

Equalities and Diversity

Devon County Council

Audit 2008-2009

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Introduction and background

- 1 Devon is the third largest county in the country and one of the most sparsely populated. Devon is also becoming more diverse – the black and minority ethnic population doubled between 1991 and 2001 but still accounted for only just over one per cent of the total resident population. More recent data is likely to show a further increase and visitors to the county are from a range of backgrounds. The number of Traveller families and people from Eastern European countries has increased. The county is a popular retirement destination and 42 per cent of the population are aged 50+ compared with the national average of 34 per cent. Some parts of Devon are among the 20 per cent most deprived in the country and there is an 18 year gap in life expectancy between the healthiest areas of Devon and the least healthy.
- 2 Devon is a popular holiday destination for people attracted by a beautiful landscape and beaches. Tourism generates over £2 billion per year. Devon also has one of the lowest average household incomes of any shire county. There is a high proportion of low-paid and low-skilled work. An estimated 35,500 children live in households in receipt of welfare benefits and approximately 28,400 live in wards that are among the 25 per cent most deprived in England. With limited job prospects and rising house prices, increasing numbers of young people leave the county to live and work elsewhere.
- 3 A successful approach to equalities and diversity is important for all councils because it results in:
 - better services and information which are accessible to everyone;
 - a higher quality of life for all and more understanding of different lifestyles between communities;
 - freedom from discrimination and disadvantage for local people and for staff;
 - recognition that people need to be treated differently in order to be treated fairly;
 - a mixed workforce which reflects the local population, respects and values difference; and
 - better understanding of customer needs and aspirations
- 4 Equalities and diversity is an important element of all Audit Commission assessment activity. For example the Use of Resources Value for Money assessment looks at how performance is improving particularly for those who are made vulnerable by their circumstances. This equalities work informs the Audit Commission's Direction of Travel assessment.

Audit approach

- 5 This work focused on how the Council is improving its approach to diversity, equalities and community cohesion. It comprised a desk based review and analysis of key documents followed by a range of interviews with staff and councillors. The following elements were included:
- Community cohesion - the Council's approach to generating better understanding between different groups of people;
 - Community engagement - how the Council works with partners to understand community needs and residents' experiences of council services;
 - Internal processes such as equality impact assessments and how they help to improve the Council's delivery of services to local people;
 - User experience - the quality of service residents actually receive; and
 - Performance management - how the Council knows whether it is improving services especially for people who are most marginalised or disadvantaged.
- 6 We have shared our detailed findings with the Council and responded to additional information. This unpublished report is a brief summary of our main findings.

Main conclusions

Overall conclusion

- 7** The Council is making good progress in improving its corporate approach to equalities and diversity. It is showing a strong trend of improvement supported by good leadership and high calibre staff involved in equalities work. It has recently achieved level three of the equality standard following rigorous self assessment and peer review. Policies and processes are comprehensive but the Council is not yet able to evidence improvements for residents across all equality strands and across all services. Equality impact assessments are developing but are not yet of a consistently high quality. There are numerous examples of good partnership working leading to improved quality of life for residents who are in a minority or who have physical or sensory impairments and the Council demonstrates good leadership. There are good examples of community engagement but this is not always co-ordinated across the Council and with partners. The Council does not receive and act on enough real time ongoing systematic feedback from customers to improve services. The quality and reliability of data is limiting the effectiveness of managing performance in some areas of equalities. Good initiatives are promoting community cohesion and the Council is working on bringing these together to provide a more strategic approach.

Community cohesion

- 8** The Council has a range of initiatives which support communities in getting on well together. For example, the Council works well with gypsies and travellers, parish councils and other agencies to improve understanding between settled and traveller communities. The Council works with other agencies to improve understanding of issues facing new migrant communities and provide appropriate services for them. This includes significant pieces of research and provision of services such as welcome packs to ensure migrant workers can access the services they need. The youth parliament and the senior council help to improve inter generational understanding.

- 9 Rapidly changing demographics in the county are an ongoing challenge to community cohesion. The BME population is rapidly expanding and support structures in the area are underdeveloped and uncoordinated. The Council has worked with partners to reduce the incidence and improve reporting of hate crime through the local delivery plan. The total number of hate crime incidents, including racial, homophobic and those relating to disability, increased from 905 in 2006/7 to 915 in 2007/8, possibly as a result of increased trust. Educational outcomes for BME children are good and some families living in largely white communities are thriving and enjoying a good quality of life while others experience isolation or discrimination. The Council is aware of the complexity of these issues and the need to avoid seeing the BME population as one homogenous group. It supports the Racial Equality Council which has limited capacity, has forged strong links with Islamic leaders and is committed to sustaining strong links with Muslim communities. Strategic intelligence about the nature of changing populations is improving significantly.
- 10 The Council is developing its strategic approach to cohesion. Although there are good initiatives across the county, the Council does not yet have a comprehensive strategic approach to cohesion to ensure that the aims of the Council and its partners are clear, that there are no gaps in provision, and to provide clear leadership about the importance of fostering greater understanding between different communities. Work is progressing in this area.

Community engagement

- 11 The Council recognises it needs to improve its co-ordination of consultation and engagement across the Council and with partners. It does not currently have an overarching community engagement and empowerment strategy. It is mapping activity across the Council, with a view to having such a strategy in place by April 2009. The Council is aware of the need for partners to work together to avoid duplication of consultation with minority groups. Co-ordination is a challenge for a large council where many initiatives are taking place but is necessary in order to avoid duplication of effort and cynicism from people in minority communities who are likely to be targeted by all public bodies.
- 12 The Council uses a wide range of methods to communicate with residents. It is continuing to improve its approach to engagement for example by using plain English to communicate with customers and making good use of the website to connect with customers. The senior council is a relatively new mechanism for connecting with older residents and engages well with the Council although the Council will need to ensure that as it grows it continues to reflect all communities.
- 13 The Council uses an equality reference group to provide independent scrutiny and ideas and includes representatives from older people, BME, LGBT, disability groups and young people. Governance and structural arrangements for the equality strategy group are being reviewed to strengthen representation and scrutiny arrangements.

Main conclusions

- 14 The Council's work on some equality strands appears slow. The Council plans to carry out consultation based research on discrimination faced by younger, older, LGBT, and faith related inequalities by April 2011 and does not deliver the migrant worker multi-agency action plan until 2011. It plans to implement guidance on Asylum Seekers and Refugees by 2010. However this programme is based on evidence from consultation with external stakeholders and the Council is aiming to prioritise its work into a manageable and achievable plan.
- 15 The Council is not yet making the best use of ongoing real time feedback about the quality of services. For example, the customer service centre responds well to complaints but at the moment it does not hold enough information about the quality of service received, the reasons why it was good or bad, and what needs to change. This information on how different users experience services could help the Council to improve incrementally and avoid more serious complaints. The Council recognises this and plans to implement effective and consistent monitoring procedures.

Internal processes

- 16 The Council has made good progress in developing policies and internal processes. There is a comprehensive equality policy and written documents cover all key equality strands. Each directorate has completed an equality action plan and roles and responsibilities are clearly defined with both a member and officer champion and an equality and customer service champion in each directorate. Employment policies are generally good but the Council could improve the ways in which it encourages applications from minority groups. Despite positive initiatives such as the graduate and apprentice scheme which has resulted in improved retention of young people, the Council recognises it has not yet attracted and retained a diverse workforce. Councillors do not yet reflect the diverse make up of the local community but work is underway through the 'Take Part' pathfinder initiative to attract people to participate in local government who might not normally come forward.
- 17 A good range of equalities training is available but is not sufficiently taken up. Employees generally receive encouragement and support to attend but training and communications generally do not consistently reach all front line staff who may not be users of email but are in close contact with residents and users of services. The Council is recommending a new approach to diversity training for managers from early 2009. Some Councillors are very aware and committed to the equalities agenda but training is not taken up by all Councillors so they understand individually and collectively where equality fits in to service improvement, leadership and performance management.
- 18 The Council has recently achieved level 3 of the Equality Standard following rigorous self assessment and peer challenge. Equality Impact Needs Assessments are carried out on new policies and strategies. However the quality of these is variable, they are not yet consistently leading to improved outcomes and there is little analysis of the way certain communities are disadvantaged or disadvantaged in employment or in services. Customer service awards are now called customer service and equality awards and are increasing motivation and understanding. The Council is working on integrating equalities into the sustainable procurement strategy.

- 19** Equalities processes and systems are sometimes too bureaucratic. The length and complicated nature of some documents and forms means that they are not supporting effective knowledge sharing and decision making. Simplification and streamlining processes where possible is likely to result in better understanding and more buy in from staff.
- 20** The culture of the Council is helping to support a diverse workforce. Staff networks exist for BME and LGBT employees and there is a deaf awareness group but no disabled staff network. The apprenticeship scheme is developing and well regarded. Work life balance and flexi time are supported. Team managers in some service areas are very supportive of staff with physical or sight impairments and ensure their practical needs are met. While steps are taken to ensure ICT supports people with specific needs such as sight impairments, more ICT support is needed to ensure they can carry out their work effectively.

User experience

- 21** The Council communicates in plain English and has a website that is easy to use. There are a range of ICT facilities for users with impairments. For example, it is easy to set the text size to a large font, information is available in sign language, the contrast can be changed and there is a facility to listen to a page. The contact centre allows people to contact the Council in a range of different ways. However, the strong progress the Council has made in terms of policy and written procedures is not yet consistently reflected in service delivery on the ground.
- 22** The Council works well in partnership to deliver positive outcomes for local people. It has demonstrated good leadership resulting in the recent signing of a Joint partnership declaration on Equality. There are numerous examples of this across the Council and a few of these include:
- Hikmat, a day centre for elderly Muslim and Chinese citizens;
 - joint commissioning with parents of and children with special needs;
 - enabling more people to claim their benefits entitlement;
 - help for children with English as a second language;
 - anti bullying strategy;
 - work with children who have carer responsibilities; and
 - improved access for people with hearing and sight impairments.
- 23** The Council recognises it needs a better range of quality information, outlined in paragraph 15, to help with gauging the quality of user experience, especially for people who are marginalised or in a minority.

Performance management

- 24** The Council recognises it needs to improve its data collection and analysis. It accepts the quality and quantity of data is limiting the effectiveness of measuring improvement for all Devon's diverse citizens. Data about the customer and the workforce has improved but is not yet fully reliable and does not provide the level of detailed information and analysis to support effective measurement of improvement. For example data quality problems prevent a realistic assessment of workforce diversity, data is not used effectively to inform equality impact assessments, and the Council does not have enough information about the extent of different forms of bullying in schools, including homophobic bullying.
- 25** Service standards are clearly set out on the website but equality objectives and targets have not been developed within each service area for race, gender, sexual orientation, belief and disability. The actions in Fair for All are not consistently SMART but the Council expects project plans to identify specific actions and milestones. Targets are not yet stretching or challenging enough to deal with experiences of discrimination and disadvantage but the Council is working on making targets both realistic and challenging enough to meet its ambitions in key priority areas.
- 26** The Council is not yet profiling performance information on all the equality strands although it plans to collect data on age, disability, gender and race. This means it cannot yet measure improvement for vulnerable people. Recommendations from equality impact assessments are not linked to the performance management system. Some councillors are involved in leading, shaping and monitoring progress in equalities but others are not. Appraisal systems support staff to put corporate aims relating to customer service and equalities into practice by including equality as a core competency to be measured. However a quarter of the Council's workforce has not undertaken an appraisal.

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