



Minutes of the meeting of the EQUALITIES PANEL of the POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE held on MONDAY 24 JANUARY 2000 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillor Long (Chair)
Councillors I Henderson (substitute for Councillor Seymour), White and I Wilson

Officers: H Miller (Chief Executive), D Jones (Strategic Director Neighbourhood Services), G Beck (Head of Regulatory Services), B Bithell (Head of Human Resources), V Gwynn (Head of Community and Economic Development), D Nickless (Head of Neighbourhood Services), G Snelson (Corporate Policy Manager), J Reed (Strategy and Performance Manager - Neighbourhood Services), B Rimmer (Benefits Manager), M Shaw (Human Resources Manager), M Vine (Housing Needs Manager), M Legg (Commissioning Officer - Adults), C Short (Community Language Service - Project Co-ordinator), T Butterwick (Policy Officer) and S Heap (Members' Services Manager)

Also Present: P Barker (NSF - Milton Keynes Branch), Z Friedman (Interfaith Milton Keynes), R Griffiths (Milton Keynes Council of Disabled People) and B Redey (Milton Keynes Carers' Project)

Apologies: Councillor Seymour, G Edwards (Milton Keynes Council of Voluntary Organisations) and Rev. M MacKenzie (Milton Keynes Christian Council)

EQ9/00 MINUTES

RESOLVED -

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 25 October 1999, be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

EQ10/00 PERSONS ACCEPTED AS HOMELESS

Further to Minute EQ6/00, the Panel considered a breakdown of decisions made on homeless applications, categorised by ethnic group.

The Panel's attention was particularly drawn to statistics relating to the period of July 1999 to September 1999 which showed that an almost equal percentage of Afro-Caribbean and White UK persons had been accepted as homeless.

It was recognised that the statistics presented provided only a superficial analysis of the homelessness in Milton Keynes and did not attempt to identify any of the causes. Further analysis was necessary if the Panel was to be able to fully understand the reasons behind the statistics.

It was suggested that the Housing Allocation system was currently potentially discriminatory, in that it relied on a person's previous addresses for acceptance on the waiting list.

It was noted that the Council was currently developing a Black and Ethnic Minority Strategy which would address, as one element, the issue of homelessness and more generally issues surrounding young black males, which the Panel had identified as a particular issue.

RESOLVED -

That officers be requested to bring forward proposals for research into issues affecting young black males, with a view to requesting the Policy and Resources Committee to commission appropriate research.

EQ11/00

CENTRALISATION OF THE BENEFITS SERVICE

Further to Minute EQ7/00(4), the Panel received a presentation on the centralisation of the Council's Benefits Function.

It was reported that the recentralisation of the Benefits Service had largely become necessary due to the new Verification Framework which on its introduction had created a massive additional workload which could not be managed efficiently at the Area Housing Offices. The introduction of the new Verification Framework had also coincided with the introduction of document imaging.

It was accepted that initially service levels had declined as staff were not familiar with either the Verification Framework or the requirements of document imaging. However, it had now been possible, as a result of recentralisation, to reduce the backlog of claims to a more manageable level.

It is reported that, although benefits staff were all now based at Saxon Court, Housing Officers at the Area Offices could deal with many benefit queries and also a direct telephone line was available from the Area Offices to the centralised Benefits Section. Home visits could also be arranged for persons unable to visit one of the Council's offices.

It was also reported that with the introduction of the "ONE" Single Benefits Gateway, as from 1 April 2000, all benefit claims would have to be dealt with via "ONE" and this had been a further factor which had required the Benefits Service to be centralised.

Some concern was expressed at the potential loss of face to face contact between clients and staff, which was recognised as being very important. It was suggested that discussions could be held with representatives of vulnerable groups to identify any concerns resulting from the change in service provision.

In answer to a question, the Panel noted that the Council's Benefits staff had liaised with Housing Associations to discuss their specific problems.

The Panel also considered the specific link between the non-processing of Housing Benefit Applications and persons becoming homeless and noted

that procedures were in place to deal with situations where persons were likely to be evicted.

EQ12/00 MILTON KEYNES ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIPS COMMUNITY INDICATORS 1999

The Panel received the Milton Keynes Economic Partnerships Community Indicators for 1999 and noted that the indicators provided a useful tool for the Council which helped it target services where they were most needed; informed bids for finance, such as the Single Regeneration Budget; and helped target the Council's regeneration work.

The Panel also noted that the Council was in the early stages of developing a Social Inclusion Project, and indicators such as those provided by the Economic Partnership would help inform the project work.

EQ13/00 EQUALITIES ANALYSIS OF NOP CITIZENS SURVEY

The Panel received an analysis of the results by Gender Ethnicity and Disability of the survey conducted by NOP on behalf of the Council.

It was noted that the information collected would be fed into policy development within Directorates and service areas.

It was noted that older persons and persons with disabilities were generally identified as being less satisfied than other respondents.

RESOLVED -

That the Strategic Director Neighbourhood Services be requested to give some thought to the findings of the survey and report to the Panel on how service delivery can be modified to take account of the concerns expressed in the Survey.

EQ14/00 REVIEW OF SERVICES FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING

The Panel noted the outcome and recommendations of the review of services for the deaf and hard hearing completed within the Neighbourhood Services Directorate, which made recommendations for the development and improvement of services across the Council.

The review had consulted the deaf community and the Hard of Hearing Group and had also considered other models of service provided elsewhere in the country, together with appropriate reports prepared by the Social Services Inspectorate.

RESOLVED -

1. That officers be requested to explore the possibility of installing loop systems in reception areas and the purchase of portable loop systems.
2. That the principle of a Corporate Contract for the provision of interpreters for the deaf community and further work being undertaken to develop detailed proposals be supported.

3. That the development of a Corporate Policy Statement and guidance for staff in relation to the use of interpreters by staff to ensure an equal quality of service is available to all be supported.
4. That the Policy Statement be considered at a future meeting of the Panel as an addition to existing Equalities Policies.

EQ15/00

TRANSLATION SERVICES: CORPORATE POLICY

The Panel considered details of the services provided by the Community Language Service, which included oral and written translation services for users of other languages.

The Panel noted that the service had been developed from a Joint Finance Bid submitted by Buckinghamshire Health Authority and the Milton Keynes Anti-Racial Harassment Group in 1996, but to date there was not a co-ordinated and consistent approach to the use of interpreters, the role of advocates and consultation within the ethnic minority communities.

It was recognised that it was important that the services available from the community language service were widely publicised and relevant groups aware of the Service's existence.

RESOLVED -

1. That the role of the Service and its development to date be noted.
2. That further work to develop a Corporate Policy in relation to the use of interpreters be supported.
3. That further work to determine the Council's longer term needs of the Community Language Service be supported.

EQ16/00

EQUALITIES ACTION PLAN

The Panel received and noted the Equalities Action Plans in respect of both Corporate Initiatives and initiatives for individual Directorates.

It was asked that when updated copies of the Action Plans were submitted they should show how they had changed from the previous version.

RESOLVED -

That regular updates on the Action Plans be provided for the Panel.

EQ17/00

PERFORMANCE PLAN - EQUALITIES TARGETS

The Panel noted that the Council's Best Value Performance Plan, which it was now required to produce, would include new statutory Performance Indicators relating to equalities issues, together with any local Performance Indicators adopted by the Council.

The Panel noted the statutory indicators and considered what local indicators should be adopted to form part of the Council's Best Value Performance Plan.

RESOLVED -

1. That the following statutory Best Value Performance Indicators be noted:
 - (a) BVPI12 - Level of CRE Standard for Local Government to which Authority conforms;
 - (b) BVPI11 - The percentage of senior management posts filled by women;
 - (c) BVPI16 - Number of staff who are disabled (as defined by the DDA); and
 - (d) BVPI17 - Minority ethnic staff as percentage of the total workforce.
2. That the Policy and Resources Committee be recommended to adopt the following local Performance Indicators and targets:
 - (a) REC Equality Standard - Level 4 by 2004/05;and
 - (b) Proportion of people treated fairly by the Council - 70% of survey respondents by 2004/05.
3. That consideration be given to the additional local Performance Indicators:
 - (a) Percentage of senior management posts filled by persons with disabilities; and
 - (b) Percentage of senior management posts filled by ethnic minorities.

EQ17/00

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

RESOLVED -

That the next meeting of the Panel be scheduled for Monday 27 March 2000 at 6.30 pm.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 8.07 PM