



The Role of Equality in Accessing Public Services

Tower Hamlets Cornerstone Project





The Role of Equality in Accessing Public Services

Access to public services should be fair and inclusive for everyone, regardless of their background or circumstances. The Equality Act 2010, through the Equality Duty, ensures that local councils and public bodies provide services that respect and accommodate the diverse needs of their communities. This legal framework requires service providers to actively consider how their decisions affect people with protected characteristics, ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities and is treated fairly.

Whether it's adjusting services for disabled individuals or offering culturally appropriate care, the Equality Duty plays a crucial role in identifying barriers to access. By promoting fairness and preventing discrimination, it helps create a more inclusive environment where all service users can feel confident their needs will be met without bias or prejudice. Understanding these protections allows you to better navigate local services and advocate for your rights when necessary.



The Equality Duty and accessing services

The Equality Duty, established under the Equality Act 2010, protects individuals by requiring public bodies, such as councils and service providers in Tower Hamlets, to consider how their policies and practices impact people with protected characteristics. It ensures that services are delivered in a way that promotes fairness, tackles discrimination, and advances equality of opportunity for everyone, regardless of their background.

The Equality Duty has three main objectives:

1. **Eliminate discrimination, harassment, and victimisation** - services must avoid practices that unfairly disadvantage individuals based on their protected characteristics.
2. **Advance equality of opportunity** - this means services should remove or reduce disadvantages faced by particular groups, meeting their specific needs.
3. **Foster good relations** - services should encourage understanding and reduce tensions between different groups.

How the Equality Duty Protects Individuals

The Equality Duty ensures that service providers who supply public services actively think about how different groups are affected by the services they offer.

This means they must:

- Make reasonable adjustments for disabled individuals.
- Provide services that are accessible and sensitive to the needs of all protected groups where possible (e.g., through translation services or culturally appropriate care).
- Ensure fair treatment and equal access for everyone, regardless of age, race, sex, or any other protected characteristic.

The protected characteristics are based on the Equality Act brought into effect in 2010. The characteristics when accessing services.



The protected characteristics are:

1. Age
2. Disability
3. Gender Reassignment
4. Marriage and Civil Partnership
5. Pregnancy and Maternity
6. Race
7. Religion or Belief
8. Sex
9. Sexual Orientation
10. Carers/caring duty (this characteristic is specific to Tower Hamlets)

These legislations ensure that no one is unfairly discriminated against based on any of these characteristics.



For example, a disabled person accessing care services should expect reasonable adjustments to be made to accommodate their needs, such as accessible facilities or communication aids. Similarly, individuals from different racial or religious backgrounds should be able to receive services that respect their beliefs and practices. Service providers are legally required to consider the protected characteristics in their policies and practices. This means offering equitable, non-discriminatory services. For service users, this results in greater confidence that they can access care without fear of prejudice or bias, and that services support inclusivity and fairness. These characteristics can influence how people experience and/or navigate a service. Having one or more protected

characteristics may sometimes make it harder to use a service. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is designed to ensure that no one faces discrimination or unfair treatment based on these characteristics. For instance, a disabled person accessing care should expect reasonable adjustments, such as accessible facilities or communication aids, to meet their needs. Similarly, people from different racial or religious backgrounds should receive culturally sensitive services that respect their beliefs and practices.

Service providers are legally required to consider these protected characteristics when shaping their policies and practices. This ensures that care is equitable, free from discrimination, and meets the diverse needs of the community. As a result, service users can have greater confidence that they will access care without facing prejudice or bias, and that services are designed to promote inclusivity and fairness.



Using the Equality Duty to Your Advantage

If a system or service provided by the council does not benefit you, you can use the Equality Duty to advocate for change by:

- **Raising concerns:** If you feel a service is failing to meet your needs or discriminating against you due to your protected characteristic, you can bring this to the attention of the service provider. The Equality Duty gives you the right to ask for fair and equal treatment.
- **Requesting reasonable adjustments:** For instance, if you are a disabled person, you can ask for modifications to be made to help you access services more easily.
- **Challenging inequality:** If you believe a policy or practice unfairly disadvantages you or others, you can challenge it by making a formal

complaint or seeking legal advice, highlighting the failure to meet Equality Duty obligations.

- **Advocating for better services:** The Equality Duty means public services must consider the impact of their decisions on the protected characteristic groups. You can engage with service providers or local councils to suggest improvements in how services are delivered, ensuring they better meet the needs of diverse groups.

By knowing your rights under the Equality Duty, you can ensure that services are more responsive to your needs, holding providers accountable for delivering fair, inclusive care.



What can you do if the council makes changes to services that make life more difficult for you or your family?

If the council makes changes to services that negatively impact you or your family, there are steps you can take to address the situation. For example, when the council shifted parking permit purchases entirely online, it created challenges for those without access to digital tools, leaving some residents unable to obtain permits.

We all contribute to the funding of council services, such as rubbish collection, street lighting, leisure facilities, children's centres and more specialised services like community safety and adult social care. If changes to these services no longer meet your needs, it's important to act.

Start by identifying which aspects of the service are not working—whether it's related to the quality, accessibility, or communication. You can then raise your concerns with the council or service provider through their complaints service. Many issues can be resolved through clear, respectful communication, whether in person, via a feedback form, or through formal complaints procedures. By speaking up, you can help drive improvements in the services you rely on. If the issue remains unresolved, you have the right to seek support and there may be other options you can explore. Remember, you are entitled to quality services, and advocating for yourself or your loved ones can often lead to better outcomes.



If things do not change?

Every decision made by the local council about funding for services needs to go through a process called an equality impact assessment. This assessment looks at the data and information about the service. This can include the number of people using it, the impact on services users and their wellbeing.

The council also needs to consider the impact on different groups of people and consider protected characteristics.

By knowing your rights under the Equality Duty, you can ensure that services are more responsive to your needs, holding providers accountable for delivering fair, inclusive care.

To find out more and where you can get support if you want to raise your concerns about a change in service visit:

www.thcvs.org.uk/cornerstone

What steps do you need to take if a service provider does not meet your needs?

If a service provider is not meeting your needs, the first step is to clearly identify what aspects of the service are falling short—whether it's issues with quality, timeliness, accessibility, or communication. Once you've pinpointed these concerns, you should address them directly with the provider, starting with informal methods like speaking to a member of staff or submitting feedback through available channels. In many cases, open and respectful communication can help resolve issues without the need for formal action. However, if your concerns are not addressed through initial discussions, you may need to escalate the matter by

filing a formal complaint through the provider's complaints procedure. Be sure to document all your interactions and responses during this process, as this can support your case if further action is needed. You can also explore alternative options for receiving the service or seek external advice from organisations that specialise in advocacy or consumer rights, particularly if your situation involves essential services like healthcare, social care, or housing.

It's important to remember that you have a right to access services that meet your needs, and by advocating for yourself, you not only improve your own experience but may also help others facing similar challenges. Staying persistent and informed about your rights will increase the likelihood of achieving a satisfactory resolution.



www.thcvs.org.uk/cornerstone

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