

The Equality Framework for Local Government: progress and next steps

Summary

This report updates the Improvement Board on the positive progress councils have made on equalities, in particular their use of the Equality Framework for Local Government, how councils have used the Framework to support improvement and next steps.

Recommendations

That members note the progress of councils against the assessment areas of the Equality Framework for Local Government.

That members comment on the approach to support for all local authorities, particularly to councils experiencing particular challenges as set out in paragraph 12

Action

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Background

1. Under the law, all public authorities, including local government, have duties relating to race, gender and disability. The key elements of these duties serve to underpin the work of local authorities in shaping the areas they serve. The duties variously require local government to promote equality of opportunity, and good community relations and cohesion. They also need to eliminate harassment and discrimination. The Single Equality Bill, currently progressing through parliament with cross-party support, will put in place a generic public duty to promote equalities and good relations across a wider range of protected groups to include sexual orientation, religion/belief and age. Councils are likely to face both internal and external challenges if they are to meet their equalities duties with fewer resources and without any deterioration in community cohesion.

2. Work on equalities and cohesion is important for the reputation of local government, a top priority in the LGA Group Business Plan, since it is often the failure of services to vulnerable residents which leads to widespread critical attention. Councils have been using the Equality Standard for Local Government since 2001 but in 2009 the Equality Framework for Local Government was launched as a simpler and smarter improvement tool to strengthen the confidence of councils to understand how everyday service delivery is influenced by equality and how they can be seen to be providing services fairly. www.idea.gov.uk/equalityframework

3. Based on three levels of achievement ('developing', 'achieving' and 'excellent'), the Framework also:

- Aids compliance with the equality public duties
- Provides a way of carrying out self-assessment
- Helps meet high standards for customer care
- Provides evidence for a local authority's organisational assessment
- Enables a partnership approach and efficient use of resources through the adoption of the model by other public authorities

4. The Framework is underpinned by a wider definition of equality that demonstrates how gender, age, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and religion/belief describe each one of us and thereby help us understand how we experience life chances (including physical security, health, education, family life, participation and legal security).

5. The Framework is focused on five performance areas: knowing your communities and equality mapping; place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment; community engagement and satisfaction; responsive services and customer care; and a modern and diverse workforce. Self-assessment and peer challenge by members and officers are used to test its effectiveness. The Framework exemplifies a sector-led approach to support since it is agreed and owned by local government rather than being dictated by central government or an inspectorate. It helps councils articulate why they have decided to provide certain services, based on

23 4

a real understanding of the area, and what they aspire to do next. The focus is on 'what makes a difference', and minimising bureaucracy and sustainability are major features.

6. Most RIEPs are using progress against the Framework as a key performance measure and driver for progress. Improvement East, working with the IDeA, for example has a well developed programme involving regional workshops, in house support targeted at district councils (who are mostly at the 'developing' level) to build capacity and accelerate progress to the 'achieving' level; sponsoring collaboration on joint projects such as equality mapping. Peer reviews are undertaken for authorities who have a target date for peer challenge for the 'achieving' level to ensure that they are ready for the external challenge. The East Midlands and the North West are two other examples of this kind of practice

Survey of authorities

7. To benchmark and assess further support an on-line survey was sent to every authority in England in January. The results show:

- **High take-up across all types of authorities and regions:**
 - A response rate of 65%
 - 98% (227) of respondents are either using the Framework or have plans to (1% had no plans and 1% did not know)
 - 43% (98) are 'developing', 42% (96) are 'achieving', 13% (29) are 'moving towards excellence' and 1% (2) is excellent.
- **Ambitious desire for improvement**
 - 55% of authorities have had an external assessment of their performance with 47% (60) using the IDeA's Diversity Peer Challenge and 76% (96) taking place in the last two years.
 - 68% currently intend to be assessed for the next level – 21% (32) in 2010, 38% (58) in 2011 and 9% (13) in 2012.
 - 76% (74) currently at 'developing' intend to be assessed externally for 'achieving'; 58% (56) at 'achieving' intend to be assessed at 'excellent'; 76% (22) of those 'moving to excellence' intend to be assessed at 'excellent'. Two authorities have been assessed successfully at 'excellent'.
 - This sense of ambition shows that the Framework is driving on improved performance by councils.
- **Further areas for support and guidance**
 - 'Equality mapping – knowing your community' was the most common at 48% (112) followed by 'improving representation of under-represented groups 32% (73).
 - Only 3% (8) stated that they did not need any help.

8. The survey confirms the feedback gained from councils through peer challenge, the website and the communities of practice. This qualitative evidence highlights a range of work including strong partnerships between the county councils and their districts, inventive methods for strengthening the community leadership of elected

23 4

members and a developing understanding of how equality delivers long-term efficiency.

9. Authorities are eager to learn from these kinds of examples and the case studies with the IDeA equality webpages and the Equality Community of Practice (CoP) receiving more hits than any others, with an average 1,490 visitors to the Framework page each month. www.communities.idea.gov.uk/comm/landing-home.do?id=44962

Partnership working

10. The Framework demonstrates how local government is leading the public sector, with other agencies/sectors customising the model. In December both the Equality Standard for Police and the Equality Framework for Fire and Rescue Services were launched. Work is underway with NHS Employers and consultation is ongoing with ALMOs on health and social housing models. OFSTED is also developing its own equality improvement framework. This will create a public service equality framework enabling benchmarking and stronger partnerships.

Next steps

11. The Framework has proved to be an effective tool and driver for progress on work on equalities. The need for support is evident particularly for smaller authorities with limited resources. For example there will be challenges in work on the new duties in the Single Equality Bill which can be complex to implement (for example the interaction between sexual orientation and religion/belief) and potentially expensive (age and service delivery).

12. Members' views are sought on IDeA's approach to supporting authorities and strengthening the Framework as a tool to do this:

- We currently subsidise peer challenges for district councils recognising that their resources are constrained and there are risks of legal non-compliance.
- Overall we will develop the Framework and peer challenges to support councils meeting their aspirations to reach 'achieving' and 'excellent' levels.
- We will develop support for councillors and officers on the 'business case' for equality linked to efficiency, productivity and value for money.
- Using our national experience with public sector partners we will undertake pilots with four districts on shared equality services and four LSPs on the partnership approach to equality.
- We will improve links with Local Government Employers as part of cross-Group working.

13. Programmes of support will be concentrated on the councils with particular challenges/problems and those who want to improve or share learning on a specific area. Guidance and information will be available on a national level backed by the continuing development of the CoP and the web pages. An important step will be how to exploit these virtual arenas as efficient means of swapping good practice, underpinning work on the ground and translating them into strong stories of how we

23 4

build effective relationships with local communities, improve services and help maintain the reputation of local government.

Financial Implications

There are no additional financial implications arising from this report. This work features within the 'reputation' strand of the LGA Group Business Plan and then in turn within the IDeA Business Plan, within existing IDeA RSG funding.

Implications for Wales

There is a different approach in Wales.