

Diversity Peer Challenge

Northwards Housing

15 – 17 February 2011

Report

1. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of a Diversity Peer Challenge organised by Local Government Improvement and Development and carried out by its trained peers. The report satisfies the requirements of the Social Housing Equality Framework for an external assessment at the Excellent Level. The Peer Challenge is designed to validate a housing organisation's own self-assessment at the Excellent Level by considering documentary evidence and by carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees and other stakeholders.

The basis for the Peer Challenge is a benchmark against five areas of performance. They are:

- Knowing your communities and equality mapping
- Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment
- Community engagement and satisfaction
- Responsive services and customer care
- A modern and diverse workforce.

The Peer Challenge is not an inspection, rather it offers an external assessment of an organisation's own judgement of itself against the Social Housing Equality Framework benchmark, by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equality/diversity agenda in their own organisations.

Peers were:

Cllr David Simmonds – LB Hillingdon
Kirsty Hopkins- Newcastle City Council
Hibou Drusden – South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service
Gill Elliott – LG Improvement and Development

The team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by Northwards Housing and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions.

1. Following this Diversity Peer Challenge, the peer team has reached the conclusion that

Northwards Housing has satisfied the criteria for the Excellent Level of the Equality Framework. Our reasons for making this recommendation are as follows:

- Northwards Housing puts its tenants at the heart of everything it does and this ethos is understood and implemented by all levels of staff. It has an in-depth and up to date understanding of its resident profile with detailed data including equalities and

diversity on 79 per cent of residents. These are the cornerstones of its success in integrating equality and diversity across all it does.

- The Board, its Chair and Chief Executive provide strong leadership and commitment to equalities and diversity. They have a high personal profile as leaders on diversity and equality within the organisation. They challenge the organisation and take opportunities to compare it with others to ensure that objectives are met.
- Tenants, partners, and other associated organisations show a high level of confidence that Northwards Housing takes their views into account in delivering services. They provided many examples of effective engagement practices at all levels. This included regular reviewing of practice and policy to ensure that emerging needs are being addressed. The organisation is recognised by its partners as playing a key role in trying to improve the lives of its tenants in North Manchester and in the community cohesion of the area. It is regarded as a leader on equalities and diversity amongst comparable organisations serving the area.
- The organisation has effectively mainstreamed equalities and diversity throughout. Managers and staff are all highly committed to providing an excellent service to its customers. They feel well trained and empowered to confidently serve their communities and respond creatively to the needs of tenants and residents. Equalities and diversity is integrated successfully throughout management processes and equality objectives are included in service plans and are effectively performance managed.
- Northwards Housing has worked very closely with its contractors to deliver the Decent Homes Programme in a way which has taken account of the needs of its diverse communities. It provides an excellent service to all its tenants and residents and responds quickly and effectively to feedback including putting in place tailored services to meet the needs of diverse groups. It prioritises and resources a range of good quality engagement mechanisms across all communities which has resulted in a close working relationship with tenants and residents to create vibrant and safe communities.

2. At the present time we feel that some of the major challenges for Northwards Housing's diversity agenda are:

- The organisation is well aware of the challenges posed by its financial situation, and needs to ensure that its values and expertise around equalities and diversity are reflected in future arrangements if the achievements to date are to be taken forward in the challenging times ahead, when all its partners are also making cuts.
- The financial challenge developing in the Housing Revenue Account will require new ways of working and the organisation will be challenged to maintain its momentum on diversity issues in this context. Northwards Housing will need to ensure equality impact assessments are used by its leaders at early stages to inform strategic decision making on key issues.

- Funding issues may challenge the future capacity to continue some of its engagement activities e.g. those with young people.
- Northward Housing will need to prioritise and resource tackling equality issues in Neighbourhood Services, to sustain excellence, for instance in meeting the needs of newly arrived communities, community cohesion and effectively tackling hate crime. This will be important in demonstrating excellence in equality as the organisation moves into a bidding exercise with Manchester City Council in 2012.
- The significant trust demonstrated in Northwards Housing's community leadership role by voluntary and community partners will be increasingly important in maintaining safe and vibrant communities through the cuts. Community partners are looking to Northwards Housing to bring them all together to allow collaborative opportunities to be identified to plug new gaps in services as they arise.
- At present the city council does not actively test the performance of the organisation, preferring to monitor by anecdotal feedback and complaints levels. This relationship could be developed further, in line with the arrangements set up with other housing bodies in the city council area, to build awareness of the organisation's successes with this key partner.
- It appears that Equalities and Diversity Resident Forums are not being used as effectively as they could be. The rich intelligence from these forums on community needs and concerns needs to be used consistently and acted upon at all levels of the organisation. While Northwards Housing has supported a widening range of communities to raise their voice there may be some dynamic, complex areas of need, for instance refugees, and survivors of hate crimes, where new techniques of involvement need to be identified jointly with these groups and communities.
- Northwards Housing does have extensive partnership involvement to tackle hate crime, but there is a need to focus now on a better understanding of the specific dynamics of hate crime against lesbian, gay and bi-sexual, black and minority ethnic, trans and disabled people by getting closer to these communities and listening and learning about the victim perspective and their range of needs and demonstrating support to these communities.
- Northwards will need to monitor the emerging challenges that arise from changes in partner organisations. For example, Greater Manchester Police are considering removing their community relations officers and this would have an impact as would changes in advice services from Manchester City Council

To help the organisation improve we have made a number of recommendations.

1. The board could reflect on its arrangements for carrying out its work to see how they could make it easier for a more diverse range of board members to participate.
2. Reconsider how you can start to meet your targets for a representative workforce particularly at senior management level. e.g. consideration could be given to advertising all vacancies internally and externally and reviewing advertising media

to include more publications for black and minority ethnic (BAME) and disabled people.

3. Challenge yourselves to increase your residents' profile beyond 79% by making best use of contact with residents (eg through gas servicing) and promoting the positive impact resident profiling has had.

4. Support the Equalities and Diversity Forums to become community led by nominating their own chairs, setting their own agenda, listening to the issues that are important to the community representatives and finding ways to use the learning from the forums to change policy and practice.

3. Detailed findings

31 Knowing your communities and equality mapping

Strengths

- There was evidence of the effective use of profiling to ensure that services are fulfilling the diversity objectives set, and good examples of people from particular equality strands encouraging others to provide information that helps the organisation understand its customers and workforce. N H contractors and its own staff such as neighbourhood wardens contribute relevant information about the access and communication needs of individual customers. Often these are identified by the pre-entry survey.

- NH has a good understanding of the community cohesion dynamics in its area and the changing nature of the community. e.g. the increasing BAME population in the Cheetham area.

- There was evidence of engagement with key people such as local councillors and city council staff who could provide intelligence about developments in the local community.

- Street level briefings are made available to managers working in particular areas, giving them detailed information about the composition of the local community in order to anticipate issues that may arise.

- NH shares quantitative and qualitative intelligence with partners. e.g. with the police on anti-social behaviour and with contractors on the communication needs of tenants. Customer profile information was used to by the fire and rescue service to identify the most vulnerable tenants when carrying out fire risk assessments.

Areas for improvement:

- Although Northwards Housing is “becoming more welcoming” to engagement with faith groups that could assist its work, this is at a relatively early stage and needs to be developed.

- Work with vulnerable tenants is an area for development already identified by the organisation, with a desire expressed to develop a better understanding of hate crime in the area in particular. A recent decision to procure mapping systems will help this work move forward.
- There was a recognition that the cost of gathering data, for example for the Audit Commission, had been disproportionate to the value of the information and in a new lighter touch regulatory regime the organisation has the opportunity to align data gathering more closely to its priorities.

3.2 Place shaping, leadership, partnership and organisational commitment

Highlights/Notable practices

- Northwards Housing is led by a board which is broadly representative of the community that it serves. It involves local stakeholders who have been brought up through the different engagement mechanisms of the organisation to take part in strategic decision making. All board members complete an induction programme and equalities and diversity is an important element of this. NH has made efforts to increase the black and minority ethnicity of its governance structures (boards and sub-boards) and this has been done in a way that ensures the involvement is at all levels which is sustainable for individuals.
- The board Chair, who also serves as the board equality champion, and the Chief Executive who fulfils the equivalent officer role, provide high level support for equalities and diversity. The Chief Executive has provided visible support for new initiatives like the Better Lives Project which is a multi agency approach targeting persistent problem families and has personally mentored other new projects. Staff and involved residents value his leadership style of open door engagement, honesty and openness which builds enormous trust and loyalty.
- The organisation has a dedicated equality and diversity officer who together with her manager have an excellent reputation amongst diverse groups of residents for supporting and motivating engagement and of growing specialist capacity for the organisation in equalities and diversity.
- Equalities is handled “collectively and corporately” with a clear understanding of the connections between the policy direction set by the city council in its community strategy, NH team improvement plans and the delivery of frontline services to residents. This is integrated with the key strategies of the city council, notably regeneration.
- The organisation recognises that diversity is not a back office function, or about box-ticking. It has used its forums to recruit stakeholders into other roles where they have built its capacity to engage more widely. The Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual and Transgender (LGBT) and Disability Involvement Groups’ work being good examples of this. This has been supported by the Resident Involvement Officers which has helped to move diversity work into the mainstream of the organisation.

- Participation in benchmarking has helped the organisation to develop a high degree of self awareness which includes a realistic appraisal of the challenges it faces such as changes to housing benefits regulations and the funding for social housing.
- The Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) review group has contributed to the effective use of EqIAs across the organisation by developing managers' understanding of their potential value in the regeneration of North Manchester. This is helping to stabilise and increase the area's population and has provided funding for a number of youth projects; apprenticeship scheme and other schemes for getting young people into work.
- There is good partnership working between NH and the community and voluntary sector. Everyone is clear about who to contact to share information. "On partnership working around community issues and needs, Northwards does above and beyond" was the comment from one voluntary sector partner. "Working with partners is second nature" was a recurring message heard throughout the challenge.
- Contractors commented that Northwards Housing is "ahead of the game" on equalities and diversity. It is clear that the organisation has a close working relationship with its contractors. In some cases they share offices, giving a sense of partnership working. Contractors attend area panels to ensure they are seen as transparent. Equality performance indicators are included in contracts covering local employment, employee diversity profiles and apprenticeships. Progress against these are monitored regularly and the organisation and its contractors work together to address any issues. For example, when the take up of apprenticeships dropped, the building futures programme was introduced.
- Contractors are included in relevant EqIAs. e.g. on the policy to introduce hand held devices. Good practice is shared by NH and its contractors e.g. one contractor did not include all equality strands in their application forms. After working with NH to develop this, the new forms were introduced regionally and nationally by the whole organisation. Contractors put a lot back into the community through the offer of placements, giving advice about trades to schools and providing apprenticeships. Contractors are fully trained in NH values and objectives. They also have their own comprehensive training eg Respect training. Putting the tenant at the heart and a commitment to equalities is clearly shared by contractors. NH regularly audits its contractors training policies and courses. Contractors' progress against equality and diversity actions takes place at board and sub-committee level. This is integrated into the performance management framework.
- All members of staff are proactive in helping to combat hate crime and anti-social behaviour. They readily report any signs or symptoms that they see and work with relevant partners to address them.
- Northwards Housing has provided funding for a number of projects supporting young people such as apprenticeships. It is working with neighbouring Salix Homes, and local councils on projects like the "Improving Your Neighbourhood" project in the Broughton and Cheetham areas.

Areas for improvement

- There was evidence that although tenants are extensively consulted, they could be more involved in making decisions, especially at estate level. There was a sense from the feedback from some tenants that the organisation could be perceived as somewhat paternalistic rather than empowering tenants.
- Data and information sharing is not always consistent across the partnerships at a strategic level, despite good use of intelligence at an operational level. For example, the police expressed a view that they share information but that this is not always reciprocated and there is a lack of clarity about who had access to what data between Northwards Housing and Manchester City Council. It was however clear that this is not a barrier to effective day to day operations but rather a query about strategic planning given these concerns.
- The equality and diversity forums are a valuable mechanism for gaining insight into the community's needs and concerns. Currently it appears that communications tends to be rather one directional from Northwards Housing and the groups are tending to be used to inform members rather than to create a dialogue enabling feedback to be given and acted upon.
- Some evidence was given that Northwards Housing does not deal effectively with all incidences of hate crime and would benefit from an in depth examination involving the forums to inform their future policy in this respect. Neighbourhood Services would benefit from allowing community scrutiny to inform their understanding and approach. When reviewing hate crime good practice could be shared from Newcastle ARCH.
- NH does not yet have a diverse senior management team. This may be important when moving forward and leading community cohesion.
- NH could use EqlAs more effectively to inform senior/board decision making on key strategic areas e.g. budget reduction option scenarios. EqlA's need to be undertaken at an earlier stage in decision making to allow NH leaders to identify which options can best mitigate adverse impact and so influence the decision.

3.3 Customer engagement and satisfaction

Strengths

- Satisfaction rates amongst tenants are consistently high. Tenants who do not wish to, or are unable to use the handheld device are able to use other methods to give their feedback. Satisfaction is monitored quarterly, including trend analysis. Reports on satisfaction rates also go to the area panels. As tenants have several repair visits throughout the year equalities information is not collected on each visit but rather customer profile data is cross analysed and also used to map trends on the satisfaction of different groups. The post inspection team investigate any dissatisfaction and regularly meet with the complaints panel. One example is a faith group who raised the need for better facilities for cultural bathing – the local Area Panel are being engaged to agree how to promote services available to tenants.

- Members of area panels are able to go on training so that they can fulfil their roles effectively, for example a chair of a panel was able to attend training on chairing skills.
- There was evidence of customer satisfaction data being used to identify where certain groups were less satisfied than the wider customer cohort. Northwards have been proactive in addressing LGBT issues in service delivery and when they identified that LGBT tenants were less satisfied with services than other tenants, they organised training for contracted staff resulting in an increase in satisfaction.
- Northwards Housing has a wide range of resident forums to facilitate engagement including area panels, disability focus groups, the communications forum, the high rise living forum, and the youth involvement project. Forums are open and accessible in relation to agendas and members feel they are professionally facilitated. Forums can discuss problems, share ideas and plan activities. Many meet at the area offices. Ongoing efforts are made to ensure all groups can participate and customer profiling is used to directly market events and encourage people to participate.
- The Communications Forum works with NH to oversee the design of information documents for tenants such as the resident's handbook and the annual report. Documents are checked by the forum to ensure they meet the local standard and are easy to read and accessible. Where appropriate they are given the "Tenant Friendly" seal of approval.
- Open days were used to inform tenants about the options available through the Decent Homes programme. This also provided tenants with the opportunity to raise concerns about access. The customer profile database was also used to target the communication programme. For example in Cheetham, posters about events were put in take- aways and work was done with the mosque leaders. Staff who could speak different languages also attended, so that everyone in the community could take part fully.
- Northwards Housing has developed a tenants' excellence committee to carry out a more in depth scrutiny of its services. Tenants on the committee can select which areas of the service they want to examine. Members of the group have received tailored training which included equalities and diversity.
- Residents consistently expressed the view that contacting the organisation is straightforward. We heard evidence that NH is proactive when things go wrong for residents, being willing to apologise for mistakes and going beyond the call of duty for vulnerable residents and those who have been victims of crime.
- NH's investment in Resident Involvement Officers has helped it engage a range of young people including those at risk of exclusion in ways which have resulted in the young people themselves leading activities. The "Flash the Cash" initiative has been crucial to helping this happen. The excellent work of the resident involvement officers in engaging with young people is a crucial aspect of how NH prevents community exclusion and is a key aspect for continuing prevention work. Young people have good opportunities to raise their voices about their own interests and agenda.

Areas for improvement

- There was feedback from several quarters that there still exists something of a 'them and us' relationship between tenants and NH, which although it had improved significantly since the creation of NH remains a barrier to engagement for some tenants.
- Tenants who make suggestions would appreciate feedback about how they have been implemented. There was positive feedback about the responsiveness of the organisation generally but it was felt by some tenants that their contributions should be celebrated more, which in turn would encourage others to come forward with their ideas.
- There was a challenge around how well Northwards engages with those trouble-free tenants who pay their own rent and make no fuss about anything, with evidence being presented that better engagement earlier would prevent some serious issues arising later on, such as financial or health problems where only at crisis point was it realised that support was required.
- Members of the involvement forum thought there were still gaps in the communication with contractors that need to be investigated.
- The role of the equality forums in influencing strategic decisions could be better developed.

3.4 Responsive services, access and customer care

Highlights/Notable practices

- Team improvement plans are derived in a clear manner from higher level strategies and policies so that the link between overall corporate objectives and team objectives can be seen.
- NH staff clearly know their tenants well, what their needs are, and are responsive to them. An example was during the heavy snow when wardens visited vulnerable tenants to provide support. Staff understand the real access needs of vulnerable tenants, for example they appreciate that the difference between accessing or not accessing a service, can be as basic as not being able to afford the bus fare. Their confidence and knowledge allows them to network effectively to problem solve around challenges in supporting residents with social issues.
- There are various ways for tenants to contact NH – by telephone, in person, at area offices, on-line, text, or in writing. A choice of appointments is offered for repairs including Wednesdays evenings and Saturday mornings. As far as possible services are provided when it is convenient for tenants. As part of the Decent Homes programme the Manchester Equipment and Adaptations Partnership (MEAP) were able to carry out adaptations at the same time which meant residents were only disturbed once.

- NH's approach to anti social behaviour is to support and enforce, identifying when each intervention is going to be effective. Their investment with their partners in new projects for residents demonstrates commitment to tackling the causes of the problem.
- NH has piloted a scheme to provide improved service from the customer call centre for vulnerable tenants with learning disabilities or mental health issues. The One 2 One scheme provides these tenants with a direct number to an operative who has been trained to deal with their communication needs. Users and their carers are highly complimentary about the scheme.
- NH has continued to invest in wardens and estate caretakers. Staff feel this is crucial to ensuring cohesion and identifying and supporting vulnerable tenants.
- NH has a well developed and effective approach to tackling domestic violence. They work with partners to implement a range of options for victims, residents and potential residents at risk of domestic violence. Staff work hard to keep abreast of new developments and opportunities for increasing their skills and knowledge in this area.
- NH's performance approach and tools allows equality and diversity action planning to be mainstreamed across all service areas and implementation to be monitored and reported effectively. This could extend to developing scrutiny by equality and diversity forums in the future.

Areas for improvement

- It was noted that there were gaps in services towards the north of the area covered by Northwards, with many services aimed at BAME and refugee residents located towards the city and some distance from people who need access to them. This was highlighted as a challenge for some partners when trying to signpost residents towards services.
- Although described frequently as a highly responsive organisation, there was feedback from several sources that the responsiveness to general customer service enquiries such as repair requests was not consistently good.
- NH may need to extend its partnership links to specialist BAME women's services to be able to further improve their domestic abuse policies for BAME residents.
- The One 2 One pilot service for disabled residents is an excellent initiative which users appreciate and rely on. In developing this service in the future, close involvement of existing users would help to maintain the quality of service as it expands.

3.5 A progressive and diverse workforce

Highlights/Notable practices

- The employee equality group, Fairground, has been used to encourage LGBT staff to provide diversity information by offering encouragement from other LGBT staff members and building confidence in the benefits of gathering the data.
- NH supports a number of employee groups including LGBT, Disability, Health and Wellbeing. It is currently assessing the interest in a cultural awareness group. The Disability and LGBT Employee Groups are shared with neighbouring housing organisation Eastlands Homes, with both organisations working together to develop staff engagement. Staff who transferred to Northwards from the Council have been able to bring forward their experience and has provided continuity of engagement since before Northwards was created.
- NH has won a “Women in Construction” award for its pro-active steps to increase the number of females working in the traditionally male dominated construction industry.
- NH has high satisfaction levels across all staff groups. It has been placed 78th in the Sunday Times list of the top 100 public sector companies to work for. NH staff feel valued by the organisation and appreciate the staff awards and incentive schemes. Staff are encouraged to submit ideas for improvement. They receive £10 for each idea which merits further investigation and £35 if the idea is implemented.
- Staff regard NH as their “employer of choice” giving them flexibility when they need it and allowing them to innovate for excellence in customer service. People feel empowered to set up effective teams and peer working systems which ensure jobs get done. Staff acknowledge that NH is encouraging a social conscience in its workforce through NICE days (one day a year paid time off per employee to do community work) and training which boosts their confidence to work with vulnerable clients. Staff said that they were encouraged, trained and well supported to do their jobs.
- NH is currently refreshing its recruitment policy to make it more flexible and less bureaucratic. The policy aims to avoid having “tokenistic” recruitment panels but wants managers to give more consideration to where they advertise vacancies. Positive action in shortlisting activities goes beyond disability to give preference to applicants from north Manchester, with particular focus on those who are unemployed for entry level jobs.
- NH has a wide range of innovative and creative ways of meeting the equality and diversity training needs of staff. All staff receive training on equalities and diversity to enable them to do their jobs. Both staff and contractors have been trained on safeguarding children and to spot the signs and symptoms of abuse and domestic violence. Staff commented that the theatre training on equalities was the “most interesting” they had ever been on and that the training was “invaluable”.
- Middle managers have a pro-active, collaborative and confident approach to designing and managing housing services for diverse communities.
- Staff are actively asked for their views and ideas for example, around making improvements and efficiencies. They understand the need for efficiencies. The Chief Executive has been providing weekly updates to staff on the budget position.

This included an initial face to face meeting. The emphasis on good communication with staff is evident when talking to them about arrangements for handovers and absences.

- Northwards has provided over two hundred apprenticeships through the Impact Manchester Procurement framework. These have been offered in professional areas as well as trades. Displaced apprentices have been taken on to complete the scheme and gain their qualification.
- The Staff Support Plan scheme helps staff with particular needs, including those arising from ill health or disability, to continue to work effectively by ensuring that support, including reasonable adaptations is available to address their issues in the workplace.

Areas for improvement

- Despite efforts to support managers and manage talent for upward diversity NH has not been able to significantly increase the under-representation of BAME and disabled managers in its top 5 per cent of earners. There has been little recruitment in recent years and for at least the next two years the trend will be to lose staff due to budget cuts.
- 12 per cent of employees are from a BAME background against a target for BAME employees of 13 per cent. However it is clear that the BAME population has grown significantly since the 12 per cent recorded in the 2001 census. Northwards should be updating their figures for North Manchester from data held by partners e.g. via school records or the Office of National statistics. It is aware that BAME numbers have risen in several areas of north Manchester. There may be a need for the leadership to challenge more to ensure that NH drives change in the composition of the workforce.
- Workforce profiling could be done in more depth to look at where minority employees are in the organisation in terms of grades and job roles. This would give an indication of where more might be done to help the organisation reach its targets for the top 5 per cent of earners.
- EqIAS on employment policies appear to be completed as part of the “sign off” process rather than as part of the policy development stage when they could inform and shape the policy. Staff groups could be involved with this to ensure that their views are taken into account.

5. Examples of innovative projects and initiatives

- One 2 One is the newly piloted service for residents with special needs and is greatly valued. This is a good practice example of providing a service through a contractor that is flexible to address the needs of residents but still using the same efficient processes.
- “NICE Days” where staff are given paid time off to do community work was shown to be a means of fostering staff participation in the community that they serve. Another benefit of the scheme is that many staff said that NICE days helped them

see beyond superficial issues so that they can understand the underlying causes of problems such as anti-social behaviour and how those tenants involved in anti-social behaviour can be persuaded to change.

- The Tenant Friendly stamp is an example of good practice in ensuring that the information provided to tenants is clear and easily understood.

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