

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY – COUNCIL PROGRESS

1. Executive Summary

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of The Council's achievements in order to be awarded Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government in November 2009, and to highlight the role of scrutiny in order for the Council to reach 'Excellent' status of the new Equality Framework for Local Government by November 2011.

2. Background

- 2.1 Achieving level 3 is a major milestone for the Council. However, not only did the Council achieve level 3, the Improvement and Development Agency assessors stated it was a 'good and solid level 3'.
- 2.2 When the assessors initially visited the Council in May 2009, it should be noted that their decision not to award Level 3 at that time was because the Council was only 'a hair's breadth away and the submission of further evidence by September 2009 should ensure a more favourable outcome'.
- 2.2 The Council's many equality achievements over the last two years demonstrate its commitment to embedding equality and diversity across everything that it does as an organisation (as an employer, a service provider, a commissioner of services and within its leadership role for communities).
- 2.3 The Council formally adopted the Equality Standard in October 2004 to show its commitment to addressing equality issues. The Council self-assessed for Level 2 of the Equality Standard in March 2007, but at this time did not have a dedicated post to progress equality and diversity issues further. Therefore a decision was made within the Corporate Services department to invest resources into such a post.
- 2.4 In November 2007 the Council successfully recruited a new Corporate Equality and Diversity Co-ordinator, Jacqui Cross. Shortly after, John Webb became the lead Director for equality and diversity, the Portfolio Holder for Community and Customer Engagement and Chair of the Excellence committee became equality Member champions, all of which has significantly improved the Council's capacity to provide the necessary leadership and expertise to ensure equality and diversity issues are embedded across the organisation.
- 2.5 The Council allocated resources, established a more robust governance infrastructure, involved key stakeholders, and set very clear aims and objectives in order to be awarded Level 3.
- 2.6 Regarding the equality agenda, the Council has led the way in Wirral in so many ways. For example:

- The Chief Executive personally overseeing the Level 3 action plan.
- Enabling the Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny Committee to facilitate briefings and training for Members.
- Producing a single equality scheme that covers all six strands of equality (race, gender and transgender, disability, age, sexual orientation, and religion or belief).
- Developing an online equality and diversity training package for all staff and Members to ensure we all have the same level of awareness about the issues (5,100 staff and Members have completed the training).
- Organising an annual Diversity Day event at Wallasey Town Hall, attracting many people from across Wirral (nearly 1,000 people attended the last event in November 2009).
- Producing an equality impact assessment template that is now recognised as an example of best practice by the North West Employers' Organisation's Equality Gateway.
- Developing a brand for the Council's equality programme (Equality Watch and jellybeans) that is now recognised across Wirral's communities as the Council's commitment to equality issues.
- Producing an equality profile of the Council workforce to help us work towards being a more modern, diverse and representative organisation.
- Establishing a Corporate Equality Group that has resolved workforce issues, produced excellent policies and strategies, and has showcased numerous community services and activities.
- Producing quarterly equality monitoring reports that clearly highlight progress across all departments.
- Establishing an Equality Watch membership scheme which has over 300 members to date receiving newsletters and bulletins on a regular basis from the Council's equality and diversity team.
- Producing a Gender Identity policy in partnership with TransWirral to support any transgender member of staff or elected Member.
- Establishing Chief Officers as Champions for each of the equality strands.
- Understanding more the equality profile of our customer base in Wirral, in order to gain an insight into their experience of accessing and receiving Council services. This information will enable us to understand the nature and extent of inequalities in accessibility and standard of services.

3. Beyond Level 3

- 3.1 In order for Councils to be able to respond to new thinking on equality outcomes, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) has developed a new Equality Framework for Local Government. This has now replaced the original Equality Standard.
- 3.2 Instead of reaching Levels 1 to 5, Councils will now work towards three levels:
- Developing
 - Achieving
 - Excellent
- 3.3 Any Council already at level 1 or 2 of the original Standard will automatically migrate to 'Developing' status, and any Council already at level 3 will migrate to 'Achieving' status, etc.
- 3.4 Wirral Council has automatically migrated to 'Achieving' status of the new Framework, and will need to be assessed for 'Excellent' status by November 2011 or risk having 'Achieving' status removed. Therefore, an action plan for reaching 'Excellent' status is currently being developed by the Corporate Equality and Diversity team.

4. The role of Scrutiny in reaching 'Excellent' status

- 4.1 The Equality Framework for Local Government highlights the need for effective scrutiny in the following areas:
- a. Is the Council meeting its equality objectives in partnership with others?
 - b. Is the Council able to identify how communities are changing and the impact this may have on equality priorities?
 - c. Can the Council demonstrate improvements and outcomes as a result of its Equality Scheme?
 - d. Is the Council scrutinising its own and its partnerships' performance with regard to equality objectives and outcomes?
 - e. Can the Council demonstrate that commissioned / procured services are delivering the Council's equality objectives?
 - f. Are communities involved in the scrutiny process?
 - g. Do Members and Senior Officers demonstrate personal leadership and understand the relevance of equality and cohesion to their local communities?
 - h. Are equality impact assessments built into all aspects of decision-making, scrutiny and policy reviews?

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 The Scrutiny Programme Board notes the progress made to date.
- 5.2 The Scrutiny Programme Board agrees to further develop the scrutiny function to incorporate the criteria of the Equality Framework for Local Government.

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