

**Meeting:** Executive

Portfolio Area: All Portfolios

**Date:** 20<sup>th</sup> July 2005

**EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN**  
(Corporate)

**KEY DECISION**

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**1 PURPOSE**

To seek Members' approval of the Equality and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan.

**2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That the draft Equality and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan be agreed.
- 2.2 That a summary of the Equality and Diversity Strategy, including the Action Plan, be produced in an easy to read format and that it be published in hard copy format and that it also be posted on the Council's website and on the Intranet.

**3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 Stevenage Borough Council is committed to equality of opportunity for all people regardless of age, colour, ethnic or national origin, class, religious belief, race, gender, disability, sexuality, marital status or trade union membership.
- 3.2 Valuing equality and diversity is an integral part of our aim to create a town we can all be proud of; a town in which people want to live, work, invest, do business and visit.
- 3.3 To encourage a fair and inclusive community is a priority for the Council under the ambition of community leadership, as set out in the Corporate Business Plan.
- 3.4 Whilst we know that we still have a lot to do to improve our performance on equalities there is a lot that we have already done. This includes:
  - An extensive programme of capital spend to improve access to Council buildings;
  - The Customer Service Centre – built to the highest modern standards, the Centre is fully accessible both in terms of access for disabled people and in terms of people whose second language is English;
  - Translation and interpreting services available for people whose second language is English;

- Procedures for reporting racial incidents linked to the Council's corporate complaints procedure;
- Extensive community consultation including 'hard to reach' groups. The Council supports the World Forum for Ethnic Communities, a Women's Resource Centre and REACT, an advocacy group run by disabled people for disabled people;
- Outreach work in the community undertaken by the Council's Community Development team, including an Asian Women's group and community education work with Travellers;
- Robust policies, strategies and action plans demonstrating a strong commitment to equalities;
- The Equalities Delivery Structure as attached, shows how the project will be implemented at an officer and Member level. The Equalities Project Team will oversee the implementation of the Equality and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan, providing regular feedback for Strategic Directors, and where appropriate, escalating any issues that arise to PMB/SMB. If a key decision is required regarding the Equalities Project, a report will be sent to Executive.
- The Equalities Champion Group will provide the main link across the service units and Equalities Project Team in respect of the co-ordination, formulation, implementation, evaluation, monitoring and review of equality actions within Service Plans. Although there will be a consistent approach to carrying out Impact Assessments, the arrangements will vary locally, depending on the service delivery unit. Whichever Impact Assessment Delivery Mechanism is deployed, measures to support the impact assessment process (e.g. staff expertise) and 'critical friends' (e.g. consultation with external groups) will be incorporated into this. A Staff Reference Group will be set up in 2006, and will provide the Equalities Project Team with a grass-roots view of equality and diversity issues.

#### **4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS**

4.1 Equalities used to be thought of solely in terms of employment. However, we now recognise that it covers every aspect of the Council's activity. The Government has set an 'Equalities Standard for Local Government' and we are expected to deliver equalities in the areas of:

- Leadership and Corporate Commitment
- Consultation, Community Development and Scrutiny
- Service Delivery and Customer Care
- Employment and Training

4.2 Stevenage Borough Council is required to report performance as part of a set of national 'Best Value Performance Indicators'. There are five levels and we are currently at Level 1. We aim to achieve Level 2 by March 2006 and Level 3 by March 2007.

4.3 The Audit Commission is responsible for auditing and driving up performance standards in local government, and visited Stevenage earlier this year to assess our performance on equalities. The Commission found a clear vision for what is to be achieved and concluded:

- That the Council demonstrates a clear commitment to user focus and race equality;
- The Council is striving to understand the needs of the community through more effective communication and consultation;
- People's options for accessing the Council's services are expanding with the Customer Service Centre and the Website;

However, there are a number of improvements required:

- Directly involve users in all service planning;
- Look at ways to engage and communicate with all residents, including those with literacy, numeracy, hearing and sight difficulties;
- Improve the use of demographic, consultation and other data in the development of policies and services.

4.4 The Council has developed an Action Plan setting out what it needs to do to improve performance on equalities. (Please refer to Appendix for the Equality and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan). This includes:

- A comprehensive programme of equality impact assessments – we are doing nine of these this year covering services to the community such as the Customer Services Centre and community services for older people and internal services such as Human Resources;
- Extensive training on equality and diversity for staff and councillors;
- All key council information to be available in range of other languages on request;
- Further works to ensure that buildings such as community centres are accessible to disabled people;
- Improved recruitment and selection procedures designed to ensure that Council jobs are open to all applicants regardless of age, gender, race, disability and any other potential areas of discrimination;
- An Equal Pay Review;
- New flexible working practices related to improving 'work/life' balance.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial Implications**

5.1 A revenue budget of £15,000 is available in 2005/06. A proposed carry forward of funds from 2004/05 of £7,400 was identified as part of the year end process, however, in line with the proposals contained within the Council's updated General Financial Strategy report (presented elsewhere on this agenda) the Council's

Strategic Management Board did not approve any carry forwards from 2004/05. Instead Officers have been asked to attempt to contain or re-prioritise expenditure on such projects within the 2005/06 budget allocations. Where this is not possible officers will then need to request the appropriate supplementary revenue estimate through normal financial regulation procedures. Therefore, at present the total budget requirement identified in this report of £22,400 (£7,000 staff and members training and £15,400 for publications) to deliver specific initiatives within the Equalities and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan is at present under funded by £7,400 for which at this stage of the year sources of funding have not been identified. To the extent that virements from other budgets do not become available a supplementary estimate will be required later this year.

- 5.2 In order to be effective the Equalities and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan must be mainstreamed into all activities across the Council and embedded in all Service Plans. Therefore, in addition to the specific budget provision referred to above the capacity to implement the Action Plans will be largely contained within existing service resources and budgets.
- 5.3 If additional potential costs emerge from the programme of service impact assessments then bids in respect of such costs will have to be made as part of the 2006/07 Forward Planning process.
- 5.4 The Council's translation policy is committed to making documents available in alternative formats and languages, on request. The take up of these has been fairly limited to date. However, there is currently no specific corporate budget to meet such costs. The situation is therefore monitored on an ongoing basis and the budget arrangements will be reviewed, if necessary.
- 5.5 In addition to the specific revenue budget provisions referred to above £450,000 of capital was provided last year in respect of achieving equal physical access to the Council's general buildings. There is provision in the current year to carry out an audit with regard to accessibility of the Council's HRA properties. Accessibility issues are also mainstreamed into other major building and refurbishment projects. In addition the Council allocates nearly £1M per annum in respect of Disabled Facilities Grants for private properties and Disabled Adaptations to Council dwellings.
- 5.6 It should also be noted that if the Council were to fail to comply with Statutory requirements in respect of Equalities and Diversity it will be at risk of potential litigation and cost.

## **5.2 Legal Implications**

Council policy on equality and diversity will be carried out in accordance with current equality legislation and Codes of Practice. Current legislation is listed in the Equality and Diversity Strategy document.

## **5.3 Policy Implications**

The Equality and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan contains a revised policy statement that includes a commitment to promote equality across the board for all key groups.

#### **5.4 Staffing and Accommodation Implications**

An Equalities and Diversity Officer has been appointed to lead in this area of work.

#### **5.5 Human Rights Implications**

The Equality and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan is consistent with the provisions of the Human Rights Act, 2000.

#### **5.6 Equal Opportunities Implications**

These proposals support the Council's Equal Opportunities Policies and commitment.

#### **5.7 Service Delivery Implications**

All services will be subject to equality impact assessments. This will be part of a three year rolling programme.

#### **5.8 Community Safety Implications**

These proposals support the Council's Community Safety Policies, and those of the Community Safety Partnership.

#### **5.9 Other Corporate Implications**

Members have an important role to play in advocating equality and diversity in the community. A programme of Member briefings and a training programme will be developed.

### **APPENDICES**

- Equality and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan (Corporate).
- Equalities Project Delivery Structure.