

Equality and Diversity Policy

Equality and diversity policy

Our commitment

Stephensons is committed to promoting equality and diversity, providing equal opportunities in employment and to avoiding unlawful discrimination in employment and against clients.

This policy is intended to assist the Firm to put this commitment into practice. Compliance with this policy should also ensure that employees do not commit unlawful acts of discrimination.

Striving to ensure that the work environment is free of harassment and bullying and that everyone is treated with dignity and respect is an important aspect of ensuring equal opportunities in employment. The Firm has a separate dignity at work policy, which deals with these issues.

The law

In implementing this policy Stephensons is committed to complying with the Equality Act 2010 and Principle 9, Chapter 2 of the Solicitors Code of Conduct 2011.

It is unlawful to discriminate directly or indirectly in recruitment or employment because of age, disability, sex, gender reassignment, pregnancy, maternity, race (which includes colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins), sexual orientation, religion or belief, or because someone is married or in a civil partnership. These are known as "protected characteristics".

Discrimination after employment may also be unlawful, e.g. refusing to give a reference for a reason related to one of the protected characteristics.

Employees should not discriminate against or harass a member of the public in the provision of services. It is unlawful to fail to make reasonable adjustments to overcome barriers to using services caused by disability. The duty to make reasonable adjustments includes the removal, adaptation or alteration of physical features, if the physical features make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to make use of services. In addition, service providers have an obligation to think ahead and address any barriers that may impede disabled people from accessing a service.

Types of unlawful discrimination

Direct discrimination is where a person is treated less favourably than another because of a protected characteristic. An example of direct discrimination would be refusing to employ a woman because she is pregnant.

In limited circumstances, employers can directly discriminate against an individual for a reason related to any of the protected characteristics where there is an occupational requirement. The occupational requirement must be crucial to the post and a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

Indirect discrimination is where a provision, criterion or practice is applied that is discriminatory in relation to individuals who have a relevant protected characteristic (although it does not explicitly include pregnancy and maternity, which is covered by indirect sex discrimination) such that it would be to the detriment of people who share that protected characteristic compared with people who do not, and it cannot be shown to be a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

Harassment is where there is unwanted conduct, related to one of the protected characteristics (other than marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity) that has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity; or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. It does not matter whether or not this effect was intended by the person responsible for the conduct.

Associative discrimination is where an individual is directly discriminated against or harassed for association with another individual who has a protected characteristic (although it does not cover harassment because of marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity).

Perceptive discrimination is where an individual is directly discriminated against or harassed based on a perception that he or she has a particular protected characteristic when he or she does not, in fact, have that protected characteristic (other than marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity).

Victimisation occurs where an employee is subjected to a detriment, such as being denied a training opportunity or a promotion because he or she made or supported a complaint or raised a grievance under the Equality Act 2010, or because he or she is suspected of doing so. However, an employee is not protected from victimisation if he or she acted maliciously or made or supported an untrue complaint. There is no longer a need for a complainant to compare his or her treatment with someone who has not made or supported a complaint under the Equality Act 2010. For example, if a blind employee raises a grievance that the employer is not complying with its duty to make reasonable adjustments, and is then systematically excluded from all meetings, such behaviour could amount to victimisation.

Failure to make reasonable adjustments is where a physical feature or a provision, criterion or practice puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage compared with someone who does not have that protected characteristic and the employer has failed to make reasonable adjustments to enable the disabled person to overcome the disadvantage.

Equal opportunities in employment

The Firm will avoid unlawful discrimination in all aspects of employment including recruitment, promotion, opportunities for training, pay and benefits, discipline and selection for redundancy.

Person and job specifications will be limited to those requirements that are necessary for the effective performance of the job. Candidates for employment or promotion will be assessed objectively against the requirements for the job, taking account of any reasonable adjustments that may be required for candidates with a disability.

The Firm will consider any possible indirectly discriminatory effect of its standard working practices, including the number of hours to be worked, the times at which these are to be worked and the place at which work is to be done, when considering requests for variations to these standard working practices and will refuse such requests only if the Firm considers it has good reasons, unrelated to any protected characteristic, for doing so. The Firm will comply with its obligations in relation to statutory requests for contract variations. The Firm will also make reasonable adjustments to its standard working practices to overcome barriers caused by disability.

The Firm will monitor the ethnic, gender and age composition of the existing workforce and of applicants for jobs (including promotion), and the number of people with disabilities within these groups, and will consider and take any appropriate action to address any problems that may be identified as a result of the monitoring process.

The Firm cannot lawfully discriminate in the selection of employees for recruitment or promotion, but the Firm may use appropriate lawful methods, including lawful positive action, to address the under-representation of any group that the Firm identifies as being under-represented in particular types of job.

Partners

Arrangements and procedures for selecting partners, their terms and conditions of partnership, access to benefits, facilities or services and termination arrangements will be reviewed and amended where necessary to prevent discrimination.

Maternity rights available to partners shall be no less favourable than the statutory rights of employees.

Dignity at work

The Firm has a separate dignity at work policy concerning issues of bullying and harassment on any ground, and how complaints of this type will be dealt with.

Clients, suppliers and other people not employed by the Firm

The Firm will not discriminate unlawfully against clients using or seeking to use facilities or services provided by the Firm.

Employees should report any bullying or harassment by clients, suppliers, visitors or others to their manager who will take appropriate action.

Barristers and Other Experts

Barristers and other Experts will be instructed on the basis of their skills, experience and ability. The Firm will not, on any of the forbidden grounds, avoid briefing a barrister, and will not request barristers' clerks to do so. Clients' requests for a named barrister should normally be complied with, subject to the Firm's duty to discuss with the client the suitability of the barrister and to advise appropriately.

The Firm will discuss with the client any request by the client that only a barrister who is not disabled or who is of a particular age; gender; marital status; race; racial group; colour; ethnic or national origin; nationality; religion or belief; or sexual orientation be instructed. In the absence of a valid reason for this request, which must be within the exemptions permitted by the anti-discrimination legislation, the Firm will endeavour to persuade the client to modify their instructions in so far as they are given on discriminatory grounds. Should the client refuse to modify such instructions, the Firm will cease to act.

Training

The Firm will provide training in equality and diversity to managers and others likely to be involved in recruitment or other decision making where equal opportunities issues are likely to arise.

The Firm will provide training to all existing and new employees and others engaged to work at the Firm to help them understand their rights and responsibilities under the dignity at work policy and what they can do to help create a working environment free of bullying and harassment. The Firm will provide additional training to managers to enable them to deal more effectively with complaints of bullying and harassment.

Your responsibilities

Every employee is required to assist the Firm to meet its commitment to provide equal opportunities in employment and avoid unlawful discrimination.

Employees can be held personally liable as well as, or instead of, the Firm for any act of unlawful discrimination. Employees who commit serious acts of harassment may be guilty of a criminal offence.

Acts of discrimination, harassment, bullying or victimisation against employees or clients are disciplinary offences and will be dealt with under the Firm's disciplinary procedure. Discrimination, harassment, bullying or victimisation may constitute gross misconduct and could lead to dismissal without notice.

Grievances

If you consider that you may have been unlawfully discriminated against, you may use the Firm's grievance procedure to make a complaint. If your complaint involves bullying or harassment, the procedure is modified as set out in the dignity at work policy and the dealing with formal complaints of bullying and harassment procedure.

The Firm will take any complaint seriously and will seek to resolve any grievance that it upholds. You will not be penalised for raising a grievance, even if your grievance is not upheld, unless your complaint is both untrue and made in bad faith.

Use of the Firm's grievance procedure does not affect your right to make a complaint to an employment tribunal. Complaints to an employment tribunal must normally be made within three months beginning with the act of discrimination complained of.

Monitoring and review

This policy will be monitored periodically by the Firm to judge its effectiveness and will be updated in accordance with changes in the law. In particular, the Firm will monitor the ethnic and gender composition of the existing workforce and of applicants for jobs (including promotion), and the number of people with disabilities within these groups, and will review its Equality and Diversity policy in accordance with the results shown by the monitoring. If changes are required, the Firm will implement them.

Information provided by job applicants and employees for monitoring purposes will be used only for these purposes and will be dealt with in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Responsible for this policy

Kerry Leigh is responsible for this policy