

MANAGEMENT BOARD

UPDATE ON THE HOUSE EQUALITY SCHEME

A paper by the Corporate Diversity Managers

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to inform the Management Board of further progress of the Single Equality Scheme and the plans for launching the scheme by the end of this year, as requested by the Board at its April meeting.

Action for the Board

2. The Board is asked to note progress and to consider the emerging themes and suggestions from the interviews and inform the Diversity team which actions they would prioritise in support of improving services to Members.

Background

3. The Scheme was prompted by a letter to Mr Speaker concerning the statutory equality duties within government departments and agencies and Mr Speaker's agreement for the House to have such a scheme about which the Commission wished to receive six monthly updates. A report now needs to be sent to the Commission when the Board has considered this paper.
4. The Scheme covers the House as an employer and a service provider to Members, the public and others on the Parliamentary Estate.

The Consultation exercise

5. Consultation has been carried by Equality Research and Consulting Ltd, part of the Equality Unit of Royal Holloway, University of London, who have considerable experience working with the public sector in equality and diversity practices. June Jackson, the lead consultant, has carried out the majority of the interviews.
6. The first phase of interviews was mainly with staff - both individual and groups with all three strands of the scheme – gender, race and disability – being covered. Staff from all pay bands and all departments were seen as well as all members of the Management Board. A meeting was also held with a group of Trade Union representatives.
7. As key stakeholders, Members were also involved in the consultation and eight across the three main parties were interviewed. This included two Members with special interest in disability, one from the 15 Members who have declared themselves as belonging to an ethnic

minority group and two with known involvement in equality issues. A small group of Members' staff were also interviewed.

8. Comments have been sought and received from a disabled persons' organisation who visited the House recently for an event and provided views and suggestions mainly around access issues.
9. Of the 95 people who have participated so far, there has been a good mix in relation to gender, age range, disability status and ethnicity, and some inclusion of different religions. All participants have been very willing to spend time discussing the issues and providing suggestions for consideration of the Scheme which will be very useful as we move forward. There has been a high level of participation and engagement around equality with mainly enthusiastic support for the development of a single Equality Scheme.
10. A paper outlining the Scheme was presented to the Administration Committee which received their support.

Other sources of information

11. Secondary sources have also been used to collate opinions on equality and diversity within the House Service. Information from a number of relevant reports from the Hansard Society, the results from the House Service Staff Surveys and feedback from the Diversity Matters event last year have been all been considered.

Themes emerging

12. There is a strong impression of good intent and a will to 'get things right'. However, staff expressed the wish to hear stronger messages of commitment to equality from the top. They commented that when these messages are received, they are noted and appreciated – they do make an impact. The most consistent issues raised by those interviewed are:
 - Consistency: people felt there could be more consistency in recruitment practices, in managing diversity in the workplace and in the provision of flexible working options (in line with business needs)
 - Gradism: there is high consciousness of grade which is perceived by some as oppressive and stifling initiative
 - Action: there is a desire for the House to be pro-active rather than waiting for issues to arise e.g. making provision for disabled access, rather than re-acting to one-off situations; encouragement of under-represented groups e.g. women in craft jobs rather than waiting for them to come through the 'normal' channels
 - More equal representation: a significant number of interviewees would like to see greater representation of ethnic minority staff across the pay bands and in different departments and of women in senior posts
 - Equality of opportunity: access to opportunities to gain skills not specifically related to current job and to move around the organisation could be improved

- Equality within business planning/Forward Job Plans: equality objectives should be included in business plans and considered in FJPs especially for those in managerial roles
- Focus on equality: equality monitoring data should be published – reports analysed, highlighting areas for improvement and plans for action. Some Members and Members' staff mentioned diversity information in relation to Members' staff; this, however, is outside the scope of the scheme.

Suggestions made

13. A large number of suggestions have been made for consideration to be included in the Scheme, some of which are already in place. This is a long list which needs prioritising and suggestions from the Management Board on their priorities would be most helpful:
 - A clear statement of what equality and diversity mean in the House and why they are important to the organisation. Commitment of Management Board
 - Acknowledgement of what has already been achieved in this area
 - Ongoing programme of mandatory training on equality and diversity aimed at different groupings of staff – managers, new staff at induction, recruiters
 - Disability and diversity awareness training for staff who deal directly with the public e.g. security
 - Aspirational targets for representation of under-represented groups and the actions to take this forward
 - Recruitment practices which will help improve numbers of ethnic minorities and disabled in all types of jobs
 - Review of House policies for equality of opportunity e.g. flexible working
 - Consultation and involvement exercises of staff for 'big issues' in the House
 - Role models of senior staff – ethnic minority/part-time/disabled etc and for them to act as mentors
 - Positive policy of internal career development and progression – internal moves, secondments, mentoring, training grades (possible positive action)
 - Intranet/internet access for everyone who requests it
 - Learning and development time allowed for everyone e.g. 5 days per year minimum
 - Greater interaction with the public through e.g. increased outreach work
 - Improved communications e.g. clearer signage, all public leaflets to be produced in large print as standard
 - Disability advice and support for Members e.g. contacts for BSL signers, dyslexia assessors
 - Members' staff allowed to attend House staff training
 - Mechanism to monitor the scheme and six monthly reports on progress.

Timetable for next steps

14. Several more interviews are planned before the rise of House, including with another two Members. An electronic consultation will take place with a number of organisations for disabled people. This will be carried out by a disability consultant who also acts as secretariat to the Parliamentary All Party Group on Disability.
15. Information from the full consultation exercise will be used to complete the detail of the Scheme including the Action Plan during July and August. A draft scheme will be presented to Andrew Walker in September and can be circulated to other Board members if they wish.
16. The Diversity team will then invite comments on the draft Scheme from a range of stakeholders. Comments received will be considered and any appropriate adjustments made.
17. It is planned that the Scheme be fully signed off by the Commission at the end of November and launched within the House at the beginning of December. The Clerk has agreed to contribute a foreword to the Scheme. As well open presentations, it is the intention to address departmental Senior Teams so that equality and diversity can feature within their departmental business plans. For the Scheme to be effective, actions and responsibility must sit within the line management and not with the Diversity team which is in line with the Tebbit Review.
18. The Scheme must not sit as a separate initiative, but should be 'entwined' with all appropriate areas such as Works and Estates, Outreach, Learning and Development, Recruitment, Performance Management etc. There are also opportunities to work closely with and support the Office of the Chief Executive in the area of risk management through the impact assessment process which will be an integral part of the Scheme.

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