

The Essential Guide to... Equal Opportunities

Equal Opportunities are about ensuring that your organisation, from your decision-making procedures through to the services you provide, is accessible and open to everyone to participate equally.

Equal Opportunity is not about treating everybody the same but is about recognising people's differences and individual needs and taking these into account when planning and delivering services and activities. It is also about challenging and opposing all forms of discrimination (whether direct or indirect discrimination or through victimisation) and ensuring that your organisation is fully inclusive in its aims and the services it provides.

Developing an Equal Opportunities Policy

An Equal Opportunities policy is a written statement that sets out your organisation's commitment and awareness of discrimination and inclusion and how you put the principles of equal opportunities into practice. It applies to everyone connected with your organisation – staff, volunteers, committee members, service users and the wider public.

The policy should demonstrate that your organization does not discriminate on the grounds of race; ethnicity; gender; marital status; sexual orientation; age; disability; religious or political beliefs and socio-economic status. An Equal Opportunities policy is now an important and common requirement of most funding bodies as this provides strong evidence that your services are of benefit to the wider community.

An Equal Opportunities policy should be developed and written with the involvement of everyone within the organisation rather than adopting one from another source. This will ensure that the policy not only reflects the needs of service users but is properly owned, understood and agreed by as many people in the organisation as possible. Ideally, a policy should include the following: a general statement; your objectives concerning equal opportunities, a plan for implementation (or code of conduct) and a process for monitoring and reviewing the policy. Smaller voluntary and community groups could consider, however, drawing up a more general statement of policy that could also be inserted within their constitution.

Some things to think about

When considering Equal Opportunities it is important to think about your organisation both internally and externally. The following list provides a good starting point:

- Recruitment – current practices for staff, volunteers or committee members;
- Is the committee representative of your beneficiary groups, are meetings accessible and do they understand their responsibilities?

- How could you advertise your group's activities to encourage a broad range of people to attend?
- Membership - are there any obvious barriers or challenges that might exist, which could be preventing some people from getting involved? For example, you may want to make information available on tape, in large type, in or in Braille, for people with visual impairments.
- If you want to welcome people who speak other languages, you may want to have some of your information translated, or get an interpreter on board.
- Some people from different faith groups may have certain requirements, such as not being able to come to meetings on certain days or at particular times.
- Think about the language you use in your printed information and at your meetings. Might it be difficult for some people to understand? How could you simplify things to be welcoming for everyone?
- Look at the people who you want to come to your activities. Do they have a lot in common, in terms of age, class, background or culture? Imagine how someone from a different social group or cultural background might feel coming in. Can you do anything to make your activities more welcoming, and to really value the input of different types of people?
- Are there any barriers to membership or participation in meetings/events – for example, transport, childcare or caring responsibilities?
- How will you ensure that specific groups in the community are not excluded? Are signers or interpreters available?
- Do you have procedures in place for dealing with complaints or allegations of discrimination or harassment?
- Environment - do your venues and your workplaces have good disability access, provide for different dietary requirements?
- Do you have plan regular training and support for staff, volunteers and committee members around inclusion, diversity and equal opportunities?

The Laws on Equality

The following laws are in place to ensure people are protected and treated fairly and it is vital that your organisation has an understanding and awareness of them:

- Sex Discrimination Act 1975 & 1986
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995
- Race Relations Act 1976 & 2000
- Equal Pay Act 1970 & 1983
- Protection from Harassment Act 1997
- Human Rights Act 1998

Further help and information

Equality and Human Rights Commission – www.equalityhumanrights.com
Telephone: 0845 604 6610 Textphone: 0845 604 6620

ACAS (Employment Advice) – www.acas.org.uk
Telephone: 08457 474747 Textphone: 08456 061600

Volunteering England – www.volunteering.org.uk
Telephone: 0845 305 6979