Recommendations from the Cross Party Equalities Working Group

At Council on 30th April 2009 amendments to the new constitution were approved, following a six month review. As part of the discussion it was agreed that "*an all party working group be set up to examine how a better focus can be given to the involvement of community groups and their representatives within the council's service delivery and to allow for issues relating to this to be easily raised and addressed, and for the recommendations from this group to be fed directly into the consultation on the 12 month review.*"

In accordance with the above, a Cross Party Equalities Group was established and met on two occasions to consider the Council's focus on equalities issues and to make recommendations for Governance Committee to consider as part of the 12 month review of the Constitution. The working group considered as part of its discussions written material produced by the Equalities and Inclusion Team and oral presentations.

The key issues raised by members on the Cross Party Working group were:-

1. There may be excellent equalities work being undertaken but members had no way of judging this as they received little information.

2. There was a view expressed that there was not adequate focus on equalities issues from the Council's perspective and that members did not have sufficient opportunities to input into the equalities work that was being undertaken;

3. The lack of a formal structure within which elected members could consider and challenge equalities progress was raised and the view was expressed that a Cabinet Member Meeting for Equalities and Inclusion would assist with this;

4. An alternative considered was an "Equalities Commission" – also to address the perceived lack of a forum where elected members could bring equalities issues;

5. It was recognised that the City Inclusion Partnership (CIP) met quarterly and included representatives from statutory partners and the community and voluntary sector. It was felt that this was a valuable forum and that some of the practice shared by partners within that group was excellent. However, members felt that CIP did not replace the need for a clearer route for all

members of the Council to raise equalities issues and learn about and challenge the Council's activity in this area. It was noted that there are 4 elected members represented on CIP and the view was expressed that this forum alone was not adequate to connect with all 54 members of the Council.

6. It was also recognised that, following the six month review of the Council's Constitution, an agreement was reached whereby at least twice per year an equalities report would be taken to Cabinet with details of performance and developments. Whilst it was acknowledged that Cabinet was technically the right place for such a discussion due to the coverage of all services, some members of the cross party working group felt that the reality of a heavy agenda and some really difficult issues to address meant that a genuine and in depth debate on equalities would not take place.

7. By way of example of the problems that members perceived with communication around equalities issues, members of the working group cited that they were not aware of the work going on around the "Get Involved" project nor of the work undertaken on Equality Impact Assessments.

8. The role of Overview and Scrutiny was discussed by the working group and the specific report of the August 2009 Older People and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Panel was considered. The Cabinet Member for Equalities and Inclusion felt that this was an excellent example of the kind of in depth focus that Overview and Scrutiny could bring to important equalities issues and that this detailed look at issue specific matters complemented the performance and development focus that Cabinet would have at its (at least) twice yearly reviews.

9. Again there was concern raised by some members of the working group that the size of agenda for Overview and Scrutiny meant that their capacity to take a regular look at equalities issues was limited.

10. In recognition of the amount of existing work on equalities that is being undertaken by the Council and that much of this is at an early stage and of the concerns raised that there is not good enough communication about this or enough opportunity to engage with it, the working group unanimously made the following recommendations:-

    - An informal equalities working group with equal representation from all parties and Chaired by the Cabinet

Member for Community Affairs, Inclusion and Internal Relations, should meet on a 6 weekly basis;

- At the working group, an overview of the equalities work that is ongoing should be brought and discussed. Ideas around improved communication for elected members would be specifically addressed. For example, the group would assist to plan an open meeting for members on Equality Impact Assessments and would input into what issues should be addressed in the reports on equalities that go to Cabinet. The meeting will also be an opportunity for the Cabinet Member for Equalities and Inclusion to communicate new initiatives or developments and to hear feedback from members on behalf of their groups on equalities issues;

- The group would not be a decision making body but an informal meeting with the aim of improving communication and engagement with elected members on equalities issues.