

Cabinet – 22 April 2009

Equalities Peer Assessment

Portfolio: Councillor Garry Perry, Communities and Partnerships

Service: Neighbourhood Partnerships and Programmes

Wards: All

Key decision: No

Forward plan: No

1. Summary of report

- 1.1 The aim of this report is to inform Cabinet about the outcome from the Diversity Peer Challenge undertaken by the IdEA (Improvement and Development Agency) in January 2009. The IdEA assessed Walsall's progress in moving through the levels of the Local Government Equality Standard, concluded that we have successfully attained Level 3 of the standard and recommended a number of areas for improvement.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Cabinet approves the recommendations from the Diversity Peer Challenge report for implementation through the Corporate Equality Group and Corporate Management Team.
- 2.2 That Cabinet welcomes Neighbourhood Scrutiny Panel's support and endorsement for Member training in the area of equality and diversity.

3. Background information

- 3.1 On 20 and 21 January Walsall Council hosted a team of external peers assessing the council's achievements in the area of equality and diversity. This process, officially referred to as Diversity Peer Challenge, is endorsed by the national Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and offers councils an independent judgment against the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG). Walsall council sought validation for the Level 3 of the ESLG.
- 3.2 As part of the assessment, the Equality and Diversity Team submitted a self-assessment report on behalf of the Council, summarising achievements in the areas of employment, service delivery and community leadership. Included with this was a set of supporting documents and existing policies. This was followed up by a two day programme of on-site visits and interviews with elected

members, managers, front-line staff, trade unions and representatives of the community and voluntary sector by the peer assessors from the IdEA.

- 3.3 The assessment concluded with a positive result. The assessors confirmed that Walsall Council has successfully reached Level 3 of the Equality Standard. This means that we are 'an achieving council' in the area of equality and diversity which will have a positive impact on forthcoming external inspections and the Corporate Area Assessment.

4 Diversity Challenge Final Report and Improvement Plan

- 4.1 The Diversity Challenge Final Report (attached) highlights the Council's achievements and includes a list of recommendations for further improvements.
- 4.2 Overall, the report applauded the council's leadership of the equality and diversity agenda from the Chief Executive and senior managers and the efforts to ensure that the needs of various disadvantaged people are considered in service delivery. There are good structures for improving services, including the Corporate Equality Group, directorate equality champions and Equality Boards which have been very effective in gathering evidence and carrying out equality impact assessments. Community engagement, and consultation practices were also recognised as being very well developed.
- 4.3 The areas for improvement include greater involvement from elected members in providing internal challenge to the organisation. The assessors suggested that Members could be more vocal about potential discrimination and inequality experienced by citizens through the scrutiny process. They recommended that Members are more actively involved in some of the current structures, such as the Corporate Equality Group and employee networks and attend equality and diversity training to gain a better understanding of where and how to use their influence in tackling inequality.
- 4.4 Another key area for improvement is employment and the Council was particularly recommended to seek to allay the perception that there is discrimination and harassment in certain parts of the organisation by ensuring that policies, such as Grievance Bullying and Harassment, and Whistleblowing are applied consistently throughout the organisation and lessons learned are shared to continually improve Council practice.
- 4.5 An improvement plan is currently being finalised and will be presented at the Corporate Equality Group on 31 March 2009. This will allocate responsibility for implementing the actions to named service areas and individual officers to ensure accountability for delivery.

4. Resource considerations

- 4.1 **Financial:** Implementation of the improvement actions will not require additional resources. However, it is expected that closer working partnerships and re-focusing of existing resources and activities will be required between some

services, such as for example performance management, equality and diversity and HRD.

4.2 **Legal:** This is a voluntary performance improvement initiative with no specific legal implications.

4.3 **Staffing:** Delivery of the improvement plan and actions will be coordinated by the Equality and Diversity team with leadership provided by the Corporate Equality Group.

5. **Citizen impact**

Further improvement in the area of Equality and Diversity will help citizens to:

- Be more aware of their rights under the new legislation.
- Experience fair treatment when coming into contact with the Council.
- Expect that firm action is taken in cases of alleged discrimination or inappropriate treatment.
- Be confident that the Council cares and actively seeks to find out about their diverse needs and use this information to continually improve services.

6. **Community safety**

No adverse impact is expected.

7. **Environmental impact**

None expected.

8. **Performance and risk management issues**

8.1 **Risk:** None expected. Further improvements in relation to the Council's application of the equality standard will help managers to improve services and better manage risk.

8.2 **Performance management:** Failure to further improve on equality and diversity policies and implement the recommendations from the report may result in poor inspection results, for example in the forthcoming Comprehensive Area Assessments.

9. **Equality implications**

There will be a positive impact on all groups covered by current equality legislation.

10. **Consultation**

Consultation has taken place through the Corporate Equality Group, Human Resources and Development and Performance Management Teams and the employee networks.

A briefing paper was considered by Neighbourhood Scrutiny Panel on 19 February 2009. The panel strongly recommended and supported the areas for improvement in relation to the role of and training for Elected Members.

Background papers

IdEA Diversity Peer Challenge Final Report – March 2009

Author

Irena Hergottova

Equality and Diversity manager

☎ 653306

✉ hergottovai@walsall.gov.uk



Jamie Morris

Executive Director

9 April 2009



Councillor Garry Perry

Portfolio holder

9 April 2009

DIVERSITY PEER CHALLENGE

WALSALL 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.

Peers were:

Councillor Ian Ward	Birmingham City Council
Julie Pal	London Borough of Barnet
Richard Bealing	Castle Morpeth District Council

The diversity peer challenge took place on 20th and 21st. January 2009

The team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by the 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:

Walsall 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

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) Walsall demonstrates leadership and commitment from the Chief Executive and Senior Management
- (ii) Portfolio Holder (cabinet member) for equality and Diversity
- (iii) There is a desire among Senior Management and staff to embed equality and diversity at all levels and to ensure “it is in every thing we do”
- (iv) The Equality and Diversity team are enthusiastic, committed and well respected both internally and externally
- (v) The Corporate Equalities Group (CEG) is chaired by the Chief Executive
- (vi) The Directorate “Champions” get the equality and diversity message across
- (vii) Staff are enthusiastic, professional and committed to service excellence delivery
- (viii) Equality and Diversity issues are highlighted in all reports to Cabinet and Scrutiny
- (ix) Use of the Es@T management tool system for gathering, compiling and analysing data
- (x) Robust performance management system in place
- (xi) Evidence of “golden thread” from corporate policies to staff’s IPMs

Some quotes

- “equalities agenda is a fundamental part of the day job”
- “the equality champions have made equalities what we talk about at team meetings”
- “We ask the “SO WHAT” questions”
- “EIAs have changed my life – made me a better person”

3.1.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) Celebrate success – show case good out comes on website and on intranet
- (ii) The Equality Standard for Local Government requires an understanding of equality and diversity policies by elected members. The Council should seriously consider requiring all elected Members to undertake equality and diversity training. This would ensure that all members are not only aware of their statutory

responsibilities but also have the skills to deal with equality issues in their role as elected representatives

- (iii) Scrutiny to be more involved in and focussed on equality and diversity outcomes and their impact on the communities and service delivery - see guidance note 1
- (iv) Member attendance (e.g. Portfolio Holder) at the Corporate Equalities Group would bring a greater understanding of the equality and diversity issues and signal member involvement/commitment to staff.
- (v) Introduce a standard method of collecting community and service user data across the Council and the sharing of the data internally and with LSP partners – see guidance note 2
- (vi) Review the focus of the Corporate Equalities Group
- (vii) Articulate Walsall's equality values – see guidance note 3
- (viii) Develop a Single Equality scheme (SES) aligned to corporate priorities – see guidance note 4
- (ix) The Council has introduced “Viewfinder” software to monitor consultation but a review of the corporate community strategy is needed to ensure there is a consistent approach to communication and feedback – see guidance note 5
- (x) The Council needs to undertake a fundamental review of the EIA process with a move from micro to macro- based on the Council's functions. 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 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
- (xi) Review and refresh corporate strategies and policies

3.2 Consultation, Community Development and Scrutiny

3.2.1 Strengths:

- (i) Strong community engagement – there is a genuine attempt to involve the communities in determining service delivery
 - Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNPs) strong and effective
 - Citizens Panel
 - Community Cohesion Group
 - Walsall Local Involvement Network (LINK)

- (ii) Strong consultation ethos
- (iii) Many examples of good informative literature available in many formats
- (iv) Work with Walsall disability forum – awards scheme
- (v) Strong partnership ethos
- (vi) The Council's monitoring of Walsall LINK to ensure compliance with equality and diversity policies

3.2.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) The Council needs to undertake a fundamental review of the EIA process with a move from micro to macro. The EIA process needs to involve the communities and the impact on the communities
- (ii) Introduce a joint approach to community data collection and sharing with LSP partners and other stakeholders
- (iii) Review consultation process with a view to targeting specific groups and improving feedback to partners, stakeholders and communities to ensure a consistent approach
- (iv) Introduce into equality and diversity training for Members and staff a module on cultural awareness. This will enable staff and Members to be more aware of the different cultures within the communities

3.3 Service Delivery

3.3.1 Strengths:

- (i) First Stop Shop staff committed to service delivery excellence and are well respected by service users
- (ii) Translation services in place
- (iii) Procurement – strong evidence of good practice
- (iv) Neighbourhood partnership areas – improving the standard of life for local people through targeted service delivery
- (v) Allocation of £200k per year over a 3 year period to upgrade access to buildings
- (vi) Innovation in service user consultation – e.g. visiting bingo halls to consult with service users
- (vii) Genuine attempts to involve service users in determining service delivery – budget consultation exercise

- (viii) EIAs
 - Significant factor in mainstreaming peoples' E&D thinking and links to service delivery
 - Examples where EIAs have lead to service improvement
- (ix) Golden thread in evidence – corporate plans – service delivery plans – individual staff's development plans – service improvement
- (x) Robust performance management processes in place
- (xi) The Council understands the need for and is becoming customer focussed and responsive to customers needs

3.3.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) EIAs
 - Review purpose and process
 - Embed outcomes into service plans
- (ii) Expand the use of PIM to include service/team plans asking whether actions specifically reduce disadvantage in service delivery

3.4 Employment and Training

3.4.1 Strengths:

- (i) Strong workforce strategy, HR development plan with equality and diversity targets
- (ii) Staff professional, enthusiastic and committed to service delivery excellence
- (iii) Equality and diversity training for staff effective – improved staff confidence in understanding the issues and how it impacts on service delivery – domestic abuse policy seen as example of best practice
- (iv) Engaging with Stonewall on sexual orientation issues
- (v) Employee network groups in place and represented on Corporate Equality Group
- (vi) Aware of challenges to become a representative employer. In particular the willingness of HR to work with the BME Employee Network in providing support to BME staff leaving the organisation to encourage a higher take up of exit interviews. The purpose is to discover if there is a trend that would explain why the number of BME leavers exceeds the number of BME's joining the organisation.

- (vii) Staff perceived prejudices challenged and changed through training and greater understanding of equality and diversity
- (viii) Staff aware and understand the Council's equality priorities
- (ix) Plan in place for addressing JE and equal pay issues

3.4.2 Areas for improvement:

- (i) Completion of Job Evaluation and equal pay audit
- (ii) Look at innovative ways to increase response rate in staff survey (34% in 2007) – see guidance note 6
- (iii) Ensure consistency in communications and feedback to staff in the required format
- (iv) Ensure consistency in implementation of policies across the Council.
- (v) Increase profile of equality champions and employee networks to staff. Ensure any barriers to staff involvement in employee networks are addressed.
- (vi) Ensure consistent approach to training and development across directorates
- (vii) Encourage Member engagement with employee networks possibly by appointing Member champions. – see guidance note 7
- (vii) Grievance; Bullying and Harassment; Whistleblowing Policies need reviewing and monitoring to ensure a consistent application across the Council in order for the staff to have confidence in the various processes and to allay the perception that a culture of bullying and harassment exists in certain parts of the organisation. The outcomes from grievances should be captured so that the Council learns from the process and reduces reoccurrence. HR need to take a pro-active role in “myth busting”

Overall Conclusion

Walsall has come a long way and it is commended for its achievements on the equality and diversity journey. However the Council will need to continue to work hard both internally and externally to maintain the (Equality) Standard and to progress with the Equality Framework

Key issues for the continuing journey to excellence.....

- **Feedback review communication strategy to ensure that feedback to partners, stakeholders, communities, service users and staff is a key part of the process and that outcomes are monitored**
- **Equality in the workplace**
- **EIAs – a strategic approach focussed on outcomes**
- **Member engagement**

- **Realising the potential of performance management**
- **Data management – know you communities, service users and staff.**

Appendix 1

Guidance notes

1. Scrutiny – this could be achieved by Scrutiny looking at the Ela process and ensuring that the EIAs are outcome focussed i.e what difference have they made to the community and that any action plans arising from the EIAs have SMART targets set and that these targets are monitored
2. Data collection –there are various methods that can be used to collect and share data and intelligence about the communities. A data-sharing protocol with your LSP and engaging with your community groups are examples. A “mosaic” system can be of benefit that is where each area of data and intelligence is collect layer by layer onto area profiling maps. An index of this data and intelligence is compiled and shared with partners and stakeholders. It is important to have clear plans in place to know why you are collecting data and intelligence and how that data will benefit the community.
3. Articulate Walsall’s equality values – this is a very public facing agenda and the Council has to ensure that the communities both internally and externally are aware of the Council’s equality values. This can be achieved by re-iterating the values and the culture the of the Council as a provider of services and as an employer
4. Single Equality Scheme – this is a major project to undertake with resource implications. Julian Horsler, Equalities Manager, Barnsley MBC is willing to share Barnsley’s experience of implementing a SES Another link: <http://www.barnet.gov.uk/index/community-living/equality-diversity.htm#our-equality-scheme>
5. “Viewfinder” – the Council has invested in “viewfinder” as the system to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate consultation. There needs to be buy in from all areas of the Council to using the system effectively and this should be aligned to a Consultation Strategy. Preparing a consultation programme for 2009 and publishing this widely will ensure that all service providers and users are aware of what consultation is taking place and the purpose of such consultation
6. Staff survey – the Council needs to find out the reasons for the low the percentage (34%) of participation and learn from the results of the survey. HR needs to be pro-active in putting the message across that the Council is interested in the views of t he staff and will put in place an action plan to remedy any issues. Some authorities offer a “prize” draw for all those taking part e.g. leisure centre vouchers
7. Member Champions – as part of the member development programme to make them aware of equality and diversity encourage Members to become “champions” to an individual staff group e.g. BME

