EVALUATION OF THE LEEDS CITY COUNCIL EQUALITIES ASSEMBLY
SUMMARY OF THE FINAL REPORT

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BACKGROUND

The Leeds City Council (LCC) Equalities Assembly was launched in 2009. The creation of the Assembly was based on the recommendations of a previous report, popularly known as the Red Paint Report.¹ The Equalities Assembly currently has six active Hubs: Age; Black and Ethnic Minority (BME); Carers; Disability; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT); and Religion or Belief. The Hubs meet individually, with the support of the LCC Equalities Team, and there are periodic Hub Representatives (Hub Reps) meetings that involve all of the hubs and key officers from LCC. The original Red Paint Report recommended that the Equalities Assembly undergo an evaluation approximately two years after its creation, and this report fulfils that recommendation.

THE RESEARCH

The research conducted for this evaluation is the result of a partnership between the Equality Team and the Leeds Social Science Institute (LSSI) of the University of Leeds. The University of Leeds School of Geography (where the researcher is based) agreed to allow the researcher to work on the evaluation on a 0.4 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) basis. As such, the researcher received no extra consultancy payment for the production of the research, but rather agreed to the arrangement out of academic and professional interest.

The researcher was asked to speak to a diverse range of stakeholders for the purposes of the evaluation, including both participants in the Hubs as well as a range of LCC staff. Although the views of these stakeholders are summarised in this report, the interpretation of these views and the recommendations that are put forward are the researcher’s independent view.

The researcher engaged in the following information-collecting activities:
1. attended at least one meeting of each of the six hubs as an observer.
2. attended three meetings of the hub representatives.
3. gathered input from a diverse range of hub members, most often in the form of face-to-face interviews, but also through email and telephone interviews. All hub members were sent (via email or post) an invitation to participate in the evaluation in a manner most suited to their preferences and needs. The total number of respondents who provided input in relation to each of the hubs is as follows: Age (5); BME (5); Carers (6); Disability (10); LGBT (5); and Religion or Belief (6).²

² In a small number of cases there is double counting as a respondent participated in more than one of the hubs. In a few cases these numbers include people who officially work for LCC but who attended hub meetings out of personal interest. They have been counted for the purposes here as hub members rather than LCC employees, although they sometimes provided information at hub meetings wearing their LCC ‘hats’.
4. interviewed a range of council employees, including senior staff working at a strategic level and staff/officers working with local people in front facing services.  
5. conducted briefing meetings with the staff of the LCC Equality Team.  
6. spent the equivalent of two days per week in the office of the Equality Team, from January-April 2011. This allowed the researcher to become familiar with the Team’s working practices and processes for organising the Assembly.

KEY FINDINGS

The full report outlines a number of key findings based on the perspectives of both Hub members and LCC employees.

Based on the views of Hub members, key issues discussed in the report include the following:

- Most respondents felt that the Equalities Team provided a good level of support in organising Hub meetings, and that the Team was open and receptive to a range of viewpoints.
- Amongst Hub members who had been involved with previous equalities bodies in Leeds, it was often felt that the Assembly had contributed to an improved tone to the relationship between Hub members and LCC.
- Hub members often felt positively about the level of access that they had to key LCC staff, particularly the Assistant Chief Executive (Planning, Policy and Improvement). However, a number of Hub members also felt that the relative lack of contact with elected members potentially limited the effectiveness of the Assembly.
- A number of Hub members felt that the Assembly presented a ‘good opportunity’ and had ‘potential’, but many still felt that there was not yet enough evidence that the Assembly was having a real impact on council policy.
- There was a general recognition that all of the Hubs needed to do more to diversify their memberships, as well as to work on ways for people to input into the Hubs who cannot regularly attend meetings. Related to this, there was a feeling that there needed to be more publicity for the Hubs if their membership is to grow.
- There was a desire for a Terms of Reference document that more clearly spelt out the nature of the responsibilities of different stakeholders in the Assembly.
- There was confusion by a number of Hub members about the level of resource devoted to the different Hubs and the wider Assembly, although most Hub members indicated that they would like to see more resources devoted to it (such as the reimbursement of travel costs).
- There was no clear consensus about the format and timing of Hub meetings. Some hub members hoped for a more formal, business-like approach with a higher level of effort put into work between meetings by hub members. Others wished for a more informal approach, where meetings were more like ‘events’. However, there was a clear view that more use should be made of themed meetings.

Key findings from the discussions with LCC staff included the following:

- There are widely variable perceptions of the Equalities Assembly across LCC, and vastly differing levels of knowledge about it.
- Many council services that have their own consultation and involvement mechanisms were uncertain about what they would gain from interaction with the Equalities Assembly. Services that focused on specific geographical areas or user populations felt that the Assembly was unlikely to include a large enough sample of the types of respondents with whom these services needed to consult.
• LCC staff often expressed that they would need more information about the nature of the Hubs (their size, composition, and information about the community networks that Hub members represented) before actively approaching them for consultation.
• Many LCC staff wanted more publicity circulated about the Hubs, and thought that the Hubs needed a stronger internet presence with meeting dates and times, downloadable minutes, and other documents.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Based on the information provided by Hub members and LCC employees, there are several challenges that face the Equalities Assembly as it continues to evolve:

• There remains a tension in the minds of both Hub members and LCC employees regarding whether the Assembly is a council-led or community-led structure.
• There also remain challenges in terms of developing the relationships between the Assembly and local third sector organisations.
• Ongoing work must also take place regarding how the Assembly relates to other consultation and involvement mechanisms in the Council, to more clearly identify those areas that show the most promise for meaningful interaction with the Assembly.
• There needs to be ongoing discussions about if and how the Hubs will become self-organising in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the input provided by participants in this evaluation, and the challenges faced by the Equalities Assembly, the full report makes the following recommendations.

1. Terms of reference: Working collaboratively with hub members, it is recommended that the Equality Team re-draft the terms of reference for the Equalities Assembly. These terms of reference should more clearly define the group’s purpose as well as roles, responsibilities, and expectations within the Equalities Assembly. These terms of reference should set responsibilities not only for Hub Reps, Hub Members, and the Equality Team, but should also set expectations for how other service areas/directorates respond to requests from the Assembly. Several hub members who also worked as employees of LCC also specifically asked for clearer guidance about how to manage their dual roles/identities within hub meetings. If (as implied in the Red Paint Report) the goal of LCC is for the hubs to ultimately become self-organising, then this should also be made explicit in the terms of reference.

2. Publicity and information: It is recommended that the Equality Team conduct a review of its publicity and information materials, both those aimed at the public and those designed for LCC staff. This review should actively involve members of the hubs. It is recommended that this review include:
   • A review of the web presence on the external LCC site: for example, no mention is made of the Equalities Assembly on the Get Involved site where members of the public can identify opportunities to participate in LCC. There is currently no website where interested members of the public can download key documents related to the Assembly (such as meeting agendas and minutes), nor is there a regularly updated site where meetings times and dates can be quickly ascertained.

• The LCC website still contains information that urgently needs updating. For example, the document ‘The Work of the Equality Team’ (on the Council’s public facing Equality, Diversity and Cohesion page)\(^4\) still advertises Women Speak Out!, REAF, and the Access Advisory Group rather than the Equalities Assembly.

• More active and systematic use should be made of hub members in disseminating information about the Assembly and developing its database. Hub members can often tap into information and publicity networks that are free or low cost, and participating in disseminating information about the hub should be considered an expectation of membership.

• The planned creation of a newsletter was considered by many hub members to be a positive step; this newsletter should be widely disseminated with the intention of attracting new participants to the Equalities Assembly.

3. Increased use of themed meetings: The idea of giving meetings stronger, more focused themes was embraced by nearly all of the hub members who were interviewed. Not only would this give meetings a clearer focus, but it would make the job of promoting meetings more effective, as members of the public could make more informed decisions about what to expect at meetings. Some of these meetings would likely still be of single hubs, but others could involve multiple hubs working in a focused way on particular themes. These themes could be approached in the form of working subgroups.

4. Promote awareness in the hubs of upcoming consultation opportunities through Leeds Talking Point and other mechanisms: A regular review of Talking Point by Hub Reps would potentially allow hubs to more clearly identify opportunities for participation and involvement in issues that will be up for wider consultation in the city. It is recommended that a regular, systematic review of Talking Point be embedded in Hub Reps meetings and Hub Reps Planning Meetings.

5. Resourcing: Resourcing proved to be one of the most widely discussed issues by hub members. It is recommended that the Equality Team work to promote transparency and open discussion amongst the hubs about resource issues (i.e. which organisations receive funding related to the Equalities Assembly, how is that money spent, and with what expectations).

• In the short term, the Equality Team should seek to prepare a discussion document, for circulation to all hubs, outlining the current levels of expenditure on different hub activities (including estimates of the volume of staff time that the administration of the Equalities Assembly consumes, the cost of meeting access requirements, etc). This will provide an informed basis on which future discussions regarding resourcing can build. A document of this kind could reduce potential misunderstandings about the level of commitment of LCC to the Assembly, while reducing (mis-)information that circulates about ‘who gets what’ in different hubs.

• Building on the above, it is recommended that the Equality Team and the hubs collaboratively review all existing and future service level agreements regarding the Equalities Assembly. The researcher is not fully aware of the details of all of the funding arrangements in place (although there are currently service arrangement agreements in place to support the BME and Disability hubs). It is recommended that a review take place of these arrangements to make fully open and transparent to all hub members the rationale for these agreements and to clarify that there is full agreement amongst the Equality Team and the relevant

\(^4\) http://www.leeds.gov.uk/Council_and_democracy/Equality_and_diversity.aspx
organisations about the types of services to be provided. If it is indeed the goal of
the Equality Team that hubs eventually become self-organising, then any service-
level agreements need to be designed with this goal in mind.

6. **Continue to explore avenues for hub participation in the Equality Impact
Assessment (EIA) process.** Hub members, while cautious, often felt strongly that
this was an area of strong potential interest. Hub members felt that, if it seemed that
they were genuinely able to input into the process, this could serve as a means to
convince sceptical members of the public that participation in the hubs was a
worthwhile expenditure of their time. However, it must also be borne in mind that
different hubs will have different levels of interest, different skill sets, and different
levels of capacity to engage with this process.

7. **Strengthen and encourage mechanisms to allow members who cannot attend
meetings to provide input to the hubs:** As suggested under publicity and
information, making all documents and minutes accessible via the web would allow a
greater number of people who may be interested in the work of the hubs to provide
input by other means rather than attending meetings.

8. **Embed discussions about the diversity of the hubs in the structure of hub
meetings:** It was broadly recognised by hub members and LCC staff that there is still
work to be done to improve the diversity of representation of different hubs. It is
recommended that on an annual basis Hub Reps officially submit a discussion
document that gives consideration to the composition of their hubs over the past year
and which discusses any ongoing efforts to reach out to groups that are seemingly
under-represented.

9. **Reconsider ways in which gender and young people’s issues can be
incorporated into the Assembly.** For many LCC staff, the lack of formal
consideration of these areas within the Assembly was considered a serious gap and
affected the reputation of the Assembly.

10. **(Re-)initiate high level discussions about the relationship between the BME
Strategic Partnership and the BME Hub.** This relationship continues to be confusing
to hub members (as well as some employees in certain council services), and has not
been resolved to their satisfaction. If there is not to be formal co-operation between
these two separate groups, then this needs to be more carefully explained to those
affected.