

The diversity peer challenge: one year on

Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA)

The IDeA works for local government improvement so councils can serve people and places better.

We use experienced councillors and senior officers, known as peers, who support and challenge councils to improve themselves.

We enable councils to share good practice through the national Beacons scheme and regional local government networks. The best ideas are put on the IDeA Knowledge website.

Our Leadership Academy programmes help councillors become better leaders so they can balance the diverse demands of people living in the same community.

The IDeA also promotes the development of local government's management and workforce. We advise councils on improving customer service and value for money. And we help councils work through local partnerships to tackle difficult problems such as crime and poor public health.

The IDeA is a member of the LGA group, comprising of five partner organisations who work together to support, promote and improve local government. It is owned by the Local Government Association and belongs to local government.

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The diversity peer challenge

All councils need a fresh pair of eyes from time to time – and that is just what the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) Diversity Peer Challenge offers.

Based on the long-running peer model pioneered by the IDeA, the challenge uses peers from other local authorities to assess performance and progress against the Equality Standard for Local Government (and from now on the new Equality Framework for Local Government). These tools enable local authorities to mainstream equality into council policy and practice at all levels.

It is not so much an inspection, rather a visit by “critical friends”, says Stuart Elrick, the IDeA consultant who supports the programme.

“The peer challenge offers the council a chance for a pit-stop on the journey,” he adds. “As well as pointing out problems, it offers solutions.”

A three-strong team of peers, composed of two officers and one councillor, carry out a two-day visit to see what progress is being made.

It is aimed at those councils needing an external assessment to confirm they are at level three of the Equality Standard, or since April 2009 the **achieving** and **excellent** levels. Central to the review is the visit by the peers during which they interview the chief executive, leader, lead councillors and senior officers as well as dozens of front-line staff, middle managers and representatives from community groups. These are either done through one-on-one interviews or via focus groups.

An IDeA consultant is also on hand during some or all of the visit to lend support to the peers.

At the end of the visit there is a PowerPoint presentation of the findings and the council is told of the result. A draft report is also produced within two weeks of the visit, which is then signed off with agreement of the council's senior management team.

But the process does not start with the visit. Prior to the two-day assessment, the peers will request paper-work covering policies, equality impact assessments and the structures in place as well as holding a pre-assessment meeting at the council to introduce themselves and go through any administration.

Seeing the challenge through the eyes of a peer

Member peers

Councillor Val Slater, Bradford City Council

Bradford councillor Val Slater describes being a peer as a two-way process. The Labour councillor has helped to carry out two reviews for Lambeth Council and Wolverhampton City Council so far, as well as being asked to take part in one on the IDeA itself.

She says during both local authority reviews she found herself coming away with ideas that she has fed back into her own local authority.

“In Wolverhampton I was impressed by the approach to consultation. The council had set up a database so firstly there was no duplication of work and, secondly, it meant that those working on the equality agenda were able to tap in to lots of information. I really think it helped them in designing their policies and services.

Meanwhile, Lambeth has done some work with external consultants which highlighted the danger of stereotyping around the six equality issues. For example, worklessness and race can often be lumped together, but unemployment can equally affect white communities. You have to be careful.”

Councillor Ian Ward, Birmingham City Council

A vast experience of working in the equality field is not a prerequisite for becoming a member peer, says Councillor Ian Ward.

“I think as long as you have had some training about what is expected under the Equality Standard then you will be fine,” says Councillor Ward. “What is more important, especially for the member peer, is to be able to challenge and ask questions.”

He stresses it is vital the peers approach the review as a critical friend.

“It is also important that you are challenging. There is no point saying this is all excellent, you must point to areas you believe can be improved.”

Councillor Ward has now completed three reviews and has noticed a common theme emerging – a lack of consistency over how equality impact assessments are carried out.

“It has differed from department to department within councils. Some are better than others. It is probably because in some areas it is not that obvious what you are measuring. For example, with leisure services it is easier to see what you should be looking for, but for economic development it can be trickier. However, it is key that councils get this right because to really progress you have to monitor performance properly.”

Officer peers

Nagina Kayani, Chelmsford Borough Council

Nagina Kayani was the lead officer on the Equality Standard at Tower Hamlets Council in London when it was in the first wave of councils to be awarded level five in 2005.

Following that success, she moved on to Chelmsford Borough Council, first on secondment to help them reach level three and then as the permanent lead on equality and diversity.

She says that one of the things she always stresses is that the equality agenda should be linked to service delivery.

“You need buy-in from all staff. To do that you have to make it relevant to them and what I find is that you have plenty of councils striving to provide excellent services and really equality and diversity is intrinsically linked to that. You cannot provide the best service if you are not delivering services that meet the needs of your whole community. That is a message, I believe, that resonates with staff.”

Zafar Saleem, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

One of the key strengths of the peer review process is that it involves an on-site visit, says Zafar Saleem. He says that it allows the peers to really find out about what is happening on the ground and cross reference this to the written submission.

Saleem, who is Rotherham’s community engagement and cohesion manager, points to his experience in reviewing South Tyneside Council to illustrate the point.

“When we received the paper-work we could tell they had produced a very strong self-assessment and on paper they had met nearly all the criteria for achieving level three, but it did not demonstrate just how good their performance was. When we visited and talked to staff and councillors you could see people really knew about the process. Throughout the council, everyone was aware what level they were at, and what outcomes and improvements the Equality Standard had helped deliver. That was really impressive and you only get that understanding from doing a visit.”

Saleem says he became a peer to help share good practice. Rotherham has reached level four of the Equality Standard and had received praise for its partnership work. The equality drive has been incorporated into the local strategic partnership (LSP) so other organisations, including the police, local NHS and voluntary and community sector, are aware and committed to promoting equality and diversity. This has led to joint projects on issues such as social inclusion and employability with the LSP’s fairness and proud board overseeing the work.

A council's perspective

Torbay Council

For an area dubbed the English Riviera, tourism is the obvious place to start when assessing Torbay's record on equality and diversity.

And what seems abundantly clear is that the commitment is very strong indeed. The English Riviera website is available in nine languages and is equipped with ReadSpeaker to allow people with visual impairments to listen to the information.

What is more, each of the tourist information centres across the bay have hearing loops, enlarged signage, level access and automated doors, while the accommodation guide is available in large print and audio tape. In fact, wherever you look, the services provided by Torbay Council give consideration to the equality agenda.

This was reflected in the IDeA's Diversity Peer Challenge carried out in March 2008. The peers praised the local authority for the good leadership from councillors and senior officers, confirming the council had achieved level three of the Equality Standard in the process.

It came after steady progress over the previous years. Underpinning the council's approach is the community plan and corporate plan which have specific equality commitments promising that no-one will be "discriminated against" on the basis of race, disability, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief.

A more detailed plan is set out in the equality and diversity policy and this is supported by the 30 to 40 individual targets in place. Meanwhile, each business unit plan includes sections relating to equalities.

Departments are also required to carry out equality impact assessments under a system developed in 2005. On top of this, the peers said they were impressed with the sophisticated computer-based SPAR.net system to monitor progress being made towards targets. And they highlighted the innovative approach to consultation, which includes text messaging to young people and the mayor's regular mobile surgery which is held from a caravan.

Councillor Louisa Aiton, the lead member for equality and diversity, says the council has "come a long way" in recent years. "The diversity of the people in Torbay is one of its greatest strengths and to achieve our ambition of providing a first class service we need to understand and respond to their differing needs."

But the peers also made a number of recommendations. These included measures to make the workforce more reflective of the community and they also said the employee forums that have recently been established needed "continued support" to allow them to play a key role.

The council was also reminded that it needed to take account of the changing population. Torbay is seeing a significant influx of migrant workers, while the ageing population – the area has one of the highest proportions of over 60-year-olds in England – also presents challenges.

Zoe Williamson, the council's policy officer lead for equality and diversity, says: "We found the peer review very helpful. We were quite aware of what areas needed improving, but the review does help give a different perspective."

The council responded to the review by drawing up an 18 point action plan to move forward with the recommendations. This was agreed by councillors by the start of the summer and is now in the process of being implemented.

It includes everything from employment measures, such as ensuring equal pay and single status, to improvements to service delivery. Williamson says: "We didn't want to stand still so acted straight away on what the peers were saying and what our own assessments showed needed doing".

Sunderland City Council

On the face of it, the equality agenda in Sunderland may not seem that complicated. Just 8,000 out of nearly 300,000 residents are from ethnic minorities. But scratch beneath the surface and a diverse multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-faith city can be found.

What is more, Sunderland has a large elderly population with more than 45,000 residents over the age of 65, while one in four people have a disability. The challenge in reaching out to the community is also further complicated by the high levels of deprivation – half the population are classed as living in the fifth most deprived district in the country.

Therefore, the equality drive has been something the city council has been placing a significant emphasis on for the last five years.

The push has been overseen by the diversity and inclusion team, which is part of the chief executive's department. But that is just the start of what is a sophisticated and extensive infrastructure in place to ensure equality and diversity issues are addressed.

There is a corporate equality steering group, which meets monthly and is chaired by the diversity and inclusion manager with senior officer representation from each directorate. Each directorate also has its own equality action group, while managers are expected to carry out assessments on all policies and services to check they meet equality requirements. And to help with council consultations there are a series of employee representative groups and independent advisory groups, composed of individuals and stakeholders, covering themes such as race, disability, gender, age, sexual orientation and religion or belief.

Underpinning the drive is the council's corporate equality scheme setting out the vision for everything from service delivery to recruitment. Such a set up has meant Sunderland has made good progress with the Equality Standard and to confirm this, and that level three had been reached, the council underwent the IDeA's Diversity Peer Challenge.

Dawn Rugman, the council's policy officer for equality, says: "We thought it would be best to go for something that meant we had people who were used to working in the field looking at what we were doing."

The three-person peer review team carried out the assessment in July 2008. The report confirmed the council was ready to move up to level three, praising Sunderland's dedication to equality in the process.

The peers said there was a "golden thread" running through all the council's activity with a strong commitment to equality from chief officers down to front-line staff. In particular, the report had praise for an online equality training programme put in place for all 14,500 employees.

It also said that Sunderland was good at listening to residents and community groups and had good partnership working in place. And it commended the work the council was doing on translation, highlighting the translation cards carried by enforcement officers as an example of best practice.

But the peer review process also pointed out areas of performance which could be improved.

The report said that the council should "seriously consider" requiring all councillors to undertake equality and diversity training. It also said more could be done to share best practice between directorates, monitor contracts and develop a strategy for Gypsies and Travellers.

Rugman says: "We found the review thorough and helpful. Many of the recommendations did not necessarily come as a surprise, but it helped to focus us on what we should be doing in the future.

We are now including all of them in an action plan to help the council go forward with the aim of getting to the 'excellent' level of the Equality Framework for Local Government by 2010."

Gloucestershire County Council

Six years of hard work by Gloucestershire County Council had produced real progress on the equalities agenda. A comprehensive strategy and infrastructure had been put in place and results were beginning to be seen across the board. But as is common with any long-term push, the council found itself in need of a little extra impetus and turned to the IDeA's Diversity Peer Challenge for help.

Kevin Lee, head of the council's equalities team, says: "It is important to take a step back and I guess that is what the review helped us to do.

"At the end of the visit, the peers gave a presentation to a host of senior people and they all heard loud and clear there was more to do. That gives you a little extra, especially as it is coming from people with experience of working on the issue."

Gloucestershire's focus on the new equalities agenda started in earnest back in 2002 with the creation of the fairness and diversity forum. The body, which includes representatives from each directorate, is responsible for everything from policy formation to setting targets and works closely with the equalities team.

Between them, they helped to produce a strategy and action plan – last updated in 2007 – which sets out the way forward for the council. The document offers guidance on equality impact assessments and the range of initiatives that should be in place for staff.

For example, managers and new starters are both taught through their induction programmes about how the agenda should be applied in areas such as recruitment, service delivery, policy and community engagement. While, four staff networks covering black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) workers, sexual orientation, harassment and disability are on hand to offer support and advice. And the impact of such measures is clear for all to see.

Some 3 per cent of the 17,500 workforce is from ethnic minorities – in line with the make-up of the local population – while 2.7 per cent are among the high earners. Beyond race, the number of women in high-earning positions is on the rise, while the council's approach to people with disabilities has also been recognised through Jobcentre Plus' two ticks disability symbol. This was awarded to Gloucestershire for its scheme which guarantees an interview for those who meet the minimum criteria available jobs.

The peer challenge, carried out in June 2008, confirmed the council had reached level three of the Equality Standard, praising everything from the leadership shown to the attitude of staff.

But it also said there needed to be an improvement in the way performance was measured and monitored.

With over 50 equalities targets in place ranging from work experience placements for disabled people to identifying potential sites for Gypsy and Traveller communities, it can be hard to keep track of everything.

The council responded to this by developing a performance scorecard which will show what progress is being made towards each target.

What is more, the council is also strengthening the links it has with the rest of the community to help with consultations and wider engagement on the agenda. A county equalities network incorporating the district councils, local NHS trusts, police and the voluntary and community sector came into being in January 2009.

Lee says the mix of praise and constructive criticism in the review provides a "good balance".

"It is nice to have things you are doing well highlighted, but equally you need that input to show you where things can be improved. I think we are now at the point where moving up to level four [the **excellent** level of the Equality Framework] is not that far away and the peer review played a key role in that."

Hackney Council

The London Borough of Hackney, to use the jargon, is an area with super-diversity. It is the third most ethnically diverse local authority area in England with 57 per cent of people from BAME groups. There are well-established Caribbean, Turkish and Orthodox Jewish communities – indeed the borough is home to the largest group of Charedi Jewish people in Europe.

Such diversity means there are more than 100 languages spoken and a quarter of residents say English is not their first language. To add to the mix, Hackney has high rates of worklessness, incapacity benefit claimants and a large lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

It is therefore not surprisingly that the council has long-made equalities and diversity a priority.

The corporate equality plan (CEP) was published in 2005, setting out the council's commitment to ensure it is a "fundamental right of every person not to be discriminated against". The CEP is supported by the equality and diversity policy which provides a framework for Hackney's target setting and good practice covering service delivery and recruitment. Directors report their progress against equality targets at their quarterly performance management meetings with cabinet members. While a corporate equality and diversity group, composed of senior managers, monitors progress and develops policy.

For example, the group has overseen the development of three statutory equality schemes for race, disability and gender. And in spring 2008 it helped to revamp the equality impact assessment regime to ensure all departments and service areas set targets based on a range of equality objectives. The council also has a good record on ensuring its 3,750 staff and body of councillors reflect the community.

A breakdown of the figures show that the overall make-up of the workforce is broadly similar to the local population, while the number of middle managers from ethnic minorities stands at a respectable 45 per cent. However, the council accepts more work is needed over the top jobs with seven in 10 chief officers and senior managers from white British groups. A range of tailored training programmes are currently being rolled out to address the issue.

Meanwhile, 26 of Hackney's 57 councillors are from BAME groups and the cabinet is one of the most diverse in the country in terms of gender, race, sexuality and disability.

Such achievements were reflected in the IDeA's Diversity Peer Challenge in September 2008, which praised the commitment shown right across the council and confirmed level three of the Equality Standard had been achieved.

The report said staff were "energetic and enthusiastic" and highlighted several schemes as examples of good practice, such as the decision to run birth registrations sessions in the community because some people were put off by official buildings.

But the peers said the council had “outgrown” its CEP and now was the time to update the strategy – something the peers noted local partners were ready to engage with. In particular, they said a more even-handed approach was needed to promoting equality across the six equality strands and the council should be doing fewer, more in-depth equality impact assessments.

Rosalind Hardie-Ejiohu, the council’s head of equality and diversity, says: “I think with the Equality Standard it is easy to get bogged down with the detail and processes. Getting to level three is all about getting the infrastructure in place, setting targets. But what the peer review helped us to think about was to concentrate on being a bit more strategic. We knew it was time we looked at the plan, but their input has helped us narrow down our thinking.”

She agrees on the ground there are plenty of examples of good practice, citing the redevelopment of the Clissold Leisure Centre which has now been given Paralympic accreditation and the birth registrations scheme. But she adds: “We now need to have a renewed focus on making sure what we do benefits people. Our new equalities plan will focus a lot more on outcomes and the targets will reflect this.”

Conclusion

Equality and diversity should be intrinsic to everything councils do, both internally and for their communities through the services they deliver and the leadership they provide. Councils have a key role in challenging discrimination, prejudice and working with partners to improve equality of opportunity, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged.

In doing so though, it shouldn't become an exercise in adding to or extending organisational processes. Outcomes for local communities should be the main focus, not measured on how well you articulate your journey, but through demonstrable evidence. Equality and quality are both key.

To achieve this it is as much about culture and "the ways we do things around here" as it is about having sound policies and procedures.

The diversity peer challenge provides an opportunity to take a step back, draw breath and consider carefully the next steps.

It is also important that we share and build on the learning from the challenges. By involving the wider public sector as partners in the process better outcomes can be achieved for communities, helping to create a fairer society for all.

For more information

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While the challenge is predominantly targeted at local government, the process is also available for arms length management organisations (ALMOs). In addition, the IDeA and the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) have developed a tailored version of the Equality Framework for Local Government for fire and rescue services. The Diversity Peer Challenge can be used for accreditation of this framework.

The peer challenge for the Equality Framework for Local Government currently costs £3,100 plus VAT, excluding expenses, for the **achieving** level.

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Printed using vegetable based inks.

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L09-187

Produced by Liberata Design and Print Studio



Local Government Association

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