

How we deliver equalities and inclusion at Suffolk County Council

Context

As a County Council, we are committed to ensuring fair and accessible services for everyone in Suffolk.

The Equality Act 2010¹ requires us to take an even more pro-active approach to equality and inclusion. We also have a responsibility to ensure that the companies and organisations that we commission to provide services on our behalf, take the same positive approach to equality.

In consultation with our communities and our staff we developed the following equality objectives, which are based on the specific duties of the Act, to reflect our commitment to equality²:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation.
- Advance equality between everybody.
- Foster good relations between communities, tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

The Equality Act also makes it clear that we, and other public bodies must pay 'due regard' to equality. This means that we must:

- Remove and minimise disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristic
- Take steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people

The weight given to the equalities and inclusion policy area within the Council specifically compliments our organisational priority in respect of *supporting vulnerable people*. In addition to this, our work in this area embraces our new organisational values through ASPIRE: Achieve, Support, Pride, Inspire, Respect and Empower.

Paying 'due regard'

Part of the equalities governance within the County Council is to ensure we undertake Equality Impact Assessment (EIA's) on new and/or revised policies and services. Whilst EIA's are no longer mandatory, we believe this provides us with an effective way of systematically and thoroughly assessing, and consulting on, any potential adverse impact that a new or revised policy or service is likely to have on the protected equality groups.

Within the County Council, the vehicle we use for paying 'due regard' is the Policy Clearing House (PCH) which is made up of officer representatives from across the organisation.

Our vision for equalities excellence

Our future vision is to be a leader in the work around equality and inclusion. As an organisation we are striving to demonstrate excellence around: *knowing our*

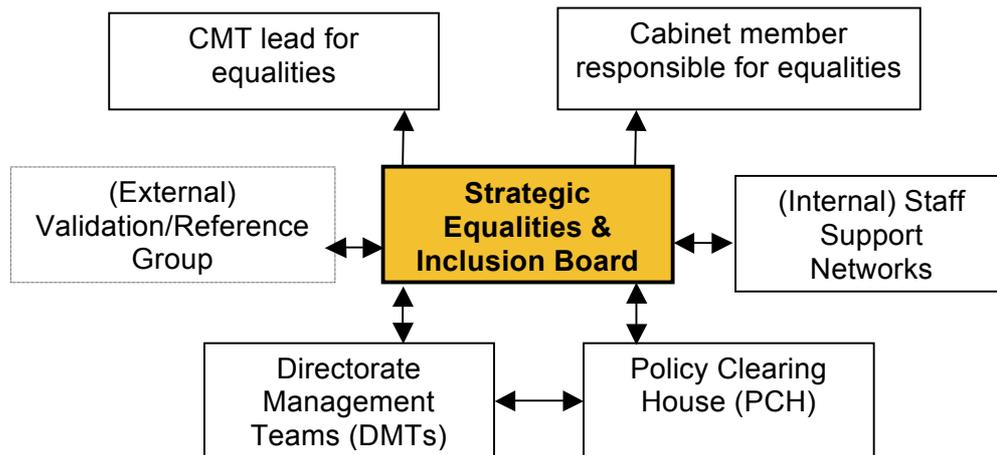
¹ The Equality Act makes reference to people with protected characteristics. The following characteristics are protected characteristics—age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation.

² The specific duty requires public bodies to set one or more equality objectives and review them at least every four years. These objectives will be reviewed in 2014.

communities; place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment; community engagement and satisfaction; responsive services and customer care and also a modern and diverse workforce.

Embedding equalities and inclusion throughout the Council

Our governance structure enables us to drive forward the equalities and inclusion agenda within the County Council, and to meet the requirements of the Equality Act, as outlined below:



Our Strategic Equalities & Inclusion Board provides the strategic framework and corporate management for this area of work. The Board membership is made up of elected members, senior officers, Union representatives and leads from our staff support networks. The Board meets four times per year.

Our Internal Staff Support Networks are committed to offering the best possible support to our staff from across the organisation. These include, the Disability; Lesbian Gay, Bisexual & Trans; Christian Fellowship; Women's; Young Person & Apprentice; Big Forty (group around mental health); and a Minority Ethnic Staff Network. The groups meet regularly and seek to support staff, influence the organisation's policy and practice, and improve our services to customers.

Our External 'Reference Group' is in the process of being established. The aim of this group will be to ensure openness and transparency about the way that we meet the needs of the protected groups. It will also create opportunities for the Council to develop our work with partners in the community around equality and inclusion issues.

Our Directorate Management Teams are responsible for equalities and inclusion delivery and performance management within their service areas. DMT representatives also represent their Directorates at the Strategic Equalities and Inclusion Board.

Our Policy Clearing House has the role of casting an objective eye over proposed new or revised policies or services through:

- Quality control at the EIA screening stage, ensuring that the policy author follows the guidance and ensures full EIAs are being undertaken across Directorates when needed
- Review and feedback re the standard of EIAs being submitted to the PCH
- Monitor and review screenings and full EIAs to ensure Directorates are incorporating this process into their service development programme.

Our clear and effective methods of communication between the Policy Clearing House and Directorate Management Teams provides an on-going feedback loop that links the outcomes of EIAs into the decision making process.

Our Corporate Management Team (CMT) and Cabinet have the overall responsibility for managing corporate performance around equality and inclusion. They are committed to improving equality outcomes for communities across Suffolk and staff internally. CMT work alongside the Cabinet member responsible for equality and inclusion.

Our equality information

As part of the specific duty of the Equality Act, we publish equality information for each Directorate annually. This information sets out our achievements, inequality gaps and areas for improvement that need to be addressed. We are committed to promote an inclusive culture for all staff and the communities that we serve; as well as to ensuring that our staff and communities are treated fairly and have access to all the services that we provide.

Our business intelligence system COGNOS provides a single source of key management data. One aspect of the system's capability is to provide our Directorate Management Teams with equalities information about their teams. This allows for trends to be mapped and action to be taken to address any gaps or issues identified.

Our suppliers of services

We are aware that we need to work with those we commission to deliver services to ensure that they have due regard to the protected groups on our behalf. Through our procurement and contracting arrangements we agree with our suppliers what considerations they need to take in relation to delivering services.

In many instances, the supplier will have a responsibility to consult with customers about their needs, including those of any protected groups that they are providing services to.

Our learning & development

As part of our corporate commitment to equalities and inclusion all new staff are required to undertake the e-learning module on equalities and inclusion within their first 6 months in post. This is part of our commitment to develop staff understanding of equalities and inclusion across the organisation.

In addition, we support elected Councillors with training about equalities and inclusion. Particularly in terms of thinking about the profile of their constituencies; how they can support people from the different protected groups; and their role in developing inclusive communities where there is a sense of belonging.

Our corporate equality priority actions for 2013/14

We recognise that there is further work that we can do to ensure that we offer fair access to services for all and that we consider the impact on the protected groups of any major changes to services that we are faced with having to take.

To provide a focus for our efforts across the organisation we have developed a set of corporately important actions to embed equality and inclusion within SCC. These are:

- Ensure that all new starters undertake equalities e-learning within 6 months of starting.
- Promote and support staff networks across the organisation in line with the values of ASPIRE.
- Demonstrate “Respect” to all service users and all staff as part of our ASPIRE values.
- Improve equality disclosure levels amongst staff across the organisation.
- Work towards the top 100 in Stonewall’s Workplace Equality Index.
- Develop an external equalities reference group to help us ensure we are meeting the needs of all protected equality groups.
- Improve attainment at key stage 2 & 4 for specific minority ethnic groups.
- Directorate Management Teams to ensure that, decisions on new or revisions to existing policies are only undertaken once an Equality Impact Assessment process has been completed.
- Improve the number of foster careers from different backgrounds in Suffolk.

Author: Business Development, June 2013