

Part of core business

Linda Bellos, Director, Diversity Solutions Consultancy Ltd, discusses the issues surrounding race, gender and disability discrimination...

Equality and diversity are now beginning to be taken seriously by all public services. There was a time nearly 20 years ago when some authorities took the issues very seriously, but the intervening years have seen equality and diversity slip from the good practice agenda.

The murder of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent inquiry into the way the police handled the investigation led the then Home Secretary to insist that all public authorities, including the police, now be subject to the same duty as local authorities were under the Race Relations Act 1976.

The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 not only ensures that police and other previously exempt bodies are now under a duty (S.71) to promote race equality and eliminate unlawful discrimination; more significantly, the Act requires public authorities to demonstrate how they will achieve the three parts of the general duty of the Act. In other words, they must all now demonstrate compliance with the law, not just write the obligatory statement about being committed to equality of opportunity.

Racial discrimination is by no means the only issue that must be addressed. But the laws against it have been made clearer and more emphatic than those that relate to gender or disability discrimination.

What is important about the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 is that provisions can and should be applied to all other strands of equality. Two major problems of past approaches to equality and diversity are that they tended to focus on employment issues, and secondly, they saw each strand of diversity as separate. Gender was seen in competition with race or disability, and little recognition was made of any potential overlap in the people who might be affected by discrimination.

Now that a new Commission for Equality and Human Rights is being mooted, there needs to be a broader understanding about the issues. Even in the field of equality and diversity, there is much confusion and suspicion. The key arguments against are that merging the commissions will lead to the watering down of important perspectives. The chief argument in favour of a unitary commission is that it would address a broader range of perspectives; it could

include sexuality, age, and religion or belief, as well as gender, race and disability. But what really matters is whether the new body will have effective and consistent powers.

Few staff ever received training in understanding equality and diversity, though a few attended 'awareness' courses. But if we are to progress with implementing equality of outcomes, staff who are meant to deliver the outcomes need to be equipped to do so. It will not be enough to accuse organisations and individuals of being sexist or racist; now we must ensure that staff are equipped to understand what is required of them, and how they can deliver services in appropriate and proportionate ways to all sections of our communities.

Merely hoping that staff in public service sign up to equality statements or codes of practice may not be enough. Face to face training has a key role to play in providing training to all staff, but it is expensive and time consuming to train all staff.

This is why public authorities need to consider e-learning as a method of imparting essential knowledge about delivering equality and diversity. A more systematic approach to equality and diversity is needed. Employers may need to prove that they have done all in their power to enable and support staff to deliver. This may mean having an audit trail of who has received training, what standards they met, etc.

Equality and diversity in the public sector should be about providing quality services, not mere window dressing. What is required, to achieve an integrated approach to diversity, is to see it as most organisations view health and safety. It is not an added extra but a non-negotiable part of core business.

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