
Section 11 Funding, Community Consultation, and the Evolution of Equal Opportunity Policy in Harrow

the funding catalysed both conflict and progress in community consultation and equal-opportunities policy

Introduction

The 1980s were a transformative decade for race relations and local governance in Britain. The post-war migration of Commonwealth citizens - from South Asia, the Caribbean, and East Africa - had by then reshaped many outer London boroughs that had previously regarded themselves as homogeneously white and middle-class. Among these, the London Borough of Harrow provides a revealing example of how national race-equality policy collided with local conservatism and civic identity.

At the heart of this transformation was Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966, a funding mechanism that by the 1980s had become a politically charged tool for managing ethnic diversity. Its use forced councils to acknowledge the presence of sizeable minority populations, to design policies for them, and - after 1983 - to consult them directly. Home Office Section 11 funding thus catalysed both conflict and progress in community consultation and equal-opportunities policy.

This statutory consultation requirement fundamentally altered the relationship between local authorities and minority communities. In inner-London Labour boroughs, it often consolidated progressive multicultural programmes. In more suburban, Conservative-controlled areas such as Harrow, however, it generated friction. Many councillors perceived Section 11 as both a central-government imposition and an ideological threat, linking them to a discourse of multiculturalism they associated with so-called “loony left” councils. The result was a pattern of reluctant compliance: Harrow accepted Section 11 funds because they were financially advantageous, yet resisted the broader equal-opportunity ethos that the grants increasingly symbolised.

This tension produced a distinctive local dynamic. Initially, Harrow’s leadership viewed equal-opportunity structures as unnecessary - even politically risky. Yet community activism, particularly from Harrow’s expanding Asian population, intersected with Home Office requirements to compel a degree of participation and policy development. By the mid-1980s, public meetings held under the Section 11 consultation framework had become arenas in which residents challenged the council’s complacency and demanded genuine racial-equality commitments.

The resulting evolution - from bureaucratic obligation to negotiated policy - illustrates how national funding mechanisms could become grounds of contestation and civic learning. Harrow's eventual creation of an Equal Opportunities Officer (initially funded under Section 11), its adoption of a Racial Equality Statement copied from Berkshire County Council, and the establishment of new community-consultation mechanisms were products of this fraught yet formative process.

This article explores those dynamics in detail. Drawing on council documents, Home Office directives, relevant data, media coverage and contemporary research - including the LSE thesis "Race Relations in Harrow" - it argues that Section 11 served not merely as a financial provision but as a catalyst for civic realignment, compelling a traditionally conservative borough to confront the realities of racial diversity and participatory democracy.

The high standard of Harrow's community engagement with the Council, facilitated through the use of Section 11 funding, became a matter of national interest.

Being an active participant in Harrow Council's transformation during that era, I witnessed first-hand the gradual but determined efforts that reshaped the borough's approach to equality. I especially recognise the commitment and support of the then Chief Executive, key managers in Housing, Social Services and Education departments, the race-awareness consultants and some councillors from the major political parties, as well as the vital influence of networking activists from the boroughs such as Brent, Ealing, and Tooting, whose collaboration helped drive the equal-opportunities agenda forward in Harrow.

Husain Akhtar
Coordinator
Harrow Monitoring Group

1. Section 11 and its purpose

A problematic view of immigration was embedded in the Local Government Act of 1966, which reflected the racial anxieties of its time. During the parliamentary debates, one member described immigration as “the great social problem of this century and of the next” (Hansard, 1966/67, Vol. 29, p.1308).

Section 11 of the Act empowered the Home Secretary to provide grants - typically covering 75 per cent of staff costs - to local authorities making “special provision ... in consequence of the presence within their areas of substantial numbers of immigrants from the Commonwealth whose language or customs differ from those of the community.”

Originally conceived to support education and welfare services for post-war Commonwealth immigrants, Section 11 had by the 1980s evolved into a more complex policy instrument linking immigration, integration, and race-relations management. Nationally, the scheme was criticised for its assimilationist overtones: it designated minority communities as “special” rather than as equal citizens. Activists also objected that grants were often spent on them rather than with them, without meaningful consultation.

2. Harrow’s early resistance and political context

In the early 1980s, Harrow Council resisted adopting the progressive equality frameworks already embraced by many inner-London boroughs. According to an LSE doctoral study, “Race Relations in Harrow” (1980s), Harrow was “one of the last London boroughs to appoint an Equal Opportunities Officer” and did so “only after considerable internal debate and pressure from local minority organisations.”

The council’s decision to finance the Equal Opportunities Adviser through Section 11 funding rather than from its own budget reflected its limited institutional commitment. Section 11 thus functioned as a political compromise: it enabled Harrow to signal compliance with national expectations while avoiding embedding equality work within its own financial and managerial structures.

3. From resistance to reluctant consultation and change

The Home Office's 1983 directive required local authorities to consult minority communities before creating or renewing Section 11 posts. This external mandate forced Harrow to engage with local ethnic-minority groups for the first time at an institutional level.

Alongside other meetings with ethnic-minority groups, a series of community consultation meetings - effectively Section 11 conferences - were held in Harrow during 1985–86, covering the areas of Housing, Education, Social Services, and Manpower Services.

The Social Services Committee minutes of 18 March 1986 record a turning-point meeting chaired by Councillor Anderson, which reviewed the outcomes of these consultations and noted that Harrow had received £415,600 in Home Office Section 11 grants. At the final plenary session, minority representatives criticised the Council's record on equality and rejected further use of Section 11 funding until a comprehensive race-equality policy was adopted.

This confrontation followed mounting frustration among Harrow's ethnic-minority representatives, vividly illustrated a few weeks earlier, in January 1986, when "ethnic participants in a PCCC (Police and Community Consultative Committee) meeting walked out after being prohibited from responding to a comment (felt offensive) made by the Conservative Leader of the Council. This incident ... signalled a breakdown of dialogue between the Council and ethnic representatives." - LSE case study on urban ethnicity.

Taken together, these episodes marked a pivotal moment in Harrow's civic history. For the first time, minority communities collectively and publicly challenged the Council's approach to equality, participation, and service provision, transforming Section 11 consultation from a bureaucratic requirement into a stage for political accountability and civic activism.

Momentum for change persisted through the next decade, despite a reluctant and often resentful administration - one that was Conservative but notably less nationalistic and right-leaning than the politics that seem to shape the council now.

Harrow's remarkable use of Section 11 as an agent of change was enabled by active community thinkers and opinion leaders who critically analysed the sociopolitical implications of Section 11 and leveraged its mechanisms to push the Council toward policy reform. This gradually improved the quality of life within Harrow's growing multi-ethnic population and expanded

minority participation at both Member and officer levels, laying the groundwork for the borough's more inclusive civic culture today.

Although there is no published borough-level staff ethnicity table for Harrow in the 1980s - when formal ethnic monitoring was still resisted - the 1985–86 Section 11 programme funded 53 posts, many of them bilingual classroom assistants, Asian social-work and community-liaison staff, interpreters, and welfare advisers. These were precisely the kinds of positions categorised in Home Office returns as “ethnic-minority” or “minority-serving” posts.

Since then, the council's staff profile has evolved significantly: by 31 March 2024, 52 percent of Harrow's workforce identified as BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), compared with 65 percent of the borough's population at the 2021 Census. Similarly, the ethnic composition of councillors has progressed dramatically - from only two Asian councillors in 1985–86 to around half of all elected members today.

While this ethnic diversification represents an important civic and sociological enrichment, there remains little systematic research on its impact on the Council's institutional culture, operational frameworks, or service delivery - particularly in light of the ongoing constraints on local-government resources, where pressures of inclusion and exclusion persist.

The political implications of this demographic shift, however, are more readily visible. Electoral strategies increasingly reflect the influence of British Indian and wider Asian communities, mirrored in the appointment of mayors of Indian heritage, the prominence of cultural and religious community engagement, and, at times, the instrumental use of ethnic identity for political advantage (see Eastern Eye, “Harrow Gain Proves Power of British Indian Support”).

4. The Berkshire statement and symbolic compliance

When pressed by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) to formalise its equality position, Harrow Council adopted almost verbatim the Berkshire County Council's Racial Equality Statement.

The LSE thesis observes that this was “seen by community representatives as a token gesture,” reflecting symbolic compliance rather than genuine reform. The adoption satisfied formal requirements but avoided the deeper structural and cultural changes demanded by local minority communities.

5. Community mobilisation and the transformation of policy

Paradoxically, Harrow's reluctance strengthened local activism. Asian and African-Caribbean residents organised around issues of access, language, and welfare. The Section 11 consultation meetings became platforms for civic participation and public accountability.

By the late 1980s, Harrow had integrated equality language into its corporate strategies and expanded liaison with voluntary organisations - a cautious yet significant institutional shift. This process also fostered the emergence of groups such as the pressure group Harrow Asian Action Group (1985), and the care group Asian Elderly Group (1986), which embodied the new confidence and agency of Harrow's minority communities.

6. Conclusion

Harrow's experience illustrates how Section 11 funding functioned both as a constraint and as a catalyst for change. What began as a statutory obligation imposed on a reluctant authority became, through persistent community activism, a mechanism for accountability and reform. The requirement to consult ethnic-minority communities forced a conservative council to recognise new voices, enabling residents to articulate their own demands for equality and fair representation.

The borough's subsequent evolution - from resistance and token compliance to measured reform and inclusion - demonstrates how even reluctant local administrations could, under pressure, internalise the principles of equal opportunity. Over time, the interplay between government policy, local advocacy, and community participation transformed Harrow's civic culture, embedding consultation and equality within its institutional framework.

By the 2020s, these cumulative shifts had produced a dramatically more diverse council and workforce, with minority representation now visible at every level of governance. The story of Harrow thus underscores how a policy once viewed as bureaucratic and imposed from above ultimately became a foundation for participatory democracy and genuine multicultural representation at the local level.

However, this demographic transformation has also carried political implications, including at times the instrumental use of ethnic identity for electoral and symbolic advantage - a reminder

that representation, while essential, can itself become entangled in the politics of identity and power.

References

Local Government Act 1966, s.11.

Hansard (Lords), *30 Apr 1980, Local Government Grants (Ethnic Groups) Bill HL debate.*

LSE PhD Thesis - '*Race Relations in Harrow*' (London School of Economics, 1980s).

Harrow Council, *Social Services Committee Minutes*, 18 Mar 1986.

Home Office Circular 25/1983, '*Consultation on Section 11 Grant Applications*'.

Equality and diversity: Harrow council website

London Borough of Harrow Annual Workforce Profile 2023-24

Harrow Councillor headcount 2025

Census data 2021

Community Liaison Working Party *minutes 13/1/1987 & 12/2/1987 – community dissatisfaction with the consultation process*

Eastern Eye: *May 13, 2022*