

Equity and Belonging Policy

Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours

Document control

Policy title	Equity and Belonging Policy
Organisation	Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours (THFN)
Charity number	1099403 (Charitable Incorporated Organisation)
Version	1.1
Status	Approved
Author	Rita Chadha, Chief Executive
Approved by	THFN Board of Trustees — 25.03.2026
Date adopted	Updated 25.03.2026
Next review date	Annually, or sooner if law, guidance or practice change materially
Applies to	All trustees, staff, sessional workers, volunteers and contractors
Designated Equity and Belonging Lead	Rita Chadha, Chief Executive — rita@thfn.org.uk 0203 007 9120
Board Trustee Lead	Chair of Trustees

Contents

1. Purpose.....	3
2. Scope	3
3. Our commitment.....	3
4. Legal framework.....	4
5. Who this policy protects.....	5
6. What counts as discrimination or exclusion.....	6
7. Equity in service design	7
8. Equity in employment and volunteering.....	7
9. Raising a concern.....	8
10. Recording and follow-up	9
11. Roles and responsibilities	10
12. Training and learning.....	11
13. Monitoring and review	11
14. Related policies.....	11
15. Contacts.....	12

1. Purpose

Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours (THFN) brings people together to reduce isolation and build friendly, supportive neighbourhoods, with a particular focus on older and housebound residents. The purpose of this policy is to:

- set out THFN's commitment to equity, inclusion and belonging for everyone who engages with our organisation — whether as a service user, volunteer, member of staff, trustee or partner;
- ensure that our services, culture and decision-making genuinely reflect the diversity of the communities we serve in Tower Hamlets;
- provide a clear framework for identifying, reporting and addressing inequality, discrimination and exclusion; and
- make plain what staff, volunteers and trustees are expected to do — and what people who experience our services can expect from us.

THFN currently supports hundreds of older people annually across many different ethnic communities, delivers services in Bengali, Somali, Cantonese and Sylheti, and operates in a borough where a significant percentage of older residents are from ethnic backgrounds. Equity and belonging are not abstract principles for us — they are central to why we exist.

2. Scope

This policy covers all THFN activities: service delivery, volunteering, employment, governance, fundraising, communications and partnerships. It applies to everyone acting on behalf of THFN, including:

- trustees;
- employed staff and sessional workers;
- volunteers; and
- contractors, consultants and partners where their work is carried out on our behalf.

3. Our commitment

THFN believes that every older person in Tower Hamlets deserves to live with dignity, to feel they belong, and to access the support they need without facing barriers rooted in who they are. We recognise that this requires active effort, not just good intentions.

We commit to:

- treating every person — service user, volunteer, staff member or trustee — with compassion and respect;

- designing and delivering services that are genuinely accessible to people from all backgrounds, including those facing language barriers, digital exclusion or cultural distance from mainstream services;
- actively listening to the communities we serve, particularly those who have historically been marginalised or underserved;
- being honest about where we fall short and taking concrete action to improve; and
- embedding equity considerations in our planning, budgeting, recruitment and governance — not treating them as an add-on.

Our values of Compassion, Inclusivity, Empowerment, Collaboration and Excellence underpin this commitment. Inclusivity means we embrace diversity and ensure our services are accessible to all. Empowerment means we support older people to maintain independence and control — which is only possible if people feel safe and that they truly belong.

At a glance

What people can expect from us	What we expect from everyone at THFN
• To be treated with dignity and without discrimination • Services that are culturally sensitive and, where possible, in your preferred language • Interpretation and translation support, so language is never a barrier • A non-digital alternative wherever a digital service is offered • To raise a concern without fear, and to get a response	• Understand and uphold this policy in every interaction • Challenge discriminatory behaviour or language where it is safe to do so — and report it if not • Report concerns to the designated lead promptly • Complete equity and belonging training as required • Never penalise anyone for raising a concern in good faith

The sections below explain this in more detail.

4. Legal framework

This policy is grounded in, and compliant with, the following legislation and guidance.

Legislation / guidance	Relevance to this policy
Equality Act 2010	Prohibits discrimination on grounds of the nine protected characteristics. THFN has obligations as both an employer and a service provider.
Human Rights Act 1998	Underpins rights to dignity, privacy and freedom from discrimination.
Care Act 2014	Promotes wellbeing and requires person-centred, culturally appropriate care and support.
Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)	Relevant to THFN's partnerships with Tower Hamlets Council and NHS bodies. THFN adopts the spirit of the PSED in its own practice.
Charity Commission guidance (EDI)	Sets expectations for charities to embed equality, diversity and inclusion in governance and operations.
UK GDPR / Data Protection Act 2018	Governs the handling of sensitive personal data, including data relating to protected characteristics.

The nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

In Tower Hamlets, where 44% of older residents do not speak English as their first language and 49% live in income deprivation, language and socioeconomic status — while not protected characteristics in law — create real barriers to access. THFN treats these as equity issues requiring active response.

5. Who this policy protects

This policy applies to all people who engage with THFN. It gives specific protections to the following groups.

Service users

Older people accessing THFN's befriending, advocacy and wellbeing services have the right to:

- receive services that are culturally sensitive and, where possible, delivered in their preferred language;
- be treated with dignity and without discrimination on any grounds;
- have their individual needs, preferences and identities recognised and respected;

- raise a concern or complaint without fear of losing access to services; and
- receive a response to any concern raised.

Volunteers

Volunteers have the right to:

- be recruited and supported without discrimination;
- carry out their volunteering role in an environment free from harassment, bullying or discrimination;
- raise concerns about inequality or discrimination they witness or experience; and
- receive training that equips them to uphold this policy in practice.

Staff

Paid staff have the right to:

- work in a workplace that actively promotes equity and challenges discrimination;
- not face discrimination in recruitment, pay, development or any other aspect of their employment; and
- raise concerns through THFN's grievance and whistleblowing procedures without detriment.

Trustees and governance participants

Trustees have a responsibility to model this policy and uphold it at board level. They have the right to participate in governance without facing discrimination, and should reflect the diversity of the communities THFN serves as far as possible.

6. What counts as discrimination or exclusion

Discrimination can be direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional. The following are examples of the kinds of behaviour this policy addresses.

Type	Definition	Example in a THFN context
Direct discrimination	Treating someone less favourably because of a protected characteristic.	Refusing to match a service user with a befriender because of their religion.
Indirect discrimination	Applying a policy or practice that disadvantages a particular group without justification.	Providing all communications only in English when 44% of older residents don't speak it as a first language.

Type	Definition	Example in a THFN context
Harassment	Unwanted conduct that violates a person's dignity or creates a hostile environment.	A volunteer making derogatory remarks about a service user's cultural background.
Victimisation	Treating someone badly because they have raised a discrimination concern.	Reducing support to a service user who complained about discriminatory behaviour.
Exclusion	Structural or practical barriers that prevent participation, even without discriminatory intent.	Holding all volunteer meetings at a venue inaccessible to wheelchair users.

Multiple forms of disadvantage often intersect — for example, an older Bangladeshi woman who is housebound, has limited English and lives in income deprivation faces compounded barriers. THFN recognises this intersectionality and designs its responses accordingly.

7. Equity in service design

THFN recognises that Tower Hamlets is one of the most diverse and most deprived boroughs in England. Our older population includes people from over 15 ethnic communities; 44% do not speak English as their first language; 73% live in social housing; 49% live in income deprivation; and the borough ranks first nationally for predicted loneliness among those aged 65 and over.

Against this backdrop, equity in service design means the following.

Language and communication

- THFN will provide interpretation and translation support in Bengali, Somali, Cantonese, Sylheti and other relevant languages, and will not place the burden of translation on service users or their families.
- Communications will be written in plain English and available in accessible formats on request.
- Language will never be used as a reason to deny or delay access to services.

Cultural sensitivity

- Befrienders and support workers will be matched with service users in ways that take cultural background, language and preference into account.
- THFN will work with community organisations from the Bangladeshi, Somali and other communities to ensure its approach is grounded in lived experience.

- Religious and cultural practices will be respected in service delivery, including considerations around gender, diet and observance.

Accessibility

- Physical spaces used by THFN will be accessible to people with disabilities.
- Where digital services are offered, non-digital alternatives will always be available — recognising that 42% of Tower Hamlets' older residents lack digital access.
- Home-visiting, telephone and remote befriending options will be maintained so housebound people are not excluded.

Outreach and reach

- THFN will actively seek to reach communities and individuals who are least likely to self-refer, including men, people from Somali backgrounds, and those without family networks.
- Referral pathways will be kept simple and barriers to entry minimised.
- THFN will monitor who it is and is not reaching by ethnicity, gender, age and disability, and use this data to improve.

8. Equity in employment and volunteering

THFN is committed to fair and inclusive recruitment, development and working practices for both paid staff and volunteers.

Recruitment

- All job and volunteering roles will be advertised through channels that reach diverse candidates, including community networks, multilingual outlets and organisations serving underrepresented groups.
- Job and role descriptions will be written in plain English and reviewed for language that might unintentionally exclude candidates.
- Selection processes will be fair, consistent and assessed against agreed criteria.
- Reasonable adjustments will be made for disabled applicants.

Working environment

- THFN will foster a workplace and volunteering environment where difference is welcomed and discriminatory behaviour is not tolerated.
- Staff and volunteers from underrepresented backgrounds will have access to support, including mentoring and peer networks where available.
- Pay and opportunity will not vary by any protected characteristic.

Governance

- THFN’s board will work towards reflecting the diversity of the communities it serves, including at least 30% of trustees having lived experience of the issues THFN addresses — as committed to in the 2025–2028 Business Plan.
- Trustee recruitment will be proactively targeted at underrepresented groups.
- Board papers and meetings will be conducted in a way that is accessible to all trustees.

9. Raising a concern

The first priority is to ensure that every person who engages with THFN feels safe, respected and heard. If someone raises a concern about discrimination, exclusion or harassment, it must be taken seriously and responded to promptly.

Concerns can be raised by:

- a service user, carer or family member;
- a volunteer;
- a member of staff;
- a trustee; or
- a partner organisation.

Anyone raising a concern should be reassured that:

- they will be listened to and taken seriously;
- their concern will be handled confidentially where possible;
- they will not be penalised for raising a concern in good faith; and
- they will be kept informed of what action has been taken.

How to raise a concern

Concerns should be raised with the designated Equity and Belonging Lead as soon as possible after the incident or issue is identified. Where the concern involves the Lead, it should be raised directly with the Chair of Trustees.

Where a service user, carer or family member wishes to raise a concern but would benefit from support to do so — for example, because of language, disability or confidence — THFN will provide appropriate assistance, including interpretation.

Where a member of staff or volunteer witnesses discrimination or exclusion, the following guidance applies.

Situation	What to do
Immediate harm or distress to a person	Provide support to the person affected. Report to the designated lead the same day.
Discriminatory comment or behaviour observed	Challenge if it is safe and appropriate to do so. Report to the designated lead promptly.
Concern about structural or policy-level exclusion	Raise with your line manager, or directly with the Equity and Belonging Lead.
Concern involves the line manager	Raise directly with the Equity and Belonging Lead or the Chair of Trustees.

Do not dismiss concerns as unimportant, promise outcomes you cannot guarantee, or take punitive action against the person raising the concern.

10. Recording and follow-up

All concerns raised under this policy should be recorded in writing within the same day wherever possible. Records should include:

- the nature of the concern, in the person's own words where possible;
- the date, time and location of the incident or issue;
- those involved (using initials or reference codes in line with THFN's data protection policy);
- any immediate action already taken; and
- the response and next steps agreed.

Records will be stored securely in line with THFN's Data Protection and Confidentiality Policy. The person who raised the concern will be kept informed of the outcome within a reasonable timeframe, normally no more than 20 working days.

Patterns of concern — for example, recurring issues relating to a particular setting, team or type of service — will be reviewed by the designated lead and reported to the Board as appropriate.

11. Roles and responsibilities

Who	Responsibility
Board of Trustees	• Owns this policy, approves it, and champions equity and belonging at board level.

Who	Responsibility
	• Ensures THFN’s governance reflects the diversity of the communities it serves, including lived experience. • Monitors organisational progress against equity commitments, including representation data. • Ensures this policy is properly resourced and implemented.
Chief Executive	• Acts as designated Equity and Belonging Lead: oversees this policy, receives concerns, and reports significant issues and patterns to the Board. • Ensures the policy is reviewed annually and updated to reflect changes in the law, good practice and the communities we serve. • Embeds equity considerations into service design, funding applications, recruitment processes and board governance. • Ensures training is provided at induction and refreshed every two years, and maintains training records. • Ensures interpretation and translation support is available so language is never a barrier. • Ensures equality monitoring data is collected, acted on, and reported in the annual report.
Staff	• Understand and uphold this policy in all interactions with service users, colleagues and partners. • Treat everyone with dignity and respect, regardless of any characteristic. • Challenge discriminatory behaviour or language when it is safe to do so, and report it if not. • Complete equity and belonging training as required. • Declare any concerns — about their own conduct or others’ — to the designated lead.
Volunteers	• Follow this policy in any task they do for THFN, and ask the staff team if they are unsure. • Report discrimination, harassment or exclusion they witness or experience. • Complete equity and belonging training as required.
Contractors and partners	• Are made aware of this policy where they work on THFN’s behalf, and are expected to meet equivalent standards.

Designated leads

- Designated Equity and Belonging Lead — Chief Executive: Rita Chadha.
- Board Trustee Lead — Chair of Trustees.

If a concern relates to the Chief Executive, it should be raised directly with the Chair of Trustees.

12. Training and learning

All THFN staff and volunteers will receive training on this policy at induction. Refresher training will be provided every two years, or following a significant incident or policy update.

Training will cover:

- what equity and belonging means in the context of THFN's work;
- the legal framework, including the Equality Act 2010 and protected characteristics;
- how to recognise and respond to discrimination, harassment and exclusion;
- cultural competence and working with diverse communities; and
- how to raise or respond to a concern under this policy.

The designated lead will maintain records of training completed. Learning needs will be reviewed through supervision and annual appraisal processes.

13. Monitoring and review

This policy will be reviewed annually by the Chief Executive and presented to the Board for approval. Reviews will consider:

- any new legislation or statutory guidance;
- concerns or incidents recorded under this policy during the year;
- equality monitoring data, including who THFN is and is not reaching;
- feedback from service users, volunteers and staff; and
- developments in good practice across the sector.

THFN will report on its equity and belonging commitments in its annual report, including progress against the board diversity target and service reach data by protected characteristic.

14. Related policies

This policy should be read alongside THFN's:

- Safeguarding (Adults) Policy and Procedure;
- Data Protection and Confidentiality Policy;

- Whistleblowing Policy;
- Complaints and Feedback Policy;
- Recruitment and Selection Policy;
- Codes of Conduct (Staff and Volunteers);
- Health and Safety Policy; and
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Policy.

15. Contacts

Role	Contact details
Designated Equity and Belonging Lead	Rita Chadha, Chief Executive — rita@thfn.org.uk 0203 007 9120
Trustee Lead	Chair of Trustees (contact via the THFN office)
THFN office	St Margarets House, 21 Old Ford Road, London E2 9PL 0203 007 9120 www.thfn.org.uk
Equality Advisory and Support Service (EASS)	0808 800 0082 (freephone) www.equalityadvisoryservice.com
ACAS (employment-related concerns)	0300 123 1100 www.acas.org.uk
Equality and Human Rights Commission	www.equalityhumanrights.com

Approval

This policy was approved by the Board of Trustees of Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours.

Signed: (Chair of Trustees)

Name: Anne Worlledge

Date: 25.03.2026