

The Equality Act – exploding myths!

The Equality Act came into force from 1 October 2010 and changes 40 years of legislation by simplifying and consolidating around 116 pieces of discrimination related laws and regulations. It widens protection to cover age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity (all known as protected characteristics).

The Act can be very technical but here are some headlines about how it will impact on the work of the County Council. We already have good policies in place to address unfairness and discrimination, but some of the changes include:

- when recruiting or interviewing, you can't ask questions about applicants' health or disability until you offer them a job
- if a person has caring responsibilities for a disabled child or relative you need to make adjustment to help them work as effectively as they can – similar to making adjustments for disabled staff
- if someone feels that office jokes or banter are offensive or discriminatory they can claim discrimination even if comments don't relate to them. The common sense approach is that we all want to work in a respectful office so be sensitive about the feelings of your colleagues
- when we procure services, contractors need to show how they comply with equality laws
- women who use our services or work for the Council must be allowed to breastfeed if they so wish.

The Council has statutory duties to promote equality and we need to show how we have assessed the impact of our decisions and policies on different equality groups – details can be found on the Equality Impact Assessment Hantsnet pages. The Act expands these duties to all areas covered by the Act from April 2011. More information will be available early next year. Meanwhile, there's lots of info on the equality (<http://intranet.hants.gov.uk/equality.htm>) Hantsnet pages. You can always ask your equality champion for advice – their contact details can be found at the Equality & Diversity action group Hantsnet pages. If you would like to discuss the impact of the Act on staff, please contact the Employment Practice Centre. (<http://intranet.hants.gov.uk/hr/hr-centres/hr-epc-home.htm>)

Hampshire Learning Centre have revised all the Equality and Diversity courses to reflect the new requirements of the Equality Act, for more information see the Equality and Diversity Training pages on Hantsnet (<http://intranet.hants.gov.uk/equality/equality-training.htm>) or book via the Learning Zone <http://cas.hants.gov.uk/courses/level3.asp?seccode=HLBAED>

Appendix 2

For more information on the Act, download a summary (http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/401727_GEO_EqualityLaw_PublicSector_acc.pdf) from the Government Equalities Office website.