



Equality Peer Challenge

Melton Borough Council

Date 27 & 28 March 2012

Report



1. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of an equality peer challenge organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) and carried out by its trained peers. The report satisfies the requirements of the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) for an external assessment at the 'achieving' level. The peer challenge is designed to validate a council's own self-assessment at this level by considering documentary evidence and carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees, councillors and other stakeholders.

The basis for the peer challenge is a benchmark against five areas of performance. They are:

- Knowing your communities
- Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment
- Community engagement and satisfaction
- Responsive services and customer care
- A skilled and committed workforce

The peer challenge is not an inspection; rather it offers an external assessment of an organisation's own judgement of itself against the EFLG benchmark, by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equality agenda in their own organisation. The assessment is a reflection of the evidence presented to the peer team, through reading the documentary evidence submitted in advance, and the interviews and focus groups when on site.

The team was:

Lead peer:	Stuart Long, South Essex Homes
Member peer:	Cllr Mike Quigley, Bassetlaw DC & Nottingham CC
Officer peer:	Steve Shaw, Royal Borough of Greenwich
Challenge manager:	Jonna Stevens, Local Government Association

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. Executive summary and recommendations

Following this diversity peer challenge, we have reached the following conclusion:

Melton Borough Council (MBC) has completed a satisfactory self-assessment against the criteria for the 'achieving' level of the Equality Framework for Local Government.

The council demonstrates a combination of clear leadership, effective policies and processes and effective engagement with partners, particularly through the delivery work done in the Priority Neighbourhoods through the Children's Centres. This has resulted in many examples of responsive services to meet the needs of diverse communities such as the Polish Stay and Play Group which acts as a referral point signposting council services and the early intervention work done with family outreach workers to engage with families with multiple needs.

Comprehensive equalities data, shared with partners, and drawing on a range of sources including the post of a Customer Insight Officer provides a sound base for services to understand the specific needs of different communities and plan services accordingly.

The Leicestershire District Council's Equality and Diversity Partnership known as 'the Partnership' (formed by the six district and borough councils of Leicestershire) is a real strength and provides the council with a resource and expertise it may not otherwise be able to sustain for example work to monitor legal compliance under the Equalities Act 2010. 'The Partnership' is well regarded and the officers working for the partnership knowledgeable and enthusiastic. They enable and facilitate discussion and consultation which influence services.

The move to new council offices at Parkside has enabled a cultural change with the senior management team leading by example in an open plan office environment and traditional departments now organised along the areas of People and Places. This appears to work well and all staff we spoke to felt that their work in the new environment was enabling in securing equality outcomes for their customers and that physical co-location facilitates closer working relationships with partners. Staff at all levels feel proud of the council's record on equality and prepared to go the extra mile to secure equality outcomes. This augurs well for the future.

The councils work on EIAs is known and understood by staff however more robust processes for internal and external scrutiny and challenge could be put in place. The peer team noted the plans for the newly created 'Check and Challenge Group' which would be a welcome step to address this issue.

In order to progress further, 'the Partnership' working with the council will now need to have the confidence to set MBC more ambitious specific objectives and targets particularly in areas that they could really impact upon such as getting to know the needs of hard to reach groups. These include rural communities and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGB and T) community and working to expand community consultation with a view to producing stronger outcomes for local people.

To help the council improve we have made a number of recommendations. These are:

1. To ensure there is rigorous 'challenge' on equalities issues. For example by letting the 'Check and Challenge Group' scrutinise EIAs.
2. By developing closer links with local community groups to develop their understanding of their role in monitoring equality issues and empower them to perform an external scrutiny role.
3. Look at the procurement process and ensure that rigorous monitoring of agreed Equality and Diversity standards are adhered to as part of the post contract monitoring. Also consider whether more value to the community can be added through procurement. For example by providing apprentice opportunities or sponsorship of local initiatives for young people.
4. Although there is an impressive mechanism for gathering and analysing data in place the peer team felt that there was a gap in using the information held by all parts of the council to inform service planning. Perhaps by establishing mechanisms for both formal and informal intelligence sharing the council can work smarter and utilise the collective knowledge of all its parts.
5. An annual summary of equalities data in Melton that can be used by officers and members would be a useful tool to quickly gauge the likely impact of a service decision.
6. Expand and develop areas of data capturing for staff and service users in line with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.
7. When developing the online presence ensure that information and support relating to LGB and T issues and issues faced by other protected characteristics groups on the website is made more easily accessible by reviewing indexing and publishing relevant links. For example how to report a hate crime incident or information about local LGB and T support groups.
8. Cascade equality and diversity objectives through service plans and down to individual objectives within the annual appraisal process to ensure that they are owned by staff. This will improve both staff engagement and effective delivery.
9. To further improve the internal communication with employees. We understand that a possible intranet site is in development. This would be a useful mechanism to communicate with staff about equalities and signpost members of staff to places of support in case of need.
10. The council needs to ensure that it continues the impetus on the equalities and diversity agenda, embedding the culture and expanding good practice so it becomes even more robust and is seen as a positive force in this economically challenging climate.

3. Impact of the challenge

The council made the following observations upon the impact the peer challenge has had:

In preparing for the peer challenge Melton Borough Council has had a clearer picture of the work undertaken in the authority which links to equality and diversity. Providing a bank of evidence to support other initiatives such as IIP accreditation. Understanding the detail of the work undertaken and the consistency of this throughout the organisation has highlighted areas of focus and the need for greater corporate oversight.

To this end an officer led 'check and challenge' group has been created to deliver a consistent approach which is of the very highest standard and utilises all of the available resources within or outside of the authority.

Internal reflection in addition to the external challenge has defined the priorities within this area of work for the short to medium term, highlighting champions for the work as we move forward.

Leader of the Council, Byron Rhodes said: 'Focus on the those most vulnerable in our communities and treating people as individuals has ensured we, as a Council, consider equalities as second nature. It is welcoming to receive external validation of our innovative approach to serving our communities.'

4. Detailed findings

4.1 Knowing your communities

Strengths:

1. Customer Insight Officer is a valuable resource able to analyse and understand the profile of MBC residents and customers. The officer provides corporate data and supports colleagues by providing this information to drive the development of services. Access to services customer insight report provides the organisation with a maturing understanding of the community. Customer insight mapping provides the organisation with a 360 degree insight resulting in changes to service delivery, for example the homelessness service.
2. Information sharing - Melton has led the drive to form effective partnerships locally and share information to encourage early intervention. Information is shared with partners for example 'health' profile identifies health issues for the Melton community. This health information has been used to prioritise services for example the opening of a cardio rehab centre in Melton.
3. Good level of data sharing and mapping between the council and partners in particular identifying vulnerable young people. .MBC has identified the issues that effect the community for example worklessness, ASB and drug and alcohol abuse put initiatives in place to deal with these issues and monitor outcomes across a number of performance indicators.
4. Equalities information and mapping is shared through the equality steering group.
5. Hate crime and Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) issues are mapped to inform hotspots and priorities. The Joint Action Group (JAG) meets on a regular basis to discuss concerns and work in a proactive manner to tackle identified issues.
6. Vulnerability information is available to staff upon contact with the organisation. Flags identify vulnerability issues and identify appropriate contact centre staff upon receipt of a call.
7. Location of the 3 Children Centres in MBC in priority neighbourhoods enables a targeted approach of services to those in most need.
8. Private sector Housing condition survey in June 2010 contains a range of useful equality and diversity information. For example the number of vulnerable people in decent homes, percentages of those in fuel poverty, the percentage of residents in income bands below £20K and estimate of cost for disability adaptations.

Areas for consideration:

1. The organisation is still reliant on the 2001 census data and could consider using schools data as a way of getting a more up to date snapshot of the community profile. This would enable MBC to have a better understanding of potential future service users.
2. Develop a summary document of the resident demographic profiles held in order that this can be used to target any underrepresented groups and inform more reflective resident involvement.
3. Make better use corporately of information that is collated throughout internal council departments.

4. MBC should consider producing neighbourhood profiles that combine the demographic data available with Mosaic information for a more complete picture.
5. Make further progress on layering customer profile data and Mosaic information with that from LeicesterShire Equality Forum funded work being undertaken by the De Montfort University.

5.2. Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

“Equality is in their DNA”

Strengths:

1. Strong leadership on equality issues is provided by two members councillors (strategic and operational) and the Chief Executive. The Chief Executive chairs monthly meeting of Equality Steering group personally. Actions are recorded and members consulted via an existing joint staff working group.
2. Lead member for equalities work with member services on providing member training. Equalities training for councillors and staff is compulsory and refreshed annually.
3. MBC is a partner in the Leicestershire District Council’s Shared Equality & Diversity Partnership known as ‘the Partnership’ and the forum enables sharing of good practise as evidenced by publications detailing achievements in each authority.
4. Strong partnership working with police and others on vulnerable groups via Joint Action Groups (JAG’s) problem solving.
5. Sharing of resources with partners, for example ‘the partnership’ and the building with partners such as the county council, Mental Health, Citizens Advise Bureau (CAB) and Job Centre plus has helped the council to deliver outcomes for local people more efficiently.
6. Staff were part of the EIA process to test access to new council offices.
7. ACCESS group of disabled service users are keen to be used as a resource for external scrutiny.
8. Young Mayor, Deputy Young Mayor and Youth Council work hard to get young people involved in local democracy and they receive support and recognition from the council.
9. MBC has shown leadership to encourage partnership working by setting up an effective information sharing agreement between organisations. A training day was organised to consider how working collectively can encourage early intervention and provide better value for the tax payer.
10. ‘The Partnership’ allows Melton to deliver on equality issues and out perform other organisations. Melton shows leadership in tackling issues faced by the community for example through the sanctuary scheme, wheels to work and the learning hub.
11. Melton has taken a proactive approach to anticipating issues around Welfare reforms and the impact that this could have for the council. They have taken a lead in setting up a working committee to consider implications with members drawn from JSA, money advice and other local authorities and this is another example of excellent partnership working.
12. Hate crime monitoring is taken seriously by partners and monitored by the Joint Action Group.
13. EIA’s are considered part of the budget setting proposals each year by the Council’s Policy, Finance & Admin Committee.
14. Despite lack of funding there is still an active commitment amongst partners to continue the work around equalities. For example, Melton Learning Hub is a social enterprise which now runs the council owned country park café providing employment and training for vulnerable young people and receives referrals through Family Intervention Project (FIP) and support for funding.

Areas for consideration:

1. Contract monitoring could be improved in particular of the employment and workforce equality practices of contractors.
2. Staff struggle to articulate corporate equalities objectives. Objectives could be redefined e.g. 'we will ensure equal access and embrace diversity to deliver fair services to all'. Need a simple message that can be remembered and understood.
3. Need to set clear equality objectives that the staff own and that is linked to service plans and monitored in annual appraisals.
4. More could be done to encourage women to stand as councillors (national average 30.6% Melton 25%) and other under represented groups such as the new Polish community.
5. There is a need to challenge EIAs to ensure a more consistent approach and the peer team notes that plans are in place for the 'Check and Challenge' Group to undertake this role.

4.3 Community engagement and satisfaction

Strengths:

1. MBC actively engages on service provisions such as modernisation of the cattle market and leisure centres through consultation with relevant working groups and stakeholders.
2. Many forms of engagement are used to gain participation such as site meetings, sounding board group, press releases, leaflets in market stalls and targeting specific groups such as the young and disabled.
3. Low levels of hate crime and good relationships with the Polish community which are the largest minority group in the borough. Consultation has led to services provided around the aspirations of the group such as the provision of a dedicated section in the cemetery for Polish nationals.
4. Pride in Neighbourhood scheme. Direct consultation with residents in the priority neighbourhoods of Fairmead, Egerton and the Town Centre with door knocking led to new initiatives for example the 'junk garage' store for unwanted furniture which has led to a reduced fly tipping. Many other resident issues resolved such as maintenance and repairs which were arranged and completed.
5. Participatory budgeting led to residents choosing priorities for their area and youth centres being run as a diversionary activity to reduce anti social behaviour. The youth centres are now run by a Voluntary Action Melton.
6. Youth mayor consulted with young people on their aspirations for Melton and as a result, extended free swimming sessions for young people in Melton.
7. There are some examples of residents involved in procurement of services i.e. Children Centre Services where residents were directly involved in the interview process for example when it came to choosing training provider for parents using the centre.
8. Melton supports the resident's focus groups in the four priority areas and provides administrative support to a number of traditional associations.
9. Funding is accessed to improve places in consultation with the community for example learning hub and regeneration of a skate park and the Ashfordby Road community facilities.
10. Resident walkabouts take place with council staff to highlight any issues in the priority areas.
11. Melton facilitates a Tenants' Forum that ensures that a wide representation of residents across the borough have a direct voice into shaping services.
12. Community Breakfast at the Hub to enable young people to say what they would like to see in Melton Borough.
13. An outreach worker is employed through the children centres to work with families in rural areas who may otherwise struggle to access services.
14. Equalities information is relayed to the children centres to target priority groups. For example all BME families are highlighted as potentially vulnerable and therefore will be prioritised and encouraged to attend the centres.
15. Council staff are based in the priority neighbourhoods to enable easier access to council services.
16. Melton is using social media effectively to engage with residents. An example of this is reacting to a Twitter feed to act quickly to remove homophobic graffiti on wall by environmental warden.

17. Access audit reports for Melton Cattle Market identified suitable remedial work such as signposting of toilets for wheelchair users and text relay service for customers who are deaf or have speech impairment.
18. Good communications strategy which recognises the importance of reputation, that well informed residents are more likely to be satisfied with their Council and to target communications to diverse audiences and stakeholders in the borough.
19. Budget Survey conducted with residents under the 'Have your Say' consultation process.

Areas for consideration:

1. Use the check and challenge group to encourage better use of the voluntary sector to enhance the scrutiny process such as is the case for the ACCESS group scrutinising disabled access in the town centre.
2. Encourage greater participation of residents in focus groups from across the demographics of Melton.
3. The team struggled to find evidence of monitoring of satisfaction and access across services other than at the children centres. Consider how Melton can ensure services are provided equally to all the community.
4. – remove as mentioned earlier under Theme 1 on page 6
5. Complaints are not monitored by protected characteristic or analysed by department meaning MBC are unable to identify any emerging issues.
6. Community Engagement Strategy document is too long for residents to really read and a shorter more succinct version could be produced when refreshed in 2013.
7. Melton Local Development Framework Core Strategy EIA is 80 pages long but has only one action attached to it 'to carry out equality monitoring alongside future public consultation events'. This is an important document and we would suggest that further time might need to be spent to fully populate the EIA with more specific actions.

4.4 Responsive services and customer care

“The person is at the heart of everything that we do. We now look at how we can shape services to their need”.

Strengths:

1. Sharing information and posts with a joined up collaborative approach to service delivery are one of the benefits of the new council offices at Parkside which has improved services for customers. MBC is pro-actively working with Leicestershire CC and the PCT, probation services and other organisations in one building to deliver a joined up service.
2. The COVE community centre was an expressed aspiration of residents and is now in place as a priority centre.
3. Influx of Polish families in the town was recognised as an issue for services through the Local Strategic Partnership and as a result targeted support is now in place.
4. Family Intervention Project (FIP) provides intensive support for families at risk of losing their homes and children due to consistent offending behaviour. The projects is working well and is a recognised model of good practise by the Department of Education and has received national recognition appearing on Channel 4 news and in the Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/feb/25/family-intervention-projects> and <http://www.channel4.com/news/anti-social-behaviour-whats-the-best-way-to-tackle-it>
5. Council will provide funding (taxis etc) to enable vulnerable and less well off access to council offices and services.
6. Broad range of access channels with telephone, email, internet, face to face and home visiting if necessary.
7. Re-alignment of service provision to focus on residents (emphasis on people and places). Early intervention and holistic approach to customers now seen as key.
8. “Melton deals with people not characteristics and delivers high levels of customer service” quote from a service user.
9. “We don’t just gather information on vulnerable individuals and groups that are vulnerable. We act on issues with family intervention, resettlement project, vulnerable adults group and children’s centres”. “Target led to assist the most vulnerable and needy’.
10. Staff feel that everyone is treated fairly and supported in line with their needs and issues. Constant updates of assessment of needs and support.
11. Children centres – one step provision for targeted residents including health clinic, family counselling, library outreach work, play groups, parent support, domestic abuse advise and customer services at reception.
12. The impact team work in ASB hotspots to provide diversionary activities and they also provide visits to victims home.
13. Awareness and preventative initiatives are targeted to schools around issues such as Hate Crime.
14. ‘Vulnerable Adults Group’ partner organisations deals with issues at operational level on a case by case basis to ensure those most at risk are given priority.
15. ‘Circle of Need’ project arose through recommendations of findings from the Pilkington Enquiry. Provides a joined up approach to dealing with vulnerable residents who are given all around support with one point of contact.

16. Aids and Adaptations there is no longer a waiting time for minor adaptations due to a combined focus in this area.
17. Safe Place Sanctuary scheme is now in operation.

Areas for consideration:

1. Website could be improved for the visually impaired. Word search could be improved did not recognise certain words such as hate crime reporting. The website content could also be better used to provide visual support (such as including links to other websites) for minority groups such as the LBG and T community.
2. Some staff felt concerned that the council doesn't always pay as much attention as it should about advertising its services and does not always consider the ease of accessibility to them.
3. Telephone response times are very slow and needs to be improved.
4. The team could not find evidence of resident satisfaction in how hate crime and ASB is dealt with. How does Melton ensure residents are treated with dignity and respect?
5. Translation services and documentation is not monitored to consider how often it is actively used
6. Equality analysis is currently inconsistent at MBC and actions are not monitored to ensure outcomes are delivered. Several impact assessments had no actions at all in the plans. Consider that all these documents are available on the website for scrutiny by the public.

4.5 A skilled and committed workforce

“Automatically consider equality in everything we do”

Strengths:

1. The Council’s workforce is broadly representative of the community it serves in relation to inclusion of BME workers. There appears to be an under representation of disabled staff based on staff declaring a disability. The age and gender profiles of the Council are reflective of local government workforces in general. Data for the borough for LGB and T representation and on religion and faith has not been used to identify comparative monitoring.
2. Feedback from staff was that the council has a good attitude towards equalities and diversity both as a workforce issue in terms of fair treatment and in the delivery of services to the public. Staff understands the value in shaping services around equalities from the start.
3. The Parkside building is proving to be a good model for flexible working practices and good for the wellbeing of staff. Staff are positive about the working environment and respect for work life balance.
4. A People Strategy, based on Local Government Workforce Strategy, is in place to support the council’s corporate aims and includes an objective to value diversity in the Council.
5. Induction training for members on Equality and Diversity is compulsory before they can sit on any Council Committees.
6. Equalities training and its inclusion in induction are good, varied and informative. For example ‘Understanding and responding to the needs of the LGB and T community’ hosted by ‘the partnership’.
7. Staff was very positive in their attitude towards partnership working and commitment to tackling vulnerability.
8. Council has a bullying and harassment policy in place and very few cases occur.
9. Council completed equal pay audit in 2005 and no main issues since or recent equal pay claims.
10. Employee relations with employees and trade unions good. Both engaged and consulted on changes in the council such as budget reductions and new policy implementation. Low numbers of grievances and discipline cases involving equality and diversity issues.

Areas for consideration:

1. Review the appraisal scheme guidance to include advice to managers on including equality considerations and also link to service plans. Managers could be signposted to sample equality objectives to include such as to carry out/be involved in EqIAs or to locate and search relevant equalities data.
2. More analysis on workforce figures e.g. reviewing under representation or viewing equalities by grade, job type and directorate. Include monitoring of LGBT, religion & faith and age profiling.

3. Limited data on workforce on faith profile (50% known) and LGB and T (not known). The Council could use Stonewall estimate of 5% (or about 4% for rural areas) when monitoring changes to service provision/uptake. Council needs to extend monitoring on workforce issues to include all protected characteristics on an annual basis.
4. 37% disagree in staff survey that there is sufficient communication between departments. This could be addressed with improved internal communication. An intranet site would greatly assist the sharing of equalities information such as publishing Corporate Messenger, Members Bulletins and Partnership newsletter.
5. Staff survey responses indicated some areas of improvement needed under customer focus e.g. customer satisfaction, awareness of complaints procedures and positive perception of the council.
6. Low response rate to the staff survey (28.5%) noted. Council could include incentives to improve response rates next time. Results not broken down by equality groups (disability, LGB and T etc) which can highlight marked differences in satisfaction.
7. Strategic HR objectives in People Strategy need to be more detailed, analytical and smarter particularly in relation to valuing diversity.
8. Equality Impact Assessments do not contain sufficient analytical information to support conclusions of no adverse impacts e.g. numbers mobile working or bullying and harassment cases. While figures may be low and may not be statistically relevant, they should still be referred to in order to be challenged. .
9. 9. The Council is attracting disabled applicants for jobs advertised but only 2/71 or 2.8% have been appointed since 2006. Additional support with interview feedback and reasonable adjustments at interview stage could improve future success rates.
10. .Front line staff struggled to remember Council's vision/statement on equality and diversity and could only recall a previous screen saver and stand up board referring to it. Message might need to be refreshed or made simpler to remember.

5. Examples of innovative projects and initiatives

The work done through the shared 'partnership' is commendable and a model of how to share resources targeting areas that may otherwise not receive funding in times of financial hardship.

The peer team was impressed with the "Melton Way" which is the proactive approach taken by Melton in targeting services to those families most in need by encouraging them to work with children centre staff and the Family Intervention Project to improve 'life chances' for families at most risk. The holistic way of treating vulnerable children and adults is very positive and has a real and lasting impact on outcomes.

The work carried out in Melton has been nationally recognised and cited as good practice in the independent report by Graham Allen 'Early Intervention' Next Steps.

Partnership working in general was seen as a real positive aspect and we saw numerous examples of really good practice and work such as the Family Intervention Plans and Joint Action Groups.

11. Signposting to areas of good practice

LGBT Issues

Monitoring sexual orientation - use the guidance provided by Stonewall when looking to monitor sexual orientation of your workforce. The Stonewall website has access to a range of useful guides for work in this area of equalities

www.stonewall.org.uk

Brighton and Hove Council is an "excellent" level authority and an exemplar on LGBT issues. See also London Borough of Redbridge who has been running joint equality training on LGBT awareness with colleagues at a neighbouring borough.

Claire Barnes, Children's Services Diversity Programme Manager, London Borough of Redbridge: Claire.Barnes@redbridge.gov.uk

The Equality CoP is now on the LGA Knowledge Hub (KHub). The KHub uses tagging to ensure that specific information can be searched across the platform, so that it is much easier to find good practice from colleagues: <https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/>

Chesterfield BC, Barrow-in-Furness BC, Oxford City and Hinckley and Bosworth BC are all strong 'achieving' district councils and contact with their Equality Officers is recommended

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