

Item 4

REPORT TO STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

REPORT OF HEAD OF ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

8th JANUARY 2008

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP PORTFOLIO

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY – CORPORATE EQUALITY PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 The CEP Action Plan provides an overarching framework to steer the Council towards Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG) and to address actions relating to disability, race and gender equality.
- 1.2 This report sets out the progress made to date against the Corporate Equality Plan (CEP) (Minute Ref OSC(1).26/06). This document is key to ensuring the Council drives forward the equalities agenda and has been updated in accordance with legislative requirements and incorporates the Race Equality Scheme, Gender Equality Scheme and Disability Equality Scheme.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- 2.1 Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the progress made to date.
- 2.2 Progress against the Corporate Equality Plan (CEP) continues to be reported to Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny on an annual basis.

3. CORPORATE EQUALITY PLAN

3.1 Background

The Council has set a challenging target to achieve Level 3 of ESLG by March 2008. The CEP is a prerequisite for achieving this and is key to strengthening and formalising corporate commitment to equalities.

- 3.2 The CEP sets out:
- Equality issues in Sedgefield Borough
 - The strategic framework
 - The Equality Standard for Local Government
 - Impact Needs Requirements Assessment Programme
 - Race, Disability and Gender Equality
 - Action to date
 - Implementation and monitoring arrangements
 - CEP Action Plan
- 3.3 **Race Equality**
The Council's Race Equality Scheme is contained within the CEP and sets out how the Council will action its general duty under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equal opportunities and promote good relations between people from different racial backgrounds.
- 3.4 This is the Council's third revision to its Race Equality Scheme (RES) and builds upon the work already done in this area.
- 3.5 **Disability Equality**
This second version of the Disability Equality Scheme (DES) focuses on how the Council will action its general duty under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995 and 2004) which makes it unlawful for a public body to discriminate against people with disabilities by treating them less favourably in employment, in the provision of services and in certain aspects of education.
- 3.6 **Gender Equality**
This second version of the Gender Equality Scheme (GES) sets out how the Council will fulfil its general duty under the Equality Act 2006 to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity between men and women.
- 3.7 **Progress to Date
Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG)**
Significant progress has been made to embed and mainstream the equality agenda across the Council. The Council has set a target to achieve Level 3 of ESLG by March 2008. Whereas Levels 1 and 2 are self-declared, Level 3 needs to be externally assessed however the peer challenge external assessment model is not available until April/May 2008 therefore the achievement date has been revised to May 2008. In preparation for external assessment, a comprehensive self-assessment exercise against the first three levels of the ESLG has been undertaken. The findings from this exercise have been incorporated into the CEP Action Plan and this has in turn informed the self-assessment report.
- 3.8 In order to prepare for the assessment, a sub group has been established and the remit of this Group is to:
- Finalise the self assessment report and monitor progress against it

- Co-ordinate departmental responses, evidence and actions to be completed prior to the external audit by stakeholder group
- Deliver briefing sessions to staff in order to prepare them for external audit

Corporate Equality Plan (CEP) Action Plan

Leadership and Corporate Commitment

- 3.9 Following consultation the CEP and associated action plan have been revised and re-published and the incorporated Race, Disability and Gender Equality Schemes have been updated and revised in accordance with legislative requirements.
- 3.10 All completed Impact, Needs and Requirement Assessments (INRA's) have been audited in order to ensure that adequate consultation took place and that the resulting actions from the INRA process were incorporated into Service Plans.
- 3.11 The INRA Programme has been re-prioritised in light of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). A number of impact assessments covering transitional projects are now underway and emerging projects that will have a lasting effect on the Borough's Communities, such as Housing Market Renewals, have also been started. It has been agreed through the Corporate Equality and Diversity Group that departments need not start any new Priority 3 INRAs in this financial year as a result of LGR, but must continue with those already started. The importance of impact assessing any new initiatives or projects before they are agreed has been reiterated.
- 3.12 Work is underway to devise a corporate mechanism for tracking and monitoring adverse impacts. This is scheduled for completion by March 2008.

Community Engagement and Accountability

- 3.13 Consultation with communities continues through the INRA process. A number of equalities objectives have been set within each service, ensuring that equality targets are in line with service user needs and work continues to be undertaken to ensure that the Council's consultation mechanisms are robust and reach all representative communities and groups within the Borough.
- 3.14 'Inform', 'Borough Matters' and other media are being used to promote positive publicity on equality issues.
- 3.15 The Council is also committed to providing all documentation in a number of formats upon request. 'First Contact' has been issued to all staff to ensure that they are aware of how to deal with customers with specific needs.

Service Delivery and Customer Care

- 3.16 The Council has devised an 'Equality Guide for Suppliers and Contractors' in order to both inform contractors of their legal obligations and to enable Council Officers within relevant services to monitor contractor compliance with Equality Legislation. Additionally the Council has taken part in the equality and diversity peer review process for the North East Centre of Excellence's Harmonisation of Local Government Documentation (Goods and Services) Project. The purpose of the project was to produce a harmonised set of Pre-qualification questionnaire (PQQ) and Invitation to Tender (ITT) documents to further improve competition and diversity within the supply market. The documents will be available for use across the region from early next year.
- 3.17 An equalities site has been set up on the intranet and internet. All corporate documentation is published on this site, including the Corporate Equality Plan. The site will also be used to publicise news and events.
- 3.18 The Corporate Complaints Policy has been revised to include equality issues. The bi-annual report to Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny highlights the fact that no complaints were received covering the six strands of equality.
- 3.19 In order to monitor the take up of services by race, gender and disability some equality statistics have been compiled across service delivery areas and these have been incorporated into the CEP.

Employment and Training

- 3.20 A number of actions contained within this section of the CEP Action Plan are underway. A series of training events for staff have been held on broader equality issues with over 170 attendees. More training is scheduled in 2008 for both staff and members, with member training being arranged in partnership with Wear Valley District Council.
- 3.21 Homeworking is currently being piloted in the Benefits Section and the policy is subsequently being refined to reflect current legislation.

Future Issues

- 3.22 Forthcoming legislation and the requirement to annually review race, gender and disability equality schemes will necessitate the ongoing refinement of the CEP and associated action plan.

4. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Human Resources

- 4.1 The CEP Action Plan details the specific resource implications and the officers responsible for delivering the aims of the plan. It is expected that this can be met from existing staffing resources.

Financial Resources

4.2 The financial implications set out in the CEP Action Plan are as follows:

	£
External validation against ESLG	8500
Equality and Diversity Training Programme	6000

This can be met from the Equality and Diversity revenue budget 2008/9.

5. CONSULTATION

- 5.1 The CEP has been subject to detailed consultation via a number of organisations, including the Ethnic Liaison Group, Age Concern, Chinese Association North East Region, County Durham and Darlington Race Equality Council, Disability Rights Commission, as well as other officers within the Borough Council. Other partner organisations have also been consulted including Sedgefield Children and Young People's Partnership, Sedgefield Learning Disabilities Group, Sedgefield PCT and SureStart.
- 5.2 In July 2006, the Council took part in a countywide event – "Have Your Say" – which consulted on disability issues that impact on the public sector. Feedback from the event was then used for further consultation with representative organisations that informed the writing of the DES.
- 5.3 Extensive consultation was also carried out when developing the GES, including Focus Groups with female employees.
- 5.4 The action plan will be monitored through the Corporate Equality and Diversity Group.

6. OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 Links to Corporate Ambitions/Values

The contents of the Equalities plans and schemes attached to this report contribute directly towards ensuring Council services are provided in an open, accessible, equitable, fair and responsive way. The outcomes of the plans will contribute towards tackling disadvantage and promoting social inclusion of minority groups.

6.2 Risk Management

The following risks have been identified via a STORM risk assessment and details of the mitigating action are set out in the Equality and Diversity Risk Management Action Plan (Reference OD 4):

- Non-compliance with statutory duties

- Non-compliance with the legislative framework
- Failure to achieve targets set out in the corporate plan
- Risk of challenge from minority groups
- Adverse inspection by Audit Commission

6.3 Health and Safety

No additional implications have been identified.

6.4 Equality and Diversity

The Council has a key strategic role to play with respect to equality and diversity and is committed to promoting equality of access to and appropriate use of its services and facilities regardless of race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation or religious or philosophical belief.

The CEP, DES and GES are an essential part of a Corporate Equalities Framework designed to firmly embed equality issues within the culture and day-to-day activities of the Council.

6.5 Legal and Constitutional

The Council has a moral and social duty to recognise that discrimination does not take place whether within the workplace or in the wider community. However, the CEP will (importantly) enable the Council to meet the requirements of current and future legislation including, Race Relations Act (1976) plus amendments (2000, 2003), Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006, Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 and Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003.

Both the DES and GES are legislative documents and set out how the Council will meet its duties arising from the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and amendment 2003 and the Equality Act 2006.

No other material considerations have been identified.

Contact Officer: Helen Darby
Telephone No: (01388) 816166 ext 4436
Email Address: hdarby@sedgefield.gov.uk

Ward(s): All wards are affected

Background Papers

The Equality Standard for Local Government – Guidance Document
Sedgefield Borough Corporate Equality Plan