

Comprehensive Equality Policy

Ashford Borough Council recognises that all our roles and functions have an impact – directly or indirectly – on the provision of equal opportunity to both service users and our staff.

1. Introduction

We also understand that such roles and functions impact on a range of groups differently. Individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds, cultures, lifestyles and experiences live in and work for the Borough. This policy outlines our commitment to ensuring that everyone in Ashford can take a full part in the social, cultural and economic wealth of the Borough.

In order to achieve this, we have to understand that diversity is about acknowledging and appreciating that individuals and groups may have different lifestyles, cultures, religions or beliefs, experiences and backgrounds. Diversity within the workforce, as well as in the community, is an asset to the Borough. Our major challenge is to ensure that our equality policy links directly to our strategies and plans, particularly those which set out our priorities for action to improve the quality of life for everyone living and working in Ashford.

This commitment to improve equality practice with regard to: age, gender, gender reassignment, disability, race, colour, ethnic/national origins, religion or belief, sexual orientation and status will take place at both corporate and departmental level. This will be evidenced by equality action planning and equality target setting within all departments and service areas, so that achievement can be measured and is visible throughout the Borough. In this way, progress towards good equality practice will be clear both at a corporate level, and in all parts of the Council's work.

2. The Aims of the Comprehensive Equality Policy

We want to achieve equality of opportunity in all our activities, including in the delivery of services to the community, as an employer and through the range of activities we fund. We will put into place a range of practical strategies to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation within the communities we serve and among our workforce. An equal opportunities organisation is one which values and utilises everyone's talents and abilities, where individual contribution is encouraged and where differences are recognised and welcomed. We want to be fully responsive to the needs of our employees and the community we serve.

It is important that Ashford is a good equal opportunities employer and a fair and effective service provider, because:

- a diverse workforce, reflecting the community, results in a better informed, more adaptable organisation that is better able to reflect and respond to the needs of our customer base;

- as the local authority it is incumbent upon us to give a clear lead to other organisations and employers in the locality;
- improved staff morale helps us to recruit and retain staff, as well as to make best use of the talents of our workforce. It also further reduces the costs to the Council;
- a stable, motivated workforce achieves higher levels of productivity and is more committed to the Council.

3. Delivering Our Commitment

It is intended that Ashford Borough Council will formally adopt the **Equality Standard for Local Government**. This is a nationally recognised framework, which we will employ to measure our progress in achieving equality and diversity on behalf of the community and our workforce. We will set targets for incremental progression through the five Levels of the Standard, as part of our corporate target setting process.

We understand that we have a strong moral and social duty to recognise that discrimination – on a wide range of grounds – does take place, both within the workplace and in the wider community. Such realities exist in Ashford as elsewhere. As a Council we are committed to doing everything we can to raise awareness and understanding in order to promote good relations between all groups and individuals, both within the workforce and in the community.

Ashford Borough Council therefore welcomes our obligations as an employer, a provider of services, as a leader of public opinion and the innovator of good equality practice. We value all the relevant legislation in supporting our functions in generating a culture of equality and fairness.

Ashford's commitment is supported by a legal duty to provide all services and employment opportunities fairly, without discrimination, and to abide by all relevant Codes of Practice. Moreover, there will be a need for the Council to review our policies and practices in the light of any future legislation.

We are particularly aware of the legal duty placed upon us by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, to work towards the elimination of unlawful discrimination and to actively promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different ethnic and racial groups. We recognise and welcome this duty, which is embraced within this Policy and Ashford's Racial Equality Scheme, first published in 2001.

Ashford has a procedure for recording and monitoring of any incident reported as a racially motivated incident and has adopted the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry's definition of a racist incident: **'a racist incident is any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'**.

The Borough also recognises the formal definition of institutionalised racism provided in 1999 by the **Macpherson Report** on the death of black London teenager Stephen Lawrence. Institutionalised racism is defined as follows.

“The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.”

Ashford will not tolerate racial discrimination, victimisation or harassment, either direct or indirect. Where there is evidence of discrimination by an employee, that employee will be subject to action under the Disciplinary Procedure.

4. Handling Complaints

If a member of the public feels that they have been treated unfairly, or have suffered harassment, on the grounds of age, sex, marital status, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, race, colour ethnic/national origins, religion or belief they should report this without fail to the appropriate Head of Service. Details of how to complain to the Council can be found on our website (www.ashford.gov.uk) or by speaking to our Customer Service Advisors at the Civic Centre.

Complaints of discrimination, harassment or bullying among the workforce will be dealt with under the Council’s Grievance or Harassment at Work Policy (details are contained in the Staff Conditions of Service Handbook).

5. Responsibilities

It is vital that the Council allocates specific responsibilities to key members of staff to ensure this Policy is promulgated and implemented.

- The Chief Executive will have overall responsibility for implementing the Comprehensive Equality Policy and overseeing the Corporate Equality Plan.
- Each Head of Service will take the lead on actions for their respective services. Heads of Service will also demonstrate commitment by incorporating the Policy into their service plans and be responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the Policy within their service areas.
- The Head of Personnel and Development will oversee the requirements of this policy insofar as they relate to staff of the Borough Council.
- The Head of Corporate Policy and Planning will oversee the development, implementation and monitoring of the Policy at all levels.

6. Members of the Council

Ashford will strive to ensure that all Members are treated fairly, and are afforded equal access to the facilities and support services of the Authority regardless of age, sex, marital status, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, race, colour ethnic/national origins, religion or belief. We will, as

far as is practical, endeavour to ensure that Members are not prevented unreasonably from fulfilling their role as elected representatives through unnecessary restriction (for example, with regard to the timing of formal meetings).

Members of the Council support this Policy and will work towards the promotion of equal opportunities and the elimination of discrimination in all the Council's activities.

7. Resources and Action Towards Improving Equality Practice

Ashford is committed to providing high quality services, which everyone is able to access. We recognise that change requires funding if it is to be effectively introduced and we will ensure that resources, whether internal or external, are provided so that equality issues can be taken forward.

Where appropriate, we will work through existing partnerships with other organisations to provide services which promote equal opportunities for all. We will do this by:

- building on our existing good practice;
- systematic consultation, self-assessment, audit and scrutiny using nationally and locally developed performance indicators;
- a commitment to community profiling, service delivery and usage;
- consulting with and identifying groups within the community whose needs and requirements are less well met by Council services than those of other groups;
- providing information which is accessible and using appropriate ways of communicating so that all sections of the community can be involved in the consultation process;
- carrying out equal impact assessments of new and existing policies and practices to ensure these do not discriminate against any group;
- delivering services which are appropriate to the needs of the community;
- removing barriers which deny people access to our services;
- using our powers to ensure that organisations providing services on our behalf work in line with this Policy;
- using our powers to ensure that organisations supplying goods to the Council work in line with this policy.
- ensuring that all the resident communities know their rights to protection from discrimination, victimisation and harassment and understand how to complain in the event that they are victims of such treatment; and

- promoting an environment which gives all residents an equal chance to live free of all forms of discrimination.

We will put into place a range of actions in our Corporate Equality Plan and Race Equality Scheme, which are aimed at tackling discrimination and appreciating/celebrating diversity within our workforce by:

- building on our existing good practice;
- working with our recognised trade unions to ensure agreement on steps taken to provide a working environment free of discrimination, harassment or bullying;
- systematic consultation, self-assessment, audit and scrutiny using nationally and locally developed performance indicators;
- a commitment to workforce profiling;
- monitoring progress and revising targets in all areas of action;
- developing a workforce which reflects the community at all levels;
- monitoring recruitment, promotion, training opportunities and take up, pay, conditions of employment, grievances, use of the Disciplinary Procedure and exit from employment;
- ensuring that all employees and Members know the effects of this Policy and provide appropriate training targeting different levels of staff;
- ensuring all employees – and the resident communities – know their rights to protection from discrimination, victimisation, harassment and bullying. Further ensuring that such groups understand how to complain in the event that they are subject to such unacceptable treatment;
- developing and promoting policies which give everyone equal access to employment and opportunities in this field; and
- setting performance targets so that we can measure progress.

The statistical evidence collated will be reported not only to Members, but to the appropriate government departments and, in some instances, to the public. Personal information will be obtained and kept in accordance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Further information

For further information about the Council's Comprehensive Equality Strategy or if you would like to make any comments or clarify any statement please contact:

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