Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Focus Group – thematic summary

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Contents

Purpose

Three focus groups were held between December 2022 and January 2023. Participants were Economic Development Officers drawn from a range of councils in England:

Focus Group One - Rural & Coastal
Focus Group Two - Urban
Focus Group Three - London and the South-East

In total, 28 officers participated.

The purpose of the focus groups was to explore how councils are working to improve equalities in employment and skills outcomes to encourage economic development for their communities. The focus groups aimed to develop understanding by capturing the thoughts and experiences of those working to advance this agenda. Each of the groups were asked the following questions:

- What, if any, are the differences in access to employment or training opportunities, employment rate, and skills between groups (with different characteristics) in your area?
- What, if anything, is the council doing about lessening these differences?
- What more might be done in the future?
- What, if any, are the barriers and enablers to lessening these differences?

This paper provides a short thematic analysis of the responses given across all three groups. Where there is any difference in response by focus group this is highlighted in the text.

Interview questions

Question 1:

What, if any, are the differences in access to employment or training opportunities, employment rate, and skills between groups (with different characteristics) in your area?

Homogeneity

Regardless of the size of the council it was evident that there was not a homogeneity of access to employment, training opportunities, employment rate or skills. The impact of this at the local level is that there is not a one size fits all approach, as this would not meet the specific needs of local communities. Individual groups within communities require support that is fit for purpose in terms of their need. For instance, support required by the over 50's who wish to return to work after a significant period out of the employment market is different to the support needed by young people or those with a disability. The challenge is that the training and support offer that is in place does not easily map onto the nuanced local context of specific needs within local communities and groups.

Intersectionality

Linked to the above, there were specific groups and individuals within local communities that faced multiple challenge. For example, those who were older and from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. This intersectionality was felt to further disadvantage those in communities who could not readily access training or employment opportunities. Ensuring that specific and relevant support was in place to enable those that faced multiple barriers to accessing the labour market was crucial, but this support infrastructure was felt not to readily be in place. In addition, it was noted that there was not an understanding, in a holistic sense, of the multiple challenges that individuals faced, both in policy but also data terms, as the data was not available at such a local and nuanced level to ensure that effective support, even when available, could be given.

Economy and local labour market

There were perceived to be historical reasons for differences in employment or training opportunities- these being due to the nature of the local economic market. For instance, areas that had predominantly been focused on rural or heavy industry economies. These historical patterns of employment were no longer in place and what now existed were either high levels of unemployment or employment that was low skilled and low paid. Issues around seasonality of employment were also raised by specific groups (especially those in coastal communities) who noted that where employment was available this was often focused on the seasonal hospitality and service industries with resulting in-job insecurity and below-average remuneration.

Linked again to homogeneity issues, participants noted that even where there appeared to be high employment and high-wage local economies there remained an issue of access for specific members of the community. For example, some employment markets were predicated around construction where employment was

often focused on younger white men, and high remuneration technical and IT related roles that were taken by white middle class males who commuted into the area. The impact on local communities looking for employment and facing multiple challenges due to their ethnicity or age for example, was considerable. Again, where these specific groups could access local employment, this was more frequently in low-paid and low skilled roles.

It was noted that local economies had also altered considerably due to the COVID pandemic. This had resulted in the growth of significant unemployment and economic inactivity, especially amongst the over 50's who had left the labour market and who were now finding it difficult to access employment. Added to this, it was noted that the claimant rate across all ages has increased due to ill health and, going forward it is likely that there will be a larger number of people looking for roles at the local level who have the added difficulty of having to manage longer term health conditions. Specific support will be needed for these groups that perhaps the current level of provision does not adequately cater for.

Diverse geography and transport links
Differences in the availability of, and access to, skills and training opportunities are also influenced by geography. Participants noted that the ability (or not) to access training and support on offer can be a considerable barrier to engagement. A key factor in this was access to transport. Relating to transport, there were issues associated with both cost and access;

Cost - participants noted that the costs of transport were a considerable barrier to accessing employment and training- this was felt to be particularly the case in rural areas.

Access - Aside from costs, participants noted that in some areas there was no public transport infrastructure in place. The highly localised nature of this issue was highlighted, with participants noting that there are some parts of their council areas that are very well served and other parts (both for rural and urban councils) that had no infrastructure in place. For those residents needing to access training and skills development activity where there was little transport infrastructure, engagement was challenging.

Digital connectivity
Participants noted that a lack of digital connectivity and the costs associated with access to IT equipment was very restrictive in terms of people both accessing online training and applying for jobs. In rural areas a lack of digital connectivity was also felt to have adversely affected businesses with the result that employment opportunities were fewer as there were smaller numbers of businesses - especially small and medium companies. Internet access is also an issue for those in extreme poverty. One authority noted that the availability of distance learning and distribution of laptops and dongles had led to the engagement of certain groups, however, for the most disadvantaged, direct face to face training support is still required and so a more nuanced approach to technology is needed.

What, if anything, is the council doing about lessening these differences?

All participants noted the challenge created by the ending of the European Social Fund (ESF) funding in 2023. There was uncertainty as to the level of funding that individual councils would receive through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and this was shaping what councils could do in terms of lessening difference moving forward.

A range of actions and initiatives at a national and local level designed to leverage growth and support for communities were noted.

Partnership working
Participants identified the importance of the effective joint working that they had undertaken across agencies, specifically; government departments, local anchor institutions, local employers and business and community partners. This approach had brought together a wide range of skills and avoided duplication of effort and had created clear linkages for access to the local labour market. Examples of partnership working with these agencies included;

Government departments - Working more closely with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) colleagues on place-based provision strategies and a new city employment plan.

Anchor institutions – The council and NHS trust working together to promote the wide range of job opportunities within their organisations and encouraging more applications from those in deprived areas from where there had previously been few.

Employers and business - Supporting and focusing on local employers and small business by encouraging a review of recruitment processes making these more accessible, identifying systemic barriers including addressing employer concerns about the costs involved in making reasonable adjustments to recruit those with learning disabilities. Providing support in designing bespoke traineeship programmes and working with the construction industry by raising awareness and encouraging women and older workers to apply. Encouraging employers to inform the council first about vacancies, allowing them the opportunity to try and support individuals into these roles and promoting a sense of social responsibility in doing so.

Community partners - Setting up resident and stakeholder panels or those with an interest in advancing equality (rather than tackling inequality) and so reframing and taking a positive approach.

Local knowledge
Participants regardless of area highlighted how they realised that the level of knowledge they had of their local areas as identified through data, was limited. To remedy this, councils were developing a greater granularity of data that more accurately provided a picture of community and related need which allowed them to

bring services to where they are most needed. For example, developing hub-based approaches in smaller areas to broker learning and employment support. Building on this more detailed understanding of local communities and their specific needs, councils were recalibrating their service offer to ensure that it more fully met local need - for instance, one rural authority described a scheme (funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) which paid for driving lessons for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), in order to allow them to access and travel to work and also to raise their self-esteem and aspirations.

Provision of support
As noted, access to relevant training and employment was not equitable to all groups at a local level. To address this councils were developing bespoke training and support that provided a tailored response to meet specific local need.

Council procurement and ways of working
Participants noted that council systems and structures could act both as a barrier and enabler to developing training and employment within their geographical area. In terms of barriers there was some concern around the ways in which councils, at times, worked within siloed structures that did not engender a joined-up approach to training and employment at the local level. To address this, a number of participants described how their councils were taking an holistic approach- for example, making their grant funding processes more fit for purpose to meet local need. In addition, councils were described as changing their practices to ensure that they were more able to let contracts to local business through proactive procurement and sub-contracting, thus creating greater job opportunity at the local level.

Regarding the ways in which the council itself recruited staff, it was noted that application processes were being streamlined to encourage greater interest from local communities, especially those from minority groups. Other councils were going further than simply refining their data sources through commissioning comprehensive local health inequality assessments. One council had established a number of equalities panels to ensure that equalities impact assessments are embedded within any major policy or spending decisions from the outset. Linked to this, councils acknowledged that they had a key role in championing EDI within local labour markets, and did this through the development of social value policies with employers, responsible business networks and through encouraging local recruitment and advertising for employment opportunities.

Funding
Councils have been considering how best to use the funding available in creative ways, to ensure fit for purpose approaches. Councils in London and the South-East noted that since the COVID pandemic, there had been an increase in unemployed residents wanting to open their own business or considering self-employment. As a result, one council had launched a business support service that would provide information, advice and guidance to local residents who wished to set up on their own.

What more might be done in the future?

It is evident that all councils were committed to developing the employment and training opportunities for all members of their community. They highlighted innovative approaches that they could operationalise if they had the funds available. Areas for further development that were highlighted included:

Role of council
Councils were considering the services that they need to provide in the future, and therefore were carrying out a needs based assessment of their current workforce to identify any staffing gaps with a view to these being recruited to from local residents.

Partnerships
Developing partnerships with other local and community agencies (including anchor institutions, employers, the NHS, police, youth clubs, schools and further education providers) was seen as key, in harnessing a wide range of staff skills and developing local employment opportunities. For example, one council described the work it was undertaking with local employers in developing responsible business networks to encourage social responsibility around job opportunities and work placements. Another authority was developing a community learning programme for adults targeting those with disabilities or learning difficulties to achieve positive results.

Local knowledge
Participants noted that a more focused, nuanced and holistic approach was beneficial. Taking into account the specific local area including its geography, workforce and also recognising the lack of homogeneity of communities within it would help them target their offer more effectively and offer place-based approaches. For example, one authority had engaged with local frontline services such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), foodbank representatives and community engagement teams which had allowed them to ensure that service information was targeted directly to those who may need it and delivered in ways that were fit for purpose for local communities.

Data
As noted in the above sections, data sharing, the granularity of data and access to high quality local and national data was noted by councils as vital to improving their understanding of local areas and in identifying pockets of hidden need within them.

Devolution
Authorities noted that devolution provided an opportunity to develop locally designed services - bringing partners and resources together to do so. Authorities were however mindful that this would require careful planning and an awareness of any risks involved.

National policy
Rural and coastal and urban authorities suggested that changes to national policy would be of benefit. This included:

- More flexibility around the receipt of benefits as this would help authorities avoid shoehorning people in according to their eligibility. They currently do not have discretion as there are ringfenced eligibility issues which are creating widespread systemic barriers.
- Taking a more 'whole-person' approach would lead to better outcomes for individuals. Linked to this
- Allowing local authorities to use a different type of intervention or delivery model based on the needs of their community would also help.
- A more fluid and aligned approach allowing authorities to refer individuals to programmes or projects that would be of most use to them (regardless of the touchpoint of an individual) and adopting a 'no wrong door' approach would ensure that they receive the most relevant support.

More specifically, one authority suggested nationally providing a targeted Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for young people in rural areas. This would support travel costs for young people to get to places where they can access services, or alternatively incentivize providers to deliver in rural areas and provide the funding for them to do so. Currently, considering how mainstream provision is delivered in rural areas is not factored into DWP commissioning models but is something that needs to be considered. Linked to this;

In addition, streamlining funding opportunities would allow for more bespoke and targeted programmes to run, rather than multiple funders all competing for the same cohort of learners. This would then rationalise assessment, referral and progression pathways.

Linking to emerging economies
Specific to rural and coastal areas, it was noted that employment opportunities are developing rapidly in renewable and green infrastructure. In these emerging economy areas, it was suggested that support needs to be provided to residents so they can benefit from these employment opportunities.

Question 4:

What if any, are the barriers and enablers to lessening these differences?

In the context of the broad funding challenges that participants had previously noted, a range of barriers and enablers to lessening differences were highlighted.

Barriers:

Fragmented Funding
Participants noted that the fragmented nature of funding (with varied size pots of money being made available at different times and for different purposes), could

make it difficult to provide targeted or bespoke support programmes. There were associated challenges in keeping track of and reporting back on the use of this funding, and issues relating to duplication of activity.

Additional barriers included the fast turnaround times required in addition to specific government financial rubric which often meant that authorities failed to take advantage of available funding avenues. The resource required for councils to administer and manage bids for very small pots of funding could also make them not cost-effective to pursue. Longevity of funding would allow councils to have a more streamlined and longer-term approach.

Authorities in London and the South-East noted the following specific issues around funding;

Overlapping funding systems – The funding system was felt to be geared towards larger adult training authorities familiar with the bidding process. Some authorities often have excellent community-based organisations but their access to regional funding schemes due to eligibility criteria, meant that the authority does not have a strong provider base. Greater autonomy is needed in order to make funding schemes more flexible and accessible.

Changes in Adult Education Budget (AEB) funding – Changes in this funding were identified as problematic. Currently adult learning allows those who are economically inactive or not seeking employment, a more accessible route into non-accredited courses.

Data
All participants noted that there was a lack of availability, and access to, both local and national data. Where there is a reliance on national data, this is not broken down to local group level and an increased granularity of local data is needed in order to provide local-level insight. For example, one combined authority noted that they were heavily reliant on local intelligence around, for example, autism and neurodiversity amongst their local community, the quality of which was variable and as a result there was differential in terms of the success of supporting these groups and this did not seem a robust or consistent approach. A greater granularity of data was also needed to enable councils to drill down to identify hidden pockets of need and also to provide information to enable them to flex services around ever-changing priority areas in their locality. A lack of data sharing at a national level, and between organisations also limits council ability to cross-reference information and ensure that their offer is relevant.

Accessibility
The inability to access services was a barrier across rural and some urban authorities. Geographically, services were not always in the most accessible locations for target groups and travelling to them had cost implications. For example, one London authority reported that some wards are not well connected to the Transport for London (TFL) network and many services are located in the north of the area as there is less space available to house them in the south. Large rural

authorities also described poor and expensive transport links to services, making access to them prohibitive to some target groups.

Local labour market
All participants noted that a lack of flexibility from local employers could create a barrier to work for those trying to return to the job market. A lack of flexibility around work hours (in order to accommodate childcare or other caring responsibilities) presented challenge and some employers had voiced concerns about the costs of making reasonable adjustments to recruit those with learning or other disabilities. For London authorities there was a reluctance amongst some employers to pay the London Living Wage making employment a less viable option for individuals.

Siloed working
Urban authorities noted that a siloed approach across council directorates could create a barrier to more effective working and that increased partnership within the council in addition to across the community and with key stakeholders was needed.

Lack of skills
For those authorities in London and the South-East, there were perceived to be particular issues for older people returning to the workforce due to the cost-of-living crisis. Low-level skills and also having had a gap in employment was making a return to work difficult.

Digital divide
Rural and coastal authorities identified a lack of digital connectivity which was a barrier to accessing online training and applying for jobs. Issues around access to hardware and the ability to use this were also noted.

Partnership working
Rural and coastal authorities suggested that although partnership working is positive, there needs to be recognition that this requires time and effort to work effectively. Partners can often be those who are used to being in direct competition with each other and this can present challenge.

Enablers:

Increase in funding and flexibility of funding
Participants noted the need for increased funding and also greater flexibility around funding rules. This flexibility would allow them more control to ensure that providers deliver against their contracts at a local level and also to ensure that local-level employer needs are met. An increase in flexibility would provide authorities with the ability to better influence local priorities rather than responding to a broad DWP focus.

Data
As noted in the barriers section above, a greater availability of more granular data at both a national and local level was required. This would allow local resources to be targeted more effectively as intersectionality could be identified more easily allowing services to become more inclusive. Some relaxation of General Data Protection

Regulation (GDPR) to produce a top-down agreement to allow data sharing between organisations with commonality of purpose was also suggested.

Partnership working
In addition to working with statutory agencies, increased partnership working with local networks, for example Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE's) would allow authorities to reach individuals who may not access services via the more formal agency routes. For these groups a 'one size fits all' approach is less likely to work.

Increased working with anchor institutions would enable these organisations to become drivers of local growth or support for communities. One authority noted that they had developed an EDI subgroup with local anchor institutions and had developed tools and training for local employers in order to tackle EDI issues around recruitment and employment.

Urban authorities also noted that more joint working and a less siloed approach across council directorates was needed to enable more effective and linked activity.

Local freedom/Devolution
Participants noted that devolution and more local freedom would enable them to more effectively tackle some of the current challenges highlighted. The focus of job centres and creation of people hubs were noted as areas where authorities could have more control. Devolution was seen as an opportunity to bring more resources and partners together, however linked to this;

Joint approach
Urban authorities noted that a more joined up approach between DWP, job centers and local councils was needed was needed in order to allow them to take effective action at a local level. Furthermore, it was felt that local areas needed to be empowered and supported by a national infrastructure which would enable all parties to implement solutions and to plan effectively.

Local commissioning
Urban authorities noted that community grants programmes have achieved very positive results when small trusted local organisations are commissioned to deliver in areas where people are happy/comfortable attending, and more of this work has the potential to lead to impactful results at the local level.

London and South-East authorities said that when commissioning services, they had developed their social value requirements within contracts in order to influence best practice. For example, including a requirement for jobs to be advertised locally and for the employer to be paying the London living minimum wage.

Council workforce
Rural and coastal authorities noted the importance of ensuring that the council recruited extremely skilled staff who understand the needs of their local communities well and are able to support and empower them. Additionally, the importance of upskilling and training existing staff to enable them to acquire any new skills required

was essential to make them more effectual in their role. This links back to the earlier discussions regarding the importance of councils employing from within their local resident communities.

Additional comments:

At the end of the focus groups, participants were asked if they had any additional comments to add. Comments included:

- Councils needed to ensure that they "walked the walk" when it came to their own job application processes and in providing flexibility for applicants.
- Council workforces are not representative in terms of EDI and this needs to be addressed.
- Councils have an ageing workforce and more young people are needed at the local level. Apprenticeships and internships could help with this.
- The pre-16 education system was described as not fit for purpose as it does not prepare young people for the world of work or with the skills that employers want.
- That improved and more efficient working relationships with DWP and other partners would be helpful; and
- Longevity of funding was described as key with extended dates where funding is available to enable longer-term and meaningful training and employment support to be developed and delivered.

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