

# Highland Council: Equal Opportunities Policy for Service Delivery (Updated October 2010)

## INTRODUCTION

Equal Opportunities is defined in the Scotland Act 1998 as:  
**“the prevention, elimination, or regulation of discrimination between persons on the grounds of sex or marital status, or racial origins, or on grounds of disability, age, sexual orientation, language or social origin, or of other personal attributes including beliefs of opinions, such as religious beliefs or political opinions.”**

Equal opportunities means recognising that there are barriers that can prevent some people from fully participating in community life, in employment, and from having equal access to services.

Equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination are central to the goals and values of the Highland Council. This policy sets out the Council’s commitment to providing equitable access to its services for all in our communities, whether delivered directly or in partnership with others, and how we will seek to identify and overcome barriers.

In adopting this policy the Highland Council is affirming the commitment in its Corporate Plan to tackling disadvantage wherever it arises and striving for equality of access to services. Developing an equal opportunities policy and an associated implementation plan will promote long term change and build consideration of equalities into the every day work of the Council and its services. The Council believes this approach is in the best interests of all in the area, and will help to promote the Highlands as a safe and welcoming community, in which people will want to live, work, visit and invest.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY

**The Council’s equalities aims are to:**

- Provide services that meet the needs of all the community
- Promote equal opportunities and tackle discrimination
- Be a fair employer

This policy document focuses on service delivery and compliments the Council’s existing Equal Opportunities Policy in Employment which sets out its responsibilities as an employer.

In implementing this policy, the Council will work towards ensuring that people in the communities of the Highlands have equal access to services regardless of personal characteristics, and to tackling discrimination and disadvantage. The Equality Act 2010 provides protection from unlawful discrimination and harassment to groups and individuals on the grounds of the following "Protected Characteristics":

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

Other groups particularly at risk of facing barriers to access services or of being unable to make their voices heard by services providers include:

- Carers
- Single parents
- Low paid and unemployed
- Homeless

The Council will aim to ensure that

- equality is central to service provision and will aim to include equal opportunities objectives in all its corporate and service plans, and
- that these objectives will be reflected in policies and procedures. Services will be required to integrate equality into the service planning process and report on progress. A planned approach to equality will result in delivering quality services that respond to the needs of communities and individuals.

In this way, equalities will not only be included in the every-day work of the Council, it will also be part of the Council's Performance Management Framework where areas for continuous improvement are identified and measured.

**The Objectives of the Council's equal opportunities policy are:**

- To ensure "mainstreaming" of equalities issues – this means making them central to service provision and part of every-day activities.
- To develop and foster consultation on equal opportunities with communities of interest, building on the Council's Working with Communities Strategy and including joint working with our partners.
- To ensure the Council complies with the statutory requirements of equal opportunities legislation
- To ensure that the Council's partners, contractors and others who deliver services on its behalf are aware of its commitment to Equal Opportunities.
- To ensure that recipients of grant aid and other support from the Council operate in keeping with the commitment to promoting equality of opportunity

- To promote and raise awareness of equality of opportunity and the unacceptability of discrimination
- To encourage a culture that values the diversity of people in the Highlands and responds to the needs of individuals. As a major employer and service provider the Council has an important leadership role to promote fairness, respect, and good relations between different groups.

The Council will make its Equal Opportunities policies widely available. The policies and associated actions will be regularly reviewed and monitored.

### **COUNCIL SERVICES**

The Highland Council provides a wide range of services to all communities in its area. These are services which, one way or another, affect everyone who lives, works, studies or visits the area ranging from refuse collection, school provision, money advice, community care, housing, Council Tax and rates collection, planning applications and many others.

The Council is continually striving to improve and develop its services to ensure efficient delivery to the public. This includes meeting new challenges in making some service available electronically, and also providing a high standard of customer care.

The Council wants to ensure that it provides the same access to services to everyone in its communities, a particular challenge when delivering services across the wide, and often sparsely populated areas of the Highlands.

### **WORKING WITH PARTNERS**

Equal opportunities is an area where a partnership approach is important and this includes working with other statutory agencies, with the voluntary sector and community groups. Increasingly the Council works in partnership with other local agencies in planning and delivering services.

The Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) sets out the vision and proposed actions of the key public agencies in the Highlands, together with the private and voluntary sectors under the Highland Public Sector Partnership. The SOA addresses a range of common objectives to jointly tackle issues to the benefit of people throughout the area.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

In implementing this Policy the Highland Council aims to ensure that equal opportunities becomes part of mainstream service delivery. To take this forward, an Implementation Plan has been developed to set out specific actions against which progress can be measured. The groundwork for this was a draft Action Plan produced by the Council's Equalities Group. This was incorporated into the Council's separate Equality Schemes for Race, Disability and Gender, and incorporated into a draft single equality Scheme on 2010.

Implementing this policy will require commitment from all Council Services and will involve working closely with Community Planning partners and with the community. The council will aim to ensure good communication between services to share "best practice" and will aim to address cross-service issues in ways responsive to the needs of different areas and groups, and will ensure efficient use of resources.

The Equality Scheme is the means of putting the Policy into practice to ensure equality of access to services and information. It aims to:

- Deliver accessible services and to treat customers fairly and with dignity and respect
- Ensure that our employment practices and policies are fair and accessible
- Increase engagement, involvement and representation of equality groups
- Create a culture in the Council that promotes equality, and demonstrates that discrimination and harassment on equality grounds will not be tolerated
- Demonstrate the continued progress of the Council to meet its public sector duties.

## **RESPONSIBILITY**

- Elected Members of the Highland Council, the Chief Executive and the Senior Management Team have ultimate responsibility to ensure that services are delivered equitably and without discrimination
- The Chief Executive and Service Directors are responsible for implementing the policy and ensuring equalities issues are included and mainstreamed within Service Plans.
- It is the responsibility of line-managers to ensure that staff are aware of the policy, that they act in accordance with its principles and are provided with necessary support and guidance to do so.
- The Council's Equalities Working Group meets regularly and has responsibility for ensuring that corporate equalities issues are addressed, and for monitoring equalities provision and progress in service plans.
- The Council's Equal Opportunities Officer provides support to services.
- All employees and Members of the Highland Council have a responsibility to ensure that the principles of equal opportunities are applied in all dealings with members of the public, and that no actions are taken which could be held to be discriminatory.

## **COMMUNICATING THE POLICY**

All Council employees will be made aware of the policy and its implications. This will be carried out through staff inductions, training, and awareness raising.

The policy will be promoted to members of the public, it will be on the Council's Intranet and internet, and will be available in alternative formats on request.

## **MONITORING AND REVIEW OF THE POLICY**

The Council will monitor and review its equal opportunities policies and practices on a regular basis. Reports will be made to the Equalities Group and to appropriate Committees.

This policy will be reviewed:

- At a corporate level the implementation will be reviewed by the Council's Equality Group, and through the annual service plan process.
- At departmental level through annual planning process
- As part of Best Value Reviews
- Through public performance surveys
- Through complaints procedures

## **DATA PROTECTION**

The Council will ensure that all information held relating to individual service users will be safeguarded under the terms of the Data Protection Act 1998

## ▪ **APPENDIX 1 Equal Opportunities Legislation**

### **Current legislation**

The main equality legislation is The Equality Act 2010 which replaces the previous range of equalities legislation and regulations. The public sector duties which apply to race, disability and gender are due to be replaced by a single equality scheme in April 2010.

### **The Local Government Act (Scotland) 2003**

The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 is a key aspect of the Scottish Executive's modernisation agenda for local government. The measures in the Act give Local Authorities more responsibility to act within an appropriate framework, to work in partnership with other bodies and the communities they serve, and to embed a culture of quality, equality and improvement.

The Act:

- provides a statutory framework for Community Planning. Local Authorities, assisted by those bodies subject to a duty to participate, are responsible for facilitating the process by which the Community Planning partnership observes equal opportunity requirements and encourage equal opportunities (from draft guidance).
- places a duty on public bodies to secure Best Value. Guidance on Best Value includes equal opportunities as a cross-cutting theme along with joint working and sustainable development.
- provides Councils with the "power to advance well-being" in finding innovative and creative ways of responding to the needs of their communities. Local Authorities will have an obligation to discharge the power to advance well-being in a manner which encourages equal opportunities and, in particular, observance of the equal opportunities requirements.