

Equalities paper – Appendix 2 – additional context and background

COVID-19

Evidence shows that Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on health and mortality for some particular sections of the communities that councils serve (such as some black and minority ethnic communities and some groups with disabilities), and for some council employees including those working in social care.

Evidence also shows that there have been, and will continue to be, significant social and economic repercussions from the pandemic, with particular concerns about widening educational inequalities as a result of loss of schooling, reduced employment opportunities, and impacts on mental health.

These impacts - health, social and economic - are playing out in complex and dynamic ways in local communities. With a crisis on this scale it is inevitable that some groups – particularly those with pre-existing vulnerabilities – are more at risk of poor outcomes. For example: some children will have found it harder to learn at home while schools have been closed; some disabled people and older people will have been more isolated and more at risk of depression and anxiety, and some poorer households may have found it harder to cope with reductions in income.

Councils, Government and partners are working hard to understand and mitigate these impacts and are increasingly looking to the LGA to help to develop the evidence base, design appropriate local policy responses, and share learning across the sector to inform the nationwide approach to both crisis support and long-term recovery.

Councillors representing and serving those communities where the effects of the virus have been felt most keenly have had significant pressures and responsibilities placed upon them. They may benefit from additional support and will have important insights to share as we move towards recovery.

Times of social and economic uncertainty can also pose particular challenges for community cohesion. The relationship between the Black Lives Matter movement and the pandemic is clearly complex. However, many councils will be endeavouring to foster good relations and provide effective community leadership at a time of heightened fear, grief and anxiety across all communities, and will be looking to the LGA to support them in doing so.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)

Councils have a helpful legal and statutory framework for considering and addressing equality in the Public Sector Equality Duty.

The Local Government Association continues to offer peer support to councils through its Equality Framework for Local Government, which helps councils to consider how they are effectively meeting the Duty through their community leadership role and the design and delivery of services.

All councils are subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty, which was brought in under the Equality Act (2010) and covers both councils' obligations to their workforces and to the community. The Duty integrated, updated and replaced the previous separate race, disability and gender equality duties. The general duty covers a range of 'protected characteristics' and obliges councils to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.

- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The protected characteristics are:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation
- pregnancy and maternity
- marriage and civil partnership (this only applies to the first of the three 'general duties')

A 'socio-economic duty'

It is worth noting that the complexity of agreeing a precise definition of socio-economic disadvantage prevented its being included as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act. However, it is widely recognised that socio-economic factors often interact with the nine protected characteristics in ways that need to be recognised, understood and addressed to ensure that the general duty can be met, and outcomes improved.

This recognition is central to work on health inequalities, for example, and underpins current policy development on social mobility and 'levelling up'. Many councils have identified the need to mitigate risks around poverty, hardship and economic vulnerability as a key part of their local coronavirus recovery planning.