

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 2 April 2008

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director
Health & Community

SUBJECT: Equality & 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 Excellent Status within the new Equality Framework 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. These groups now interlink with the Local Strategic Partnership, Equality, Community Cohesion and Engagement Group.

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 and will be launched in April 2009.

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 The Council is currently at Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. However in April 2009 the Equality Standard will be replaced by the Equality Framework for Local Government.

4.3 The Framework differs from the Standard in a number of ways. Firstly the current five levels of the Standard will be simplified by consolidation into three levels, these being: -

- Developing
- Achieving
- Excellent

Authorities currently at Levels 1 and 2 of the Standard will be classified as **Developing**, those on Level 3 as **Achieving** and those currently at Level 5 as **Excellent**. Authorities on Level 4 will be classed as 'Moving towards Excellence', on an interim basis' as this is not one of the main Framework levels and these authorities will be expected to demonstrate that they will start working towards and have achieved Excellent status within two years.

4.4 Accordingly at its last meeting the All Party Members Equality and Diversity Group agreed to recommend that the Council should now start working towards excellent status within the Standard by the end of 2010. This will build upon work which is already being undertaken, and which is described in paragraph 4.6 below.

- 4.5 The Equality Framework is also designed to assist authorities to working within the new performance framework, as outlined in the 2006 White Paper 'Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities', and particular CAA which also comes into effect from April 2009. Whilst the CAA does not use specific Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) there will be an assessment in how the Council responds to the community's needs in providing all its services, in particular the specific areas of 'Inequality; and 'People whose circumstances make them vulnerable. The new Framework reflects this.
- 4.6 To support the process in working towards excellence progress has been made in the following areas: -
- A template has been produced to form the basis of a self assessment. This will be completed by all Directorates and will be pulled together by the Corporate Equalities Group to form a comprehensive document.
 - 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 and will reflect the requirements of the single Equality Bill and this will be widely consulted upon.
 - A working group has been established to review the guidance for, and effectiveness of, Equality Impact Assessments and to recommend appropriate improvements to the service planning and performance monitoring guidance;
 - A newly constituted 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 and has widened its remit to consider a range of community cohesion issues.
 - The Council's Personnel Department are in the process of producing a template which will be used to conduct a comprehensive staff survey for Equal Opportunities monitoring purposes.
- 4.7 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.

4.8 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. 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.

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 Council's statutory duties.

5.2 The Equality Standard for Local Government will come into effect in April 2009. The Council will therefore have to fund a further peer review in order to progress to the 'Excellent' level but the resource implications of this are not yet clear.

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

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children & Young People in Halton

To continue to enhance equity of access to high quality services for children & young people in Halton.

6.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton

To continue to enhance equity of access for employment and learning opportunities.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

To continue to promote and enhance access to support, services and activities for the people of Halton.

6.4 A Safer Halton

To continue to promote equality and diversity for a safer Halton.

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None identified.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 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 CAA rating. Another key risk to consider is that non-compliance could result in legal action.

8.0 EQUALITY & DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 The Council is currently at Level 3 of the Equality Standard and the progress which has been made in recent months will be built upon as the Council works towards Excellent status within the new framework.

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Executive Board Report 16/10/08	Municipal Building Widnes	Dwayne Johnson Strategic Director Health & Community