

POLICY REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL 20 NOVEMBER 2012

Present :- Councillor Julie Young (Chairman)
Councillors Mark Cable, Nigel Chapman, Barrie Cook,
Mark Cory and Jo Hayes

Substitute Member :- Councillor Richard Martin
for Councillor Margaret Fairley-Crowe

18. Equality and Diversity // Annual Update

Councillors J Young (in respect of her spouses Chairmanship of Colne Housing Association Board) declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5).

Lucie Breadman, Interim Head of Life Opportunities, assisted by Andrew Harley, Equality and Safeguarding Co-ordinator, presented a report asking the Panel to review progress made in meeting the Council's statutory duties and achieving its Equality and Diversity objectives, and also to endorse the proposed approach going forward.

Mrs Breadman explained that, since the last annual report, the Council had met the new specific duties, publishing information and setting equality objectives, continued to address the general duty of 'integrating consideration of the advancement of equality into the day-to-day business of public bodies, and across all its functions' and made clear in the Strategic Plan its commitment to creating better local communities with opportunities for all residents.

With this in mind, all councils, including their councillors and staff, were required to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a 'protected characteristic' and those who do not;
- foster good relations between people who share a 'protected characteristic' and those who do not.

The 'protected characteristics' were age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. The duty also covered marriage and civil partnership, but not for all aspects of the duty.

The period covered by this annual report is the first full year during which the general and specific duties have been in force. The Council needed to maintain a responsive and flexible approach during 2011/12 while it awaited the results of national consultation and policy developments, and the subsequent issuing of statutory or non-statutory guidance.

Beyond meeting the requirements of the specific duties and general duty, it is left up to public bodies to decide how they will go about ensuring compliance.

We have used our best endeavours to keep informed and up-to-date with the changing policy picture at national level, and to interpret this into what we need to do and publish locally. We believe that this has enabled us to meet our obligations under the Act to date.

In practical terms, in order to meet the Council's obligations, the following evidence had been published on the Council's website and includes:

- Equality Impact Assessments;
- The Council's Strategic Plan and Strategic Plan Action Plan;
- The Council's website pages on Equality and Diversity;
- The Council's equality information section contains all required information;
- Workforce statistics: Equality monitoring information;
- Work undertaken by the Council's Research and Engagement team about service users, customers and the borough's population;
- The Council's independent, external accreditation as an 'achieving' organisation under the Equality Framework for local government.

The report proposed that, going forward, the following approach be adopted:

- Continue to gather evidence and assess our approach in meeting our statutory obligations;
- Encourage and support Council services in the delivery of the practical steps they are taking to improve accessibility to our services. The Universal Customer Contact Fundamental Service Review will embed a customer-centric approach that will have the different needs of our customers at its heart;
- Further develop the use and content of Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs), especially with our politicians and scrutiny groups;
- Make more systematic the use of the Council's surveys, consultations and equality monitoring data when equality impacts are being assessed by Services;
- Use the Council's Forward Plan to help allocate due priority to the key decisions listed there in order to better 'integrate consideration of the advancement of equality into the day-to-day business of public bodies, and across all its functions';
- Develop internal learning and development tools, especially online and ask our Member Development Group to focus on how to help councillors develop their understanding and awareness of this important area of work.

Particular discussion from the Panel members was in relation to:

- The work undertaken by the Equality and Safeguarding Co-ordinator and the impact of the additional safeguarding responsibilities on the equality role;
- The mechanism for Councillors to continue their involvement following the discontinuance of the Members Liaison Group;
- The purpose and outcomes of the 'Removing Barriers to Council Services' workshop;
- A request for the Equality and Safeguarding Co-ordinator to investigate further the issue of A boards which the Fair Access to Colchester Group had been trying to address for a considerable time;

- The valuable work undertaken by the Street Angels project;
- The need for a solution for the storage of mobility scooters within Sheltered Housing Schemes;
- The need for greater awareness within the cycling community of the potential for greater care for pedestrians with visual or hearing impairment;
- The current proposal regarding the removal of vehicles from the High Street but the retention of buses, taxis, motorcycles and cycles and the potential safety issues;
- The Council's current relationships with TACMEP;
- The importance of the Council's role generally in tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

It was explained that the Equality and Safeguarding Co-ordinator's role had been extended from two to three days in order to adequately incorporate the two areas of responsibility and that there were areas of overlap and connections with the two roles such as in respect of vulnerability and disability as well as age and young people.

Mrs Breadman was of the view that the Council was now in a better position than before. The Equality Impact Assessments work schedule was regularly monitored to ensure any assessments due for review were prioritised and there was far greater awareness with officers across all service areas.

It was intended that the Member Liaison Group would have an ongoing role but on a topic by topic basis. Additionally Councillor involvement had taken place separately in the context of the Budget savings exercises.

The Equality and Safeguarding Co-ordinator indicated he would respond to the Panel members on the outcome of his investigation of the A board issue and he confirmed that TACMEP continued to flourish and the Council was working with the Group and the relationship was a useful one.

RESOLVED that the progress made in meeting the Council's statutory duties and achieving its Equality and Diversity objectives be noted and the proposed approach going forward, as set out in the report be approved.

19. Older Persons Accommodation Task and Finish Group // Recommendations

Councillor Laura Sykes, Chairman of the Older Persons Accommodation Task and Finish Group, presented the final report of the Task and Finish Group which had been set up at the request of the Portfolio Holder for Housing to:

'Undertake a comprehensive review of the issues relating to accommodation for older people in order to assist in the determination of a Strategy and action plan which will assist older people in Colchester find housing solutions which meet their needs.'

The Task and Finish Group had initially considered a number of particular topics:

- What do we know about need, demand and current provision and what are the

gaps?

- What are the key national and local policy drivers?
- What do older people want and what do they think of current provision? What does the next generation of older people want? What should the Council's key strategic objectives be for its strategy?
- What actions should be undertaken to meet these objectives?
- What resources are available?

The Group had undertaken a number of tasks including:

- Assembling an evidence base of information to determine need, demand and current provision from research and information already available
- Considered the national key policy drivers
- Considered the key strategic documents of other key organizations
- Looked at existing consultation with older people undertaken locally
- Looked at the existing Housing Strategy for Colchester and considered relevant objectives and actions from that document and those identified by the group from the research undertaken

The Group also undertook visits to different types of accommodation which had been provided for older people:

- Winnocks and Kendalls Almshouse provided by a voluntary group (rented accommodation)
- Meadow Park Retirement village (owner-occupied accommodation)
- Balkerne Gardens Trust (Privately owned Sheltered accommodation)
- Wenham View (Social rented/Shared Ownership Sheltered accommodation)
- Elfreda House and Walnut Tree House (Colchester Borough Council's Sheltered Accommodation)

The group felt that the Council needed a strategy to set out the Council's ambitions for meeting the housing needs of older people in Colchester over the next five years which would be a key driver for close working with the Council's partners to ensure Colchester remained a place where older people flourish and could make an important contribution to the life of the borough.

The strategic priorities for the strategy which was set out in full in an appendix to the report, were:

- To deliver a choice of good quality housing for older people in the borough.
- To enable older people to live independently in their own homes for longer.
- To make the best use of technology to enhance the quality of life for older people.
- To provide better access to information and housing advice for older people.

Councillor Sykes thanked the other members of the Task and Finish Group for their hard work and the officers who had supported and assisted the Group in its work.

Councillor Lewis attended and, with the consent of the Chairman, addressed the Panel. She was a member of the Task and Finish Group and considered that the report was a

fully comprehensive one. However, she was of the view that the Group should have undertaken more visits to Sheltered Schemes in Colchester, taken the opportunity to look into the issues relating to Sheltered Housing in Colchester in more detail and considered that the Group still had more work that it could do to continue to assist the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities. She also felt it was important for the Council to acknowledge the need for a particular category of Social Housing for Older People.

Particular discussion from the Panel members was in relation to:

- The need for a great deal of sensitivity to be adopted in relation to older people who were in situations of over- occupation and potentially fearful of losing their home
- Equity Release Schemes and concern around the suitability of schemes for residents;
- The potential need for more work to be undertaken in relation to dementia, given the predicted significant increase in its incidence in the coming years;
- The need for consideration to be given to the installation of domestic sprinkler systems in Lifetime Homes, as the devices provided opportunities for people with disabilities to survive a fire in their homes.

It was explained that the review of Sheltered Housing was being undertaken by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities and that it had not been included in the remit of the Task and Finish Group. It was important for the Group's work in terms of its current remit to be concluded and it would be for the portfolio holder to consider any further work to be undertaken by a Task and Finish Group at an appropriate time.

The Group's recommendations on Equity Release Schemes was in relation to the registered schemes which had been very successful nationally in enabling people to release funds to undertaken valuable repairs and maintenance and in the availability of adequate advice about the Schemes which were nationally recognized ones.

RESOLVED that:-

- (i) The members of the Older Persons Accommodation Task and Finish Group be thanked for the work they had undertaken;
- (ii) The recommendations of the Task and Finish Group be agreed;
- (iii) Subject to the action on downsizing being amended to refer to 'sensitively encourage', the contents of the draft Older Persons Accommodation Strategy be agreed;
- (iv) The draft strategy, as amended, be referred back to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities for a decision on the adoption of the Older Persons Accommodation Strategy.