

DIVERSITY PEER CHALLENGE

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT 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 on 23rd/24th April 2009. 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.

Peers were:

Cllr Ian Ward – Birmingham City Council
Kirsty Hopkins – Newcastle City Council
Suranjana Lall – Warwickshire County Council

The team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by the council and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions.

2. Overall conclusion

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

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

This equates to “achieving” under the Equality Framework for the purposes of external assessment.

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 amongst political leadership at Bromsgrove. A high level of commitment is shown by the Portfolio holder; "Equalities are in everything that we do". Members are involved in diversity at several levels and the Member Champion attends the Equality Champions Group
- (ii) All political groups have demonstrated a commitment to equality and diversity. This is reflected in the fact that all Members have attended Equalities and Diversity training. Parts of the training were delivered by external agencies including SCOPE
- (iii) Equality and diversity issues are included in all Cabinet reports.
- (iv) The Chief Executive is a strong driving force for the equalities and diversity agenda at Bromsgrove. There is a good structure in place to support the equalities and diversity agenda in the Council led by Head of Legal, Equalities and Democratic Services who acts as the lead officer for diversity.
- (v) The Council has funded a full time Equalities Officer since 2006. She has monthly meetings with the Chief Executive on equality issues and progress. The postholder is held in high regard by the Members, staff and the Equality and Diversity Forum.
- (vi) There is a well developed Equality Champions Group with representatives from across the authority. The Council is building the capacity of the Champions Group through focussed training and is hoping to offer members of the group the opportunity to undertake a 12 week National Vocational Qualification on equality.
- (vii) Monthly departmental performance reports include equalities and diversity. These are seen by the Chief Executive, the Portfolio holder and Leader. Equality is also a standing item on agendas throughout all tiers.
- (viii) Service plans include the outcomes from equality impact assessments, service information collated through the Complaints and Compliments system, feedback from consultation and any inspections. Service managers are also briefed on the requirements of the Equality Standard that are relevant to their sections and include these within their service plans.
- (ix) There is strong evidence of the 'golden thread' running throughout the organisation.
- (x) Equality Schemes have been developed and consulted upon. The Inclusive Equality Scheme includes all 6 strands of equality and is in line with legal duties.

3.1.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) Although there is agreement that the Champions Group has worked to date, there is acknowledgement that it needs to evolve and be empowered to drive the equality and diversity agenda. We heard, “The Champions Group needs to change; we need to ask the question is the group fit for purpose?” Consideration should be given to raise the profile of the Group through reviewing the current membership, terms of reference and direction.
- (ii) Consider improving the strategic nature of the Champions Group by including senior managers and the Portfolio holder in its membership.
- (iii) The Champions Group should look to develop consistency in equality impact assessments. We were informed that the Equality Officer is leading on the development of a single equality impact assessment schedule for the Council and she will involve the Champions as needed to confirm the content.
- (iv) The Champions Group needs to play a more proactive role in challenging and scrutinising equality impact assessments and share good practice.
- (v) There is a need to ensure that the Council continues its progress and momentum, particularly with the move to the Equality Framework.
- (vi) The Council needs to address the issue of setting targets for age, religion/belief and sexual orientation as there has been little visible progress.
- (vii) The Council’s Scrutiny Committee should be encouraged to be more proactive in looking at equality and diversity issues and monitoring equality and diversity data.
- (viii) There is a lot of progress on disability; however Elected Members need to be more visible in their commitment to all six strands of equality within the communities of Bromsgrove.

3.2 Community engagement and accountability

3.2.1 Strengths:

- (i) The Council engages effectively with its communities on equality and diversity related service issues via the Equality and Diversity Forum, the Disabled Users Group and “annual” conferences.
- (ii) The Equality Forum members feel involved in shaping the Council’s equalities and diversity agenda. The Forum takes its role of critical friend very seriously and can input and influence policies. The Forum has active involvement in participatory budgeting and auditing equality impact assessments.
- (iii) The Forum considers that there is excellent two way communication with the council, and they get feedback when they raise issues, “we feel we are fully engaged, listened to and the Council takes active measures”.
- (iv) The involvement of the Forum in the budget process is cited as a good example.

- (v) The Forum believes that the Council is taking active measures and has, “a culture of continuous improvement”.
- (vi) The Forum includes representation from LGBT and the Gender Trust and is seen as being helpful to raise awareness and understanding of these issues. The “Finding a Voice” initiative has been funded to set up an LGBT support group in Bromsgrove.
- (vii) There are increasingly regular community events, “annual” consultation conferences, and workshops aiming to engage and gain a better understanding of the needs of the wider community including:-
 - Together Bromsgrove, the residents magazine
 - “Chat with the Chief”
 - Parish Forums
- (viii) The Customer Service Centre, Reporting Centres and partnership working were cited as good examples.

3.2.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) The Equality and Diversity Forum needs to continue its efforts to positively encourage young people to get involved.
- (ii) The Council needs to look more closely at the needs of new migrant communities.
- (iii) Further work needs to be done to develop more positive publicity for LGBT issues within the community.

3.3 Service delivery and customer care

3.3.1 Strengths:

- (i) The Council has set targets and objectives in relation to race, disability and gender and resources have been allocated to achieve these.
- (ii) The Council is actively addressing disability issues in the town centre, for example:
 - The regeneration and redevelopment of the train station.
 - Developing a map of the town centre to identify the location of dropped kerbs for wheelchair users.

 - Developing a contour map for people with vision impairments.
 - Developing a community bus service for those who have difficulty using standard bus services,

- (iii) Procurement training for staff has ensured that equality and diversity issues are addressed. A seminar was held for all suppliers which included equalities and diversity requirements. The Council is aiming to embed equality and diversity and sustainability into the procurement chain.
- (iv) Equality Champions provide advice and support within departments.
- (v) Equality impact assessments are embedded throughout the Council and informing service planning and delivery. Each service department has its own three year rolling plan of impact assessments and a council wide plan is under development.
- (vi) There are examples of positive action, for example the Hate Crime reporting centres in place throughout Bromsgrove.
- (vii) There is effective partnership working with the community, the voluntary sector', BDHT and other local authorities.
- (viii) Customer Service Centre, Home Choice Plus Initiative, shopmobility service and the 'Changing Places' facility were further cited as good examples.

3.3.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) There is limited collection of monitoring information about who is or is not using services. Target setting needs to be based on better quantitative data. This will inform service planning and monitoring of progress against targets.
- (ii) The Council should revisit the tendering threshold to attract a wider range of suppliers. It should provide more opportunities to promote the Council's message to attract a bigger pool of companies.
- (iii) Ongoing contract monitoring should be undertaken to ensure compliance with equality clauses.

3.4 Employment and training

3.4.1 Strengths:

- (i) There is an established programme of equality and diversity training which has been delivered to Members, managers and all staff. The training has evolved to become targeted and specific to the need of services. Training has been delivered to staff and Forum members on completing equality impact assessments. Feedback on training has been positive.
- (ii) Equality and diversity training is mandatory for all staff and has been well received. Specific training has also been received on the equality impact assessment process. Equality is built into the induction training programme. A skills audit has been undertaken as part of developing the Workforce Development Plan and the training needs of staff are addressed through the PDR process

- (iii) There are examples of positive initiatives, such as SCOPE placements and advertising of jobs through the West Midlands Recruitment Portal and Ethnic Britain.
- (iv) Equality and diversity targets are included in service plans, PDRs and the Modern Manager Framework. Staff are aware of the importance of PDR's for service and personal development.
- (v) The Council has qualified to use the Two Ticks disability symbol.
- (vi) Staff feel that there has been a real shift in culture over the past five years. They are aware of what Bromsgrove are trying to achieve in relation to equality and what progress has been made. There was strong evidence of the 'golden thread' running through to front-line staff.
- (vii) Staff feel that there is good communication, with particular reference to e-Connect and they are regularly asked for their input, an example of this is the staff engagement exercise around setting the priorities for 2009/10.
- (viii) Staff are aware of the Equality Officer, the equality Champions and where they can go to for support and advice.
- (ix) Particular praise was given to the flexible working arrangements at Bromsgrove, for example flexi, parental leave, supported return to work following sickness absence and support for studying.
- (x) The Council has been pro-active in addressing employment issues for people with learning difficulties.

3.4.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) More work needs to be done on workforce monitoring at all stages of employment and this data needs to be used to inform targets and actions. In particular, work needs to start on sexual orientation and religion/belief.
- (ii) The Council should consider working towards inclusion in the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index
- (iii) Closer relationships should be established with Trade Unions on furthering the equality agenda.
- (iv) There has been progress on the equality and diversity agenda, particularly in the last two years, but more could be done to celebrate success.
- (v) The Council needs to take action to address the issues raised in the staff survey.

3.5 Quotes

During the challenge, the following quotes were noted:-

- “there is a culture of continuous improvement”
- “the Equality Officer’s door is always open”
- “communication is excellent”
- “we work together within the Forum on all equality strands and do not isolate ourselves”
- “achieving level 3 is about improving service delivery”
- “The Champions Group needs to change; we need to ask the question is the group fit for purpose”
- “Are we going in the right direction?”

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