

# Equality Impact Assessment

## Pensions Ombudsman - back catalogue

### Introduction

The Pensions Ombudsman has carried out an equality impact assessment (EIA) on its functions, policies and services to meet the requirements of the:

- Race Equality Duty;
- Disability Equality Duty; and
- Gender Equality Duty.

This process helps to make sure:

- Our 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; and
- Opportunities for promoting equality are identified.

### Background

The Pensions Ombudsman's Office is a Tribunal Non Departmental Public Body. The Pension Ombudsman's statutory duties are set out in [Part X of the Pension Schemes Act 1993](#). The Pensions Ombudsman is independent and impartial and investigates complaints about the maladministration of personal and occupational pension schemes.

We have carried out an equality impact assessment on our policies and procedures under the following headings:

- Human Resources (our employee policies)
- Customer Service
- Accommodation

Each aspect considers the impact it has on race, disability and gender equality.

### Our employee policies

Our employee policies and procedures are covered in our newly issued Staff Guide. This mirrored our lead department (Department for Work and Pensions) employee policies at its outset.

When we create new employee policies within the guide, or where changes are made, their equality impact will be considered by the Senior Management Team and we will make a fresh assessment of the policy. The SMT will decide how best to act if any negative impacts are found. Our staff communication forum is a good way to communicate any issues/changes to the rest of the

office for further staff comment. The ultimate decision on making any changes lies with the SMT; this ongoing process for reviewing any changes ensures that the policies are kept up to date and avoids the risk of negative impact on equality.

All our policies are written using plain English. They are available for staff to view via our online knowledge base *RightNow*. At present this is not accessible to staff who may use assistive technology. Should we have a member of staff who requires adjustments to be made, we would carry out an assessment and make the necessary amendments.

Should any employee wish to read the policies in another format, Braille for example, they can make a request via the Business Manager who will arrange to have the documents converted.

We have a knowledge management group constituted from legal and investigative staff who work together to create the best practices for the office and guidance to staff on how best to follow them. Any employee wishing to question a procedure or policy or suggest an improvement can do so through our staff communication forum. This is a group comprising of different grades who meet to discuss issues arising in the office. Any employee can approach their team's representative who is a member of the forum. They will then take it forward to the rest of the group. The decisions made will be forwarded to the Senior Management Team to implement whatever change they decide is necessary.

It is the responsibility of line managers to ensure our employment policies are followed. The office mitigates the potential for inconsistency of application by managers by actively promoting good practice, equality of treatment and the elimination of harassment and discrimination within the policy and the supporting procedural guidance.

We have recently launched an online toolkit, endorsed by the National School of Government, which guides managers and staff on how best to carry out recommended procedures whilst ensuring consistency.

We regularly consult with the Department for Work and Pensions (our lead department) to ensure that we are following the correct procedures and policies. Their guidance supports equality by directing managers to exercise discretion reasonably, consistently, and appropriately unless specified by the policy and to make decisions that:

- comply with the policy;
- are procedurally correct;
- take account of the employees' circumstances;
- are legal;
- satisfy the principles of natural justice;
- are reasonable and fair;
- can be clearly explained and justified; and
- take account of our [aims and principles](#).

Through our guidance we require line managers to take account of the individual circumstances of the employee at all stages of our decision making processes. This helps us to make sure that there is no discrimination and that we are promoting equality.

We have a few policies that are not covered by our staff guide:

#### *Sustainability Policy*

We have put in place a policy to show how we as an office consider the environment when making business decisions. This has no negative impact on disability, race or gender. It is available to view on our website. We also have a guidance note for staff to show the best way to achieve good sustainability practices. This is available on our internal website.

#### *Aims and Principles*

We have put together a document for our employees that outlines the way we operate both internally and externally. It is available to view on our website. In terms of internal relationships, we encourage fair treatment and respect for all our employees. We do not discriminate or treat any employee negatively in respect of their race, disability or gender status.

We welcome applications from all groups in society and (as stated in our staff guide) under the guaranteed interview scheme disabled candidates who have the right skills and competencies for the role will be guaranteed an interview. This is also highlighted in application packs when we advertise job vacancies.

#### *Information Management policy*

This has been set in place to treat people's personal information in a respectful, sensitive and secure way, thus minimising the opportunity for others to discriminate on these grounds.

We will consider editing publicly available documents/determinations where they contain sensitive personal information to help protect an applicant's anonymity. See the section in our website entitled [Your Personal Information](#). We ask all applicants to sign a declaration to say that they have read this when they apply to us.

We have taken steps to protect personal information by rethinking our e-mail policy. We no longer transfer personal information by email (unless encrypted). We accept that there is the possibility that this could adversely affect the hard of hearing who prefer to communicate by email rather than over the telephone, but after careful consideration have decided that this negative impact is over-riden by our responsibility to keep personal data secure.

## **Customer Service**

Our service is available to those who wish to make a complaint regarding their personal or occupational pension. Customers are first required to take up the matter in question with the party that they are complaining about. Once they have done this, we would suggest that they contact the Pensions Advisory Service (TPAS) in the hope that they can rectify any problems that cannot be solved with parties involved. If necessary TPAS will then refer the customer to the Pensions Ombudsman. Nonetheless most of our customers contact us after a referral from another company or organisation. Once a customer is referred to us we are happy to consider any requests for assistance with making his/her complaint.

Customers can contact our office in several ways; by telephone, in writing, by email or online. An application form will need to be completed in order to formally apply.

Under our [Accessibility Policy](#) we are committed to providing an accessible service within the constraints of the legislation which governs the way we work. We will take steps to ensure that our service is accessible to all those who may wish to or need to use it, in accordance with our Aims and Principles and commitment to equal opportunities.

A customer survey is to be carried out by early 2010/11. This will provide detailed customer feedback including information relating to disability, gender and race which will be used to help improve our services.

## **Service Standard**

This outlines the way that we deal with our investigations (including the way we interact with our customers). This is published on our website.

In the past the only recourse for customers unhappy with the standard of service was to write to our Casework Director. There was no mechanism to obtain wider feedback from customers on the quality of our service. This will be rectified by the customer survey. The information gathered will be used to improve the quality and accessibility of our services.

We are currently liaising with our web provider about uploading a feedback section onto our website so that we can encourage customers to give feedback about their experience with our office. We will use the suggestions made to help improve our services and thus reduce the likelihood of any negative equality impact.

It is intended to make it clear that our services are accessible to all. We are open to requests on how we can make it easier for an individual to communicate with us, for example, if you have a visual impairment and require information in large print or Braille.

Those customers who cannot read English can write their enquiry in any language and we will endeavour to respond to them in their preferred language, through the translation service provider *Language Line*.

As well as considering how we treat our people internally, our [Aims and Principles](#) document also outlines how we are dedicated to providing a high level of service in respect of our external customers. It demonstrates how we treat all our customers in the same way, never choosing to favour one social group over another. Our impartiality helps to ensure that there is no negative impact regarding race, gender or disability.

### **Accommodation**

We do not consider that our accommodation discriminates against or favours anybody in terms of their race.

Our staff members are seated in open plan offices, in teams consisting of both male and female employees.

We have never had a staff request to move workstations because of race, disability or gender, but should this occur we would carry out a workplace assessment and ensure that the employee is not negatively affected on these grounds. After assessment, if deemed necessary, we will endeavour to adapt an employee's working environment to ensure they have easy access to all areas that they need to.

We pride ourselves in ensuring that our building provides ease of use for disabled people. This includes:

- Three large lifts. Two of which are fitted with a delay that enables a wheelchair user to safely enter and leave in a comfortable manner.
- Disabled toilets.
- Ramps.
- Power assisted front door.

Our staff are happy to assist visitors who have any special requests when visiting our building. Within reason, we will adapt our environment to make it more comfortable should the need arise.

### **Conclusion**

We believe that our policies and procedures consider all social groups in their design and do not negatively impact on any one group in society. As we continue to update and compile new documents, we will carry out an equality impact assessment as part of the change/implementation.

We continually monitor our services and employee information. We have a number of staff groups who look at customer service, process, quality, employee services and policy. These groups meet on a regular basis to assess our working practices. Any comments made by employees are

considered at the staff communication forum and necessary changes are implemented by the Senior Management Team. Legal consultation with Treasury Solicitors Department is carried out where necessary to ensure that we comply with statutory regulation.

The customer survey due to be carried out in early 2010/11 will give us a better insight into our customer and stakeholder needs. We will adjust any services or policies should the survey identify any issues. An equality impact assessment will be carried out to ensure that any resulting changes do not have negative impact in relation to race, disability and gender.

## Summary of planned actions

- Undertake customer survey which will provide feedback relating to disability, gender and race which will be used to help improve our services. **By early 2010/11**
- Install feedback facility on our website and use information gathered to improve the quality and accessibility of our services. **By early 2010/11**