

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR (ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT) AND THE EQUALITIES OFFICER TO THE EXECUTIVE
5 DECEMBER 2008

Accessible Information Policy (AIP)

1.0 Introduction and Report Summary

- 1.1 The Council is committed to the principle of equal opportunities and aims to deliver accessible services and employment opportunities which meet the needs of all residents and employees.
- 1.2 To help it achieve this, it needs to ensure that its service information is accessible to everybody. The Council needs to pay particular attention to the needs of disabled people, older people and people who have English as a second or other language.
- 1.3 The Accessible Information Policy sets out what the Council will do to meet the information needs of these groups, in terms of providing alternative formats, translations and interpreters (including sign language interpreters). It also highlights the need for all Council service information to be in Plain English, in an accessible font style and size and following a clear layout. These aspects should improve overall readability of Council information for the wider community.
- 1.4 This approach aims to be proportionate, practical and clear. It will also help the Council to meet its legal duties in terms of promoting disability and race equality.
- 1.5 This report summarises the purpose and need for the AIP and outlines what it covers. It explains what shaped the Policy and how it would be rolled out if approved by Council. This report also asks for the Executive Committee to recommend that Council adopts the Accessible Information Policy, with an implementation date of April 2009.
- 1.6 The contact officers for this report are Helen Bishop, Deputy Director (Organisational Development and Support), telephone 01235 520202, email helen.bishop@whitehorsedc.gov.uk and Katharine Doherty, Equalities Officer, 01235 520202, email katharine.doherty@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

2.0 Recommendations

That the Executive recommends that Council adopts the Accessible Information Policy, with an implementation date of April 2009.

3.0 Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies

- 3.1 This report supports the objectives of the Council's vision and the Council's corporate priority to "improve and modernise access to services."
- 3.2 This report relates to the Council's Equality and Diversity Scheme 2008/09 – 2010/11 and Communication Strategy.

4.0 Background and Supporting Information

4.1 The Accessible Information Policy sets out the Council's approach to ensuring that the information it provides is accessible to service users. It focuses specifically on how services will provide information (via written or verbal communication) to best meet people's needs in terms of:

- formats
- languages
- overall readability (use of Plain English, font size and style and layout)

The Policy aims to provide Council services with a clear, consistent and proportionate way of addressing these three areas. By adopting and implementing this Policy, the Council will be confident that it is maximising access to service information whilst taking into account the make up of the Vale's population

4.2 Providing accessible service information is important because without it, people's opportunities are immediately limited. They may not understand their social and legal duties and responsibilities and will find it difficult to engage with the Council.

Groups of people who are likely to find it more difficult to access service information are:

- disabled people (those with visual, hearing and learning impairments) – 13.1% of people in the Vale have a disability
- older people (they are more likely to experience visual and hearing difficulties) – according to the last census, 15% of people in the Vale are aged 65 or above. We also know that our population is aging (an issue highlighted in the Council's Sustainable Community Strategy 2008-16)
- people who have English as a second or other language – the Vale has small pockets of people who have no or limited English. Anecdotal evidence highlights that a significant number of people from the Chinese community are likely to face language barriers.

4.3 The information needs of these groups are addressed by the AIP as follows:

- Council services will meet any requests they receive for alternative formats and translations (where information is translated into alternative languages), where there is a genuine need. Staff are encouraged to discuss any requests with the individual service users to ensure the right outcomes are achieved.
- This is also the case regarding requests for interpreters (including signers) and lip speakers
- In addition, services dealing with vulnerable people and/or a higher number of disabled/older people will need to take a more proactive approach. They will need to **offer to provide** key public information in alternative formats **upon request**. They will do this by including a statement on relevant documents which offers to make the information available in alternative formats upon request.
- Services dealing with vulnerable people and/or a higher number of people from ethnic minorities will also need to take this more pro-active approach. They will do this by including a statement on relevant key documents in English which **offers to provide** the information in alternative languages, **upon request**. They will also include a Chinese translation of the statement alongside the English version.

- 4.4 The AIP also sets out how the Council will write all its information for service users in plain English, using a clear layout and a standard font style and size. These considerations will help to make Council information more accessible to the wider population.
- 4.5 Providing information in these alternative ways will help the Council to meet its duties to promote equality under the Race Relations Acts and the Disability Discrimination Acts.
- 4.6 In addition to meeting legal requirements, the Policy has also been shaped by:
- anecdotal evidence from Council services about the requests they receive for alternative formats, translations and interpreters
 - Department for Communities and Local Government guidance for local authorities about translating publications (2007)
 - good practice from leading national charities that support disabled people
 - research carried out by the Council about the language needs of local ethnic minority businesses
 - consultation with the public, Councillors and Council staff (carried out in September-October 2008)
- 4.7 The AIP will be accompanied by a staff handbook called 'is your message loud and clear?' This will act as a guidance document, providing all the practical detail officers will need to implement the Policy.
- 4.8 If the Policy is adopted, the Equalities Officer and the Head of Communications will run an awareness raising campaign across the Council. Between January and March 2009, they will finalise the staff handbook, attend team meetings to explain how the Policy affects services and include articles in Team Brief and the Councillor's weekly information sheet to explain the Policy. The AIP will then come into force from April 2009.
- 4.9 Financial implications - service areas will be responsible for covering any costs associated with meeting requests to provide their information in alternative languages or formats. As specific budgets do not exist for such expenses, services will need to use under spends held in their existing service budgets. Any additional printing costs will be absorbed by the centralised printing budget. We do not expect to receive a significant number of requests but we will monitor this over the course of 2009/10 and review the funding situation if necessary.
- 4.10 Human Resource implications – there are none relating to this Policy.
- 4.11 Legal implications – see 4.5 above.
- 4.12 Equality implications - the AIP has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment which did not identify any negative equality and diversity issues.

Helen Bishop
Deputy Director (Organisational Development and Support)

Background Papers:

- a) Accessible Information Policy (attached)
- b) Equality Impact Assessment (attached)