

# The Rent Service Race, Disability and Gender Equality Schemes 2008 – 2011

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## Foreword



The introduction of housing benefit reforms, including the new Local Housing Allowance in April 2008, is part of the Government's wider Welfare Reform agenda, culminating in the Welfare Reform Bill, which received Royal Assent in May 2007.

This has meant that fundamental changes have taken place in the operational activities of The Rent Service since the publication of our last equality scheme in December 2006.

The new housing benefit system will no longer require a separate stand alone body to support it and Ministers have announced that the remaining functions of The Rent Service will transfer to the Valuation Office Agency in April 2009. Structural change to the business is set to continue as part of our Transform Programme, until the merger date.

In the meantime we have continued with a programme of diversity awareness for our staff in order that they can continue to provide high levels of customer service and reflect the communities they serve.

Our diversity and equality strategy is overseen by the Equality Board, whose members come from the most senior levels of the Agency and reflects our commitment to diversity at the highest level. The Equality Board will ensure that all elements of diversity will remain an important part of our agenda while our Transform Programme continues.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patrick Boyle". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Patrick Boyle**

**Chief Executive  
The Rent Service**

## Introduction

Our equality scheme and action plans are designed to include the principles of equality and fairness in all that we do and are aimed to be inclusive of all of our staff and customers. As a result the Agency treats all areas of diversity equally and we are working towards having one scheme which covers race, disability and gender as well as other areas of diversity. Action plans for the individual diversity strands are contained as annexes to the scheme.

The Rent Service is an executive Agency of the Department for Work and Pensions, and does not have its own public service agreement objectives and targets. As a front line service delivery organisation The Agency contributes to the Department's overall public service agreement objectives and targets.

In our equality schemes annual progress reports published in November 2007, we explained that we had decided to review all our equality schemes in 2008 for the following reasons:

- race legislation requires race equality schemes to be reviewed by May 2008;
- to take on board comments on our first disability and gender equality schemes;
- to move towards our objective of mainstreaming and aligning with the usual April-March planning cycle used across government, and to align our cycle with the Spending Review cycle; and
- to move towards a single equality scheme.

This will help to embed diversity and equality into the way we do business. As this review is significantly earlier than required for disability and gender, we discussed this decision with the Disability Rights Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission before they became part of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights in October 2007. They supported the proposal to carry out the third year review early with a 'light touch' review of our disability and gender equality schemes at the same time as we review our race equality schemes.

## Overview of Progress

The Rent Service has been working towards having a single equality scheme in place since December 2006 that covers race, gender and disability as well as other diversity and equality issues.

The race equality scheme has been in place since May 2002 and was reviewed in May 2005. We have issued progress reports since the introduction of the combined equality scheme, the last being issued in November 2007 and these are available on our public internet site at [www.therentservice.gov.uk](http://www.therentservice.gov.uk)

Since that time The Rent Service have moved our actions forward including:

- Following the successful roll out of diversity awareness training for all staff, we continue to raise diversity awareness amongst staff through updating our diversity intranet site as well as rolling out a training workshop on disability confidence to all staff which was completed by the end of April 2008.
- Carrying out impact assessments of policy and procedures issued to all staff as well as major publications to customers.
- Meetings of the Equality Board to review strategy and monitor progress in our action plans including offering The Rent Service staff the option of joining Valuation Office Agency diversity consultative groups from September 2008 in advance of the merger of the organisations.
- Monitoring our staffing statistics for gender race and disability and publishing the results in our Annual Report.
- Working with the Valuation Office Agency to review both organisations' diversity and equality policies procedures and practices with a view to recommending the best practices to be adopted in time for the merger in April 2009.

## Consultation and Involvement

As part of our continued commitment to a high quality standard of service, we work in close partnership with our staff, customers and stakeholders, including our trade unions, to ensure that users of services are not adversely affected by the organisational changes that are taking place. In order to do this we undertake a range of measures to ensure these groups are consulted and involved and their views incorporated in the preparation of our equality scheme and action plans.

- We consult with our customers through customer satisfaction surveys which ask diversity questions to ascertain whether customers feel the service they receive has been affected due to their background. Customers are given the chance to feed back on the standard of service they receive and comments are analysed.
- Staff are also consulted via an annual staff survey which includes a diversity section. They are also able to feed back on diversity issues they may have via the Head of Diversity Health and Safety who will take forward any concerns raised. If staff have any unresolved issues dispute resolution through mediation is available via our Welfare Unit or as a last resort a formal grievance procedure.

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- We monitor complaints from our customers as and when they arise and taking appropriate corrective action if required. Complaints from customers on diversity issues are referred to the Head of Diversity Health and Safety to ensure that customers are satisfied with our responses.
- We also consult with customer representatives through our Departmental customer workshops and actions arising are fed into action plans as necessary.
- As landlord and tenants are important customers of the organisation, we attend local fora locally to our offices to give advice on our services and giving members of the public a chance to comment and give feedback on our service.
- We will work with the Valuation Office Agency to compare our ranges of stakeholder consultation and involvement and consider the opportunity for our staff to join diversity consultative groups as part of a larger organisation.
- We undertake an annual review and report of the progress of our schemes and action plans and publish these updates externally giving customers an opportunity to comment.

## Impact assessment

As a public service provider, our activities could have adverse effects on our customers and partners. In order to identify these effects and minimise any potential adverse impact we conduct impact assessments.

As the Agency is not responsible for drafting legislative policy, and the main functions of The Rent Service are set out in statute, the legislation and Government policy we work to is drafted by main Government departments and will be impact assessed via their processes.

Our duties bring us into contact with a number of customers and stakeholders who we wish to treat with respect and fairness. Therefore we have a process for use by staff to impact assess our internal policies and guidance, for race, disability, gender and other diversity areas as well as our published documentation, which has been in place since 2006. We completed the impact assessment of our existing guidance during 2006/07 and now impact assess all new and revised guidance.

All our senior managers who are responsible for developing internal guidance and policy are trained in impact assessment using an assessment tool with additional guidance to support these processes. The assessment process is overseen by the HR Directorate and places responsibility on senior managers, who are required to consider the extent to which policies meet the general duty and do not inadvertently lead to unlawful discrimination.

By continuing to work with our partners, including following our parent Department's processes, other Government Departments and our trade unions, customers and suppliers, we will improve our assessment systems following any feedback received. These measures embed the principles of diversity and equality in our interaction with all of our customer groups.

We will continue to screen our guidance to staff to ensure that they treat our customers and stakeholders with equality and fairness. We will also work with the Valuation Office Agency to ensure the best standards of impact assessment is continued following the merger of the organisations.

As a result of impact assessments we do amend our ways of working to account for customers' varying needs. This has included printing our service information leaflets in size 14 font and making our Internet site more accessible. We have reviewed our HR guidance to staff and produced a cultural guide to help staff to give them greater understanding of cultural and ethnic differences. We are undertaking a review of our main guidance to operational staff who undertake visits and the impact assessment process is under way to highlight any remedial action required. As part of the impact assessment process we carried out a review of under represented groups in The Rent Service the results of this review during 2006/2007 have been fed into our action plans.

In assessing our impact we:

- Assess our new and existing procedures and guidance to identify any potential adverse impact on minority groups and to work to reduce or eliminate adverse impacts where practicable.
- Identify any adverse impacts and feed these into the action plans. Progress will be monitored by the Equality Board.
- Advise the relevant authority where an adverse impact is identified in the course of our duties in an area in which The Rent Service is not the policy maker;
- Publish the outcomes of the assessment process and identify areas of improvement on our internet site and in hard copy upon request.
- During 2007-08 we have carried out 9 impact assessments on internal guidance and published documents with no decisions needing to be changed as a result of these assessments.

## Monitoring and Evaluation

We monitor, analyse and evaluate a range of information on our staff to meet the specific requirements of the Race Relations Act, the Disability Discrimination Act and the Equality Act. This helps us to ensure that our staff from under-represented groups receive equal outcomes and are able to fulfil their potential. Our employment data is reported in the Department for Work and Pensions equality schemes in the chapter on Corporate Human Resources.

The Agency has monitored its staff by ethnicity, gender, disability and age since 2003 and also publishes this data in the Annual Report and Accounts since 2006. The purpose of monitoring is to help decide whether our policies are working, by maintaining statistical data on the number of employees and applicants for jobs and identify if there are any barriers to recruitment, career development and retention. Monitoring of staff data also helps to comply with requests for information by The Cabinet Office as well as complying with legislative requirements.

We have also introduced exit interviews and questionnaires for staff leaving the organisation to ensure that they are not leaving because of discrimination harassment or bullying. So far results from exit interviews show no one leaving the agency on the grounds outlined above.

## Extent to which policies, functions and services meet the needs of disabled people

We carry out a series of consultations with disabled people in our day-to-day activities. Owing to the size of The Rent Service these consultations are in line with our resources. In the course of our functions we carry out inspections of property and come into contact with tenants and landlords from a wide variety of backgrounds. Our staff are trained to treat everyone with equality, fairness and respect.

Where we are advised of individual needs in advance, we will do everything within our control to adapt our service to meet people's various needs.

The following are examples of how we adapt to the differing needs of disabled people.

- We make adjustments to our estate to make our premises accessible to all, including disabled people. These include the provision of ramps to aid wheelchair access and induction loop systems in reception areas of our offices.
- We make reasonable adjustments to the working conditions of our disabled staff, including the provision of specialist equipment and furniture and reporting the outcomes of these adjustments.

- We provide a range of our service leaflets and publications in different formats, including large print, Braille and audio tape, as well as in a range of different languages.
- We train our staff in diversity issues so they do not inadvertently discriminate on grounds of disability and are currently rolling out a programme of disability confidence training.
- We carry out regular customer and staff satisfaction surveys and analyse the results according to gender, ethnicity and disability, where this information is provided. Outcomes are fed into our action plans as necessary.

## Procurement

In developing relationships with our suppliers we have regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment and promote equality of opportunity. We ensure that our business procurement processes are explicit, including in our invitation to tender specifications. They outline responsibilities in relation to legislation and we expect contractors to provide evidence of their equality policies. All contracts let are made in accordance with good practice and available guidance from the Office of Government Commerce, the Cabinet Office and the Department for Work and Pensions, including Office of Government Commerce guidance on social issues in purchasing to ensure that our contractors and suppliers follow equality principles.

## Equal pay

We aim to ensure equal pay for staff doing work of equal value by operating a pay system that is transparent and is based on objective criteria.

To achieve this we:

- use a systematic job evaluation scheme that incorporates the principles of equal pay;
- will undertake equal pay audits, including the monitoring of bonuses and allowances;
- provide guidance to managers involved in decisions about pay and benefits;
- consult regularly with our joint trade unions on these matters; and
- will review and improve this approach as appropriate.

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In so doing it is our objective to reward fairly the skills, experience and potential of all our staff, to avoid unfair discrimination, and as a result to continuously improve efficiency, productivity and operational effectiveness.

## Progress reporting and reviewing

As part of our commitment to diversity we publish our equality scheme and action plans via the Internet and hard copies are available upon request. We also publish the results of our diversity achievements via the annual report and progress reports which will be available in similar formats. Our aims and goals for the business are published annually in the business plan. Once reviews have taken place, updated versions of the action plans will be posted on the website.

The equality schemes are reviewed every three years in order to set a new agenda and to meet legislative requirements. The review of schemes will be carried out in consultation with staff, customers and stakeholders so that the schemes are tailored to meet their requirements.

## Annex 1 – Assessment of functions and policies

As required by legislation we have completed a review of our functions. As the Agency's main functions are laid out in legislation our functions do not change often. No major change has occurred to our functions since the last review in 2006 and as a result the possible adverse impact of our functions remains low. We do not draft government policy or legislation but apply the legislation we work to. Any potential adverse impact carried by the policy governing our work is normally owned by the Department for Work and Pensions and other government departments or agencies. However, if a potential adverse impact is identified we will raise this with our stakeholders and pass it on for further consideration.

We do issue internal guidance to staff as well as information to customers and clients.

The main functions of The Rent Service are to provide rental valuation services for the private rented housing sector for housing benefit purposes and the new local housing allowance that became operational in April 2008. The Rent Service also carry out fair rent determinations, non-statutory advice to customers and stakeholders within the public, private and charity sectors and provide advice to local authorities on the effects on rental valuations for housing renovation grant applications made by landlords.

The introduction of the local housing allowance is a new function to the Agency and applies this from April 2008. The local housing allowance is part of the Government's wider welfare reform agenda which is designed to provide housing benefit claimants with greater fairness, choice and personal responsibility, and creates a simpler and more transparent system for them to access housing benefit support. This policy will have been assessed by our parent department and is designed to lessen any adverse impact the current housing benefit system has. Much work has been done to prepare for the introduction of the local housing allowance. We have completed a comprehensive review of localities across England, including extensive consultation with our local authority customers.

Our residual role and functions will transfer to the Valuation Office Agency in April 2009 who will take over responsibility for these at that time.