

**Report to: Finance and  
Performance Management  
Scrutiny Panel**



**Date of Meeting: 27 March 2008**

**Portfolio:** Finance, Performance Management and Corporate Support Services (Councillor C. Whitbread)

**Epping Forest District Council**

**Subject: Gender Equality Scheme and Disability Equality Scheme – first annual report on progress**

**Officer contact for further information:** D. Macnab (Ext 4051)

**Committee Secretary:** A. Hendry (Ext 4246)

---

**Recommendations:**

**That the Scrutiny Panel notes the progress that has been made with implementing the Gender Equality Scheme and Disability Equality Scheme, and comments on this.**

**Report:**

**The Gender Equality Scheme**

**Background**

1. The Council is required under the Equality Act 2006 to take actions which promote gender equality, proactively taking forward the statutory duties placed upon it. The general statutory duties placed upon the Council are:

- To eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment; and
- To promote equality of opportunity between men and women.

2. In addition the Council has specific statutory duties as follows:

- To prepare and publish a Gender Equality Scheme;
- To consider the need to develop actions to address the causes of any gender pay gap;
- To gather and use information on how the Council's policies affect gender equality;
- To consult stakeholders and take account of any relevant information;
- To assess the impact of its current and proposed policies and practices on gender equality
- To implement the actions set out in its Gender Equality Scheme; and
- To report against the scheme every year and review the scheme every three years.

3. At its meeting of 16 April 2007 the Cabinet agreed the adoption of a Gender Equality Scheme for the Council and noted that the scheme would be subject to consultation with stakeholders and community groups, and be monitored by the Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel. The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee of progress which has been made with the implementation of this scheme.

4. Although it had been intended that consultation with the community would take place over the last year leading to the development of an action plan for gender equality, in practice this has not happened. This is due to the fact that priority has initially been given to consultation on the Disability Equality Scheme, the details of which are described later on in this report. Given the consultation resources available it has been necessary to prioritise accordingly. That said, consultation proposals relating to gender are being drawn up for implementation in late Spring 2008, as noted elsewhere on this agenda.

### **Gender Equality Monitoring**

5. The Panel will note that a key statutory duty placed upon the Council is to gather and monitor information on how the Council's policies affect gender equality. This is an area where considerable progress has been made, and elsewhere on this agenda is a report entitled 'Race Equality Scheme and progress with equalities work'. Attached to the Race Equality Scheme is a document 'Equality Monitoring 2008/09' which provides information relating to the monitoring of the Authority's activities with respect to race, gender and disability. Included in this is detailed monitoring about a number of equality measures relating to gender, and the conclusions which can be drawn from this. The Panel is asked to consider this, particularly the employment data relating to the Council's workforce, which is set out at Section (a) 'Human Resources Monitoring'. This provides an analysis of, amongst other matters, the leavers and starters at the Authority, applications for employment and any pay differentials between men and women. To support this, demographical information is provided relating to the distribution of men and women across the District.

### **Development and training programmes**

6. A key issue that emerges from the monitoring data is that although women make up more than half of the workforce, they are under-represented at senior levels. In order to address this a Women's Development Programme has been launched called 'Springboard'. This programme aims (amongst other matters) to build confidence in participants, enhancing their ability to apply for more challenging roles in the Council, whilst considering some of the issues faced uniquely by women in society and at work. The programme has 28 places and 37 applications were received. In view of the demand, an additional course is scheduled to take place later in the year.

7. Whilst there is clearly a place for programmes such as Springboard, there are other development opportunities in the Council which benefit women, and should lead to greater representation at senior levels. In September 2007 the Authority launched a challenging in-house management development programme. 60% of the delegates are women, from a range of backgrounds in the Authority.

### **Actions resulting from the Staff Survey**

8. The Staff Survey took place in November/December 2006 and included questions on equality and diversity. The majority of respondents felt that the Council treated people fairly as an employer, and that they themselves felt treated fairly. 90% of respondents said that they had not witnessed or experienced any unfair discrimination in relation to service delivery, and 75% said that they had not witnessed or experienced any employment discrimination. Of those stating that they had witnessed or experienced discrimination, women were not significantly represented. Notwithstanding this, the Authority is currently reviewing its Harassment and Bullying Policy to ensure that these matters may be dealt with speedily and effectively.

### **The job evaluation scheme**

9. This scheme ensures that our pay rates for jobs are determined in a way which is free from gender bias. The Authority completed an equal pay audit in 2006 which indicated that there was no gender bias in the operation of the scheme. In completing job evaluation for the whole workforce a harmonization of terms and conditions took place resulting in all

enhancements being available across the board, regardless of job or gender. For example, a bonus scheme had been available to craftworkers who are all male, and this has now been removed.

10. The corporate job evaluation panel continues to monitor equal pay issues, and recently removed descriptions of its 'job experience' and 'length of service' requirements in defined years (for example, some jobs required 'a minimum of four years clerical experience'). The driver for this was the recently introduced age discrimination regulations, but this also had an indirect impact on women, some of whom would be unable to meet this kind of experience requirement due to time away from work childrearing.

### **Employee Wellbeing Framework**

11. As noted above, the Harassment and Bullying Policy is currently being reviewed in light of Staff Survey feedback. In undertaking this piece of work it became apparent that a more holistic approach to staff welfare was required, and as a result an Employee Wellbeing Framework was agreed by Cabinet on 12 November 2007. This sets out for staff the responsibilities of Members, managers and staff, facilities available to promote a healthy work/life balance, health and safety issues, supporting Human Resources policies and Employee Health Services provided by the Council. It is anticipated that this will contribute to the promotion of gender (and other) equality in the workplace, in that individual's needs may be more effectively addressed.

### **Development of the Youth Council**

12. At its meeting of 12 December 2007 the Cabinet agreed the establishment of a Youth Council for members of the public aged between 13 and 17 years. The purpose of this is to provide a point of contact for engagement with this 'seldom heard' group who are not always able to access Council services and contribute to their development. Elections to the Youth Council have taken place, the outcome being that two thirds of the places on the Council are occupied by young women. This provides an excellent opportunity for the Council to engage with this group in developing services and seeking feedback.

### **Corporate priority: Safe, Clean and Green in Epping Forest**

13. At its meeting of 12 November 2007 Cabinet considered a report which concluded that a number of research and customer feedback exercises had raised concerns about some of the Council's front line services, and suggested that the principle of the provision of more integrated 'street scene' and related services through locality based service delivery be developed. The exercises had included:

- the 2006 Epping Forest District Council General User Satisfaction Survey;
- the DEFRA Local Environmental Quality Report; and
- the Rogers Review on enforcement priorities.

14. The feedback from these surveys and reports was that:

- a) satisfaction with the Council was down from 2003 and was below both the Essex and national mean;
- b) satisfaction with street cleansing was slightly better than in 2003 but was significantly lower than the Essex and national means;
- c) perception that the local environmental quality was poor in some areas;
- d) prioritisation of enforcement activities concentrating on national and locally set priorities; and
- e) local concerns regarding levels of environmental and other crime.

15. In response the Cabinet decided that these matters should form a key consideration in the corporate restructuring which was being developed at that time. The newly formed Environmental and Street Scene Directorate has been structured to provide integrated street scene and enforcement activities, thus aiming to provide a more responsive service. The street scene environment is key to issues of community safety and has a direct impact on the quality of life experienced by residents of the District, thus directly promoting the Council's Gender Equality Duties (for example, female safety issues).

### **Customer Complaints**

16. The complaints monitoring statistics indicate that females are more likely to complain about Council services than men. 81% of complainants were female. An analysis of the nature of complaints from females rather than males has taken place in order to identify why so few men proportionally use this service. However at this stage it has not been possible to draw any meaningful conclusions.

### **Housing Directorate Initiatives**

17. The Epping Forest Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership has part funded a Sanctuary Scheme for the District. Under this scheme victims of domestic violence may have a room in their accommodation converted so that it is safe from the perpetrators of domestic violence (for example by the installation of a more robust door and security lock). This provides a place of sanctuary in an incident of domestic violence, from where the police may be called for assistance. The service is available to residents in both public and private housing stock, and two sanctuaries have been created since the launch of the scheme, thus preventing homelessness. As domestic violence is usually perpetrated against women, this initiative has a positive impact on the Council's gender equality duties, and complements the existing 'Stay Safe' Scheme which provides advice and support in cases of domestic violence.

### **The Disability Equality Scheme**

18. The Disability Discrimination (Amendment) Act 2005 placed a duty on the Authority to:

- Promote equality of opportunity between disabled persons and other persons;
- Eliminate discrimination that is unlawful under the Act;
- Eliminate harassment of disabled persons that is related to their disabilities;
- Promote positive attitudes towards disabled persons;
- Encourage participation by disabled persons in public life; and
- Take steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, even where that involves treating disabled persons more favourably than other persons.

19. As with the other equality duties, the statutory duty can be met by undertaking the following functions:

- Carrying out impact assessments in order to ensure that disability issues are mainstreamed into the Council's business;
- Gathering and analyzing evidence;
- Prioritising remedial actions;
- Involving disabled people; and
- Public reporting of progress.

20. In addition to the General Duty, there are Specific Duties placed upon the Council as follows:

- To prepare and publish a Disability Equality Scheme, having involved disabled people in its production;

- To complete the actions set out in the Scheme; and
- Annually report on progress against the Action Plan.

21. The Cabinet agreed the Council's first Disability Equality Scheme at its meeting of 16 April 2007. It was recognized that the Scheme represented an interim position, and that the required Action Plan could only be drawn up following detailed consultation and involvement of representatives from the disability community.

### **Disability consultation**

22. Since that time a number of meetings have taken place between officers of the Authority and the following organizations:

- Disability Essex
- Epping Forest District Access Group
- Guide Dogs for the Blind.

23. In addition representatives from the Epping Forest District Tenants Forum have expressed an interest in attending, and this group will be invited to future meetings. Invitations were extended to a wide range of other disability groups, but they have declined to attend.

24. From the inception of these meetings the Authority decided that it did not wish to set an agenda or priorities for the consultative group, as it was important that concerns, issues and priorities could be voiced in the order of importance decided by disability representatives. In addition the Deputy Chief Executive chairs the meetings to ensure that all parties are aware of the importance of the consultative process.

25. Each meeting of the group focuses on the services provided by an individual Directorate, in a priority decided by the disability representatives themselves. The meetings have so far considered Planning issues, followed by Housing and the Environment and Street Scene Directorates. The appropriate Director is asked to attend each meeting in person, and the session begins with a presentation of the services offered by the Directorate, followed by questions, scrutiny and challenge. At the end of these meetings an action plan will be produced setting out the issues raised and how the Authority intends to address them. Issues which have arisen so far include the positioning and design of street furniture, parking policy and designing new homes to the Lifetime Standard.

26. In addition to the consultation taking place with community representatives, plans are currently being developed to consult staff with disabilities on their views of the Council as an employer.

### **Disability Monitoring**

27. As noted above, monitoring information is collected for a range of functions and activities with respect to ethnicity, gender and disability, and details of recent monitoring activity can be found attached to the report 'Race Equality Scheme and progress with general equalities work', which is considered elsewhere on this agenda.

28. In 2006 a survey of staff was carried out to determine the level and nature of disability in the workforce. Guidance was given on the definition of disability to assist staff, and the outcome was that in 2006 2.04% of the workforce considered themselves disabled prior to the survey, but that figure jumped to 8.31% of the workforce after the survey had been completed. The figure in the working population of the District is 5.15%.

### **Training and development**

29. All staff are required to attend a course entitled 'Dealing with diversity', of which a proportion of the programme is devoted to disability issues. In addition, a specific disability

course is offered in the annual training programme which deals with the experience of disability, and how this affects service users. This course has proved popular and is well attended.

### **Customer complaints**

30. 14% of complaints in 2007/08 were from people who stated that they had a disability. In all cases the disability was described as 'difficulty in getting around'. Further work may be needed to determine whether there is any pattern to the complaints, or particular disability issues arise.

### **Other issues for the Panel's consideration**

#### **Corporate Equalities Action Plan**

31. As noted elsewhere on this agenda, the Corporate Equalities Action Plan has been updated to take into account the revision to the Race Equality Scheme. Further updating may be required once the action plans for the Gender and Disability Equality Schemes are produced.

#### **Impact Assessments**

32. As noted elsewhere on this agenda, all Impact Assessments are up to date, and services have been assessed with respect to gender, ethnicity and race.

### **Overall conclusions**

33. Although it has not yet been possible to complete the consultation exercises and action plans associated with this process, much work has been completed, with positive outcomes for both staff and the community. This work will now continue and the corporate equality action plan will be updated accordingly.

#### **Reason for decision:**

34. To advise the Scrutiny Panel of progress with equalities work, and the fulfillment of the Council's statutory duties.

#### **Options considered and rejected:**

35. None. The Council is statutorily required to carry out these activities.

#### **Consultation undertaken:**

36. Consultation with disability groups is ongoing, and consultation on the Gender Equality Scheme will commence shortly.

#### **Resource implications:**

**Budget/Personnel Provision:** The actions set out in this report will be met within existing budgets.

**Land:** Nil

**Council Plan/BVPP Reference:** Council Plan Section 10 – 'Action Plan': action IP4.

**Relevant Statutory Powers:** Race Relations (Amendment Act) 2000, Gender Equality Act 2006, Disability Discrimination (Amendment) Act 2005.

**Background Papers:** None

**Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications:** Breaches under the Acts described in the report may also be actionable under, or in conjunction with, the Human Rights Act

**Key Decision Reference (if required):** None