

HIGHLAND AND WESTERN ISLES VALUATION JOINT BOARD

UPDATE REPORT ON GENDER, DISABILITY AND RACE EQUALITIES SCHEMES

Report by Assessor

1. There is an obligation for periodic reports to be received by the Board in relation to the Department's Gender, Disabilities and Race Equalities Schemes. This arises at a time when the oversight of legal obligations is undergoing structural change in that these matters are being brought under the single responsibility of the Commission for Equalities and Human Rights.
2. It is the intention over the coming year to draw together all such policies under a single 'Equalities' banner and to unite the approach taken where at all possible to leverage efforts. This will be done by tapping into the efforts of the Highland Council and the Comhairle on their own account and in connection with their diverse partnerships as well as by looking to unify the Department's own work.
3. That this is an appropriate approach can be seen from the fact that the research most pertinent to the Department, namely that carried out in the electoral registration field, shows that there is a correlation between gender, race and disabilities issues and the incidence of participation.
4. While that work remains to be commenced, the immediate purpose of this report is to advise Members as to the work carried out under this head in the past year.

Disability Equalities

5. In terms of the action plan for the past year, the audit of our premises has revealed a need to provide a wheelchair user emergency stair escape device for Moray House. The new Dingwall offices were designed to have wheelchair friendly access and otherwise to meet current regulations. The Department's web site, given that it is embedded in the Highland Council site, now meets the higher standards required today as to accessibility and the Scottish Assessors' Portal has similarly been upgraded.
6. While many of the Department's forms are readily usable the conclusion has been reached that there is room for improvement. This is the result of self audit. The intention is to train in the relevant design principles and then revise all forms in an effort to improve their ease of use. The essential conundrum is to reconcile the twin needs for clarity and appropriate brevity with the need fully to explain the business in question often in a manner required by statute. This work will be carried forward in the period ahead.
7. In the field of employment policies, the intention is to review these in the same timescales as the Highland Council as the lead authority in order to avoid duplication of effort. So far as staff training is concerned, the Depute Assessor has attended a course designed to introduce Equalities matters in a united form, a precursor to training of all staff over time.

8. More generally, liaison with the Electoral Commission, The Returning Officer, the Highland Council's Equalities Officer and other ad hoc contacts has served to keep the Department abreast of developments in the field.

Race Equalities

9. It should be noted that the Department's policy is due for review and this will be by incorporation into the policy amalgamation referred to above.

10. The aim of the current policy is to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups. This arises in the context of a region in which the black and minorities groups form a very small proportion of the population.

11. While it is not considered that the Department is discriminatory in its employment practices, the composition of the staff is again entirely white and British following the return of the only member of staff from a minority group to her home town in the South. It is equally true to state that staff turnover tends to be low and change in the employee profile of the Department would be expected to lag changes in the population composition. The specialised functions carried out by the Department may also have a bearing.

12. There is no barrier to recruitment of non-white/British staff and interviews have been granted to black and minorities candidates who met the minimum requirements for the posts in question.

13. So far as staff training is concerned the Depute Assessor has attended a course designed to introduce Equalities matters in a united form, a precursor to training of all staff over time.

14. Electoral Commission research shows that race is clearly a relevant factor in explaining some lack of participation and engagement in the democratic process and the Department has formed the view that across the Equalities agenda electoral registration is the main area where we have the ability to make a difference. In pursuit of this aim the Department recently participated in a seminar held by CEMVO which is a minorities umbrella organisation. One of CEMVO's projects is work for the Electoral Commission seeking to assist minorities groups at local level to promote their members' interests and to foster engagement in the political process. A number of promising contacts were made and are being pursued.

15. The main development has therefore been the establishment of contact in a viable fashion that directly relates to the Department's functions. This will be followed up directly and also via the Highland Council/Wellbeing Alliance channels.

Gender Equalities

16. The recently approved policy in this area identified that the only clear concern in the gender balance of the Department was the entirely female character of the clerical and administrative staff. That position has not altered nor has any proper means been identified that might reasonably be expected to change that situation.

17. The Department continues to take a positive approach to requests for flexible forms of working in support of diverse needs on the basis both of legal obligation and the fact that skilled and experienced members of staff are difficult to source and replace and that flexible working assists retention.

18 While the Depute Assessor has received pertinent training there is a need to devise an overall training for all staff across the Equalities agenda and in view of the slippage this is seen as a matter that should now be carried out on an integrated basis. Highland Council courses are the likeliest vehicle.

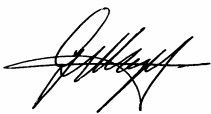
19. A key gender issue is pay and it is hoped that the year ahead will see job evaluation advanced on the basis that this is a method, beyond mere impression, that will identify whether any inequality of grading has inadvertently been established over the years.

20. The Department's complaints form has been altered specifically to identify concerns as to discrimination of any type.

20. While female participation in the electoral process is no less than for males, it is clear that in some minorities the position is less favourable. Generally the creation of a combined approach to equalities issues should serve to cross reference these issues and permit a more efficient approach to remedying any problem areas that come to light.

Generally

21. The Board is requested to note this report and to agree to the production of a single Equalities policy in a similar timescale to that being adopted by the lead authority.



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