

Diversity Peer Challenge

South Lakes Housing

20th – 21st October 2010

Report

1. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of a Diversity Peer Challenge organised by the Local Government Improvement and Development and carried out by its trained peers. The report satisfies the requirements of the Equality Framework for Local Government for an external assessment at the Achieving level. The Peer Challenge is designed to validate an organisation's own self-assessment at the Achieving Level by considering documentary evidence and by carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees and other stakeholders.

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

- Knowing your communities and equality mapping
- Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment
- Community engagement and satisfaction
- Responsive services and customer care
- A modern and diverse workforce

The Peer Challenge is not an inspection; rather it offers an external assessment of an organisation's own judgement of itself against the Equality Framework benchmark, by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equality/diversity agenda in their own organisation.

Peers were:

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| Cllr Cec Tallack, Milton Keynes Council |
| Kirsty Hopkins, Newcastle City Council |
| Simon Lee, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council |
| Andrew Nembhard, formerly of Liverpool City Council |

The team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by the SLH and SLDC 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:

South Lakes Housing has completed a satisfactory self-assessment against the criteria for the Achieving level of the Equality Framework for Local Government.

South Lakes Housing (SLH) has demonstrated strong leadership on equalities with a Board who are totally committed to the agenda. It shows clear leadership locally and in the housing sector by engaging fully with the public sector equalities duties despite no legal compelling reason to do so as they are a small organisation with fewer than 150 staff.

SLH is very strong across all areas of the Framework with regards to disability and age. It has a positive working relationship and good reputation with its tenants, partners and key stakeholders and this should be commended as all groups spoke very highly of SLH and its commitment to equality & diversity.

However there are some significant gaps both in data and in identifying and achieving outcomes around race, gender, sexual orientation and religion and belief. SLH should seek to rectify this as a matter of priority in order to consolidate its position at the “Achieving” level of the EFLG and also prior to progressing onto the “Excellent” level.

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

1. Improve data collection and monitoring in all areas of the business where relevant for race, sexual orientation and religion/ belief. This includes exploring the reasons why the tenant population does not reflect the wider population and where that is the case taking action to redress this.
2. Ensure that there are explicit equality actions within the delivery plan and managers’ service plans. These should be across all areas of inequality (see above) and should be focused on achieving outcomes for existing and potential tenants.
3. SLH should seek to improve the diversity of its workforce to more reflect the wider population of South Lakes and not just the existing tenant population. Where possible, SLH could use the work placements from AWAZ and Lindeth College to do this when opportunities arise, and encourage people from diverse backgrounds, such as former work placements, to apply for jobs when they arise.
4. Significant improvements are needed to the way Equality Impact Assessment (EqIAs) are conducted as there are very few actions arising out of the process. Service managers need to own the process and sign off the final product and use the outcomes to improve services for underrepresented groups.

2. South Lakes Housing made the following observations upon the impact the peer challenge has had:

"We found the peer review process an extremely challenging and valuable experience. The process helped to develop ways to capture good examples of staff going above and beyond to help customers. There were also areas where we thought we were performing well but needed further guidance. The assessment report was welcomed by tenants too who recognised that it was their landlord that IDeA was talking about. We were grateful for the expertise provided by the housing specialist who provided us with best practice which we have since taken on board. Above all, the experience fits well with the reform agenda, with peer reviews giving practical tips to organisations which do not cost a lot of money".

3. Detailed findings

3.1 Knowing your communities and equality mapping

Strengths:

- SLH recently mapped their tenant profile by equality group (age, disability, gender and race). As a result, they can identify specific needs particularly for disabled tenants, for example using text messaging as the preferred method of communication for deaf tenants.
- The Housing Visitor Support Team now captures information about tenants' sexual orientation. This will help to develop an understanding of the LGB tenant profile.
- Data is disaggregated by age, disability, gender, and race. This has included boosting the recent Place Survey to obtain more data on disability and race.
- SLH have service level agreements with the Equality Consortium of Cumbria Disability Network, Awaz, and OutREACH Cumbria in order to improve both its knowledge of different equality issues, and its services for the diverse communities in South Lakeland (see section 4 "Examples of innovative projects and initiatives")

Areas for consideration:

- SLH needs to encourage tenants to provide data on sexual orientation, gender (including transgender) and religion / belief. Staff need to be confident about asking the questions and be clear why this information is collected.
- The tenant profile does not reflect the local BME population. We recommend this should be investigated. It is unclear if equality issues are monitored on applications, waiting lists and allocations so there is no clarity about why tenants do not reflect the local population.
- SLH should seek a better understanding of potential tenants, not just existing tenants and those on the waiting list. Staff should take action to ensure there are no barriers (cultural, economic, linguistic etc) that are deterring people from different communities applying for housing with SLH. More use could be made of the good working relationship with its voluntary sector partners to help identify these barriers and address them. SLH should be confident about using information from these partners to improve services.

3.2. Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

Strengths:

- SLH is demonstrating clear leadership locally and in the housing sector by engaging fully with the public sector equalities duties despite no legal compelling reason to do so as they are a small organisation with fewer than 150 staff. They have an equality scheme, conduct equality impact assessments and address concerns that their tenants have, for example changes to décor and door designs in communal areas.
- SLH was the first housing provider organisation in Cumbria to enter into an SLA with the Equalities Consortium (see section 4 "Examples of innovative projects and initiatives") A number of housing providers have subsequently joined the contract.
- SLH has demonstrated good performance since inception in 2004, which was confirmed by audit commission in 2008, which rated it as "Good Service" and "Excellent Prospects for Improvement"

- There are good governance arrangements. The management board is tenant-led. Service delivery is consistently high across all areas of responsibility.
- South Lakeland District Council has received good feedback on SLH's performance from tenants on key deliverables such as adaptations, sheltered housing, and meeting the needs of older people.
- SLH has helped to resolve community cohesion issues between social housing tenants with young families and owner-occupiers in Ulverston, by facilitating a discussion between the two parties.

Areas for consideration:

- There needs to be a more direct link between the equalities information it collects (e.g. from the Equalities Consortium) and the design, delivery and monitoring of services. This is strong in some areas (age and disability) than in others (sexual orientation, gender and religion and belief).
- When looking at future service developments, SLH should build equality considerations for all areas of inequality into the process. This would enable it to begin to address the needs of potential tenants as well as existing ones.

3.3 Community engagement and satisfaction

Strengths:

- SLH has well developed community engagement structures with existing tenants. These include informal engagement opportunities such as family fun days, annual tenant participation roadshow and mystery shopping, as well as more formal structures such as the tenants' committee and the tenants' involvement and community engagement team. This has increased the involvement of young people and improved inter-generational relations.
- Tenants feel that they are able to influence decision-making mechanisms through the Service Improvement Groups (SIGs) (see section 3.4 "Responsive Services and customer care" and section 4 "Examples of innovative projects and initiatives")
- SLH has developed a database of tenants who would like to be involved in engagement. This includes details about the individual (address, age, gender, disability, religion and belief) and their area of interest. This has led to more representative consultation and involvement, especially with young people. This is now included in welcome meetings to capture the information from new tenants.
- SLH was involved in the work with SLDC to provide multi-use games areas (MUGAs) in Kendal and Ulverston. Through increased engagement with young people in the design of these areas, anti-social behaviour and youth disorder has been significantly reduced.

Areas for consideration:

- Improve the tenant information and consultation databases to ensure that it includes information on sexual orientation and religion and belief.
- Increase the diversity of the tenants SLH regularly engages with, for example at the SIGs. The improved database should help with this.
- Improve engagement amongst the rural communities and other communities that may not currently be tenants. This could help to diversify the tenant population to more reflect the wider population in South Lakes.

3.4 Responsive services and customer care

Strengths:

- There are several examples of improved equality outcomes. These include the customer services flagging system is used to inform staff of the specific needs of customers. Tenants can text with repair requests and two staff are trained in BSL to improve communication with deaf people. All staff are trained to be responsive to tenants' needs (including repairs staff when visiting properties to conduct repairs).
- The EIA group review policies and provides input into the completion of EIAs. These are then referred to the Service Improvement Groups to ensure that service user views are incorporated
- Tenants, staff and partners felt confident that SLH takes customer views into account when delivering services. The Service Improvement Groups are an important part of this (see section 4 "Examples of innovative projects and initiatives"). Informal comments are also acted on, for example, a visually impaired person commented that using similar colours for walls and doorways is not accessible. Walls are now to be painted in a different colour.
- Specific services have adapted to meet various customer needs, for example the Repairs and Maintenance service now have specifically timed appointments, operatives have a password so that the tenant knows who is attending to carry out the work, and an online ordering system. The Aids and Adaptations service has a large budget with a rapid response. There is a strong ethos of keeping people in their homes wherever possible, and maintaining individual privacy and dignity. There is a 92% satisfaction rating with the Sheltered Housing scheme, where residents have daily support and activities from the scheme manager. Broadband has been installed in all sheltered housing and training on internet use has been provided; this is especially good for those in the rural areas for communicating in general and accessing services online.
- There is a lot of work being done to ensure tenants in rural areas are visited and communicated with. This includes home visits, area officers remaining in place, regular surgeries, and road shows. SLH is part of the regional choice based letting system, Cumbria Choice. A newsletter was sent to all 3187 tenants and 247 leaseholders explaining that SLH wanted their opinions about what they would like to see for the future of their homes and services. A series of drop in sessions were held in 22 locations, with over 240 people attending. A free telephone line was installed for anyone wishing to speak to an officer. Officers also knocked on doors of those who had not responded to questionnaires to try to ensure contact with every tenant.
- Equality issues are built into contract documentation and the contractors' "welcome pack", including the equality impact assessment template and sample equality policy for smaller contractors to adopt. Tenants are routinely asked for their feedback on contractors' performance (such as installing electric doors and aids and adaptations). SLH Contractors are provided with the details of any specific needs of tenants before attending to carry out repairs or adaptation; this includes visual impairments, mobility issues or language needs.
- There is a good understanding of need in terms of providing support with rent arrears.
- "Customers [tenants] are always central to what we do". Housing officers visit all tenants every other year to ensure that they are satisfied with the service they get.
- Plans are in place to provide online access to rent accounts with a payment facility. This will be especially ideal for tenants in rural areas.

- Ulverston Partnership Group targets ‘Problem Youth’, e.g. through coaching sessions by the police and the development of ‘young Cumbria’. There has been a reduction in anti-social behaviour as a result.

Areas for consideration:

- The EIA process needs to be clearer and a more direct link made to service areas. Currently the EIA Group and SIGs complete the EIAs rather than service areas. It is important that EIAs are an integral part of service management and improvement and we therefore suggest that service managers take a more prominent role. This could be in conducting EIAs, but also signing them off and developing actions to address their findings. This would increase ownership of the EIA process and actions.
- There needs to be a clearer link between EIAs and achieving equality outcomes. SLH should ensure that there is a ‘golden thread’ between equality monitoring, impact assessments, objectives and achieving equality outcomes. There is currently little evidence to show direct links between inequalities identified in EIAs and service improvements to address these.

3.5 A modern and diverse workforce

Strengths:

- The workforce reflects the tenant population.
- The workforce is well-informed and feels listened to. Staff are kept up to date by the intranet, staff briefings and regular team meetings. They feed suggestions into problem solving and addressing concerns.
- SLH is a supportive employer. There is a staff mentoring scheme and work-life-balance policies. These include flexible working and a phased return to work after long-term sick leave. Support is also offered by a free independent financial adviser – “Money Made Clear” – who is available during working hours. Staff feel it is a caring organisation to work for. This is reflected in the fact that there is a low staff turnover.
- There are strong industrial relations. Unions are involved in changes and EIAs. Concerns are raised with unions and the wider staff group and in Chief Executive briefings. SLH and Unison work jointly with SLDC to improve the skills of its workforce. Staff are allowed time to work on some of this (e.g. attaining NVQs) with minimal disruption to services. This has led to an increase in staff confidence.
- SLH is very supportive of training the wider population as well as existing staff. It offers apprenticeships and work placements to young people across a variety of roles, including building trades, finance, housing management and ICT. See ‘Examples of Innovative projects’ section for more detail.

Areas for consideration:

- Although the workforce is representative of the current tenant population, it is less representative of the wider diverse community in South Lakeland. In particular, there are few BME staff. SLH should investigate why this may be, and what can be done about it. Action should be taken to ensure that there are no barriers to employment. However, this will be affected by low staff turnover.
- There is little or no information on the sexual orientation or religion / belief representation of the workforce. SLH should develop its staff to understand the value of collecting and using this information and help them to feel comfortable asking relevant questions and responding to them.

4. Examples of innovative projects and initiatives

- Ulverston Partnership Group – reduced anti-social behaviour in the area by making contact with local youth via “Young Cumbria” for coaching sessions run by the Police.
- SLH has both an apprenticeship scheme and a work placement scheme. Young people can be apprentices in a variety of roles (including building trades, finance, housing management and ICT). During the summer, there are work placements for school age children. Work placements are also offered to people who have recently arrived in the country. Working with AWAZ, SLH are able to provide people with a placement that will give them a reference which helps them to find long-term employment.
- Student placements are also provided to adults with learning difficulties at Lindeth College. Participating students have a mentor at SLH, who often stays in touch long after the student has left Lindeth College. This builds up confidence, skills and knowledge for people with learning difficulties who are often marginalised in employment.
- Service Improvement Groups (SIGs) have been set up in each of the locations that SLH operates in. They provide tenants a regular opportunity to give feedback and offer suggestions to improve services. They are also part of the EIA process.

5. Signposting to areas of good practice from Local Government Improvement and Development

- Stonewall’s “What’s it got to do with you?’ leaflet. This is attached to email and available from the website:
http://www.stonewall.org.uk/what_we_do/2583.asp#Equal_Opportunities
- Salix Homes have several excellent examples of processes that SLH may benefit from exploring. The report from the Diversity Peer Challenge at Salix Homes is attached to this email. Of particular note is the training that is provided to staff on the need to collect information about sexual orientation and religion / belief.

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