities objectives within our strategic documents such as the corporate plan and the sustainable community strategy. Additionally, tools such as the Equality Framework for Local Government and Equality Impact Assessments allow us to review policies, services and functions to ensure that they are responsive and appropriate to diverse need. The council does not consider this bureaucracy and red tape but key to ensuring that all policies, services and functions are responsive, effective and efficient.

We strongly believe that the previous objectives presented in the public sector Equality Duty of improving transparency; devolving power; focusing on measurable results and enabling the public to exercise greater choice, would have helped us to progress our achievements further by ensuring increased transparency and accountability to the communities that we serve. We are disappointed by what we see as a watering down of the legislation which will make it increasingly difficult for us to achieve against our mainstreaming ambitions and will mean that other public bodies, who may not see equalities issues as key, will be given the ability to 'opt out' of this important area of work.

Lighter touch transparency approach

Lambeth Council sees this as an important part of the duty. We have made great progress in opening up the council to scrutiny from our communities, which has resulted in improvements to our policies, services and functions. However, without a process for engaging with and analysing information about our communities we would not have achieved as much success. We understand that the wording "publishing sufficient information" is subjective, however, there does need to be guidance about publishing information. This ensures that any data / evidence we make available to the public is accessible and meaningful and enables readers to understand how we have arrived at decisions. We are therefore particularly concerned about the removal of the requirement to publish the equality analysis undertaken as part of policy decision making. In addition, it would seem appropriate that the publication of such information was in accordance with the Government's own public data principles. Lambeth Council will continue to publish information that details our analysis and engagement as we have found this to be a constructive way of ensuring involvement from all of our communities and improved outcomes.

Equality objectives

All public authorities have more than one corporate objective and therefore it would not be disproportionate for any public authority to have more than one

equality objective. An organisation might not require an equality objective for each protected characteristic but it is likely to be able to identify several equality objectives within their corporate targets.

Without setting out how progress will be measured when setting objectives the authority will find it difficult to communicate that genuine progress against objectives has been made. By setting out how progress is going to be measured we will be more accountable to our customers and residents.

For example, the Government's own 'Social mobility strategy' states that: "It is important that we measure the impact of our policies on social mobility for three reasons:

- to increase transparency;
- to assess the success of our approach; and
- to ensure that we are putting our goal of improving social mobility at the heart of government activity."

After which the strategy goes on to detail how progress will be measured and key milestones. It is important to note, that this should be no different to the approach that any public authority should take in communicating equality practices to their residents and customers.

Matters specified by a Minister of the Crown

There will always be national issues that can be set by the Minister; this does not mean that a public authority (and its partners) can not decide how to tackle a national issue as an area. The purpose of this is to enable us to compare across areas if there has been any shift as a result of different interventions and adapt others' actions to suit our own areas – such as in relation to national agendas such as child poverty and social mobility.

Conclusion

To conclude, we recognise that the Government is trying to remove red tape. However, at Lambeth Council we are concerned about the negative impact of removing requirements to publish details around engagement and equality analysis. We feel that these requirements help, not hinder us, in mainstreaming equality work throughout our organisation, and provide a degree of rigour and accountability which our stakeholders find helpful. Indeed, we think that withdrawing the regulations in these areas will make our commitments to advance equality of opportunity, eliminate discrimination and foster good relations significantly more difficult.