

**POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL**

**1<sup>st</sup> April, 2008**

**Present:** Councillors Cowper, Freeman, Kellett, McDonnell, Simmons, Thompson and Wolstenholme.

**Also Present:** Councillors Kelly, Marsden, D. Smith and Turnbull.

**Apologies for Absence:** Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Lightly, Martin, Walker and Wilkes.

In the absence of the Chairman of the Policy Scrutiny Panel, Councillor Wilkes, the Vice Chairman of the Panel, Councillor Freeman, took the Chair.

**Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2008.**

The Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2008, were approved as a correct record.

**BULLET POINTS**

**UPDATE ON THE COUNCIL'S SICKNESS ABSENCE LEVELS**

- The Director of Corporate Services was in attendance to update the Panel on the current levels of Sickness Absence within the Council.
- Current figures indicated that the general trend in Sickness Absence was down with the Council now on track to meet its target figure for the year of 10 working days per employee, a decrease from last year of 2.3 days. This also contrasted with the figure three years ago of 13.98 days per employee.
- It was hoped that the rate would continue to fall into single figures, which would equate to the Mid to Upper Quartile for Sickness Absence. The national average was 8.2 days per employee.
- The Director of Corporate Services indicated that the successful reduction of the Sickness Absence Rate had been due largely to the introduction of the services of Diagnostic Health Solutions and the consistent application across the Authority of the corporate Sickness Absence Procedures.
- The regular examination of sickness figures, the raising of the profile of Sickness Absence and the further training of Managers had also contributed to the reduction of the rate.
- It was noted that the reduction had been seen across all Council Services but had been more marked in the manual workforce.
- The Director of Corporate Services acknowledged that LGR may also further affect levels of Sickness Absence in the forthcoming year with issues such as lowered morale, loss of staff and the impact on those who were left all being possibly significant. However as yet these effects had not been marked.
- Members expressed their satisfaction at the figures and their thanks for the efforts of all staff in reducing the rates of Sickness Absence
- It was agreed that the Policy Scrutiny Panel again review the Council's Sickness Absence Rate in October, 2008.

## UPDATE ON THE COUNCIL'S TELEPHONE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

- The Panel had reviewed the Telephone Communication System in October, 2007 and the subsequent recommendations had been approved by Cabinet on 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2007.
- The Director of Corporate Services updated Members on the progress of implementation of the recommendations.
- Modifications needed to accommodate the short term improvement measures requested by the Policy Scrutiny Panel had been activated within the current system capabilities.
- A review of staffing resources had taken place and some minor changes had been made involving staff relocation. The Revenues and Benefits section had installed an automated response line which had taken much of the call burden from front line staff. Figures showed approx. 3,000 "Low Value" calls being received with 10% of those going through to a staff member.
- Due to LGR it was unlikely that the current telephone communications software would be replaced. An LGR Workstream was currently considering the general subject of Communications.
- An instruction had been sent to all Council Staff to respond to all voicemail messages within 24 hours and to keep up to date all voicemail greetings.
- It was acknowledged that the system still had limitations, mainly in relation to Cityinfo call traffic and other "Hot Spots" of particularly heavy call traffic in relation to specific issues. However the Director of Corporate Services indicated that the system had been the most cost effective at the time of purchase. Any proposals for major change or financial expenditure would now need to be forwarded to the new Unitary Authority.

### **Any Other Business**

- Members raised their disappointment over the refreshments that had been made available.

The Meeting Terminated at 6.10pm

## **POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL**

### **DRAFT REPORT**

## **EQUALITIES POLICIES**

### **BACKGROUND**

1. In 2007 the Centre for Public Scrutiny in conjunction with the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission, produced a document entitled "Equal to the Task" advising Local Authorities how to ensure their Equalities Policies are in place, are adequate, are being actioned, and meet the "Equality Standard for Local Government"

1.1 Following production of the Document the Policy Scrutiny Panel were requested to look at the City of Durham's own Equalities Policies and to assess if they were fit for task or if they needed further development. A Scoping Document was drawn up to set the parameters of the Scrutiny.

### **AIMS**

2. To review the Council's existing Equalities Policies and assess progress made against the individual Action Plans drawn up against each Policy.

2.1 Specific areas to be looked at were Overall Corporate Equalities Issues, Individual Equalities Policies and their Action Plans and the viability of working towards Level 3 of the "Equality Standard".

### **ACTIONS**

3. To facilitate an initial discussion Policy Scrutiny Panel Members were provided with the City of Durham's Equal Opportunities Policy, the Corporate Equality Plan, the Corporate Equality Action Plan, which had been utilised to achieve Level 2 of the Equality Standard, and a copy of the most recent Internal Audit Report, dated July, 2006, on the Council's Equalities Procedures. The Director of Corporate Services attended the Panel and gave Members a background to the documents and to the Council's Equalities Procedures generally.

3.1 Members subsequently raised a number of questions which were forwarded to the appropriate Officers and written responses to those questions were circulated back to Members for a later Panel Meeting.

3.2 Members of the Policy Scrutiny Panel were then provided with copies of the Disability Equality Scheme, the Gender Equality Scheme and the Race Equality Scheme. The Head of HR and Support Services and the Principal HR Manager

attended the Panel to give a detailed report on progress against each of the Equality Scheme Action Plans.

## **OUTCOMES**

### **4. The Equality Standard**

4.1 The Equality Standard is a national standard against which Local Authorities measure their progress in embedding Equalities awareness and practice into all areas of their business. There are five levels of achievement within the Standard with Level 5 being the highest and each level indicating the degree to which the individual Local Authority has progressed. These are as follows:-

**Level 1** – Commitment to a Comprehensive Equality Policy

**Level 2** – Assessment and Consultation

**Level 3** – Setting equality objectives and targets

**Level 4** – Information systems in place and monitoring against targets

**Level 5** – Achieving and reviewing outcomes

4.2 The Director of Corporate Services indicated that City of Durham has already achieved Level 2 which was currently the District Council norm. The achievement of Level 3 would generally necessitate the embedding of all Equalities Policies into Service Delivery itself and the further development of processes for measurement of the effectiveness of the Policies. Equality objectives and targets are currently set out in our existing Equalities Action Plans, but level re-assessment has not been applied for.

4.3 Larger Authorities have however achieved higher levels against the Standard. Newcastle City Council has achieved Level 3, as has Stockton Borough. Hartlepool Borough Council was also currently aiming for Level 3.

4.4 The Director of Corporate Services indicated that in order to be re-assessed against the Equality Standard the Council would have to commit £10, 000, payable as an assessment fee, and make a further considerable commitment of staff time in order to prepare for the re-assessment. As City of Durham has relevant Policies in place together with processes for measuring progress against targets, has already achieved Level 2 and has a comprehensive Equalities Training programme in place for staff, Members would need to consider, especially in relation to imminent LGR, the cost effectiveness of further re-assessment.

### **5. The Corporate Equality Plan**

5.1 Equal Opportunities issues linked to the Equality Standard have been embedded into all areas of the Council's business by a staged process and have been incorporated into the Corporate Equality Plan. The Equalities Steering Group has been instrumental in progressing the Council, through the Corporate Equality Plan, to Level 2 against the Equality Standard.

5.2 The Council now has in place three pointer Equal Opportunities Policies. These are the Race Equality Scheme, the Gender Equality Scheme and the Disability Equality Scheme.

5.3 The Internal Audit Inspection of July, 2006, rated the Council's Equalities Procedures as "Excellent" with a rating of 1, from a range of 1-5, with 1 being the best. The Audit Report also included relevant Equalities BVPI's and the Council's performance against them. The figures related to returns for 2005/2006 and Members requested updated figures for consideration. BVPI returns were subsequently produced for 2006/2007 which showed improvement against most Indicators. Members recognised that there were individual Equalities BVPI's against which progress was to an extent out of the control of the Council and care had therefore to be taken when prioritising resources to meet individual BVPI's.

In response to a query from Members the Panel was advised that Internal Audit have no plans to include a Full Audit Report of Equalities Procedures in this year's Audit Plan.

5.4 In response to a further request from Members information was produced regarding the number and cost of Appeals against the Council over the past two years as there appeared to have been a significant increase in the number. It was identified that only one Appeal had been brought about on Equalities grounds.

5.5 For their consideration, Panel Members also requested further information regarding the following:-

- Council Documents permanently available in languages other than English
- The demand for material in languages other than English
- The legal requirements placed upon the Council in relation to supplying information in the required format
- Requirements for adherence to statutory Equalities Policies in Council Contract Documentation
- Records/Breakdown of percentage of job applicants who were disabled and ratio of successful/unsuccessful applicants
- The Corporate Training programme for Officers and Members in relation to Equalities Training

A comprehensive written response was subsequently circulated to Panel Members which incorporated responses to all the above points.

## **6. The Equalities Action Plans**

### **6.1 The Disability Equality Action Plan**

The Disability Equality Action Plan contains 19 individual targets for achievement. The Principal HR Manager detailed to Panel Members the actions taken, the progress made against and the achievement of individual targets.

Members noted that equality monitoring information is collected by Service Areas but there is currently no corporate approach. A Sub-Group linked to the E Government Partnership had been set up to look at the situation.

Members also noted that a "Dignity at Work Policy" had been introduced, relevant training had been carried out and the Policy placed on the Council's "Sharepoint" for the information of staff.

## 6.2 The Gender Equality Action Plan

The Gender Equality Action Plan contains 20 individual targets for achievement. The Principal HR Manager detailed to Panel Members the actions taken, the progress made against and the achievement of individual targets.

Members noted that a “Family Friendly Policy” had been introduced. It was available to the entire workforce and had been well publicised. The Policy included relevant LPI’s to enable performance to be measured.

Members also noted that a review was ongoing of communications and publications with regard to ensuring the inclusion of gender-inclusive language.

## 6.3 The Race Equality Action Plan

The Race Equality Action Plan contains 18 individual targets for achievement. The Principal HR Manager detailed to Panel Members the actions taken, the progress made against and the achievement of individual targets.

Members noted that Race (and other) equality objectives had been incorporated into departmental service plans. Relevant local PI’s and targets had been set.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **7. Progress against Action Plans**

7.1 Members of the Policy Scrutiny Panel were encouraged by the robustness of the Equalities Policies in place and by the Council’s position in relation to meeting the targets set out in their respective Action Plans. However it was recognised that a balance had to be struck between the prioritising of individual BVPI targets and ensuring and maintaining an effective overview and awareness of Equalities Issues throughout the Authority.

7.2 Members were also informed that the appropriate LGR Workstream was currently looking at Equalities Issues with a view to incorporating existing Policies and Procedures for further development by the Unitary County Council.

### **8. Equalities Training**

8.1 Members acknowledged and commended the extent of Equalities Training that had already been carried out throughout the Council’s workforce (87% of the workforce since 2001). It was also noted that Equalities Training continued to feature in the annual Corporate Training Programme.

8.2 It was acknowledged that Equalities Training has, in previous Training Programmes, been offered to Elected Members. However the Panel raised a general concern that Members elected at the May, 2007 elections, had not been specifically offered Equalities Training, as the 2007 Programme had been produced and circulated in March, 2007.

8.3 It was agreed that it was of vital importance to the Authority that all Members be provided with training on Equalities issues and it was recognised by the Panel that any unmet requirement for Equalities Training both for Elected Members and for Staff still represented a major risk for this Authority.

## **Recommendations**

- 1) That the appropriate Officers be commended for embedding robust Equalities Policies, Procedures and Action Plans into the work of the Council and for the achievement of the required BVPI targets.
- 2) That Equalities Training be included in the Corporate Training Programme for 2008/2009 and the Programme be circulated to all Members at the earliest possible opportunity.
- 3) That over the time left to this Administration, priority continues to be given to making available to all Elected Members, either initial training or refresher training courses in Equalities Issues.
- 4) That in view of imminent LGR, application for re-assessment against Level 3 of the Equality Standard be not pursued.
- 4) That the good practice evident in the Equalities Policies and Procedures at Durham City Council be commended to and incorporated by the new Unitary County Council.