Summary

1. The committee has previously received an independent verification report which assessed the Authority as ‘performing strongly’ at Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. Achieving Level 4 is through a process of self-assessment and Members are asked to accept the Service’s draft report (Appendix 1) as an accurate assessment of recent progress and evidence that the organisation meets the Level 4 criteria.

2. The report acknowledges that further work is required in some areas. However, it highlights key developments including the monitoring and reporting of equality and diversity information. Accordingly, while the Committee has previously received individual reports on equality and employment statistics, Members are asked to receive the Service’s first comprehensive Equality Monitoring Report (Appendix 2).

3. The Authority had previously agreed that following attainment of Level 4 by July 2009, the Service would aim to achieve Level 5 by December 2010. The introduction of a new national Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) means that Level 5 has been replaced by an ‘Excellent’ category. A report setting out the implications will be brought to the next meeting of the Committee.

Recommended: that

[1] subject to Members’ comments, the draft self assessment report is accepted as evidence that the Service meets the criteria for Level 4 of the Equality Standard for Local Government.

[2] the Equality Monitoring Report 2008 -09 is received

[3] a further report is produced on the implications of the Authority attaining the new ‘Excellent’ category under the revised Equality Framework for Local Government.
Background

4. Achievement of Level 3 of the Standard required independent external assessment, and on the 19 December 2007 the external assessor informed Cheshire Fire & Rescue Service (CFRS) that it was ‘performing strongly’ at Level 3. The final assessment report also outlined a number of areas requiring further development.

5. Achievement of Level 4 is via an objective self assessment and attached at Appendix 1 is a comprehensive report setting out progress against all of the development issues highlighted in the Level 3 report. Also included is evidence of action taken by the Service against each of the criteria contained in the Level 4 standard. In addition, the report includes a small number of case studies to demonstrate practical action which has resulted from the Service’s commitment to Equality and Diversity.

6. While achievement of Level 4 is via self assessment, an informal peer review session has been arranged later this month with a representative from a fire authority which has recently reached Level 4. This will provide some third party assessment of progress and help to share areas of best practice.

7. In addition, it is worth noting the following comment from the Improvement and Development Agency team which completed the Service’s Operational Assessment Peer Review last month: “The Service has taken a very positive approach to equality issues. They have attained level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government and are making a proactive contribution to equalities externally through work with some of Cheshire’s most vulnerable communities and internally through its training and development and its recruitment of volunteers and advocates that broadly represent Cheshire’s communities.”

8. The replacement of the Standard by a new national Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) means that the Service will need to review its original objective of achieving Level 5 by December 2010. In addition, there is a current consultation commissioned through the Chief Fire Officers’ Association (CFOA) proposing a fire and rescue version of the new Framework.

9. A report on the implications of these two developments will be brought to a future meeting of the Authority.

Financial Implications

10. There are minimal costs associated with the self assessment and peer review which can be met from the corporate equality and diversity budget.
Equality and Diversity

11. Achievement of Level 4 by July 2009 shows the Service’s commitment and dedication to mainstreaming equality and diversity throughout the organisation both in service delivery and employment.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS:
1. Draft Level 4 self assessment report
2. E and D monitoring report 2009/10