

Diversity Peer Challenge

23rd and 24th March 2010

Three Rivers Council

Report



1. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of a Diversity Peer Challenge organised by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and carried out by its trained peers. The report satisfies the requirements of the Equality Framework for Local Government for an external assessment at the Achieving level. The Peer Challenge is designed to validate a council's own self-assessment at the Achieving Level by considering documentary evidence and by 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 and equality mapping
- Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment
- Community engagement and satisfaction
- Responsive services and customer care
- 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.

Peers were:

Cllr Theresa Higgins	Colchester Borough Council
Nick Stephenson	Swindon Borough Council
Stuart Malpass	Wolverhampton City Council

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.

2. Overall conclusion

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

Three Rivers Council has completed a satisfactory self-assessment against the criteria for the Achieving level of the Equality Framework.

Strengths and areas for consideration identified by peers are highlighted below.

3. Detailed findings

3.1 Knowing your communities and equality mapping

Strengths:

- Extremely strong emphasis on customer service mapping using MOSAIC

- Data collected used to influence delivery of services
- Have identified income inequality as major factor influencing local quality of life
- Use of focus groups and surveys to gain views of some “harder to reach” people

Areas for consideration:

- Develop better ways of understanding factors other than income that affect customer experience
- Use broad equality mapping to paint a richer picture of the needs of the community

3.2 Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

Strengths:

- Strong leadership commitment from the Leader and Chief Executive on tackling inequality
- Recognised leadership role adopted with Hertfordshire County Council and neighbouring districts around equalities
- Clear understanding and articulation of cohesion challenges in the District
- Equality priorities of council well reflected in Sustainable Communities Strategy
- Positive use of procurement processes to achieve improved equality objectives for the community

Areas for consideration:

- Members to be more confident in scrutinising equality performance
- Need to raise the potential benefits of the equality agenda as part of the shared HR service with Watford
- Undertake EIA of Customer Excellence Model

3.3 Community engagement and satisfaction

Strengths:

- Very good processes for collecting customer information
- High public satisfaction ratings with council services
- Positive relations with local community and voluntary sector groups
- Use of focus groups with specific sections of the community to better understand their needs

Areas for consideration:

- Improve engagement with wider range of diverse groups to include faith and LGBT/T and harness the results to inform policy and service development

3.4 Responsive services and customer care

Strengths:

- Very responsive approach to meeting customer needs
- High customer satisfaction ratings and are working with groups expressing lower satisfaction
- Council staff empowered to provide personalised services to the public e.g. refuse collection
- Innovative engagement with young people through play ranger service

Areas for consideration:

- Ensure that learning from research and local best practice is used to inform service improvement

3.5 A modern and diverse workforce

Strengths

- Positive, “family” focused in approach
- Open culture where staff feedback is encouraged
- Good and flexible use of reasonable adjustments
- Shared HR function with Watford leading to efficiency and opportunity for a co-ordinated approach to equality and diversity
- Job related equality training provided in response to identified need

Areas for consideration

- Using the opportunity of shared HR services to provide for positive action including creative use of secondments particularly as an alternative to agency staff
- Establish a training programme for staff and members that equips people to understand and respond to the diverse communities of Three Rivers

Improvement and Development Agency

Contact: Pete Jackson

Improvement Manager

0787 6656178

Pete.jackson@idea.gov.uk