


LGA Equality Peer Challenge

Somerset Council

3rd – 5th October 2023

Feedback report





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1. Executive summary

We were very pleased to be invited by Somerset Council (SC) to provide an external challenge by peers on the progress the new council has made so far on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and to make recommendations to build on that progress and help take the work on EDI forward.

We found an organisation that is starting to think and act to establish and embed EDI internally and throughout all areas of its work within the community. The leadership including members and officers are highly committed to EDI and to the council being an anti-racist organisation. Service managers were able to relate some good practices in service delivery. There is a general lack of understanding and confidence around EDI at all levels of the organisation. Members and officers want more training opportunities. The organisation lacks a strategic framework for EDI and needs more governance around EDI to monitor progress and advance the work. Staff forums have huge potential, and they would benefit from some more support. The voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCFSE) is a significant resource in Somerset and is keen to work more closely with the council and its new local community networks (LCNs) on joint objectives.

Context

These are still early days for the new council. Vesting Day on April 1st 2023, brought together four district councils and the county council into one new unitary council. The council also has a new Liberal Democratic administration. The organisation has acknowledged that it is still in a “state of flux” with only the top three tiers of the organisation having been formally appointed. We also heard from staff that morale is low because of the upheaval and uncertainty of Local Government Reorganisation over the past two years. However, they value the fact that senior leaders are demonstrating their commitment to EDI.

We think that it is highly commendable for the council to want to embed EDI into the organisation right from the start. There is real ambition for the council to be an anti-racist organisation and there are many positives to build on. A lot of work was done on EDI in each of the five constituent councils. The team of EDI professionals have brought with them a huge amount of experience, knowledge and long-term working

relationships which have enabled them to work well together and continue to be effective as the new organisation has formed around them. Like most local authorities in the country, the council has significant budgetary challenges which can impact on the resources available for EDI work.

The peer team were asked to consider to what extent they could endorse the self-assessment prepared for this peer challenge by the council's EDI team. We found it a useful document for helping to establish a baseline for moving forward and demonstrates real self-awareness. The conversations that the peer team had with staff, elected members, and other stakeholders tested that self-assessment and will only add to the richness of that knowledge baseline.

Commitment and Understanding

There is a strongly stated commitment to EDI amongst the senior leaders of the council. Both the Leader and the Chief Executive are strong advocates for EDI in the organisation. The Portfolio Holders for Public Health, Equalities and Diversity and Localities (LCNs) are also very vocal EDI supporters. The council has started to look at the culture and the values it wants for the organisation. Values workshops have involved over 1500 staff and the top three themes which have emerged are fairness, honesty and kindness which align well to EDI and show that staff are "in tune" with the direction that the Leadership want to take the organisation. The Chief Executive is determined to include EDI as one of the stated values in the council.

Staff across the organisation understand the importance of EDI, however some feel that budget setting and system reorganisation are being prioritised and dominating the agenda. We heard concern that there will be insufficient budget behind initiatives like the peer challenge and the Race Audit. It will therefore be important for SC to evaluate what capacity there is to deliver EDI ambitions and recommendations resulting from this peer challenge and the forthcoming race audit.

The organisation demonstrates a real willingness to be challenged and learn from good practice elsewhere. Commissioning of this peer challenge so early in its life is evidence of the commitment to improving and embedding equalities council wide.

The level of EDI knowledge, understanding and confidence amongst officers and

Members is variable. There is a lack of understanding around issues like racism and discrimination. We heard that both Members and officers want more training around language and Equality Impact Assessments (EIA), for example. It is very positive that both members and officers want to know and learn more, so they can apply this effectively in their roles.

“Legal and safe” appears to be the priority for the organisation. There is an emphasis on “due regard” within decision making. We heard that often EIAs are being done too late to consider mitigation fully or provide real scrutiny. EIAs need to be embedded at the beginning of any change process. In addition to due regard around decision making, the organisation also needs to be able to demonstrate how it meets the other three Public Sector Equality Duties: 1) to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, 2) to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not and 3) to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Strategy, Objective Setting and Governance.

A strategic equality framework is needed to provide the “golden thread” from the Council Plan through to personal objectives. Officers responsible and accountable for EDI in the organisation could have an instrumental role in embedding the golden thread through the provision of support and challenge to all services.

Current EDI objectives and those in development, are very much “operational” rather than strategic or setting the direction for the organisation and its aspirations for staff, residents and place. There has been a delay in setting the workforce objective and this is now hampering internal EDI communications and staff belief in the organisational commitment to EDI. A debate is still ongoing about how EDI can be incorporated into service planning, and work on performance management processes has started.

Governance around EDI needs to be strengthened. A Corporate Equalities Board might provide the best way forward. Both the Member Steering Group and staff forums would be able to contribute. There is little formal Scrutiny of EDI so far. Scrutiny could be more involved in embedding EDI by providing assurance on the progress towards achieving the organisation's equality objectives and KPIs. The governance and support to the employee EDI forums also needs be strengthened to

clarify their role and purpose and maximise their potential contribution to help drive EDI forward in the organisation.

Partnership and Working with the Community

Community engagement is a priority for the council, its Communications Team, heads of service and new Local Community Networks (LCNs). The council has plenty of data to support working in the community. The Somerset Intelligence site is a good source of data for helping to identify challenges and priorities.

The voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCFSE) wants to work more closely with the council. VCFSE organisations often represents 'seldom heard voices' and the sector see good opportunities for more joined up and cohesive partnership with the unitary council around cultural needs and inequalities. It has a good skill set and is willing to share/offer its own EDI and social cohesion knowledge and priorities with the council. The VCFSE organisations we spoke to said that since Vesting Day, they have felt better engaged with the council through the EDI Team.

2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

- 2.1. Make EDI the lens through which all decisions are taken. Weave it in at an early stage – not as a thing to do “later”.** SC is keen to ensure that due regard is taken of equality impacts when all its decisions are made. EIAs need to be done at an earlier stage to allow for any negative impact to be mitigated (particularly around any planned budget reductions) and for positive impacts to be maximised. This would also enable Members to request more data or consultation from officers before a decision is taken. Consider publishing EIAs in one easily accessible area on the council website.

- 2.2. Consider how to prioritise the use of resources to have the greatest impact on equality – priority places; communities; groups.** Like many councils, Somerset has significant budgetary challenges. Spending on EDI related issues should be focussed on those who are most disadvantaged in

the community. EDI should also be business as usual once embedded in processes like service planning and commissioning.

- 2.3. **Establish a Corporate Equality Board to act as a driver for developing an EDI strategy and delivering the EDI objectives.** The council lacks governance around EDI at present. A corporate equality board could oversee how EDI is being embedded and allow for voices to be heard from Members, staff forums and external stakeholders.
- 2.4. **Strengthen the Members Equality Steering Group by clarifying its role and function within the decision-making and assurance process.** This is a relatively new all-party group with an important role to play in the council. Clarifying its role will enable it to have more influence over the issues it considers and be more effective.
- 2.5. **Put in place a comprehensive training programme for officers and Members to help embed EDI throughout the organisation.** Knowledge and understanding of EDI issues is variable across the council. Managers, frontline staff and Members all want to feel more confident about issues like language when serving diverse customers or interacting with diverse communities as well as holding conversations with staff.
- 2.6. **Accelerate Member involvement in embedding EDI in the council through the scrutiny function, specifically in monitoring performance of equality objectives, KPIs and reviewing equality impact assessments.** Scrutiny of EDI is not currently undertaken. Scrutiny should have an important role to play in embedding equality into the council by providing assurance and giving early focus to specific EDI issues e.g. a “rurality” commission.
- 2.7. **Enable the VCFSE to have a place at a strategic “EDI table”.** The VCFSE in Somerset wants to work more closely with the new unitary council and the new Local Community Networks. They want to be involved more strategically in setting shared objectives.
- 2.8. **Take advantage of the Local Community Network (LCN) Link Workers to**

understand and integrate EDI thinking into the work of the LCNs. There are 9 LCN Link Workers attached to the 18 LCNs. They will have capacity to help the LCNs deliver on their EDI objectives.

- 2.9. **Create opportunities to look at cumulative equalities impacts of commissioning and procurement.** This will identify whether there are decisions which will impact on one group or area more than another. Commissioners said they were often unaware of the activity of others and the cumulative impact of all of their work.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by an experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Gail Bishop – Strategy and Partnership Specialist (Equality and Diversity) - Cornwall Council
- Dr. Irena Hergottova - Head of Community Building and Cohesion - Walsall Council
- Nikki Parkhill - Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - Surrey County Council
- Councillor Stewart Golton – Leeds City Council
- Sebastian Burch - Warwickshire CC – (Shadow Peer)
- Gill Elliott – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

3.2. Scope and focus

The Council asked the peer team to focus on three specific issues.

- The level of ownership throughout the organisation by officers and Members of equality, diversity and inclusion.
- An understanding of the commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion by officers

and Members across the organisation.

- How effectively 'Due Regard' is embedded within all stages of the decision-making process to inform the direction you take.

The Peer Team used the specified scope as a lens to align our findings with the themes of the Equality Framework for Local Government

- 1. Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment**
- 2. Understanding and working with your communities**
- 3. Service delivery and customer care**
- 4. Diverse and engaged workforce**

3.3. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days on site in Taunton, Somerset, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from around 22 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to around 100 people including a range of council staff, Members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings which they share as fellow local government officers and Members.

4. Feedback

4.1. Leadership, partnerships and organisational commitment

EDI is a priority for the Leader, the executive and opposition members. Members are

willing to share their own lived experience and take the lead in their own wards. They are committed to raising the visibility of council commitment to EDI, for example by attending LGBTQ+ Pride events and future events that are planned for migrants, carers and women. The VCFSE appreciate that Members are far more visible on EDI issues than before.

There is an established all party Member Equality Steering Group which was developed to provide some organisational challenge on EDI. They have made an excellent start, and there is now an opportunity to focus their activity by clarifying their role and position within the decision-making process and enabling them to hear from others e.g. staff forums, and community groups. Scrutiny could also be more involved in embedding EDI by providing assurance on the progress towards achieving the organisation's equality objectives and KPIs. Scrutiny can also give early focus on specific EDI issues. One of these could be a form of "rurality" commission.

Confidence is variable amongst Members in addressing EDI, particularly around language. This need for training and greater confidence around language was echoed throughout the organisation including managers and frontline staff.

One of the five key operating principles of the new LCNs is to consider equalities implications. Nine LCN Link Workers, who will also be and Public Health Champions, are associated with the 18 LCNs. There has been some early success, for example in the focus on young people in Taunton, but there needs to be more collaborative working to embed EDI in localities.

There is strong personal commitment to EDI from the Chief Executive and the senior leadership team. The Transformational 'Values Workshops' have been delivered by senior leaders helping to set the scene for the EDI programme. The Chief Executive and the Executive Directors are accessible through Q&A sessions with staff. Both the Leader and the Chief Executive include EDI issues in their blogs to staff. Going forward it will be important to find more opportunities to demonstrate commitment through role modelling, sharing lived experience through videos and blogs, and challenging inappropriate behaviour when it occurs.

EDI delivery in the council is being strengthened through the alignment with Public Health. The Community Safety Partnership Group sits in Public Health. Its website

shows a focus on inequality, but it needs to increase the visibility of the issues and find ways to strengthen engagement to widen inclusion and increase impact of its work.

The council has built good working relationships with local partners (e.g. Town and Parish, Citizens Advice, SPARK – the VCFSE umbrella organisation). This is building trust which helps to counteract myths and rumours. There are good examples of co-production and commissioning solutions to budgetary and service cuts. This has been a good opportunity for partners to demonstrate their in-depth local knowledge and for them to take ownership and continue delivering services.

The EIA process needs to be strengthened and embedded into processes from the start like project management, change management and democratic processes including the Forward Plan. This would increase the number of projects being informed by EDI considerations and could help to demonstrate better mitigation. The Equalities Team provide quality assurance for EIAs before they are appended to committee reports.

The peer team did not talk to statutory partners during the peer challenge. However, we understand that partners in the NHS, the Integrated Care Board and organisations on the Health and Wellbeing Board including the police and the fire and rescue service are keen to collaborate on equality related issues with the council. It might be useful to include links to partners in any future EDI framework (the golden thread) and corporate EDI group.

4.2. Understanding and working with your communities

The council is a “data rich” organisation. Sources include Somerset Intelligence which has been used to identify key community challenges and for completing some EIAs; Somerset Hate Crime and Community Cohesion Group share data on hate crime; the VCFSE holds qualitative data and has insights that could be better utilised to understand the 'churn and change' taking place across Somerset. Not everyone knows where to find data so its use can be patchy. For example, there is no central place for monitoring community tensions and elected Members don't have an established 'place' to share their intelligence. There need to be more opportunities to

turn data into insights and to share data with the VCSFE and other partners to understand where the gaps are. A data strategy around collecting, storing, sharing and using data is in place but it may need to be more widely known about within the council.

We heard about some good community engagement. Citizen Space is an effective method of engagement and alternative formats are provided. There are some excellent examples of engagement with SEN/SEND, looked after children, care leavers, Gypsy, Roma, Traveller people (GRT), young people, Migrants and Muslim communities, often in partnership with the VCFSE. These have made a real difference with the development of meaningful work placements for young people and changes to the provision for Muslim burials. Inter-faith work with schools requires more focus and is under-funded. We did hear that learning from some consultations is not always fed back to the community.

Libraries understand and work with communities well – they have an 'everyone is welcome' focus and support 127 languages, digital exclusion and mental health. There is a potential for the 'public realm' to be used for future cohesion initiatives by creating more cohesive, friendly and healthy public spaces like parks. The Council has good engagement with the Hinkley Point C community projects. These include funding for a Minehead Mens Shed to improve mental health of men who may be isolated in their community, and grants for a range of projects supporting vulnerable women with housing problems or suffering abuse. Somerset is hosting a significant infrastructure project, Hinkley Point C. As a result, there are various groups set up to identify impacts of the project. One of those is the Hinkley Community Safety group which looks at the impacts of the project on the community, and their safety.

The VCSFE view the establishment of the new unitary council as a good opportunity to improve communication and reduce duplicated effort. Some of those we spoke to want the council to 'rationalise' and/or 'commission out' multiple community initiatives – e.g., Connect Somerset, Public Health Champions, LCN link workers and village agents. The VCFSE want to have a place at a 'strategic table' with the council, the Member Steering Group and other partners. They think that the council needs to support the Somerset VCFSE to be sustainable and not rely so much on expertise from outside the local authority area. The VCFSE also want more support for local organisations via the commissioning process.

The Local Community Networks (LCNs) are still at the design stage with most having only met once so far. When fully effective they should enable better conversations and consultation with local communities which will contribute to ensuring due regard when decisions are taken. LCNs have EDI as one of their core principles. The VCFSE would like to have a common set of EDI objectives with the LCNs, including clear cohesion expectations. They feel that “seldom heard voices” in communities need to be linked up with the VCFSE and LCNs because as one said “We all want to talk to the same people”.

4.3. Responsive services and customer care

There is a clear commitment amongst Heads of Service to EDI. They were able to articulate how it is relevant to their service areas. Many services are considering needs beyond protected characteristics e.g. social needs assessments in bus planning. Directorates need some time and space to reflect on how well they are working to advance EDI. Consideration is still being given to how EDI can be incorporated into service planning or improvement. There is a feeling that the organisation is focussed on mitigating legal risk rather than advancing EDI: maybe now is the time to broaden the focus of the work.

The council needs to be ready to understand, respond to, and meet the needs of a rapidly changing population. It should consider ways of producing accessible communications for staff and residents. Front-line staff are keen to learn more about EDI to meet the needs of their diverse customers. More safe spaces are needed for staff to talk about EDI in teams to help their learning without fear of “getting it wrong”.

The new Director of Public Health and Population Health (first joint role) has meant that there is more spent now on prevention, leading to a bigger impact on the population.

A Gypsy Liaison Officer role has been created to improve engagement with the community and overcome barriers to services.

Some outreach has been done with GRT and Muslim people to understand their cultural needs and requirements e.g. Muslim burial sites.

We heard about other EDI positive service provision including:

- Good practice in adult social care e.g., Carnival of Good Practice; Use of

micro-providers in social prescribing.

- Increased focus on the importance of education and positive educational outcomes.
- EDI being a golden thread throughout all learning and development activity in Adult and Children's Social Care.
- Libraries playing an important role in EDI as locations for sharing information with residents.
- Running Drag Queen Story Time despite some challenges.
- Creative approaches to working with vulnerable communities e.g., work with health services to support rough sleepers.

There needs to be a range of ways that people can access services, especially for those that are digitally excluded. The Library Service is often relied upon to fill gaps in provision and offer opportunities for residents, so the council needs to consider what this means for resourcing needs for libraries.

Commissioners in services would like to move more from reactive to proactive work and would like time to reflect on the challenge of holding both operational and commissioning responsibility. Social value and corporate social responsibility could be exploited further to advance equality and inclusion for residents. Heads of Service should consider how these factors are monitored more closely within contract and performance management. The council could consider reinstating the strategic commissioners' group to create opportunities for collaboration, sharing their work and understanding cumulative impact of change.

We understand that budget is a key area of concern for the council. The peer team were told by different stakeholders that the organisation is trying to provide services for broad population groups but without the required budget. It was suggested by participants that the council should consider ways of prioritising delivery for those who need it the most.

4.4 Diverse and engaged workforce

Local Government Reorganisation has had a big impact on staff in the council. The

organisation recognises that its staff are going through a lot and has put in place an Employee Assistance Programme. Officers and Members involved in selection/recruitment have received unconscious bias training to help ensure fairness throughout these processes.

Staff knowledge of EDI is variable. Managers are often unsure about how to deal with different staff problems and need considerable assistance from HR. We heard that HR officers have built trust with depot managers through strong one-to-one relationships.

A great deal of HR data is collected, however as the legacy organisations collected different data there are some gaps in workforce data. As a result, it is not always possible to analyse the data on a corporate basis. Some employees don't trust how their data will be used and fear being identified. Characteristics like disability, religion or sexual orientation have high rates of "unknown" that will need to be resolved to better understand the Councils staff base. Better use could be made of data in identifying barriers to progression for protected groups of staff.

The organisation has a number of staff forums. They have the potential to be a considerable asset to the organisation. Some are newer than others and most are at different stages in their development. Members of the forums that we spoke to were very passionate, driven and self-starting. Some of the groups were able to identify where they have had successes e.g., work on menopause guidance and the recent RISE conference on Race which was very successful. In general, the forums lack structure and terms of reference. They have little direct access to senior managers so few opportunities to influence. More senior leadership support and sponsorship would help them to be more confident and effective.

The organisation is beginning to identify the values and type of culture it wants for itself. Fairness, honesty and kindness were the top three values that staff wanted for the new council. There is clearly more work to be done on culture. We heard fears expressed by staff around being able to challenge upwards, including being labelled a 'troublemaker' and being told to be 'grateful for having a job'. The council has seen a recent and stark example of racism by staff and service users against Black social workers recruited internationally. Lessons are being learned from this and rapid action was taken including commissioning a race audit and training. The staff

affected have also been supported by the organisation. Managers and staff said that there is pressure on time which reduces the opportunity for voices to be heard and staff to be able to reflect together on issues like racism in a safe space.

The organisation is a Level 2 Disability Confident employer, and it is working towards level 3. This is to their credit. There are some issues that need addressing. We were told by some staff that there is an inconsistent understanding of the Access to Work scheme and reasonable adjustments.

The organisation works hard to bring young people into its employment. There are good apprenticeship and graduate schemes with high retention rates of around 90%. There are also some established pathways into employment for disadvantaged young people such as work experience for care leavers and those who are neurodiverse. Some further work is needed on the implementation of these schemes to ensure that expectations from the prospective employees are managed and can be met.

5. Next steps

The LGA recognises that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and the LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for the Southwest, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

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