

DRAFT

CORPORATE EQUALITY

ACTION PLAN

2003 - 2007

# **Corporate Equality Action Plan**

## **Introduction**

Equal opportunity is central to the Council's objectives and values. This action plan builds on the good work already completed during the Best Value Review of Equalities and in the publication of the Race Equality Scheme and adoption of the Comprehensive Equality Policy.

Through its Corporate Plan the Council has made a strong commitment to develop, improve, enhance and encourage Eastbourne to become a safe, healthy, prosperous, enjoyable, fair and socially inclusive society. A Council that meets the needs and realistic expectations of its community by reaching out to those who are excluded or disadvantaged and enable them to participate in all areas of community life.

The Corporate Equality Action Plan will assist the Council in delivering the overarching Corporate Plan and sets the Council in a prime position to satisfy the Government's initiatives covering social inclusion and community cohesion.

## **Council's role in leading the Community**

The Council's role as community leader brings with it great responsibility. The responsibility of leadership requires the ability to build trust and encourage participation; to listen and be open to change; to demonstrate understanding and show through actions that every single individual's contribution is valued and needed. The Council does not shy away from this responsibility as demonstrated throughout this plan.

The Council also acknowledges that it still has some way to go in order to build credibility as an organisation that promotes equality of opportunity, eliminates unlawful discrimination and promotes good race relations in the provision of services and employment. In addressing these gaps the Council has set itself long-term goals that will ensure equality and diversity are mainstreamed and continuous improvement is sustained.

## **Helping to build an inclusive and cohesive community**

Building an inclusive community must begin with understanding the factors that make people feel excluded or disadvantaged, in other words, they feel discriminated against.

Anyone's personal circumstance can change at any time and these changes may significantly increase the risk of becoming excluded, for example, experiencing mental health problems or being made redundant. Other factors that can lead to feelings of exclusion and/or disadvantage include: being from an ethnic minority; living in a deprived area; age; low income; disability; being an ex-offender; religion and beliefs; family conflict; sexual orientation; being in care and school problems.

The government has defined social exclusion as 'a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas

suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown'. [extract from Cabinet Office publication: Preventing Social Exclusion]. The government has chosen to highlight these factors as examples only as there are many other dimensions of exclusion that could be added. The most important characteristic of social exclusion is that these problems are linked and mutually reinforcing, and can combine to create a complex and fast-moving vicious cycle. Therefore, policies will only be truly effective when this process is properly understood and addressed.

Providing equality of opportunity in service provision will help to build an inclusive community for Eastbourne, indeed, the overarching aim for an inclusive community as set out in Eastbourne's Community Strategy is: 'To enable all individuals in Eastbourne to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life.'

The Community Strategy also states several aims of Eastbourne's Strategic Partnership one of which is to deliver the services Eastbourne people need in a way that is open to everyone. Where these services need to change the Partnership will ask the community to play a key role in their development.

When people feel included and listened to they are more inclined to participate in community activities and work with others in solving problems and achieving a sense of belonging and identity.

A major part of the Corporate Equality Action Plan is to assess services delivered by the Council against certain equality criteria and make changes as appropriate. The assessment process will satisfy the requirements of the Council's Race Equality Scheme and the Equality Standard for local government. Similarly, it will also assist the partnership in achieving their aims and the Council in building a cohesive community.

It will only be possible for the Council to play a key strategic role in the creation of an inclusive community through establishing and maintaining links to existing partnerships and, more importantly, by building better links with the community itself. Existing good practice will be shared and used to influence improvements in our equality practices.

The same is true for mainstreaming equality. The Council will progress towards continual improvement in equality practice only if the equality action plan does not stand alone. It is vital that these equality action targets become an integral part of all our policies, plans and performance management systems now and in the future.

## **Building Capacity**

Building capacity throughout every service of the Council will help to mainstream equality. We will do this by communicating a clear and consistent message to all employees and through explaining the reasons for self-assessment, enable all of us to have a better understanding of why there is a need to promote equal opportunity. We will also build capacity through the delivery of training on both general and specific topics such as the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. An equality training programme is included in this Plan.

## **Equality in Service Delivery**

Regardless of the proportions of equality categories that make up the population of Eastbourne, everyone living, working or visiting Eastbourne is entitled to receive the same level of service from the Council.

Carrying out service based equality assessments will highlight any areas of concern and help us to make appropriate changes to our services. Monitoring will enable us to see if the changes have been successful or if change was not appropriate that the service maintains its good practice.

## **Corporate Equality Action Plan**

The action plan supports the Council's Comprehensive Equality Policy and sets out what we need to do in

order to achieve each level of the Equality Standard for Local Government. The plan also provides an assessment framework for our corporate commitments and individual service areas. It has been designed with pull out sections for managers to use when assessing service functions for equality and action to take should the equality impact be adverse.

## **Section 1 Equality Action Plan – Key Links**

### **1.1 Equality Standard and the Equality Action Plan**

The Equality Standard for Local Government has five levels of achievement. The Standard provides a flexible framework for improving equality practice and producing equitable outcomes in service delivery, employment and pay. The Standard builds upon the good practice and experience of the Commission for Race Equality, the Disability Rights Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission.

The Corporate Equality Action Plan for Eastbourne Borough Council outlines processes that will enable the Council to achieve each level of the Equality Standard.

### **1.2 Race Equality Scheme and the Equality Action Plan**

Although race equality forms part of the Equality Standard, the Council has chosen to keep its Race Equality Scheme (RES) as an entire document appended to its Comprehensive Equality Policy. For purposes of the Corporate Equality Action Plan it is seen as an integral part enabling the authority to monitor and report its progress in every area more easily.

The Corporate Equality Action Plan covers the statutory requirements of the RES and expands the need to carry out equality impact assessments to the categories listed in the Comprehensive Equality Policy. Each relevant function and policy listed in the RES will need to be assessed accordingly. Relevant functions and policies are listed in a separate section of this plan.

Details of the agreed equality categories with a brief explanation of each can be found in appendix 1.

### **1.3 Equality and modernisation**

Equality is a key feature of a modern high quality service that recognises the diversity of its customers and can respond to their needs. Being responsive requires understanding and we can only understand the real needs of our customers and build trust by listening, and involving them in our decision-making processes from the beginning. The Council is keen to listen and to take action that will ensure fair treatment and the provision of appropriate services delivered in ways that meet community needs.

### **1.4 Equality and Best Value**

Central to the Government's agenda to modernise local government is the concept of Best Value. Equality is already one of our corporate objectives and is now a Corporate Health Indicator BVP2 (formerly Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) Standard) bringing equality directly within the framework for Best Value

Performance Review.

When services are to be redesigned in light of Best Value Reviews we need to ensure that the conclusions and option appraisals reflect comprehensive equality needs analyses. For example, if a community has been identified whose specific needs are not met, our improvement plans will need to specify how this gap will be addressed. This is also reflected in the principles of community planning.

### **1.5 Equal Opportunities and Service Reviews**

The need to review a Service can arise outside of the Best Value process, and when it does equal opportunity plays an important role. Encouraging existing and potential customers to be involved in service reviews is a vital part of ensuring the services we deliver are appropriate in content and in delivery.

Reviews may result in changes to resource levels and equality must be an automatic consideration. Modern employment practice begins with getting the right person for the job based on skills and ability, not circumstance.

## **1.6 Equal Opportunity in Employment**

A diverse workforce with a wealth of skills and experience will better meet the needs of a diverse community. Equal opportunity is at the heart of our employment practices and begins right at the start of the recruitment process and carries on throughout employment until an individual leaves. Information on our employment practice is detailed in a separate section of this plan and covered in the Councils Personnel Standards.

## **1.7 Equal Opportunities in Community Planning**

Equal opportunity is an essential part of our Community Planning process for two reasons. Firstly, there is a need to establish the best way of involving the different communities in our area, and secondly, in determining priorities. For example, where deprivation and social exclusion are significant factors for any community, the Community Strategy will need to address how these are to be tackled and how the quality of life of those deprived communities is to be improved.

The Eastbourne Strategic Partnership is one mechanism for building relationships between local citizens, the business community, voluntary and community organisations and public authorities and is already highlighting areas for attention.

# **Section 2 Leading on Equality and Diversity**

### **2.1 Sharing Responsibility**

Every Councillor and individual employee has an important part to play in ensuring equality becomes an integral part of everything we do. The responsibility to promote equal opportunity and to take action to identify and address possible discrimination whenever and wherever it could occur, is a responsibility we all share, not just those who have a defined equality role.

## **2.2 Defined Equality Roles**

Resources have been assigned to work on the implementation of this action plan as follows:

### **2.2.1 Leader of the Council**

The Leader has a critical role to play in shaping the direction that will make the corporate aim ‘a place for everyone’ become a reality. Part of this will be to ensure Equality remains a top priority for the Council, challenging and encouraging the authority and its partners to combine ideas, share information and focus their efforts into making Eastbourne an inclusive society.

The Leader is the Council’s representative on the Eastbourne Strategic Partnership and is Chairman of the Equality Steering Group. The purpose of this group is explained in a separate section of this plan. The two roles will be key in establishing links between this internal action plan and the Community Strategy.

## **2.2.2 Chief Executive**

The Chief Executive is responsible for ensuring the Council becomes a leading example of good practice in equal opportunities both in access to services and in employment practices. The Chief Executive is the corporate lead for Service and Financial Planning under the Council’s aim ‘A Place for Everyone’.

Most important is the creation of an environment where individuals have the confidence to challenge discriminatory practices and behaviour such as bullying, harassment and stereotyping.

The Chief Executive sits on the Equality Steering Group and is Chairman of the Corporate Equality Planning Group and the Corporate Management Team.

## **2.2.3 Corporate Projects Manager**

The Corporate Projects Manager (CPM) is responsible for managing specific cross-cutting projects and mainstreaming equality is one of these.

The key objective is to lead, co-ordinate and monitor the Council’s action in meeting the general and specific duties of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, and to achieve each level of the Equality Standard for Local Government.

The CPM is a standing member of the Corporate Equality Planning Group and the Equality Steering Group, and represents the Council at external Race Equality forums.

## **2.2.4 Departmental Equality Representative**

Each of the Council’s five departments has an assigned equality representative. Each equality representative will assist the CPM in building awareness throughout the Council.

Departmental Equality Representatives will be standing members of the Corporate Equality Planning Group.

A breakdown of key tasks and person specification for the role of Departmental Equality Representative is attached as appendix 2.

# **Section 3 Equality Steering Group**

## **3.1 Purpose**

The main purpose of the Equality Steering Group is to oversee the self-assessment and audit process of the equality work within the Council and ensure that there is accountability and effective consultation. It will be responsible for the corporate annual report on the progress and outcome of self-assessment and audit.

The group will also look at how the Council incorporates equality into the planning and initiation of a series of processes across the Council, and in partnerships with other groups and organisations. This will include the

development of clear equality objectives for services, departments and the Council as a whole.

It is fundamental that the group does not have strong links with a particular department but does have a clear corporate role and therefore linked to the corporate decision-making process.

## **3.2 Composition**

The Equality Steering Group will consist of internal corporate stakeholders and external community stakeholders.

At present two external stakeholders have been invited to attend from recognised community groups. Although the initial composition of the Steering Group appears select, it is hoped that through consultation and community participation the composition of the Steering Group will alter over time. External membership representative of a wider range of community groups will reflect the growing trust between the Council and the community.

The standing members are:

**Chairman** - Leader of the Council. Councillor with portfolio for equality and social inclusion whose main responsibility will be to ensure that each member of the group has a clear understanding of their role and that the group remains focused on its purpose.

**Corporate lead for Equality** - Chief Executive. Corporate lead officer for equal opportunity and Chair of the Corporate Management Team.

**Responsible officer for Equality** - Corporate Projects Manager. Reporting directly to the Chief Executive on mainstreaming equality and representative of the Council on external race equality forums. Co-ordinator of Departmental Equality Representatives and Council contact officer for Equality issues. Administrator for the Steering Group.

**External Stakeholders** - East Sussex Disability Association. Nick Tapp, Assistant Director. Representative of the disabled community. Sompriti. Ila Mazumdar, Co-ordinator. Representative of the black and minority ethnic community.

**General** - internal officers such as heads of service will be invited to attend the Equality Steering Group to present their service/policy equality assessment reports.

## **3.3 Training**

The Equality Steering Group will be most effective if its members have a clear understanding and awareness of equality issues and self-assessment. Therefore, every member of the Steering Group will receive training in equality impact assessments in order to gain knowledge of the work being carried out within the Council.

A full breakdown of Equality Training is detailed in a separate section of this Plan.

## **3.4 Meetings and Reports**

The Equality Steering Group will meet twice a year as a minimum. The Corporate Projects Manager will be responsible for the co-ordination of agendas and will liaise with the Chairman in this respect.

The group will receive final draft copies of equality assessment reports, and if the assessment shows that the equality impact is adverse, the associated proposed policy documents highlighting the change of policy/ service delivery. The Head of Service will be invited to attend the meeting to present their equality assessment report.

The Equality Steering Group will ensure that changes in policy will be subject to the committee process. This will be the responsibility of the officer concerned.

The Steering Group structure and methodology for report referral is detailed in a separate section of this plan.

## Section 4 Corporate Equality Planning Group

### 4.1 Purpose

The main purpose of the Corporate Equality Planning Group is to provide internal leadership on the development of authority-wide policy and practice and to take primary responsibility for consultation and scrutiny element of the Corporate Equality Action Plan. The Group will also be responsible for co-ordinating the self-assessment and audit processes and ensuring each element of the Plan is progressed in a systematic way. The Group will require attendance by internal officers only.

### 4.2 Composition

The composition of the Corporate Equality Planning Group will consist of the following members:

There are no external stakeholders on this Group as it is purely an internal planning group.

4.2.1 **Chairman** - Chief Executive - Corporate lead officer for equality and Chair of Corporate Management Team. The Chairman will ensure that the group remains focused on its purpose and each member of the group is aware of their role. The Chief Executive will maintain links with the Chairman of the Equality Steering Group and will ensure that the equality assessment reports going forward to the Steering Group are sufficiently robust to stand up to challenge.

4.2.2 **Responsible officers for Equality** – Corporate Projects Manager. Reporting directly to the Chief Executive on mainstreaming equality and representative of the Council on external race equality forums. Council contact for equality issues. Administrator for Group.

4.2.3 **Departmental Equality Representatives** - Representing each department on the planning group and ensuring departmental involvement in the setting of equality objectives. Point of contact for equality issues connected to the services delivered in their department helping to build trust with the community.

4.2.4 **Head of Personnel** - All impact assessments will have a human resource element and it is important that the Head of Personnel is able to comment upon and offer equal employment advice to managers who are conducting assessments.

4.2.5 **Head of Audit** - The role of audit in performance review will ensure that a systematic approach is taken to the process of self-assessment. It is important to have a co-ordinated approach to measuring progress against the equality standard across the authority.

4.2.6 **Officer with experience of developing and mainstreaming corporate strategies:** Strategic Development Officer - performance management.

4.2.7 Heads of Service will be required to attend as and when their

services/policies are under review for equality impact assessment.

4.2.8 Representative of the local branch of UNISON.

## **4.3 Training**

The Corporate Equality Planning Group will be most effective if its members have a clear understanding of the services and functions that are under review and each element of the Plan, for example, access to services. Therefore each member of the Group will receive training in equality awareness, impact assessments, monitoring, and each element within the Plan.

## **4.4 Meetings and Reports**

The Corporate Equality Planning Group will meet four times a year as a minimum. The Corporate Projects Manager will be responsible for the co-ordination of agendas and will liaise with the Chairman in this respect.

The Group will receive draft equality assessment reports. The Group will also receive proposed policy documents if the assessment has shown that the equality impact is adverse and as a result it is necessary to make changes to the policy. The Head of Service will present the report.

The Corporate Equality Planning Group reporting structure and methodology is detailed in a separate section of this Plan.

# **Section 5 Corporate Self-Assessment**

## **5.1 Corporate Self-Assessment**

Corporate self-assessment is a necessary function of the Equality Standard for Local Government. In order to work through each level of the Standard the Council will need to conduct an annual review of its equality work and report the findings through the annual Best Value Performance Plan. The annual report will include the Council's own assessment of the level achieved during the year. As the report is subject to external scrutiny it will be necessary to validate the self-assessed level of achievement. Validation requires the provision of supporting evidence therefore evidence gathering is a key part of any self-assessment process.

The aim of self-assessment under the Equality Standard is to ensure that equality feeds into all aspects of policy, employment and service delivery and the purpose of evidence is to demonstrate that this has been achieved.

## **5.2 Self-assessment framework**

The framework supporting self-assessment is below:

- § the corporate equality training programme
- § briefings and consultation methods
- § guidelines for the collection of information

- § a structured approach to gathering evidence
- § integrating equality work into existing processes
- § integrating equality work across services
- § structure and methodology for report clearing
- § evaluation and validation of performance
- § communicating the results
- § developing equality action plans

Each element above will form part of the annual review and will be examined against certain criteria each year that will ensure the Council progresses through the levels of achievement.

### **5.3 Evidence gathering**

The type of evidence to be gathered for each level of the Equality Standard is detailed in appendix 8, although this is not an exhaustive list.

Evidence plays a very important role in self-assessment and the Council is committed to seeking honest feedback through agreed mechanisms of information gathering, and taking action that is appropriate and reasonable in consideration of local circumstances.

Evidence and the resulting action will enable the Council to continually improve against the standard and ensure that our assessment is based on fact not perception.

### **5.4 Annual Review**

The annual review will be in the form of a Corporate Equality Report. The Steering Group will pull together all the evidence and examples of equality work delivered by the Council throughout the year. The evidence will need to be tested against criteria set at the beginning of the year. The criteria will be different year on year as we progress through the Equality Standard levels of achievement.

### **5.5 Benefits of self-assessment**

Self-assessment is simply a structured way of measuring achievement. Overall, self-assessment will:

- § encourage continuous improvement
- § establish priorities for action
- § keep equality on the agenda
- § identify good practice
- § provide measurement of progress and report progress to stakeholders

§ provide ongoing staff development

## **5.6 External audit**

The Equality Standard became a Best Value Performance Indicator in April 2002 and local authorities will be expected to provide evidence of their progress. We will be audited against the following criteria:

§ has the authority adopted the Standard

§ carried out a self-assessment review

§ has evidence to support its findings

§ does the evidence support the level claimed for the whole authority in all of the four equality activity areas

Specifically audit will focus on the effectiveness and validity of the procedures adopted in the self-assessment process and will examine:

§ the audit report and the framework

§ the supporting evidence

§ evaluation against the Standard

§ composition of the Steering Groups and other validation procedures

§ action plans

§ consistency in the self-assessment process

## **Section 6 Next Steps**

### **Building Relationships with Black and minority ethnic groups**

The 2001 Census statistics covering ethnicity will be published early in 2003. This will provide important information for the Council to establish a local view and begin to build relationships with its local black and ethnic minority (bme) community.

Building relationships takes time and until the Council has established strong links with its bme community it has been agreed, as part of the Council's Race Equality Scheme, to work in partnership with Sompriti, a community organisation working with bme people in East Sussex. Sompriti has a dedicated community worker in Eastbourne, who has been in post for the past two years and has established strong links with Eastbourne's bme population.

### **Consultation (BME groups)**

Due to the points covered above Sompriti will be commissioned to organise and run four focus groups to take place during 2003/04. The bme focus groups will be organised to coincide with the race equality impact assessment timetable. This will enable Heads of Service responsible for conducting equality reviews to use the focus groups for consultation purposes. When the Council has established links itself the need to use Sompriti for this purpose will reduce.

Corporately co-ordinating bme consultation will hopefully remove some of the pressure from Heads of Service and result in purposeful data that will inform service level equality action plans.

## **Reporting Mechanisms**

### **Service Actions**

It is important to set in motion the series of initiatives set out in this Plan that will enable each service area to co-ordinate their equality work. Part of this will be to formalise the arrangements made in this Plan for reporting progress made against service level equality targets. This will be achieved through training and awareness briefings and initiatives will be in place by March 2003.

### **Race Equality Action Plan and BV Implementation Plan**

A review of progress made against the actions and targets set as part of the Race Equality Scheme and the Best Value Review of Equalities will take place in February 2003. Following the review a report will be presented to the Corporate Equality Planning Group.

### **Timetable**

The first meeting of the Equality Steering Group will set out an equality timetable that will enable the timely reporting of assessments to coincide with other corporate and committee programmes already in place.