

COMMITTEE: RACE ADVISORY FORUM

DATE: 4th April 2005

SUBJECT: EQUALITY AGENCY-FEASIBILITY REPORT

REPORT BY: HEAD OF EQUALITIES

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IMPLICATIONS:

LEGAL	COMMUNITY SAFETY
EQUALITIES	ENVIRONMENT
FINANCIAL	CONSULTATIONS
STAFFING	OTHER

WARDS AFFECTED:

PURPOSE

1. To inform Forum Members of progress on the feasibility study

RECOMMENDATION(S)

2. Race Advisory Forum Committee is recommended to note the progress on the feasibility study.

BACKGROUND

3. The Forum is recommended to note the progress on the feasibility study, to request a further report from the Steering Group by the end of March

2005 with recommendations for action and to give consideration to the procedure it might use to respond to the recommendations in the next few months.

BACKGROUND:

4. Luton is one of the few towns nationally and certainly in the Eastern region that has a significant minority population (of around 30%) but does not have a Race Equality Council (REC) to support the work of race equality. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act, 2000 strengthens the Race Relations Act 1976 by placing upon all public bodies a general duty, which pro-actively requires them to work towards elimination of unlawful discrimination, and promotion of equality and good relations between people of different racial groups.
5. The Council's report on community cohesion 'Sticking Together' also raised the issue that people who needed specialist advice or support about issues to do with discrimination, would either have to go to Bedford or London. One of the actions set out in the Sticking Together report, was to explore the possibility of setting up of an Equalities Agency that would address all aspects of equality and diversity and support all victims of unlawful discrimination.
6. In May 2004, as part of its developmental programme, the Commission for Racial Equality ("CRE") provided a grant of £15,000, to fund a feasibility study in Luton. It is worth noting that the CRE left open the option as to whether such an agency should be a "Race or generic Equality Agency". That decision is therefore dependent on the findings of the feasibility study and of course on the wishes of local individuals and organisations. The recent Government White Paper proposals on the amalgamation of the three existing Commissions into a single Equality and Human Rights Commission may also be a relevant consideration with regard to future funding opportunities.
7. One of the central questions the survey needs to address is whether Luton needs an equalities agency and if such an agency was to come into being, whether it should address all discrimination issues including race, disability, gender, age, religion, sexuality and any combination thereof.
8. **The study considered a number of questions through detailed consultation with key stakeholders as follows:**
 - i) Does Luton need to have an equalities agency? If yes should it be :
 - A race equality agency or

- An equalities agency covering all aspects of equality?
- ii) What role and functions could/should such an organisation perform?
- iii) Are there any gaps in provision that existing organisations are unable/unwilling to fill?
- iv) What the structure and constitutional arrangement for such an agency should be for the options at (i) above?
- v) Are there specific service delivery/employment needs either in the public or private sectors, which such an organisation could meet? If so what are they?
- vi) What kind of resources in cash or kind may become available to support the work of the agency either now or in the future from the public or private sectors?

REPORT

Summary of report findings

9. Three hundred and forty seven (347) questionnaires were sent out to local community and voluntary organisations and thirty-nine (39) organisations returned completed questionnaires. This represents a response rate of approximately 11%.
10. The overwhelming response to the question “ in your opinion does Luton need or could it benefit by having an equalities agency” was ‘yes’ with 73% (29) of the respondents, while 21% (8) said no. Of the 73% (29) who said yes to an equalities agency, 83% (24) wanted a ‘generic equalities agency’, dealing with all strands of equality. This compares with only seven (7%) who wanted a ‘race specific agency.
11. Respondents were asked to identify four priority areas of work of a future equality agency. The four top areas are as follows:
 - Supporting residents who have experienced hate crime or discrimination
 - Dealing with harassment
 - Legal advocacy/advice
 - Developing links with local and regional organisations to promote equality
12. The main gaps identified were:

- Dealing with harassment
 - Counselling
 - Conflict resolution
 - Supporting residents who have experienced hate crime
 - Advocacy & legal advice
13. While there were no clear responses to question of possible structure, the overall view supported, was the need for an independent body with membership drawn from local community organisations.
 14. To the question relating to what service delivery or employment needs such an agency might address a number of areas were identified including discrimination in employment, assistance to vulnerable groups - e.g. the elderly from minority ethnic communities, the need for premises for social and community events, and training and capacity building on issues of equality.
 15. Finally respondents were asked to outline any help they may be able to offer a new equality agency .In the main, there was significant goodwill to assist through making a contribution to the work of the new body. As this first questionnaire stage had focused solely upon local voluntary sector agencies (themselves dependent on external grants) it was not surprising that there were no offers of cash help.

Focus Groups:

16. All agreed that an equalities agency would be useful for Luton and should address a variety of diversity issues. There were differing levels of enthusiasm for this agenda and concern about the organisation spreading itself too thinly.
17. All of the 5 focus groups felt that there were serious issues for their client group in Luton that needed to be addressed and that could be addressed by this agency.
18. The type of work that the groups felt the agency should do was mainly individual case work but there was some discussion on it having a more strategic role i.e. supporting existing specialised agencies that already exist in Luton.
19. The majority were concerned that the agency be set up with care, ensuring the right support and management, which could allow it to succeed financially and in the community.
20. The majority felt strongly that it should be independent however there was some acceptance that it may need to be part of LBC. In either case there

was strong feeling that it needed to be taken seriously and have a high profile inside or outside of the Council.

Interviews:

21. There were differing levels of enthusiasm for the agency. One person stating there was no need for another agency, the current agencies being sufficient. Others said it could be a good thing for Luton some considering it a need others as a “useful” addition.
22. All stated it should address at general equality issues, not a race specific organisation.
23. There were differing views on the type of work that an equalities agency should carry out: from strategic (supporting other agencies in Luton to lobbying and or awareness raising to individual casework (or all three)
24. There was acknowledgement of the number of agencies already working on areas of discrimination and that Luton has already structures in place to further equality. Also there was acknowledgement of the strength that diversity brings to the area.
25. Lack of current joint working across agencies was highlighted and a new agency was seen as the solution where this was identified as a problem
26. All offered support from their organisations

Report Conclusion

27. Overall there appears to be strong support overall for a generic equalities agency in Luton, which is independent of the statutory agencies. The main services provided by the agency should include individual casework and strategic support of other agencies, lobbying and raising awareness.

28. Update.

Since the writing of this report the final version of the feasibility report has been approved by the Equality Steering Group and has been despatched for printing. Copies will be made available to all forum members as early as possible.

29. Secondly we have now had a response from the Commission for Racial Equality to the funding application, details of which were reported to the forum in February 2005. **The Commission has rejected our request for funding for the three project areas but has indicated its willingness to consider the establishment of a race equality agency in Luton and has invited further discussions to consider this further.**