

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

7 APRIL 2009

EQUALITY STANDARD FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT - LEVEL 4 SELF-ASSESSMENT

DIRECTOR OF HR

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to:
 - outline the background to the Equality Standard for Local Government and the associated assessment processes
 - set out the approach taken since achieving level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government in May 2008
 - outline the approach taken toward the achievement of level 4
 - present the Council's self-assessment (Appendix 1), agreed by the Deputy Mayor on 19 March 2009, which outlines how the Council meets the requirements of level 4 of the Standard.

BACKGROUND

2. The Equality Standard for Local Government was established in 2001 as a tool to combat the institutional processes that can lead to discrimination as part of the culture, administration and governance of an organisation. Prevailing assumptions and practices can set up barriers that prevent fair access to services and equal employment opportunities, which in turn can discriminate against people on the grounds of age, disability, gender, religion or belief, race, or sexual orientation. To ensure the Council's practices do not lead to this situation, for the last four years it has worked with the Equality Standard for Local Government, using the associated toolkit to measure progress against the five levels of the standard.

3. At each level of the standard a series of criteria are set out under the following themes:
 - Leadership and Corporate Commitment
 - Community Engagement and Accountability
 - Service Delivery and Customer Care
 - Employment and Training.

Level 3 Equality Standard for Local Government - Final Report and Action Plan

4. In May 2008 the Council was externally assessed as having met the criteria to enable achievement of level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. To ensure that the Council's approach to diversity was developed further, an action plan was developed to address the few areas for improvement identified within the external assessors' report. All the actions within this action plan have now either been completed or embedded into ongoing pieces of work. At this time the external inspectors advised that they considered Middlesbrough Council to be a very strong level 3 Local Authority and the decision was taken by Corporate Management Team to work toward level 4 of the Equality Standard for Local Government by March 2009.

Approach taken toward the achievement of level 4 of the Equality Standard

5. Guidance from the Improvement and Development Agency (I&DeA) and the best practice approach undertaken for the level 3 assessment, were utilised to develop the Council's approach to level 4 of the Equality Standard. This approach incorporated the Council's ongoing use of a bespoke version of the [ES@T](#) toolkit to collate evidence against the requirements of level 4 of the Standard.
6. To ensure that the Council could demonstrate that equality and diversity issues were embedded within the decision-making and performance management processes of the organisation, a version of the toolkit was completed not only at a corporate level but also by every service area.
7. The evidence gathered was then utilised to produce the Council's self-assessment. The self-assessment summarised the Council's position against the Standard's criteria, outlining in detail the processes that the Council has put in place to ensure diversity and equality issues are identified, addressed and promoted, as appropriate. The toolkit was designed to enable the Council's position on each question to be scored against each of the nationally recognised diversity strands:
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Disability
 - Sexual orientation
 - Religion or belief
 - Ethnicity.
8. The Council also chose to highlight transgender as a separate strand for the purposes of this exercise. Transgender issues have traditionally been included within the sexual orientation strand and have not received as high a profile as the

other elements within that strand. There has also been an ongoing debate nationally, which recognises that transgender is a gender orientation issue, rather than a sexual orientation issue and as such it should sit within the gender strand. By separating out the transgender strand within the work for level 4, an important piece of work has been undertaken within the Council, utilising the self-assessment evidence gathering process to highlight the particular needs of the transgender community.

Self-assessment against level 4 of the Equality Standard for Local Government

9. The Council's self-assessment against the requirements of level 4 outlines in detail the processes that are in place to ensure that the Council has a systematic approach in place for the assessment of equality and diversity issues. The use of these processes to support the Council's commitment to continual service improvement is also demonstrated within the self-assessment.
10. Some of the main strengths outlined within the self-assessment included:
 - the suite of equality and diversity policies, supported by an embedded range of HR procedures and policies, to ensure that the aspirations of the Council in relation to equality and diversity are delivered
 - the use of the performance management regime, comprising several elements which complement each other
 - the Council's approach to community engagement which has been further strengthened since the award of level 3 with the launch of the consultation portal, enhancing corporate oversight and co-ordination of consultations.
11. The Council's proposed declaration of level 4 of the Equality Standard for Local Government has been scrutinised by a number of groups to ensure the findings of the evidence gathering exercises are accurate.

Next Steps

12. A small number of actions have been identified as a result of the self-assessment process. To ensure these actions are fully addressed, an action plan has been developed, which will be taken forward as part of the Council's preparations for attainment of 'excellence' within the revised Equality Standard for Local Government. The action plan is contained within the self-assessment.
13. The main actions relate to work already being undertaken to strengthen the depth of monitoring information processes within the Council and a number of actions have been identified to ensure national best practice continues to be followed.
14. The Council has set a pass mark of 80% for each element of the evidence gathering process and every service area assessed has achieved at least 80%. As part of the Council's continued commitment to equality and diversity, service areas will utilise the findings of the evidence gathering process to address those areas where they have scored less than 100% (as detailed within the self-assessment). These actions will be incorporated into Service Area Diversity Actions Plans as appropriate.

Revised Equality Framework for Local Government

15. From April 2009, a revised version of the Equality Standard for Local Government will come into use, called the Equality Framework for Local Government. This new framework has been designed to link into the forthcoming Single Equality Bill and the requirements of the Comprehensive Area Assessment process.
16. The framework now only contains three levels, as opposed to the five contained within the current standard. These three new levels are:

| | | |
|---------|--------|------------|
| Level 1 | —————> | Emerging |
| Level 2 | —————> | Achieving |
| Level 3 | —————> | Excellent. |

17. Existing Equality Standard scores will be fitted into the new model. By declaring level 4, the Council has been classified as 'moving toward excellence' within the new model. This score will be applicable for two years from April 2009, after which time the Council will be required to undergo external assessment to be assessed against level 3 of the new framework.

| <u>Current Score</u> | | <u>Status against the new model</u> |
|----------------------|--------|-------------------------------------|
| Levels 1 and 2 | —————> | Level 1 - Emerging |
| Level 3 | —————> | Level 2 - Achieving |
| Level 4 | —————> | Moving towards excellence |
| Level 5 | —————> | Level 3 – Excellent. |

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

18. There are no direct financial implications surrounding the declaration of level 4 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. However a strong approach to equality and diversity will ensure that the Council's services continue to meet the needs of the community, with a value for money impact and reduce the likelihood of the Council undertaking an action which would be contrary to equalities legislation, resulting in the possibility of costly legal actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

19. It is recommended that the self-assessment (attached at Appendix 1) and the Council's declaration of level 4 of the Equality Standard for Local Government is noted.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Equality Standard for Local Government – Level 4 guidance.

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