

Chapter One

Wealden's Approach to Equality

Equality Principles and Values

Equality of opportunity is central to the Council's objectives and values as stated in the Wealden Corporate Plan. The aim of the Wealden Equality Scheme is to set out how **we will ensure that all our services and employment opportunities are provided with equity and fairness to everyone**. The Council is committed to

- Promoting equality of opportunity and good race relations for all individuals and communities in Wealden.
- Collecting data and information on the impact of our policies and practices.
- Eliminating any unlawful discrimination or harassment in the provision of our services and employment.
- Improving the accessibility of our services and employment opportunities for all, and tackling the causes of social exclusion
- Ensuring effective implementation of equality duties across all service areas.

The Council acknowledges that there are many forms of prejudice and is committed to taking action to ensure equality for everyone, whatever their disability, family status, gender, race, religion, belief, marital status, sexual orientation and, with regard to our employment policies, age.

A socially inclusive society is one where every individual is able to attain a decent standard of living and to access the services they need easily, free from discrimination and fear. The failure of some people to integrate fully into society can be the result of one or more factors, including low income, lack of skills, fear of crime, poor housing, family breakdown, experience of discrimination, lack of transport or physical access difficulties. The Council aims to tackle the causes of social exclusion so that we can improve quality of life for everyone in our District.

The Wealden Equality Scheme represents a comprehensive equality policy and builds upon the work previous undertaken. We recognise that successful implementation of the Wealden Equality Scheme is dependent upon systematically working through the action plans to ensure all our services and employment opportunities are provided with equity and fairness to everyone.

The Council treats all equality issues with the same degree of seriousness, in addition to complying with relevant legislation (details of equality legislation can be found at Appendix 3). It is unlawful to discriminate against anyone because of their age, disability, ethnicity, gender, religion, belief or sexual orientation when they are applying for a job and on any of these grounds, except age, when people are accessing our services, except in prescribed circumstances. The Council has a duty to produce an Equality Scheme for Disability, Gender and Race equality and these are found later in the Scheme (Chapters Four to Six) and should be read alongside this chapter. The Service

Delivery and Employment Action Plans incorporates the actions identified in these schemes and covers all equality areas.

The Council recognises that equality is a central feature of a modern quality service for local government. Through increased understanding and by tackling identified barriers, we will strive to ensure our public services are accessible.

The importance of incorporating equality principles and values into all of the policies and practices of the Council is acknowledged throughout this Scheme and Action Plan.

Wealden's Mission, Corporate Objectives and Values

The Council's approach to equality is guided by its mission, its corporate objectives and the values it upholds.

The following values underpin all policies, processes and programmes for our delivery of services. In all our work we aim to:

- Conduct our business in the public interest with integrity, being even-handed, open and accountable.
- Have the highest ethical standards of conduct from members and officers and provide both training and monitoring to ensure such standards are maintained.
- Strive to ensure our services are accessible to all.

Lines of responsibility and decision making

The Equality and Diversity agenda is led within the Council through the following structures:

- The lead councillor for Equality and Diversity is the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services who has responsibility for the effective delivery of Council policies in relation to equality;
- The corporate lead officer for Equality and Diversity is the Director of Corporate Services who is responsible for the review and progress of the Wealden Equality Scheme
- Service Heads are individually responsible for implementing the Wealden Equality Scheme actions and principles within their service area
- The Internal Equalities Group is formed by representatives from each service area and oversees the development of the Wealden Equality Scheme.

The responsibility to promote equality of opportunity and to take action to identify and address possible discrimination, whenever and wherever it could occur, is the individual responsibility of every Councillor and employee of Wealden District Council.

Fair employment policy

The Council is committed to promoting equality of opportunity through its employment practices. Selection for employment, training or any other benefit will be on the basis of aptitude and ability. All employees will be helped and encouraged to develop their full potential and the talents and resources of the workforce will be utilised to maximise efficiency of the Council.

Every employee is entitled to work in an environment that promotes dignity and respect to all and the Council will not tolerate any form of intimidation, bullying or harassment on any grounds.

The Council's Employment Equality Action Plan can be found in Chapter Three of this Scheme.

Action Plan

The Service Delivery and Employment Action Plans focus on the principal aim of this Scheme to ensure that all services and employment opportunities are provided with equity and fairness to everyone. The plans incorporate the actions and specific objectives identified in the development of the race, disability and gender equality schemes.

Resources

We are committed to achieving our equality objectives over the next three years and beyond. Many of the actions will be met from existing resources and will be mainstreamed into the work of the Council. In addition, the Council has made a commitment in 2007/08 to designate a £20,000 corporate budget to pursue the Equalities Agenda and implement specific initiatives such as consultation and publication of results.

Equality Impact Assessment

An Equality Impact Assessment is a thorough and systematic analysis of a current or proposed strategy, policy, service or procedure and its likely impact on equality groups.

The Council's Equality Impact Assessment process covers all equality groups and is outlined in Chapter Ten of the Wealden Equality Scheme.

Contractors and agencies

The Council will ensure that where equality legislation or duties apply to functions or services that are contracted out, the contractors have their own, or are able to implement the Council's, equality policy. Integrating equality issues into all the Council's procurement processes is currently being undertaken as part of the Council's Corporate Procurement Strategy.

Working in partnership

When working in partnership with other public authorities (where those partnerships do not have a separate legal identity in their own right) each partner is individually responsible for meeting their equality duties. The Council will seek to ensure that relevant partnerships are aware of the equality duties to enable discussion and arrangements, where appropriate, for

planning, funding and managing joint work that will allow partners to meet their statutory duties.

East Sussex Equality Scheme Co-ordination Group

The Council is a member of a county-wide group which includes representatives from the County, District and Borough Councils, Sussex Police, Primary Care Trusts (covering East Sussex), East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service, Terrence Higgins Trust and the East Sussex Disability Association. The group meets quarterly in order to share information and good practice, progress equality work and discuss issues, with the aim of working together to find solutions.

Dealing with racist incidents and other hate crimes

In East Sussex there is an agreed process for dealing with racist incidents. Full details of this scheme and contact information are detailed in Chapter Six of the Wealden Equality Scheme.

Other hate crimes may be reported to Sussex Police and informal support may be provided by local support networks.

Complaints against the Council

We investigate complaints about discrimination and harassment in accordance with clear written procedures through our formal complaints procedure. Further details on our procedure can be found on the Wealden website at www.wealden.gov.uk or from the complaints helpline on 01323 443114.

Local Government Equality Standard

The Equality Standard is a framework to assist local authorities mainstream equalities into all aspects of the council's work. The standard was developed by the Commission for Racial Equality, Equal Opportunities Commission, Disability Rights Commission, Employers Organisation, Dialog, and the Local Government Association in 2001. The Council's progress against the standard is monitored and audited through the Council's review service and will be reported annually in the equality progress report.

Implementing the scheme and self assessment process

This scheme will be published on the Wealden District Council website and available in a hard copy or alternative format.

We will implement the actions identified to gather and use information to meet our equality objectives.

On an annual basis we will publish a report containing a summary of the steps taken to fulfil our priority objectives, the results of the information gathered in this time period and what action we will take as a result. This will form part of an annual review on all equality work and will be reported to Members and published on the Council's website.

The Wealden Equality Scheme will be reviewed every three years and will take into account the information gathered to date, the results of impact assessments and any feedback from stakeholders on the effectiveness of the preceding scheme.

Conclusion

The aim of this Wealden Equality Scheme is to identify and tackle discrimination, to prevent harassment, and to ensure that the Council's work promotes equality of opportunity. It is acknowledged that this can only be achieved by incorporating our equality principles and values into all of the policies and practices of the Council. This requires a proactive approach and we will work through the Service Delivery and Employment Action Plans to meet our aim.

The key outcome will be equality for all individuals and communities in Wealden.