

# Bristol City Council

## LGA Remote Peer Support Equality Peer Challenge

## Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and lockdown began in March 2020, the LGA suspended the physical delivery of all peer challenge work. To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA rapidly refocused their support and adopted a new remote approach.

Bristol City Council commissioned the LGA to carry out an Equality Peer Challenge against its Equality Framework for Local Government. The Framework was updated in 2020 and the Council agreed to pilot a new style peer challenge which no longer makes awards of Excellent or Achieving. This peer challenge seeks to provide a peer perspective of the council's achievement and progress to date and areas for further development, utilising the LGA's Equality Framework to do so. It considers where the council is now and how it can make further progress. Since 2018 the Council has had two other external reviews of its internal Equality and Inclusion practices. The recommendation from these two reviews have informed much of the work done by the council on equality and inclusion issues since.

The Equality Framework has four areas of performance. They are:

- Understanding and working with your communities
- Leadership and organisational commitment
- Responsive services and customer care
- A diverse and engaged workforce

The Peer Challenge is not an inspection; rather it offers an external assessment by critical friends who are subject experts and have experience of delivering an equality/diversity agenda in their own councils.

The peers on the team were:

- Councillor Johnson Situ – London Borough of Southwark
- Suwinder Bains - Head of Equalities and Cohesion, Birmingham City Council
- Dr Irena Hergottova – Community, Equality and Cohesion Manager - Walsall Borough Council
- John Cowings – Senior Policy Officer – Equalities - Derbyshire County Council
- Gill Elliott – Review Manager - Local Government Association
- Kathryn Trant – Review Manager -Local Government Association
- Kirsty Human – LGA Adviser and shadow peer

The peer team were provided with background documents and spent two days talking remotely to a range of stakeholders including staff, managers, Members, and partners from the third sector and other public sector partners. The team would like to thank everybody that they met and spoke to during the process for their time and contributions.

Our initial findings were presented to the Council on 30th March 2021. This report builds upon that feedback and contains more detail on the findings and the team's recommendations.

## 1. Executive Summary

Over the last four years Bristol City Council has made significant progress in taking forward its equality agenda for both the organisation and the city. The Council itself has been on a considerable financial and cultural improvement journey since 2016 when the current Mayor was elected. It has undergone two external equality reviews and an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge since 2018 and this is testament to its willingness to invite external scrutiny on the way it does things. Everyone the peer team spoke to during the Challenge said that with regards to Equality and Inclusion (E&I) the Council was now a very different organisation compared to 2016. People described it as being far more engaged on equality and inclusion issues, less complacent and more willing to listen and respond to the different voices both within the council and in the community. The Council is clearly still on this transformational journey. There is more to be done and it will take time to really see the outcomes from the many initiatives and programmes that have been put in place, which now need to be fully co-ordinated and seen through.

The Mayor and Deputy Mayor responsible for Communities, Equalities & Public Health are clearly driving the improvement of equality and inclusion within the Council itself and across the City of Bristol. They are highly committed, passionate and articulate about their ambition and vision for Bristol. This commitment is recognised by partners in the public and third sector who paid tribute to the Mayor and Deputy Mayor for taking such a strong stance. Other Cabinet Members are equality champions and there is a willingness amongst Members generally for more effective cross party working on this issue. Members also said that they would welcome more training and awareness about E&I issues including Equality Impact assessments (EQIAs).

The Council's senior management team also provide strong leadership on the equality and inclusion agenda. The Chief Executive and Directors understand the issues. They are committed and leading the culture change that is underway. Expert support is provided by the Equality and Inclusion (E&I) team and by Human Resources (HR), Organisational Development and Communications. The E&I team was strengthened and re-established in 2018. Its' expertise is valued by the organisation and partners, and it is clearly making a difference to the success of delivering the agenda by helping managers and staff to have conversations about equality and inclusion issues. The team has also been instrumental in producing a number of equality toolkits for the organisation and revising the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) process.

We found a clear pathway or "Golden Thread" from the seventeen high level United Nations Sustainable Development Goals<sup>(1)</sup> to the commitments in the One City Plan, the four Mayoral Commissions on Women, Race, Disability and History, and internally to the Corporate Strategy; E&I Policy and Strategy and through to the annual corporate Business Plan and Service Equality Action Plans. Furthermore, a governance structure for E&I has been put in place to ensure that systemic change is achieved. These are strong building blocks for establishing change, but understandably it will take time for this to become embedded into the culture of the organisation. The Mayoral Commissions for women and race were established several years ago, but the Mayoral Commissions for History and Disability are both very new, with the latter still being formed. Making the Commissions more 'joined up' in future will help to ensure that all voices can be heard and that issues of intersectionality can be addressed better.

(1) <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

A 'One City' approach has been spearheaded by the Council to bring many of the public, voluntary, community, academic and private sector companies in Bristol on board to tackle E&I issues and many more things besides. A city-wide Equality Charter was created which has been signed by 200 organisations in the city as a public declaration to support E&I. We heard mixed responses from partners and others in terms of the Charter's value. Some said that it had raised the bar for equality & inclusion in the city, but this had led to a mismatch between the Charter's aspirations and the experience of large organisations. Several partners commented that it should be more directly linked to actions with a requirement for organisations to report back on what they have done or achieved. Annual events were planned to share learning but were postponed during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Council's response to the pandemic and the vaccination programme is testament to its commitment to work with partners in the NHS and across the community. The Council recognised early on the possible disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and people with a learning disability. It commissioned the Black South West Network to undertake further research and the results helped to inform the Council's response to the pandemic. The Council also led on the development of a region-wide Equality Impact Assessment for the Local Resilience Forum's Strategic Recovery Group. Whilst we did not have the opportunity to speak to a wide range of voluntary and community organisations during the challenge, those we did speak to said, that in general, they would like to engage earlier with the Council when it comes to decisions being made.

The Council is determined to embed equality and inclusion throughout the organisation. Service Equality Action Plans are a good initiative, designed to ensure that all services consider equality and inclusion in service development and delivery as well as in their workforce (this is the second year of the council using Service Equality Action Plans). We heard several times about "pockets of good practice" which suggests that not all services are consistently doing this as well as they could. It will be important going forward to consider how this good practice can be shared across the organisation. The central gathering of data and analytics in the Council was impressive. Data can be easily layered and used to consider intersectionality issues. We felt that data needs to be made more available to the rest of the organisation and better use made of it. An example of this is Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs), which are key to good decision making, warning of the potential for adverse impacts and maximising the benefits of initiatives. However, the EQIAs that we saw were of variable quality with a lack of data analysis and action plans. The Council had redesigned its process for EQIAs at the time of the peer challenge and is due to launch this alongside new training in the coming months.

The Council understood that it needed to address workforce issues to be effective in changing the culture of the organisation. It has made a concerted effort to deal with historic grievance cases and has reduced the disproportionate involvement of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff and those who are disabled in disciplinary and grievance procedures. The latest staff survey in 2020 contained some very positive feedback on cultural changes. However, we spoke to some staff from equality groups who felt that change needed to happen at a faster pace. Some spoke of micro-aggression from fellow staff and service users. The Council has made strides to provide safe spaces and support for staff and the success of these should be kept under review. Resources like the Manager's toolkit for talking about racism and the Recruitment and Selection Impact Assessment Toolkit are good but their impact and how widely they are used needs to be evaluated so that the Council can make any necessary changes to their content or the way it supports managers to use them.

Workforce representation is clearly a key priority for the Council and progress on this is being supported by a range of measures and initiatives such as Reverse Mentoring; a Recruitment and Selection Assessment Toolkit; diverse recruitment and selection panellists and the requirement for recruitment agencies to produce diverse shortlists. It is important that this work continues as it will take time to deliver results. It may be helpful for the Council to consider the use of aspirational employment targets for all under-represented groups in senior posts to complement its Diverse Voices scheme, which provides shadowing and coaching opportunities for aspiring Directors from under-represented groups. Increasing the number of young employees in the organisation is a priority for the Council. This is understandable given the low numbers of young employees, but it is also important for the Council to recognise the potential for the progression of existing staff from protected characteristics and to ensure that this can happen. Whilst initiatives like talent spotting people with potential can be useful, processes must be transparent.

There has been a significant investment by the Council in its staff led equality groups, which have seen an increase in staff awareness of their presence from 65% in 2019 to 72% in 2020. They are clearly making a positive contribution to the Council in terms of policy development and support for their members. Members of the groups said that they were a safe space for them to be able to hold the Council to account. The Council's initiative around procurement and the Black Pound was suggested by the embRace staff group. Going forward the Council should keep the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in the groups under consideration to ensure that they continue to operate as effectively as possible.

## 2. Recommendations

The following recommendations are the most significant from the peer team. However, throughout the report there are other suggestions for improvement. We recognise that the Council is on an improvement journey. It has addressed and is still addressing recommendations from earlier equality reviews. Our recommendations seek to reinforce the importance of the work that is already ongoing to embed E&I into the organisation.

### Leadership and Organisational Commitment

1. Review Member training on E&I generally to include awareness of EQIAs and the importance of equality and inclusion issues in their community leadership role. Members from all parties want to get more involved in equality and inclusion issues. Currently they rely heavily on officers' knowledge and input. More training for Members would enable them to play a greater role in ensuring that they know what to look for in EQIAs before decisions are taken and how to better use their role as community leaders to further the equality and inclusion agenda.
2. Review the Equality Charter with partners to ensure a connection between its aims and actions. The Equality Charter is currently a statement of commitment to equality and inclusion with each signatory responsible for developing and monitoring its own actions. We think that now that the Charter has had time to "bed in" it would now be timely to review its impact and consider whether it needs to include a stronger link between aims and actions by signatories and an element of monitoring outcomes. This could be an annual celebration of achievement rather than a holding to account.

## Understanding and working with your communities

3. Keep under review the mechanisms for the different Mayoral Commissions to work better together. The Women's and the Race Commissions have been operating for several years. The History Commission was set up in 2020 and the Disability Commission has yet to be fully launched. The Commissions recognise that they are still largely "working in silos", despite the fact that together they span a great deal of intersectionality. Finding ways for them to work better together will deliver on outcomes far more efficiently.

## Responsive Services and Customer Care

4. Continue the work to embed and improve the quality and consistency of EQIAs. The EQIAs that we saw were of variable quality and lacked analysis of data or adequate action plans. We know that the template and process is under review. This should be completed and training rolled out to support its use.

## Diverse and engaged workforce

5. Continue to work with the Staff Led Groups to fine tune their participation. We appreciate that a great deal of effort has gone into making these groups work as well as possible. This dialogue will need to be ongoing as projects are completed and commitments and capacity of those involved change.
6. Agree workforce representation targets for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and other protected characteristics even if these are aspirational. Currently the only targets in the performance framework are for the number of women in the top 5% of Council posts. Aspirational targets would establish a baseline and give the organisation "something to aim for" and measure progress against.

## 3. Detailed findings

### 3.1 Leadership and Organisational Commitment

The Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Chief Executive provide strong leadership on E&I and have rightfully gained a reputation for their personal commitment. The Chief Executive chairs the Strategic Race Equality Leaders Group with city partners and the Mayor and Deputy Mayor are active locally, nationally and internationally on equality & inclusion related campaigns. The Mayor has lobbied at a national level to give asylum seekers the right to work. The Deputy Mayor is the Cabinet Member for Communities, Equalities & Public Health. She has driven the commitment from the current Council administration to work better with communities. Membership of the Cabinet is diverse with some members having an equalities champion role. Bristol was the first Council in England to appoint a Cabinet Member with responsibility for women. There is a willingness amongst Members for cross party working to broaden their knowledge and they would welcome training and awareness about E&I issues including EQIAs. Both the Mayor and Deputy Mayor were active in the media on debates around Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. The Council set up the Bristol

Race Equality COVID-19 Steering Group to tackle systemic health inequalities and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

The Council's senior managers demonstrated knowledge, commitment and understanding of equality and inclusion issues in Bristol - they want to help deliver positive change and improvement. The Chief Executive chairs the Council's quarterly Strategic E&I Leaders Group meeting. He is also a mentor for staff from under-represented groups and the 'Stepping Up' programme. Directors were passionate and well informed about issues of discrimination and deprivation in the city. They all spoke of a real shift in recent years from a Council that was complacent about long standing inequalities in parts of Bristol to one that is now listening to the communities' experiences, owning the agenda and taking steps to deliver on it. Heads of Service are leading the equality and inclusion agenda in their services. They are required to produce service equality action plans. All Directorates have an Equality & Inclusion Meeting, with representation from across the directorate, equality and inclusion champions and Staff Led Groups. Heads of Service have supported cross service steering groups. One such group became a consultation group for the Council's Covid-19 Risk Assessment toolkit.

The Council has a refreshed Equality and Inclusion Policy and Strategy 2018-2023, with unanimous cross-party support, and a new Advancing E&I Action Plan linked to E&I action plans within services. Its five equality objectives are linked to the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The Council has expanded the groups that are included in its equality and inclusion policy and strategy to include the nine protected characteristics in the Public Sector Equality Duty as well as people in care, refugees and migrants, people with caring responsibilities and socio-economic disadvantage.

The Mayor is driving his vision for Bristol to be a City of Hope with "no-one left behind" and "where everyone is included in its success". This is enshrined in the overall Vision set out in the Council's Corporate Strategy. The Council set up and funded the City Office, to help deliver this goal and others around issues such as climate change and the economy. The Council recognises that the partnerships and other boards that it works with need to be more diverse at a senior level and work is being done to ensure all partners sign up to E&I as part of the One City approach. One City has started to have success with projects involving partners e.g. Period Poverty and a project to fund an additional 100 beds for the homeless. In 2020 Bristol became a Living Wage City and the Council a Living Wage employer.

As part of One City, an Equality Charter has been signed by 200 organisations as a public declaration to support E&I. The Charter led to the development of the Bristol Equality Network with over 160 members who come together to share information and good practice. We heard mixed responses from partners and others in terms of the Charter's value with the view expressed that the charter itself was nothing more than a piece of paper. Signatories of the Charter are responsible for taking forward their own equality actions and policies. Several organisations commented that it should be more directly linked to actions with a requirement for organisations to report back on what they have done or achieved.

Partners praised Bristol City Council leaders for their commitment and visibility on Equality and Inclusion in the city. Mayoral Commissions on Women, Race, Disability and History have been set up, although those on Disability and History are very new. Making the commissions more joined up in future will help to ensure that all voices can be heard and that issues of intersectionality can be addressed better. LGBTQ+ issues are generally less advanced in the Council and it is working on improving its place in the Stonewall Workplace Index. We feel that it could engage better with voluntary groups in the city to get wider views into the debate about the issues faced by the LGBTQ+ community.

The Council's work with partners around the Covid-19 response and vaccinations has been impressive including joint funding with the NHS of a post in the Public Health team and dedicated support within the Equality and Inclusion team. The Strategic Leaders Group enabled a single public sector response to be launched in 2020 with each collecting and sharing data on personal protective equipment (PPE), deaths, staff sickness, patients etc. The Council is viewed as a national leader of E&I best practice. It significantly contributed to the Department of Health and Social Care's Race Equality Standard and the Ministry for Housing Local Government and Communities (MHCLG) Changing Futures programme which aims to help improve the way that systems and services work to support individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage. The Council has also won awards for its Stepping Up program, which is open to organisations across multiple sectors and provides staff from groups under-represented in senior leadership with tailored leadership development training and coaching.

There is a need for greater consistency around E&I practices across the organisation. Staff as well as Members have different perceptions about the equality and inclusion journey that the organisation is on and their role in it. Directorates too have different practices. Communication is one of the key tools for spreading best practice and ensuring that messages are heard within the Council and across the city. Further consideration should be given to how internal and external communications can make everyone feel more included in the E&I agenda. A single document setting out all the E&I initiatives that the Council is involved in would really help employees to be aware of all the initiatives, programmes and tools available to them.

### **3.2 Understanding and Working with Your Communities**

Bristol has many different open data platforms e.g. ward profiles, One City, Quality of Life indicators including 'Equality View'. Its central data analytics team is constantly building on and improving the data held, including softer more qualitative data. Data can be easily layered and used to consider intersectionality issues. Data summaries for all the Council's objectives are publicly available online, and in plain English. There are provisions in place for securely sharing data and intelligence with partners and examples were shared with us regarding data sharing with the NHS and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) around the response to Covid-19 and the vaccination programme in the city. With a new Census in 2021 it will be timely to review the organisation's data systems so that they include or monitor new categories of protected characteristics.

There are many formal opportunities for residents/communities to be involved in considering council proposals. They include the Citizens' Assembly and Citizen Panel. The representativeness of these forums is currently under consideration. The Voice and Influence Partnership enables citizens from equality groups to comment on the Council's proposals and policies. Members include the Care Forum, the Older People's Forum, the Centre for the Deaf and voluntary partners like Stand Against Racism and Inequality (SARI - which works on Hate Crime). The existing strategy on consultation and engagement is due for review. It aims to improve target rates for respondents by diversity categories and be closely linked up with the E&I Policy and Strategy.

Significant work has been done with communities but there were some concerns raised about areas to strengthen in respect of disabled residents. Voluntary sector partners recognise the work of the council but find engagement processes at times difficult to navigate. Some of the partners we spoke to felt that the council could engage earlier to get the views of the community before proposals are shaped by services. Surveys on transport and clean air were praised, with staff seen as keen to get out and work with communities.

Community groups that we spoke to also wanted to have more feedback following engagement or consultation. One suggested that there needed to be more of a “You said, We did” approach from the Council.

The response to the coronavirus saw the Council expanding its work with the community and community leaders still further. The Vaccination programme led to increased working with community leaders to tackle vaccine hesitancy amongst groups in the city. The Council worked with its 10 Community Champions drawn from organisations across the city. Initiatives included using two city mosques and the Malcolm X Centre (a Black and Ethnic Minority community centre) for vaccinations; a pop up vaccination clinic for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community; internal and external communications about COVID-19 issues including videos sent out in different languages to target hard to reach groups including migrants. A specific event has also been organised for British Sign Language users.

There are a number of race equality groups in Bristol including the Race Commission, the Bristol Muslim Strategic Leadership Group, the Race Equality Strategic Leaders Group, Race Equality in Education and a group considering the Lammy Review. The Council facilitates a formal meeting of all these groups twice a year to understand what each is doing. In 2019 it hosted a Race in The City event. Research for a recent review of the community and voluntary sector in Bristol was undertaken by the Black South West Network. This was the first ever Black led organisation to lead on a generic review and is an indication of how far the city has come in terms of widening the involvement of minority community groups in generic issues affecting the voluntary sector.

The Council has a good understanding of the newly settled communities through being a City of Sanctuary, having a Refugees and Asylum-Seekers Inclusion Strategy and dedicated Council Brexit resource providing advice to EU citizens. Collaboration of charities for delivery of hate crime services seems well organised and services are easily accessible online.

### **3.3 Responsive services and customer care**

The Council is working to embed equality and inclusion throughout its services. As part of a formal annual service planning exercise aligned to budget-setting, all Services are required to produce a service equality action plan with actions that support the corporate E&I objectives. These are monitored and reported on via the Performance Monitoring system, with additional overview and spot-checking from the Equality and Inclusion team. We heard that there are departments with really good practices such as Adult Social Care but also pockets of not so good practice or departments where there doesn't appear to be a long tradition of equality and inclusion, such as IT. An example of improving good practice in service delivery is work done in the Education and Skills Department to increase the diversity of school appeals panels so that they are more representative and supportive of parents who have communication issues or who don't speak English. One area of concern raised with us was about the workplace culture within Housing and lack of representation of diverse voices on Housing Panels and other Fora. In 2020 the Cabinet approved a multi-million pound investment in culture and practice change within Housing, called Moving Forward Together. We would like to see good practice in services more widely shared and reproduced across the organisation.

EQIAs are not yet embedded in all parts of the organisation and the quality of those we saw was variable. There is good data available and the Strategic Intelligence and Performance team is able to disaggregate data to support intersectional analysis which can be taken account of in policy making, service development and EQIAs at an early stage. The Council has a range of data systems which help inform service design and delivery. A good example

of this was funding for youth services in the south of the city. Data showed that 45% of need was in South Bristol but it received only 36% of the Council's resources. The Council used the data to bring together system leaders in the youth sector, Adult Services and business partners to tackle a number of generational inequality challenges in that part of the city. As a result, five workstreams have been developed to progress a Youth Zone that will be located in the south of the city.

The importance of procurement to the equality and inclusion agenda is recognised by the Council. Contracts are monitored for equality considerations that were identified at the tender stage. The Social Value policy is being rewritten so that its use in contracts that the Council lets is more effective. A Black Pound initiative started by the embRACE staff led group which aims to increase the representation of Black suppliers in Council contracts is being developed within the Procurement Team.

Bristol has a well embedded Integrated Health Care system, which aligns the agendas on Equality and Inclusion with Public Health and other health organisations in the City. The emerging vaccination strategy/plan is led by a manager/health professional with lived experience of the target groups, informed by the Bristol Race Equality COVID-19 Steering Group and underpinned by well researched data.

The Social Care Race Equality Standard and Corporate Parenting Strategy are excellent examples of how Bristol City Council strives to improve customer experience and consider diverse needs, e.g. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Safeguarding Group. However, there still needs to be more robust customer satisfaction data collected and used in service development. Customer satisfaction surveys do not always capture data by protected characteristics.

### **3.4 Diverse and engaged workforce**

Workforce issues are a major part of the Council's agenda on equalities and inclusion. Consequently, it has refreshed its organisational values and is undertaking a cultural and transformational programme. The Council also has a new Workforce Strategy. Staff we spoke to said that they are beginning to see positive changes in the organisation such as the removal of barriers to secondment opportunities and a greater emphasis on staff wellbeing. This was reflected in the most recent full Staff Survey in 2020 where 79% of staff said that they believe the Council is committed to creating a diverse and inclusive environment up from 72% in 2019. However, we did hear that the focus on BLM in 2020 meant some staff such as those who are disabled felt somewhat forgotten by the Council, although the Council's internal communications on these issues highlighted the importance of all groups.

The Council understands that it is still not as representative of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff or disabled staff at the highest level of the organisation as overall staff numbers would suggest and it is working hard to address this. Its annual workforce report shows that only 4.35% of jobs paying more than £50k are held by Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic staff. This amounts to only eight out of the 203 most senior posts in the Council. Employment targets are not consistent across grades and protected characteristics. A target exists for women in the top 5% of salary but no other groups. There may be lessons to learn from how the Council has sought to meet the target for senior women for other protected characteristics. Diversity workforce planning now needs to be integrated into mainstream workforce planning. We understand that this is now part of the workforce planning tool that was launched in the 2020 service planning cycle.

More positively, employee diversity self-declaration rates are good and improving. The new HR Dashboard enables managers to understand their workforce profile and address gaps in their service equality action plan. Despite not being required to do so, the Council is reporting its pay gaps in 2021 and the latest statistics show a reduction in pay gaps for both Race and Disability. It has also committed to reporting LGBTQ+ pay gap information from 2021 in light of improved data quality resulting from improving self-declaration rates.

The Council has introduced a range of initiatives including Positive Action designed to increase workforce representation. They include Reverse Mentoring; an Assessment Toolkit and Diverse Panellists (70 diverse recruiters and 800 recruiting managers have received refreshed recruitment and selection training with an emphasis on bias.) Be on Board - an organisation in Bristol that supports businesses in improving the diversity of their Governing Bodies and Boards - has been approached to sit on recruitment panels for senior officers. Recruitment agencies working with the Council are required to produce diverse shortlists. Secondment rules have also been changed to remove the need for a manager to agree to a member of staff applying for a secondment. This practice was seen by minority staff as a barrier to progression. The Council has also become the first local authority in the UK to become a 'Ban the Box' employer and remove barriers to employment for people with criminal convictions. It will now use job applications without a tick box that asks applicants about their criminal record. Recruitment of young people is a challenge for the Council and one way of addressing this has been to adopt the Living Wage for all its employees including apprentices over the age of 18. The Council's Young Professionals Network works alongside HR to review job paperwork and advertisements to roles suited to younger people.

The Council has challenges recruiting a diverse workforce in some professions. Social work was described to us as being less diverse than it used to be. One reason given for this is the increased national requirement for educational qualifications which Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic applicants in Bristol may not have attained due to previous inequality in education. The Council has joined the national pilot Social Care Race Equality Standard as part of its plan to address the issue of diversity in social work. The Council is also looking to "grow its own" to overcome a shortage of diverse applicants. For example, in the Finance Department there is a shortage of Black applicants. Work with HR established that this is due to failures in school and higher education for this group. The Department is looking to recruit NEETS (young people not in education, employment or training) and is working with the Mayor on a programme of Black internships.

There are four staff led groups within the Council – Race, LGBTQ+, Young Professionals and Disability. Since a review in 2019/20 there has been real change around the staff led groups within the Council and the transformation of these groups has been fundamental to the progress made on E&I. Investment in the groups has been significant and purposeful. Each now has a senior management level sponsor and budget and their terms of reference have been reviewed. There are still outstanding concerns about the capacity of the groups' members to be able to undertake all the work they would like to get involved with. Continued conversations with the groups about this and what can be realistically achieved will help to ensure that adequate support is in place for them. The group chairs sit as full members on the Strategic Equality and Inclusion Group alongside the Chief Executive and senior leaders, and whilst this is welcome, they have expressed a wish to be supported in contributing confidently and effectively in this senior environment.

The organisation has recognised and is addressing the disproportionate rates of discipline and grievance cases for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff and disabled staff, and historic grievance cases have been dealt with. The toolkits available to managers to assist discussions on issues such as Race and Transgender inclusion are a good resource and have boosted managers' confidence to discuss difficult issues with their teams. The Council

should monitor the use of these toolkits for take up and usefulness as this will be an indicator of whether managers are acting consistently. We heard that not all teams were aware of or used the Race toolkit for example. Staff still felt that more needed to be done to support safe spaces for difficult conversations within teams. The Council has a number of progressive policies and guidance in place. e.g. menopause, mental health first aiders, and a trans inclusion policy in development. The use of procurement to further equality aims also extends to Human Resources (HR). The new contract for the Employee Assistance Programme includes a requirement to provide Black, Asian and minority ethnic counsellors.

Disabled staff welcome the establishment of an HR adviser for reasonable adjustments and the introduction of "Health and Wellbeing Passports". We heard that although the situation with reasonable adjustments had improved there are still some ongoing issues that need to be resolved. Some disabled staff said that the response from managers was still inconsistent. Others feel that the organisation needs to draw more on those with lived experience e.g. staff with neurodiverse disabilities. We were also told that the Equality & Inclusion team suggested introducing a buddying scheme for disabled staff. Following complaints from the Disabled Colleagues Network staff led group, who felt the initiative embodied a medical rather than a social model of disability, the scheme evolved into a Disability Peer Navigator Scheme focused on supporting and challenging managers to implement timely reasonable adjustments. The decision to introduce the scheme was approved without the full support of the network and group members told us that their views were not fully listened to.

There has been increased investment in training and skills development for managers around the EDI agenda. An example of this is the Cultural Intelligence Programme. The Council provides a range of training for staff to support the culture and transformational change programme including an assessment of Cultural Competency. Investment in staff training has started at the top of the organisation and this policy may explain why some staff feel that change is not percolating down the organisation quickly enough. As well as management training the Council has introduced a number of targeted learning and development programmes aimed at increasing the diversity of senior posts including Diverse Voices (enabling aspiring Directors from under-represented groups to attend and contribute to its Corporate Leadership Board) and its award-winning Stepping Up programme.

#### **4. Next steps**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on the findings and suggestions in this report.

The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: e-mail [paul.clarke@local.gov.uk](mailto:paul.clarke@local.gov.uk)

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

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