

PROGRESS TOWARDS THE EQUALITY STANDARD

PROGRAMME AREA RESPONSIBILITY: CORPORATE STRATEGY AND FINANCE

CABINET

24TH MARCH, 2005

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To receive an update about Diversity and Equalities issues facing Herefordshire Council and agree the measures necessary to ensure that the Council has all the evidence to demonstrate the achievement of Level 1 of the Local Authority Equality Standard (the Standard) immediately, and has sound plans to reach Level 2 and beyond. The Council's draft Comprehensive Equality Policy is being circulated separately to Cabinet Members. Copies are available in the Members' Room, on the Council's website or on request.

Key Decision

This is not a key decision.

Recommendations

- THAT (a) the Comprehensive Equality Policy, which will replace the Council's Equal Opportunities Policy, be approved; and**
- (b) Cabinet commits to the process of Corporate Equality Planning by means of a Corporate Equality Plan to implement the Policy, including consultation, community development and scrutiny.**

Reasons

Although the Council adopted the Equality Standard for Local Government in 2002 and has had the Equal Opportunities Policy since 1998 (reviewed in 2002) the latter is not sufficiently comprehensive to meet all the detailed requirements of the Standard.

Considerations

1. The Council has statutory and moral duties in respect of diversity and equalities. to reflect the needs of the county's population through both its service provision and as an employer. In particular, it must meet the following:
 - (a) The Standard requirements, including fulfilling the Council's statutory duties (the Race Relations Amendment Act, the Sex Discrimination Act, the Equal Pay Act and the Disability Discrimination Act).
 - (b) Notwithstanding the extensive work across the Council, which has been

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
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overseen by the Diversity, Race Equality, Disability Groups, and the various policies and plans adopted and implemented by the Council, the authority does not have all the documentary evidence necessary if it is to be assessed as having met Level 1 of the five-part Standard. We also need to be able to demonstrate that we will be making good progress towards Level 2 during 2005/6. The current Corporate Plan's target for Level 2 is 2006/7.

3. To achieve Level 1 of the Standard, the Council needs to do the following:
 - a. By 31st March, 2005, adopt a Comprehensive Equality Policy, which will replace the Equal Opportunities Policy. The draft Comprehensive Equality Policy is attached as Appendix 1.
 - b. For the same reason, all Directorate/Departments and Service Areas have been required to record formally by 31st March their commitment to the Comprehensive Equality Policy and to the inclusion in their directorate and service plans in due course of the necessary actions to implement the Corporate Equality Plan.
 - c. In order to implement the Comprehensive Equality Policy, Herefordshire Council must commit to a policy implementation process by means of a Corporate Equality Plan (CEP). This overarching Plan will need to state how it will pursue specific race, gender and disability equality objectives and will set out how the Standard will be implemented across the authority, including clear responsibilities of named individual managers for every action included in the CEP. This plan will need to be developed and approved by Cabinet in 2005 and must include the following (some of which the Council has already done):
 - Actions to be taken to achieve outcomes
 - Specific targets and monitoring procedures
 - Named officers responsible for achievement of outcomes
 - Carrying out a process of equality impact and needs assessment, including the needs of race, gender, disability, religion or belief, sexuality, income and age categories.
 - Earmarking specific resources for the development of the CEP
 - Timescales for delivery
 - Commitment to a fair employment and equal pay policy as part of the CEP
 - The development of equality self-assessment, scrutiny and audit
 - How the outcomes from the commenced programme of Equality Impact Assessments will be used to plan changes in service delivery
 - d. In order to ensure that there is corporate ownership of the Plan, it should be developed in consultation with all Council Directorates/Departments and Service areas. Furthermore, to ensure the participation of stakeholders and community groups in the development of the CEP, a continuous process of consultation should be undertaken with stakeholders and various sectors of Herefordshire's community, including (although not exclusively):
 - Disability Rights Groups

- The Rainbow Forum (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual Group)
- Relevant voluntary organisations from the Herefordshire Partnership's list
- Herefordshire Council's Staff Race Equality Group
- Communities Against Racism Group
- Herefordshire Equality Partnership Board
- Trades Unions
- Travellers' Group

All consultative processes will be inclusive of disabled people, making public meetings and events accessible. This will include providing, upon request, an alternative format of any written documents, interpreters and sign language interpreters, hearing enhancement systems and level access with adequate emergency exits and departure procedures. Invitations and publicity for all such events will clearly state the facilities available and provide details of appropriate booking systems to request any facilities or services required.

- e. Herefordshire Council has a Bullying and Harassment and Dignity at Work Policy for responding to harassment within the organisation, including harassment on the grounds of race, disability and gender. We need to have the equivalent externally, so as to ensure better mechanisms for responding to incidents regarding race, gender and disability. This will include participation of the authority in a multi-agency panel for dealing with, and countering, incidents of harassment; a feedback scheme; and promotional material advising staff and service users of harassment procedures.
- f. It should be noted that the Plan will be formulated in addition to the Council's statutory Race Equality Scheme and non-statutory Disability Scheme. The Race Equality Scheme and Disability Scheme will become subsets of the CEP.

Risk Management

The above approach has been devised with close reference to the requirements of the Equality Standard, which is widely recognised as the leading tool to measure a public authority's progress in setting and achieving diversity objectives. Attainment of levels of the Standard is also a National Performance Indicator. To deviate from the approach advocated within this report would leave the Council with no recognised mechanism for measuring systematically its achievements on diversity.

Alternative Options

There are no alternative options.

Consultees

Diversity Group

Background Papers

None identified.