

Equalities Structures and Engagement at Leicestershire County Council

Background

Leicestershire has a population of 645,000, of which about 11 per cent are from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups; it is an ethnically and culturally diverse county, benefiting greatly from close links with Leicester city, one of the most culturally diverse cities in the UK. Leicestershire is mostly a rural county, although almost half of the population live in market towns or urban areas close to Leicester city. Leicestershire County Council employs about 24,000 people in a wide range of service areas. It has been in Conservative control since 2001 after two decades of no overall control.

Summary

At Leicestershire County Council, there is robust leadership of the equalities agenda, which can be demonstrated by the visible commitment and involvement of the council's Corporate Management team (CMT) and cabinet in improving the council's performance on equalities. We have a cabinet lead member for equalities who champions equality and diversity at a political level and promotes the agenda at every opportunity. In addition to the above, the council has instated a comprehensive structure to deliver the equalities agenda at all levels of council business.

Who is involved?

The main responsibility for scrutiny of equalities work lies with the council's Corporate Management team (CMT), the Equalities Board and Scrutiny Commission, before approval by cabinet and full council.

The **Equalities Board** provides a strategic overview of all equality and diversity related objectives, activities and initiatives which the council undertakes. It is the accountable body providing endorsement for such activities in order to help the council achieve its aims. It is chaired by the director of adults and communities, has assistant director level representation from all five departments, and representatives from our three workers groups.

The Equalities Board and the **Corporate Equalities team** ensure that work within and between Departments is effectively coordinated and prioritised so that our overall objectives are met. Members of the Equalities Board influence and oversee the work of the five departmental equalities groups, to ensure that there is a consistent approach to equalities across all of the council's five departments.

The Corporate Equalities team are hosted in the Policy and Partnerships team, within the Chief Executive's Department and are largely responsible for leading the work on the council's corporate equalities agenda, in partnership with the Equalities Board, departmental equalities groups and workers groups.

Each department has its own **equalities group**, which is chaired by the departmental representative on the corporate Equalities Board. These groups have adopted common terms of reference which are aligned to the corporate equality and diversity priorities established by the council.

Departments are responsible for producing three year equality action plans, which include actions to improve employment practices and service delivery. Plans have been discussed and agreed at each departmental management team, so that they are owned, and can realistically be achieved by them.

Our **employee support groups** include the Black Workers' Group (which was established in 1991 in adult social care and since 2004 has been a corporate group), a Disabled Workers Group (which was established in 2004) and a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Workers Group (established in early 2008). These groups are well-supported and are represented on our Equalities Board. All three groups have played, and will continue to play, a pivotal role in shaping policies and employment initiatives. They meet on a regular basis and make a significant contribution to the equalities agenda. The groups receive funding from the corporate equalities budget and have used this funding to hold annual conferences which have been very successful.

The Leicestershire Working Together (LWT) Forum aims to give all Leicestershire communities the chance to influence and shape the work of 'Leicestershire Together' (the local strategic partnership for Leicestershire) and its partner agencies. By engaging with diverse communities in Leicestershire, through the LWT Forum, we hope to utilise people's experience, interests and expertise when considering any changes to services affecting them. The LWT Forum therefore provides an 'equalities challenge' to the work of the 'Leicestershire Together' partnership.

We also have good working relationships with our district/borough and city council colleagues in respect of the equalities agenda. The county council is a founding member of the **Leicester Shire Equalities Forum (LSEF)**, which is a sub-regional working group of equalities leads, primarily from the statutory sector across Leicestershire. The forum represents the strong ethos of partnership working in Leicestershire and promotes a shared vision for equalities across the sub-region. The council recognises the need to continue to support this forum and work more effectively in partnership with other agencies to tackle more persistent inequalities.

Leicestershire has a rich diversity of voluntary and community groups and organisations. The county council has developed positive and constructive working relationships with a number of equalities-related organisations to progress the equality and diversity agenda, including, among others, the following local organisations:

- St Philips Centre for multi-faith understanding
- The Race Equality Centre (Leicester)
- Human Rights and Equalities Charnwood
- Leicester LGBT Centre
- Leicestershire Ethnic Minority Partnership
- Action Deafness
- Vista (Society for the Blind)
- LeicestHERday Trust
- Age Concern
- Leicester Centre for Integrated Living.

The council has established an **Inter-faith Forum**, the purpose of which is to provide support for faith communities to build up their social capital, and to encourage the building of social cohesion between faith communities. Meetings provide a focus for dialogue, debate and the development of mutual understanding across Leicestershire's faith communities.

Outcomes

The strengths of Leicestershire County Council's structures have enabled us to effectively and successfully deliver the equalities agenda, with ownership at all levels.

Below are some key achievements from some of our structures:

Quality assurance and scrutiny of EqlAs

Once drafted, all EqlAs are quality assured by the relevant departmental equalities group before they are published on our website. Leicestershire Working Together Forum also plays a part in the scrutiny of EqlAs. Actions arising from completed EqlAs are captured through the corporate performance management process and delivery of these actions is actively monitored by departmental equalities groups.

Lead member for equalities

Some of the key activities of the lead member for equalities are as follows:

- Support the roll-out of the equalities and diversity learning and development programme for elected members;
- Oversee the implementation of the new County Council Equality, Diversity and Human Rights strategy (2010-2013) and the new Single Equalities Action Plan (SEAP);
- Support, and participate in, activities and events during the annual Equality and Diversity Week, and workers group events and conferences throughout the year;
- Represent the Leicester Shire Equalities Forum on the Leicestershire Together Strategic Board.

Leicestershire Working Together Forum

One of the Leicestershire Working Together Forum's key achievements was the establishment of a sub-group of the Leicestershire Together Strategic Board, to look at issues affecting the Gypsy and Traveller community in Leicestershire. Leicestershire Together Board members agreed to work with representatives of the LWT group to try and resolve some of the issues. Members of the sub-group, including several elected members, are now working on a pilot project in the borough of Hinckley and Bosworth to improve communication between the settled and Gypsy and Traveller communities.

There have been other specific achievements. The LWT group have:

- Shaped the NHS Single Equality Scheme and the Leicestershire County Council's Equality, Diversity and Human Rights strategy.
- Worked with officers at the county council to ensure carers are included as a category in the new County Council Equality Monitoring guidance following recommendations made by the group.
- Responded to the consultation on the NHS White Paper: Liberating the NHS, and worked with NHS colleagues locally in restructure of services.
- Commented in detail on the Local Transport Plan 3 – specifically its impact on individual communities of interest.
- Held a workshop on the County Council's budget for 2011/12 as part of the wider budget consultation process.

What we learnt

In May 2012, a development session for the Equalities Board was held, which focused on reviewing the feedback received from the EFLG peer assessment, reviewing changes in legislation, and considering the impact of departmental restructures. The board also reviewed current structures, including, the emergence of new groups and agreed on future priorities.

At the development session for the Equalities Board, it was felt that a more effective approach for improvement was for the existing equalities task group to be disbanded and, in its place, Task and Finish groups established to undertake specific projects. The Task and Finish groups would look at specific

issues, such as the equality monitoring policy, the Plain English campaign, cumulative impact of EqlAs and so forth. The task and finish groups would enlist support from workers groups and departmental equalities groups.

There was also strong support for developing the Equalities Forum so that it acts as a useful sounding board and becomes a forum for sharing best practice within the local authority.

Another key recommendation from the recent development session is to have a clear operational and strategic lead for each of the council's equalities priorities. The Corporate Equalities team are now doing some further mapping and engagement work to ensure that all of the council's priority objectives have a strategic lead and also an operational work lead to ensure that action is undertaken.

Leicestershire County Council's approach to the equalities agenda continues to go from strength to strength. We recognise the need to continually build on our previous achievements and review and improve on our equalities structures and practices. We have therefore demonstrated continued commitment, to ensure the equalities agenda receives appropriate and effective focus, particularly in a time of challenging budgetary and service reductions and we are confident in our ability to achieve our objectives.

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