

By: Judy Edwards, Director, Policy & Resources
To: Communities Policy Overview Committee, 9 May 2007
Subject: Equality Strategy
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report presents Kent County Council's Equality Strategy, which was approved by Cabinet on 16 April 2007.

The Strategy sets out how the Council will promote equality and community cohesion and tackle unfair discrimination in Kent.

The Strategy is the product of extensive data analysis and consultation. Work will be ongoing over the next six months to undertake further engagement work on the Strategy with Members (through POCs), service users and employees, to explore issues highlighted through consultation, identify appropriate responses and take forward key actions. This will inform a review at the end of the year.

Introduction

1. The Council has a statutory obligation to produce Disability and Race equality schemes, which it already has in place. From 30 April this year, it was also required to publish a Gender Equality Scheme. Following discussion at the Strategic Equalities Group in November last year, it was agreed to amalgamate these three documents, to:
 - Address multiple issues more effectively
 - Ensure that the Council's approach to equality is consistent and integrated across the organisation
 - Make sure that we are not duplicating information.
2. The Strategy aims to support continuous improvement in service delivery across all areas of the Council, with a greater focus on meeting the needs of diverse service users. It is underpinned by a commitment to achieving best value for available resources, working in partnership and encouraging more people to have their say locally to influence decisions which affect them and their community.

About the Strategy

3. The Equality Strategy brings together the Council's disability, gender and race equality schemes, and focuses primarily on these three areas. It spells out what disability, gender and race equality mean for those who live, work in and visit

Kent, and the priorities to be tackled in each area. It also deals with community cohesion, poverty, deprivation, and the cross-cutting issues of age, faith, and sexual orientation. In doing so it summarises specific initiatives being delivered across the Council to tackle these issues, such as reducing teenage pregnancy, migration, and work on the Equality Standard for Local Government.

4. The Disability priorities and actions remain identical to those contained in the Disability Equality Scheme 2006/09, which was the product of extensive involvement work with disabled people last year. Similarly, the priorities and actions identified in relation to Race reflect those set out in Year Three of the current Race Equality Scheme 2005/08.

The five priority outcomes

5. The Strategy identifies five priority outcomes, which support the Council's Equality and Diversity Policy Statement:
 - Equal and inclusive services and information for all, regardless of age, disability, gender, faith, race or sexual orientation.
 - Creative opportunities for participation and involvement in service planning and decision-making.
 - Work with our partners to ensure the county's most vulnerable groups feel safe and free from harassment, and can report incidents in the knowledge that issues will be handled sensitively and effectively.
 - Enhance the quality of our intelligence and monitoring systems, to ensure we can target disadvantage in the county where action is most needed and best reflects effective use of resources.
 - Maintain our reputation as an excellent employer, promoting a culture where the Council recruits on merit, diversity is valued, and where employees are proactive in anticipating the needs of service users.
6. The five priority outcomes are underpinned by a range of priorities that relate specifically to age, disability, gender, faith, race and sexual orientation. These have been identified to address specific need within the county and the Council, and gaps in understanding or service provision. They are supported by a series of robust action plans, which set out a phased approach to achieving the five outcomes. The Council's Strategic Equalities Group will monitor performance against the action plans.

How the Strategy was developed

7. The Council's agreed Disability and Race Equality Schemes form the basis of the Equality Strategy, together with supplementary statistical information. This includes:
 - Census data
 - National research

- Directorate Management Data.
8. The Strategy also draws upon a wide range of recent consultation data with both service users and employees, including:
- Consultation on the existing Race Equality Scheme 2005/08
 - Engagement with over 400 disabled people on the Disability Equality Scheme 2006/09
 - Residents satisfaction and Best Value survey data
 - Two gender focus groups and two mini depth interview days with a number of men and women from across the county, reflecting a range of different life stages and demographics
 - An employee questionnaire made available on KNet.

The relevance of the Strategy to the Communities Directorate

9. Given the public-facing nature of our services, and the breadth and diversity of the people we serve, it is particularly important that Communities has an effective, people-focused response to the legislation, so that we ensure the services we provide reflect the needs of all Kent residents.
10. In line with other directorates, Communities has established a Directorate Equalities Group (DEG), whose members cover the whole scope of the Directorate. DEG members facilitate a flow of information between the corporate/directorate level equality agenda and the directorate's services. Many members are 'champions' of a particular diversity strand, again concentrating on how our services can best relate to the relevant group.
11. DEG reports to Communities SMT regularly through the Director of Policy & Resources, who also represents the Directorate on the Strategic Equalities Group. The Chair of DEG sits on the Equalities Lead Officer Group, thereby ensuring full interaction with the corporate equalities agenda and decision-making processes.

Next steps

12. The Strategy is currently being considered by all Policy and Overview Committees. In addition, further engagement work is taking place over the next six months on the document with service users and employees, to explore issues in greater detail and reflect ongoing work in Directorates on equality impact assessments. This work will feed into a formal review of the Strategy at the end of the year.
13. Although the Strategy is already shorter in length than the existing Race Equality Scheme, a summary version will be produced and made available for ease of access.

For consideration

Members views are sought on the following:

- (a) Does the Strategy have a clear direction of travel?
- (b) Does the Equality Strategy capture the main issues?
- (c) What are its strengths/weaknesses?
- (d) What other issues might inform development work over the next six months and the end of year review?
- (e) How can the Strategy maximise its impact to improve quality of life for everyone in Kent?

Jo Richardson

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Background documents: KCC's Disability Equality Scheme 2006/09
KCC's Race Equality Scheme 2005/08