

**Our ‘Equality Journey’:**

**Reaching the ‘Achieving’ level of the Equality Framework for Local Government.**

**Introduction**

We believe that Bath and North East Somerset Council has the characteristics of an ‘Achieving’ Authority. This document will set out how we have reached this judgement, and the journey we have travelled to get to this point. It will also set out our local and somewhat distinctive context, and how this has influenced the approach to equalities that we have taken here in Bath & North East Somerset.

**Background – the area**

Bath & North East Somerset is a great place to live, work and visit. The area has approximately 170,000 residents. Over two thirds of the area is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Green Belt. The World Heritage City of Bath forms the main urban conurbation with Keynsham and Midsomer Norton and Radstock being the other significant areas of population. The rest of the district consists of small rural communities including sixty nine villages.

Bath & North East Somerset enjoys a unique quality of built and natural

environment, world-class arts and culture, a relatively strong economy and

low levels of unemployment. The area has very high levels of educational

achievement, low crime levels, excellent public services and a relatively

affluent and healthy population.

There are a great many positive things about Bath & North East Somerset.

However, there are a number of **challenges in the equality agenda**:

* There are **pockets of extreme deprivation** within the district. A small number of neighbourhoods feature within the most deprived 10% in the country, with one featuring in the most deprived 5%. This in stark contrast to the majority of the area which results in significant levels of inequality and impacts adversely on the life chances of the population living in these areas. Although overall life expectancy is in excess of the national average, this masks considerable health inequalities within small pockets of the community.
* **Narrowing the gap** between the most and least affluent is a real challenge facing the area and impacts on a multitude of factors, including health, educational achievement and access to services. This leads to a variety of related issues including poverty of aspiration within a number of isolated areas. Addressing inequality is essential in building stronger communities
* Our “**communities of interest**” such as people with learning disabilities and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities fare significantly less well than mainstream residents with many of the same deprivation issues as the neighbourhoods described above.
* As far as **age** is concerned, our population is slightly more ageing than the national average, which means extra consideration is needed to ensure the area provides the right services to meet the needs of older people and also their carers. We also have large student populations living in some wards, with resultant community cohesion issues to address.
* Our **Black minority ethnic (BME) population is smaller** than the national average (approximately 2.8% in the Census 2001, and now estimated to be at around 5.5% by ONS 2006). Whilst our BME communities are dispersed throughout the area, a large proportion of them live in Bath city itself.
* There are relatively **few organised equality-focused forums** and groups (especially outside Bath city), which makes effective consultation and engagement with minority groups, such as the LGBT community, difficult. We have tended to rely on a small group of ‘community leaders’ and gatekeepers for engagement activities – however there are concerns about the pressure this can put upon them, and also how truly representative they are of the wider community’s views and interests.
* As the whole of Bath city is a World Heritage site, containing many Grade 1 listed buildings, negotiations with English Heritage over improvements to **physical access to our public buildings** have been protracted and time consuming. Whilst we have made many ground breaking changes (for example, installing lift access into the historical monument of the Roman Baths), at times progress has seemed frustratingly slow.

**Background – the Council**

Bath & NES Council has 65 councillors. No political group has a majority of the 65 seats on the Counci, and it was agreed that the Conservative group would form the Cabinet. The cabinet is made up of a leader and six portfolios:

* Resources
* Adult Social Services and Housing
* Development  & Major Projects
* Customer Services
* Children's Services
* The Council as Corporate Trustee

There are also five Overview and Scrutiny panels whose role it is to examine critically the decision making of the cabinet and where necessary call decision makers to account.

The Coucil employs approximately 6500 staff (including school staff).

**Equality in Bath and North East Somerset Council**

Bath & North East Somerset Council is currently self assessed at level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. In summer 2008, the Corporate Equality Group (CEG) agreed to an equality improvement plan focussing on the EFLG; it was decided that working towards ‘achieving’ was more aspirational than working to level 3 of the ESLG. The improvement plan ran until August 2009, setting out short, medium and long term actions along with the underpinning reporting systems necessary that enable us to effectively monitor and peer-review progress towards ‘achieving’ of the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG).

The improvement plan was project managed with governance agreed by Strategic Directors Group (SDG). SDG are the project board and receive updates each quarter. CEG are the project team, meeting 6 weekly. Directorate Level Equality Groups were set up to carry our service level actions and they report formally into CEG every 6 weeks.

During 2009, the Council formed a formal partnership with NHS-B&NES and responsibility for setting up equality systems within the health and well being partnership was awarded to the Council’s equality team. The PCT board also agreed a one-year health equality improvement plan (expiring May 2010) that aims to raise the equality performance and reporting systems and assurance processes within both delivery and commissioning in NHS-B&NES.

In 2009 we wrote a combined (NHS-B&NES and B&NES Council) single equality scheme and action plan which, at the time of writing, was about to be formally adopted by the Council and the Health and Wellbeing Partnership

**Key progress/achievement in reaching the ‘Achieving’ level of the EFLG:**

In November 2009, the Council was fortunate to take part in a ‘mock’ assessment conducted by two members of the South West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership. Over a period of two days, the assessors looked at evidence and spoke to a wide range of elected members, staff, partners and external stakeholders, and concluded that Bath and North East Somerset has the characteristics of an ‘Achieving’ Authority. The assessment report commended some areas of our equalities work as excellent, whilst also highlighting shortfalls that would need to be worked upon prior to us undergoing formal peer challenge of the achieving level.

Following the mock inspection the Council developed a short term 4 month improvement plan based upon the gaps identified in the mock assessment. This improvement plan included actions to address shortfalls in our monitoring of workforce data and the way it is reported on.

Below we set out our key strengths and areas highlighted for improvement (along with what we have begun to do to address these), structured around the 5 areas of the Equality Framework for Local Government.

**Knowing your community - equality mapping**

We have made great progress in this area. An equality mapping project has been undertaken to assist the Council in making better use of national and local information and data streams. The research and results have been published across the Council and we are continuing to update this site as new information is being gathered. We are focussing specifically on improving our understanding of how well inequality is being addressed within our community – geographical, cultural, economic and specific communities of interest. The work we have done so far has enabled us to begin to identify ‘equality gaps’ often experienced by different communities. Due to our specific demographic profile, it is often challenging to compare B&NES local data sources with national equality data; however this comparison will be crucial to delivery on a number of key national indicators.

One area that we still have to develop is to alter the format of the information to make it accessible and appropriate for the public website.

The mock assessment report states that B&NES Council “… *has an excellent understanding of the community, its needs and aspirations. A range of data and methodologies are used to ensure all sections of the community, including newer communities’ needs are identified…. These data are used to inform decisions and set priorities*

**Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment –**

The Council has developed a Single Equality Scheme combined with the Health and Wellbeing partnership, which sets out our local approach to equalities and the priorities for our area. The scheme was developed through consultation with key stakeholders including staff and partners in the voluntary and community sector). By combining the NHS and Council's separate equality schemes into one Single Equality Scheme for Race, Disability, Gender, Age, Religion or Belief and Sexual Orientation, we can address all equality issues in a more strategic way to meet our commitment to move towards equality for all and the requirements of the Equality Act 2009.

The need to address inequality is one of the key drivers in the Sustainable Community Strategy, a core aim of which is supporting the disadvantaged and protecting the vulnerable. The SCS sits at the top of our strategies, and influences all of our other work. The Corporate Plan (2009-10) which was refreshed to take account of emerging issues places a strong emphasis on reducing disadvantage.

The mock assessment report confirmed that within Bath & North East Somerset Council, there is clear political and managerial leadership of the equalities agenda – and equalities issues are considered and tested by both Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny. It also commended our work with elected members as excellent. Our Overview and Scrutiny panels have each received a ‘bespoke’ equalities briefing on equalities in scrutiny, and in March 2010, in partnership with South West Councils, we hosted a regional event ‘*Using Scrutiny to deliver fair services for all’*. Attended by 55 people. B&NES Council’s training materials were used for the workshop sessions.

We have delivered a series of equalities briefings for elected members throughout 2009/10, with a clear focus on the relevance of equalities in their role.

We have robust reporting structures in place to ensure equality work is mainstreamed throughout the Council. Each Directorate has its own directorate level equality group (DLEG) with each of their services having specific equality improvement plans that feed into the corporate plan. DLEGs report back to the CEG on a 6 weekly basis by written and verbal updates. Our three worker challenge groups (Black and Minority Ethnic staff; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender staff; Disabled staff) also report (on a more informal basis) to the CEG every six weeks.

We participated in a Beacon pilot (SW Regional Race Equality project) to design an Equality Impact Assessment template that was not only easy to complete but also effective in delivering the information gleaned by the report author directly to members of the public. The template we designed has been accepted and launched as a national standard. We have carried out a comprehensive training programme and have been publishing EIAs demonstrating our commitment to improving service delivery. We have recently streamlined our EIA template to ensure it is as effective as possible. Decision making templates produced for elected members include a question asking if an EIA has been carried out – this enables members to question report authors on the decision not to carry out an EIA and/or the timetable for completion of an EIA if has not already been produced.

**Community engagement and satisfaction**

Whilst there are some inconsistent approaches across the Council in consultation (which means we can not always demonstrate that hard to reach groups are included, and consultation methods are accessible), our ‘Community engagement strategy’ has become a driver for new and innovative ways of engaging and working with the different sections of the B&NES Community. It sets out the framework and principles by which the Council works and communicates with the members of the local community and is helping us to improve our quality and consistency of engagement and involvement.

Our web based consultation system now enables members of the public to register their interest in subjects that are important to them, as well as taking part in consultations and discussion groups online. It also displays the results of previous consultations and states how this information has been used.

The Council is using new and innovative ways of engaging with the community and has commissioned ‘Re:generate’ to work in areas and wards that have high levels of socio economic deprivation. Regenerate’s role is to empower vulnerable and marginalised groups within our local communities to inform and influence the Council’s agenda and priorities.

Members of the public and other stakeholders are being encouraged to comment on the results of EIAs we are now publishing; we have a dip sampling group of external partners and stakeholders that randomly select and scrutinise draft EIAs before publication.

We have demonstrable good practice in consultation undertaken as part of our Overview and Scrutiny process. The chairs of two of our O&S panels made presentations of their work (which included how they have involved BME and other minority communities in the decision making process) at the regional event we jointly hosted in partnership with South West Councils in March 2010, ‘*Using Scrutiny to deliver fair services for all’*.

The mock assessment report states that within B&NES Council “*there is good quality consultation with communities across all groups, including those who may be vulnerable and marginalised as a result of their circumstances*”.

**Responsive services and customer care**

The Council has a good understanding of the community, its needs and aspirations. We use equality impact assessments (EIAs) to influence corporate decisions and changes in service policy. The Mock assessment report confirms that: *‘There is a comprehensive range of EIAs of both policies and functions. These are carried out as a matter of course and are an integral part of the decision making process and are made public.’*

Our ‘dip sample’ group provides a robust quality control function for our EIAs. Membership of the group comprises of partner organisations and representatives of communities of interest. We work successfully together to ensure that our EIAs are of a consistent quality across the Council and stand up to scrutiny.

Our positive experience of training elected members on how to scrutinise EIAs has been recently acclaimed as ‘excellent’ during a mock inspection carried out by IDeA South West REAP in November 2009 and we have shared this good practice regionally.

We deliver a ‘Customer Service and Equality’ training course as part of organisations Corporate Training programme and the Equalities Team continues to provide bespoke equalities training courses/EIA sessions for individual teams with a specific focus on the partnership EIA’s and associated delivery plans. We are aware that there is still an inconsistency in the quality of EIAs across the Council and the Health and Wellbeing Partnership but feel that significant improvements have been made. One way we are addressing inconsistency is through the introduction of criteria to assess the quality of EIAs.

The IDeA Mock Inspection Report states that “*There is a clear system in place for driving this agenda across the organisation i.e. Corporate Equality Group, DLEGs, Worker Challenge Groups”.* In practice, Strategic Directors Group have taken responsibility since March 2009 to ensure that EIAs are being carried out and published within their areas of accountability. They ensure appropriate and adequate arrangements are in place to approve EIAs before publication, to identify key themes arising from EIAs and then build these themes into service improvement plans.

We have built a good working relationship with equality third sector groups resulting in newly commissioned work built on a greater understanding of what we as a public body need to deliver and the capacity of the third sector to deliver services on our behalf with added value. By embedding equalities within mainstream procurement and commissioning practice we ensure that new services are designed to meet the needs of the local communities and minimise any adverse equalities impacts from the outset.

**A modern and diverse workforce**

**Data collection and analysis**

The mock assessment report states that the Council *acknowledged that the lack of good quality HR data is having an effect on the council’s ability to progress this agenda further, particularly with regard to being able to evidence that the equality aspects of the workforce strategy are implemented and monitored.*

As a response to this observation, since November 2009 the Council has focussed on gathering employment data in order to analyse it and act on any adverse trends we identify. The Human Resources team have carried out adaptations to the Resourcelink and Northgate systems which have made it possible to generate employment reports for corporate data, directorate data and local reports for CEG and the Directorate Level Equalities Groups to receive which are carefully written to avoid issues of confidentiality on our workforce composition. We received our first full set of data down by each equality strand covering issues such as Recruitment and Selection, Harassment & Bullying, Grievance, Leavers etc. at May CEG 2010.

The Human Resources team is assisting Strategic Directors to identify and acknowledge key areas of concern and address in service planning. Those key areas of concern will continue to drive HR strategy, service improvement planning and DLEG action plans.

We have addressed the issue of compliance with legislation; information is now available on the website.

**Equality Impact Assessments**

All of our key human resources policies and procedures have been equality impact assessed. We are aware that these EIAs will need to be reviewed in light of new employment data and information that is now available

**Our Workers Challenge Groups**

The Council supports three ‘Workers Challenge Groups’: a Black and Minority Ethnic Workers Group, a Disabled Workers Group and a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Workers Group. These groups provide support for staff from minority groups within the organisation, and also help to identify workplace issues for the Council to address. The chair of each workers challenge group is a member of the Corporate Equalities Group, which helps to ensure that we are aware of the issues affecting our minority staff.

**The staff survey 2008**

Hundreds of staff filled in the survey which was all about finding out what they think of working for Bath & North East Somerset Council. A detailed corporate action plan was put together to tackle the issues that were common across the Council. Each Divisional Director committed to taking action on additional issues specific to their service areas and most services are working to action plans written in direct repose to local issues raised in the staff satisfaction survey.

**Equality training**

Equality is an integral aspect of induction training. Mandatory equality training for middle managers who have not received recent training has been very well received, and continues to be rolled out. Our corporate training programme covers topics such as, ‘Harassment & bullying – no place for it in my team’, ‘Disability confident’ and ‘Equality through customer service’

EIA training has been delivered to all five Overview and Scrutiny panels and an ongoing programme of support and specialist advice for O&S panels has been agreed. We have also delivered a programme of equalities briefings for our elected members, and received positive comments on the usefulness of these.

**Recruitment and selection**

In order to work within tight budgetary constraints but to continue to keep our profile as a recognised equal opportunities employer we regularly use generic advertising in targeted publications; for example Fyne Times; Able magazine etc.

We have a new innovative initiative, “Project Search” which is a new initiative offering pupils internships within the Council for one year, whilst they learn employment skills from a classroom within the place of employment. We are proud that we were able to provide 30 successful work placements for school children within our Heritage Services at the Roman Baths. We have recently held successful Community Centre open days with the dual purposes of showcasing new community centres as well as inviting local people to apply for local jobs with –in the centres.

**Single status**

The implemented Single Status without the necessity to cut jobs or salaries and without reducing or cutting services to fund the costs of implementation. We were effective in recognising and addressing areas where there was unequal pay.

**Disability leave policy & Reasonable Adjustment Panel**

The Disability Leave Policy was written and submitted for adoption by the Disabled Workers Challenge Group. It enables employees to take time off for issues relating to their impairment or disability without them worrying about sickness absence or taking annual leave. A further step was taken by introducing a reasonable adjustment panel (RAP) process with the aim of resolving any issues relating to disabled employees by negotiation and agreement where possible, and avoiding recourse to Employment Tribunal. The RAP advises on and considers the provision of reasonable adjustments in the workplace and assists managers and employees to reach a suitable and acceptable decision.

**Stonewall**

The Workplace Equality Index continues to provide a useful framework for the Council to chart its progress on sexual orientation and LGBT issues. Whilst the areas for improvement we have identified relate to LGB issues, almost all are equally applicable to the other equality strands

**Performance review**

The Competency framework is part of the HR strategy and equality is a specific aspect of all five levels of the competency framework. This serves to make the organisation’s values as an employer clear and to match these values with expectation of our managers behaviour, skills and abilities.

**Conclusion - Demonstrating ‘Achieving’**

Bath and North East Somerset Council is proud of its progress on equality and diversity and the work we have done on a partnership basis to promote equality in this area.

This journey document provides a broad overview the Council’s performance and work in relation to promoting equality and diversity, challenging unlawful discrimination, and promoting good community relations. It outlines our key strengths of

* strong working with leaders and elected members;
* high levels of commitment and leadership throughout the organisation;
* a good knowledge of our communities, their needs and aspirations;
* successful community consultation and engagement,
* a strong focus on embedding equality in employment policies and practices;
* staff satisfaction - the staff survey that shows that staff believe our performance on equalities issues has improved significantly, both in terms of service delivery and the way it employs people.

Examples of work we are proud of and initiatives that are making a real positive difference for local people are set out in detail in the accompanying templates, and we welcome further discussion on these during the Peer Challenge. We do recognise that this is a journey that we are undertaking and there are still areas where we need to improve. Our interim equality improvement plan is almost at its end; we will refresh this plan with detailed actions based upon the peer team’s comments and suggestions.

May 2010