

BRIEFING NOTE

TO: Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel
DATE: 19 February 2009

RE: DIVERSITY PEER CHALLENGE - INITIAL FEEDBACK

Purpose

To report the initial findings of the Diversity Peer Challenge assessment.

Background

Elected members, chief officers, managers, front-line staff and representatives from the community participated in giving evidence towards this assessment. Scrutiny represented an important part of our documentary evidence, as well as on-site interviews (with the Chair of Scrutiny being interviewed on the first day). This feedback covers in particular those recommendations where more involvement from elected members is needed for the Council to become an excellent authority (as defined in the new equality framework). The list of recommendations highlighted in this briefing is by no means full and should be viewed in the context of the whole set of recommendations outlined in the presentation (attached).

Diversity Peer Challenge – Why we went for it?

Diversity Peer Challenge is a major assessment of local authorities in the area of equality and diversity. The aim of the challenge was to provide an objective and fair external opinion of our achievements and set out recommendations for future improvements. It is important to recognise that the findings will inform our future inspections, such as the Comprehensive Area Assessment - where there are direct links between the Audit Commission and IDeA (Improvement and Development Agency) who coordinated the Challenge. It is in Walsall Council's interest to continue to improve. Our ability to follow the principles of equality and diversity in the delivery of Council priorities will be examined ever more closely through our major audits and inspections.

Following the paper evidence evaluation, on-site visits, and interviews, the assessors provided an initial feedback to senior managers in the Council outlining our strengths, areas for improvement and reasons for awarding the Level 3 (the presentation is attached). Their overall judgement was that Walsall Council has achieved Level 3 of the Equality Standard and is now an 'achieving authority' (which is one of the new categories of the revised framework that will be in place from April 2009). They recognised that we have come a long way and they commended us on our achievements. The hard work starts now. We need to maintain our high standards and also improve in a number of specific areas, in order for us to become an 'excellent authority' (as defined in the new equality framework).

Initial Findings – Areas for Improvement

A draft report and action plan to take the Council forward will be considered at the Corporate Equality Group (chaired by the Chief Executive) when they meet on 25

February. The portfolio holder plans to take a report to Cabinet with specific recommendations about how the areas for improvement can be implemented.

A key area that Scrutiny can assist in taking forward is in relation to the role of elected members. The areas for improvement from the assessors are shown below:

1. Leadership and Corporate Commitment:

- 1.1 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
- 1.2 Scrutiny to be more involved in and focussed on equality and diversity outcomes and their impact on the communities and service delivery
- 1.3 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.

2. Consultation, Community Development and Scrutiny:

- 2.1 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. Employment and Training

- 3.1 Encourage Member engagement with employee networks possibly by appointing Member champions.

Recommendations to the Scrutiny

- (a) **To comment on the areas for improvement in relation to elected members and how these may best be taken forward;**
and;
- (b) **To comment on the wider areas for improvement and recommendations to inform the recommendations to be taken to Cabinet.**

The recommendations and comments from Scrutiny will be used to inform the future report to Cabinet.

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Walsall Council
Diversity Peer Challenge
20th & 21st January 2009

Peers

Cllr Ian Ward

Julie Pal

Richard Bealing

The Challenge

- Designed to assess Walsall Council's own self assessment
- Not an inspection but an external assessment by critical friends

The Challenge

The Standard at level 3 focuses on:

- Leadership and corporate commitment
- Community engagement
- Service delivery and customer focus
- Employment and Training

Leadership & Corporate Commitment

Strengths

- Strong leadership and commitment from CE; Senior Management
- Portfolio Holder with responsibility for Equality and Diversity
- Desire to embed equality and diversity at all levels
- E&D team enthusiastic, committed and well respected

Leadership & Corporate Commitment

Strengths

- Corporate Equalities group chaired by CE
- Directorate “Champions” get the message across
- Open to challenge
- Staff enthusiastic, professional and committed to delivering service excellence

Leadership & Corporate Commitment

Strengths

- E&D issues highlighted on all reports to Cabinet and Scrutiny
- Es@T system in place
- Robust performance management system in place
- “Golden thread” from corporate policies to IPMs

Leadership & Corporate Commitment

Some Quotes

“equalities agenda is a fundamental part of the day job”

“(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”

Leadership & Corporate Commitment

Areas for Improvement

- Celebrate success –show case good outcomes on website
- Scrutiny to be more involved in and focussed on equality and diversity outcomes
- Standardisation of data collection across Council – sharing of data
- Consider mandatory training for Members on equality and diversity to broaden their understanding

Leadership & Corporate Commitment

Areas for Improvement

- Member attendance at Corporate Equalities group
- Review focus of Corporate Equalities group
- Articulate Walsall's equality values
- Develop a Single Equality Scheme aligned to corporate priorities

Leadership & Corporate Commitment

Areas for Improvement

- Corporate communication strategy has **Act Change Tell (ACT)** principles but inconsistent approach to communication and feedback
- Fundamental review EIA process –micro to macro
- Update/refresh strategic policies

Community Engagement

Strengths

- Community engagement strong
- Strong consultation ethos - viewfinder
- Good informative literature
- Genuine attempts to involve communities in service delivery
- Local neighbourhood partnerships (LNPs)
 - playbus adapted for access

Community Engagement

Strengths

- ‘Round n about’ publication – summarises achievements of LNPs
- Walsall disability forum – awards scheme
- Community Cohesion Group
- Working closely with Walsall Local Involvement network – monitors effectiveness of E&D

Community Engagement

Areas for Improvement

- Joint approach to data collection with LSP partners and sharing of community data
- Greater consistency in feeding back to partners and stakeholders
- Fundamental review of EIA process – micro to macro – impact on communities/ community involvement

Community Engagement

Areas for Improvement

- Review consultation process –target groups
- Improve awareness amongst Members and staff of the different cultures within Walsall

Service Delivery & Customer Focus

Strengths

- First stop shop –staff respected
- Translation services in place
- Procurement – strong evidence of good practice
- Neighbourhood partnership areas – improving the standard of life for local people

Service Delivery & Customer Focus

Strengths

- Allocation of £200k/year to upgrade access to buildings
- Innovation in service users consultation – visiting bingo halls
- EIAs significant factor in mainstreaming peoples' E&D thinking
- Genuine attempts to involve service users in determining service delivery – budget consultation exercise

Service Delivery & Customer Focus

Strengths

- EIAs lead to improvements in service delivery –
- Golden thread in evidence – runs through service delivery
- Understands the need for and are becoming customer focussed
- Responsive to customer needs – act on complaints

Service Delivery & Customer Focus

Areas for Improvement

- EIAs – review purpose and process
 - embed EIA outcomes into service plans
 - take EIAs from micro to macro – based on Council's functions
- Expand use of PIMs to include service/team plans asking whether actions specifically reduce disadvantage

Employment & Training

Strengths

- Strong workforce strategy – HR development plan – equality targets
- Staff professional, enthusiastic and committed
- Equality and diversity training – improved staff confidence
- Engaging with Stonewall on sexual orientation issues

Employment & Training

Strengths:

- Employee networks in place and represented on the CEG – BME exit interviews
- Staff prejudices challenged and changed through training and greater understanding of E&D
- Staff understand the Councils' equality priorities
- Domestic abuse policy seen as best practice

Employment & Training

Strengths:

- Plan in place for addressing JE and equal pay issues

Employment & Training

Areas for Improvement

- Completion of JE and equal pay audit
- Look at innovative ways to increase response rate in staff survey (34% in 2007)
- Ensure consistency in communication and feedback to staff in required formats
- Ensure consistency in implementation of policies e.g. staff involvement in staff groups

Employment & Training

Areas for Improvement

- Increase profile of equality champions and employee networks to staff
- Ensure consistent approach to training and development across directorates
- Encourage Member engagement with the employee networks

Employment and Training

Areas for Improvement

- Staffs' perception and experience of grievances
- Ensure Council learns from outcomes to reduce re-occurrence.
- HR should pro-actively engage in myth busting

Overall Conclusions

You have come a long way and we commend you on your journey.

However, you will need to continue to work hard to maintain the Standard and to progress within the Equality Framework

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

- Feedback – review communication strategy to ensure that feedback to partners, stakeholders and staff is part of the process
- Equality in the workplace
- EIAs – a strategic approach
- Member engagement
- Realising the potential of performance management

Overall Conclusion

congratulations



WALSALL 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 from 1 April 2009.

**Good luck on your continuing
journey**

Thank You

Any Questions