



AGENDA ITEM: 7

SUMMARY

Report for:	Finance and Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting:	20 March 2012
PART:	1
If Part II, reason:	

Title of report:	Equalities Update
Contact:	Cllr Brian Ayling, Portfolio Holder for Service and Performance Improvement Author/Responsible Officers: Elissa Rospigliosi – Corporate Graduate David Gill – Group Manager (Partnerships, Policy and Communications)
Purpose of report:	This report updates Members on recent work that has been carried out related to equalities. It gives background on recent equalities legislation, summarises the results of recent consultation, and proposes a number of immediate objectives for Members to scrutinise.
Recommendations	(1) That Members consider and make comment on the proposed objectives noted in the report and due for publication in April. (2) That Members agree to include the revised equalities strategy in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme for later in 2012.
Corporate objectives:	Building Community Capacity: The subject matter of the report deals with ways in which we can improve outcomes for Dacorum’s communities and build community cohesion. Dacorum Delivers: The recommendations aim to improve service delivery by helping the Council target its services more efficiently and effectively diagnose community needs.
Implications:	<u>Financial</u> The Council needs to ensure that it is meeting all its legislative requirements relating to equalities to avoid the risk of claims of unlawful discrimination.

Value For Money Implications	<p>Claims would give rise to cost implications, e.g. legal fees, and, if successful, would result in compensation awards, in respect of which there are no statutory limits. The Council must show that it has mechanisms in place to ensure that unlawful discrimination does not happen anywhere across the organisation.</p> <p><u>Value for Money</u></p> <p>The objectives aim to maximise the use of resources by helping the Council target its services more efficiently.</p>
Risk Implications	There is a risk implication as the Council will be open to challenge if it does not fulfil its legislative requirements.
Equalities Implications	The report itself details the equalities implications.
Health And Safety Implications	None.
Consultees:	<p>Assistant Directors</p> <p>Public consultation</p> <p>Local community organisations</p>
Background papers:	<p>Single Equality Scheme (linked)</p> <p>Service and employment data snapshot (linked)</p>

1. Background

Dacorum's draft Single Equality Scheme was approved by Cabinet in September 2010. The decision to combine three existing strategies on race, gender and disability into a single scheme reflected the new legislative context of the Equality Act 2010.

The Equality Act passed into law in October 1 2010, extending protection under the law to eight 'protected characteristics': age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy/maternity, race/ethnicity, religion/belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

The Department for Communities and Local Government published its new cohesion strategy, *Creating the conditions for integration*, on 21st February 2012. The strategy focuses on localism, integration, and on mainstreaming equalities into the business of the community.

The Equality Act places a general duty on all public bodies. This came into force on 5 April 2011. Public bodies are to have due regard across all their functions to eliminating discrimination, advancing equality of opportunity, and fostering good relations between the different groups defined under the protected characteristics.

The Act also places two specific duties on public bodies. These came into force on 10 September 2011. These require public bodies to 'publish relevant, proportionate information demonstrating their compliance with the Equality Duty; and to set themselves specific, measurable equality objectives'

(Home Office, 2011). The deadline for publication was 31 January 2012 and the objectives are to be set and published by 6th April 2012.

The new legislation has emphasised the importance of building an evidence base of equality-related information that can guide and inform Council decision-making. The “Spotlight on Dacorum” project had already developed a Dacorum community profile. The recent work on equalities has therefore focused on building a more detailed picture of the people who are using Council services and of any specific needs they might have which could impact, or be impacted upon by, Council services.

Following the Cabinet approval in September 2010, we have consulted with the public and with local specialist organisations on the draft Single Equality Scheme. This consultation was also an opportunity to gather information about our service users’ experiences.

In order to fulfil the first Specific Public Sector Equality Duty, we took a snapshot of the data we currently hold on our service users. The resulting report was published on the Council’s website on January 31st.

2. Consultation methodology

This report draws together relevant material from:

- consultations carried out at DBC
- consultation work which was carried out locally by other statutory bodies and which included Dacorum residents. (This included work carried out by the Dacorum Partnership, the Volunteer Centre and Hertfordshire County Council agencies.)

The Council undertook specific consultation on equalities between August and December 2011. This email and paper-based survey was undertaken with specialist organisations. The survey was made up of open ended questions about equality issues. The Council also consulted with the general public via a survey which was available in paper-based form, by email and as an online survey.

This consultation was followed by a short multi-choice online survey which was distributed by email to specialist groups in Dacorum. The survey focused specifically on possible issues of access to Council services. In each case, the electronic versions were checked for accessibility for people with disabilities.

In each case the response rates were too low for a full statistical analysis, but some useful themes emerged.

3. Themes from the consultation

3.1 Access to existing services

There was a perceived need for increased staff awareness around the issues faced by people with different protected characteristics. Consultees made

specific mention of the needs of Deaf people, trans people and lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Access issues included the absence of visible inclusion (such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) friendly signs and spaces in Hemel Hempstead), the availability of interpreters, and different ways of contacting the Council for Deaf people. In some communities there is a tendency not to report abuse they experience and thus not to access the Anti-Social Behaviour service.

3.2 Providing new services/initiatives

There was strong support for a facility such as a dedicated community centre to support ethnic and faith groups and facilitate interaction and understanding.

Other consultees highlighted the need for additional support in some cases, such as community development work for ethnic and faith groups; a specific email group for Deaf people advertising opportunities for inclusion; for people with disabilities, additional support in getting jobs or in volunteering opportunities.

3.3 Involving residents and service users

People with disabilities were seen as a particular priority for involvement in service design. Better opportunities to act as community representatives were prioritised for Deaf people.

Other consultees suggested ways in which the Council might change its involvement and consultation opportunities. These focused in particular on making more use of existing channels of communication to make it easier for people to find out about, and remain involved through, such opportunities. Others focused on making more use of the knowledge held by existing specialist organisations and on more face to face consultation, rather than surveys.

3.4 Developing better information

Feedback was given that the Council would benefit from developing a more sophisticated evidence base for equalities policies. One response suggested the Council look more closely, in particular, at domestic violence incidents which are not reported to police.

4. Proposed objectives

It is proposed that we revise and renew our equalities strategy following the development of the current evidence base. This is timetabled to take place between April and August 2012, and will involve the development of objectives to improve equality in Dacorum. However, the Equality Act 2010 requires the Council to set and publish at least one objective in April and the following are being proposed for Members to consider now.

4.1 Develop a more robust, sophisticated and usable set of equalities data on our service users.

The service data snapshot exercise demonstrated that the Council does not hold consistent equalities data across its services. In some cases, the Council holds data for most users: for example, data is held on the ages of 100% of Benefits claimants and all applicants to the Housing register have supplied data on ethnicity, age, gender, and disability where it affects their housing need.

However, in most cases the data we can derive is for less than 55% of our service users and in some cases it is very low indeed (10% or less). Local authorities would expect to hold data on around 85% of their service users.

Consistent data would enable the Council to identify problems affecting particular groups, diagnose any issues with access, and track the impact of changes made to services to ensure that no group is disadvantaged. The Council would also gain additional opportunities for joint working to address individuals' multiple needs.

This objective would also offer the opportunity to improve and more effectively target Council services. Consultation with specialist organisations highlighted improved data as a key priority.

4.2 Improve inclusion, access to services and opportunities for involvement for all people in Dacorum. To develop a pilot project to address the needs of Deaf residents.

In the absence of comparative data, the Council has the opportunity to use community knowledge to start identifying access barriers for services. This will allow us to follow the direction given to us through the consultation to make better use of the knowledge held by specialist organisations.

It is proposed that we set up a pilot project involving Deaf people in Dacorum. Deaf people in the UK experience significant deprivation: Deaf people suffer higher unemployment than the rest of the population, and higher rates of long term illness. Targeted work at improving outcomes for Deaf people is likely to be an effective way of directing services towards some of those in greatest need.

A former Deaf services development officer has offered to work with us to improve access to services for Deaf people in Dacorum. This project will be used as a pilot to explore the ways in which we could work to improve access for other groups.

4.3 Increase the proportion of incidents reported to the Council which are recorded as hate crime or hate related incidents.

Improving the recording of hate crime is a key priority in the Department for Communities and Local Government's new cohesion strategy.

Current reporting rates for hate related incidents are relatively low for some demographic groups. Some groups in Dacorum informally report high levels of hate related incidents but do not make use of the services we offer for dealing with these.

The Council's Anti-Social Behaviour Team has piloted work with Dacorum Mencap's service users to build better understanding of reporting, and the

processes for dealing with, hate related incidents. This has been positively received and has highlighted a need to improve wider understanding of the importance of reporting and addressing hate crime.

Increasing the proportion of hate related incidents which are reported to and recorded by the Council would enable us to work to reduce the overall incidence of hate crime and build community cohesion.

4.4 Develop our consultation base so that it becomes more representative of the community.

The Department for Communities and Local Government's new cohesion strategy identifies participation as a key factor in integration. However, the take up rate for formal consultation is often low. In addition, because Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups form a low percentage of the population of Dacorum, in practice this can mean that we hear from very few people from certain ethnic minority groups.

Some consultations are not currently monitored at all and the Council thus has no way of knowing how representative they are.

In addition, feedback has suggested that we should be making better use of groups representing different communities and that face to face consultation can be more effective than other methods.

This suggests that the Council could improve the ways in which it consults to gather information more effectively and representatively. Members' knowledge of the issues faced by their communities would offer valuable additional information.

5. Conclusions

The Council needs to conform to certain requirements placed on it by new legislation or face the possibility of legal challenge.

While detailed strategic work will take place later in 2012, the objectives detailed in this report have been developed in response to needs highlighted both by the data held by the Council and by evidence from consultation.

The work to fulfil the legislative requirements has therefore created a number of opportunities for service improvement; these opportunities will also contribute towards corporate priorities.