

REPORT TO: Executive Board
DATE: 16 October 2008
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director
Health & Community
SUBJECT: Equality and Diversity Progress Report

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the Executive Board on the current position on the equality and diversity agenda in Halton.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive Board:

- i) **Note the report and endorse the actions outlined in section 4 in order for the Council to move forward to Level 4 of the Equality Standard for Local Government.**

3.0 CO-ORDINATION

3.1 The Council is making progress towards creating a culture whereby equality and diversity are part of the mainstream planning and service provision process. The Council has developed a specific structure around equality and diversity duties. At its core is the Corporate Equality and Diversity group, currently chaired by the Strategic Director of Health & Community. This has representation from officers from across the Council. Underpinning this are Directorate groups. In addition there is a Members Equality And Diversity Group, chaired by Councillor Wharton, Executive Board Member, Corporate Services. Its role is to give a strong political foundation, champion equalities issues, and provide the necessary degree of monitoring and challenge on the Council's pursuit of its equalities aspirations.

4.0 PROGRESS UPDATE

4.1 Equalities are a dynamic area of public policy. There have been major recent legislative changes in this area. The Equality Bill, *A Framework for a Fairer Future*, was presented to Parliament in June 2008.

The Bill provides for: -

- A new streamlined single Equality Duty on public bodies which

brings together the three existing duties (race, disability and gender) and extends to gender reassignment, age, sexual orientation and religion or belief;

- A requirement to report annually on rates of pay by gender and employment of people from ethnic minorities and disabled people;
- A framework to make clear the outcomes that the Bill is designed to achieve.

The legislation has strengthened the requirement to not only tackle discrimination but to actively promote diversity. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has been established to bring together the activities of the three former organisations, these being the Equal Opportunities Commission, Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission. The EHRC has a statutory enforcement role and it will be possible for individuals and organizations to seek judicial review of the actions or lack of action of public bodies.

4.2 In December 2006 the Council adopted a new Corporate Equalities Scheme. This encompasses all its then legal duties in terms of promoting the race, gender and disability equality schemes. Rather than adopt separate schemes for each aspect of social identity, the Council has put in place a single equality scheme, which includes the statutory requirements to produce a Race Equality Scheme, a Disability Equality Scheme and a Gender Equality Scheme. Public consultation took place on the scheme in May 2007 and no adverse comments were received. The Scheme is currently being revised to ensure that the Council fulfils all its legal obligations.

4.3 In May 2008 the Council invited the I&DeA to undertake a Peer Challenge and has subsequently been judged to have progressed to Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. Following this the Corporate Equality and Diversity Group has agreed and is progressing an Action Plan to move forward to Level 4 of the Standard, acknowledging at the same time that the system may be amended in 2009-10.

4.4 To strengthen this process progress has been made in the following areas: -

- A working group to review the Corporate Equality Scheme has been established, with a view to producing a revised Scheme which encompasses the Council's duties and ambitions for 2009 – 2012, which will be in a more accessible format and be widely consulted on;
- A working group to review the guidance for, and effectiveness

of, Equality Impact Assessments and to recommend appropriate improvements to the service planning and performance monitoring guidance;

- An Equality, Community Cohesion and Engagement Group has been established within the Halton Local Strategic Partnership, which consists of representatives from partner and stakeholder organisations; This is chaired by Councillor Swain.
- The Halton Local Strategic Partnership is conducting co-ordinated support, with Riverside College, for Libyan families who have recently begun residing in the Borough;
- HR are in the process of producing a policy on Disability Related Sickness Monitoring;
- The Council is in the process, overseen by the Corporate Equality and Diversity Group, of producing an information package for migrant workers resident in the Borough.
- Progress is also being made towards the establishment of a multi-faith prayer room, which is likely to be located at Kingsway Learning Centre and will be available to all staff and members of the public;

4.5 Equality and Diversity is part of the corporate induction for all new staff. In addition there is a corporate equalities training course offered to all officers and members. Attendance is currently voluntary, however it is proposed that training for all employees be made mandatory i.e. all staff to attend a one day training course and a half day refresher course every 18 months in order to keep up-to-date with changes. Community Cohesion and Governor training is also under consideration.

4.6 An examination of the Council's approach to equality and diversity was a key part of the CPA/JAR inspection process in the spring of 2008. As statements of intent the Council has an overall Corporate Equalities Scheme and four Directorate plans. In the current service planning process Departments are being asked to demonstrate the mainstreaming of impact of equality and diversity issues in their service plans to develop smarter targets and to ensure that equality and diversity impact assessments are undertaken for all policies and services. It will be important that these are done regularly and to the standard required, quality assured and challenged through Directorate Equality and Diversity Groups, and used to inform revised Directorate Action Plans and Departmental Service Plans.

4.7 The equality and diversity section of the Council's intranet and website has been revamped and now ensures that all the most up to date documentation is available.

4.8 Halton engages in an equalities forum with other Merseyside authorities. This has been very helpful in allowing us to benchmark ourselves against best practice locally. A further benchmarking exercise is currently underway which will obtain valuable information from authorities currently achieving Levels 4 and 5 of the Equality Standard on mainstreaming equality and diversity into service planning and performance management processes. Some of the key messages from these exercises are around visible leadership and championing of issues by Chief Executives and Leader/portfolio holders; addressing issues collaboratively with other partners in the LSP and having joint approaches to strategies and plans; and, very clear equalities outcomes and targets embedded in the community strategy and Local Area Agreements. This is in line with the philosophy of the EHRC and *A Framework for a Fairer Future*.

4.9 Underpinning all of this and determining our rate of progress is the level of resources dedicated to the task. Unlike in many unitary authorities there remains not yet an agreed dedicated Corporate resource for equality and diversity activity. A conscious decision has been taken to carry forward equality and diversity work in the day-to-day task of service delivery. It is clear that budgets will remain highly constrained over the next three years. However, it is also clear that Halton's progress in respect of the equalities agenda will be proportionate to the effort and resource expended. In conclusion, all services will need to continue to demonstrate how they will effectively and efficiently encourage their teams to positively incorporate equality and diversity issues into their attitudes, behaviour, culture and all aspects of service delivery in order for this to have a beneficial impact on our communities.

5.0 **POLICY & FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 Equality and diversity has an impact on how we deliver all our services. The equality and diversity agenda will also help us to lead the way forward in delivering our sustainable community strategy and corporate plan. The equality and diversity policies of the council, and their implementation, are key to the fulfilment of the Councils statutory duties.

5.2 It seems likely that the Equality Standard for Local Government will be superseded next year by the I&DeA's Equality Framework. If this is the case the Council may have to fund a further peer review, in order to progress to the 'Achieving Authority' or 'Excellent Authority' level but the resource implications of this are not yet clear.

5.3 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

6.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

6.1 The equality and diversity agenda cuts across all of the work that the

Council is now included in all major inspections. A poor judgment within this area will impact on our performance rating. Another key risk to consider is that non-compliance could result in legal action.

7.0 **EQUALITY & DIVERSITY ISSUES**

7.1 The Council is now at Level 3 of the equality standard and progress has been made in recent months to demonstrate on-going improvements.