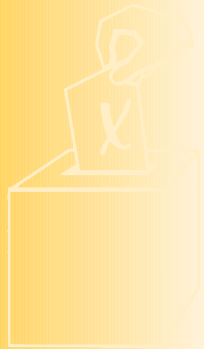




Service Quality



Participation



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OFFICE OF THE
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT
RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Research Summary

Equality and Diversity in Local Government

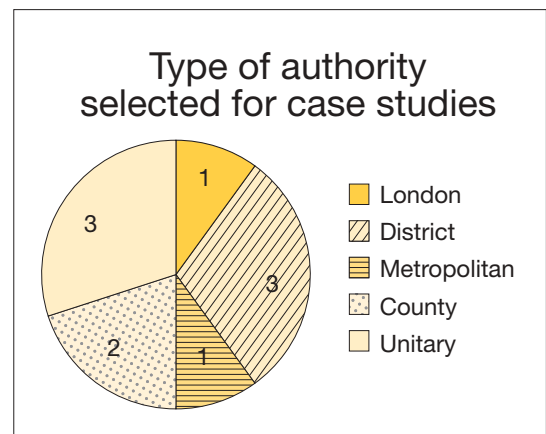
The Government considers equality and diversity to be an essential element of the modernisation agenda for local government. This reflects a growing realisation of the benefits of a more diverse and integrated workforce, and of the important role that responsive and flexible services can play in combating social exclusion and building strong communities.

In order to support equality and diversity in local government, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) commissioned OPM™ to undertake research into how local authorities have addressed equality and diversity issues in three core areas of their work:

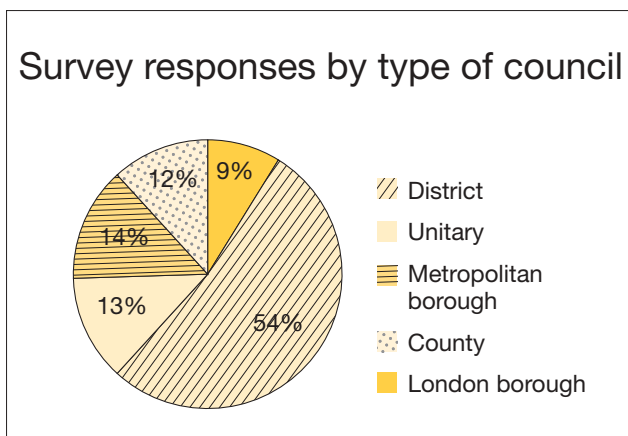
- Representation, participation and leadership
- Structures, committee organisation and staff
- Service procurement, delivery and impact

The project aimed to generate baseline information about equality and diversity practice in local authorities, and to begin to explore what seems to be working in each of the three areas, and why.

The research activities took place over four months and built on a literature review that the ODPM had undertaken. The activities involved a series of scoping interviews with stakeholders, a baseline survey (undertaken jointly with the Dialog team in the Employers' Organisation) sent to all local authorities in England, and ten exploratory case studies. The types of councils who agreed to be case study sites are shown below.



We received 200 responses to the survey questionnaire, a response rate of 52 per cent of all councils in England. Responses to the survey were broadly representative of the different types of councils.



The main findings of the research are outlined below.

Overview

People’s awareness of and attitudes to equality and diversity, and the practices used to promote them, vary across England’s councils. There is a tendency to equate diversity with race, especially in rural areas that have smaller numbers of people from visible minority ethnic groups. Whilst some councils also considered gender and disability important issues, age, sexuality and religion received markedly less attention. Overall, there is a perception that some aspects of diversity may be easier to tackle than others: for example, physical access to buildings for people with disabilities seems to be regarded as less contentious than race issues. Councils also report that the legal requirements relating to race and, to some extent, disability have the effect of focusing efforts towards these issues, often at the expense of a broader approach to equality and diversity.

Representation, participation and leadership

Despite having been elected by local people, councillors are not always seen to be representative of the diversity within the communities they serve. We saw some evidence of steps being taken to address this: for example, some councils are offering contributions towards childcare costs to encourage a broader range of people to participate; others are running mentoring schemes to support new councillors. However, the challenge of broadening representation is often perceived as being ‘beyond the Council’s remit’ and the responsibility of political parties.

Although widening the pool of elected councillors is regarded as important, it is clear that good community leadership involves more than the elected representation of particular groups. There was widespread support for the idea of councillors making

more proactive attempts to engage with the local community and a recognition of the skills development that they might need to help them do this.

Community engagement techniques varied across the local authorities studied. However, current methods tended to be somewhat passive and ad hoc: providing information in various formats, for instance, rather than creating opportunities for meaningful involvement in on-going decision-making. Many of the research participants recognised that local authorities needed to develop more strategic and creative approaches to community engagement and involvement.

Across the case study sites, there was only patchy evidence of effective collaboration between members and officers on diversity issues. Nevertheless, people recognised that strong working relationships, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, were important if progress was to be made on the equality and diversity agenda.

Structures, committee organisation and staff

We noted many instances of effective practice in relation to staff recruitment, training and development. For many councils, however, the absence of a strategic, co-ordinated, and corporate approach to equality and diversity appears to be hampering further progress. It is clear that many councils lack a shared organisational understanding of equality and diversity and the breadth of issues that are relevant in this area.

The majority of people interviewed during the scoping phase emphasised the need for senior level commitment and clear lines of responsibility to ensure that equality and diversity policies and practices are promoted and made real. This was echoed in the case studies: interviewees at several sites, and at all levels, noted the importance of a visible commitment from the chief executive’s office, and the need for responsibility and accountability to be clearly defined, to ensure that policies and initiatives are followed through. The scoping interviews and case studies also highlighted the importance of strong performance management systems to provide councils with valuable intelligence about what works, and evidence of impact, to support their continued efforts in this area.

Service procurement, delivery and impact

Tackling equality and diversity in service delivery and impact is regarded as much more complex and difficult than addressing staff-related issues.

Many councils were not sure how, in practical terms, to integrate equality and diversity into mainstream service provision. Some councils lack accurate information on their populations and reported that it could be difficult to monitor services and assess their impact. The broadening out of the equality and diversity agenda only added to the significant challenge councils faced in this area. In some rural areas, there was a concern that if one focused on diversity and the needs of particular communities in relation to service delivery, this might actually exacerbate community tensions.

Officers recognised the potential for using the procurement process as a vehicle for promoting equality and diversity. However, some local authorities reported difficulties in making sure that their contractors complied with regulations and requirements.

Some people thought that current inspection regimes did not reinforce equality and diversity because the requirements tended to emphasise processes rather than outcomes, and different regimes sometimes conflicted.

A number of people expressed doubts about the capacity of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) to fulfil its policing role in relation to equality and diversity.

Opportunities

There are some clear opportunities and drivers to improve practice in the area of equality and diversity.

There is a growing awareness of England's diverse population, and recognition of the mounting pressures on councils to respond to the new demands and accountabilities this creates, in relation both to staff issues and services. More specifically, there is an increased recognition, even among councils whose practices are not yet fully developed, that a 'public service business case' exists alongside a moral responsibility to promote equality and diversity.

Developments in the legislative framework are establishing a range of new expectations of councils, and mapping out a more proactive role for them in promoting the equality and diversity agenda. At the same time, a range of other important factors are coming together. Modernisation and continual service improvement are reinforcing the kind of questioning,

self-critical attitudes and behaviours that are also required to address equality and diversity issues. The neighbourhood renewal agenda, and the new focus on community planning, are highlighting the importance of consultation, engagement and responsiveness. The increasing emphasis on partnership working also presents some new opportunities to share knowledge, experience and resources.

Barriers

However, some blocks and barriers remain.

Despite some clear drivers in the external environment, changes in attitudes and behaviour do not appear to be as far-reaching or consistent as might be expected, given how long many equality and diversity issues have been on the agenda. A few of our interviewees used language and expressed opinions that cannot be considered to fit with the thrust of legislation and guidance in this area. Several interviewees we spoke to were at pains to point out that black and ethnic minority people in their community 'weren't any trouble' or 'made an effort to fit in' – views that imply an underlying association between race and diversity and social problems.

The failure of councils to develop and disseminate shared corporate understandings of equality and diversity that reflect current guidance appears to be a significant obstacle to progress. In some cases, a climate of fear or uncertainty surrounds these issues, and this seems to be preventing councils from addressing them effectively. In other cases, there is a lack of practical competence, especially in how to integrate equality and diversity into mainstream service provision and assess the impact of policies and services. Under-developed management (and particularly performance management) systems also appear to act as a block to the best intentions.

The current pool of elected members remains unrepresentative of England's population and councillors do not always have the capacity, incentive or interest to act as champions for equality and diversity. The cyclical nature of electoral politics, with its emphasis on short term, vote-winning strategies, may also impede the progress of the equality and diversity agenda.

The absence of credible sanctions for poor performance and non-compliance with legislation means that efforts to promote equality and diversity sometimes lack a sense of urgency: real progress appears to depend, instead, on the personal conviction and commitment of particular individuals. There is scope for central government to clarify its expectations of local government in this respect.

Recommendations to strengthen practice

Develop a more strategic approach and build best practice

Further work is needed to explore what kind of practical assistance councils – differentiated by type and demography – need to allow them to assess needs, integrate equality and diversity into mainstream service delivery, and monitor and measure impact. Smaller councils, in particular, may need to work with others to access expert equality and diversity advice.

Such practical assistance must address the whole range of equality and diversity issues, including ‘newer’ aspects such as age and sexual orientation. Some councils may need assistance and encouragement to ‘revisit’ the question of gender and tackle this more effectively, as there is some evidence to suggest that this issue may have dropped off the agenda.

There is a particular need to explore the kind of advice and assistance that would help councils in rural areas understand what diversity means in the context of small black and ethnic minority populations and to formulate appropriate strategies for addressing the broader range of issues that diversity includes.

Some longer-term, in-depth studies of local authorities are needed to find out exactly what impact particular measures have on organisational performance over time. Extension of the Beacon Council scheme might encourage excellence in this area.

Foster leadership and cultural change

Real progress on the equality and diversity agenda will require strong and effective leadership from chief executives, senior teams and leaders, acting as ‘champions’ for these issues. More work is needed to identify the kind of support that would allow senior individuals to assume such a role. Alternative types of training – either individually or, for instance, through action learning sets where senior staff and leaders can share best practice – need to be considered.

Further work is needed with members to raise their awareness of the necessity of consulting with the whole of their constituency and, in particular, with hard-to-reach groups. Members may need more guidance on new and more creative techniques for engagement, so that they can expand their repertoire beyond established approaches such as surgeries. Diversity concerns might be better integrated into existing training for members. Existing support for black and ethnic minority councillors needs to be promoted better, and further opportunities explored.

Improve community engagement

Councils need more help to improve community engagement. Progress in this area will involve the development of a strategy for engagement that explicitly addresses how and why local communities should be engaged. The strategy needs to reflect the challenges of community engagement in varied contexts, and the fact that different approaches will be appropriate for different situations, issues and groups. Officers and members may then require further training in order to build their skills and their capacity to deliver this strategy.

Support progress

Further work is also needed to explore whether equality and diversity can be integrated better into mainstream service provision by including specific and measurable targets within established inspection regimes (and integrating diversity issues across inspection regimes). Targets need to focus much more specifically on outcomes and impact for local people. Thought also needs to be given to what is needed – beyond sanctions – to encourage compliance with legislation and guidance.

To obtain copies of the full report, priced at £18, or further copies of the summary, contact:

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This summary and full report are also available on the ODPM website:

<http://www.local.odpm.gov.uk/research/crosscut/crosscut.htm>

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