

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leader and Cabinet 13 December 2007
AUTHOR/S: Improvement Manager / Equality and Diversity Officer

DRAFT EQUAL OPPORTUNITY POLICY AND EQUALITY ISSUES

Purpose

1. To consider the Draft Comprehensive Equalities Policy and associated consultation programme, and to make a corporate commitment to the equality issues outlined in the report and the recommendations.

Background

2. The Council needs to address the issues of equalities for a number of reasons. Legislation requires local authorities to uphold equal opportunities legislation. Importantly the Corporate Governance Inspection in February 2007 highlighted the need for the Council to ensure policies and behaviours address the needs of, and promote the well being of, all sections of the community. As well as this the changing nature of the district requires us to re-shape services to meet the needs of a more diverse community.
3. At its meeting of the 13 September 2007 Cabinet agreed to address equality issues and to an action plan to reach level 1 of the Equality Standards for Local Government. To date an Equal Opportunity Steering Group of staff and members has been set up to oversee the development of equality policy and an audit of existing policy is complete.
4. The Equality Standard for Local Government was launched in 2001 and is an assessment process to assist local authorities in examining and combating the institutional processes that can lead to discrimination. The Equality Standard has 5 levels. The Council has not yet reached level 1 of the standards but has committed to do so by December 2007.
5. Each level of the Equality Standard commits the council to a higher level of commitment to equalities covering all aspects of policy-making, service delivery and employment.

Level 1: Commitment to a Comprehensive Equality Policy

Level 2: Assessment and Consultation

Level 3: Setting equality objectives and targets

Level 4: Information systems and monitoring against targets

Level 5: Achieving and reviewing outcomes

6. In order to reach level 1 the council needs to make a commitment to the introduction of the standard which includes the development of a draft Comprehensive Equalities Policy and a commitment to introduce policy and changes in practice to ensure equal opportunity for staff, customers, partners and the wider community of the district. The process for evaluating the equality standard is separated into four different sections to ensure authorities focus on the key components of good equality practice, these are:

- Leadership and Corporate Commitment
- Consultation and Community Development and Scrutiny
- Service Delivery and Customer Care
- Employment and training

These elements are essential to achieving level 1 of the standard and are set out in the report below.

Considerations

Leadership and Corporate Commitment

7. At its meeting of the 19 July the Council agreed three new corporate objectives and a suite of service priorities to achieve them. All three objectives include a commitment to work with, deliver services to or enhance the quality of life for everyone in South Cambridgeshire. More specifically the Council committed to work towards level 2 of the equality standard for local government.

Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS)

8. The Council has been working with the South Cambridgeshire Local Strategic Partnership to develop its priorities for the Sustainable Community Strategy for the district. As has already been reported to Cabinet previously there is significant overlap between the two sets of objectives which is to be welcomed. The priorities of the SCS also include commitments to working with and for everyone in the district and more explicitly priorities aimed at improving service delivery for older and younger people, travellers and migrant workers and other hard to reach groups.

Draft Comprehensive Equalities Policy

9. A new Draft Comprehensive Equalities Policy is attached at **Appendix A**. The Council has an existing policy adopted in 2003 however this needed to be reviewed and updated in line with new equalities legislation. This policy contains a commitment to promoting equality of opportunity, good community relations and to tackling all forms of discrimination.

Consultation programme on the Comprehensive Equalities Policy

10. The Council needs to consult widely on its draft Comprehensive Equality Policy and a programme setting out how this will be done is included at **Appendix B**. The results of this process will be reported back to the Cabinet when the final Comprehensive Equalities Policy is considered next spring.

Corporate Equality Plan (CEP)

11. The Equality Standards for Local Government provides a systematic framework for the mainstreaming of equalities across the council. It requires the authority to carry out a process of equality and needs/requirements assessments of all its policies and functions to ensure it complies with the requirements of equality legislation particularly the Disability Discrimination Act. The results of the impact assessments will form the basis of a Corporate Equality Plan (CEP) for the Council setting out how the equality policy will be implemented. This plan will be the action plan for the Council on how it implements its Comprehensive Equality Policy and it will use it to direct equalities work and measure its success.

12. The Equal Opportunities Steering Group have already undertaken a preliminary review of the functions and policies of the Council at their meeting of the 24 September 2007. The group ranked each policy high, medium or low risk in relation to equality issues and how this impacted on customer-facing services and the importance of the function or policy to the Council.
13. The Corporate Equality Plan will not only bring together the actions arising from the equality impact assessment it will:
 - Include the specific requirements the Council needs to consider in relation to race, gender and disability and it will be consistent with the Council's Race Equality Scheme, which will be incorporated in the CEP.
 - Address issues of multiple discrimination.
 - Identify actions and targets for all services which can be measured and included in service plans.
 - Identify the necessary resources to implement the actions including the identification and provision of reasonable adjustments.
14. The development of the Corporate Equality Plan will be the responsibility of the Equalities and Diversity Officer and will be reported to Cllr Mark Howell as Portfolio Holder responsible for Equalities. The CEP will be monitored by the Equal Opportunities Steering Group and regular progress reports will be made to Executive Management Team

Budget

15. The Council has already committed resources to the improvement of equality practice through the provision of a full time Equality and Diversity Officer. As well as this the Council will need to provide a modest budget of £10K in 2008/9 to develop this work.
16. The Council has also been successful in attracting resources from Building Capacity East to carry out equality training in the New Year.

Scrutiny of Equal Opportunity Policy and Practice

17. A requirement of level 1 of the Equality Standard is that the Council undertakes a self-assessment of equalities in order to demonstrate how it has achieved the standard. A self-assessment will be completed in December and will be scrutinised by the Policy Development Committee at its meeting on the 12 December.

Service Planning and Equalities

18. The revised service planning framework introduced this year provides the structure for the systematic introduction of improvement of equalities practice across the authority. One of the Council's service priorities is to improve equal opportunities by achieving level 2 of the standard and this priority will be reflected in each of the draft service plans being prepared.

Employment and Training

19. An important part of improving equality practice is ensuring that the employment and training practices of the Council are non-discriminatory. Over the past year a number of policies have been reviewed and policies will continue to be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure they comply with equality objectives. The employment of an

additional human resources officer will provide the capacity to ensure that the following actions are undertaken in the next year: -

- Policies and procedures associated with equality objectives will be included in the staff handbook.
- Senior staff will be trained on setting service objectives, action planning and equality monitoring.
- Equality objectives will be built into the appraisal mechanism.
- Disabling barriers within recruitment/training, performance management and development processes will be identified and removed.

Fair Employment and Equal Pay

20. The Council is committed to developing an equal employment and equal pay element of the Corporate Equality Plan and will undertake an assessment of the local labour market area within the region.

Implications

21. Financial	As well as the cost of the dedicated Equality and Diversity Officer it is also proposed that a budget of £10,000 is approved for 2008/9 for equalities issues.
Legal	The Council has a legal duty to comply with Equal Opportunities legislation and by implementing the action plan to reach Level Two of the Equality Standard will ensure it meets its duties.
Staffing	The full time post of Equalities and Diversity Officer has been established.
Risk Management	One of the three CGI Report recommendations was the need for the Council to improve its performance on equality issues. If the Council fails to address this important area it is at risk of failing any re-inspection. As well as this the Council is also at risk of litigation if it does not implement the duties set out in Equal Opportunities legislation.
Equal Opportunities	This is covered within the main body of this report.

Consultations

22. This report has been developed with the involvement of the Equal Opportunity Steering Group as well as the Executive Management Team.

Conclusions/Summary

23. The Council is making good progress on equality issues and has put in place the necessary building blocks for improved equality practice in the future. The Council is on track to achieve Level 1 of the Equality Standard in December.

Recommendations

24. Cabinet is asked to:

- (a) adopt the draft Comprehensive Equalities Policy and associated consultation programme at Appendix A and B, and
- (b) commit to improving equality practice within the Council in particularly the actions set out in paragraphs 7 to 20 of this report.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: Cabinet Report on Equalities 13 September 2007.

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