

DIVERSITY PEER CHALLENGE

WORCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT

1. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of a Diversity Peer Challenge organised by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and carried out by its trained peers. The report satisfies the requirements of the Equality Standard for an external assessment at level 3. The Peer Challenge is designed to validate a council's own self-assessment at level 3 of the Equality Standard, by considering documentary evidence and by carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees and other stakeholders.

The basis for the Peer Challenge is a benchmark which incorporates the set criteria of the Equality Standard at level 3. The benchmark focuses on four key areas: Leadership and Corporate Commitment; Community Engagement and Accountability; Service Delivery and Customer Care and Employment and Training.

The Peer Challenge is not an inspection; rather it offers an external assessment of a council's own judgement of itself against the Equality Standard benchmark, by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equality/diversity agenda in their own councils.

The Peers were:

Cllr Cathy Bakewell	Somerset County Council
Samantha Jones	Bath & North East Somerset Council
Carol Trachonitis	Herefordshire County Council

The diversity peer challenge took place on 26th. And 27th November 2008

The team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by Worcestershire County Council and would like to thank everybody that they have met during the process for their time, enthusiasm and contributions.

2. Overall conclusion

Following this Diversity Peer Challenge, we have reached the following conclusion:

Worcestershire County Council has completed a satisfactory self-assessment against the criteria for level 3 of the Equality Standard.

This will equate to "**achieving**" under the Equality Framework for Local Government from 1 April 2009...

Strengths and areas for improvement as identified by peers are highlighted in paragraph 3.

3. Detailed Findings

3.1 Leadership and Corporate Commitment

3.1.1 Strengths:

- (i) There is a strong commitment to Equalities and Diversity from Directors and Senior Managers. This view is supported by the Middle Managers. All Directors own the Equalities agenda and have their own Equality service targets
- (ii) The Member Equalities Champions from all three main political parties sit on the Corporate Equalities Board. There is excellent engagement and Leadership shown by the Cabinet Member with Equalities in his portfolio. There are regular reports to Cabinet, who understand the importance of equalities not just from the personal viewpoint but also from the business case angle.
- (iii) The Corporate Equalities Board closely monitors statistics, as does the Scrutiny Committee. The Scrutiny Committee takes on board many aspects of equalities when scoping and carrying out their role. Much of the Scrutiny is pre-policy.
- (iv) There are many opportunities for elected members to become involved in equalities; through the Induction process, through Community Fairs and Conferences and multi-faith picnics. Awareness training is undertaken with the District Councils.
- (v) The Policy Officer Group is supporting the improvement of performance and the management systems in place are robust. This group is championing the needs for better information, better monitoring and better follow up.
- (vi) The CPA November 2008 assessment was 'Improving Well' which indicates the progress the Council has made since it started on its Journey some 5 years ago. Councillors report that the organisation both looks and feels different.
- (vii) The Countywide Chief Executives and Leaders Group regularly receive reports on Equalities and Diversity.

3.1.2 Areas for Improvement

- (i) Although the Council has moved a long way, it has concentrated on processes which have caused it to become a little bogged-down. There is a need to refocus on outcomes.
- (ii) There is a lack of consistent application of equalities policies by some line managers in the Council. This is leading to some confusion amongst staff.

- (iii) The active promotion, and on-going monitoring, of equality and diversity in procurement is an emerging area for Worcestershire. Although the letting of contracts is monitored by the Corporate Procurement, there is no robust equality monitoring during the term of the contract the emphasis is on contractual compliance, rather than using equality to bring about improvements to service quality and employment e.g. are there opportunities to promote the employment of people with learning disabilities in key suppliers? The West Midlands Procurement Forum may be a useful source of good practice around this.
- (iv) The Equality Standard for Local Government requires an understanding of equality and diversity policies by elected members. This would ensure that all members are not only aware of their statutory responsibilities but also have awareness as to why this is important in delivering their role as community leaders. Whilst there is training on Equality and Diversity for elected members this is not compulsory, nor has it so far, focused on the six strands. Members are fully aware of their responsibility under Race, Gender and Disability, but extra training is needed to raise their awareness of the new requirements. This would ensure that all members are not only aware of their statutory responsibilities but also have awareness as to why this is important in delivering their role as community leaders.
- (v) Staff data collection has yet to begin over the full six strands. In order for the Council to be compliant by March 2009, staff should begin collecting the full data now. The data collection systems are not integrated and staff are unclear exactly what to do with the information they have collected.
- (vi) The new structure for the Equalities Team is causing some confusion amongst staff. This was evidenced during meetings with staff and managers when the revised staffing structure as per the intranet was discussed. Better dissemination of what is planned should be a priority.
- (vii) The Intranet requires updating since the Equalities and Diversity message is from the previous Chief Executive.
- (viii) Young people are fully engaged and there is a very active Young People's Cabinet who produced their own manifesto. Although this manifesto was not overly demanding, elected members have so far failed to indicate what they might be able to help deliver. Care needs to be taken to ensure young people do not become disillusioned and fail to engage in consultation.

3.2 Community Engagement

During the challenge a number of focus groups, interviews were held with a number of individuals, stakeholder groups and community groups to gain evidence of the level of engagement the community feel they have with the council.

3.2.1 Strengths

- (i) The corporate assessment Audit in November 2008 said “the Council was engaging well”
- (ii) There was strong evidence showing that local ward members took an active role within the community in engaging with many community groups.
- (iii) People talked about the success of the “community fairs” in certain areas.
- (iv) The Council has employed a “young people’s engagement officer” to specifically work with young people to get them involved in local initiatives. An excellent example of engagement is the “big questioner” enabling young people to feed directly into the strategic planning process
- (v) “You said / we will” news letter seemed popular with many individuals and was seen as getting to the vast majority within the community.
- (vi) Some specific work in schools was highlighted around narrowing the achievement gap and engaging with local people with language and cultural skills. This had encouraged some adult learners to get involved and achieve an accredited qualification. (Support work in Schools –SWIS)
- (vii) There have been a number of initiatives working within the Muslim community; these have included the setting up of a BME lunch club that encourages all members of the BME community to come together. This is not exclusive to Muslims but is predominately targeted at older people. There has been an identified need to increase space at the local mosque and through community work this spiritual need has been addressed.
- (viii) There were some good examples of how the traveller heritage was being captured with the aural history project. There is evidence of some out reach work for adult travellers around literacy.
- (ix) An examples of good of partnership work within the community particularly with the PCT is the work being done in addressing the health issues of travellers, migrant workers and young people
- (x) The Worcester Hub does give opportunity for local people to have their say and is also the front page of the website for ease of access
- (xi) The “being different together project” this a partnership project between the county council and the district councils to get a better understanding of their

local communities, establishing new ways to engage with local communities, improve targeted services and building confidence within local communities that the councils understand diversity issues.

3.2.2 Areas for improvement

During the challenge a number of focus groups, interviews were held with stakeholder groups and community representatives and the following is a summary of their concerns regarding community involvement and engagement.

- (i) The local Gay community feel let down by the lack of engagement with the county council and this was also borne out by the union reps regarding LGBT issues. Communications between the unions to the diversity team to discuss issues regarding LGBT needs to be improved and this may be achieved by inviting the Unions to have a representative on the Corporate Equality Board.
- (ii) The local voluntary sector and stake holder groups do not feel involved in the project “being different together” They felt that it was very much about the statutory organisations getting together but did not feel that the community had had much involvement with this project so far. The Race Equality Council did not feel involved or engaged with this project .
- (iii) The voluntary sector feels that when they do feed into consultation they do not get any feed back as to how this is used and what any outcomes are. In some cases where numbers are small within communities there is a feeling that the same people are being asked time and again “consultation overload”
- (iv) The WEG (Worcester Equality Group) is not functioning well. Members of that group feel that it lacks leadership and focus and is at risk of collapse
- (v) Feedback from staff indicates that there was still a need to increase staff awareness of diverse communities and how those communities are changing. Better awareness raising and staff training was requested. The need to dispel stereotypes in staff training particularly around Gypsy / Travellers and the LGBT community.
- (vi) It was felt by a number of stakeholders that the offer and delivery of alternative formats needs to be more overt and a better understanding of what is available. That alternative formats are not just about translation services.
- (vii) The voluntary sector representatives felt that although a “Compact” had been signed there was still confusion about what it was set up to do and how it would be embedded.
- (viii) Community Fairs although highlighted as good practices, however, other communities felt that they were too Asian focused and that other communities had not engaged. They are a good idea but a more diverse approach needs to be taken to engage with other sectors of the community.

- (ix) The key strategic partners both the PCT and Police did not feel engaged or have knowledge of the council's decision to go down the single equality scheme route and had so far not been involved.
- (x) Some communities feel that the barrier to services is due to lack of information and often the lack of opportunity to have face to face contact.
- (xi) The process around Equality Impact Assessments was discussed with a number of key officers and stakeholders and it was found that this is an area of work that needs considerable review.
Cognisance is taken of the fact that a review has been undertaken by the Corporate Equalities Manager into the previous process and a number of recommendations are forthcoming, however, from the evidence collected during the challenge from a number of perspectives it is recommended that the review needs to consider the following key areas.

The key areas that were identified are;

- (a) Currently the EIAs focus predominately on Race. (in some areas this has extended to Disability and Gender however there is little evidence that any of the other strands are taken into consideration).
- (b) There is little evidence that the training that has been delivered has been effective. It is considered that it is too legally focused and that individuals did not understand the reason for doing them (EIAs). Staff reported that they did not find the training helpful.
- © Communities were not involved in the consultation process in regards to EIAs, and that the community was not engaged with the process.
- (d) For the EIAs to become meaningful and have an impact on service delivery they must become real and not just a tick box exercise!
- (e) The corporate guidance on EIAs could be strengthened in a number of ways to improve the quality of EIAs at Worcestershire. Specifically we would recommend greater emphasis on including specific evidence in the assessments, importance of stakeholder consultation to inform the EIA, the need for EIAs to be completed as part of policy development retrospectively, distinguishing between no evidence of discrimination and no data, greater focus on identifying positive opportunities to promote equality and diversity in service delivery and employment, and critically a clear set of actions linked to the identified issues at the end of each EIA. The IDeA web site has best practice guidelines on EIAs and there is also a Community of Practice with helpful documents such as Tower Hamlets Guidelines
www.idea.gov.uk/eqia

3.3 Service Delivery and Customer Care

During the challenge a number of focus groups, interviews were held with a number of individuals and stakeholder groups to gain evidence of the how the Council's service delivery and customer care was perceived by the various communities.

3.3.1 Strengths:

- (i) There was evidence that stakeholder groups were involved in service planning e.g. children's and young people's services.
- (ii) Innovation in service delivery was in evidence -.adult learner bus was dispatched to specific target areas with specific care to visit traveller sites
- (iii) The "person centred services" are working well and appear to be addressing the needs of vulnerable adults Services are provided to vulnerable adults even when they appear not to be matched to a particular service. A principle of "best fit" was applied.
- (iv) Evidence of EIAs influencing service delivery – e.g. the budget for the provision of dropped kerbs was increased following EIA
- (v) Personal care suites are provided in some schools & shops
- (vi) Translation services are available
- (vii) Meals service is regularly monitored by elected members
- (viii) "Services based on customer needs" - CPA November 08

3.3.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) The Council should look at ways to reduce traveller children exclusions in schools
- (ii) The Council should consider implementing a programme to supply accessible toilets and personal care suites across the County
- (iii) There is a lack of some specialist local services in the County e.g. for Asian families where service provision is being sought from Birmingham
- (iv) The telephone hub staff reported being unaware of how to communicate with customers with English as a second or other language and where their English is not of a sufficient level to be able to communicate effectively
- (v) There was a repeating theme that service delivery to Lesbian, Gay and bisexual services are under developed and needs a focused approach to improvement

3.3 Employment and Training

3.3.1 Strengths:

- (i) The West Midlands regional recruitment portal appears to be a positive initiative that may benefit WCC
- (ii) The exemplar employer programme promotes the work of WCC in a positive light
- (iii) Learning Disability work placement programme was a positive move to widening the diversity of the workforce
- (v) Although the Disability Equality Network is fairly new their work was praised and endorsed by unions
- (vii) Induction training for councillors is robust
- (viii) A prayer room was made available for religious observance during Ramadan
- (ix) Staff are given time away from their duties to attend worker groups.
- (x) Targeted recruitment campaign for BME people with learning disability

3.3.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) The Council needs to integrate the recording and monitoring systems.
- (ii) Staff need to understand and be able to relay a consistent message on the need to monitor, including the uses of the information and benefits to the organisation and service users
- (iii) The impact of the staff groups is patchy; they need to be more widely promoted (both for new recruits to the groups and to managers) and supported. The Black Colleagues Group reported that they have not been functioning since 2007
- (iv) The Council should consider allocating funds to support the staff groups
- (v) There are unclear lines of communication from and to staff groups. If this was made more effective it would aid decision making
"We need to tell staff that we care about them"
- (vi) Consideration should be taken to employ initiatives to increase the diversity of top 5% of earners.

- (vii) Develop strong, formal and regular links between Senior Management Team, HR and Unions to ensure a joint approach to workforce development
- (viii) Consider whistle blowing policy (Care homes)
- (ix) Consideration of protocols to ensure effective sharing of information on contract workers to avoid re-employing unsuitable staff in other Council departments
- (x) Lack of consistent staff training for schools
- (xi) The style of diversity training too “legally biased”, it needs to be tailored to suit staff needs and to inspire staff to participate
- (xii) More comprehensive Member training is needed to embed the importance of leadership within equality of opportunity – see Areas for Improvement Leadership and Corporate Commitment