BRITISH COUNCIL

People Function

Equality Policy

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Document control

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Introduction

As an international cultural relations organisation working with people in over 150 countries, the British Council is committed to creating an environment in which all people are treated with dignity, fairness and respect.

Our goal is to ensure everyone who we engage with internally and externally is able to participate, contribute and succeed. We acknowledge everyone has a different starting point and faces different barriers. We aim to identify and address those barriers wherever we work.

We commit to creating conditions in the workplace and wider society which encourage and value different experiences, views and perspectives and which promote dignity and inclusion and a culturally sensitive approach.

Our Equality Policy sits alongside our Code of Conduct and other relevant policies. It sets out how we will promote fairness and inclusion across our workforce, programmes, partnerships and operations. It supports compliance and managing risk. It outlines what internal colleagues and external stakeholders can expect from the British Council.

We aspire to be a leading organisation in arts and culture, education and the English language, known for creating positive global impact and strengthening connections between people. As the world changes at pace, including through advances in artificial intelligence and other emerging trends, it is more important than ever that we treat people fairly, value human relationships and create a sense of belonging.

Scope

This policy applies to British Council operations worldwide, including overseas branches and all separate legal entities owned and controlled by the British Council. It is applicable to, and must be followed by, all staff regardless of location, including remote workers and non-permanent workers regardless of contract type and length.

All those receiving British Council funds or representing the British Council in a voluntary capacity, including consultants, contractors, freelancers, suppliers, grant recipients, partners and agents and trustees, are also required to act in accordance with this policy. Where appropriate, equality, diversity and inclusion expectations will be reflected in contracts, grant agreements, partnership arrangements and procurement processes. The British Council may take proportionate action where serious or repeated breaches occur.

Our Equality Policy originates from the United Kingdom (UK) because we are an organisation with roots and headquarters in the UK. However, it applies globally as the British Council's organisational standard. Where local legal requirements differ, implementation will take account of applicable law while seeking, wherever reasonably possible, to uphold the principles of this policy.

Policy statement and principles

Working effectively with equality, diversity and inclusion is an essential part of our purpose, which is to support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries.

We strive to build fairness into all aspects of our work, so that everyone we interact with experiences a culture that promotes respect, inclusion and diversity in support of mutual benefit.

We are committed to:

- recognising and supporting human rights
- preventing discrimination, bullying, harassment including sexual harassment and victimisation
- identifying and addressing barriers to participation and progression
- making reasonable and appropriate adjustments to enable meaningful engagement
- creating environments that acknowledge everyone is different, promote wellbeing, encourage openness and make it easy for people to seek support when needed
- using evidence and data to improve outcomes and reduce inequalities
- identifying and addressing equality impacts arising from the use of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, ensuring such technologies are used in ways that support fairness, inclusion and human dignity
- holding ourselves accountable for progress.

We will not unlawfully discriminate including on grounds of age, disability including HIV/AIDS status and neurodivergence, marital status including civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, political opinion, race/ethnicity and culture, religion and belief including protected beliefs, sex and gender identity including transgender and intersex, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, spent convictions, trade union activity or membership, having or not having dependants or work pattern.

We recognise that people can experience discrimination in different ways when aspects of their identity overlap (such as ethnicity and religion, or disability and age) and are committed to addressing this.

We offer flexibility in working hours and enable home, remote and hybrid working where business needs allow. This benefits a wide range of people at varying life stages with different circumstances and responsibilities.

We recognise that people think, learn, process information and communicate in different ways. We are committed to creating an environment where these differences are understood, valued and supported, and where success is measured by outcomes rather than by working in a particular way.

We promote equality, good relations and inclusion in accordance with Great Britain's Equality Act 2010, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Welsh Language Act 1993, and relevant legislation aligned to the different geographies in which we operate.

Many countries where we operate follow the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights or similar regional frameworks. This Declaration refers, in Article 2, specifically to the prohibition of discrimination on grounds such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

In some of the countries where we work there are equality-related laws or other compliance requirements we must follow and we do so. Examples include mandated equality training, policy requirements or legal quotas relating to employment (for example, employers over a certain size may be required to ensure 3% of their workforce are disabled people and to pay a fine if this quota is not met; or there may be a requirement to employ a certain percentage of nationals of that country).

We aim to make sure our policies and practices support equality, respect diversity and create an inclusive culture. This includes how we recruit, manage and develop people; monitor pay gaps and performance; handle complaints and deliver our work. A range of policies including safeguarding, bullying and harassment, and our code of conduct - along with this equality policy - set clear expectations for everyone who works with or for the British Council.

Internal Controls

Policy owners and/or managers shall ensure equality screening and impact assessment is completed before the approval of qualifying policies. This helps identify and address potential equality impacts and informs decision-making.

In Northern Ireland, equality screening and, where appropriate, equality impact assessments (EQIAs), shall be undertaken in accordance with the British Council's approved Equality Scheme and our statutory obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The outcomes shall be published and appropriate consultation undertaken in accordance with the relevant statutory requirements and organisational procedures.

Programme/Product/Activity leads shall use inclusive planning tools to inform the development of their work. These help promote equality, support inclusion, build good relationships and avoid unfair discrimination, while tailoring our approach to meet different needs.

Managers shall ensure reasonable adjustments are implemented where required, in line with our Reasonable Adjustment Policy. These are focused on identifying and reducing, or ideally removing, the barriers people might face in accessing or interacting with us.

Workforce data and diversity metrics shall be maintained by the People Function and reviewed by relevant leadership teams to assess equality outcomes and inform improvement actions.

Equality data shall be collected from external contacts, including programme participants, where required by funders or partners, where it helps monitor reach and/or impact.

Staff shall complete mandatory equality, diversity and inclusion training every three years.

Breaches of this policy may be subject to disciplinary action, however each case will be considered on its individual circumstances. Context and circumstances will always be taken into account before decisions are made.

Roles and Responsibilities

All staff including those working from home, whether on full-time, part-time, indefinite, fixed or temporary contracts, regardless of length of service, and non-permanent workers, have both rights and responsibilities under this policy. Everyone has the right to be treated fairly and with respect and is responsible for upholding these standards in their interactions with others. This means:

- taking personal responsibility for understanding and meeting the expectations set out in this policy
- treating others with dignity and respect and contributing to an inclusive environment through words and actions
- challenging behaviour that falls outside of this policy where it is safe to do so and escalating through relevant channels where directly challenging is not appropriate
- sharing this policy with external stakeholders working on behalf of the British Council and holding them to account for acting in line with it.

All managers are responsible for ensuring that this policy is implemented in their teams and departments and for dealing with matters arising from it. Managers are responsible for:

- making fair decisions and communicating clearly
- addressing concerns promptly and appropriately
- being mindful of different needs, working arrangements and backgrounds
- creating an inclusive and accessible environment where people feel respected, supported and able to contribute in different ways and making reasonable adjustments where needed
- promoting an environment where people can be open about mistakes and can respectfully express a different view from the majority without fear of negative consequences
- referring to this policy in relevant training courses, guidance and procedures, including throughout the procurement process, in the induction of consultants and contractors and as part of operational work.

Senior leaders are highly influential; their words and behaviour influence others, both inside and outside the organisation. They are additionally responsible for:

- supporting the strategic direction of this policy and our wider work to create a more inclusive organisation

- demonstrating visible commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion through their decisions, actions and behaviours
- holding leaders and managers accountable for implementing this policy and meeting expected standards of behaviour
- demonstrating accountability for outcomes that lead to greater inclusion.

Accountability is an important part of ensuring improvement. However, we do not advocate a zero-tolerance approach to discriminatory or unacceptable behaviour. This is especially important for an organisation as geographically, culturally and linguistically diverse as ours.

A zero-tolerance approach is often associated with giving the most severe punishment possible for any breach, or a punishment for every wrongdoing. It does not encourage transparency and a desire to learn from mistakes, or allow for extenuating circumstances, or take into account context or history. It is a blunt instrument for a complex area, and we do not believe it is an effective tool.

We know equality and inclusion work best when people feel safe to speak up and be heard, without fear of negative consequences. As a global organisation, we support open discussion and freedom of expression. We welcome different views because they often lead to increased understanding and better decision-making. Nothing in this Equality Policy is intended to interfere with the legitimate freedom of artistic or intellectual expression, investigation or discussion. We live, however, in a world of increasing polarity around political and cultural issues. We ask people to share their views respectfully and take responsibility for their impact. Our speak up policy gives a clear way to raise concerns if needed.

Policy review

This policy will be reviewed by the Global Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion every three years, or sooner where organisational, legal or operational changes make this necessary.

Key Definitions

Equality is about fair treatment. It recognises that people face different barriers and may need tailored support, opportunities or adjustments. Diversity means valuing and managing the different experiences, backgrounds, perspectives that people bring. Inclusion means creating an environment where everyone feels respected, welcome, able to access, participate, contribute and succeed. Greater equality is the outcome we seek. Diversity and inclusion help us achieve it.

We do not have separate policies to cover different areas of diversity. Instead we have a primary but not exclusive focus on the following areas, acknowledging these combine and affect people differently, depending on their life stage, culture and personal experience:

Age

We are committed to preventing age discrimination and challenging assumptions based on age. We aim to provide fair opportunities at every stage of life, for example to development and career opportunities, caring responsibilities (for children, parents and other dependants), health and wellbeing considerations and changing work preferences. We are mindful that people's needs and experiences may change throughout their lives.

Age should not be used as a criterion unless there is a rationale for doing so that can be clearly justified. In the UK and some other countries where we operate, there is no default retirement age. This helps ensure people are not limited by age and supports an inclusive workforce that benefits from a wide range of experience. In countries where there is a fixed age to retire, this is likely to influence our own practice.

Disability

We are committed to removing barriers faced by disabled people, making reasonable adjustments and creating accessible environments, services and programmes. We recognise disability as a broad concept that includes physical, sensory, learning and mental health issues or conditions, which may be visible or non-visible, long-standing, progressive or fluctuating, for example, HIV/AIDS, sickle-cell and cancer.

We strive for disability inclusion, recognising the skills and expertise many disabled people hold and the benefit this brings to our work and to cultural relations.

We recognise both the reality and the benefit of neurodiversity and acknowledge the potential overlap between neurodivergence and disability.

We believe that people are often disabled because of a range of inter-related factors, including cultural and religious attitudes, social norms and physical and systemic barriers. We promote the social model of disability (which seeks to bring about change by identifying and removing the obstacles that society creates which exclude and restrict people with impairments or differences), while recognising other empowering and rights-based models.

We acknowledge the stigma and global impact of HIV and AIDS. We have a shared policy, developed in partnership with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which confirms we do not discriminate against applicants or employees who are HIV positive and sets out the support available to colleagues and their families and our commitment to a safe, respectful workplace. In the UK and some other countries, people with HIV or AIDS are legally protected from unfair discrimination from the point of diagnosis.

Ethnicity, race and culture

We are committed to addressing racial and ethnic inequalities and promoting fair representation, participation and opportunity. We recognise that experiences of race, including ethnicity, nationality, skin colour, caste and indigenous identity vary across countries and contexts and believe that our work is stronger when it reflects this diversity.

We know that in many parts of the world conflict and civil unrest linked to ethnicity, culture, migration or refugee status exist and this undermines inclusion. Our employees, partners and

suppliers must not discriminate on these grounds and must promote positive, respectful relations.

Our goal is to build connections, mutual understanding and trust between the people of the UK and those in other countries. To do this well, we need to understand how these relationships have been shaped over time, including where the UK has had colonial influence or power. We must be aware of this context and make sure our work is respectful, open and based on mutually beneficial relationships.

Language also matters. In our offices, materials and programmes we aim to communicate through language that connects and includes. This relates to the languages we use (our decisions about when to communicate in English and when in local languages) and more generally to the words we choose.

Religion and belief

We respect everyone's right to hold, change, or not hold a religion or belief, including protected philosophical beliefs such as humanism, environmentalism, pacifism and gender-critical beliefs. We expect all colleagues to treat one another with dignity and respect, regardless of their beliefs, identities or backgrounds.

We aim to create environments where people from different traditions, perspectives and worldviews, including those with no religious affiliation, can participate fully and respectfully. Where possible, we support individuals to observe practices that are important to them, for example by providing space for prayer, meditation or quiet reflection. Where dedicated facilities are not available, we will take a supportive and flexible approach, recognising the important role these convictions and practices play in many people's lives.

Where work requirements conflict with religious or cultural needs, we will consider making adjustments where practical. As a global organisation, we recognise that our colleagues and stakeholders hold a wide range of beliefs and worldviews. We are committed to engaging respectfully with this diversity because understanding different perspectives helps build trust, strengthen relationships and improve our work.

Sex and gender

We are committed to promoting sex and gender equality and removing barriers faced by women and girls, men and boys, and people of diverse gender identities. We recognise that experiences of sex and gender vary significantly across cultural and legal contexts.

Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define humans as female or male. Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women, men, boys and girls – such as norms, behaviours, roles and relationships. Gender identity refers to a person’s deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person’s physiology or designated sex at birth.

Much of our work focuses on supporting women and girls where they are marginalised or disadvantaged. We also address inequalities affecting men and boys to ensure they are not excluded or under-represented.

We recognise and seek to eradicate discrimination based on gender reassignment, perceived gender reassignment, intersex status, or non-binary gender identity including people who are transgender or gender fluid. We aim to treat everyone with respect and respond promptly and effectively to any concerns raised.

We recognise that sex and gender-related experiences, including social or medical transitioning, fertility treatment, pregnancy, maternity, perimenopause and menopause can affect people's experience at work and may require support or adjustments.

We strive to ensure our leave and support policies for people with caring responsibilities are inclusive and challenge stereotypes, assumptions and stigma, including for example those that may discourage men from making use of them.

Sexual orientation

We are committed to creating inclusive environments for people of all sexual orientations and to preventing discrimination, harassment and exclusion. We respect each person's choice about whether to share their sexual orientation. We recognise that some people may not feel comfortable doing so because of prejudice, stigma or fear of negative treatment.

We are aware that some laws and cultures are particularly hostile towards sexual minorities. We expect everyone working with or for the British Council to ensure that their behaviour, language and decision-making are respectful, inclusive and free from discrimination based on actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Socio-economic disadvantage

We recognise that factors such as income, education, social background and access to opportunities can affect people's experiences and outcomes. We seek to create an environment where people can succeed based on their skills and potential, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances.

We aim to widen access to jobs, as well as opportunities to participate in our programmes, events, classes and activities wherever possible for people from disadvantaged or under-represented socio-economic backgrounds. This supports our commitment to social value.

Reference to related Documents, Policies, Procedures, Forms, Checklists, Templates, Guidelines and other resources

This Equality Policy should be read alongside other British Council policies, including but not limited to:

- Code of conduct
- Reasonable adjustments
- Bullying and harassment
- Speak up

- Social media.

Document History

Date (month/year)	Version	Name and post	Comments and/or changes made
January 2022	n/a	Fiona Bartels-Ellis, Global Head Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Policy effective from January 2022
January 2024	n/a	Jane Franklin, Global Head Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Updated wording, included definitions of sex, gender, gender identity and gender norms.
October 2025	n/a	Jane Franklin, Global Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	Updated wording and updated Hyperlinks.