

Equality Framework for Local Government: Developing Level Diversity Peer Challenge Final Report

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, 11th – 12th October 2017

1. Peer Challenge Team:

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2. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of a Equality and Diversity Peer Challenge organised by Rotherham MBC to provide independent feedback and insight into its progress towards implementing the requirements of the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG). The Peer Challenge process is designed to validate a council's own self-assessment at the Developing Level by considering documentary evidence and by carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees and other stakeholders. The Developing Level can be summarised in the phrase: "understanding the importance of equality"

The basis for this Peer Challenge has been against the benchmark outlined by the LGA for two of the five areas of performance of the EFLG. They are:

1. Knowing your communities and equality mapping
2. Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

The remaining three benchmark performance areas have not been directly assessed however, during the review process, any areas of interest in these areas that may have come to the attention of the Peer Challenge Team have also been noted in the report. These areas are:

3. Community engagement and satisfaction
4. Responsive services and customer care
5. A modern and diverse workforce

The Peer Challenge is not an inspection; rather it offers an external assessment of a council's own judgement of itself against the Equality Framework benchmark, by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equality/diversity agenda in their own councils.

3. Executive summary and recommendations

Following this Equality and Diversity Peer Challenge, we have reached the following conclusion:

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council has completed a satisfactory self-assessment against the criteria for the Developing Level of the Equality Framework for both the performance benchmarks of “Knowing Your Community” and “leadership, partnership and organisational commitment”.

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC) demonstrated a wide range of examples of equality commitments and practices being embedded in its services, policies and practices. There were particularly good examples of the leadership team providing direction and impetus to the equality and diversity agenda, developing the processes, policies and structures to enable the Council to continue to make equality and diversity a core aspect of its vision for the borough and to shape its future service development. It is committed to understanding the diversity of its communities and the inequalities that may exist and these are beginning to be reflected in its core strategic priorities and plans.

4. The Council made the following observations upon the impact the peer challenge has had: -

Rotherham Council has really welcomed the opportunity to undertake a critical assessment of our equality performance and to have this objectively verified by our peers, as this was a crucial step in our ongoing journey to deliver and improve equality outcomes in Rotherham. The process of preparing the self-assessment and narrative documentation through to organising and facilitating the peer challenge has caused the Council to reflect on its equality practice and delivery in an in-depth, holistic way. The honest self-assessment reassured us that we were at level one of the framework stage, so it is very pleasing that the peer team saw enough of what we think makes Rotherham substantiate that.

Rotherham Council is justifiably proud that its employees, Elected Members and partners work closely and effectively together to improve the lives of the residents of our diverse town. Equality has long been integral to what this organisation is about, so the validation of our peers using the EFLG accreditation provides us with a valuable tool to promote our good work in this area and to engage the town in improving even further as we continue on our equalities journey.

Summary

The Council has gone through major changes over the last three years both in relation to the impact of budget pressures and responding to the Jay and Casey reports.

During this time the Council has worked hard to continue to be a good employer, which respects individuals, treats people fairly and one that recognises that differences and diversity bring benefits to the Council in many ways.

Reflecting on the information provided in the self-assessment, along with the supporting documents in the evidence file, demonstrates that we are a developing council that understands the importance of and has a commitment to equality. Overall, what the self-assessment reveals is that the Council has put in place the foundations on which we can build but we recognise that there are gaps in the Council’s implementation of equalities objectives. 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.

We wish to reflect on and learn from the findings from the Peer Review to identify the next steps we need to take. There are five key areas of improvement we need to focus on:

1. We need to establish what information should directorates collect and how do they do this. Once this information is collected how the information is analysed to inform decisions about services including how we embed equalities in service plans, design and commissioning of services. This will ensure we are monitoring equalities performance and business intelligence.
2. A comprehensive evaluation of our current policy and action plan with the completion of an annual report with more outward facing objectives.
3. We need to adapt a more comprehensive and consistent approach to our approach on Equality Impact Assessments.
4. Develop a Community Engagement Strategy and toolkit so the council have a clear, consistent and joined up approach to community engagement to influence and shape what happens in Rotherham.
5. Develop staff and organisational development to build the knowledge and expertise of managers to embed equalities protocols and practice as well as increase representation from all protected groups in the workforce.

We have already identified that regular equalities data analysis and reporting needs to be put in place and those Directorates should be required to address equalities issues as part of service planning and monitoring. This will enable us to use equalities information to inform decisions about investment, commissioning and service delivery models. It is unclear the extent to which Council staff understand and implement equalities principles and working and we propose to introduce staff development to address this. We also have a suite of proposals designed to embed a consistent approach to engagement and consultation.

On the positive side some of the foundations for good practice in equalities have been put in place. The Council has made progress in a number of areas. Examples include:

- Adoption of the new Equality and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan “Equality For All 2016-2019”.
- Development of equality objectives encompassing both employment and service delivery.
- The establishment of our Corporate Equalities group chaired by Councillor Alam, Cabinet Portfolio Lead.
- The establishment of a Community Reference Group.
- Some excellent examples of engagement and consultation with groups of protected characteristics.
- Development of the Rotherham Building Stronger Communities Strategy.
- Reviewing our approach to tackling hate crime in all its forms.

We recognise that we still have more to do.

The challenge ahead will be embedding the equality and diversity strategy across the organisation and we hope and expect that the peer review will help us to identify the most effective way to do this.

5. Knowing your communities

Developing Criteria

- The organisation has gathered and published information and data on the profile of its communities and the extent of inequality and disadvantage.
- Systems are being developed to collect and analyse soft and hard data/intelligence about communities, their needs and aspirations.
- Plans are in place to collect, share and use equality information with partners.

5.1 Core strengths:

Rotherham Council has collected and published the vital pieces of information on the diversity of the local borough and its workforce (JSNA, Borough and Ward Profiles, workforce diversity analysis). In some areas it also includes detailed analysis of service-take-up (eg Adult Placements). We can see this information on equality and diversity reflected in key strategies of the Council and the wider partnership.

We have seen that this evidence is being shared with partners through a variety of Rotherham Together partnership structures and this was informing joint decision-making and priorities, for example the Rotherham Together Partnership Plan 2016/17.

We have also been able to identify areas where there are plans to enhance this working with partners, the community and other stakeholders to ensure that community engagement enables decision-makers to better understand needs and develop improved services as a result. The Tenant Involvement Strategy 2016 – 19 is a good example of this commitment and planning for engagement to improve understanding and influence service delivery.

Managers and front-line employees all appeared to have a sound knowledge of the needs of the local community and knew where to go to seek further information should they need it.

5.2 Good practice examples:

The following areas of work are examples of good practice which have helped Rotherham Council to better understand their local communities, and which other local authorities may wish to learn more about to inform their own practice:

- Rotherham Tenant Involvement Strategy makes clear commitments to engaging all sections of the community and outlines how this will happen.
- Different but Equal is an excellent example of engagement with young people from diverse backgrounds.
- Service workforce demographic dashboards provide service heads with the information they need to set objectives for workforce diversity and plan accordingly.
- The Pulse Survey “You Said We Did” action plan identifies clearly what you have learnt and what steps you will be taking as a result, including around work-life balance, well-being and dignity at work. However, this could be strengthened further by identify those areas where different groups of staff had different experiences e.g. BME employees, disabled employees, male and female employees etc.

5.3 Areas for further development:

“Things like data-sharing seem to get stuck in the middle, despite the commitment from the leadership. It is often because the middle managers don’t feel empowered to act on the commitment.”

Partner organisation

Rotherham Council has a strong commitment to sharing data with its partners so they can collectively understand the needs of the local community and better plan how to meet them. However, in practice the feedback we received is that this doesn’t always happen as well as it might – sometimes taking too long or

not happening at all. This may be because those charged with implementing the policy perhaps do not feel adequately authorised to do so or have the information they need to do this.

Almost all the equality and diversity data we have seen being used by the authority relates to diversity; describing different communities, their locations and size, and in a few examples to service take-up. We could find very few examples however where this data analysis goes deeper into understanding the inequalities these diverse communities experience for example in health, housing or education.

There did appear to be some gaps in the diversity and equality data collected, such as that for the LGBTQ community and the Gypsy and Traveller community or for deeper understanding of intersectional issues e.g. of BME older people.

It is also not clear that the most is being made of community engagement activities which are an opportunity to better understand the experiences and needs of diverse groups. For example, the Rotherham Voice report did not explain how successful this project was at reaching different sections of the community or the arrangements made to try to ensure the process was accessible and inclusive to all, nor whether their views differed, which might have been expected for such a strategic and formative engagement exercise.

5.4 To progress to Achieving Levels:

The Council should build on the sound data and analysis it already has around diversity, to better understand the experience of diverse groups and to inform its priorities, objectives and plans. So, for example, could services use the workforce demographic and pulse survey data to analyse the experience of BME or Muslim employees and identify ways to increase their representation in the workforce? We heard from partners and community groups that services could do more to understand who uses their services and what their experience was – for example social care could monitor the take-up and outcomes of services for LGBTQ clients, or BME clients.

We could see very few examples of how Service Plans had considered equality or diversity data and used this to inform the plan's challenges, priorities, objectives or actions. Consideration needs to be given to how this data, or at least the key messages this gives to the service, informs the planning process. What advice and assistance is given to service managers to collect and consider the appropriate evidence?

The Council should give further thought to what it really needs to know about equality in the local community and how it intends to use this information to set its priorities and evaluate success. It could look deeper into the data it already holds on customers to assess customer access needs, educational achievement of children from different ethnic backgrounds, for example and sharing this to inform service planning. It could also make greater use of engagement with the community to gather 'soft' data on the barriers faced and needs of different sections of the community, and use this to help set objectives and determine improvements.

A fuller explanation of the Equality Impacts process used within Cabinet reports would help decision-makers to understand the specific impacts predicted and the actions that have been or will be taken to mitigate any inequalities that may result. This would help to demonstrate how data analysis is informing decision-making. For example, the Libraries Assessment of Local Need – Could this be used to help understand how the pattern of usage by BME groups or older people differs from those of White UK residents and younger people? Would this inform the priorities for the Library service in the future?

6. Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

Developing Criteria

- The political and executive leadership have publicly committed to reducing inequality, fostering good relations and challenging discrimination.
- Decision makers understand what equality means and why it matters locally. Partnership working arrangements are being reviewed with the voluntary and community sector and the wider community to ensure that local equality priorities are addressed.
- Equality objectives for the organisation have been set and published in accordance with the requirements of the specific duties to support the public sector equality duty.
- Appropriate structures are in place to ensure delivery and review of equality objectives.
- Communications promote a clear commitment to advancing equality and fostering good relations across all local communities.
- The organisation ensures that procurement and commissioning processes and practice take account of the diverse need of clients, and that providers understand the requirements of the public sector equality duty.
- Structures are in place within the organisation and across partnerships to understand relationships and map community tensions.

6.1 Core Strengths

The Senior Leadership Team at Rotherham Council appear to have made great strides towards developing an equality and diversity culture within the organisation. The core message and expectations are widely communicated through the Values and Behaviours. We heard evidence from many sources (senior leaders, service managers, front-line staff, partners and community groups) that these values were being put into practice and that positive cultural change is well underway.

“Equalities is part of the DNA of the Council”

Partner Organisation

The leadership’s commitment to equality and diversity is supported by a range of key documents including the Equality and Diversity Policy, the Equalities for All Strategy, and the establishment of the Equality and Diversity Board should help support its continued development, implementation and review. The equality and diversity agenda in the Council has the active and practical support of the political and executive leadership who understand how this will be crucial to the Council’s vision for the borough.

There is a shared understanding across the leadership team, the workforce, the Rotherham Together Partnership and the community sector that bringing people from different backgrounds together is one of the biggest challenges that the borough faces and must be a priority if the area is to achieve its potential. This community cohesion priority has informed the ongoing approach to dealing with far-right marches in the town; making public declarations that the protests are not welcome in the town, and seeking to minimise the disruption and risk to safety these pose to the local community and on community tension.

We have also seen how incidents of hate crime are being monitored in the town and how the leadership are aware that this is increasing and understand the complex factors which could be causing this (increased prejudice and increased awareness of / confidence in reporting process). We heard that the Council takes a lead and is working well with the Police and other partners to challenge hate crime in Rotherham.

The Corporate Plan makes a strong commitment to values that will inherently support the equality and diversity agenda.

We were presented with evidence that Elected Members understand their role in developing an equal and diverse council by providing scrutiny and challenge to the executive and to the work of important partnership structures and strategies. We heard that key public sector partners and commissioners valued the positive and constructive challenge provide by Cabinet and Scrutiny and the how the aligned priorities of various partners enabled a more purposeful relationship, enabling the successful re-commissioning of services with Member involvement. Partners also observed that the Council had a much more cohesive leadership, who were putting their values of honesty, integrity and transparency into practice.

There is evidence that there is challenge taking place in the decision-making process around equality and diversity impacts of the policy and budgetary changes. We saw evidence of a comprehensive programme of Equality Analyses of proposed budgetary savings. We also saw that a number of cabinet reports appeared to summarise the equality and diversity impacts of the recommendations being made. Some service plans also incorporated clear equality objectives, informing the future direction and priorities for the service.

Q - "If Rotherham Council was a vegetable, what kind would it be?"

A - "We think potato – a good all-rounder, good in lots of situations but not exotic"

Front-line staff group workshop session

6.2 Good Practice Examples

The following areas of work are examples of good practice which have helped Rotherham Council to better understand their local communities, and which other local authorities may wish to learn more about to inform their own practice:

- Innovative use of text messaging with communities. These appear to have been especially useful during far-right protests, to communicate quickly and effectively with local people and businesses.
- Extension of equality analyses to include other equality concerns beyond protected characteristics, for example social deprivation. This demonstrates a commitment to making the process meaningful for Rotherham and to focus on inter-sectional inequalities.
- Effective use of values and behaviours, which embed principles of dignity and respect, to help drive cultural change.
- The Community Reference Group is an interesting approach to provide challenge to the Council on equality and diversity as well as to develop a shared perspective on the challenges faced and what is needed to address these across the partnership and community. Being chaired by a senior elected member helps gives this group profile and purpose.

6.3 Areas for further development

The “Equalities for All” Strategy needs annual reviews and updates, with the involvement of the senior leadership team in evaluating progress and identify priorities for the year ahead. This would ensure that the Council was meeting its Public Sector Equality Duty in this regard.

A sample of service plans considered by the Peer Challenge team showed that practice at embedding equality and diversity objectives was mixed at best. Some plans did identify equality objectives and demonstrated the analysis of some equality and diversity performance data however several others did not. This would suggest that whilst the leadership on equality and diversity agenda is very strong it does need to inform every service plan if it is to have meaningful results for local people and employees.

The view of some partners and community representatives is that the confident and committed approach to equality and diversity at a senior and corporate level of the Council does not always follow through at service level. We also heard that there are many examples of front-line officers doing great work and trying to implement co-production with diverse communities. Reference was made to equality and diversity getting “stuck in the middle”, not necessarily due to any opposition from middle managers but due to daily imperatives and protocols for their jobs. One example cited was that it is difficult for managers to share data with partners as they may not have confidence to do this or the detailed knowledge of the law to do this in practice.

The lack of a corporate performance and business intelligence function appears to have a negative impact on the Council’s ability to fully understand its communities, and the inequalities they face. Without this focus of outcome-orientated performance data it can be very difficult to demonstrate how equality and diversity supports the objectives of the council and the community as a whole. For example, we could find very limited evidence that the Council understood the differing educational achievements, employment outcomes, housing conditions or health outcomes for different sections of the community beyond those identified by age or geography.

There appeared to be a lack of clarity about the role and membership of the Community Reference Group. Several groups who we would have expected to be part of this group or at least aware of its purpose seemed to have very little understanding. Improved communication and involvement with these groups may help to broaden ownership and understanding of its work.

Equality analysis practice is also variable. This will always the case to some extent. We did find some examples of good equality data analysis informing the strategies and decisions being made but in some areas this was still lacking. We were surprised to find that the workforce strategy made little reference to equality and diversity, and had no clear objectives related to improving workforce diversity or other equality outcomes such as the gender pay gap or occupational gender-segregation.

The Council may also wish to consider how to encourage more elected members to engage with equality and diversity training, such as by making the training mandatory.

6.4 To progress to Achieving Levels:

Currently, equality and diversity activity appears to be, in the large part, an internal process, driven by internal objectives and action plans. If equality and diversity is to really make a difference to the way the council functions then it must have impact in the community. Whilst it is understandable that the council has so far focused on its internal culture, policies and processes we would strongly advise that the agenda

will find much more traction at service level if there were specific outcome orientated equality objectives that service plans could implement. These should align with and support the corporate objectives.

The challenge for leadership is to level-up the practice wherever possible to identify those decisions where support is needed to ensure the most robust EA practice takes place. The Senior Leadership Team can make the critical difference by regularly questioning report authors about the potential equality impacts and the evidence they have drawn upon in making that assessment.

The Equality and Diversity Board may wish to consider what added value it can bring to this process of identifying projects with high priority equality issues (where a more robust EA process is needed and hence resources for support should be allocated) and to checking the effectiveness of the measures taken.

The council has many employees with skills and knowledge about the needs of diverse communities, with experience of the methods and contacts needed to work effectively in partnership with these groups. Others have a deep understanding of the equality analysis process and are well-placed to help ensure this is a meaningful exercise for services and decision-makers. The Council may wish to consider whether it currently has the right allocation of officers to support work in these areas and whether it is making full use of the staff skills and experience it has at hand.

7. Observations on the other elements of the EFLG:

7.1 Community Engagement and Satisfaction

“If we do not listen to our communities we will not get things right”.

Elected Member

The Peer Challenge team saw evidence that the Council was committed to working with its local community and that it understood the different forms this needs to take; information, consultation, involvement and co-production. Whilst there are areas where this could be better implemented, the evidence we heard from partners and the community is that practice is improving.

Some areas where the Council may wish to focus its efforts in the future include:

- Listen and feedback to those you are involving. Young people told us that they had been consulted on several occasions and whilst in odd cases they were listened to (bus fares) on several other occasions they were not, or not told what the outcome of the consultation was or the reasoning behind decisions that were subsequently taken. They felt that young people were too easily ignored.
- Make sure you reach those groups who may be harder to reach. There could be more effective engagement with diverse groups, and steps should be taken to ensure engagement processes are accessible to them (on-line surveys on their own will not be accessible to many people) and inclusive (ask questions that are relevant to them).
- Demonstrate your commitment to the community by championing the work they do. The Council could more actively support local activities by promoting and re-showing things on social media and via corporate communications.

- Community engagement results do not appear to be routinely analysed by protected characteristics to better understand the views of the community in finer detail. For example, do the views and experiences of older and younger people, or men and women, straight / LGBTQ differ on some aspects of the consultation and if so does this need to inform the conclusions drawn?

7.2 Responsive services and customer care

“My job as councillor is to help protect everyone in my community.”

Elected Member

There appeared to be a strong commitment to equality and diversity among those providing services to the community. We could observe how this commitment was following through into co-production with the community (eg Eastwood partnership, Sight and Sound) and where diverse communities felt they were being listened to and their needs addressed.

Some good examples we heard about included:

- Supporting people with physical impairments and learning disabilities to volunteer and to find work (Adpro service) and with community gardening, litter picks for example.
- Working in the community to celebrate diversity (Rotherham Show, Rotherham Pride, the Jo Cox Picnic).

However, in other areas we heard from partners and the community that this commitment didn't always follow through into practice. From the service plans and strategies we had the opportunity to read, we found few included specific objectives and commitments to effective engagement with diverse communities to ensure all needs can be met.

Some important examples are:

- We did not see any evidence which demonstrated a corporate commitment or that plans are in place to ensure services are accessible to disabled people (nor how the Accessible Information Standard being implemented).
- Young people also explained to us that hate crime and harassment are major issues in local schools and communities. They explained that they did not report it because they did not feel it would be taken seriously. These concerns need to be tackled urgently if the trust of young people is not to be eroded and community cohesion efforts undermined.
- Young people do not know how to contact the Council unless they happen to have a specific person to contact.
- Community grants could be simpler and less cumbersome for small community groups to apply for.

7.3 A modern and diverse workforce

The Council has recently introduced an Equality and Diversity on-line training course which covers the elements of its policy and behaviours. For employees who are not on-line there is a printed information leaflet which gives the same core messages. Values are well publicised and seem to be well understood by

the workforce. These are promoted through magazine, awards, the staff survey, posters, PDR process for example.

In the first three months approximately 1/3 of employees had completed the training. We heard that staff had engaged positively with the Equality and Diversity training on offer.

We also saw evidence that Rotherham Council monitors the diversity of its workforce and sets improvement targets. It was less clear however how these targets were set, whether there are quality issues associated with the data, or what action was being taken to achieve them - which might be areas the Council wishes to consider when working towards the Achieving level of the Framework.

The knowledge and expertise on equality and diversity matters of employees who leave the Council or change role is a risk to the future development of this agenda. When staff leave they take skills and experience with them, as well as successful relationships, community knowledge etc. Whilst an organisation is reducing in size and re-orientating itself towards the changing demands of the community the turnover in staff is inevitable and often necessary. However it may be worth considering what assets there are in remaining employees around equality and diversity and how these can best be utilised.

8. Concluding Comments

The Peer Challenge team would like to thank the Members and employees of Rotherham Council, for making them feel welcome and their programme of meetings and evidence reviews run so smoothly. We found that everyone we met were keen to be open and honest, were determined to use the exercise to improve how the Council delivers on the equality and diversity agenda, and above all were fiercely proud of Rotherham and its communities. In short, they exemplified the values and behaviours that the Council is working so hard to promote.

As a team we have appreciated the good work that Rotherham is doing and have all individually taken our own notes of some of the ideas and activities being implemented in Rotherham with the hope these can inform improvements in our own authorities. We have tried to outline some of these areas in the good practice sections of this report.

The team would, in particular, like to thank the members of the community, the partners and voluntary sector representatives who were so willing to share with us their experiences, both positive and negative, to help us come to a balanced view as to the performance of the Council against the Framework's requirements. Whilst we haven't been able to reflect every comment in this report we hope we have nonetheless done justice to their views and experiences.

We would like to wish Rotherham Council success in its continuing efforts to deliver a more equal and diverse organisation, which in turn will help deliver a more equal, diverse and thriving Rotherham.