

EQUALITIES PANEL

21 November 2011

4.00 - 6.00 pm

Present:

Councillors – Gerri Bird, Sarah Brown, and Salah Al Bander

Also present: Councillor Reid

Public Members – Norah Al-Ani, Bintou Niangane Graham Lewis and Nicky Wrigley.

Staff Member – Jackie Hanson (Operations and Resources Manager),

Officers – John Frost (Head of Revenue and Benefits), Alison Cole (Benefits Manager), Deborah Simpson (Head of Human Resources), Vicki Davidson (Organisational Development Manager), Paul Williams (Diversity Advisor), Chris Williams (Strategy Officer) and Toni Birkin (Committee Manager).

FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL**11/31/EP Welcome, Introductions and Apologies**

Apologies were received from Antoinette Jackson, Councillor Marchant-Daisley, Bridget Keady and Nacer Dali.

11/32/EP Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

11/33/EP Minutes of Previous Meeting and Matters Arising

The minute of the meeting of the 20th June 2011 were agreed as a correct record subject to the addition of Councillor Reid to the attendance list.

11/34/EP Welfare Reforms

The panel received presentations from the Head of Revenues and Benefits and the Benefits Manager regarding Welfare Reforms. He suggested that the fundamental changes to the welfare system would have a big impact on Cambridge. The Benefits Manager outlined the local position regarding Housing Benefit and Local Housing Allowance. Copies of the presentations would be circulated to the panel and are available on request.

Members of the panel were concerned that the changes would have a disproportionate impact on the working population. Panel members asked how vulnerable groups would be identified and assisted. The Benefits Manager outlined that the existing definitions of vulnerable groups would not change.

Cambridge City Council would be working closely with neighbouring authorities and Registered Social Landlords to deliver the changes. The timetable of the reforms is very tight and would have an impact on Local Authorities..

An EQIA of Universal Credits had demonstrated an impact on disabled claimants..

The Head of Revenues and Benefits outlined other changes that would be taking place regarding Council Tax benefits and discounts. Decisions on this would be taken at a local level and would include a consultation period.

Panel Members asked the following questions:

1) How much information has been circulated to claimants?

Initial information had been circulated and would be followed up as further changes are rolled out.

2) If residents cannot afford the under occupancy shortfall, will they be offered assistance to move?

This is currently unclear. The existing compensations scheme for those freeing up larger properties may need to be reviewed.

3) Will there be sufficient smaller properties for those needing to downsize?

Joint working with other social landlords and the private sectors is seen as the best way to address this issue.

4) When will the first impact of the changes be felt by claimants?

Once the transitional arrangements begin to be phased out (January 2012) claimants will feel the first impacts of the changes.

5) Is there a support plan in place for front line staff?

Training of such staff is on-going. Communication with claimants is seen as key.

6) The move to Universal Credit would transfer the responsibility for paying rent direct to claimants. This would make the work of agencies working with those in debt or with other issues much more difficult. It could also lead to an increase in homelessness.

Communication would again be key. External agencies are being informed of the changes and can request training.

7) What impact can the consultations process have?

This would be limited to the decisions that are being taken locally.

Councillor Reid commented on the impact of the broad market rent area policy decision and the impact on City residents. The City Council has raised this decision with Central Government.

11/35/EP Equality in Employment

The panel received a report from the Diversity Advisor regarding Equality in Employment.

Panel members questioned the low percentage figure of staff declaring their sexual orientation to be lesbian, gay or bisexual and suggested this might be linked to the relatively high proportion of staff who prefer not to answer this questions. Members were pleased to see an increase in the numbers of BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) applicants and asked if there were any positive links to local groups to encourage this.

An error in 5.4 of the report breaking down redundancies by gender and full time, part time posts was noted.

The following points were raised:

- Members asked if information on exit interviews could be included in a future report
- It would be helpful to have a breakdown of BAME applications cross referenced to grade of job applied for.
- The concentration of BAME staff in band 3 needs further investigation.

The panel concluded that they would find it helpful to know more about the pay bands and the jobs types they encompass. Use of terms such as JNC, needed further explanation.

11/36/EP Diversity Peer Review

The panel received a tabled report from the Strategy Officer regarding the Diversity Peer Challenge. Cambridge City Council is an 'achieving' authority. The report highlights current good practice and makes a number of recommendations for future improvements. Much of what is recommended was already happening.

The panel questioned the staff take up of Equality and Diversity training. A corporate programme was in place and all staff were encouraged to attend.

Panel members asked for detail on how the findings of the review would be used. The officer responded that 'achieving' is the middle grade and the report highlighted opportunities for improvements.

Councillor Reid concluded the discussion by confirming that the report would be cross-referenced to the Single Equality Scheme 2012 - 2015, which is currently under consultation, and would inform future developments.

11/37/EP Membership of the Equalities Panel

Staff and public panel members whose terms of office is at an end were thanked for their work on the Panel over the years and invited to reapply if they so choose. Councillor Reid asked for feedback on experiences while part of the panel. It was agreed that the panel had improved over the years. Moving meetings out of the Guildhall had been helpful. There was general agreement that the panel was now fulfilling its role.

An audit of panel skills and training needs was suggested. This would highlight gaps which could be addressed by future recruitment. There is currently no training available to public members. Deborah Simpson would investigate this and would look at the possibility of them to attend member training sessions.

The panel vacancies would be advertised widely and the staff groups would be approached to promote them to their members. The staff vacancy person specifications would be updated.

11/38/EP Future Work Programme of Equalities Panel

The panel members agreed that the briefing on the recent marches in the City had been very useful. More events of this type, with invited external agencies and staff in attendance would be welcomed.

11/39/EP Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be held on 18th June 2012.

The meeting ended at 6.00 pm

CHAIR