



Equality Peer Challenge

Bracknell Forest Borough Council

28th March 2014

Report

1. Background

Bracknell Forest Council asked the LGA to carry out a re-accreditation of the Council at the “Achieving” level of the Equality Framework for Local Government. The Council first gained the “Achieving” level in 2010.

The re-accreditation peer challenge provides a “light touch” external assessment of an organisation’s judgement of itself against the equality framework benchmark, by a team of peers who have experience of delivering an equality agenda in their own organisation.

The team undertook a desk top analysis of the Council’s self-assessment and supporting documents. This was followed up by a one day site visit during which they met with employees, councillors and other stakeholders. This report confirms the judgement of the peer team and sets out some of the strengths and areas for further consideration.

The basis for the peer challenge is a benchmark against five areas of performance. They are:

- Knowing your communities
- Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment
- Community engagement and satisfaction
- Responsive services and customer care
- A skilled and committed workforce

The peer team was:

- Irena Hergottova – Walsall Borough Council
- Councillor Kay Hammond – Surrey County Council
- Gill Elliott – Local Government Association

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

2. Summary

The peer team were unanimous in concluding that Bracknell Forest Council (BFC) could be re-accredited at the ‘achieving’ level of the Equality Framework for Local Government.

The organisation was able to evidence how it has built on its experience and expertise in tackling inequality since the previous assessment in 2010, and show how it had adapted its methods and structures to address the new challenges that it faces. Despite experiencing ongoing financial pressure, the organisation continues to focus its resources on improving outcomes for its most vulnerable communities, with equality underpinning the council’s work with partners and stakeholders to contribute to improved outcomes for people living and working in the borough.

It was very clear that the Council was determined to use the 2010 peer challenge to improve its approach to equality issues. An action plan was developed to implement the recommendations and all the actions have been completed or nearing completion. The Council is self-aware and knows where it still needs to improve. Its self-assessment for this

Peer Challenge included areas for improvement across all five performance areas and the peer team are in agreement that these should be addressed.

In addition, and to help the Council on its journey towards the Excellent level of the Equality Framework, the peer team has made a number of recommendations that the Council may wish to consider. These are:

- How can regeneration of the town centre and other commercial developments in the future be harnessed to provide more opportunities for developing skills and providing more local jobs? The Elected Member for Economic Development and Regeneration could help make links to other Council priorities and strategies.
- Although it's clear that Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) are being embedded within the Council, it might be timely to review training for Members and staff to ensure that full EIAs consistently contain SMART Action and that all Members know how to use them to assist their decision making. This includes giving consideration to cumulative EIAs on savings or major service redesigns.
- Consider what more could be done to assist in developing a workforce that is more representative of an increasingly diverse community within the Borough. This might include some positive action.

3. Detailed findings

3.1 Knowing your communities

1. The Council has a good understanding of its communities, including the extent of inequality and disadvantage. It understands how the diversity of its residents has changed in recent years and is still changing and has prioritised its activities accordingly. An example of this is the work done with the Nepalese community including the development of Nepali Health Trainers, a project financed by the European Integration Fund.
2. There is excellent census data analysis by ward and good use is made of other data research such as Experian and Mosaic. The 2010 peer challenge report recommended that the Council could use the data that it and its partners held to produce a simple "equality story of Bracknell". In 2013 the Council used census data to produce the Equalities "Story of Place" which provides a concise summary of the demographics of the Borough and the key equality issues it faces.
3. The Council regularly shares data with partners and other agencies. The Stats Share data hub provides up to date figures that are used to develop and monitor strategies across the Council and with partners. Some partners were very positive about Stats Share although it was not clear that all partners used the information that was sent out on the CDs.
4. There is a new Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA) which highlights key health and well-being initiatives and a new JSNA website has been developed to improve access to the data held by the Council, partners and communities. The public health team have commissioned a local survey of health and wellbeing to generate primary data on the local population which is due to be published in May this year.

3.2 Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

5. Senior leaders within the Council provide strong and visible leadership on equality. The Leader is the executive member for Community Cohesion and Equality and publicly supports equality. He has chaired and delivered speeches at equalities events including the launch of the “One Community Stop Hate Crime Now” campaign. Other Members are equally committed with Member Champions for Older People and the voluntary sector.
6. The Council’s single Equality Scheme “All of Us” 2012-16 has streamlined its equality objectives and action plans. Actions are monitored by senior officers and members as well as partners and the community. Equality information Reports are produced annually within key services to identify if action needs to be taken. These are published on the Council website and are received by senior officers and Members. These reports are good practice in terms of take up of services and greater corporate coordination of these information reports would be beneficial going forward. Within the Equality Scheme there is a commitment to publish the reports every year in January as required by the Public Sector Equality Duty statutory code.
7. EIAs are taken seriously by the organisation and many that were seen are of a high quality. Members are using EIAs to challenge budget decisions but some Members would value refresher training on the use of EIAs in decision making. This includes giving consideration to cumulative EIAs on savings or major service redesigns.
8. Initial screening of EIAs is left to managers and whilst this model is satisfactory, care needs to be taken to ensure that adverse impact is addressed. For example, in the EIA on Blue Badges, there was no recognition of the impact of the increased charges on disabled people. In the initial EIA screening on redundancy criteria, there was recognition of the fact that more disabled or Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people were made redundant but the impact was not explained and it was not deemed serious enough to take through to full assessment. The Council should also ensure that SMART action plans are consistently included in EIAs.
9. Overview and Scrutiny is addressing equality issues through its panel workshops, and performance reviews. Members said that they are able to consider ideas and concepts before they go to Cabinet and so are able to influence policies at an early stage. For example the Children’s Assessment Framework was changed as a result of scrutiny and Members were able to influence the way some of the children’s centres were closed or merged.
10. Partners in Bracknell Forest have joint equality objectives and priorities. Statutory Partners are very positive about working with the Council compared to other unitary councils in the county. Some felt that the new Health and Well-being Board needs wider representation. At present it does not include the police, housing or wider partners.
11. Public Health has integrated well within the Council and is helping it to broaden its vision around health inequalities, for example around smoking and substance mis-

use. Representatives from the BME community felt that more preventative measures to combat diabetes and cardio-vascular conditions in this group were needed.

12. There is real evidence of how the Council is fostering good relations within the community, for example, via the Healthy Voices project and the way it involved the Bracknell Forest Access Group in the redevelopment of the town centre. The Residents Survey in 2012 reported good community cohesion, with 87% of residents saying that people from different backgrounds get on well together.

3.3 Community engagement and satisfaction

13. It is clear that there are many opportunities for formal and informal community engagement between the Council, residents, tenants, voluntary and community groups and representatives. There is a Bracknell Forest Community Engagement Strategy, a Community Engagement Protocol, an on-line consultation portal called "Have Your Say". Other effective methods of engagement include social media and client/user groups within Directorates.
14. Community partners were very positive about the opportunities they have to engage with the Council. Some were aware of the Council's equality impact assessments and felt that they were well consulted on their views about proposals in a way that was not just about ticking boxes. There was however a degree of confusion amongst the community partners about whether certain fora or partnerships were still in existence. Several felt that the Council still needed to improve the amount of feedback it provided after consultation exercises.
15. Gypsies, Travellers and Roma require attention in terms of dealing with hostilities towards them. Certain groups such as Eastern European migrants would benefit from better take up of vaccinations.

3.4 Responsive services and customer care

16. The Council was able to demonstrate real outcomes that have improved equality in its services. Children's Services are focussed on closing attainment gaps around ethnicity, disability and financial disadvantage. Each year these gaps are closing. EIAs are more outcome focussed and there are examples of actions being taken to mitigate against the adverse impact of cuts across a range of services. For example cuts to concessionary bus fares and subsidised bus services and youth and children's centres.
17. The Council uses commissioning and procurement to good effect as a means of delivering on local equality and economic objectives. In order to get better value for money, its procurement strategy links equalities into the organisation's corporate vision and objectives, and opportunities to obtain wider (community) benefits when procuring have been identified. Procurement processes are in place to ensure that

contractors and grant receivers are meeting the changing needs of clients. Both the tendering and the contract monitoring processes address equality issues.

18. Within the procurement strategy, there is a strong focus on using local suppliers. 82% of existing suppliers are small and medium enterprises and 54% of spending is within the Borough. Via the Local Enterprise Council, the Council takes part in various events such as “Selling to the Council” and “Meet the Buyer”. Voluntary sector partners said that they were well supported through tendering process by the Council. Part of the Council’s procurement strategy going forward will be to add more value to its contracts by building in more requirements for contractors to employ apprentices. This is an area where it could do more.

3.5 A skilled and committed workforce

19. Staff seem to enjoy working for Bracknell Forest Council. Managers’ awareness of stress triggers has been increased through training and there are low levels of sickness and turnover in the organisation. Employees were positive about the “Good to Great” initiative with several people saying they felt empowered by the opportunity to improve services.
20. Relationships with the Trade Unions are good. There are relatively few discipline or grievance cases. Human Resources are seen as effective in handling change within the organisation including the way they deal with redundancies and redeployment. Staff with disabilities are well supported by the Council.
21. Going forward, the Council needs to reconsider its workforce planning and how it will reach its targets, for example, to have a representative workforce within the top 5% of salary banding. It is difficult to see how the workforce will be able to change significantly as turnover is low and no positive actions are in place at the moment.
22. Good employee policies are in place around flexible working, but staff peers spoke to indicated that there were inconsistencies around which staff can access flexible working. As an example some staff said that they were unable to take advantage of home working opportunities because of operational management decisions.
23. More consideration needs to be given to the next staff survey, so that results can be disaggregated to consider issues like staff satisfaction by protected group characteristics.

4. Examples of innovative projects and initiatives

The Council’s Equality Scheme is very good with clear examples of how the objectives link in with the Council Strategy and Service Planning.

There is some really good staff engagement as a result of the Good to Great programme. It could be used to drive through equality initiatives.

5. Signposting to good practice

Bristol City Council

Following research the council developed a programme of 25 projects to address workforce diversity with regards to people from a BME background. Innovative projects included opportunities for reverse mentoring: white managers being mentored by BME staff; involvement of trained BME staff on selection panels; community representatives on selection panels; a BME Leadership Programme; targeted apprenticeship and internship schemes.

Challenge Manager: Gill Elliott
Tel No: 07747 753263
E-mail: gill.elliott@local.gov.uk

Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ