

Diagnostic report for Wiltshire Improvement Partnership re North Wiltshire District council and Equalities

This report provides a diagnostic assessment for North Wiltshire District Council (North Wiltshire/NWDC)) on equality and diversity including the level of the Equality standard reached.

A. The Purpose of the Project

This defined the task for Di Parkin, and her team: Graham Partridge and Caroline White (mapping) the IDEA Consultants as:

- An assessment of how authorities are currently performing in terms of the ESfLG
- Identification of action taken or underway to address weaknesses identified in inspection reports
- Identification of ongoing weaknesses in mainstreaming equality and diversity
- Identification of areas where joint working could be explored
- Target date for achievement of next level of Equality Standard, with action plan
- Mapping of Equality and Diversity Initiatives

(This interim report covers the first four items)

B Report structure

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1. The North Wiltshire demographic context

North Wiltshire is a district with a population of over 130,000 and covers 300 square miles of rural landscapes and expanding urban centres; the council offices are at Chippenham. It is composed of five community areas including rural villages, small towns and areas with a large military presence. 1.6% of the population at the last census were of Black and Minority ethnicity (BME) 13.6% have limiting long-term illness and 10.2% of the economically active are disabled

2. Review of Documentation and Equality

The specification of groupings of people facing potential discriminatory barriers varies from policy to policy.

For example the Equality and Diversity (E&D) policy itself includes "financial hardship" and "culture and religion"; the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) includes the military, but not Lesbian Gay and Transgender (LGBT).

This may not be wrong but it could well be inadvertent.

2.2 Race Equality Policy and Scheme

The scheme covers the requirements, however it is rather general, with the voices and concerns of black and minority ethnic people in the area not appearing strongly. It does however explain the robust process of impact assessments conducted by NWDC.

This policy covers the necessary requirements; it would benefit from my detail on the local minority ethnic communities. It says it will set up appropriate mechanisms to monitor and deal with Racial Harassment; but in defining Racial Harassment says that 'although it is not specifically mentioned in the Race Relations Act' But case law in the Courts has extended the notion of unlawful racial discrimination to include racial harassment. Case law extends the provision of the act.

2.3 Gender Equality Scheme

We sent detailed comments on this scheme (see appendix) the GES covered the requirements, but would be improved by some more in depth analysis, e.g. on the grade at which the glass ceiling is located at NWDC

2.4 Disability Equality Scheme

This scheme has a thorough action plan, including on impact assessment and shows good practice in particular in relation to Deaf and Hearing impaired people. It does not however show clearly how disabled people participated in drawing up the scheme.

2.5 Equality & Diversity Policy

The approach taken here is that Equality and Diversity is not only about equal opportunities but also about ensuring have a full appreciation and understanding of

the diverse communities so the wide range of services we deliver directly, or in partnership with others, are accessible, and delivered to a high standard to each and every sector within the community. " We also need to ensure that as one of the major employers in North Wiltshire, we are seen as an excellent role model, "

Section on Procurement

This is in some ways over strong 'contractors unwilling to have policies in place to promote equalities will not be awarded contracts' But it fails to mention that the positive duty to promote EO is a legal duty which devolves to contractor.

However the 13 pages Procurement Strategy only refers to the recent Race Relations Amendment Act, RRAA, not to Disability Discrimination as Amended 2005 and the Equality Act 2006 (Gender). Thus the statements need amending to refer also promoting gender and disability equality

2.6 Statement of Community Involvement

There are instances of exemplary best practice on consultation – at least on paper – set out in the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) produced as a statutory requirement of the Local Development Framework.

Such a document offers a sound and robust basis for its wider corporate use (e.g. in its methodologies for listening and dialogue; a practical resource listing relevant agencies, community groups and specialist equalities contacts).

If this document was produced internally, the staff expertise should be brought into the E&D group and used to improve the specification of NWDC.' general communications and consultation protocols; of produced externally, the same expertise could usefully be brought to bear to corporate customer interface, communications and consultation functions.

2.7 Corporate Plan and Community Strategy

The identification of "Customer Focus; E&D; and Partnership Working" as the three top priorities for the 2006/09 Corporate Plan, and the linking of these, ensures the right corporate context for effective progress on E&D issues.

However given the intrinsic linkage of these three agenda within the corporate plan, it is surprising that neither the 'Customer Focus' nor the 'Partnership Working' key actions lists include clearly identified E&D barriers and challenges, nor how these can be overcome by key actions.

The strength of the focus on the three corporate priorities also points to an apparent weak "fit" with the NWDC Community Strategy, under which the NWDC Corporate Plan is deemed to sit (p10).

E&D issues are invisible within the published version of the Community Strategy. Equalities expertise is not available at partnership level perspectives and, apart from the notable exception of the Youth Council; equalities perspectives are not formally represented.

According to the evaluation, the LSP operates with scant information of need, or on impact (para6.7); has poor communications with wider communities (5.10) and lacks focus on community involvement (7.4).

All these impact adversely on the “hard to reach communities”, in particular BME communities in the district, (8.8), and creates a barrier with them (8.9): yet these are the people with whom the E&D agenda primarily concerns itself. It is vital to address this because the LSP is stated to be the future “driver” of the NWDC Corporate Plan (p 39).

The need to review the Community Strategy following the evaluation, and in line with the requirements of the ‘Egan agenda’ for these to be reviewed and developed into “Sustainable Community Strategies” gives an invaluable and critical opportunity to align the LSP better with the E&D agenda and to develop common protocols for performance managing E&D in North Wiltshire.

This scope for synergy, and for “sinking or swimming together”, is further re-enforced by the recommendation in the LSP evaluation about the need for a “growth in output and throughput” using expert groups to bridge the equalities gap offers relevant additional capacity and opportunities to NWDC as the leading partner, if implemented within the LSP.

The LSP Action Plan identifies: “Remove barriers to access to create equality of opportunities for everyone” as a “Checklist issue”.

There is a two-way improvement issue here: NWDC has an opportunity, and a duty, to offer its more developed understanding and practice in E&D (Equality Standard for Local Government ES/FLG level 2) to the LSP which would, on appearances, struggle for level 1.; In return, as lead partner, NWDC could benefit from using consultation processes and performance management frameworks, if these become better developed, to bring additional capacity to play for its own requirements in these areas, through its role within the LSP.

This approach is consistent with the NWDC Audit Commission recommendations (March 06; see paras 36-37). Their Annual Letter – March 2006 stated NWDC was ‘failing to deliver what it promised’ on targets re race equality.

There is clear scope for better synergy and effectiveness on E&D issues by improving the fit with the LSP/Community Strategy, especially as capacity, skills and opportunities for dialogue with equalities groups are at such a premium within NWDC.

This link can be made more coherent and explicit as LSPs move towards new Sustainable Communities Strategies, which will require community cohesion, diversity and equalities to be intrinsic and more embedded.

4. Evidence of Commitment & Knowledge

4.1 General

From the diagnostic visit to NWDC on 4th April, the consultants found, among the staff we met, a nexus of staff that provided evidence of a healthy culture of professional commitment to the Equalities and Diversity (E&D) agenda within North Wilts.

Within public bodies, the culture of response to the E&D agenda can cover a wide range (e.g. from a resentful ‘compliance’ through to a values-led mission for social justice).

In NWDC, the embedded corporate culture and values of ‘Customer Focus’ (relates to CRM and ICE programmes) create a context within which individual staff with the

motivation to work to best practice standards had achieved self-awareness and clarity that working with a positive awareness of diversity, and eliminating discrimination against particular groupings was, in fact, a baseline standard of robust generic professional attitudes and practice.

When E&D work is part of a general standard of professionalism, in this way, the agenda becomes more accessible to colleagues who might otherwise dismiss its relevance (e.g. as 'political correctness'). This is a clear strength.

This ethos came through from almost all the staff we met.

3.2 Leadership: Officer and Members

There was a commitment at member level, with the E&D portfolio having moved from one councillor to another, which is evidence that, at member level, leadership on E&D issues was not completely dependent on a single individual's interest or commitment.

The current member champion for E&D had a particularly strong focus on Disability issues, informed by detailed knowledge and experience.

The cross-departmental internal equalities group was a real strength, as this enabled support, coordination and 'drive' on E&D, both within the wider corporate ethos of NWDC, but also in respect of specific actions which the group were able to discuss and follow up, albeit informally.

However members of the group reported inconsistencies and "patchiness" on E&D across the departments and functions of the authority.

To some extent the internal E&D group is "merely" an internal support group for staff who, to some degree, participate on a 'volunteer' basis.

In the context of the internal re-structuring of the NWDC local authority staff, it will be important to ensure that, as well formal responsibilities and accountability for E&D, there is a clear assignment of **leadership responsibility** across the authority at senior corporate management level.

At present, 'Equalities & Diversity' is not a named "Area of work" within the Corporate Plan, nor is a Lead Officer or Working group/cross-business arrangement identified (although these may exist in practice). This should be more explicit for one of the Corporate Plan's number one priorities; its omission is a weakness.

Many of the opportunities for enhancing effectiveness and for developing a "raised game" on E&D will depend on the E&D agenda being taken forward from a corporate and integrated interdepartmental perspective (and not, for example, merely left to operate as an "add-on" to HR functions).

This is especially important when resources, skills and capacity are at a premium, and when performance in this area may not be seen as a relevant priority for all staff and business functions.

Evidence that NWDC already has some capacity for understanding E&D as a critical component of a 'step change' in the corporate culture can be seen in the way that the 'Respect for People' and the Disability Awareness training programmes have both been rolled out on an authority-wide basis.

Resistance by some elected members to Equalities training is a weakness, partly ameliorated by E&D becoming part of the induction programme for all new councillors.

3.3 Staff views and knowledge on Equalities

These have been assessed from interviews, a focus group, and the use of documents to deduce further observations.

The basic template used to review this area was a simplified SWOT framework using the questions:

- (a) What do you see as the strengths of N Wilts on E&D?
- (b) How do you perceive some of the challenges facing NWDC on E&D?
- (c) If you could bring forward one key change, what would it be?

The staff attitudes throughout the day were cooperative, open and non-defensive. It is important that NWDC continues to encourage this organisational 'atmosphere', as it actively enables staff to talk and learn without fear of making, or revealing, inadvertent mistakes, and thus it ensures people continue to be open and positive about learning to do better, which is a core outcome required at this stage.

3.4 Strengths

North Wiltshire have installed:

- ❖ Browsealoud software to convert text to speech
- ❖ Been awarded 'See it Right' accessible website logo

The internal E&D group meets regularly and has enthusiastic members.

The active profiling of their work through the E&D newsletter is a commendable example of NWDC's commitment to "doing more than the minimum", although the distribution (e.g. should it go to all staff? Is electronic or hard copy better?), use and impact should probably be reviewed, including gathering some feedback from its readers.

All staff seemed to have some awareness of the Equalities Impact Assessments (EIAs), except the temporary communications team.

The scope of material examined in the internal E&D group was wide, varied across nearly all equalities areas, and was discussed in appropriate depth, with pertinent questions asked and issues raised.

The openness of the internal E&D group to additional participants is strength, as this draws out and builds on positive motivations and enthusiasm.

Awareness of Gypsy and traveller issues, and of migrant workers, enhanced people's awareness of the relevance of the race equality agenda within a rural setting.

The role of the Youth Involvement Development Officer is an example of where NWDC has invested in enhanced capacity to reach, and engage, a specific equalities grouping (i.e. young people) with clearly evidenced results (outputs). Also, because professional youth work practice has equalities and diversity "curriculum" at its core, the participation of this postholder enhances the E&D group with particular skills and perspectives.

Participants in the focus group held an intelligent discussion on the "pros and cons" of NWDC having a dedicated Equalities Officer: such a post would give much needed expertise as well as capacity to coordinate and resource this work, but on the other hand could detract from mainstreaming and embedding E&D actions within departmental service plans and performance managed actions.

Practical activities, consultation and actions on disabilities were more clearly evidenced than other equality areas.

The website seemed to use best practice in terms of accessibility (Browsealoud; See It Right), and the translated function was excellent, though it was not clear that these were the languages needed, or whether they were used by N Wilts residents to access the site.

3.5 Challenges

There was limited awareness of examples of the practical use of EIAs to change practice or service models and to directly integrate actions into business plans

There was a general lack of specific knowledge of, or relationship of dialogue with, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups.

Given this gap, of which many people were self-aware, it was even more noticeable that valuable material like the "Buffer zone" report, commissioned through the Community Safety Partnership, was not widely known about.

The internal E&D group, whilst it is an effective support resource for those staff who are pro-actively committed to E&D and who have volunteered to 'step up to the plate' on E&D issues, does not have the power or role to push through any actions. This highlights the need to ensure a clearly authoritative role within the most senior corporate management team as an explicit, clearly identifiable element within the restructuring of NWDC staffing.

As a related issue, it is notable that E&D is not identified as an "Area of Work" in the accountability Table for delivering the Corporate Plan (p.11).

As is often the case in rural authorities, there is weak history of pro-active work on E&D issues, which argues for investment in some additional expertise, at least for the short to medium term.

Effective dialogue with members of specific equalities groupings seems tenuous and/or merely formal in some areas (e.g. around BME groups where the Wiltshire Race Equality Council (WREC) often seems to be the only bridge.

In this context however we commend the work that has taken place given the votes (200) for far right parties, including 91 for the BNP in one ward in the May 2007 elections, indicating the challenges faced.

The dialogue links directly to the quality of consultation. There is no clear, consistent, or adequately resourced, process of dialogue with equalities groups (although the work with the Youth Council is something of an exception to this, and gives evidence that something can be done to tackle such gaps.

In a context where NWDC relies on the effectiveness of its Customer Focused approach (Charter Mark recently re-awarded; first priority of the Corporate Plan), and where public contact is increasingly delivered corporately through a single team, there is a clear weakness, and risk, where the operating model and delivery of this function is not itself appropriately skilled, resourced and driven by a clear E&D agenda. A health check and action plan to supplement a further EIA of this function should be undertaken with a view to ensuring appropriate resources and skills are present, with staff training to bring in best practice models from elsewhere.

The above similarly and equally applies to the communications function, where the staffing situation is in transition.

This function needs an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA), or a new EIA, because of the reliance on this unit, or function, for dissemination and well as for consultation. This should be undertaken urgently to inform the re-configuration and staffing of this team, currently underway, as best practice in E&D is core to its mission, performance and effectiveness. Particularly if this team is to be a/the main route for consultation and dialogue with, and feedback from, residents, there needs to be access to appropriate expertise and resources, and a fitting skill set across the staff team, to ensure that the most "distant" voices" do not end up even further marginalized.

It is essential that when the Communications Team is finally re-configured (from its current interim status, where staff from other roles are providing temporary cover) that this team has the best possible practice standards, adequate resources and an appropriate remit, to help NWDC become more effective in its dialogue with equalities groups, and with individuals who face often entrenched discriminatory barriers of which service providers are unaware.

An approach to "treat everyone as individuals" (a phrase that appears in several EIAs) does not obviate the need to aware of - and to take pro-active measures to overcome - discriminatory barriers that are endemic to society, and that are often exacerbated in a rural setting.

The outreach research work commissioned through the Community Safety Partnership gives another illustration of the potential for and value of, active synergy and coordination with the NWDC Partnerships.

At present the full value of these links are not being realised.

On a more immediate and practical level, the list of achievements for 2005/06 under the E&D heading of the Corporate Plan shows evidence that most equalities areas are now showing benefit from the recent investment in E&D activities and actions.

4. Performance Management, Monitoring and Scrutiny

“How well are we doing?” “How do we know how well we are doing?” “ How hard a look do we take at how well we are doing?”

NWDC’ capacity to ask these questions of the impact of its E&D work will become more important the higher the level of ESfLG. As Level 2 in ESfLG is essentially self-assessed N Wilts is already engaging with these questions.

Some good practice on equalities performance measures, and the creating the evidence and tools for assessment are becoming embedded in the workings of routine or mainstream systems.

A good example is the new reporting template for NWDC Council and Committees, which elevates E&D issues to stand alongside finance, legal, and HR considerations into the standard coversheet for all such reports.

This shows some implementation of 5.1 in the formal E&D Policy regarding the requirement that E&D needs integrating down through from the highest level- Corporate Plan, Business Area Plans, Service Team Plans and Individual Work Plans

In the time available to access documentation, it is impossible to give an opinion “from the outside” as to how far this process can be evidenced in action; how far it is informed and driven in practice by EIAs; and the detail in which Service Team Plans demonstrate that they actively address specific E&D issues.

The degree to which NWDC “mainstream” management and performance review systems are adapted to provide robust evidence of the E&D policy at work and the individual equality schemes in action is therefore a critical determinant of future success. This will only happen consistently and comprehensively if practical E&D issues are identified within the “core business “ and mission of each level, function and staff unit, and translated into performance measures, down to individual personal appraisals wherever possible.

One action fulfilled and verified is better than six aspirational targets that cannot be met or checked.

The HR team may need to review performance assessment (PA) templates, ensure personal development plans (PDPs) identify E&D learning needs, and offer any additional training necessary to support the supervision and management of staff - at all levels - in an aspect of work in which they may lack experience and/or feel exposed to censure.

Whatever the quality and effectiveness of the systems in use, there needs to be regular, sound linkages and information sharing between the internal E&D group and the senior manager responsible for E&D, if in day-to day terms the E&D group are to continue their positive work as the “driver” and coordinating group for E&D actions, activity, and follow-up ideas. (This does happen to a degree a present, but it could be strengthened.)

Some EIAs clearly evidence conscientious application by some staff (e.g. Customer Contact/Access Strategy), although without better opportunities for “outside” or additional input it is likely that some basics will continue to be missed.

Other EIAs seem more perfunctory (e.g. Empty Homes Strategy).

In several EIAs the self assessment that everyone is treated as individuals seems to be used to obviate the need to drill down to see if barriers or additional needs/disadvantages exist for some equality groupings.

It is not clear to what extent issues identified are followed through to appear in work plans, whether change is achieved, and whether outcomes are monitored are evaluated. (E.g. Young people's issues in Access strategy; use of plain English; uptake of translated languages; front line worker training as per Bufferzone report; analysis of satisfaction surveys; use of alternative formats for correspondence).

Some EIAs and reports have flagged up a general capacity and resourcing issue for NWDC re BME engagement and impact. It is not clear whether this has gone anywhere for decision, albeit a negative one.

Again it is more worthwhile to make a decision to one thing that is followed through and evaluated for impact, rather than generating comprehensive lists of needs and options that go nowhere.

Although the use of EIAs is becoming embedded, there is scope to support their usefulness by further training, 'critical friend' type scrutiny, outside equalities perspectives and/or best practice input on the most important ones, and challenging weak performance. Such support is necessary to help staff "raise their game" in using EIAs, especially for the ones likely to be most critical for equality groupings in regard to the NWDC core business and service models, such as the functioning of the reception area, the use of the website, consultation methodologies, etc.

(Examples where issues appear not to be getting picked up include the need for child friendly facilities in the main reception area, clear signposting of Translation & Interpreting protocols, grants only available through very local community plans excluding more scattered equalities groupings, etc.)

There is also scope to improve tracking systems that can make it easier to report on progress re specific issues that have been identified in EIAs.

The monitoring forms used to assess satisfaction with the telephone service do not help identify any lack of usage or lack of satisfaction by BME users and/or people whose first language is not English. This may be true of other monitoring templates.

5 Level of Equality Standard

Despite the above comments, we commend the work that NWDC have done on equality impact assessments (a key building block for Level two). A list of the 54 completed assessments is published on the Internet, together with the completed assessments and a programme for future work. A gap analysis was produced which identified some questions and areas where further progress was needed to achieve level two of the Equality Standard.

The council responded by clarifying some matters and undertaking further work or commitments. There remain a few areas where more consolidation work is needed as NWDC moves forward to Level three:

- Need a statement re requirements for partners to promote equalities
- Procurement: More work may be needed (Jointly with other councils as part of Phase two of WIP)
- Review harassment policies & ID required from Trans gender people

- Work on equal pay reviews is, as elsewhere nationally, halted pending Union agreements
- Need to include question on monitoring in the impact assessment guidance

However we can now say that the authority is at **Level Two** of the Equality Standard.

Conclusion

North Wiltshire has a well organised and structured approach to equality and diversity, with is following through on the impact assessment process with actions included in business plans and a robust training process. In some areas the approach is not fully included, particularly in partnership working. An approach to “treat everyone as individuals” does not obviate the need to aware of - and to take pro-active measures to overcome - discriminatory barriers that are endemic to society, and that are often exacerbated in a rural setting.

Appendix One

Comment on North Wilts initial gender scheme by Di Parkin (IdeA)

1. In the section on demography; it states that 14% of all households in the district do not have access to a car; it would be helpful to say what % of women do not have access to a car. Nationally 16% of the population do not have access to a car, the figure for women nationally is 22%. The national figures also show that 81% of men have a driving licence, as do only 63% of women). **Even if The scheme do not have the actual figures you can extrapolate from this that perhaps around 20% may not have access to a car in N Wilts.**

This is of high importance for gender equality schemes, because it indicates that women are more reliant on public transport.

There is some confusion in the way some of the figures are presented.

2. The scheme says that the council "will achieve level 2 of ESfLG but March 31st, presumably, more correctly it should say " "is on target to..."
3. The summary statement on procurement, in the GES is weak, saying that the council "encourages contractors to observe" policy on equality, rather than a stronger statement which is made elsewhere
4. EIA The scheme says that there is a commitment to EIAs and that they have been carried out. A list of what has been done and what is to be done would be useful perhaps?
5. The scheme report on the staff survey and that more women than men felt that they had flexible working hours and a good work life balance. This is clearly important and we commend your statement that men should be encouraged to take these opportunities
6. Harassment. It would be useful to include the data on what the breakdown of reports of harassment is by gender?
7. Comments and complaints. As well as noting if there are any complaints about discrimination on the grounds of gender, The scheme need to cross tabulate the (more likely) possibility that men or women may be more or less likely to complain or be dissatisfied about some services?
8. Carers. The scheme doesn't say if men or women are equally likely to take up this policy
9. Where is the glass ceiling in N Wilts? The scheme talk about gender stereotyping in manual grades and about the top 5% of earners. What is happening in the middle? Where is the flip over between predominantly female and predominantly male occupation of posts? Why is it that N Wilts interestingly employs more men than is common in local government?