LGA Equality Peer Challenge

Slough Borough Council

10th – 12th September 2024

Feedback report

1. Executive summary

We were very pleased to be invited by Slough Borough Council (SBC) to provide an external challenge by LGA peers to help the Council take forward its work on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

We found an organisation whose leadership (officers and Members) are committed to advancing equality for staff and residents, even if this is sometimes viewed through the narrow lens of Race, ethnicity and religion. Given the diversity of the population of Slough, it is not surprising that Race is a key issue for the organisation and peers were asked to explore the extent to which the organisation is confident talking about race, racism and racial inequality. Race was the subject most often discussed by those interviewed but we found a lack of knowledge and confidence amongst Members, senior officers and staff to talk about other key inequalities or issues such as disability, LGBTQ+ and intersectionality.

Members are keen to have a role in operationalising EDI on the front line. The Leader has a good knowledge of the different communities in the borough and the portfolio holder is confident of the commitment the Council has to equalities. The new Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) shows commitment to both tackling deep-seated inequalities and supporting staff through the changes at SBC. We did hear the view expressed by some members and staff that because senior managers are not from Slough they don't know or understand Slough and are not listening to the community.

Equalities needs to be central to the work of the Council's Improvement Recovery Board. A clearer and more consistent corporate narrative about equalities generally would also be helpful. For example, the corporate plan has three equality commitments but there are six equality objectives. The six new equality objectives were developed and published after the Council was written to by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) about non-compliance with the Equality Duty. We do understand that the starting point for the development of equality objectives was the Corporate Plan, which identified 3 overarching equality commitments and that the final adopted equality objectives were then extended to 6 after public consultation. There is as yet limited awareness of these objectives amongst leaders and staff and no underpinning delivery plans or governance is in place to ensure

progress is made against them. This is already acknowledged as a gap, that needed to be addressed.

Closer alignment and clarity is required between those responsible for workforce equalities and those tackling known differential equality outcomes in services. The policy team need to be upskilled on equalities issues to bolster capacity at the centre (supported by the EDI lead and the Directors of Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement and HR and Workforce Transformation). There needs to be a stronger focus on service inequalities in the other Directorates, particularly around equality outcomes.

The Council has a new Director of Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement with overall responsibility for equality diversity and inclusion. She is working closely with the new Director of HR and Workforce Transformation who has responsibility for workforce equality. Both recognise that the Council has yet to put in place some basic foundations and measures to improve equality for staff and residents. Understandably the focus in the past three years has been on the financial difficulties and on the process of recovery including filling senior management posts.

We found some real "green shoots" of change, with staff and partners wanting to be part of the work to deliver a more inclusive Slough. Organisations that we spoke to in the voluntary sector were particularly keen to work more closely with the Council. There was also some really good practice around service user engagement in children social care services; Adult Social Care (ASC) , Adult Social Care Commissioning and Education which could serve as models for other services. We understand that ASC are already sharing some good practices with colleagues across the council.

The significant organisational and financial challenges which the Council is still facing are continuing to have an adverse effect on the feeling of wellbeing amongst staff. Many staff that we spoke to portrayed feelings of low morale amongst themselves and their colleagues. They reported feeling unseen and often unheard by senior managers and in need of considerable emotional support and bolstering from council leaders. It is staff's perception that the most recent recruitment round has resulted in limited diversity at the most senior levels of the Council and a feeling amongst staff lower down the organisation that recruitment isn't inclusive or fair for Slough staff.

There is a lack of trust in leadership with staff expressing low psychological safety to speak out to challenge discrimination. This lack of trust is also affecting the organisation's ability to capture staff equality data. More positively, the three staff equality networks are well attended and energised and want to be part of the work to move Slough forward. The new Our People Forum is also a good opportunity to involve more staff in taking the organisation forward.

Since the Community Engagement Directorate was restructured and effectively dismantled in 2021 the approach to community engagement and community cohesion has been somewhat underdeveloped and should form part of the Council's new target operating model. The organisation has recognised this and created the new role of Director of Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement to develop a systematic approach to community engagement at the strategic centre of the organisation, and to build trust and confidence between the Council and communities as an integral part of improvement and recovery.

Data is patchy on community profiles and service users, which hampers a consistent understanding about the communities served by the Council, particularly new and emerging communities. This in turn affects service design, equality impact assessments (EQIAs) and an understanding of how services are being received by different communities within the borough. The Education department does have good data sets and a clear understanding of which children from different ethnic groups are underperforming and why.

Organisations in the Council for Voluntary Services (CVC) in Slough don't feel treated as equal partners by the Council and want to engage at a more strategic level.

Context

Slough Borough Council (SBC) is still in a period of recovery and transformation with continuing government intervention. In July 2021, the council issued a Section 114 notice and it has been under government direction, with appointed MHCLG Commissioners in place, since December 2021. Children's social care services are subject to a separate statutory Direction, from the Department for Education, with SEND also having its own Direction. Children's social care services in Slough are managed by Slough Children First (SCF), a company established in 2015 and wholly

owned by Slough Borough Council since 2021.

Financial challenges at the Council are ongoing. As with other councils, the demand on public services is increasing, and the needs of residents are becoming more complex. In response the Council has been developing a new operating model to enable it to come up with viable and sustainable ways of meeting residents' needs, as one of the smallest unitary authorities in England. The new target operating model has also given the Council the opportunity to rethink how it works and how it tackles inequality, eliminates discrimination and bias and builds community relations.

In Autumn 2023 there was a senior leadership restructure intended to address issues the commissioners felt were not being progressed quickly enough. The posts of Director of Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement and Director of HR and Workforce Transformation were created at this time, both with explicit leadership briefs around equality. Commissioners reported in January 2024 that the council was still "organisationally fragile", had high levels of staff turnover, low staff morale and issues around recruitment and retention. The Council's Chief Executive and s151 Officer were both appointed on an interim basis in April 2024. At the time of the Peer Challenge there were still over 300 interim and agency staff out of an establishment of around 1300. In the recent past, Resident surveys showed low levels of satisfaction with services and low levels of confidence in the leadership of the Council.

This equalities peer review should be seen in the context of this evolving situation at SBC. The Council want to ensure that the whole organisation, staff at every level, partners, members and corporate leadership develop a shared understanding of the challenges from an equality perspective. It wants to start to make a positive impact on workforce and resident outcomes as part of the new operating model, as well as understanding how to mitigate any negative impacts. It is for this reason that the peer review team were asked to focus on Diverse and Engaged Workforce and Responsive Services and Customer Care, two of the themes of the LGA's Equality Framework for Local Government.

2. Key Recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the feedback section of the report. The following are the peer team's **key** recommendations to the council. We have divided these into "Quick Wins" - three to six months delivery and Longer Term" recommendations. Many of the "Quick Win" recommendations are intended to help provide a more nurturing and supportive environment for staff in the face of the ongoing organisational financial instability and uncertainty and to boost morale and increase trust in senior leaders.

Quick Wins

Workforce Actions

- Start to celebrate the diversity of staff and residents – consider symbolically flying flags, an events calendar, Black history month, South Asian Heritage month, Holocaust Day etc. intranet articles and diverse imagery in council buildings. There is some good practice e.g. SCF has been celebrating diversity through marking key events such as Black History Month, for example with a drop-in lunch that involved all staff.

- Provide some additional trauma support for staff that is culturally appropriate over and above the Employee Assistance Programme.

- Build into the proposed operating model some clear commitments on inclusive recruitment e.g. diverse panels; no all-white short lists; recruit internally first where possible.

- Provide better security and support/training for reception staff at Observatory House so that they can deal with visitors who may present with challenging circumstances. (We understand that consideration is being given to the future of this building so this recommendation may only be an interim measure)

- Review absence and flexible working policies and how these are put into practice to ensure that SBC can be more inclusive in its' approach to agreeing time off for religious dates, recognising the diversity of the borough and of staff. One idea could be to initiate a flexible leave policy which would allow staff to swap public holiday leave for days more relevant to their

culture/religion. This would support staff capacity issues and encourage forward planning throughout the year.

- Encourage senior managers to walk the floor and meet more staff especially outside the main council building. We understand that this is happening but staff also want to be personally acknowledged more and engaged with as individuals.

- Establish a regular hybrid meeting for senior manager to engage the workforce, provide information and to enable staff to showcase achievements.

- Have the Chief Executive attend staff network meetings.

- Re-establish having a different senior leader sponsoring each staff network

Service Actions

- Share The Slough Insights pack with elected members and staff widely as it is a really good resource.

- Develop a delivery plan for the EDI objectives with realistic timeframes and accountability.

- Create a "Who's Who" directory for partners. (This would also benefit staff).

- Encourage senior managers to take opportunities to visit and learn about different communities in the borough.

Longer Term Recommendations

Workforce Actions

- Confirm the permanence of the leadership team to provide stability for the organisation.

- Develop a programme of member EDI training and consult Group Leaders and backbenchers about topics they want included.

- Invest in the development of the Intranet to provide more content on EDI and signpost staff to forums etc.

- Set out an approach to staff progression including work shadowing, coaching mentoring that will enable more staff from diverse backgrounds to progress. Consider the feasibility of reverse mentoring for senior staff.

- Provide accessibility passports to help disabled staff move more easily between roles and directorates.

Service Actions

- Establish a corporate equalities board chaired by either the Chief Executive or the Leader to oversee the delivery of equality objectives and other delivery plans. 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.

- Broaden the assurance of Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) by possibly involving the staff networks.

- Establish a strategic partnership/compact with the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) and other partners to enable more honest conversations to happen.

- Ensure all communications are in plain English (and then add appropriate translation tools)

- Ensure that there are varied engagement platforms for different communities.

- Establish the needs of the communities and then determine the required services (possibly via external delivery) to reduce long term spend.

- Establish a clear vision for community engagement through the target operating model where members have a clear leadership role as custodians of their place.

- Formalise the community feedback or insights that come in via different services, how is that captured, acted on and understood across the council?

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:

Shammi Jalota – Head of Equalities and Partnerships Essex County Council

Joanna Brown – Director of People and Inclusion, London Borough of Camden

Serena Simon – Director of Communities, LB Westminster

Councillor Nazia Rehman- Wigan Borough Council

Councillor Simon Minas-Bound – Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

Gill Elliott – LGA Associate

3.2.   Scope and focus

The Council asked the peer team to focus on two of the key themes of the LGA's Equality Framework for Local Government:

- Service delivery and customer care
- Diverse and engaged workforce

The Council also asked the peer team to consider how it could best start to deliver against its new EDI objectives and gain real impact.

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 Slough, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from around 30 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to around 80 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.   Diverse and Engaged Workforce

Although there is a huge amount to be done around workforce EDI, there are some positive features. The Council's Diversity and Inclusion Lead, now based in Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement is long serving and highly experienced on workforce and EDI issues. Equality impact assessments are done for all new HR policies and for service provision. Staff are passionate about Slough residents and have lots of experience and organisational knowledge that they want to share. Many staff have long service in the Council (26% of staff have more than 10 years' service) Over a third live within the borough. Staff feel invested in the Council and the borough. They want to have a reason to be hopeful and celebrate Slough.

There are three equality staff networks covering Women, Disability and Race (REACH). SCF staff are also active members of the wider staff Employee Networks, working with SBC staff to celebrate diversity through events (Black History Month, diversity lunches, International Women's Day etc) and to support the wider promotion of inclusion in the organisation. The Chairs and members of the staff equality networks are energised and want to do more. Network Chairs would like to have a regular slot at Corporate Leadership Team meetings. With the recent turnover of senior managers, the system of each network having a senior manager sponsor has been lost and needs to be re-established. Network Chairs believe there may be scope for an LGBTQ+ staff network in the future. Although the staff networks have a

small annual budget for projects last year some of it wasn't spent due to a lack of administrative support.

Staff we spoke to feel positive and hopeful about the new appointments at the senior level and think the new appointees are 'saying the right things'. However, they are also fearful that senior managers will not stay in post so they still feel unsettled. One described the Council as continuing to be "a bit wobbly". We could see that a few senior leaders are starting to share their personal stories and staff are keen to see more of this 'human side' of leadership.

There are some good examples of co-production/participation of staff networks in recruitment of senior managers. Equality staff network Chairs were involved in the appointment of the Director of HR and Workforce Transformation and the Director of Adult Social Care (along with the ASC co-production network members) They all feel very positive about this process and would like to see it systemised across the Council.

The new Director of HR and Workforce Transformation has a clear vision for improving workforce equality. There is an emerging draft People Strategy and a draft People Plan which will address many of the basic developments that are needed in HR. Delivery of new policies is lengthy however due to the need for sign off by the Employment Committee.

 The People Strategy has 4 pillars of activity:

- Building Brilliant Basics – around being data driven and evidence led

- Empowering Leadership

- Enabling learning and development

- A healthy workplace and Inclusive culture

A new recruitment Policy is being developed which will include success profiles and diverse recruitment panels. Recruitment and selection training will be mandatory for those involved in these processes. Training for line managers around HR policies and procedures will be rolled out over the next eighteen months and there is a good appetite amongst managers for this type of training. There is an acceptance that the Council needs to succession plan and grow its own staff including more apprentices and interns.

It will be important for HR to share this strategy and plan with staff once it is agreed so that staff can see how the Council plans to improve. HR staff also need to be upskilled to deliver these new initiatives. Staff at lower levels perceive that they are being asked to do multiple jobs because of staff cuts and that they are being set up to fail on this basis and this makes it hard for them to apply for more senior jobs when they come up. Investment in staff at senior level exacerbates the feeling of unfairness. Staff also feel there is no appetite for 'grow your own' staff via trainees, or progression. They believe that they are being discouraged from making job applications and that in the Council you get jobs based on 'who you know'.

Many staff we engaged with said they did not feel listened to or heard. Black Asian and other ethnic staff told us they feel leaders talk 'in code' and this is a barrier to their progression. They also talk about a lack of diversity at senior levels. Black, Asian and other ethnic staff referenced experiencing microaggressions from colleagues and service users and expressed fears about calling out bad behaviours. They also talked about a lack of confidentiality when concerns have been raised in the past.

The Council has low levels of return around staff equality data with the exception of gender. The Agresso HR system is clunky and not easy to use. Managers lack the skills to use the system and emerging data is often inaccurate. There is ongoing work to cleanse data and provide managers with some training to make better use of the system.

In relation to the low levels of disclosure around disability some staff were not aware that they were disabled. Others feared being discriminated against particularly if they have a visible disability. Staff understand that the Council wants to be data driven and have improved levels of staff equality data. However, they have low levels of trust in how this data will be used or managed. They also feel that they know what the problem areas are and don't want the Council to wait for perfect data to take action.

4.2.   Responsive Services and Customer Care
There is a clear focus on healthy life expectancy which should be linked to the

corporate plan. The EQIA framework could also be revamped to make health central to all policies.

We heard about some really good Public Health initiatives including:

• how a multi-generational health campaign around vaccinations for the elders in the family provided an opportunity to assess younger members.

• Healthy Workplace support for companies which is a good opportunity to generate income

• Launching a genetic test to identify infant genetic anomalies proactively

Whilst the Public Health work does identify cohorts with inequalities, there was limited evaluation built into key commissioned public health contracts around equality. There is an initiative to develop an evaluation framework and we would support this. We also heard about a Health and Wellbeing Board strategy and associated plans to track delivery against known equality differential, though analysis is patchy so far.

SCF staff clearly appreciate the rich population diversity of the borough and through the delivery of children's social care services, provide opportunities to support children and families from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. This has been highlighted in recent Ofsted reports on a range of services.

There are pockets of good co-production within the Council but the good practice is inconsistent. The Adult Social Care Co-production board, is a brilliant example of partnership working with the voluntary sector. Within Education, SEND Head Teachers are being included in co-design of services more than ever before. SCF are seeking to co-produce and engage on aspects of their work with care experienced young people e.g. through "question time" and the recent launch of their corporate parenting strategy.

The ASC commissioning Team is helping other departments in the Council such as Housing and Public Health with effective ways to engage communities. They have a wide range of forums established for people with learning disabilities, older people, Carers, mental health, the latest being the Autism Steering Group. Residents are involved in tender panels and recruitment panels for senior staff in the Directorate.

Within ASC EQIAs are integrated throughout the commissioning cycle and co-

production is integral to much of the work. E.g. the Advocacy Project where at the tender presentation stage ASC tried to diversify the audience.

The One Slough community fund is well received. This is a pot of funding that is allocated to community groups to advance equalities and promote health and independence and is commissioned through Adult Services, in conjunction with partners and the co-production network. This type of intervention compliments the council's equalities work.

We heard about good use of data for helping to address debt collection. Debt is a big problem in Slough. The top 500 households owe close to £4m. There is a plan in place and a streamlined way to make contact and agree payment terms which is based on demographic profiling.

Differential access and outcomes around equalities and service provision needs more focus. Data collection and data maturity across services is underdeveloped. Options and choices around how to improve this needs a CLT conversation.

There is no clear and consistent understanding of communities and their needs across the council. There is no single platform for data to be stored or accessed. Consequently, actions to tackle inequalities are not always as effective as they could be.

The Slough Insights pack is useful e.g. for EQIAs but many directors and managers were unaware of it. It could also be supplemented by intelligence from Slough based staff. Ward profile information needs to be shared with all members so they know their communities better.

We heard from several sources that people cannot get appointments at the local hubs for weeks, so they come to Observatory House and may often sleep in the reception area until they are removed or individuals from within the council seek to assist. There does not seem to be a policy on dealing with this issue but rather it is reliant on the individual staff members to take action.

We were told by CVS organisations and others that SBC is not providing a satisfactory service to marginalised communities such as asylum seekers. Other communities who may not be being well served include the Romanian community (particularly around education) and other new arrivals. If SBC is to meet their

objective of supporting the most vulnerable and reducing long term spend it will have to deliver through others. It has to start with what the community needs and what is required to solve it. For example, how can Observatory House and the local hubs be more receptive to the community? We also heard that the housing service is not adequately responding to the needs of a resident with autism, who was unable to home swap to a home more suited to their needs.

The Council could do a lot more around representation to the council by enabling different communication platforms to engage with varied and growing communities. The council has limited ability to meet communities where they are located or face to face- not everyone wants or can cope with digital communication. A new Resident and Engagement Group has been set up to discuss this topic. Although still at the scoping stage it is a positive development. SCF proactively seeks to reach diverse communities as foster carers, for example by engaging with local LGBTQ+ events like Burnham Pride.

There is a need to formalise the community feedback or insights that come in via different services - how is that captured and acted on or understood across the council? We were told by staff and CVS organisations that the council holds on to stereotypes from many years ago e.g.' "Pakistani women stay in the home". This viewpoint indicates a lack of up- to- date cultural competency in the organisation which could be addressed via awareness training.

CVS organisations we spoke to do not feel that the Council is responsive to those most in need. One said "The Council is just not present". There are many CVS forums with Council attendance but none of a strategic nature. As a result, the sector does not understand the situation the council is in - what it can and can't deliver and therefore cannot adequately respond to requests (without financial support) to do more. CVS organisations don't feel they are equal partners with the Council. Some we spoke to said they are called to meetings with the Council expecting "free work" from them.

With the exception of ASC commissioning, procurement within the Council does not strongly reference EDI. A corporate contracts team has just been set up and a commissioning guide is being launched. The Council wants to commission locally. Its' procurement strategy makes reference to social value, but many managers don't

understand the concept or how it is applied. For example, there is a tool for evaluating and weighting social value in a tender bid on the national social value portal which managers can use. However, social value will have to be approached more meaningfully to target the most deprived.

4.3 EDI Objectives

There is a lack of clarity around EDI priorities in the Council. The six new equality objectives are not fully aligned to the corporate performance report. The Corporate Plan has three EDI commitments which were established before the objectives.

Managers and staff were largely unaware of the equality objectives and had not given any thought as to how their services could contribute to them. The objectives need to be communicated to all staff and managers.

A clear plan and process is needed for how equality objectives can be integrated into service plans across the organisation with progress towards them performance managed by key decision makers. The Council should be clear about the evaluation and success measures for the objectives.

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, Clare Hudson, Principal Adviser for the South East, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Clare is available to discuss any further support the council requires.
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