

STRABANE DISTRICT COUNCIL



SECTION 75 – NORTHERN IRELAND ACT 1998

REPORT OF 5 YEAR REVIEW

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strabane District Council's equality scheme has provided a framework through which we have delivered our statutory duty in relation to equality and good relations.

Key lessons, which have been learnt over the past 5 years in terms of effectively implementing the approved equality scheme include:

- Commitment from elected members, Chief Executive and senior managers is essential to successful delivery of equality and good relations.
- Resources need to be dedicated in order to effectively deliver equality and good relations.
- Ongoing awareness training and development is required for staff at all levels to deliver equality and good relations.

In terms of the future the main priorities for the Council are:

- Provide awareness training for all staff on those Section 75 categories not previously carried out including sexual orientation.
- Provide refresher training on screening and equality impact assessments for those officers involved in the process.
- Review progress of screening and equality impact assessments to date and consider investing additional resources to assist with this process.
- Continue to develop monitoring and data collection systems.
- Carry out a good relations audit and develop a strategy to promote good relations.

1. A general introductory statement specifying the purpose of the scheme and the public authority's commitment to the statutory duties.

The Council's Equality Scheme was approved by the Equality Commission in June 2001. In its scheme the Council defines its commitment to the statutory duties and outlines the internal arrangements, which have been put in place to promote Equality and Good Relations.

- The Human Resources Officer has responsibility for co-ordinating the implementation of the Equality Scheme and is the point of contact for the Equality Commission and Consultees.
- Chief Officers and Heads of Department have responsibility for implementing the Equality Scheme within their area of responsibility. Progress in relation to the Equality Scheme is reviewed regularly at Senior Management Team meetings.
- The Community Relations section have responsibility for developing and delivering programmes to establish good relations, strengthen understanding of cultural diversity and provide community benefit.
- An inter-departmental working group has been set up to deal primarily with Equality Impact Assessments. This group is made up of the Council's Human Resources Officer, Corporate Policy Officer and those managers and officers involved in the Equality Impact Assessment process.

A Council working group, which includes the Chief Executive and elected members, has also been set up as an additional mechanism for implementing and monitoring the Equality Scheme during the 5 year period. The group reviews the annual progress report and monitors the progress of Equality Impact Assessments.

The Council's Human Resources Officer represents the Council on the Statutory Duty Network. This is chaired by the Local Government Staff Commission and is made up of representatives from the Councils as well as other public sector organisations including the Housing Executive.

The Council's Corporate Strategy includes equality as one of four core principles established to inform the corporate direction of the Council. Equality is also mentioned at a top level within one of four focus areas of the Corporate Strategy - a leading authority, which sets out an aim of Strabane District Council as follows. "To become a leading local authority through civic leadership, advocacy and equality.

The Council produces its corporate plan in the form of the Balanced Scorecard. Equality and good relations objectives are included in each services' scorecard and individual employee personal development plans. Performance indicators have also been developed and are incorporated.

Example of objectives included during the 5 year period are:

- To improve public perception that Strabane District Council treats all residents fairly and without discrimination.
- To improve sensory impairment access to Council publications.
- To undertake an audit of data.

The Council produces a strategic plan for Community Relations on an annual basis. Specific good relations objectives are included based on 5 main themes.

1. Cross community contact.
2. Cultural identity.
3. Community Relations resource training.
4. Mainstreaming.
5. Community Relations partnerships.

It is difficult to define the expenditure associated with statutory duties as the Council has tried to mainstream this across all services. An estimate of direct costs would include:

- 30% of salary of Human Resources Officer, (£11,422)
- 2 Community Relations staff (£40,743)
- 10% of salary of Council's Corporate Policy Officer (£2,900)

In addition, the training budget has been increased during the 5 year period to cover relevant training. The Council spends in the region of £3,000 per annum on equality related training. A budget of £2,000 per annum was allocated specifically for consultation during the first 3 years of the scheme.

The main enablers to monitoring scheme implementation have included the extent to which equality and good relations objectives are incorporated within the Council's business planning process and its ongoing commitment to training. The main impediment currently is resource related, particularly in relation to the amount of time managers and officers can allocate to Section 75 duties such as equality impact assessments. The Council may consider employing consultancy support in the near future to assist with this.

2. An outline of how the public authority intends to assess its compliance with the Section 75 duties and for consulting on matters to which a duty under that section is likely to be relevant.

The following impacts and outcomes have been achieved during the 5 year period.

Persons of different religious beliefs

- Ongoing capacity building and training particularly in the field of good relations.

Persons of different political opinion

- Ongoing capacity building and training particularly in the field of good relations.

Persons of different racial groups

- Ongoing consultation with the newly formed Strabane Ethnic Community Association in relation to Council services.
- Two conferences arranged to raise profile of different racial groups.
- Development of linguistic diversity policy.
- Leaflets produced on food hygiene and safety regulations in Chinese and training provided for the Chinese catering community.

Persons of different age

- Ongoing development of a range of activities in Council's Leisure Centres and Sports provision.

Men and women generally

- Ongoing development of female employees including mentoring programme and management development programme.
- Equal pay audit ongoing.
- Single status implementation commenced.

Persons with and without disabilities

- Greater awareness among staff as a result of training relating to disability.
- The Council's newsletter Snapshot is recorded for the local talking newspaper and its font size has been amended based on the guidelines of the RNIB.
- Induction loops and text phones introduced to improve accessibility.
- Accessibility of services to the hearing impaired improved, as all front line staff have been trained in British Sign Language.

Persons with and without dependants

- Development of family friendly policies in the workplace.
- Council working towards IIP Work life Balance Model.

Persons of different sexual orientation

- The Council plans to deliver a programme of awareness training on this Section 75 category as well as consider examples of good practice from other public authorities.

Annual progress reports were reviewed by the Senior Management Team and Equality Working Group following submission to the Equality Commission.

During the 5 year period the Council has undertaken consultation exercises in relation to:

- Development of Equality Scheme.
- Outcome of screening exercise.
- Screening timetable.
- Equality Impact Assessments

Consultation exercises included:

- Adverts in the local press.
- Advert on Council website.
- Written correspondence.
- Public meetings.
- Individual meetings and focused group meetings with representatives from Section 75 categories.
- Open days.

When organising consultation events consideration has been given to how the meeting is to be run, the time of day, the appropriateness of the venue and whether it can be accessed by those with disabilities.

The most successful means of consultation has been individual meetings with representatives from the Section 75 categories or representatives from local groups who are being affected by proposed changes. The least successful has been written consultation with a low response rate.

3. The authority's arrangements for assessing and consulting on the impact of policies adopted or proposed to be adopted on the promotion of equality of opportunity.

The Council undertook a screening exercise during the period July-October 2000. This was carried out by Chief Officers and Heads of Department responsible for services with the Human Resources Officer co-ordinating the process.

A report was produced with a list of policies screened. This included a brief definition of the policy and an indication if it was to be subject to equality impact assessment. The report also included a programme for equality impact assessments based on the Council's Best Value programme. This report was circulated to all consultees in October 2000. A series of consultation exercises were also carried out including public meetings and individual meetings with representatives from Section 75 categories. The purpose of this consultation was to seek views on those policies, which had been identified as requiring an impact assessment and also those policies, which had been included from the impact assessment process. The Council also sought views on its proposed timetable

A report on the conclusions reached as a result of the consultation was produced and forwarded to all consultees in May 2001.

The policies screened for equality impact assessment included.

Economic Development

- Funding Applications

Community Services and Community Relations

- Community Relations Policy
- Community Services Grant Aid Programme
- Attendance of Officers at Meeting of Community, Voluntary and Statutory Organisations
- Summer Scheme
- Booking of Equipment and Council Minibus
- Pricing Policy
- Booking Procedures for Community Centre
- Block Bookings for Recreation Fields
- Community Development Support Programme

Building Control

- Disabled Access to Council Property
- Procurement of Consultants

Leisure Services

- Procedure for Free Use or Concessionary Rates
- Booking Policy
- Admission Procedure
- Advertising Procedure (does not include job advertisements)
- Sports Development

Administration

- Registration Service
- Hours of Business
- Access to Council Minutes by the Public
- Provision of Information to the Press/Public
- Admission to Public Gallery for Council/Committee Meetings
- Complaints “Putting Things Rights”
- Voluntary Contributions Policy
- Purchasing Policy

Environmental Health

- Service of Public Health Notices by Chief Environmental Health Officer in Consultation with Clerk and Chief Executive.

Technical Services

- Play Provision
- Street Cleansing
- Designation of Areas applicable to “Street Drinking” Bye-Laws
- Naming of Housing Developments

These were all screened on the basis of equality of opportunity considerations. The Council has reached the indicated stage on each of the following equality impact assessments.

1. Community Relations Policy – Stage 6
2. Summer Scheme – Stage 6
3. Community Development Support Programme – Stage 6
4. Community Services Support Grant Aid – Stage 6
5. Linguistic Diversity Policy – Stage 6

These were all identified as part of the original screening process with the exception of the Council’s linguistic diversity policy, which was the result of subsequent screening.

New policies, which have been screened out following screening include;

- Child Protection
- Customer Feedback
- Civic Receptions
- Day Release
- New TSN
- Food Enforcement
- Maternity Policy

Many new policies can be screened out of the full EQIA process as the equality implications have been addressed before the policy is finalised.

Training has been provided to all managers and officers involved in screening to ensure effective screening of all new policies developed. A standard form was devised.

Following this review it is the Council's intention to review its original screening report and its equality impact assessment progress to date. Any proposed changes will be subject to consultation. The Council may have to consider investing additional resources such as consultancy support to assist with this process.

4. The authority's arrangements for monitoring any adverse impact of policies adopted by the authority on the promotion of equality of opportunity.

During the 5 year period the Council developed its data collection and monitoring systems. Various sources of data have been used including census information and NISRA equality website. Qualitative information was gained from internet research and from conferences, seminars and meetings with representatives from the Section 75 categories.

The Council carries out a household survey every 2-3 years. In addition, the Council has developed a customer feedback policy. This includes the development of a computerised system for monitoring complaints and any feedback received from the public on Council services.

During the period a baseline of data was prepared to assist those Officers involved in equality impact assessments. This is a summary of data obtained from the census as well as information from surveys and questionnaires.

The Council recognises that this is an area it needs to develop further.

5. The authority's arrangements for publishing the results of equality impact assessments and of monitoring any adverse impact of policies adopted by the authority on the promotion of equality of opportunity.

The results of equality impact assessments are forwarded to consultees and are also distributed at consultation meetings. These can be obtained in alternative formats.

6. A commitment that in making any decision with respect to a policy adopted or proposed to be adopted by it, that the public authority shall take into account any equality impact assessment and consultation carried out in relation to the policy.

In terms of the equality impact assessment, which reach Stage 6 any mitigation measures and alternative policies which were recommended were introduced.

7. The authority's arrangements for training staff on issues relevant to the duties.

The Council is committed to ensuring that employees and elected members have the necessary knowledge and skills to meet its obligations as outlined in its Equality Scheme.

Training needs are identified through the personal development plans which are completed with all employees twice a year. These are then incorporated into the Council's annual training and development plan.

- To meet its training objectives as outlined in its scheme the following training has taken place and continues to take place on an ongoing basis.
- Awareness training on current anti-discrimination legislation in NI including the provision of Section 75, Schedule 9 and Section 76 of the NI Act 1998.
- At the outset of the Equality Scheme implementation, awareness training for staff and elected members was facilitated by Harry McConnell, Equality Consultant. This was repeated at various stages over the 5 year period for new staff. Awareness training is also incorporated into the Council's induction training delivered in house twice a year.
- Those employees involved in the screening of policies attended a one day training programme organised in-house and facilitated by Harry McConnell, Equality Consultant.
- Those employees involved in the equality impact assessment of policies attended a one day course organised by the Local Government Training Group.

- The Council's Equality Officer and Policy Officer attended a 2 day course on consultation techniques organised by Sustainable N.I Programme.

During the 5 year period the Council consulted with representatives of Section 75 groups and delivered relevant training. This included:

- A 30 week course on British Sign Language to 13 frontline staff provided by North West Institute of Further & Higher Education.
- Gender awareness training provided by Belfast Traveller Education & Development Group (BTEDG).
- Cultural awareness training provided by BTEDG.
- Disability awareness training provided by Disability Action.

In addition employees attended various relevant external courses on a variety of equality issues and mainly organised by the Local Government Training Group.

As outlined above all staff have received awareness training. Evaluation of the training to date has indicated that employees have found the training useful and made them more aware of their Section 75 obligations. In the future the Council will continue to provide training with a particular focus on Good Relations. It will also provide awareness training on Section 75 categories which to date have not been covered including sexual orientation.

8. The authority's arrangements for ensuring and assessing public access to information and to services provided by the authority.

In accordance with its Equality Scheme the Council has arrangements in place for providing information in accessible and alternative formats. The Council publicly communicates these arrangements. These arrangements have been considered in the development of a Linguistic Diversity Policy, which aims to take a more proactive approach to ensuring services are accessible to disabled and ethnic minority customers. The policy contains a code of courtesy and monitoring form to inform the Council of which formats have been requested. The policy has been promoted in local newspapers and in the Council's twice-yearly newsletter, Snapshot.

Snapshot is recorded for the local talking newspaper, which is distributed to local people with sight impairment. The format of Snapshot has also recently been amended including the font size based on the guidelines of the RNIB.

Frontline staff have now all been trained in British Sign Language, which should assist with accessibility of services to the hearing impaired.

The Council aims to ensure that customers are aware of the accessible products and services, which are available to them including induction, loops and text phones. The Council's text phone number is included on all letter headed paper.

The Council's Environmental Health department produces leaflets associated with food hygiene and safety regulations in Chinese and has organised training specifically for the Chinese catering community.

9. The authority's timetable for measures proposed in the scheme.

The Council has made progress towards implementing the measures proposed in the scheme. The main delays are in relation to the equality impact assessments. As previously stated the Council intends to review this process and progress to date. Any changes proposed will be subject to consultation.

In terms of the extension of the equality scheme beyond the 5 year period, the Council would wish to consolidate its current scheme, progress with the completion of equality impact assessments and continue to progress with training.

10. Details of how the scheme will be published.

In its scheme the Council made a commitment that its scheme would be available from the Council Offices and could also be accessed on the Council's website.

The Council also made a commitment that systems would be in place to ensure that the scheme could be made available in accessible formats in a timely fashion.

The Council met all these commitments.

11. The authority's arrangements for dealing with complaints arising from a failure to comply with the scheme.

During the review period no complaints were received by the Council or referred to the Equality Commission.

12. A commitment to conducting a review of the scheme within five years of its submission to the Equality Commission and to forwarding a report of this review to the Equality Commission.

The guidance provided by the Commission has been very useful in producing this review. It has been a valuable exercise in terms of identifying progress to date and the areas that need to be further developed.