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Working Towards Equality and Diversity in Local Government

LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH PROGRAMME

In this leaflet you will find examples of what local authorities in England are doing to promote equality and diversity in three major areas of their work:

- Councillors' representation, participation and leadership
- The local authority's structures, committee organisation and staffing
- The procurement, delivery and impact of services

It is based on an exploratory study of equality and diversity practices in local authorities in England. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister commissioned OPM to undertake this study in four parts: a gap analysis of existing literature; a survey of all local authorities in England; a series of interviews; and ten 'case studies'.

Why is equality and diversity important?

'Equality and diversity' is an essential element of the Government's modernisation agenda for local government. The benefits that come from a more diverse and integrated workforce, along with more responsive and flexible services, are vital elements in any local authority's efforts to combat social exclusion and build strong communities.

Many different pieces of legislation together form the framework within which local authorities are required to act. They include the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), Disability Discrimination Act (1995), Human Rights Act (1998) and Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000). The European Commission has also passed legislation and disseminated guidance on equality and diversity. The Employment Directive and the Race Directive contribute to a more comprehensive anti-discrimination legislative framework that, as it continues to evolve, will include age, sexual orientation and religion.

Working towards equality and diversity in representation participation and leadership

It works well when authorities:

- have councillors with the commitment and skills to act as community leaders and engage with all sections of the community
- make a sustained effort to understand and remove some of the barriers that prevent people from minority groups from standing as councillors
- adopt a strategic and coherent approach to community consultation that demonstrably leads to better results for local people
- make good use of partnership structures and arrangements to streamline engagement activities, pool resources, share learning and avoid 'consultation fatigue'.

A Metropolitan Unitary Council's engineering and traffic services received a number of complaints from disabled members of the public about the borough's street environment. The council realised that it would be cheaper to consult with disabled members of the public and find out what should be done in the first instance, rather than carrying out engineering works and then having to make changes when the new street environment turned out not to be suitable. The council's response was to produce *The Journey*, a film that catalogues the problems faced by disabled people in the borough every day. In producing the film, various members of the public with differing

disability needs went out into the borough and pointed out specific problems they encountered with some street environments. The resulting film is now used as a reference guide for engineers so that they will not lose sight of the needs of the disabled public when carrying out works and devising projects. It is also used at various universities on engineering courses. A copy of the film is available at the British Library.

But there is still way to go:

- despite some instances of good practice, community engagement tends to be ad hoc and passive. It usually involves giving and getting information, rather than developing the means for communities to become more involved in decision-making

A County Council with a minority black and ethnic population of between 5 and 10 per cent has helped to set up a Network for Women and Minority Ethnic Communities. The purpose of the group is to encourage and support work with and for women from minority ethnic communities in the area, to enable them to participate in economic and social opportunities. The network, which is supported by the council and meets in council buildings, exists to share good practice, offer advice and consultancy to employers and service providers, and develop partnerships with organisations in order to promote a more coherent approach by these agencies. The network seeks funding to achieve these objectives, and provides training opportunities for social and professional development.

- even though they are elected by local people, councillors are not always seen as representative of – or responding to – the diverse communities they serve
- while there is some evidence that steps are being taken to address this, it is widely regarded as an extremely challenging problem; some councils see it as ‘beyond their remit’.

Working towards equality and diversity in structures committee organisation and staff

It works well when authorities:

- take a broad and positive approach that encompasses all aspects of the equality and diversity ‘agenda’. This includes making clear links between policy, operational planning and services so that these services become more responsive and effective for everyone
- have visible, senior-level commitment, backed up by adequate resources
- build strong and effective working relationships between councillors and officers
- adopt fair and transparent recruitment and promotion procedures that take account of the informal judgements and networks that can affect decision making in this area

A County Council has successfully implemented a work placement scheme for disabled graduates. The scheme offers placements of six to ten weeks, to give graduates the opportunity to sample employment in local government. The scheme has been very successful and has led to permanent

employment being offered to one of the graduates. In a Unitary Council with a mix of urban and rural areas, there is a comprehensive equalities training programme linked to service and business planning. The three-day course focuses on ways of bringing equality and diversity into the ‘mainstream’ of council activities, and on analysing the impact that policies are having on minority groups. Around 400 staff – including all directors and service leaders – have attended the compulsory course, which was funded by the learning and development department.

- conduct more training, of better quality, that captures people’s imagination and creates ‘safe spaces’ for them to explore equality and diversity issues without fear of blame or embarrassment
- put in place clear systems of accountability and performance management, including sensitive grievance procedures that are seen to work and effective procedures for managing unacceptable behaviour.

But there is still some way to go ...

- although there are examples of effective practice – especially in relation to staff recruitment, training and development – the absence of a strategic, co-ordinated and corporate approach to equality and diversity appears to be hampering progress in some councils
- there is evidence to suggest that changes in attitudes and behaviour may not be as far reaching or consistent as might be expected, given the length of time

equality and diversity issues have been on the agenda

- in many councils there is no shared organisational understanding of equality and diversity, and there is a tendency to equate diversity with race, especially in rural areas
- sometimes a climate of fear or uncertainty surrounds these issues, and councils lack the confidence to tackle them effectively
- compliance with legislation is variable, and some councils express doubts about the capacity of the various bodies charged with policing equality and diversity legislation to fulfil their roles adequately.

A Unitary Council provides funding for a Black Workers’ Forum (BWF), Age Forum and Disabled Workers’ Forum. The possibility of setting up a gay and lesbian forum is also being considered. The forums provide staff with the opportunity to discuss and address issues specific to their experience, and help with the development of council policies and initiatives. Forums receive and manage a training budget, provided by the core value group. The BWF has brought in trained facilitators and mentors to help build capacity and facilitate career development. The chief executive meets with the different forums every three or four months. A local voluntary organisation has been contracted by the County Council to provide HIV and sexuality awareness workshops for senior and middle managers. The workshops focus on both the legislative and the moral bases for

equal treatment. The workshop organisers aim to create an open and supportive environment in which staff members are free to explore issues and raise questions.

Working towards equality and diversity in service procurement delivery and impact

It works well when authorities

- hold reliable and up-to-date demographic statistics on the local area
- develop services based on local need, after effective consultation with local people
- are committed to performance management and building the capacity and skills of staff to carry out effective monitoring and impact assessment
- disseminate the results of monitoring widely, both internally and externally
- monitor supplier organisations for compliance with equality and diversity requirements, both before they are awarded the contract and after they have carried out the work.

But there is still some way to go ...

- most councils find tackling equality and diversity in service delivery far more complex and difficult than staff-related issues
- many councils express doubts about how, practically, to integrate equality and diversity into mainstream service provision. The broadening out of the equality and diversity agenda is seen to add to the challenge

- many councils lack accurate information on their populations, and report difficulties in monitoring services and, in particular, assessing their impact
- in some areas there is a perception that focusing on the particular needs of different communities might exacerbate community tensions
- while the procurement process offers councils a useful way of promoting equality and diversity, some councils report difficulties in making sure that their contractors comply with regulations
- there is a perception that current inspection regimes do not reinforce equality and diversity, as targets emphasise processes rather than outcomes
- summary of the research findings is available, as well as a full report of the study.

Heads of service in one county council are expected to take equality and diversity issues fully into account in drawing up individual service plans. They are sent a list of ten key questions to prompt their thinking and to check their own and their staff's awareness of the relevant legislation and council policies and procedures. The ten questions are:

- Do you know what the current statutory duties are for your service, with respect to race, gender and disability?
- Have all your staff been fully briefed on equality issues as they affect the delivery of your service?
- Are you collecting evidence to check that the services you provide are equally accessible to all local citizens?
- Are you using that evidence to identify any possible barriers to service take-up by minority users?
- Do you have an action plan for eliminating these barriers?
- Have you consulted relevant minority groups about improving access?
- Have you linked your equality action planning to relevant best value plans, or to statutory targets/performance indicators?
- Have you considered how to adopt the county council's plans for increasing the diversity of its workforce?
- Have all staff involved in recruitment or interviewing received appropriate training?

Equality and diversity for all

People's awareness of equality and diversity, their attitudes to the issues, and the practices used to promote greater equality and diversity, all vary across England's councils. In some places, especially in rural areas with smaller numbers of people from visible minority ethnic groups, there is still a tendency to equate 'diversity' with matters of race. Although, in some of the councils we looked at, gender and disability are also considered important issues, it is clear that other aspects of diversity – such as age, sexuality and religion – still receive less attention.

Although we recognise that much has been done already, the main conclusion we reached is that a more inclusive and integrated approach to equality and diversity still needs to be developed in nearly all aspects of local authority working.

Key Finding

Seventy per cent of authorities reported that contractors are assessed for compliance with equality and diversity requirements in the tendering process. Conservative-led councils (56 per cent) were less likely to report that contractors are assessed in the tendering process compared to Labour councils (81 per cent), Liberal Democrat councils (81 per cent) and those councils with no overall control (70 per cent). Only 26 per cent reported that contractors are assessed on their compliance with equality legislation in the post-contractual period.

Extent of Data held on Different Groups

