

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR HR AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

TO:	PERSONNEL COMMITTEE		
DATE:	16 MARCH 2022		
TITLE:	EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION UPDATE		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR MCEWAN	PORTFOLIO:	CORPORATE AND CONSUMER SERVICES
LEAD OFFICER:	SHELLA SMITH	TEL:	0118 937 4697
JOB TITLE:	ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF HR AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	E-MAIL:	Shella.Smith@reading.gov.uk

1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report presents an update on the work being undertaken to advance Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the Council since the last update to Personnel Committee in March 2021. It details the findings of an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Audit which was undertaken for the Council by Business in the Community (BITC) and the work being done to implement their recommendations. It also provides an update on the Healthy and Ethical Workplace programme which is being delivered in the Directorate of Adult Care and Health (DACHS), in partnership with Ethical Reading, which is focused on achieving a vibrant, values based and ethical culture.
- 1.2 The findings from the BITC Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Audit will be used alongside the findings of the Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap reports for 2021 and the Workforce Profile for 2020/21 to inform the development of an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for the Council. It will be co-created with input from a range of stakeholders, with support from an external partner who will be appointed shortly. A further update on progress will be presented to Personnel Committee on 14 July 2022.
- 1.3 Appendices
 - Appendix 1: BITC Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Audit report - October 2021
 - Appendix 2: BITC Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Audit recommendations which have been implemented or are in progress - February 2022

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

It is recommended that Personnel Committee notes:

- 2.1 The progress made to advance Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the Council since the last update on 17 March 2021.**
- 2.2 That a progress update on the development of an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for the Council will be presented to Personnel Committee on 14 July 2022.**

3. ADVANCING EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AT THE COUNCIL

3.1 On 17 March 2021, Personnel Committee received a report on progress made towards meeting the requirements set out in the ‘Tackling Employment Inequality’ Motion agreed by Council on 20 October 2020.

3.2 Since this time, the following activity has taken place to advance Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the Council.

3.3 Business in the Community (BITC) Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Audit

3.3.1 BITC was commissioned to review the Council’s approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. They have reviewed our policies, processes and initiatives, as well as sought insights into employees’ experience across seven key areas: Strategy, Leadership, Recruitment, Staff, Employee Engagement, Pay Gaps and Life Balance. The key objectives of the research were to:

- Review relevant workforce data and pertinent policy documents;
- Uncover employee perceptions and experiences in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion at the Council; and
- Provide recommendations for next steps and considerations for driving inclusion in the workplace.

3.3.2 During the first stage of the audit, BITC met with the following stakeholders:

- Cllr Brock, Leader of the Council
- Cllr Emberson, formerly Lead Councillor for Corporate and Consumer Services
- Cllr Barnett-Ward, Lead Councillor for Neighbourhoods and Communities
- Peter Sloman, Chief Executive
- Jackie Yates, Deputy Chief Executive
- Frances Martin, Executive Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services
- Seona Douglas, Executive Director of Social Care and Health
- Shella Smith, Assistant Director for HR and Organisational Development
- Trade union leads from GMB, NEU, Unison and Unite

- 3.3.3 BITC then ran five staff focus groups; each providing an opportunity for 10-12 colleagues to come together to discuss their perceptions and experiences of inclusion at the Council. Each session was facilitated by BITC experts and was a confidential 'safe space'. One of the groups was for staff who work in frontline roles in the community. There were two sessions for staff from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. The other two sessions were for anyone to come along to.
- 3.3.4 The first draft of the report was shared with the Corporate Management Team, Senior Leadership Group, the Joint Trade Union Committee and the Cultural Unity, Diversity and Inclusion Network and their feedback was invaluable in shaping the final version of the report which was received in October 2021 and is attached as Appendix 1. Anonymized quotes from focus groups or interviews are included where it helps the reader contextualise the findings to the Council, and to demonstrate the value of having direct access to employees with lived experience of the issues presented. Primary recommendations outline the actions that BITC believe will have a significant impact on progress for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) at the Council. Primary actions outline the actions that BITC believe will kick start change and demonstrate that the Council is taking action.

Key findings

- 3.3.5 There were many positive comments about working for the Council expressed by people who contributed to the audit, but the findings focus mainly on those areas requiring improvement. During the focus groups, particularly those for colleagues from ethnic minority backgrounds, it was expressed that the organisational commitment and strategy relating to EDI was not clearly communicated throughout the organisation. All focus groups identified that there is a lack of diversity in the senior leadership team, and that this was something that should be addressed to enact change and make progress. The Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic focus groups vocalised that there was a lack of awareness amongst the senior leadership team around cultural issues and barriers that ethnic minority employees face. Though efforts were recognised to address issues such as bullying and harassment, there was a consistent feeling that not enough action has been taken to back up any commitment to EDI expressed by leadership. It was expressed that greater engagement and visibility from senior leaders would be appreciated.
- 3.3.6 Across all focus groups, there was a consistent feeling that most recruitment is internal and based on existing relationships, which is a blocker to fostering a more diverse and inclusive workforce, and there were concerns about the lack of transparency regarding promotion decisions. There was a common opinion that opportunities were given according to networks and cliques; this was felt more strongly by the ethnic minority focus group. The Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic focus groups reported a lower sense of inclusion than others. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic employees offered examples of microaggressions such as comments around accents and hair, mispronouncing names and unequal distribution of work and opportunity. Many white colleagues expressed that they felt that they could bring their whole selves to work but this was not the case for many Black and Asian colleagues.
- 3.3.7 All focus groups identified that incidents of bullying exist within the organisation. Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority employees believed that racism was not always

taken seriously within the Council. The words used to describe the culture were mixed as well as dependent upon directorate and team. This is reflected in the popularity of the word “inconsistent” to describe the Council’s culture.

Next steps

3.3.8 There is clearly much work to be done and the Corporate Management Team acknowledges that it is not currently where it wants to be in terms of EDI. The next stage is to review the recommendations and actions proposed by BITC and co-create an action plan for implementation and embedding, with input from senior leaders, Trade Unions and staff representatives. The Assistant Director for HR and Organisational Development held follow-up discussions during November and December 2021 with the following groups:

- Senior Leadership Group
- Trade Unions
- LGBT+ Network
- Staff who attended a BITC focus group and who volunteered to continue to be involved
- Team Reading Delivery Group

3.3.9 Many of the recommendations made by BITC have already been implemented or are in progress; these are summarised in Appendix 2. However, it has become apparent that the development of an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy needs to be the priority focus as many of the recommendations will flow from this (e.g. setting targets for more diverse representation at senior levels, introducing a reverse mentoring scheme for senior leaders and junior staff from diverse backgrounds, targeted training and awareness raising for staff, managers and senior leaders covering issues like unconscious bias, microaggressions, how to be a good ally etc). The EDI Strategy will set out the Council’s aims and ambitions for becoming a more diverse and inclusive organisation, our priorities for achieving this over the short, medium and long term, and how progress and success will be measured.

3.3.10 The Assistant Director for HR and Organisational Development is seeking support from an external consultant with expertise in this area to assist with the strategy development as there is currently no specific EDI resource within the Council. They will support this by working with the stakeholder groups listed above as well as key elected members. Personnel Committee will be provided with a further update on progress at the next committee on 14 July 2022.

3.4 Healthy and Ethical Workplace programme within the Directorate of Adult Care and Health

3.4.1 Seona Douglas, Director of Social Care and Health, has instigated a culture change programme running over two years within the Directorate of Adult Care and Health (DACHS). The programme aims to address several issues around behaviours, including presenteeism and absenteeism. The Organisational Development and Learning team within HR is supporting the roll out of the programme which is called “DACHS Energise - It starts with me”. We are working in partnership with Ethical Reading on an intervention based on achieving a Healthy and Ethical Workplace. The vision for the programme is to achieve a vibrant, values based and ethical culture:

“Where everyone is respected, treated fairly and with compassion. Everyone accepts their responsibilities whilst acting with integrity in a spirit of collaboration. People understand how their role fits into the overall purpose of the department.”

- 3.4.2 The programme involves every member of the directorate and started with a benchmarking survey which was carried out in March 2021 to assess current state. Regular ‘pulse surveys’ will be carried out throughout the programme to check progress; the next one is planned for March 2022. There will be Core Healthy and Ethical Workplace training, together with mental health awareness training for all staff; which started with the senior management team and management layer. Delivery of the training element of the programme began in May 2021 and is due to complete in March 2022. Feedback from both manager and non-manager participants has been very positive with comments such as:

“Very inspiring, absolutely can see how embedding a culture of inclusion and respect will help us all be happier in our work. Thank you”

“I think it was the best equity, diversity and equality workshop ever and it has really helped me to think differently. Thanks”

- 3.4.3 Members of the HR and OD team are receiving training and support from Ethical Reading to be able to co-deliver the Healthy and Ethical Workplace workshops and programme in other directorates. The work in the Directorate of Adult Care and Health could therefore also be a ‘pilot’ for a wider roll-out in the Council, subject to evaluation of the programme demonstrating that it is achieving its objectives and financial considerations.

4. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 4.1 Advancing equality, diversity and inclusion within the Council’s workforce enables moving to a position where our workforce represents the community it serves and ensuring a Council that is fit for the future.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 None.

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 6.1 The BITC report has been shared with Trade Unions and all staff who participated in a focus group, who were invited to a meeting with the Chief Executive and Assistant Director for HR and Organisational Development in November 2021, to discuss the report and their views on its findings and next steps.

7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not required for the issues covered by this report.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

This report assists the Council to fulfil this duty.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There will be a cost to engage an external partner to assist with the development of an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. Proposals and costs are being sought currently from suitably qualified and experienced partner organisations to undertake this work. The financial implications are therefore currently unknown but will be met from within the existing HR and Organisational Development service budget.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Personnel Committee report - 17 November 2021 - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Update

Personnel Committee report - 16 March 2022 - Gender and Ethnicity Pay Reports for 2021 and Workforce Profile for 2020/21