

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Report of Chief Executive & Town Clerk
To
Standards Committee
On
22nd December 2008

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Adviser

Agenda
Item No.

5

SETTING HIGH STANDARDS IN SERVING ALL OUR COMMUNITIES

A Part 1 Public Agenda Item

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To agree key actions to enhance the involvement of Members across the equalities and diversity work.
- 1.2. To set out the roles and responsibilities for Members in setting high standards to ensure the Council meets the needs of all the communities we serve.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. **That the Committee endorses the important role of Members with respect to equalities and diversity issues.**
- 2.2. **That training and development be provided to Members to help them understand the impact the Council can have on access and service quality for all our communities. This will help Members to:**
 - **Understand the need to work to redress any issues about lack of access and respect for individuals and communities regardless of who people are, where they come from and their levels of need;**
 - **Be aware of how effective the Council is at meeting the needs of our diverse communities, for example, service uptake of different groups, including minority and vulnerable groups, and improved outcomes; and**
 - **Understand how far the Council is meeting its legal duties to promote equality in relation to the six equality strands (age, race, gender, disability, religion/belief and sexual orientation) when carrying out its functions including policy-making, service provision, employment matters, and statutory discretion, as well as decision making.**
- 2.3. **That the Committee monitors, reviews and challenges local equalities and diversity priorities and local equalities and diversity targets. In particular ensuring the Council does not breach any equality laws.**

- 2.4. That a Protocol for Members be developed which is designed to address those standards of behaviour and conduct that are expected of Members which are not expressly detailed in the Code of Conduct but which nevertheless are expected given position of Members as representatives of the Council. This should highlight a zero tolerance of prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice and discrimination should always be challenged by Members.
- 2.5. That the purpose and roles of Members in relation to equalities and diversity be set out in the Protocol referred to in 2.4.

3. Background

- 3.1. Having achieved Level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government in August 2007, the Council has set an ambitious, but achievable target of reaching Level 3 by March 2009. We seek to reduce inequalities above and beyond the minimum legal requirements to do so. We expect all citizens to receive fair public services, which are tailored to their needs, delivered with respect, which maintain their dignity and which are anti-discriminatory.
- 3.2. To pass the assessment for achieving Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government we need to demonstrate that equality & diversity has become embedded into our work and is making a difference in improving our services. An essential element of being able to demonstrate that we are a Level 3 Council is to be able to evidence that Members fully endorse the equalities agenda and that they provide leadership and good governance to officers in this regard.
- 3.3. In October 2008 a report which set out the roles and responsibilities for Scrutiny members in considering equality and diversity implications was agreed at the three Scrutiny Committees. In addition at Council on 6 November 2008 Members further endorsed the importance of serving all communities fairly and having a strong equalities policy. Some Members have also received training on equalities, including 'Inspiring Diversity', and a selection of innovative and informative DVD's which promote an inclusive workforce and community is made available in the Members room on a permanent basis for Members to view. We have made great strides on the way we engage with and serve our communities but more work needs to be done to really embed equalities into all our work. **Appendix 1** highlights the good progress made in this regard.
- 3.4. **Audit Commission Pilot**
 - I. In preparation for the Level 3 assessment the Council recently took part in an exercise to pilot a toolkit being developed by the Audit Commission to assess the governance arrangements on Equalities, Diversity and Human Rights for public organisations. The process included surveying all Members and senior managers, interviews and group discussion with Councillors, stakeholders, staff and residents which was carried out over 4 days, 17, 18, 25 and 26 November 2008. The Chair of the Standards Committee was interviewed as part of this process.
 - II. The Audit Commission Pilot highlighted some initial areas of weaknesses and strengths; the full findings will be presented to the Council on the 13th January

2009. Our strengths include a clear corporate commitment to reducing inequalities; front line staff feel empowered to make a difference and strong staff engagement.

- III. However the main areas of weakness includes a need for greater clarity on purpose, roles and behaviour of Members, managers, staff and other stakeholders in relation to equalities and diversity. There is also a greater need for good practice to be communicated to residents and stakeholders.
- IV. The nature of Members' involvement on equalities and diversity issues will affect the corporate commitment to achieve Level 3 by March 2009. Our progress will be assessed through an external review by the IDeA in February 2009 which will determine if the Council has met Level 3.

3.5 Member Endorsement

The need for Members to endorse the equalities work is supported by the Good Governance Standard, four of the six principles relates directly to our work to achieve Level 3. These are:

- Principle 1 Focusing on improving the well-being and outcomes for citizens and users, particularly the most disadvantaged, meeting the changing needs of diverse communities and providing fair access for all. Taking informed, transparent decisions, based on proper data and information and managing opportunities and risk to deliver better outcomes for local people;
- Principle 3 Promoting values of equality, diversity, respect and human rights for the whole organisation/partnership and demonstrating the values of good governance through behaviour;
- Principle 5 Ensuring good governance and employment practices which are achieving a reflective board and workforce, attracting and keeping able governors and staff; identifying discriminatory outcomes or abuse of human rights for any groups of employees and arrangements which develop the capacity and capability of the governing body and staff; and
- Principle 6 Ensuring the leadership of the organisation/ partnership effectively engages with stakeholders; works effectively in partnership, including with staff; and makes accountability real.

3.6 Recommendations

In light of all of the above, the Standards Committee is recommended to take appropriate action. The recommendations set out in (2) reflect good practice set out by the Audit Commission and IDeA on governance relating to equalities and diversity.

4. Corporate Implications

4.1 Contribution to Council's Vision & Critical Priorities

The roles and responsibilities for all Members in considering equality and diversity implications will undoubtedly contribute to the Council's vision of being an 'Excellent' Council; and help the Council to achieve its 'Higher Performing' and 'Reducing Inequalities' cross-cutting themes. There will be links to a

number of Corporate Priorities – including helping to ensure that the priorities are reflective of community need.

4.2 Financial Implications

The costs of the recommendations will be met through the respective service budget.

4.3 Legal Implications

The Council must be careful not to act in a way which may amount to any of the prohibited forms of discrimination, or to do anything which hinders the Council's fulfilment of its positive duties under equality laws.

4.4 People Implications

As set out in the report.

4.5 Property Implications

None

4.6 Consultation

This report forms part of the overall programme with Members to help embed equalities and diversity across the Council. There has been consultation with the Council's Equality Champion.

4.7 Equalities Impact Assessment

This report has direct implications for the Council's work on equality and diversity. The purpose of the report is to ensure that the Standards Committee leads on the government guidance on equalities and diversity for Members.

4.8 Risk Assessment

Failure to embed equalities across all the Council's functions will result in the Council failing to achieve Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government.

4.9 Value for Money

The report will help Members to identify appropriate actions and ensure that any resource being spent is focused on serving all sections of the community.

4.10 Community Safety Implications

None

4.11 Environmental Impact

None

5. **Background Papers**

None

6. **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Highlights of Good Practice

Appendix 1 Highlights of good progress on equalities.

- The Council has 3 Equality Schemes in place, Race, Gender, Disability and the associated actions are progressing well. Schemes for the other 3 equalities groups (Age, Sexuality and Faith/Religion) will be incorporated into a single scheme.
- The Council has a programme of Equality Impact Assessments in place to assess the impact on the community of services, policies and projects. Over 50 have been completed to date.
- An extensive training programme has seen over 1,000 staff and Members attend sessions for equalities awareness raising, legislation, and challenging behaviour.
- The Council has introduced a standard approach to obtaining the demographic profile of service users that gives services a better picture of their customers, enabling services to be tailored accordingly.
- The work of the Council is driven by:
 - The Equalities Board, made up of key partners and community groups, which sets the overall direction.
 - The Corporate Equalities Steering Group – officer group that oversees implementation.
 - Departmental Equality staff groups that drive the work in service areas.
 - Cabinet, Scrutiny Committees and the Council's Corporate Management Team receive updates on the Equality & Diversity programme.
- A few examples of the impact made in relation to Equalities:
 - introduction of translation booklets for Electoral Registration canvassers.
 - works to Council buildings to make them suitable for customers and staff with disabilities.
 - service profiling means that South Essex Homes repairs contractors can be briefed in advance of tenants who have disabilities.
 - Recent CSCI Inspection stated that 'use of Direct Payments has had a positive impact on an increasing number of carers and people, who used services, including those from black minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds.
 - 49.5% of the Council's top 5% of earners are women.
 - Establishing an older people's assembly – with key involvement on projects such as bus pass usage.
- Further work in the areas of involving service users, working with partners and obtaining better data on Southend's communities has been identified.