



CHALLENGING INEQUALITY  
& CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

**Equality Steering Group**

**Annual Report** 2003/04





# Equality Steering Group<sup>1</sup> Annual Report 2003/4

## Foreword

It is with much pride and pleasure that I present this annual report on our Equality Steering Group's achievements in equality. What follows in the report is the result of a great deal of work by the Steering Group, the Equality Reference Group and a number of dedicated members of staff in all Directorates.

The highlight of the year must be the achievement of Level One of the national Equality Standard, but this of course is only the beginning; we have much more to do before Level Five is achieved. The basis of the work lies in our 'Justice through Equality' policy which embraces the five separate areas of our equality agenda.

The task of the Steering Group is to turn these excellent policies into practice, so that both our workforce and the recipients of our services feel valued and respected regardless of their own particular circumstances.

I hope that we are never complacent about how much more needs to be done. It is therefore vital that we receive feedback about our work and where it needs to improve further. Comments on the report will therefore be extremely welcome. Please send them to [equality@devon.gov.uk](mailto:equality@devon.gov.uk).

Councillor Jill Owen  
Member Equality Champion

## I. The Year at a Glance

- The Steering Group played a key role in enabling the Council to achieve its first national standard on equality. All the Council's Directorates were engaged in work to meet the standard which included laying important foundations for the future. The Council should feel proud of its achievement.
- We have continued to develop and strengthen our relationships with voluntary and community organisations that play a vital role in improving our policy and practice.
- We completed a study of the learning and development needs of employees and elected members on equality and produced a three year action plan to meet the needs identified.
- We also held our first equal opportunities awareness week and brought together Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans employees to explore their experiences of working for the Council, living in Devon and receiving services from the Council. Their thoughts and ideas will help improve outcomes for employees and local people.
- The Steering Group also played a key role in bidding for funds to develop transit sites for travellers in Devon and in undertaking new projects to benefit people with disabilities. Work continued on the Council's Race Equality Scheme which will be the subject of a separate report.



<sup>1</sup> The Equality Steering Group is mandated by Corporate Management Board to help mainstream active equal opportunities practice throughout all aspects of the Council's work.

## 2. The Legislative Framework

During the year we saw the introduction of new legislation that will:

- prohibit discrimination in employment and training on the grounds of sexual orientation and religion. The legislation provides protections similar to those already provided on grounds of sex, race and disability.
- incorporate the EU race directive which covers employment, training, education, access to and supply of goods and services into UK law.

A draft Disability Discrimination Bill has also been published for detailed examination before a Bill is brought before Parliament. The Bill would extend rights to people with cancer, HIV and MS and, amongst other things, place a positive duty on public authorities to promote disability equality which would parallel race.

The Government is also legislating to give transsexual people legal recognition in their acquired gender ensuring that for the first time transsexual people are afforded all the rights and responsibilities appropriate to that gender.

The Steering Group keeps a watching brief on environmental influences and examines how changes will impact on the functions of the Council. It also plays a key role in raising awareness and helping the Council meet its responsibilities and deliver on its commitments.

## 3. Research

Locally we were fortunate to see the publication of two key pieces of research which provide a distinctive perspective on life in rural Devon, which up to now has been largely unheard.

The first, carried out by Devon Racial Equality Council, describes the experiences of 170 Black and Minority Ethnic people living in rural Devon and their recommendations for promoting cultural diversity and achieving better race relations. The second, commissioned by Teignbridge and South Hams Racist Incident Priority Action Teams (of which Devon County Council is a member), was a cultural audit that sought the opinions, feelings and ideas of 320 Black and Minority Ethnic people on improving public services and quality of life.

Both pieces of research are already proving to be a rich source of information for the Council's employees and elected members. Full details are accessible via the diversity website and are essential reading for decision makers.

An organisational and partnership response is being formulated to both pieces of research to ensure that the voices of participants are heard and used in a meaningful way to improve our policy and practice.

The richness of research and information on racial equality has highlighted the lack of qualitative and quantitative information on other equality themes. This is something which is also felt by our partners and we are looking to address it through some targeted work with Devon Strategic Partnership.



## 4. Membership and Ways of Working

This was the first year in which the Equality Steering Group operated to full capacity. The Group met six times during the year and held a development day. It refreshed its terms of reference, defined key roles carried out by members of the Group and clarified arrangements for support and accountability.

Coaching partnerships were set up between the Council's Directorate Equality Representatives and members of the Devon Equality Reference Group to enhance learning and increase personal effectiveness.

## 5. Achievements

### A. Learning and Development

Previously there have been few opportunities for employees and elected members to engage in learning and development activities on equality partly because a new strategic approach to learning and development has been emerging.

Recognising that learning and development is critical to organisational improvement on equality, the Steering Group commissioned a local consultant to (1) assess and prioritise the learning and development needs of employees and elected members taking account of the legislative framework (current and anticipated) and the Council's policies (2) draw up an action plan to enable the Council to meet the priority learning and development needs identified over a three year period from 1 April 2004. Headlines from the research included:

- there is little perception of the reality of discrimination and disadvantage in Devon and the circumstances which lead to some people being excluded

- many people in DCC are oblivious or unaware of equality issues
- there are a number of people who are resistant and some who are antagonistic towards the Council's equality agenda
- there are supporters who are working hard to champion and lead the equality agenda
- there is discomfort at not having the right language
- there is passive compliance with harassing behaviour
- the majority of participants want to learn more about equality.

This work has been completed and a three-year corporately funded learning and development programme has been agreed for implementation from 1 April 2004.

### B. Community Engagement

During the year the Council worked with the Islamic Centre of the South West to pilot a new approach to engaging Black and Minority Ethnic people in Devon. The Islamic Centre has a history of working well with people from different racial and faith groups and people of no faith on educational, quality of life, social and health care issues. The Centre has well-developed networks and has become a natural and trusted point of contact for many individuals and families seeking help, support and social contact.

The partnership enabled the Council to work through the Islamic Centre to reach its extensive networks across Devon and engage people on the issues that are meaningful to them. Over 350 people have been contacted during the pilot that has led, amongst other things, to a new community facility for Chinese adults and children in Exeter and a research project leading to greater





understanding of how to meet the needs of Muslim elders. The project worker believes that the initiative has awoken a sense of citizenship amongst BME people, given recognition and acknowledgement to the work of volunteers and led to a greater understanding of the work of the Council. We are hoping to continue this project into 2004 and beyond and enable our partners to participate.

### C. Achievement of Extended Level 1 of the Equality Standard for Local Government

During the year the Council reached Level One of the Equality Standard for Local Government. The Standard is a Best Value Performance Indicator and provides the basis for continuous improvement in equality policy and practice.

The Council has worked beyond the basic Standard which covers race, gender and disability and included age, gender identity and sexual orientation which parallels the Council's equality policies.

The Council chose not to opt for self-assessment preferring instead to invite its Equality Reference Group to carry out an audit, thereby increasing employee and public confidence in the result. A decision has recently been taken to extend the Standard further to include religion and belief.

### D. Challenging Inequality and Celebrating Diversity Week

From 14-21 November 2003, the Council held its first equal opportunities awareness week for employees and elected members. County Hall was the venue for the week's activities making events particularly suitable for employees and members living and working in Exeter.

Over 200 people participated in events including a debate, information fair, consciousness raising workshops, street awareness classes and a seminar giving managers early access to findings from Devon Racial Equality Council's Multi-Ethnic Devon research. The Council will hold its second awareness week during September 2004.

### E. Communications and Information

The diversity website was restructured, refreshed and relaunched as a toolkit and resource for employees and elected members. The site provides 'how to' guidance and gives access to the latest research and thinking.

New materials were produced including a 'Did you know?' exhibition revealing facts and figures about inequality, a guide to the world's major religions and leaflets summarising the Council's equality policies and what they mean to employees and Councillors.

### F. Development of Gypsy and Traveller Sites

A member of the Steering Group led the submission of two bids to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for 100% capital funding to develop two transit sites for travellers in Devon. Many of the traditional stopping places used by Gypsies and Travellers for generations have been lost to housing and industrial development.

Research nationally and locally has highlighted serious health and education difficulties within the travelling community partly due to the decline of traditional stopping places. At the time of writing the Council does not know whether its bids have been successful. However, bids are dependent upon planning permission which was narrowly refused by the Council. Work is continuing with a view to submitting a second bid in January 2005.



## G. Supporting Asylum Seekers and Refugees

A member of the Steering Group continues to lead a multi-agency asylum seeker forum in Exeter. The Council holds a contract with the Home Office to accommodate asylum seekers waiting for resolution of their claim. Very positive and creative partnerships have grown up to ensure the provision of high quality care, language tuition, access to housing, employment, etc. An independent refugee support organisation has been created which is now registered as a charity and is self sustaining.

## H. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) Employee Project

From September to November 2003, the Council ran a number of focus groups for LGBT employees to explore their experiences of living in Devon, receiving services from the Council and working for the Council.

32 employees participated in the Project which was the first of its kind in the Council. Key themes can be drawn from people's experiences including a feeling of isolation, the lack of a public profile of LGBT people, the prevalence of heterosexism (that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise) and that LGBT is an uncomfortable subject.

The Council is currently taking forward the 18 recommendations arising from the Project and supporting the development of the LGBT network formed as part of the Project.

## I. Recognising British Sign Language

In March 2003 the Government recognised British Sign Language (BSL) as a language in its own right. The British Deaf Association, which represents the UK's Deaf community, has produced a

Charter to help local authorities give substance to the recognition of BSL and comply with the spirit of the Disability Discrimination Act. The Charter sets out a number of key pledges to improve access and rights for Deaf people who use BSL, leading to greater inclusion of Deaf people in society.

The Council is currently working with the Deaf community to develop a local Charter and is playing a key role in promoting BSL recognition locally.

## J. Becoming a Dyslexia Wise Employer

Following some consciousness raising work by a member of staff with dyslexia, the Council is working towards becoming a dyslexia wise employer. Dyslexia affects around 10% of the population (around 2000 of our employees) and is a combination of abilities and difficulties which affect learning, literacy and numeracy. The nature of the changes required will mean that benefits are felt by the majority of the workforce.

## K. Space for Contemplation and Prayer

Employees and elected members working at County Hall have been given the opportunity to say whether they would use a space for contemplation and prayer during the working day. Some employees have previously indicated that they would use a space for prayer and others have said that they would use a space for reflection or contemplation, for example, at times of bereavement.

If the survey identifies sufficient demand Corporate Management Board will be asked to agree to a facility being piloted for one year and, depending upon the outcome, steps could be taken to assess the need at other workplaces.





### L. Incidents of Discrimination

The Council has developed new guidance for employees on how to deal with incidents of discrimination and refusal of service from Council clients. The guidance makes clear that each situation needs to be treated on its merits and that employees and managers need to balance the Council's responsibility to individual service users and its responsibilities as a good employer. The guidance has been developed to implement the commitments given in the Council's 'Justice through Equality' policies.



The Steering Group is monitoring incidents of discrimination in the workplace, school environment and at the point of service delivery to ensure the learning from incidents is used to inform prevention work and support those affected.



### M. Impact Assessments

The Council has developed a more sophisticated approach to undertaking equality impact assessments which are now a legal requirement.



The purpose of an impact assessment is to ensure the Council does not discriminate and promotes equality. It is a way to make sure decision makers think carefully about the likely impact of their work. It involves anticipating the consequences of policies and projects on different sections of the community and making sure that, as far as possible, any negative consequences are eliminated or minimised and opportunities for promoting equality are maximised.



Over time equality impact assessments should become second nature. Work is progressing to embed impact assessments and

contribute to the Council's achievement of Level Two of the Equality Standard for Local Government which is a priority for 2004/5.

### N. Improving Access

The Council has continued to work with people with physical and sensory disabilities, trained as access auditors, to assess what changes need to be made to our public buildings to ensure they are accessible to all. This work will inform a corporate access improvement plan that will focus on the removal of physical and attitudinal barriers.

## 6. Equality Reference Group

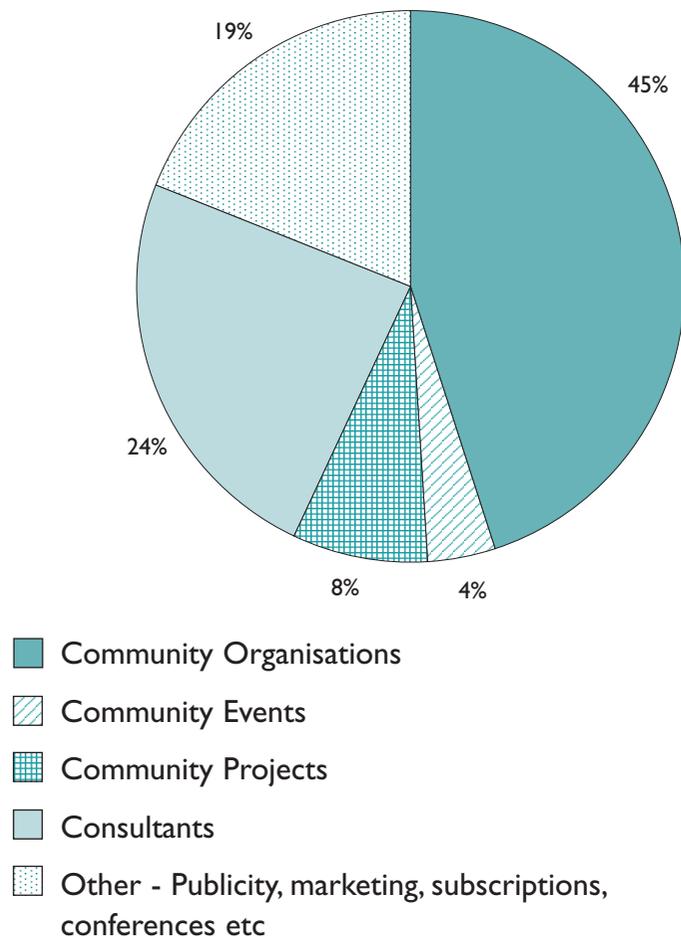
We were pleased to secure the involvement of Fair Play South West in our Equality Reference Group (ERG) who bring to the table a detailed knowledge and understanding of the issues affecting women at work and in the community. Fair Play's involvement means that the voluntary sector membership of ERG reflects the Council's policy framework strengthening its ability to advise the Council effectively.

We would find it difficult to progress our work on equality without the involvement and commitment of the Reference Group both from individual members and from their organisations who support our work. The Group has been heavily engaged in audit and action planning work on the Equality Standard for Local Government and has played a major part in enabling the Council to reach Level One.

## 7. Budget 2003-4

We successfully secured a much needed increase of £60,000 in the corporate equality budget in 2003/4 making a total of £70,000. The majority of the budget has been allocated to our work with communities through the funding of projects and organisations that work with people directly experiencing, or at risk of, prejudice and discrimination. See Figure 1 below.

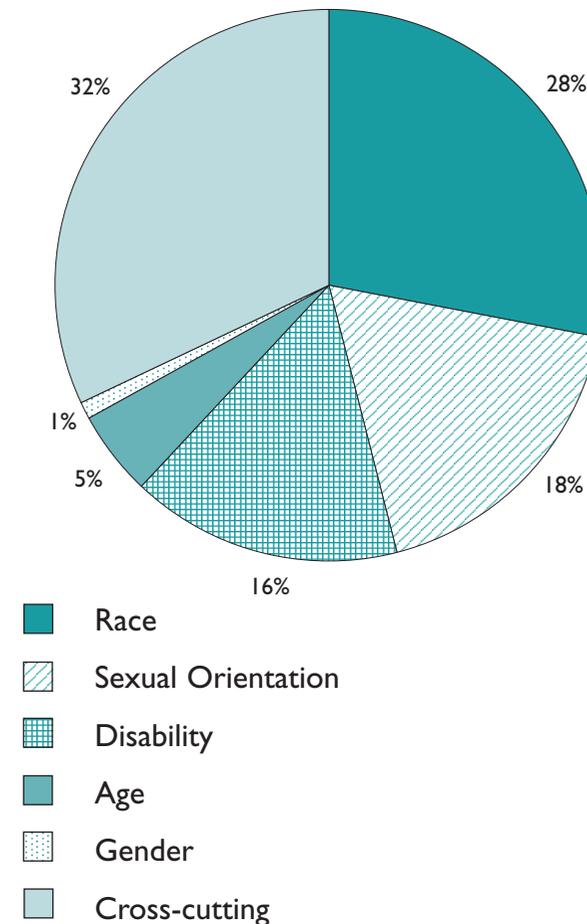
**Fig 1 - Allocation of budget and community orientation**



In terms of equality themes, our work on race equality attracted the greatest level of investment followed in order by sexual orientation, disability, age and gender. See Figure 2 below.

In addition to the £70,000 corporate equality budget, a grant of £10,000 is made annually to Devon Racial Equality Council as part of a programme of ongoing support.

**Fig 2 - Allocation of budget by equality theme**



## 8. National Work

During the year the Council was fortunate to be able to contribute to national research and good practice on equality as follows:

1. From 13-15 May 2003, the Council participated in an Audit Commission study on race equality approaches across the public sector. The main aim of the study was to investigate how local agencies are responding, at a strategic level, to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 in terms of delivering improved outcomes to local Black and Minority Ethnic people.

The Council was one of ten fieldwork sites selected nationally. The field visit report and final study report 'The Journey to Race Equality', which includes a case study from Devon, are available on the Council's website. Some of the work featured in this report begins to address some of the actions highlighted during the field visit, other actions are being progressed by officers as part of their mainstream responsibilities.

2. In October 2003, the Council was asked to participate in a roundtable discussion on a new Equality and Diversity Challenge for Council/political group leaders. The final Challenge will be launched in the summer of 2004 and the Council's leaders have already said that they would like to sign up to it and use the opportunity to become more involved in the Council's work on equality. This is excellent news.

3. County Council case studies featured in two guidance documents produced by the Employers' Organisation for

Local Government. 'Sexuality - The New Agenda' provides advice on engaging and supporting lesbian, gay and bisexual people. 'Race is Relevant' offers guidance on how to progress race equality work in rural areas.

4. In March 2004, Devon was one of seven Councils chosen to comment on the Employers' Organisations guidance on implementing the new employment equality regulations.

## 9. Looking Ahead to 2004/5

The Steering Group has had a busy year and is currently working on a detailed Corporate Equality Action Plan which will bring together the work the Council needs to take forward over the next three years to deliver true equality outcomes for local people. The Plan will build on the Council's successes embedding what works and changing that which does not. The Plan will require the active participation and motivation of employees, Councillors, partners and local people if it is to achieve its objective of improving services and quality of life overall.

### Equality Steering Group

March 2004

Copies of this programme are available in large print, on computer disc, audio-tape, Braille, British Sign Language and other community languages. If you or someone you know would like a free copy, have any queries or comments please:

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