Wirral Council Equality and Diversity Strategy - DRAFT

Mission Statement

The Council is committed to ensuring that it delivers all of its services in a fair and equal way. It also pledges to develop an inclusive and recruitment and selection procedure aimed at creating a strong and diverse workforce. This two-pronged approach ensures that we work towards removing barriers to our services and actively promote and support diversity. This mission will be carried out in close working relationship with our partners on the Local Strategic Partnership.

The Purpose of the Strategy

The purpose of this strategy is to create a framework that will encompass all of the necessary actions required in order to carry forward the mission statement. This strategy recognises that there are distinct drivers in the equality and diversity agenda.

Equal opportunities initiatives typically happen because the law has put in place measures to create a 'level playing field' in the work place. They aim to ensure that individuals, irrespective of their race, nationality, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age or disability, can have equal access to employment and services. The law plays an important role in ensuring that the 'rules of the game' are fair.

Diversity initiatives go further, they aim to take people's diverse characteristics into account to gain maximum benefit from their uniqueness as individuals. Different people have different aspirations, expectations, opportunities, responsibilities and needs and treating people fairly means recognising their differences, respecting them and acting accordingly. Diversity is about valuing differences and respecting people.

The legal aspects of the equality and diversity agenda are crucial in terms of ensuring we do not fall foul of the specific areas of discrimination covered by legislation. The legislation is outlined in detail in the Corporate Equality and Diversity Policy.

Equality and diversity is a cross-cutting theme included within all major inspections including corporate assessment, service-specific key lines of enquiry and other inspectorate regimes such as Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI). A poor judgment within this area will impact on our performance rating. The way in which we deliver our services has an impact on how we are perceived as a corporate citizen and the equality and diversity agenda has implications for us in our role in leading the social inclusion and community cohesion agenda. Another key risk to consider is that non-compliance could result in legal action.

This strategy will use the corporate equality plan in order to monitor performance management and build the structures that will be required to monitor the progress. This equality plan supports the Equality Standard for Local Government, and Wirral have adopted an approach based on the six areas of the equality standard: this is called the 'six pillars' (attached).

The National Context

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.

There are new frameworks and organisations being developed to challenge persistent patterns of discrimination and inequality, and to protect diversity, promote good relations and human rights. However, discrimination and inequality are still widespread in many areas of society. First, there is the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights. It will inherit the powers of the three existing Commissions whose focus is on equality relating to gender, race and rights for disabled people.

The Equality Act (2006) summarises its mandate: the underlying objective of the new body is to support the development of a society where:

- there is respect for the dignity and worth of every individual,

- there is respect for and protection of each individual's human rights,

- people's ability to achieve their potential is not limited by prejudice or discrimination,

- every individual has an equal opportunity to participate in society, and

- there is mutual respect between groups based on understanding and valuing diversity and on shared respect for equality and human rights.

The Commission will aim to bring about real change by aiming to be a mix of enforcement of the law alongside a duty to promote and encourage new thinking and best practice in relation to diversity, good relations and human rights. It will have significant powers to take legal action and will also conduct investigations if it has formed a reasonable belief that unlawful discrimination or harassment may have occurred. There will also be enforcement powers for the new regulations outlawing discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, religion or belief and age.

A Champion for Human Rights

The Commission for Equality and Human Rights is not just about enforcement - it will have a huge role as a champion for equality, diversity and human rights. Some of its functions include:

- providing information, advice and assistance on equality and diversity, human rights and good relations issues,

- issuing guidance and good practice to help employers and service providers embrace equality and human rights,

- publish a State of the Nation Report every three years, showing how the United Kingdom is doing on equality and human rights; then set outcomes to work towards and benchmarks for progress,

- challenge prejudice against and stereotyping of particular groups, and

- establish a strong evidence base and an understanding of discrimination, to inform future policy development and best practice.

It will have the power to provide grants to bodies working towards the objectives of the Commission. This area of its work will provide a real opportunity for local authorities to deliver some of the most exciting and productive outcomes, especially when working with local networks. The importance of working with local networks is essential because it is at a grassroots level where we need to see the positive outcomes for our equality and diversity strategy and frameworks.

Also, part of these changes is the work being undertaken by two reviews:

- the Equalities Review, examining the root causes of persistent patterns of inequality and how they can be tackled, which is expected to report later this year, and

- the Discrimination Law Review, which is evaluating the effectiveness of current legislation, with a view to having a Single Equality Bill introduced in this Parliament.

The role of the public sector will be under review in regards to the way that it promotes equality. and what appropriate duties it possesses. A Green Paper setting out initial proposals will be published around the turn of the year. This will open a consultation process that is vital for Wirral Council to engage with in order to ensure that we are at the heart of the decisions and frameworks of the future.

The Local Context

Wirral has a relatively small and dispersed Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community, however their groups have a substantial membership on the Wirral Voluntary and Community Sectors Network. within its multicultural sub-group. This group, with the support of the Network, held a series of meetings which culminated in the publication of a report entitled 'Your views matter'. This report highlighted a number of concerns about the level of engagement and the extent to which the views, needs and aspirations of the BME community are met.

Culture and Leadership

The culture of any organisation plays a fundamental role in how it operates. Wirral Council workforce will have an overt culture and this will be experienced by our service users and customers through the way we deliver

our services. Frontline staff in one-stop-shops, libraries, social services and call centres play a crucial role in projecting this culture through the face-to-face services we deliver. This culture will also be perceived through the corporate image of the Council in the way that it is portrayed in the media and the visible roles taken on by the Councillors and the office of Mayor. Chief officers whose roles also have a customer facing element will also help to play a part in the culture of the organisation.

The covert culture of the organisation: this is how the organisation operates and how its custom and practice dictates how the services are provided will often be very different to the overt culture. Cultures within organisations can also vary from department to department and can depend very much on the leadership of the chief officer.

The culture of any organisation therefore plays a crucial role in the way staff are employed and retained and in the way that services are delivered.

The Council recognises its unique role not only as the major employer in the area, but also as the key service provider. In recognising this key role and the importance that culture plays within an organisation, the Council is keen to ensure that leadership in this area is strong enough to communicate a corporate message that transcends all departments and helps to create a culture whereby equality and diversity become part of the mainstream planning and service provision process.

Culture can be addressed on many different levels, but it will be essential to ensure strong leadership within this area. This will be seen at officer level by ensuring that a member of the Chief Officers Management Team chairs the Corporate Equalities and Inclusion Group. The Chair should in turn be supported by chief officers representing every department. The chief officers should also be responsible for chairing their own departmental equalities working groups, ensuring that work is then delegated to the appropriate staff. This structure will ensure that the equality and diversity agenda will be given the highest possible profile throughout the Authority. The chief officers will have the role of equality and diversity champions within their own departments and this should be supported by the introduction of elected member champions, one from each political party.

Culture within the workforce will therefore be addressed by ensuring strong leadership within this area and a supportive political foundation. Staff training will help to support staff in their knowledge and skills in this area and this in turn will be backed up with access to online training and information via the Council's intranet.

Policies and Procedures

The main policies that will be required to ensure that this strategy fulfils its purpose are: the Corporate Equality and Diversity Policy, (which incorporates the Race Equality Scheme, the Gender Equality Scheme, and the Disability Equality Scheme). All of the Council's policies and procedures are reviewed in

a rolling programme of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs). This process has been supported by the adoption of a corporate toolkit for assessing policies and is used by all departments. The EIA process will be monitored by the Corporate Equality and Inclusion Group (CEIG) and the policy framework for the whole of the Authority is currently under review.

Management Practice

The way in which we deliver our services will have an impact on our customers: as an example, the language that our staff use and the accessibility to our services will both impact on customers and affect whether we are perceived to be fair and equal. It is therefore essential to ensure that staff are appropriately informed of the correct use of language, and that we endeavour to remove barriers that may impede access to our services.

This will be achieved by ensuring that staff have access to a guide book on use of language: this will be made available via the intranet. Improving access to services will be delivered in a number of ways: Wirral already has a contract with the National Interpreting Service, but recent enquiries from staff have demonstrated that the level of knowledge about this service across the organisation is patchy at best. It will be necessary to re-launch the NIS service and to carry out an audit of reception areas from a selection across the Authority. Updating and maintaining an up-to-date register of the number of staff who can communicate in British Sign Language is another important element of management practice. The introduction of the corporate guidelines will also help to establish standard practice across the organisation. This practice should include the use of standard text boxes detailing how leaflets and other documents can be accessed in other languages.

Training and Organisational Development

Training staff and elected members is an essential element of any organisation's development. There are currently some excellent examples of training throughout Wirral Council. However, in order to address issues of consistency, and quality, we will carry out a full needs analysis of this training.

Performance Management

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure that equality and diversity is rigorously monitored through the performance management systems available to us. The aim of the performance management framework is to ensure that the equality and diversity agenda receives the highest level of support and attention within the organisation. An appendix to the corporate plan will detail the Council's performance on equalities and this will be reported to the chief officers' management team and cabinet on a quarterly basis. A role for scrutiny will also play a part in ensuring that we meet our targets.

Community Engagement and Consultation

In order to deliver equality, it is crucial to develop effective community engagement and consultation activities. Engaging with hard-to-reach groups and gaining an understanding of how we need to tailor our services and employment practices is an important element of the work that we do. Community engagement will be supported by use of the community engagement toolkit.

The Council has a clear community leadership role. The key elements of this are:

- building local vision and direction
- facilitating community involvement
- securing improvements in services and standards
- ensuring access and inclusion
- making best use of resources
- accounting for performance and service quality

Development

All organisations rely heavily upon the continued development of their Information Computer Technology (ICT) services to support the business. Wirral Council will continue to seek new ways of supporting the equality and diversity agenda through its *1Business* ICT programme. The development will focus on the use of the Customer Relationship Management system and how we harness the information gained from the comments, compliments and complaints that come into the system. The research group will in turn provide corporate guidance on how we can best collect demographic information that will help us to understand the breakdown of people who use our services into the six strands of the Equality Standard for Local Government.

The development of the equality and diversity agenda within Wirral Council will take into account opportunities for working with our Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) partners to ensure that we are working together wherever possible. This could or will include joint stakeholder events, focus groups and conferences.

The LSP will also be responsible for monitoring the cross-cutting theme of equality within the Local Area Agreement. The role of the third sector will be supported and developed via a work programme that is driven by the LSP this will ensure that any capacity building required by the third sector in order to engage with the Local Area Agreement is met by all partners.

A community engagement strategy will be developed with all LSP partners: the purpose of this strategy is to ensure that, wherever possible, joint working is maximised and that the community engagement toolkit and its good practice is used to provide blanket coverage across the Borough.

In order to carry through the development work plan, it will be necessary to create a new focus on equalities through a dedicated Corporate Equalities Team. This team will lead the corporate workload that is necessary for delivering the equalities agenda. The team, the workload and a new focus on equalities will necessitate a re-launch at many levels including team briefs, departmental meetings, Departmental Management Teams and Chief Officers Management Team.

Summary

This strategy establishes the direction that Wirral Council wish to take with the equality and diversity agenda. The combined Equality and Diversity Policy sets out our aims and the Corporate Equality Plan draws together the different strands of work that have to be achieved in order for us to achieve our vision and mission statement.

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