



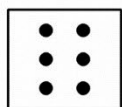
Durham County Council

Equality Policy

2024-28



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2 April 2024	V2.0	S Evans	Cabinet 16.10.24	April 2024
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Policy statement

Equality and inclusion are at the heart of Durham County Council's vision and core values and we are committed to promoting equality and diversity as an employer, in the services we deliver, in partnership and in the decisions we make.

Background

The Equality Act 2010 brought together a number of existing laws making it a more streamlined piece of legislation. It sets out the personal characteristics that are protected by the law and behaviour that is unlawful. The protected characteristics under the Act are; age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex, sexual orientation.

Under the Act people are not allowed to discriminate, harass or victimise another person because they have any of the protected characteristics. There is also protection against discrimination where someone is perceived to have one of the protected characteristics or where they are associated with someone who has a protected characteristic. As a major employer and provider of services Durham County Council is committed to advancing equality of opportunity and providing fair access and treatment in employment and when delivering or procuring services or working in partnership.

This policy reinforces our responsibility under the public sector equality duty (PSED) which was created under the Equality Act 2010. It consists of a general equality duty and specific duties.

General Duty

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

Specific Duties

- To publish information to demonstrate how we are complying with the Public Sector Equality Duty, and
- To prepare and publish equality objectives (at least every four years).

The specific duties help us to improve performance on the general duty, by improving focus and transparency.

Responsibilities

Our policy applies to every elected member, employee, volunteer and any other person or organisation employed by the council to work or to deliver services on its behalf. This includes contractual and commissioning arrangements. The policy applies to all work-related situations including social events and the use of electronic communications and social media.

It is the individual's responsibility to:

- Treat others fairly, with dignity and respect
- Follow council policies and procedures
- Ensure documentation, information and activity is lawful
- Consider reasonable adjustments and other requirements relating to people with disabilities
- Challenge discrimination and unfair treatment, reporting it where appropriate
- Attend relevant training and ask for advice where necessary

All actions, which are intentionally contrary to this policy, will be dealt with under the appropriate disciplinary procedure.

Our commitment

We recognise that inequality continues to affect different people and communities in different ways. We know that some people face inequality and disadvantage, prejudice and discrimination and we are committed to tackling this. We understand the challenges some groups experience, for example, the social and physical barriers experienced by disabled people, which limit opportunities or choices. We are committed to integrating equality into mainstream service planning, development, delivery and management. This is evident through our policy documentation, equality analysis and budgetary decisions and allocation.

We will take all reasonable steps to ensure that discrimination is prevented, such as mandatory staff training, use of the equality impact assessment process and through the inclusive design and delivery of accessible services. We perceive discriminatory bullying, harassment and unfair treatment of any individual as contradictory to our core values which will not be tolerated and have processes in place to investigate complaints.

Equality objectives 2024-28

As part of our specific duties we must develop and deliver equality objectives at least every four years. These help us to focus our attention on specific equality issues in order to deliver real improvement. Our objectives were initially identified through public consultation in 2019 with a wide range of stakeholders and partners for a shared vision for the county, also informed by analysis of countywide data sets¹ and national policy. We have extended our objectives for a further four years, refreshing their focus based on current data to allow us to build on the progress made to date:

We will improve employment opportunities for disabled people

¹ [Durham Insight](#)

- As a Disability Confident Leader, we will improve recruitment and retention rates of disabled people within the council. The Disability Staff Network underpins our approach to inclusion and has ambitious plans including the implementation of a buddy system to provide tailored support for any employee with a disability who needs this. Our employability programmes, such as DurhamEnable and work with jobseekers and local employers, to break down the barriers to paid work faced by people with disabilities, neurodiversities and long term health conditions, further supports our leadership status.
 - Underpinning evidence: County Durham has higher than average levels of disability and poor health compared to the rest of the country. Disabled people continue to face barriers in gaining and retaining employment and employers (in particular small employers) need support to ensure they have inclusive employment policies and practices in place.

We will build inclusive communities

- We will work with our communities to support their development and give them more control over the factors and decisions which affect their lives. As our communities have differing needs, strengths and potential, and we recognise one size does not fit all, we will target support towards those most in need and help to build capacity and resilience. By working more effectively with other organisations and interested parties such as parents, carers and service users, to collectively shape services and initiatives that matter, means we are doing things with communities rather than to them. This is known as our Approach to Wellbeing.
 - Underpinning evidence: Cost of living pressures and trends such as an ageing population and increasing levels of long term health issues, including poor mental health, are creating greater pressures on council services. We are one of the least ethnically diverse populations in the country which can exacerbate issues such as safety and isolation for Black, Asian and minority ethnic people. There has been an increase in anti social behaviour since 2022 and recorded hate crime has increased in terms of race, religion, disability and LGBT.

We will build an inclusive and welcoming employee culture

- We are committed to creating and sustaining a modern and supporting working environment for our employees and tackling inequalities, prejudice and discrimination. We aim to be an inclusive organisation, with improved staff engagement and effective staff networks.
 - Underpinning evidence: Our Workforce Strategy, approved by Cabinet on 15 May 2024, set out our approach towards the recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce in the face of increased competition for skilled workers, an ageing workforce with limited demographic spread and retention via positive and fulfilling experiences in the workplace. We believe it's important to employ a workforce which represents our local communities. Our objective to build an inclusive and welcoming employee culture supports the Workforce Strategy.

The objectives support the 2035 vision² that County Durham is a place where there are more and better jobs, people live long and independent lives and our communities are well connected and supportive. The council plan reflects this vision and includes a fourth

² [County Durham Vision 2035 \(countydurhampartnership.co.uk\)](https://countydurhampartnership.co.uk)

ambition to be an excellent council. Public consultation on a refreshed council plan (2024-28) sought feedback on the equality objectives and agreement to continue with them until 2028. The Plan was approved at full council on 28 February 2024.³

Our equality objectives are used as part of our annual reporting framework to illustrate how the council complies with the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Our values

The culture of our council is created by the way we behave. To help develop a positive and inclusive culture, four core values and a behaviour framework have been developed to describe the sort of organisation we want to be. Our 'open' values focus on creating a positive working environment by setting guidelines for the way staff should approach their work which underpin our approach to equality and inclusion:

Outcome focussed – we work together to achieve the best for people

People focussed – we put people and communities at the heart of everything we do

Empowering – we value trust and support each other

iNnovative – we embrace change and look for better ways to deliver services

Impact assessment and equality analysis

We use a process of equality impact assessment (EIA) to support the development of inclusive and responsive policies, procedures and service provision. These are carried out when a new policy, procedure or service is being developed or significantly changed, where a service review is taking place or where a potential inequality has been identified. The assessment involves an evidence based analysis of impact across the protected characteristics. This is carried out for all medium-term financial plan (MTFP) proposals as well as Cabinet and delegated decisions where there is a relevance to equality.

Integrated communities

We know that people in our communities can face prejudice and discrimination. This can be due to fear, a lack of understanding or intolerance which may be linked to a person's disability, race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity. We recognise that some people express fear via a lack of respect and contempt towards people from other groups and communities.

To tackle this, we work closely with a range of agencies including Durham Police under the banner of the Safe Durham Partnership to tackle the underlying causes of crime and adverse behaviours affecting our communities. Current safe Durham priorities are to tackle anti-social behaviour and crimes which disrupt our communities, hate crime and building community cohesion, and sexual violence and other violent crime.

We actively facilitate cohesion, with programmes that build intercultural awareness via activities such as the refugee mentoring project. We raise awareness and mark specific commemorative events such as Holocaust Memorial Day and Srebrenica Remembrance and celebrate events including Durham Pride and International Women's Day.

³ [Agenda for County Council on Wednesday 28 February 2024, 10.00 am - Durham County Council](#)

Consultation and involvement

To ensure our services and decisions are inclusive and responsive we involve and consult with people who use our services, employees, elected members, trade unions and partners on service changes, new approaches, refreshed strategies and policy changes. Stakeholders include communities and organisations who represent protected groups, e.g. Disability Partnership, Youth Council, North East England Rainbow Alliance and staff networks. Engaging with communities of interest allows us to gain equality focussed customer and employee insight and, where required, seek external validation for schemes such as our Disability Confident Leader application.

Commissioning and procurement

Embedding equality considerations into our commissioning and procurement practices improves services by making them more inclusive, appropriate and responsive to the needs of different groups.

Employee policies and practices

As an inclusive and supportive employer we treat staff with dignity and respect. We are committed to ensuring that our employment policies and processes do not discriminate and are fair and equitable to all. We welcome job applications from everyone, and successful candidates are considered only on their skills and ability to do the job. We offer a wide range of apprenticeship opportunities at the council for all ages. We also offer internships and supported employment placements and coaching and mentoring support for employees wanting to access this.

As a respectful employer, it is important that we encourage people to be themselves at work. We have a number of staff networks providing support for all staff and which help us to raise awareness of equality related issues. We have a programme of activities and support available to staff to promote and sustain wellbeing including access to: occupational health service, 24/7 mental health support, flexible working options etc. As part of our approach to staff wellbeing we carry out regular staff surveys which allow us to implement improvement plans.

Our commitment is demonstrated through achievement of several inclusion standards and pledges including; Disability Confident Leader, White Ribbon accredited, North East England Rainbow Alliance, Armed Forces Covenant Gold Award, Mental Health at Work Commitment and Better Health at Work Award.

All staff and elected members receive mandatory equality training. Additional specific and tailored equality training modules or sessions and awareness raising events are also available to staff and members. All employees will receive fair and transparent pay, reward and employment conditions, as well as options to work flexibly and access to learning and development opportunities.

We will monitor our employment procedures to avoid unlawful discrimination and ensure consistent treatment.

Dealing with complaints

Any allegations of discrimination, harassment and/or unfair treatment will be investigated

with disciplinary action taken where necessary. There are a number of ways to report equality related issues or complaints:

- **Employees** can raise issues informally with their line manager or Head of Service. Formal complaints should follow the grievance policy.
- **Councillors** can report issues through the member officer protocol or the code of conduct depending on the nature of the complaint.
- **Members of the public** can use the corporate and statutory complaints procedures. <http://www.durham.gov.uk/complaints>

We will take prompt action to investigate any complaints. Anyone who has complained will not be treated unfavourably or victimised. However, if a complaint is found to be malicious this will be dealt with under the appropriate disciplinary procedure.

Monitoring

Relevant actions will be monitored via quarterly monitoring reports⁴, and, also through our annual updates to demonstrate compliance with the public sector equality duty. We also produce mandatory gender pay gap reporting, as required on an annual basis.

⁴ [Quarterly reports - Durham County Council](#)

