

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Chief Executive

Corporate and Efficient Governance Committee: 27 August 2008

Subject: A Single Equality Scheme

1. Purpose

- 1.1** The report presents a proposal for the formulation of a Single Equality Scheme to replace the current schemes for Race, Disability and Gender.

2. Background

- 2.1** The Council currently has three statutory equality schemes covering separate periods and responding to separate reporting and review timetables. They are:

Race Equality Scheme 2005-8
Disability Equality Scheme 2006-9
Gender Equality Scheme 2007-10

- 2.2** In addition to the three statutory schemes, the Council is one of the few authorities to have a Gypsy/Traveller Strategy.
- 2.3** In June 2007, the Council asked to be presented with an annual equalities report rather than four separate reports.
- 2.4** In June 2008, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) issued guidance in which it confirmed its acceptance of single equality schemes but underlined the need for them to contain all the measures expected of the individual schemes and to avoid any dilution of authorities' approach to equalities. Where there is inconsistency between the requirements of the three equality duties, the EHRC expectation is that this will be resolved by 'levelling up' to the highest standard of the three existing duties.

3. Main Issues

- 3.1** The issues which determine whether the Council moves from three equality schemes, plus the Gypsy/Traveller Strategy, to a single scheme can be summed up as those 'for' and 'against'.
- 3.2** The 'for' arguments include the existence of a single equality commission and the single equality legislation anticipated for 2010/11. A single equality approach would simplify reporting arrangements and provide the opportunity to give equal attention to other equality strands, e.g. age and sexual orientation. There are significant common elements in the three existing schemes, such as monitoring, training and impact assessment.

3.3 The 'against' arguments include the danger that some equality strands will be lost in the wider approach; a particularly relevant issue in a Council with a very small black and minority ethnic population where a 'needs not numbers' approach should be maintained. The absorption of the Gypsy/Traveller Strategy could be seen as a loss of recognition of a particular minority group.

3.4 Other arguments against a single equality scheme are that the different time periods covered by the current schemes would prevent a neat transition, and that the single scheme may be formulated before single equality guidance is issued by the UK Government.

3.5 In June 2008, the Council's Equality and Diversity Working Group, made up of Members and officers, examined these arguments and concluded that the Council should move to a single equality scheme. The 'against' arguments should be addressed by having the single scheme structured and presented in a way that makes clear the Council's commitment to all its equality duties, and has standards that are 'levelled up' to the highest. The scheme should initially focus on approaches to race, disability and gender, and the Gypsy /Traveller community, but pave the way for the extension of the Council's duties to age, sexual orientation and religion and belief under new legislation.

3.6 An appropriate timetable for a Single Equality Scheme would be:

Nov 2008 Publish a new Race Scheme, satisfying the current statutory duty.

Nov 2009 Publish a Single Equality Scheme, coinciding with the requirement for a revised Disability Scheme. This will absorb the 2008 Race Scheme and the current Gypsy/Traveller Strategy, and be 7 months ahead of the requirement for a revised Gender Scheme.

4. Personnel Issues

4.1 There are no personnel issues directly associated with this report.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 There are no financial implications directly associated with this report.

6. Risk Analysis

6.1 The proposal for a Single Equality Scheme is designed to remove the risk of non-compliance with current and future equality legislation.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1** The report summarises the arguments for and against the formulation of a Single Equality Scheme to replace the current schemes for race, disability and gender, and the Gypsy/Traveller Strategy. It concludes that the Council should publish a Single Equality Scheme in November 2009 and that this should pave the way for the extension of the Council's equality duties under the forthcoming equality legislation.

8. Recommendations

- 8.1** The report recommends that Committee should agree that Council should publish a Single Equality Scheme in November 2009.

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David McMillan
Chief Executive
Date: 14 August 2008

Person to Contact: Lewis Morrison, Policy Officer (Disability & Access)
(01389) 737201
lewis.morrison@west-dunbarton.gov.uk

Wards Affected: All wards are affected.