



Equality Peer Challenge
London Borough of Brent

June 30 - July 2 2015



1. Background

The London Borough of Brent (LBB) asked the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct an Equality Peer Challenge against the Excellent level of the Equality Framework for Local Government. This report is a summary of the peer team's findings. The Peer Challenge is designed to validate a council's own self-assessment by considering documentary evidence and carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees and other stakeholders.

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

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

The Peer Challenge is not an inspection, rather it offers an external assessment by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equality/diversity agenda in their own councils.

Peers were:

Councillor Marie Pye- LB Waltham Forest
Mike O'Hanlon – LB Redbridge
Kay Banfield – Kent Fire and Rescue Service
Sally Atueyi – Rochdale Borough Council
Gill Elliott – Local Government Association

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.

Following the Challenge, the peer team's decision was that the Council was very close to reaching the Excellent level of the EFLG. The team's view was that the Council, by addressing the Peer

Team's recommendations, could expect to be awarded Excellent within a relatively short time frame.

The team made five key recommendations on areas which it feels the Council needs to progress further before it can be reconsidered for the Excellent level award. These were:

1. Corporate Management Team to report on progress on the Equality Strategy Action plan after the first six months.
2. Effectively address the building accessibility issues of the new Civic Centre
3. Implement the recommendations in the latest Annual Workforce Equalities Report
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the new Equality Committee
5. Progress the recommendations in the HR Review action plan

The team are confident that the Council will achieve these recommendations and it will be very happy to make a return visit to confirm this has been done, with a view to validating the Excellent status.

The peer team found much that was impressive in the way the Council is mainstreaming equality in all of its activities. The Leader provides a clear vision and strong leadership and he is well supported in this by the Deputy Leader and the rest of the Cabinet. The Chief Executive and her corporate management team are also fully committed to equality and diversity and their leadership has ensured that equality has been mainstreamed within the Council's service delivery and its workforce development.

The peer team were able to see the progress that the Council has made on the equality agenda in recent years. It has strengthened its approach to equality analysis and is using this knowledge to influence key budget decisions. Equality analysis is also guiding the design development and delivery of services and mitigating adverse impact for the most vulnerable in the borough where possible.

The Council has made considerable efforts to gain an in-depth knowledge of the communities within the borough and to ensure that data and other information informs all it does. It understands which

residents are most affected by poverty, welfare reform and poor health. In recent years it has maintained its support for the community and voluntary sector via grants. It has also maintained Council Tax support for the most vulnerable people in the borough.

The Council has made a conscious effort to improve community engagement. The Residents' Attitude Survey 2014 is a good example of this. Its results have informed the Brent Borough Plan 2015-2019 and key budget decisions. Community relations in the borough are good. 84% of people surveyed said that it was a place where people from different backgrounds can get on well. The community and voluntary sector have good and longstanding relationships with the Council and there were some excellent examples of Service user groups being involved in designing services and procurement decisions.

The peer team's decision not to award Excellent was made for two key reasons. One related to the new Civic Centre and the significant outstanding remedial action recommended by the Access Audit completed in 2014. At the present time only a third of the recommended actions in the audit have been completed, but there is a plan that is being implemented to agreed timelines. The peer team felt that to be considered Excellent the Council needed to expedite and complete the majority of the recommended actions in the report and to identify a mechanism to ensure that disability access is maintained at the highest level in all council buildings.

The second reason was that the team felt that the Council needed more time to progress a number of other important initiatives. The major review of the Council's HR policies and practices was only completed by the Local Government Association in late 2014, following a ruling against the Council of race discrimination by an employment tribunal. The review was very positive and, though few, the recommendations were welcome. The peer team considers that many of the recommendations in the HR Review Action Plan are key equality measures. There is clearly a will within the Council to deliver on these actions and several measures are already in place. There has been slippage on a few initiatives since January and the Council recognises the importance of maintaining momentum.

The very recent establishment of a new Member Equalities Committee is hugely positive. One of its responsibilities is to oversee implementation of the HR Review Action Plan. The peer team felt that it was important for the effectiveness of this committee to be evaluated as it would be overseeing the HR Review, and the recommendations of this equality peer challenge.

The other two key recommendations made by the peer team concern the action plans of the Equality Strategy 2015-16 and the Annual Workforce Equalities Report 2014-15. The peer team felt it was important for the measures contained in these action plans to be further progressed and for some outcomes to be visible before the Excellent level award was made.

The peer team feel that these recommendations will have a significant impact on the Council and will greatly strengthen its reputation for equality and diversity. It will be pleased to return at a time of the Council's choosing to review progress with a view to being able to award the Excellent level of the Framework.

3. Detailed findings

3.1 Knowing your communities

Strengths

The Council has an in depth knowledge about its changing communities. It has a good evidence base, which is easily accessible to staff in the form of ward and service user profiles. Ward profiles use Census data and information from other sources to provide good quality and regular analysis of the Borough make up. Service User profiles also use data from a range of sources and indicate variations in key service outcomes for different equality groups. There is also a wide range of information available to the public on the Brent Data section of the Council website, which includes all of these profiles.

The Council uses data well to identify key issues and set organisational priorities and equality objectives. For example, evidence about the changes to the ethnicity of Looked After Children and the increase in white British, Somali and Eastern European children was used to target services for children at risk of coming into

the care system. Good use has also been made of data that is shared with partners. Examples include community safety work relating to gangs and violence against women.

There is a structured approach to ensuring that data is communicated to all parts of the Council. Staff workshops were run in 2014 to discuss the issues raised by the service profiles and how they should inform service development and delivery. This approach has now been incorporated into the mandatory corporate induction process.

There is good evidence of how equalities data is being used to inform service planning. An example of this is the South Kilburn Regeneration project, where information from both the Census at ward level, and the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), coupled with the detailed needs assessment of each of the households affected by the project by Brent Housing Partnership, was brought together to create the blueprint for an ambitious and sustainable community development plan providing for the aspirations of existing and future residents' education, health and social needs provision. There has been an ongoing dialogue with the community throughout the history of this project through an on-site neighbourhood housing office and the formal involvement of the Tenants Steering Group to provide information on issues of concern to the community.

Areas for consideration:

Representatives from the community and voluntary sector said they would value a regular bulletin from the Council of "what's new" as they often have limited resources to analyse data and information from their own resources. This feedback is despite the fact that there is a single web page with all relevant information available for voluntary sector on the council website.

There is scope for better information sharing between services, partners and contractors. In some cases contractors are engaging with specific communities and their knowledge and expertise could be better captured and utilised more within the council. An example of this is Veolia, the Waste contractor, and the intelligence it is gaining from its engagement with the Nepalese community.

3.2 Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

Strengths:

The Leader has a clear vision for the Borough based on fairness, growth and resilience. Community stakeholders said that in the past three years they had seen a “new energy” within the Council towards equality issues. They attributed this change of culture to the Leader. He was also praised for having a very visible presence within the community and voluntary sector. Cabinet Members are also committed to and leading the equality agenda. The Deputy Leader in particular has been instrumental in taking the Council forward. There has been a positive response to equality measures from the leader of the Opposition. New arrangements for Member training and development look comprehensive and include equality and diversity.

The culture change that is evident in the Council around equality is also a testament to the strong leadership of the Chief Executive, her corporate management team and the directors.

The refreshed Equality Analysis process which was introduced in 2014 has strengthened equality analysis within the Council and ensured that it is more embedded into business processes. The launch of the process was supported by a communications and training programme to support staff and build understanding of the importance of equality analysis. Members clearly value the use of equality analysis and gave positive examples of how they have used it to take key budget decisions including deciding which services should not be included in cuts. Cumulative analysis of budget proposals has influenced budget decisions by demonstrating how proposals taken together would adversely affect protected groups.

A new Member Equalities Committee has very recently been formally constituted to oversee the implementation of the HR Review Action Plan and the EFLG peer challenge recommendations. This is a very positive development for the Council going forward.

The previous Scrutiny Committee had a strong equality focus. Just one example is that in 2014 it published a report on preventing violence against Women and Girls (VAWG). Actions from the report

have already produced positive outcomes such as taking action to protect young girls identified at risk of forced marriage.

It is evident that the priorities of the Borough Plan 2015-19 were informed by engagement with partners and other stakeholders. A “golden thread” relating to equalities is clear from the Borough Plan through to the Council’s Corporate Plan, service plans and the Equality Strategy.

The Council’s Diversity Reference Group is chaired by the Chief Executive and attended by operational directors from all departments. This is a serious commitment. Departmental equality groups (DEGs) are playing a positive role in equalities-related work. They form a link between the Diversity Reference Group and the departments. One of their key activities is to audit equality analyses for their department. This has led to greater ownership within departments and more rigorous analyses. DEGs are supported by the Equality Team. The Equality Team is a valuable resource for the organisation and it is good to see that it is being maintained despite budget cuts and restructuring within the organisation.

Areas for consideration:

The Council and its partners are very ambitious for the Borough. The challenge for the Council will be to continue to deliver on its equality related targets at a time of financial austerity and major organisational changes. There is a new interim Head of HR and a new Chief Executive will also be in post later in the year. Going forward, there will be significant budget cuts to manage, whilst working to a new Borough Plan whose implementation is still in its infancy and with a new Corporate Plan 2015-19 and crucially a new Equality Strategy and Action Plan 2015-16. In light of the significant and imminent changes in leadership, it is important that the momentum is continued in order that the significant organisational energy already directed towards equality results in the outcomes envisaged.

Equality analysis processes require a focus on both mitigating negative impact and making improvements to policies to positively improve their impact on equality. There was little evidence of this within published EAs and consideration needs to be given as to how to ensure that those working on EIAs look at both areas more

consistently. The Council may also wish to consider adopting carers as an additional protected group when undertaking their equality analysis.

Whilst the previous Scrutiny Committee is to be commended on their work relating to equality there is now an almost completely new committee and unfortunately the review team were unable to meet any of the new members due to availability. It is essential that this new committee maintains the excellent focus on equality that the previous one demonstrated.

Although there is a new and comprehensive process for assessing reasonable adjustments for officers there is not an equivalent process for councillors. The role and position of a councillor is different to an employee and whilst councillors praised the authority for providing reasonable adjustments, a simple and transparent system for reasonable adjustments would be beneficial.

3.3 Involving your communities

Strengths:

The Council clearly has many ways of involving residents, the community and the voluntary sector in the way services are designed, developed and delivered. Examples of really good outcomes include the Harlesden Town Regeneration, the South Kilburn Regeneration Project and the Dementia Research project. The Residents' Attitude Survey in 2014 has given the Council a good insight into the key priorities for customers. The results were also part of the Consultation for the Brent Borough Plan 2015-19. The Plan outlines some new and creative ways that residents will be able to engage with the Council including a new volunteering scheme.

There have been notable improvements in the last 3 years in community engagement by all levels of the organisation with community and voluntary groups and contracted service providers. Consultation forums include Brent Connects, Brent Youth Parliament the Brent Multi Faith Forum and the Voluntary Sector Liaison Forum. Prior to setting the budget for 2015/16 a large scale public consultation was undertaken with residents, the community and

voluntary sector, and local businesses to understand where they felt council spending should be focussed.

Communities from across all protected characteristics are involved in decision making. Members of Bheard, the Adult Social Care user forum have been trained by the Council as peer consultants to visit care homes to talk to staff and residents. They have also been involved in writing specifications, assessing tenders and interviewing on appointment panels. Members of Bheard took part in the appointment of a new Involvement and Engagement Officer.

A greater range of groups is participating in engagement with the Council e.g. Younger residents are targeted by the Brent Housing Partnership through "Our Say", a magazine aimed at young people including young tenants. Saafi, a community based Somali organisation, is involved in signposting Somali residents to Council and other services.

Areas for consideration:

A common theme from community groups and other stakeholders is that the Council could be better at ensuring that feedback is always given so that those providing input feel valued. This could be via some kind of post consultation exercise or other communication just to "close the consultation loop"

Several people peers spoke to within the community said that the Council could be better at avoiding the use of corporate or technical language which can create a barrier to meaningful dialogue with the community. This was particularly pertinent to those meetings that had taken place away from council premises. However, community groups expressed a view that they had seen a marked improvement in the Council's community engagement in recent years.

3.4 Responsive services and customer care

Strengths:

The New Civic Centre is a tremendous asset to the Council, the community and the local area. The building and surrounding hotel and retail developments have regenerated the area and provided an

impressive community space. The building has clearly succeeded in its aspirations to be transparent to the community.

Improved equality analysis is influencing service development and improvements. The Single Customer Records system has enabled the Council to know who is or is not using its services and what their needs are. The system is populated from a range of key services so the information captured about customers is richer and more detailed and accessible from a single point. The 2014 Residents survey indicated increasing satisfaction with Council Services including those with protected characteristics.

The Council has a good understanding of those residents who are affected by welfare reform and has worked with the Department for Work and Pensions to respond to residents' issues. Council Tax support and the Discretionary Housing Support Payments Fund continue to provide support for the most vulnerable in the Borough.

There is clear evidence of the inclusion of equalities requirements within specifications for procured services. Residents and service users are often involved in procurement decisions. Members of some service user forums have received accredited training to become peer consultants. They have reviewed services including care homes, and recommendations from peer consultants have led to improvements at the care homes visited.

There were good examples of some responsive and innovative services:

- The Council's domestic violence initiative is responding to changing population patterns within the borough. There has been a growth in domestic violence within the Eastern European communities and in response to this, special Eastern European domestic violence advocates have been appointed. The council has also worked with the Polish Church and shops and appointed Polish community beacons.
- Brent Housing Partnership's (BHP) Academy was launched in April 2015 to give every BHP resident the opportunity to get involved in a training and development programme to equip

them to stand for election to the BHP Board and for other opportunities for involvement with BHP. This has helped BHP with their search for resident Board Members and has given residents the opportunity to develop their skills. Recently they have also co-opted a young person onto their Board to provide the perspective of young people under the age of 25 years.

- The Council's flexible child-minding service offers families access to affordable childcare at short notice, overnight and at weekends. This provides vital support to parents working irregular hours or shift work, or who are juggling other commitments such as job interviews.

Areas for consideration

One of the peer team's key recommendations is for the Council to address access barriers for disabled people in the Civic Centre and take senior level ownership of the project. The actions were identified by an access audit in 2014 that was commissioned by the Council. The peer team heard several personal accounts of difficulties disabled people had getting into and around the building. The process of parking for disabled people is another issue that might need further consideration.

The Somali community is a significantly increased population in the borough. A greater focus could be given to the specific and unique challenges that affect the community, through encouraging the employment of Somali people in key services and agencies to both gain an understanding of the nuanced needs of the community and to build increased trust, confidence and their continued engagement.

3.5 A skilled and committed workforce

Strengths

The Council as a whole has a very diverse workforce which broadly reflects the ethnic diversity of the community. This has been the case for many years, regardless of reorganisation and restructuring. Senior grades are split almost 50/50 on gender and the number of staff declaring as disabled has increased despite the decreasing workforce.

The Council's Apprenticeship programme has been very successful and has so far recruited over 80 apprentices. Over 80% of these are from a BAME background and the Council is committed to reserving 20% of vacancies for looked after children

New robust guidance on reasonable adjustments has been published on the Council's website. It was developed with the help of disabled staff who attended staff focus groups relating to disability.

The HR Review and Annual Workforce Equalities Report 2014/15 are both evidence based, clear and focussed. The HR Review had strong leadership and significant engagement with staff and partners. It has proposed some innovative initiatives including reverse mentoring, a local graduate scheme and unconscious bias training. The Council has made a good start on implementation as 36% of actions from the HR review have been delivered

Areas for consideration

The ethnicity of the workforce does not reflect some specific communities in the borough, although Brent benchmarks well with the rest of London. BAME staff are concentrated in low grades and there are relatively few at senior level despite this being a priority for several years. The HR Review Action Plan contains a number of measures to address these issues. Timely implementation will be important as well as on-going review and making changes to any measures that may prove less effective in delivering the outcomes the Council wants.

The data and information presented in the Annual Workforce Equalities Report would be enhanced by increasing the categories of BAME employees to reflect other ethnicities or nationalities such as Somalis, Chinese, Arabs and other relevant groups.

It will be important for the Council to monitor the satisfaction and effectiveness of the new reasonable adjustments guidance across all departments. Further training might be needed to ensure that managers understand their responsibilities.

There was a very low completion of the disability section on application forms (8%). We understand that this was because of an error in the reporting function of the database. The Council has since been provided with an accurate report by the provider. It is now in the process of incorporating this into the final version of the Annual Workforce Equalities Report

There has been no staff survey completed for several years. The HR Review has recommended a staff survey be carried out and we understand this is due to take place in the autumn of 2015. It will be important to disaggregate the results by protected characteristics. Response rates to staff surveys are often high because they are anonymous, so it should be possible to differentiate views across a range of ethnicities and other characteristics and across departments and grades.

The HR Review was very ambitious in its timescales and 27% of actions have slipped. Progressing this review is one of the peer team's key recommendations.

4. Signposting to good practice elsewhere

The peer team think that the Council could improve its engagement with disabled people. Disability Rights UK has produced guidance for local authorities on inclusive communities and involving disabled people.

<http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/sites/default/files/pdf/1%20%20InclusivecommunitiesLAguidance.pdf>

As the Council takes forward its initiatives to increasing the representativeness of BAME people at senior levels it might find it useful to contact **Bristol City Council** which has had some excellent recruitment and selection initiatives to address the representativeness of its workforce.

The report "Race at the Top"- which gives a comprehensive picture of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) representation in leadership in UK business may also be of interest.

<http://raceforopportunity.bitc.org.uk/research-insight/research-articles/race-top-0#sthash.lu8E4MYG.dpuf>

The peer team suggests that the new Scrutiny Committee may find it helpful to consider the report 'Equal to the Task', which was produced by the Centre for Public Scrutiny. It looks at how equality can be built into scrutiny. Although this report is now a few years old it is still highly relevant.

<http://www.cfps.org.uk/publications?item=201&filter=health&offset=50>

For follow-up support relating to this report and details of other LGA support that is available, please contact:

Heather Wills

Principal Adviser London, South East (Buckinghamshire, Hampshire and Isle of Wight, Kent, West Sussex)

Email: heather.wills@local.gov.uk

Tel: 07770 701188

For queries relating to this report please contact:

Gill Elliott, Peer Support Adviser

Local Government Association

Tel No – 07747 753263

Email gill.elliott@local.gov.uk

Local Government House

Smith Square

London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Facsimile 020 764 3030

E-mail info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk