

Scrutiny Committee – 11<sup>th</sup> September 2007

## 9. Corporate Equalities Strategy Progress Report

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### Purpose of the Report

To report progress in the implementation of the Corporate Equalities Action Plan.

### Action Required

The Scrutiny Committee is requested to note and comment on progress.

### Background

The Scrutiny Committee considered and the draft Equalities Strategy in 2006 and it was agreed that 9 months after implementation an update report would be submitted.

The Corporate Equalities Strategy was adopted by the District Executive in November 2006. The priority outcomes for the strategy are as follows:

1. Improve customer care by promoting anti-discriminatory practices at a corporate, service and individual level.
2. Engage with communities and staff in order to better meet local needs, priorities and aspirations.
3. Develop equalities targets which are relevant and can be measured, to ensure long term improvements,
4. Embed a culture of ensuring that all groups of the community have fair and equal access to Council services.
5. Regularly monitor and evaluate policies and practices to ensure Equality Standards are being met.

### Progress

It was noted in the last report to the Scrutiny Committee in October 2006 that SSDC's Equality and Diversity Officer had " a major role in ensuring the implementation of the Equalities Strategy". This post has been vacant since February 2007. A recruitment exercise in April 2007 was not successful, and the post has been re-advertised recently. This long standing vacancy has clearly created difficulties in driving work forward as originally planned.

In order to continue the work and maintain momentum, an independent consultant was contracted in June 2007 for a limited period to undertake critical actions from the strategy.

The adopted Corporate Strategy is the key means by which the Council delivers its statutory duty with regard to Race, Disability and Gender and to moving through the levels of the Equality Standard for Local Government (BVPI 2a : The level of the Equality Standard for local government to which the Authority conforms in respect of gender, race and disability).

Work undertaken since the strategy was adopted has moved SSDC to BVPI 2a: level 2. This requires the council to be engaged in an impact and needs assessment, a consultation process and an equality action planning process for employment and service delivery. To achieve our aspiration of level 3, we need to have completed this process.

## **Service Equality Impact Assessments**

Critical action to achieve priorities outcomes 1 and 5 is to undertake Equality Impact Assessments for each service. The order in which services and related policies are assessed is set out in the Corporate Equality Scheme Schedule (Appendix 3). Of the first five to be impact assessed this year, 2 (Sport, Arts and Leisure and Customer Services) have been completed and reported to the SSDC Corporate Equalities Steering Group. Two further service assessments (Area Development and Countryside, Heritage and Tourism) are in the process of being completed and will be reported to the October meeting of the Steering Group.

The fifth, Housing and Welfare, has been postponed due to serious staff shortages within that service. An approach is being developed to promote an assessment of the Environmental Health Service within Housing and Welfare. The Impact Assessment will be reported in stages over the next six months and will align with reporting requirements for the Housing Inspection in October.

Further impact assessments will be undertaken this financial year in accordance with the agreed schedule as resources permit.

Undertaking the impact assessments has been supported through the establishment of an officer working group. The group is beginning to identify corporate policies and practices that could benefit from a common approach and/or the development of a new policy. These corporate assessments will be reported to the Steering Group and other relevant management groups for action.

## **SSDC Corporate Equalities Steering Group**

Critical action to achieve 2 and 4 of the priority outcomes has been to establish the Corporate Equalities Steering Group. The Council's Steering Group membership includes key councillors, officers and participation from the community and voluntary sector representing each of the key Equality strands (Disability, Race, Gender, Faith, Age and Sexual Orientation). Its community membership broadly parallels that within the South Somerset Equalities Group, a voluntary and community sector network that acts independently of the Council. The Corporate Equalities Steering Group first met in January and was successfully reconvened 30 July 2007. The group have agreed their terms of reference and received Equality Impact Assessment reports from the first two services that have completed their assessments. For the Terms of Reference please see Appendix A to this report.

To achieve priority outcome 3, equalities targets will be developed through the Steering Group as the group and all its members become more confident about the Impact Assessment process and as effective relationships are built between officers, councillors and Equality Community and Voluntary Sector representatives.

## **Gender Equality Scheme**

The current Council's Equalities Strategy and Equality Impact Assessment process already incorporates the statutory requirement to consider gender issues throughout all policies and practice assessments. However, the Council are required to produce and publish a separate Gender Equality Scheme. A joint approach is currently being developed with the other District and County Councils and it is hoped that SSDC will be able to take advantage of that.

The Corporate Equalities Strategy Steering Group Terms of Reference is attached at Appendix A to this report.

***Background Papers:*** *Report to Scrutiny Committee*

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