



Promoting equal opportunities for all



Learning outcomes

- Equality in the workplace
- Equality in action
- Example of promoting equal opportunities in a local authority.



Introduction

This case study will look at how local government has embraced the spirit of equality in the workplace and the supports they have received from the Local Government Management Services Board (LGMSB).

It will highlight some of the best practices that local government have employed to create an environment of inclusion and to leverage the strengths of its employees and so benefit all its stakeholders.



The LGMSB

The LGMSB acts as national employer's agency on behalf of local authorities. The Board's vision is to support and influence the development of local authorities as high performing work organisations meeting the needs of all their stakeholders. It delivers its vision through:

- The provision of a range of Human Resources, Industrial Relations and Management Services to local authorities.
- Being a source of best practice research, expertise and advice on Human Resources, Industrial Relations and Management Service issues.
- Influencing and supporting the development of the HR and people management capability within local authorities.
- Leading the development of the sector through undertaking and publishing national research and formulation of policy on key issues affecting the sector.
- Strengthening the relationships with stakeholders at national and local levels.

Local government

The purpose of local government is to enable people at local level to provide services for themselves, to exercise some control over their affairs and to make decisions through the democratic process. Local government consists of a number of local authorities:

- 29 County Councils
- 5 City Councils
- 80 Town/Borough Councils

Local residents elect representatives to each local authority. These representatives make decisions on behalf of their constituents and levy local taxes to fund local services. Policies for all local authority services and activities are set nationally through the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

Local authorities

There are 34 local authorities in Ireland that constitute our local government system. Between them, local authorities employ over 34,000 people making local government the second largest employer in the country.

Local authorities carry out a broad range of activities that make a significant contribution to the physical, cultural, social and environmental development of their communities.

These activities include:

- Planning and development
- Road maintenance
- Housing
- Waste Management
- Fire Protection
- Libraries and Museums
- Environmental Protection
- Parks, Amenities and Arts

Towards 2016

Towards 2016 is a social partnership agreement for 2007-2015 between the Government and the social partners. It includes a series of key commitments to improve and modernise services in the public sector. The agreement reinforces the commitment of local authority management and staff, and of the social partners, to the implementation of equality legislation.

Equality legislation

Ireland has made significant progress in relation to combating discrimination and promoting equal opportunities for all. A strategic framework for action on equality is in place and includes:

- Legislation such as the Employment Equality Act 1998, the Equal Status Act 2000 and the Equality Act 2004.
- The establishment of the Equality Authority and the Equality Tribunal.
- Resources for initiatives such as the Equality for Women Measure of the NDP, the National Action Plan against Racism etc.
- Participation of those who experience discrimination and inequality and their representative organisations in social partnerships and in new structures developed as part of the reform of local government.
- Gathering and analysing data from groups experiencing inequality and discrimination.

The Equality Authority

The Equality Authority is an independent body set up under the Employment Equality Act 1998. It has statutory responsibility to promote equality and combat discrimination by public and private sector bodies in Ireland.

Employment equality

The Employment Equality Acts set out the law on equality of opportunity for everyone in the workplace. They also guide employers and employees on their roles and responsibilities and provide guidance on what to do if issues arise. In addition to outlawing discrimination and harassment in the workplace, equality of opportunity also means building a positive working environment for staff. It recognises that in some cases special arrangements have to be made to ensure that everyone can fully participate in the workforce, such as wheelchair access for disabled workers.

Discrimination is described in the Acts as the treatment of a person in a less favourable way than another person is, has been, or would be treated on any of nine grounds.

1. Gender
2. Marital status
3. Family status
4. Age
5. Disability
6. Race
7. Sexual orientation
8. Religious belief
9. Membership of the Traveller Community



2007 — European Year of Equal Opportunities for All

The LGMSB regularly reviews all Human Resource Management (HRM) practices and procedures pursued by local authorities to ensure that they are fair and equitable and in-line with the equality policies.

Equality in the workplace

Local authorities in Ireland have made a significant investment in equality. All local authorities in Ireland have equality policies in place. Local authorities have equality officers to promote equality in employment and to ensure that employment practices promote a

positive working environment for employees. A significant number of local authorities have formed action plans on equality and have inter-departmental committees working on equality.

Each local authority is committed to a policy of equality of opportunity in its employment practices. Recruitment and selection policies and procedures endeavour to ensure that no job applicant or staff member receives less favourable treatment on the nine grounds of discrimination.

Local authorities aim to select, promote and treat all individuals on the basis of their abilities and merits according to the requirements of the job, and all individuals will be given equal opportunity to demonstrate and develop their abilities and to progress within the local authorities.

Equality supports

The human resources division of the LGMSB supports the development of best practice human resource management (HRM) within local authorities. The role of the LGMSB in relation to equality is to provide support to Equality Officers, Access Officers and Equality Action Teams, through the provision of:

- Handbooks on various equality issues and practices. These include *Cultural Diversity* booklets.
- Template policy documents. These can be adapted for use by each local authority, e.g. *Dignity at Work Policy and Procedures*.
- Seminars and conferences. The LGMSB facilitate seminars and conferences on a range of issues including equality and diversity and implementing the Disability Act 2005.
- Equality Officer Regional Networks. The LGMSB facilitates these networks by providing an advice and information service and promoting information sharing.
- Guidance and recommendations on a range of issues, e.g. *Guidance Framework on Implementing the Disability Act 2005*.
- Advice to individual authorities on a range of issues.

Business impact of equality & diversity

The Equality Authority and the National Centre for Partnership and Performance published a report in 2007 by Kathy Monks of DCU on the *Business Impact of Equality & Diversity*. The report found that equality is good for business as well as for society. It also found a positive relationship between the adoption of equality policies and increased

commitment, job satisfaction, life satisfaction and reduced stress of employees. Companies that had integrated equality into their policies experienced positive employee performance outcomes with reductions in absenteeism, labour turnover, improved employee relations and greater innovation and creativity among employees.

Investment in equality and diversity initiatives has led to improved organisational performance in four inter-related areas:

- Human capital benefits such as the ability to resolve labour shortages and to recruit and retain high calibre staff;
- Increased market opportunities with access to more diverse markets;
- Enhancement of organisational reputation to suppliers, customers and prospective and existing employees;
- Changes to organisational culture such as improved working relations and reductions in litigation.

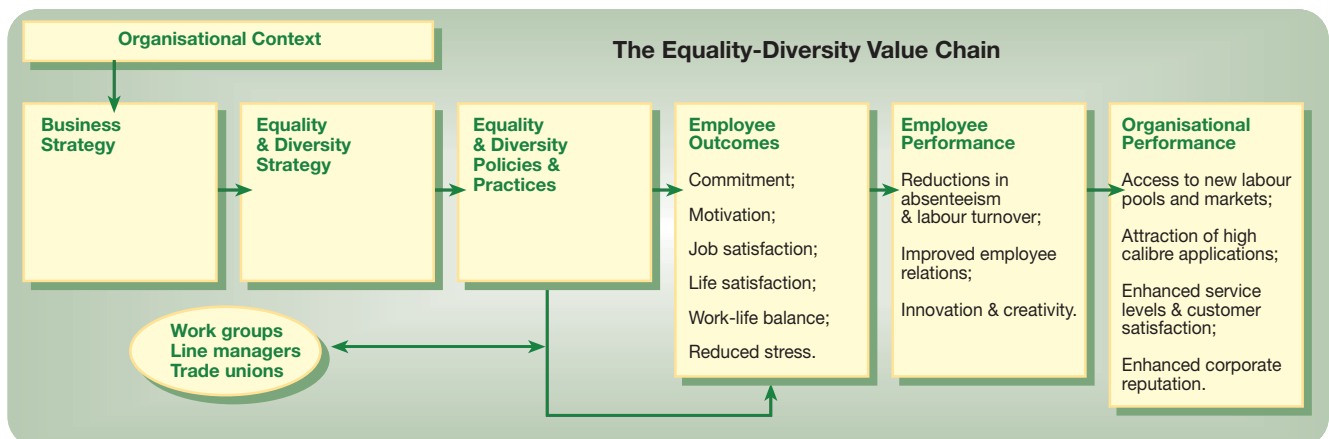
European Year of Equal Opportunities for All

2007 is the 'European Year of Equal Opportunities for All'. The European Year is the centrepiece of a framework strategy designed to ensure that discrimination is effectively tackled, diversity is celebrated and equal opportunities for all are promoted. The Equality Authority is the national implementation body for the European Year in Ireland.

Local government activities

The Equality Authority works closely with the LGMSB. Together they have developed an equality survey that has recently been undertaken by local authorities. This survey is aimed at establishing the extent to which local authorities have equality and disability policies in place to promote equality and diversity and combat discrimination. This project is being undertaken as one of the actions happening for the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All.

The Equality Authority also provided funding for LGMSB's equality networks so that they can promote greater awareness and understanding of equality issues in their network areas. The LGMSB is also one of the organisations participating in the Public Sector Learning Network. The Network has been established as an initiative under the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All and provides a means for public sector organisations to share information and good practice on promoting equality in customer service.



Equality in practice

Flexible working conditions can be an essential part of implementing equality in practice. They can help employees develop their careers while fulfilling their personal responsibilities. This empowers employees and helps them balance their work commitments with their home lives. It leads to improved quality of life and promotes harmony and productivity in the workplace.

Local government aims to develop family friendly work life balance arrangements and offers a wide range of working options for example:

- **Work sharing:** Employees may work a different pattern to the regular full-time week. For example, working a three-day week.
- **Term time:** Unpaid leave in the summer to enable employees to match their working lives with their children's holidays.
- **Flexible working arrangements:** For example flexitime, special leave, career breaks.

There are many challenges in integrating equality effectively into an organisation's way of working. This is not always an easy task. Many local authorities have developed innovative projects that demonstrate that equality can be embedded into a local authority's work and bring benefits to service users across the nine equality grounds as well as to employees.

Equality in action - Roscommon County Council

County Roscommon is situated in the heart of Ireland with good access to the main urban centres, seaports and airports. Roscommon County Council is the primary unit of local government in the County with 26 elected members, representing six electoral areas. The overall running of the County Council is divided between the elected members and the County Manager.

Excellence through people

Roscommon County Council employs in excess 700 skilled and committed staff with the qualifications, competences and experience necessary to provide an efficient and effective service to the public.



Roscommon County Council has achieved the *Excellence Through People Award*. This Award is testimony to the commitment of Roscommon County Council to employee training and development, equality, health, safety and welfare and strategic planning of customer services. This Award could not have been achieved without a high performing workforce dedicated to serving the needs of the County Council and providing quality services to its customers.

Equality & diversity

Roscommon County Council has made a significant investment in terms of equality and is committed to equality in employment. Equality policies are actively in place and there is an Equality Officer and an Equality & Diversity Action Team to promote equality in employment and to ensure that employment practices promote a positive working environment for employees. Equality issues are included in the County Council's Corporate and Departmental business plans. There have been focused

initiatives across a wide range of departments and actions are tied to specific targets. Training on equality issues (spanning all nine grounds) is mandatory for all staff. Employment practice and service delivery are monitored in relation to equality.

The Equality Officer of Roscommon County Council is supported by the LGMSB and benefits from the Board's experience and expertise. The Equality Officer is also part of the Western/Northern Regional Equality Officers' Network which meets regularly and provides a forum for discussing equality issues. A representative from the LGMSB attends each meeting.



Meeting of Equality & Diversity Action Team.

Equality examples

The following are just a few examples of the equality policies and procedures in place in Roscommon County Council.

- Work/Life Balance policies including Work Sharing, Flexi Time, Parental Leave, Term Time Leave, Carers Leave.
- An Employee Assistance Programme providing an information, advisory, counselling and referral service designed to give employees a resource to contact for guidance and assistance when required.
- Disability Co-Ordinator to aid the implementation of the National Disability Strategy and the relevant Sections of the Disability Act, 2005 including adherence to 3% quota for the employment of people with disabilities.
- Facilitation of work placement for members of the Travelling Community in line with the Opening Pathways Initiative for Employment of Travellers.
- Equality and Cultural Diversity promoted in the Workplace.
- Information pack circulated to all staff to mark European Year for All 2007.
- Equality and Diversity policies reviewed in conjunction with Cross Functional Equality and Diversity Action Team and Workplace Partnership.
- Strategic Actions contained in the Equality and Diversity Action Plan 2007 monitored and implemented.
- All human resources policies and procedures are reviewed and equality proofed in conjunction with the Equality and Diversity Action Team.
- Commitment to Equality and Diversity in service delivery.
- Local Anti-Poverty Learning Network in place to oversee the implementation of the Disability Strategy.
- Development of Inter-Cultural Strategy 2007-2010.
- A fully staffed Social Inclusion Unit established to focus on issues to ensure equality of opportunity for all.



Roscommon County Council utilises a wide variety of mechanisms to keep staff informed of developments in the area of Equality & Diversity. These include the Intranet facility, email, memoranda, notice boards, wage packet flyers, information leaflets, annual reports, staff awareness briefings and regular department/team meetings. Roscommon County Council maintains a planned and systematic approach to equality, diversity and social inclusion.