

ALL together now



Nicola Gibson begins a two-part series explaining how implementing a single equality scheme can help early years settings to promote inclusion and tackle disadvantage in their local community...

The first time it happened, staff in the setting thought that Taylor was wearing the ill-fitting shoes for fun, but by the third day they were puzzled and asked Mum why.

Mum told them that Taylor needed new shoes but as she also needed to feed the family for the week, she had very little choice but to give Taylor her own shoes to wear to nursery.

'Going without' is becoming a stark reality for families struggling to raise children during the worst post war recession on record. Research by Save the Children has found that one in eight of the UK's poorest children are going without at least one hot meal a day, and one in 10 of the poorest parents have cut back on essentials, and sometimes their own food intake, to ensure that their children have enough to eat.

With data from the Department for Work and Pensions showing that 3.6-million children are now living in poverty, and changes to tax and welfare benefits inbound, even families with relatively good incomes may soon find themselves struggling to make ends meet.

Vulnerable & disadvantaged

Socio-economic disadvantage is closely linked to other forms of inequality, which means that specific individuals and groups are at a higher risk of poverty than the rest of the population during a period of austerity. These include:

- disabled parents and disabled children;
- black and minority ethnic families and those seeking asylum;
- workless households, lone parents and large families;
- young children living in poor housing.

As a means of protecting the most vulnerable on the lowest incomes, the last government introduced a new Equality Act in 2010. This brought together all previous equality legislation and included a new socio-economic duty. However, in their first term of office the new government removed this duty from the act.

This happened at a time of deepening economic crisis and a decline in public

support for the most disadvantaged in our communities. However, the success of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games has brought about a welcome shift in attitudes.

Happy to help

One legacy of the Games has been the inspiration it has provided many to volunteer. Volunteering was once an activity undertaken by a narrow group of citizens, but the profile of volunteers is changing. Today in the UK, 19.8-million people from a wide range of backgrounds formally volunteer at least once a year. One of the most successful groups of volunteers in recent times comes from one of the most diverse and least affluent London boroughs, Newham, and played a sizeable part in making last summer's Games one of the most successful ever. An evaluation of this group found that they ranked altruistic and community development as an incentive more than material gain, and saw their volunteering as a way of developing social groups, transferring skills and improving awareness and value of cultural and ethnic differences.

Early years settings have always benefited from the support that volunteers can provide. Historically, preschool volunteers mainly comprised parents and grandparents who helped with play sessions, coffee mornings, and committee duties. However, with changes to employment and working hours, a much wider group of people with a wider skills base are offering their services, or even creating new services where there is a gap in provision. These volunteers are often driven by personal experiences to make changes in the most disadvantaged areas.

Innovative approaches

One approach that has proved particularly effective in capturing and utilising the expertise of volunteers and addressing inequality is the 'single equality scheme'. These schemes are a means by which public bodies can comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty, and although no longer a legislative requirement, are used to effectively capture information, instigate change, and work with local communities. Essex County Council, for example, has used single equality schemes throughout its services for a number of years, including in its early years



find out more

The Pre-school Learning Alliance's *All Together Now: Implementing an early years equality scheme* publication is available at shop.pre-school.org.uk

provision, and evidence has shown that their use has produced some favourable Ofsted results.

For an early years setting, such a scheme can help change attitudes, tackle entrenched inequality and foster stronger and closer partnerships with users and the local community. They are particularly helpful in making sure settings 'keep on track' with their inclusive practice to meet regulatory and legislative requirements. The most successful schemes are those that develop close partnerships with the volunteers who are helping to implement them, many of whom have had first-hand experience of discrimination, or have relevant expertise, both of which are especially helpful for creating a synergised approach.

Next issue, I will look at how implementing such a scheme can help settings support the most vulnerable of families.

Nicola Gibson is inclusion manager at the Pre-school Learning Alliance.