

ALL TOGETHER NOW



Nicola Gibson concludes her series on the benefits of implementing a single equality scheme with some advice on how best to get yours started...

Since the late 1980s the early years sector has seen a great many changes to equality law and policy, so much so that it has become increasingly difficult for busy settings to keep track of what is lawful and good practice in relation to inclusion. Many settings are finding it increasingly hard to provide a 'façade of equilibrium' in service provision whilst having to 'paddle' furiously to keep on top of decreasing budgets, increasing workloads and cuts to local services. Financial margins are now so tight that many are resorting to innovative ways to remain sustainable in order to meet legislative, regulatory and funding requirements and support struggling families.

By formulating and implementing a single equality scheme, some early years settings are finding innovative and aspirational methods to be lawful, sustainable and inclusive. Such a scheme can help settings:

- highlight good practice;
- identify/address areas of concerns;
- engage with volunteers;
- improve attitudes and practice;
- develop new skills and expertise;
- build confidence and be innovative;
- access more funding opportunities;
- achieve improved inspection scorings;
- bring the local community closer together;
- renew or generate interest in the setting;
- develop links with local organisations.

IMPLEMENTING A SINGLE EQUALITY SCHEME

The aim of a single equality scheme is to eliminate all forms of discrimination in a settings in order to promote equal opportunities and improve outcomes for children, families and staff disadvantaged because of inequality. It sets out a setting's equality vision and how it hopes to realise that vision through a SMART action plan. This plan may include:

- an equality impact check on policy, procedures and practice;
- an access audit for disabled users and visitors;

- updating of promotional literature to ensure inclusivity;
- social events to initiate and widen local participation;
- partnership working with local community groups and national organisations;
- ways of seeking employment initiatives;
- running topical advice surgeries.

GETTING STARTED

Schemes are usually initiated by early years settings but could be started by anyone (such as a parent of a child in the setting) with a desire to develop a more inclusive service and tackle local inequality. Once a proposal for a scheme has been agreed by the management team, the best way to take it forward is by setting up an Equality Working Group (EWG). The EWG will help initiate, implement and manage the scheme, and is usually made up of volunteers and a small number of staff from the setting. The group does not need to be large (in fact sometimes a smaller group can be more effective) but the essential elements are that the volunteers are drawn from a cross section of the local community and all share a desire to make changes to improve equality outcomes.

The EWG should aim to be representative of the group of people it is intending to support and ideally will be made up of a range of individuals with first-hand experience of being discriminated against, and/or individuals who have a professional or personal interest in equal rights and community cohesion. To create as wide a group of volunteers as possible it may be necessary to consider different ways to attract individuals to participate. This may involve advertising for volunteers in familiar and sometimes unfamiliar places such as community and leisure centres and libraries, supermarkets, places of worship, hairdressers and barbers; or hosting a stand at a local community event.

A DIFFERENT FOCUS

Most equality schemes focus on nine areas of inequality as defined in the Equality Act (2010). These areas are called protected characteristics and cover disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, sex (gender), age, marriage and civil partnership. However, because areas of discrimination may be occurring simultaneously and cross over



find out more

The Pre-school Learning Alliance's *All Together Now: Implementing an early years equality scheme* publication is available at shop.preschool.org.uk/A131

more than one aspect (not all being defined or addressed in equality law) I recommend including socio-economic disadvantage as an extra category. This area of disadvantage is closely linked to other forms of inequality and can help target the most vulnerable and disadvantaged local families, especially those living in or at risk of poverty.

The benefits of a successful scheme for the volunteers and wider community are varied and could include:

- a feeling of wellbeing and belonging;
- a better understanding of issues faced by others;
- recognising and addressing one's own prejudices;
- developing new skills and expertise;
- becoming familiar with the unfamiliar;
- continuing professional or personal development;
- new friendships and alliances.

But by far the most important factor of a successful scheme is that the most vulnerable families will feel nurtured and supported even in the most difficult times – so that every local child has an equal chance to aspire and succeed.

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