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Information Services for Tenants:
Empowerment & Participation

Equality and Diversity – a Guide for Tenants’ Associations

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InSTEP
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Equality and Diversity – A Guide for Tenants’ Associations

Summary

Equality means ensuring that everyone has equal opportunity to participate, contribute to and benefit from the activities undertaken by tenants’ associations. Diversity goes beyond fair and equal treatment to recognise and appreciate the benefits that people’s different talents bring to an organisation or community. Society is diverse in many different ways. Embracing and celebrating diversity helps create an environment where everyone feels included and valued.

This information sheet explains:

- The main strands to equality and diversity
- What equality of opportunity means in practice
- The steps that tenants’ associations should take to ensure everyone in their community is able to participate and feel included.

Equality and Diversity – A Guide for Tenants’ Associations

Introduction

What is this information sheet about?

An essential goal for community organisations must be to involve all parts of the community and enable everyone to participate fully. Yet prejudice and discrimination can lead to some people being treated unfairly or excluded, however unintentionally. Other tenants with previous bad experiences may simply exclude themselves. All tenants’ organisations have to take active steps to ensure that everyone feels welcome and has equal opportunity to participate, contribute to and benefit from the activities that the association undertakes.

Growing awareness and understanding of equality and diversity over the past four decades has resulted in:

- Extensive legislation to prohibit unlawful discriminatory practices, harassment and victimisation in employment and the provision of facilities and services.
- Statutory duties on public bodies such as local authorities and the Housing Corporation to promote equal opportunities. Housing associations are required to demonstrate their commitment to equal opportunities when carrying out all their functions and to adhere to the Housing Corporation’s Regulatory Code and good practice guidance. Tenant association constitutions must include a commitment to equal opportunities.
- Equal opportunities policies and practices designed to:
 - Eliminate discrimination
 - Treat everyone fairly and equitably
 - Raise awareness about the effects of prejudice
 - Promote measures to combat discrimination
 - Remove any barriers to full participation.
- Recognition of how valuing diversity helps to:
 - Appreciate and respect peoples’ differences



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- Harness the strengths of the whole community by enabling hard to reach groups to play a full part
- Achieve equality of opportunity for an increasingly diverse community or customer or employee group
- Provide services that match differing needs and preferences
- Promote understanding and good relations between people with different backgrounds and experiences
- Increase the pool of talent available to help share the load when it comes to getting things done.

British people place a high value on fairness and greater equality. But this belief is often undermined by prejudice towards particular groups, an attitude that equality is only about helping disadvantaged minority groups, and a dislike of what is seen as misguided political correctness. Fortunately, more and more people are now recognising the very substantial benefits that an inclusive approach brings to organisations, communities and wider society. A more equal society benefits us all.

The following sections outline:

- Getting to grips with the terminology and jargon
- The main strands of equality and diversity
- What equality of opportunity means in practice
- The steps that tenants' associations should take to enable everyone in their community to participate and feel included.

Getting to grips with terminology

Simple explanations and examples help everyone to make sense of the terminology

Discrimination is treating someone differently (usually unfairly) because of prejudice or lack of knowledge.

Prejudice is an opinion formed without any proper evidence or consideration. The opinions a person holds are usually influenced by family, friends, schoolteachers, television, etc. Making assumptions about people based on the group to which a person belongs can give rise to prejudices. Action based on prejudices is discrimination.

Equality, Equality of Opportunity and Equal Opportunities are different ways of describing the policies and steps required to eliminate discrimination and ensure that everyone is treated fairly and respectfully. Equality does not mean forcing everyone to be the same. It means empowering people to fulfil their ambitions, to be themselves, and to be different, if they wish.



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Diversity extends beyond fair and equal treatment to recognise and appreciate the benefits that people's differences and talents bring to an organisation or community. Society is diverse in many different ways. Some people are older, others are younger, some are black, some are disabled, some are women, some are men, some are gay and others are straight, some have children and others do not. And the list doesn't end there. Diversity also includes ways of communicating, celebrating and accomplishing tasks, cultural ideas and backgrounds, religious practices and beliefs, levels of ability, physical qualities, social background, language and accent, patterns of thinking and behaving, political opinions, education and so on. Embracing and celebrating diversity helps create an environment where everyone feels valued.

Harassment is conduct that violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. Harassment takes many forms, ranging from remarks, jokes, teasing, insults, ridicule, persistently playing loud music, through to damage to property and physical assault. Harassment can be racial, sexual, homophobic or more general in character, depending on the circumstances.

Victimisation is deliberately treating someone less favourably because of something they have done, for example having helped someone to give evidence in court.

Stereotyping is making assumptions about who someone is and how they behave simply because they are a woman, black, gay, under 25, disabled, and so on.

The six primary strands to equality and diversity are:

- *Ethnicity*
- *Gender*
- *Disability*
- *Age*
- *Sexual orientation*
- *Religion and belief*

The main strands to equality and diversity

In one way or another, most people will experience discrimination at some point in their lives. The six primary aspects of difference cover:

- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Disability
- Age
- Sexual orientation and gender status
- Religion and belief

Ethnicity

Black and minority ethnic (BME) people now make up about 9% of the population (one in four in London). Many are British-born or have lived in the UK for a long time. Yet experience of racism, prejudice and hate crime remains widespread.

Respecting differences in heritage, culture, religion, customs and language helps people to feel that they are part of the community rather than outside and apart from it. Equally, someone's geographic origin may be much more relevant to them than their skin colour, so it is important to avoid jumping to hasty conclusions about race and ethnicity. For example, Bradford-born second generation Pakistani young people often define themselves as Asian from Yorkshire.

Gender

Women can still be judged more by their appearance than by who they are as individuals. More than 30 years after the Equal Pay Act became law, women are often still paid less than men and are more likely to work part-time in low-paid jobs. Childcare responsibilities keep many at home and prevent them from working or taking part in activities. Many women are reticent about speaking up or volunteering to do things. Domestic violence accounts for nearly a fifth of violent crime.

Disability

Up to one in seven of the population has a physical or mental impairment. 'Disability' covers a wide range of differing physical and mental abilities. Examples include restricted mobility or eyesight, illnesses like cancer, multiple sclerosis, heart conditions and HIV, and mental health conditions or learning difficulties.

Age

Age affects everyone. Everyone has experience of being young and most will experience becoming older and less active. Young people often complain that their views are ignored and there is nothing to do. Bullying at school remains a serious problem for many children and young people. Older people can become isolated and frightened to go out at night.

Sexual orientation and gender status

About one in twenty people are lesbian or gay. Yet many people think they do not know anyone who is gay, and many automatically assume that everyone is straight. Many think it is acceptable to make jokes about 'poofs' and do not mind appearing to be prejudiced. Bullying and hate crime continue to occur.

Some, particularly older, lesbians and gay men feel unsafe about being open about their identity and conceal their sexual orientation.

Religion and belief

Although an increasingly secular society, Britain has a Christian heritage. Members of other religious faiths can feel that there is insufficient acknowledgement of, and respect for, their different religious traditions, convictions and beliefs, prayer, dress and dietary requirements, religious holidays, and so on.

Legislation

Equalities law is complicated. More than 30 different laws and regulations deal with protection from discrimination, harassment and victimisation. This means that in the employment of staff and the provision of goods, facilities and services, in most cases it is illegal to treat one person less favourably than another person on grounds of race, gender, disability, age, sexuality, gender status, and religion and belief.

The Government is currently undertaking a Discrimination Law Review with the aim of streamlining equalities legislation.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is the body with overall responsibility for reducing inequality, eliminating discrimination and promoting good relations between communities, as well as protecting human rights.

What delivering equality and diversity means

Equality and diversity combine equality of opportunity with the benefits of tapping into the diversity of the population as a whole. Creating equality and diversity means you must:

- Recognise and respect differences
- Acknowledge that prejudice and discrimination exists
- Take action to ensure that discrimination on grounds of age, sex, race, colour, national origin, ethnic origin, nationality, belief or lack of religion or belief, gender, being married or a civil partner, pregnancy, sexual orientation or disability does not occur

Equalities legislation provides protection from discrimination in employment and the provision of goods, facilities and services across all the equality strands. But the legislation is complicated!

Equality and diversity combines equal opportunity to participate with respecting and catering for people's differences so everyone feels involved

- Make positive efforts to encourage all sections of the community to participate, particularly anyone who may be worried about encountering prejudice, or feeling unsafe, or not being welcome
- Appreciate that different people have different needs and take action to ensure that these different needs are met
- Harness and promote diversity arising from age, background, race, sex, sexuality, disability, personality
- Ensure that an inclusive approach applies to everything the association does.

Agreeing an Equality and Diversity Policy

Tenants' and residents' associations represent their local community. It is important to ensure that all sections of the community feel included. Associations that are able to show that they are fully representative of their local community will carry more authority when dealing with their landlord.

An Equality and Diversity policy sets out the plans for ensuring the association is genuinely inclusive and complies with the law

Most associations have a constitution, which sets out their aims and objectives and describes how they should work, and normally includes a commitment to equal opportunities (usually a condition of funding). Associations will need to agree a policy and plan of action to ensure that their approach is genuinely inclusive and complies with the law and regulatory requirements.

Set aside time to discuss how prejudice and discrimination might affect members of the local community. Some people find it very hard to accept that their views are prejudiced. Consider using a diversity toolkit and/or games to make it easier for anyone who might find the discussion difficult. Alternatively, invite someone from outside the group to lead the discussion or to provide diversity awareness training. See if your landlord will pay for you to employ a trainer.

Try to agree a policy for the group containing the steps you plan to take to promote equality and diversity. Record your commitment in an Equality and Diversity Policy.

Example Equality and Diversity Policy

“Membership of the Association is open to everyone living in the community. All members will actively promote equality and diversity and will not discriminate on the grounds of age, sex, race, colour, national origin, ethnic origin, nationality, belief or lack of religion or belief, gender, being married or a civil partner, pregnancy, sexual orientation or disability.”

The Association will:

- *Publish its commitment to equality and diversity*
- *Take steps to ensure that everyone in the community is able to participate fully in all the Association’s activities*
- *Engage and work with local minority groups*
- *Ensure that all meetings are accessible*
- *Challenge any racist, sexist or other discriminatory behaviour or harassment*
- *Ensure that staff (if any) are treated fairly and equitably*
- *Arrange diversity awareness training for committee members and anyone involved in recruiting staff or volunteers*
- *Monitor who is participating in the Association’s activities and at least once every year review progress in implementing this policy.*

Putting the Policy into Action

Make a public statement

- Ensure that all members of the community are aware of the group’s equality and diversity policy, and its determination to

apply it. A public statement about the group's commitment is an important part of letting the community know that the group takes equality and diversity seriously and that everyone will be welcome.

- Put up a notice in the place you hold your meetings reminding everyone about the policy and what it means.

Make connections locally

- Make contact with local community groups and any informal groupings in your area and discuss how their members might get more involved in your group, for example young people, older people, black or Chinese residents etc. Personally invite them to your meetings. Consider inviting representatives from these different groups to join your committee.
- Get to know local groups such as those catering for women, the disabled, lesbian and gay people, and youth clubs with a view to exchanging resources and working together. The local library or the Council should have contact details.

Key steps for putting the policy into action:

- *Make a public statement*
- *Make connections locally*
- *Encourage everyone in the community to participate*
- *Make meetings as accessible as possible*
- *Promote equality and diversity*
- *Challenge prejudice and stereotyping*
- *Monitor and review progress*

Encourage everyone in the community to participate

- Advertise your group in local community magazines, community centres, health centres, libraries, places of worship, cafes, shops, schools, etc. Concentrate on places you know are used by the groups you find most difficult to contact.
- Use clear plain language and try to avoid jargon. Use print that is easy for everyone to read. Wherever possible speak to people rather than sending letters.
- Use inclusive and welcoming images in any posters or publications. For example, choose pictures of black and disabled people as well as white able-bodied people, and include a rainbow (a symbol used by many minority, particularly lesbian and gay, organisations). Consider whether any materials need to be translated.
- Seek out and welcome new arrivals to the community. Make special efforts to include anyone newly arrived in Britain.

Make meetings as accessible as possible

- Plan meetings to make it as easy as possible for people to participate:
 - Small meetings are less intimidating
 - Times need to suit people who are working and people with childcare responsibilities
 - Avoid finishing late at night, otherwise those who are frightened to go out at night may not come
 - Women who do not socialise with men outside their families will only come to women-only meetings.
- Choose places to meet which are accessible to people with mobility difficulties and parents with pushchairs. Some people may need a hearing loop to hear properly.
- Use an inclusive room layout like a circle so everyone feels included. Leave spaces for wheelchair users and chairs for latecomers to occupy without disturbing anyone.
- Arrange lifts for people who would otherwise find the journey too difficult.
- Consider whether the group can help with babysitting or a crèche.

Promote equality and diversity

- In addition to ensuring everyone has equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from the association's activities, think about the accessibility of the information you provide, the meals you provide, the activities you provide, to each individual in the community.
- Explore and celebrate different aspects of culture, in terms of belonging, similarity, traditions, language, customs, food etc.
- Look for imaginative ways to draw people in to increase the pool of talent available to help share the load when it comes to getting things done. Try to target young people, people who are retired, speakers of particular languages, and so on.

Challenge prejudice and stereotyping

A lot of prejudice stems from a lack of awareness and is not deliberate. It can also arise from deeply held convictions. Help members to learn about the different ways that prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping impact on people. At the same time, do not allow unacceptable comments or behaviour to pass unchallenged.

Where a member's behaviour is totally unacceptable, a group may need to consider whether the person can continue to remain a member. Given that equality and diversity is all about valuing differences and encouraging inclusiveness, expulsion should be a last resort after all attempts to achieve an acceptance and tolerance of differences have failed.

Monitoring and review progress

- Monitor who is participating in the association's activities
- At least once a year, take time to review progress and update the Action Plan.

Checklist

Does your association have an Equality and Diversity Policy?

Does your landlord expect you to have one?

Are you sure that your association is complying with the law?

Does your landlord have staff who are experts in this area who can help you?

Does your association have a practical and up to date Equality and Diversity Action Plan?

Are you monitoring who is participating in the association's activities?

Has the association sought funding to pay for training?

Further Information

Useful Websites

Equality and Human Rights Commission

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx>

National Council For Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk>

Website of the umbrella body for voluntary organisations in England. It includes an online gateway to voluntary sector information and ask NCVO, a source of guidance on a wide range of practical and legal issues.

Useful Contacts

InSTEP

InSTEP Information Services for Tenants. Freephone helpline 0500 844 111.

Email: info.instep@tribalgroup.co.uk

Website: <http://www.instepservices.co.uk>

Further Reading

Tenants' Diversity Pack published by Ashford Borough Council

Available to download from:

<http://www.innovationintoaction.org/default.asp?contentID=588>

Including Everyone Diversity Games published by Ashford Borough Council

Available to download from:

<http://www.innovationintoaction.org/default.asp?contentID=588>

Good Practice Note 8: Equality and diversity, Housing Corporation 2007

Explains the Housing Corporation's statutory obligations arising from equalities legislation and their implications for housing associations, the benefits of adopting an equality and diversity policy, and some of the issues to be considered when developing a policy. Available to download from:

<http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.12906>

Making Diversity Happen! Published by NCVO 2003

A Guide for Voluntary and Community Organisations £15.00 (£10.50 NCVO Members)

Making Equality Simple, by Anne Hayfield and Mohammed Aziz, published by NCVO 2005

A plain English guide to the 2003 Employment Equality Regulations on religion, belief and sexual orientation for voluntary and community organisations. Available to download from: <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/publications/showall.asp?id=1473>

Development through Diversity. A step-by-step toolkit for community organisations published by bassac £10.00

A toolkit for community organisations interested in developing diversity effectively within their organisation as well as within the wider community. See:

http://www.bassac.org.uk/pages/dev_through_diversity.html#dtdtoolkit

Equality and Diversity: A framework for review and action by J Jeffery and R Seager, National Housing Federation 2006

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Information services for tenants: empowerment and participation

InSTEP provides information and training services to tenants in social housing.

InSTEP is a national service which offers a number of services to help tenants and landlords to work together, to inform and empower residents and to encourage tenant participation.

We offer a variety of services including:

- a free telephone helpline service 0500 844 111
- free information on tenant participation and housing
- training for tenants
- events to promote participation.

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