

Report to:	Audit and Best Value Scrutiny Committee
Date:	18 November 2009
Report by:	Director of Policy and Communications
Title:	Equalities Update
Purpose:	To inform the Committee of progress on the Equalities Agenda

RECOMMENDATION: The Audit and Best Value Scrutiny Committee is recommended to consider the information in the report, ask questions and make any recommendations if necessary.

1. Background

1.1 One of the recommendations in the Audit Commission's last Annual Audit and Inspection Letter, published in March 2009, was that the Council should "Build on the strengthened corporate approach to the equalities and diversity agenda to embed processes, harness good practice and further improve outcomes."

1.2 The recommendation arose from the Council's awareness that whilst there was some good practice on equalities in all departments, there needed to be more consistency of approach across the whole council.

2. Progress

2.1 A key to the progress that has been made has been the appointment of a corporate policy officer for equalities, Sarah Dyde, in the Chief Executive's Office. Since her appointment in January Sarah has been working, with Assistant Directors from all departments, to ensure a strong and consistent approach to equalities and diversity issues across the Council. This approach must be built into our main business and performance planning processes, to ensure that real outcomes and improvements in services are made. Progress against key work streams is set out below.

3. Single Equalities Scheme

3.1 The first building block for our new arrangements is a Single Equalities Scheme (SES), which brings together the Race Equality Scheme, Disability Equality Scheme and Gender Equality Scheme which we have a statutory duty to produce. This will replace the existing schemes that the Council has had in place, giving a single, readable document. The scheme has been drawn up to take account not only of current equalities legislation, but to anticipate the new single equalities bill that is to be enacted next year and to incorporate the Human Rights Act.

4. Equalities Impact Assessment Process

4.1 We are also required to have an Equalities Impact Assessment process (EqIA) which covers the six strands of equality covered by existing legislation (age, disability, gender, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation). The process requires a rigorous approach to carrying out EqIAs across all services and policies. A risk assessment tool has been developed to ensure that the programme of EqIAs are completed in priority order.

4.2 Two new EqIA forms have been developed, one that covers service delivery and one that covers policies and strategies, to ensure EqIAs are being carried out to an acceptable standard across the authority. The EqIA process takes account of the Human Rights Act and includes in it the consideration of other potential impacts such as rurality and socio-economic

deprivation. We believe that this is the first EQIA to be used by a council which specifically takes account of the Human Rights Act.

4.3 Training in the EqlAs has been given to key members of staff and will be made available to all through the Council's corporate training programme.

5. Equality Action Plan

5.1 Each department has completed a self assessment against the new Equality Framework for Local Government. The self assessments are currently being verified and an equality action plan for the Council will then be drawn up, which combines all the activities in place across all departments.

5.2 It is important that actions are integrated into the normal Reconciling Policy and Resources (RP&R) business planning process, to ensure that they are adequately funded and performance monitored. The guidance given to departments on RP&R has been reviewed and revised to take account of the strengthened approach to equalities.

6 Next Steps

6.1 Once the single action plan has been completed it will become the action plan for the Single Equality Scheme and will be the subject of wide consultation and engagement with staff, residents and our partners to help prioritise actions. The production of an action plan for the authority as a whole, as opposed to actions within individual departments, will ensure that we are better able to target actions and ensure positive outcomes across all services.

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None