

What is the Equality Duty?

Background

On 5 April 2011, the public sector equality duty (the equality duty) came into force. The equality duty was created under the Equality Act 2010.

The equality duty replaced the race, disability and gender equality duties. The first of these duties, the race equality duty in 2001, came out of the Macpherson Report on the murder of the black teenager, Stephen Lawrence. Following failures of the investigation of Lawrence's murder, the report revealed institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police. It was clear that a radical rethink was needed in the approach that public sector organisations were taking towards addressing discrimination and racism.

Prior to the introduction of the race equality duty, the emphasis of equality legislation was on rectifying cases of discrimination and harassment after they occurred, not preventing them happening in the first place. The race equality duty was designed to shift the onus from individuals to organisations, placing for the first time an obligation on public authorities to positively promote equality, not merely to avoid discrimination.

Following the introduction of the race duty, it was clear that progress could also be made on other areas of equality through the introduction of similar duties. The disability equality duty came into force in 2006, followed by the gender equality duty in 2007.

The Equality Duty

The equality duty was developed in order to harmonise the equality duties and to extend it across the protected characteristics. It consists of a general equality duty, supported by specific duties which are imposed by secondary legislation. In summary, those subject to the equality duty must, in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

These are sometimes referred to as the three aims or arms of the general equality duty. The Act explains that having due regard for advancing equality involves:

- Removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics.
- Taking steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people.
- Encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low.

The Act states that meeting different needs involves taking steps to take account of disabled people's disabilities. It describes fostering good relations as tackling prejudice and promoting understanding between people from different groups. It states that compliance with the duty may involve treating some people more favourably than others.

The equality duty covers the nine protected characteristics: **age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.**

Public authorities also need to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination against someone because of their marriage or civil partnership status. This means that the first aim of the duty applies to this characteristic but that the other aims (advancing equality and fostering good relations) do not apply.

Purpose of the Duty

The broad purpose of the equality duty is to integrate consideration of equality and good relations into the day-to-day business of public authorities. If you do not consider how a function can affect different groups in different ways, it is unlikely to have the intended effect.

This can contribute to greater inequality and poor outcomes. The general equality duty therefore requires organisations to consider how they could positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations. It requires equality considerations to be reflected into the design of policies and the delivery of services, including internal policies, and for these issues to be kept under review.

Compliance with the general equality duty is a legal obligation, but it also makes good business sense. An organisation that is able to provide services to meet the diverse needs of its users should find that it carries out its core business more efficiently. A workforce that has a supportive working environment is more productive. Many organisations have also found it beneficial to draw on a broader range of talent and to better represent the community that they serve. It should also result in better informed decision-making and policy development. Overall, it can lead to services that are more appropriate to the user, and services that are more effective and cost-effective. This can lead to increased satisfaction with public services.