

**Human Resources
Diversity and Equality
Centre of Expertise**

**Equality Impact Assessment
Equality Schemes Customer Reference
Group**

Equality impact assessment for the DWP's Equality Schemes Customer Reference Group

Introduction

1. DWP has carried out an equality impact assessment (EIA) on the introduction of a Equality Schemes Customer Reference Group for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to meet the requirements of the:
 - Race Equality Duty.
 - Disability Equality Duty.
 - Gender Equality Duty.
2. This process will help to make sure:
 - The Department's strategies, policies and services are free from discrimination.
 - Due regard is given to equality (specifically disability, gender and race) in decision making and subsequent processes.
 - Opportunities for promoting equality are identified.
3. This equality impact assessment considers the impact of the approach to establish a customer reference group in terms of age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, race, religion and belief and sexual orientation.

Aim of the proposal

4. The aim of the introduction of the Equality Schemes Customer Reference Group is to help DWP involve customers specifically on diversity issues and to act as a consultative group for the Department's Equality Schemes. DWP must involve its customers in the development of its equality schemes. This legal obligation to involve customers is set out primarily in the Disability Equality Duty but there are corresponding requirements in the Race Equality Duty and the Gender Equality Duty. As a public authority the Department is required to involve customers in the development and agreeing of action plans for its Equality Schemes. Involvement must be "planned, focused and significant" and it must achieve the active engagement of stakeholders.
5. The representative customer group will provide customer insight across the range of equality issues (Annex 1 shows the Terms of Reference of the Group). The actions set out in the Department's Equality Schemes' action plans represent a challenging programme of work for the Department. Recognising this, the Department wants to continue to involve customers, stakeholders and staff, seeking their views on the delivery of our 2008 action plans and in developing equality schemes in the future.
6. For practical reasons there will only be a limited number of representatives who are able to take part in the formal Equality Schemes Reference Group. The group will have

a specific remit which will provide a focus on equality issues and specifically a means of customer feedback on the Department's Equality Schemes.

Who will benefit from the proposal

7. The Department aims for the reference group process to be beneficial to both customers and the Department. The Department's vision is to place customers "at the very heart of the design and delivery of services. Ensuring that customers receive the support they need, when they need it, in the most appropriate way, reaching across organisational boundaries to meet customers' needs, delivering services in the most efficient way possible".
8. Central to this vision is the commitment to establish a customer involvement strategy for the Department's diverse customers in order to:
 - Support the delivery of the customer commitment.
 - Provide an accessible, accurate and efficient service.
 - Help the Department achieve its aim of treating customers and stakeholders with respect.
 - Enable productive feedback and sharing of good practice, internally and externally and help reduce duplicated effort for customer representative groups and the Department.
 - Enable the Department to meet its legal obligations under the Disability, Gender and Race Equality Duties.
 - Meet the commitments made in our Equality Schemes.
9. The customers in the reference group have direct and early involvement in the development of policy and the Department's action plans for equality. This will help to make sure that customer views are taken on board when developing policies and deciding on key equality sanctions that the Department must take forward.
10. Not only will it help us to meet the requirements of legislation, ie the need to involve disabled people in the development of our equality schemes, it will provide an opportunity to seek customer's views and ultimately improve services. We will be able to make sure that we target resources to meet the needs of both employees and customer.

Consultation and involvement

11. The Department already has a range of customer involvement activities at Departmental level and business level including:
 - Formal published consultations, for example for green papers.
 - An equality impact assessment process.
 - Analysis of research data and other management information.
 - Existing departmental formal meetings, e.g. DWP Annual Forum, DWP Inclusion Forum and the DWP Disability Annual Forum.
 - Ongoing consultation and involvement activity with customer representative groups (at all levels from local to national).

- Equality 2025.
- Local outreach activity.

12. In developing its approach the Department sought the involvement of a range of organisations covering all the equality strands (invitations were sent to almost ninety representative organisations). In addition the proposal to set up an Equality Schemes Customer Reference Group was also discussed with members of the national policy forum and inclusion forum. It was decided to run a pilot meeting of a customer group in February 2008.
13. The aim of the event was test the effectiveness of the approach and seek views as to how well the Department is doing in delivering its Equality Scheme action plans and to consult customers on what areas it needs to concentrate on for the future, in order to improve services to its range of diverse customers. In addition invitees and participants were advised that if the pilot workshop was successful (and there was a positive response to the need for a representative group from customers), the Department would consider setting up a formal Equality Schemes Customer Reference Group. The Group to meet on a regular basis, (probably twice yearly).
14. Internal consultation was also carried out and the Department formally involved the employee representatives of the Departmental Trade Unions and the diversity and equality staff network groups to discuss its proposals for setting up a customer Equality Scheme Reference Group.

Changes made as a result

15. The feedback from both the internal consultation and the pilot of the reference group was positive and therefore, following the decision via an internal formal governance process, it was agreed to set up a formal customer Equality Schemes Reference Group.
16. The initial pilot was successful in that the Department gained feedback on its plans for its equality schemes and customers had another method of having their say on the action plan priorities. There was one concern from a wider perspective. The pilot workshop attracted a majority of disabled customers' and stakeholder representatives and there was some customer feedback that not all of the equality areas were represented. Therefore when designing the approach for the new formal Group, additional effort was made to attract interest from customer representatives across all of the equality strands. It is intended that the membership will be of a steady state until any formal evaluation suggests that change is needed or members leave for other reasons.

Data and information

17. As the reference group is only part of the Department's overall involvement and consultation approach it is not intended, nor is it possible, for the group to be fully representative of the whole of the Department's customer community. There is a wide range of groups, individuals and stakeholders represented on numerous other

Departmental focus groups and measures taken to gather customer feedback. Invitations were sent to representatives from all seven of the equality strands however to ensure that the Equality Schemes Customer Reference Group is fully representative of the equality issues. The final Group membership does cover all of the equality strands interests.

Details of the Reference Group

18. The reference group is not intended to duplicate the activity of other consultation groups. The focus of the Reference Group is to concentrate on cross cutting customer service equality issues (not concentrating on one area). The Department has a number of customer groups, which meet on a regular basis inputting into the Department's policy or commenting on service delivery. We do not wish to reinvent or duplicate these systems.
19. The group concentrate on policy issues and broad aspects of service delivery, rather than details of individual cases. The group will have robust terms of reference. It will be formed of a small number of nominated individuals acting in the "critical friend" role. The intention is to have individuals who have experience as customers of Departmental services on the group, in addition to those from representational organisations. Members to be asked to contribute/comment on a particular policy. Additionally a key part of the role will be to participate in the development and revision of the Equality Schemes, for example supporting the Department in setting priorities for action planning and helping establish communication approaches.
20. Every effort has been made in setting up the Group and the pilot meetings to ensure that the communication is accessible to all participants. Access needs have been considered for future meetings and communications. All materials are sent out to participants in their required format. The meetings are held in accessible venues, checked by the Diversity and Equality Centre of Expertise prior to the meeting.

Conclusion

21. The aim of the proposal for the customer Equality Schemes Reference Group is part of the Department's approach to meeting its legislative requirements under equality law in delivering its Equality Schemes and action plans. As such the Department believes that the effect of the group should be a positive benefit to the Department's customers.
22. The impact assessment process has not identified any key areas of adverse impact at this stage, after the additional effort was made to attract participants to the group from across all the equality strands. There is still a risk that if a particular representative group does not attend the meetings some areas may not be as well represented as others. To make sure that all groups are represented the Terms of Reference set out the strand coverage in the membership section.
23. Additionally the formation of the Equality Schemes Reference Group is only part of the Department's approach to involvement and ongoing customer consultation. The Group

is not able to represent every one of the Department's customers but should be able to provide an overview of key themes which are being raised by its diverse customers.

Next steps and evaluation

24. Once established, the Department will seek the views of the customer Equality Schemes Reference Group on the formal method of evaluation of their role. The Terms of Reference will be amended as necessary to agree the evaluation approach.
25. The Equality Impact Assessment will be amended and reviewed accordingly at that stage.

Name and contact details of the officer(s) responsible for the assessment

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Equality Schemes Reference Group: Terms of Reference

Purpose

- To add value to the quality of our involvement strategy by providing expertise and experience of the Department for Work and Pensions' services, to add to the feedback gained through other involvement channels.
- To add value to the scope of our involvement strategy by providing a greater breadth of involvement, across the range of the Department's services, to add to the feedback gained through other involvement channels.
- To add value to the continuity of our involvement strategy by providing a longer-term commitment than might be gained through other involvement channels.

How the Reference Group will add value

- The Reference Group will provide a more insightful level of customer involvement through a mix of its experience across the range of the Department's policies and services and its background knowledge of equality legislation and codes of practice.
- The Reference Group will examine the 'big picture' rather than just at individual, localised problems. For example it might look at cross-cutting issues that impact across the Department and it may identify issues to be addressed in the Department's equality action plans.
- The Reference Group will comprise experienced customers and 'critical friends' who will provide a more informed, continuous level of involvement than would be gained through one-off involvement initiatives and exercises.

How the Reference Group will benefit DWP and its customers

- By expressing and sharing the views and experiences of the Department's customers.
- By giving a critical friend view on how customers use and perceive the Department's services and functions.
- By providing a level of involvement that is informed by genuine insight into the services that the Department provides.
- In doing the above having an input into influencing and shaping the Department's policies, processes and services.
- By helping the Department to deliver better equality schemes.

- Helping the Department to identify the issues that will need to be addressed in its action plans.

Scope

- As a group that addresses cross-cutting, 'big picture' issues, the Reference Group will represent the range of equality strands and customers across the range of services and functions provided by the Department.
- As a group that will be a longer term fixture of the Department's involvement activities, the Reference Group will be able to take a 'long view' on how issues emerge, develop and are addressed over time.

Membership

- Members of the Reference Group will represent customers or groups of customers and will, collectively, cover the range of equality strands.
- Members will attend twice-yearly meetings that are timed to coincide with the cyclical publication of equality schemes and progress reports. Meetings will take place in London, with a core membership of a minimum of nine or more individuals. Meetings will be chaired by a Departmental facilitator.
- Members' of the group will not be paid for their time, but other expenses will be paid (e.g. travel and for personal assistance at the meeting) by the Diversity and Equality Centre of Expertise.

Ethics

- Members will represent the broad views of the Department's diverse customers and will share a commitment to the promotion of diversity and equality.
- Members will not use the Reference Group to promote their own individual interests or to pursue individual grievances or complaints.
- Members will respect other individuals' opinions and will not breach other individuals' or the Department's confidentiality of issues discussed at the meetings (unless issues are in the public domain, this will be expressly stated at the meetings).

Role of the Diversity and Equality Centre of Expertise

- The Centre of Expertise will provide administrative and secretariat functions and will, as appropriate, determine agenda items (but will also seek agenda items from customer representatives).
- The Centre of Expertise will deliver the Reference Group's findings, feedback and any recommendations to the appropriate point within DWP.