

**REPORT TO:** Executive Board

**DATE:** 29 November 2007

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Strategic Director Health & Community

**SUBJECT:** Equality & Diversity

**WARD (S):** Borough-wide

## **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 Equality and diversity policies are central to all Council functions. The purpose of this report is to update Executive Board on the current position on the equalities agenda in Halton.

## **2 RECOMMENDATION**

- 1) That the report be noted, and agree the approach described in Section 4.**
- 2) That a partnership with other key partners be established under the auspices of the Local Strategic Partnership and a wider review of investment be considered.**
- 3) That the community cohesion agenda be directly connected to the wider equality and Diversity agenda.**
- 4) That the Corporate Equality Plan be fully adopted.**

## **3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 Equalities are a dynamic area of public policy. There have been some recent legislative changes in this area, including the requirement to create a gender equality scheme (from April 2007) and increased expectations in tackling discrimination on the grounds of faith, disability, age and sexuality. The legislation has also brought in the requirement to not only tackle discrimination but to actively promote diversity, and increasingly within the framework of the Human Rights Act 1998. This is a significant change to our responsibilities and one that will require us to act in different ways.
- 3.2 In December 2006 the Council produced a new corporate equalities scheme. This encompassed all 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. At the time the Executive Board approved the Plan and asked for consultation to be undertaken. Public consultation took place on the scheme in May 2007 and no adverse comments were received. It is proposed that the Corporate Equality Plan be now fully adopted.

- 3.3 The Executive Board recently considered a scrutiny report surrounding community cohesion and it was decided that there should be greater congruence and partnership with the Local Strategic Partnership.

#### 4. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 4.1 Our current strategy recognises that there are distinct drivers within the equality and diversity agenda. The national context is an important driver and it is useful to understand this context fully. Britain is changing fast: demographics; globalisation and migration are making us more aware of different identities, cultures, religions and beliefs. There are changing relationships between men and women, new family patterns and the needs of the labour market and public services.
- 4.2 The new Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) formally began its work in October. It replaces the existing Equal Opportunities Commission, Commission for Racial Equality and Disability Rights Commission. It will also for the first time provide institutional support for tackling discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, religion or belief and age. It will lead in promoting human rights and equal opportunity for every individual to participate in society, and fostering good relations between different groups of people.
- 4.3 Bringing together equality and human rights in the new Commission marks an important shift in thinking about equality. It places equality firmly in the context of people's fundamental rights and freedoms. This is especially about how people deal with and respect each other in 21st century Britain. In particular how to ensure that our communities are strong and cohesive. The Council has recently completed a policy development process on community cohesion in Halton.
- 4.4 Equality legislation currently is contained in numerous statutes, orders, regulations and European directives providing different degrees of protection against discrimination on grounds of race, sex, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief and age. The government recognised the need for a more coherent legislative framework to underpin the work of the new Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). Therefore, it recently published a Green Paper setting out detailed proposals for a single equality bill, which would replace the existing complex array of primary and secondary legislation. A consultation has begun on this, to which the Council has responded. It is likely to be 2010 before the Bill is enacted and becomes law. However, there is much Halton can do to pick up on the spirit of the proposal and embed in how equality and diversity policy operates in the borough.
- 4.5 The Council has made considerable recent progress in understanding and addressing the equality and diversity agenda across all services. Looking at the Halton position we can identify the following key issues and challenges:
- 4.6 **Leadership** - Is vital if the Council is to create a culture whereby equality and diversity becomes part of the mainstream planning and service provision process. The establishment of a lead role at Strategic Director level has been an important part of this process. In recent times the Council has developed a specific structure around its equality and diversity duties. At its core is the Corporate Equality and Diversity Group, chaired by the Strategic Director of Health & Community. This has representation from Officers from across the

Council. Underpinning this are Directorate groups. Community cohesion is now directly linked to these agendas. In addition and more importantly there is an all party Member Equality and Diversity Group, chaired by Councillor Wharton. The role of this Group 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 equality aspirations.

- 4.7 **Training** – It is said that our staff represents our biggest resource. The role that they play in delivering our services in a fair and equal way is a crucial element in ensuring that the Council is viewed as an organisation that takes equalities seriously. Equalities now form 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. In order to show our aspiration to be a value-led organisation it is proposed that the course be made mandatory for all, with short refresher courses for all staff to keep up with changes in this area of policy. This is akin to the stance that the Council are now taking on health and safety.
- 4.8 **Standards** – one of the current BVPIs (although not in the new National Indicator set) is the level achieved in the Equalities Standard for Local Government. The levels span 0 to 5 depending on the demonstrable commitment to equalities against a rigorous framework and measurable criteria. Halton is currently at Level 2, a median position nationally, which was achieved in April 2006.
- 4.8.1 A process plan of actions needed to achieve Level 3 has been developed. However, there is still some distance to travel. It had been hoped that Halton would take part in an Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) peer assessment pilot project this year. In the event the programme was over-subscribed and will now take place in 2008. That process of external challenge and validation is a key part of ensuring we can demonstrate the necessary evidence to justify a Level 3 ranking. We had set a target to reach level 3 by April 2007. The target has now been amended to a more realistic timetable of April 2009.
- 4.9 **Documentation** – As statements of intent the Council has the legal Equalities Scheme, an overall Corporate Equality Plan and four Directorate Plans. The latter are of varying levels of sophistication and robustness. In the current service planning process Operational Director's are being asked to consider equality issues in their service plans and to ensure that impact assessments are in place for all policies and services. It will be important that these are done well, challenged through Directorate Equality Groups, and used to inform revised Directorate Action Plans by the new year. In addition changes to the EDR process have been agreed incorporating the equalities agenda. This will allow the Corporate Equalities Plan to be sharpened up in line with our Level 3 process plan. It is important that everything within the plan is backed up by evidence.
- 4.10 The equality and diversity section of the Council's intranet and website is being revisited to ensure all the most up to date documentation is available.
- 4.11 **Good practice** – Halton now 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 this 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 Agreement. The issue of partner collaboration and community cohesion has recently been raised at the Halton Strategic Partnership Board meeting.

4.12 **Resources** – Underpinning all of this and determining our rate of progress is the level of resources dedicated to the task. Partnerships with other partners are essential and other statutory partners e.g. Police, PCT, Probation, Housing etc. The Council, therefore, should be considering ways to combine our efforts and join resources to tackle the Equalities agenda. In neighbouring Authorities they have established Equalities Partnerships constituted under the LSP. There is agreement within the Corporate Equality and Diversity Group that such a group should be established in Halton in order to work together but also combine our united resources to develop the agenda. In addition this could be widened to include some outcomes in the LAA to embed the Equalities agenda in our partnership agreements.

4.12.1 In conclusion, all services will need to determine how they will effectively and efficiently encourage their teams to positively incorporate equalities issues into their attitudes, behaviour, culture and all aspects of service delivery in order for this to have a beneficial impact on our communities. A healthy focus on quality issues should be part of day-to-day business of any service area and as such must be demonstrably embedded as part of core business.

## 5. **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. There is a need to review our current investment alongside partners and join resources to establish either a dedicated team or 'virtual' partnership with a common agenda.

## 6. **RISK ANALYSIS**

6.1 Another key risk to consider is that non-compliance could result in legal action and attendant bad publicity.

## 7. **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

7.1 The Council is still only at Level 2 of the Equality Standard and, whilst good process has been made in recent months, there remains a great deal of work to be done to both inhibit discrimination and actively promote a diverse workforce and population. If the Council is serious as an organisation about this agenda, there is a need to both make public our commitment and then ensure that our actions reflect it.

**8. LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

<b>Document</b>	<b>Place of Inspection</b>	<b>Contact Officer</b>
Corporate Equality Plan Executive Board 7 December 2006	Municipal Building Widnes	Dwayne Johnson Strategic Director Health & Community