

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EQUALITIES COMMITTEE HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOMS 2/3, CIVIC OFFICES, ANGEL STREET, BRIDGEND, ON WEDNESDAY, 7 NOVEMBER 2007 AT 10:00AM

Present: -

Councillor C A Green BA - Chairperson

Councillors

D A D Brett  
R D L Burns  
L Davies  
E P Foley  
J Radford

Councillors

D Sage  
M Thomas  
M C Voisey  
K Watkins

Officers

T Garthwaite - Executive Director - Strategic Change  
L Smith - Corporate Equalities Co-ordinator  
S Kelly - Policy and Performance Management Officer  
P Miles - Pay and Reward Officer  
L Hutton - Employee Resourcing Manager  
O Retter - British Sign Language Apprentice Interpreter (BSL Futures)  
C Branford - Cabinet and Committee Officer

55 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillor M M Bertorelli - Work commitments  
Councillor P A Hacking - Illness  
Councillor R G Hughes - Other Council Business  
Councillor R D Jenkins - Other Council Business  
Councillor K T Rowlands - Taking his wife to hospital  
Councillor J H Tildesley - Work commitments

56 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

57 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 10 SEPTEMBER 2007

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on the 10 September 2007 be approved as a true and accurate record.

58 MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE EQUALITIES MANAGEMENT GROUP – 24 OCTOBER 2007

Members queried why the issue of translation services was raised in the meeting on 24 October 2007, as it had been discussed at a Task and Finish Group as early as 2005. The Executive Director – Strategic Change explained that the issue had been explored in various different ways, including an unsuccessful approach to a neighbouring Authority, but no solution had been reached. He explained that the issue was being picked up again and alternative avenues being explored.

The Cabinet Member – Resources asked if the outcomes of the Task and Finish Group had been conveyed to the appropriate Officer, as the issue could not be pursued unless the relevant information was communicated. He suggested that a record of Scrutiny recommendations should be kept in the same way as the Cabinet kept a record of decisions made at its meetings. He suggested that this would be useful for the Equalities Committee, as they could pursue recommendations made.

59. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair welcomed Olivia Retter, British Sign Language Apprentice Interpreter, to the meeting. She explained that today's meeting would provide Olivia with the opportunity to learn about Committee procedures and terminology. She hoped that Members would also benefit from Olivia's attendance at the meeting.

60. EQUALITIES IN THE BCBC WORKFORCE

The report was presented by the Employee Resourcing Manager who explained that the statistics in the report were increasingly more accurate as a result of the Trent system improving. She advised that this report represented a good starting point for benchmarking.

The Pay and Reward Officer informed the Committee that the first issue to be considered when compiling the report was to define who exactly constitutes the BCBC workforce. To this end, four categories were established to define the criteria for an employee: Full Time, Part Time, Multi Part Time and Casual/Relief.

The Executive Director – Strategic Change advised that these categories may be further refined in the future. He advised Members that the intention was to translate the data into information which should in turn be used to develop meaningful policies and initiatives.

The Cabinet Member – Resources advised that he appreciated the comment about the data but that he hoped the definitions were not so flexible as to require frequent change as some degree of consistency was vital. He explained that what was recorded as a day's absence could in fact have been merely an absence for a two hour shift in cases where the employee was casual or relief. He advised that he also hoped to see a standardisation of categories leading to greater clarity.

He drew attention to the statistics detailed on page 6 of the report, giving the age profile of the Authority's employees, pointing out that only the under 35s and over 45s categories were listed, meaning that one age group – 36-44s – were omitted and it was therefore misleading to suggest that a sum total could be arrived at. Members agreed that it would be more helpful to include all categories or an explanatory note about data that has not been included in the report.

The Cabinet Member – Environment echoed these concerns and warned that if the statistics were looked at in isolation, they could produce a misleading impression. He stated that where gaps in data existed because people had declined to provide information, this fact should be clearly stated. He pointed out that if people refused to divulge information on their ethnic origin, this in itself had implications.

In response to queries from Members, the Executive Director – Strategic Change confirmed that the staff using the Trent system had received full training and that the system was increasingly being used to its maximum potential.

In response to a question on the possibility of obtaining statistics on the Casual and Agency staff, the Employees Resourcing Manager advised that agency workers had a different status within the Authority, and any information on these staff would need to be provided by the agency itself. She cautioned that the information would not perhaps be of great value.

The Executive Director – Strategic Change advised the Committee of the need to encourage confidence in the statistics produced, informing them that the ultimate aim was to get as near as possible to 100% accuracy. This would then enable the Council to develop policies which were fit for purpose.

The Employees Resourcing Manager cautioned that employees could not be compelled to provide data, especially on sensitive issues such as sexual orientation and religious belief. The Equalities Co-ordinator advised that it was necessary to find a sensible way of enabling people to anonymously provide information. She further advised that any data collected should be meaningful, and used in a practical way. She stressed that it was important to reassure staff, when attempting to obtain information from them, that this information would not impact negatively on them, and to avoid exposing anyone to harassment.

Members enquired if part of the reason for a non-return or a not stated response on forms might be difficulties in understanding what information was being requested. The Employee Resourcing Manager responded that the revised job application forms used by BCBC were very straightforward and used a tick box approach wherever possible, and advised that she did not believe that people experienced difficulties completing the forms. The Committee requested that sample forms be provided at its next meeting.

In response to a Member's question on Equalities Policies in schools, the Executive Director – Strategic Change advised that schools had the option to accept BCBC's policy, or create their own. He conceded that it was a complex issue, but reminded Members that schools were also bound by the same legislation as BCBC even though they may have their own procedures on equalities issues. The Equalities Co-ordinator advised the Committee that schools had a separate duty to produce a Race Equality Policy and a Disability Equality Policy, the requirements for which were slightly different than for the BCBC Equality Strategy. She conceded that there was some confusion over the relationship between BCBC and schools as far as the equalities issue was concerned. The Executive Director – Strategic Change assured the Committee that the policies of Bridgend's schools met the expectations of the Council.

The Cabinet Member – Resources advised that it was important for the Committee to distinguish between what it was 100% accountable for and what it only advised on. He emphasised that any reports produced should be helpful to the citizen, and clarity was vital when dealing with statistical information. He pointed out that the list of background papers provided with the report omitted any reference to the Education Act, and had no regard for the impact of the European Constitutional Treaty. He advised that an enormous challenge lay ahead for Local Authorities in terms of meeting their equalities targets.

RESOLVED: That Human Resources Officers continue to work with the Equalities Co-ordinator to look at potential areas for developing including:

- identifying certain groups who are under/over represented within our workforce against local and national comparators;
- analyzing whether there are policy implications resulting from the data revealed;
- seeking a steer from the Equalities Committee as to direction of equalities reporting; and
- developing and improving the data held for equalities reporting through effective recording within the Trent HR/Payroll system.

61. REPORT ON THE NEW EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION AND THE SINGLE EQUALITY BILL

The Executive Director – Strategic Change informed Members that he had, along with the Corporate Equalities Co-ordinator, recently attended a conference on the New Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Single Equality Bill, and a key message to emerge from this conference was that meaningful conversation was more effective than punitive measures in ensuring commitment to the equalities agenda.

He drew attention to paragraphs 4.9, 4.10 and 4.11 of the report, emphasising that BCBC is already committed to the production of a single equality scheme as a result of the support of this Committee, that in Wales there exists an additional consideration, that of the Welsh language and that this is the right time for the Council to review its approach to equalities issues. He advised Members that the Authority had agreed to pursue a single equality scheme. He informed Members that he believed the Welsh language was a language and culture issue rather than strictly an equalities issue.

The Corporate Equalities Co-ordinator delivered a presentation on the New Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Single Equality Bill. The presentation was signed by the British Sign Language Apprentice Interpreter. The Corporate Equalities Co-ordinator advised that there was a need to challenge current thinking about equalities issues, as causes of inequality are often a combination of status and life events (“trigger”), not just a case of who or what a person is. She emphasised that support for local independent advocacy was a key issue as the first point of contact for a victim of prejudice or hate crime was a grass roots organisation embedded in the community.

She informed Members that one of the key new proposals in the Single Equality Act was to extend protection from harassment to cover public settings. She emphasised that the focus in the future should be on meaningful outcomes rather than processes. She informed Members that a key message from the Equality and Human Rights Commission was that it was preferable to do a little better rather than too much badly.

The Executive Director – Strategic Change advised that there was a tendency to be over-reliant on the Corporate Equalities Co-ordinator, whereas equalities should be everyone's concern – Elected Members, Directors, Managers and individual staff members. He emphasised that people were a resource, as well as money, in the drive to meet the equalities standard.

The Cabinet Member – Learning asked about the future of VALREC and whether the new legislation would make the organisation less dependent on funding from the public sector. The Executive Director – Strategic Change responded that there was evidence that VALREC was improving as an organisation. He advised that the organisation was reviewing its funding regime and that it intended to adopt a core funding model, with supplementary funding for additional services, a change which would necessitate a greater financial contribution from BCBC. He advised that VALREC was currently exploring ways to work with Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent Councils.

The Cabinet Member – Learning expressed concern over the apparent concentration on the public sector in the presentation, with fewer requirements made of the private sector. He asked if coercion was really the best approach. The Corporate Equalities Co-ordinator advised that the presentation had focused on how the legislation would impact on the Council as a public authority, however the Single Equality Bill did include several proposals existed to cover the private sector, among them an Equality Mark Scheme similar to the Investors in People initiative.

The Cabinet Member – Resources cautioned that resources did not match ideology in the area of equalities. He advised that the settlement had not yet been received from the Welsh Assembly Government, but that it was unlikely to be good and, therefore, funding was a real issue.

The Executive Director – Strategic Change conceded that Members faced enormous challenges in allocating resources to the projects recommended by Officers. He agreed that there was a need to be realistic when recommending proposals to Members. He reminded Members, however, that not all proposals were dependent on financial input, and much could be achieved by utilising human resources, or utilising current resources more effectively.

Members expressed anxiety that the presentation included data from the National Equalities Review that showed that some targets were not achievable in this lifetime, and wondered whether or not anything was achievable in the shorter term. It was also suggested that each area of the Authority should have an equalities champion rather than it being the sole responsibility of the Committee.

The Executive Director – Strategic Change responded that the Equalities agenda was woven through all other service areas, and that there was a need to be bold and realistic about BCBC's commitment to equalities. Members added that a change in culture and mind-set, did not entail a financial outlay.

RESOLVED: That the contents of the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 12.15pm.