



GENDER ACTION PLAN ARDS BOROUGH COUNCIL

MAYOR'S FOREWORD

We have come a long way since suffragettes chained themselves to railings, committed arson attacks, agitated and interrupted official political meetings, were jailed and in some cases, died, to secure the right to vote for women.

The suffrage movement took many years to gain their victory, but it was a pivotal moment in the history of campaigns for equal rights and the first step on a road which would see rapid developments in the equality arena in the 20th Century.

Nowadays, fundamental equality battles tend to be fought on other fronts, but gender issues still exist, and to ignore them, particularly as an employer, is to ignore a significant portion of the workforce – in our case, a total of 40% of our employees are women. We want to ensure that the opportunities afforded to them are equal to those available to their male colleagues.

With that in mind, the Council has been working for some time to address sex equality and has now, I am pleased to say, done the extensive groundwork to allow a formal Gender Action Plan to be developed.

I would also stress that, while historically-speaking gender inequality has been most applicable to women, that is not to say that men cannot also be subject to inequality.

And there are issues which the Plan seeks to address – from under-representation in certain job areas and job segregation – which will at times be just as pertinent to men as to women. This is after all a **Gender** Equality Plan, not a Women’s or a Men’s Equality Plan. I look forward to its implementation and to the benefits it will bring to our Council as a whole.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Angus Carson', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Angus Carson
Mayor of Ards

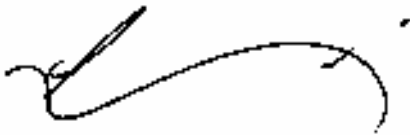
CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S COMMENTS

When we set out to create a Gender Action Plan we were motivated – as always – by a desire to see practical outcomes and real change over the three year period of the Plan's life. In other words, this is not about paying lip service to gender equality.

Our track record shows that we have been taking the promotion of equality of opportunity seriously, from meeting the wide-ranging obligations under our Equality duties and complying with other relevant legislation, to ensuring we have the specific policies in place to help employees work more flexibly and achieve that all important work-life balance.

2006 saw us formally adopt the 'Declaration of Principles' arising from the Women In Local Councils Initiative, while at the same time we demonstrated our support in a very tangible manner, marking International Women's Day for the first time and organising the very successful 'Visible Women' event with colleagues in North Down.

And now, in 2007, we are progressing yet further, creating this Gender Action Plan and applying the practice as well as the principles of gender equality at a corporate, strategic and operational level.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ashley Boreland', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Ashley Boreland
Chief Executive

Gender Action Plan

Introduction

Ards Borough Council is committed to the promotion of equality of opportunity for elected members and all its employees.

In line with this commitment and in support of the 'Women in Local Councils' initiative, the Council has developed a Gender Action Plan. The Plan provides a framework to consider the key issues in respect of gender equality and complements the Council's Equality Scheme under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Council is keen to encourage more integration of men and women into non-traditional roles and to ensure equality of opportunity in terms of access to all relevant levels of employment, leadership, training and promotion opportunities.

The Plan is designed to be flexible. It will be reviewed on an annual basis, with the support of the Local Government Staff Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Initially it is anticipated that the Plan will cover a 3 year period from 1 January 2007, after which it will be reviewed to determine its effectiveness in meeting the stated objectives.

Ards Borough Council will provide appropriate human and financial resources to ensure the effective implementation of the Plan. Targets resulting from the Plan will be incorporated into the Service Delivery and Improvement Plans for each Section, and will be regularly reported upon to ensure that progress is reviewed by the Senior Management of the organisation and the Council.

The aims of the action plan are:

1. To ensure that the Council's policies and practices meet legal requirements.
2. To promote best practice in relation to gender equality.
3. To address gender under-representation and job segregation by;
 - Promoting gender equality
 - Developing and implementing strategies to identify and remove barriers in an attempt to address gender under-representation

The following Plan outlines the key actions adopted by the Council in pursuit of this strategy for both elected representatives and employees of the Council.

Ards Borough Council's Gender Action Plan

Prior to creating a Gender Action Plan, Ards Borough Council identified what action it had taken to date to address gender issues. The Council has :

- Established the following core policies and procedures each of which has a commitment from the Council to meet its equality obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The work undertaken by the Council to date continues to mainstream Equality as a key consideration for the organisation.
 - Corporate Plan 2005-2009.
 - Human Resources Plan
 - Equality Scheme
 - Equal Opportunities Policy
 - Work-Life Balance Document, including flexible working arrangements
 - Promoting Employee Wellbeing Policy
 - Training Policy

- Developed flexible working arrangements in line with legislative requirements and best practice including implementing a systematic and objective procedure for considering requests.

- Completed an Opportunity Now Benchmarking Survey for 2006.

- Developed a mechanism as part of its equality mainstreaming process ensuring that all current and proposed policies are screened from an equality perspective. This, together with monitoring the effect of policies is an ongoing process. This has effectively caused a change in organisational culture which is now clearly focussed on equality and gender issues.
- Required each Service Unit within the organisation to include Equality Considerations in their Service Delivery and Improvement Plans. This in turn means that targets may be developed for each Service Unit and that performance against them they will be regularly reported.
- Implemented wellbeing measures such as Westfield Health, which offers opportunities for health screening and access to confidential counselling and medical services.
- Granted free membership of its leisure facilities to all employees as a health promotion initiative.
- Worked in partnerships with other partners such as the Health Promotion Agency and the Chest Heart and Stroke agency to provide health checks and lifestyle advice.
- Adopted the Declaration of Principles (Women in Local Councils Initiative) - copy attached.
- Established a Gender Equality Group (This includes male, female and elected member representation).
- Established a high visibility Women's Champion.
- Held specific Women's events e.g. the International Women's Day and the "Visible Women" events. Given the success of these, the Council has agreed to hold similar functions on an annual basis. In addition, the Ards Women of Achievement Awards initiative has also been established.
- Secured the Chief Executive's commitment, including his participation in development centres for Women.

Taking into account what the Council has achieved to date the following Gender Action Plan has been developed:

Ards Borough Council's Gender Action Plan		
Aim	Action	Target Date
Mainstream Gender issues	Integrate gender issues, with targets, into Service Delivery and Improvement Plans.	March 2007
	Integrate gender issues, with targets, into the Corporate Plan Mid-Point Review process	March 2007
	Have gender issues identified as an item on the Senior Management Team's monthly agenda	February 2007
Identify barriers preventing participation by women in Ards Borough Council	Review historical data and obtain real-life experiences from persons in the sector. Ascertain appropriate mechanisms to establish best practice benchmarks with other organisations and other sectors.	January 2008
Carry out a Gender Action Plan Officer Review.	Collate information from existing documents and gather further quantitative and qualitative data. Analyse current trends and policy impacts.	April 2007
Review training and development from a gender specific perspective for both employees and elected members	Examine statistical information on training uptake and perform a gender gap analysis. Ascertain barriers to training and establish policy opportunities and impacts.	September 2007

Integrate the Work and Families (Northern Ireland) Order 2006	Review legislation to ascertain its likely impact on the Council's workforce. Amend policy framework appropriately ; amend Work-Life Balance Policy document and relaunch.	March 2007
Communicate and embed the Declaration of Principles	Publicise the Council's commitment on its website and ensure all employees are aware of this obligation. Amend training courses if necessary.	March 2007
Establish levels of elected member female participation since 1990	Review historical data to establish roles of women in the Council, e.g. Chairs, committee membership, and mayors.	March 2007
Evaluate take-up and satisfaction rates of Work-Life Balance policies	Examine historical data to identify trends and barriers. Report on potential for policy realignment to remove barriers to participation.	March 2008
Take action to address gender under-representation in non-traditional roles	Gather information on participation rates in other EU countries. Examine internal participation rates. Review perception of non-traditional roles and recruitment practices, if necessary. Develop an outreach programme for local schools and the wider community.	January 2009

<p>Communicate progress and success of the Gender Action Plan</p>	<p>Devise robust mechanisms for the delivery of positive communication both internally and externally.</p> <p>Ensure that mechanisms chosen are capable of two-way communication.</p> <p>Communicate the Council's wish to be seen as a Best Practice employer.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>
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Appendix 1

Declaration of Principles