

Cabinet – 21 October 2021

Reference from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 14 September 2021

179. Race Equality in Harrow Council

The Committee received the Race Equality in Harrow Council report, which set the council's strategic vision for race equality. The report launched a series of new corporate objectives designed to ensure that the council's policies and practices would be fair and equitable for all staff in the workplace, with a focus on race and ethnicity.

The portfolio holder for Equalities and Public Health, Councillor Krishna Suresh, introduced the report and highlighted the need for equality, diversity and inclusion to be actively improved upon within the working environment of Harrow Council. The report had examined Harrow Council's role as an employer and had commissioned an independent race review, with engagement with employees having taken place alongside this review. It was noted that this report would support a series of new corporate objectives for Harrow Council which would ensure that policies and practices were fair and equitable for all staff.

The Chief Executive added that though there had been attempts in the past to tackle race inequality and that more should have been changed then. It was important that on this occasion the Council aimed to tackle this issue, so much so that the Council should not have to repeat the work that had been done in this review and action plan. It was also noted by the Chief Executive that this action plan should be tested periodically challenged and maintained, in order to be sustainable.

The report was presented by an Officer in brief. It was highlighted that:

- That the race equality report had represented the Council's corporate approach to race equality as well as the wider equality, diversity and inclusion agenda. It was also in response to the independent race review that had taken place earlier in 2021.
- Over 230 staff members were involved during the consultation.
- Though the report had focused on race and ethnicity it was noted that the strategic approach taken could act as a framework that would underpin the Council's equality, diversity and inclusion strategy, which would be produced during early 2022.

- The Council's high-level approach centred around: safe spaces to be created; for the culture and behaviour of the organisation to be changed through leadership, training and development as well as recruitment and retention.
- The work that was undertaken within this report were underpinned by the strategic principles as outlined in the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategic Framework. Research took the form of both qualitative and quantitative research, for example the independent race review conducted by Dr Patrick Vernon and the analysis of the workforce profile and ethnicity pay gap review.
- Key themes that had emerged from the independent race review included: psychological safety, racism in the workplace, challenges with management behaviour, lack of career opportunities for black, Asian and multi-ethnic staff, impact of racism on health and well-being, race and sexism as well as institutional and structural racism.
- That the council had responded to the independent race review's five recommendations, where clear commitments had been made to these recommendations in order for the action plan to have the best possible outcome.
- As well as the corporate action there were plans outlined for a directorate action plan to take place. In addition, there would be service level EDI objectives to be included in all service plans and embedding SMART EDI objectives for all staff members. Finally, initiatives would be reviewed, to ensure EDI objectives were met.

The Chair thanked the officer for their presentation and opened the floor to Members for questions, which were answered as followed:

Q. How were you going to take Members through the process and include Members to be trained and developed on EDI?

The Chief Executive explained that Members had been involved in the scrutiny and approval of the strategy. Member engagement needs to be built and this would be done through influencing the strategy through the working group but also by the strategy being challenged through scrutiny. In addition, with the agreement from Members, it was important to make sure Member processes were just as appropriate as Officer processes. It would be encouraged for Members to sign up to member training sessions that the Council would provide the appropriate support, advice and guidance.

Q. Regarding the top 5% of senior staff, being more representative of the overall resident population by 2025. What methods would be used to achieve that?

The Chief Executive responded by noting that the achievability of this was based on a number of factors. The first being turnover, which was why 2025 was set as the deadline. The Chief Executive noted that a new Corporate

Director had recently started at Harrow Council, who was the most senior non-white woman with the organisation. The recruitment process was done through new techniques, it was made sure that the Chief Officers Appointment Panel was appropriately balanced from a representation perspective, the recruitment partner was recruited based on their track record around diversity and inclusion, with diversity built into every stage of recruitment process.

During this process best practice was followed and it was found that there were a greater proportion of diverse applicants. This had demonstrated that when recruitment was done differently it had made a difference to people's motivation in coming forward to apply.

The Director of HR and Organisational Development added that it was important to be consistently more creative, to be focused on the importance and benefits of diversity, for it to be ensured that different skills and backgrounds were being valued. They also added that it was important for this to be tackled step by step and highlighted that there was a glass ceiling at a certain grade for Black, Asian and multi-ethnic staff. Therefore, it was important for career development opportunities to be promoted within the organisation, as it was just as important to foster our current workforce being balanced with recruitment from a more diverse talent pool.

The Leader of the Council also added that the Council needed to change the way it recruited staff through better training. In addition, equality train had been provided for Members in the past, there possibly should be some compulsory training moving forward.

Q. Had there been instances where Harrow Council had breached the Equalities Act 2010?

The Chief Executive noted that he was not aware of any breaches of the Equalities Act 2010 and noted that there was a big difference between being legally compliant and for best practice to be actioned, with this report being focused on how the Council moves from legal compliance to actual best practice.

Q. What were your thoughts on labelling ethnicities as there was a concern surrounding tabulating ethnicities.

An officer explained this had been considered throughout the process, when terminology was concerned and to not homogenise groups because that would risk a one-size fits all approach being produced. However, once the work force profile data had been examined, there was the ability to look at particular groups where there were particular issues around racial inequality, racism or pay gap. In addition, guidance was issue to managers earlier this year that encouraged managers to not use the BAME terminology and to not homogenise Black, Asian and multi-ethnic but to be specific around who they were talking about when policies were being developed. The report did use the terminology Black, Asian and multi-ethnic as opposed to one word being used describe various multiple identities.

Q. Does the figure 1 on page 29 create more confusion? If a particular ethnicity was underrepresented, does it mean that there would be a focus on improving that underrepresentation?

An Officer explained that there were a number of ways that the data could have been presented in order for underrepresentation to be explained. Figure 2 had shown that within each of the Directorates where some of our staff were. Figure 3 was a breakdown of the pay bands within ethnic groups, it was found that there was more of a fairer representation of white staff across the organisation and the pay bands compared to black, Asian and multi-ethnic groups. These figures were there to show underrepresentation in senior graded roles for black, Asian and multi-ethnic groups. It was noted that the information could be presented differently in order for a better understanding to be realised.

The Chief Executive added that this was more to do with the data being used to get managers to think more differently and more creatively and to get managers to think about diversity within their team. In addition, there was a need for evidence of what has happened previously to be provided in order for it to be figured out where in the recruitment process improvements need to be made.

Q. Could we get confirmation that the training would be delivered by people with lived experience? As the optics of that were really important. In addition, could the truth and reconciliation meetings be explained further? Were we confident in the action plan that microaggressions would be picked up and addressed?

An officer explained that work had been done with a provider who have had substantial experience in delivering EDI training to corporate organisations. In addition, the Council had ensured that when commissioning that provider, the Council had taken the views of staff networks and consulted around that training programme, so that the lived experiences of staff were considered.

The truth and reconciliation meetings were planned to be a series of meetings very similar to the focus groups that were organised as part of the collaboration/co-production process of creating this report. It would be hoped that they would be facilitated by Dr Patrick Vernon around some of the more difficult aspects of the race report that was published, It would be what staff had experienced and to look as those experiences with managers and senior leaders through a facilitated dialogue.

The Chief Executive added that the training, the development and the support that had been planned to be given would not be a tick box training routine but would allow lived experiences to come through and understood. It was also added that there had been a strong staff network, which had been staff lead with strong input which came from the Council's Black, Asian and multi-ethnic staff to which staff were good at holding senior leaders to account and prepared to speak of issues they had faced and would continue to do so now that the infrastructure was there.

The Director of HR and Organisation Development added that the Dignity at Work Policy was not just a policy but would be a cultural shift to allow a dialogue to continue in order for issues to be raised and for the organisation to take part in that conversation without fear, so that mistakes could be learnt from.

Q. What measure were in place for the Council to continue learning from other Councils and comparable organisations and how was Harrow Council sharing its experiences of this process with other Councils?

An Officer explained that Harrow Council had been working closely with other London Councils, with what had been learnt shared with those Councils and in addition, it was noted that Harrow Council was also a member of the London Councils Tackling Racial Inequality Group and West London Alliance Race Equality Group where it was planned to present the race action plan in November 2021.

The Director of HR and Organisational Development added that the London Chief Executives had set up the Tackling Racial Inequality Group, where Harrow had been leading the large employers work stream, this had meant that Harrow were sharing best practices across the 33 London Boroughs. In addition, there was an established knowledge hub where local authorities had shared their policies and initiatives. Therefore, there should be good learning and good practice shared on issues that were particularly challenging.

Q. How were we communicating to Harrow residents about what would the Council had been doing, what progress had been made and what were the next steps as well?

The Chief Executive outlined that it was important to make sure as an employer, the race review and action plan was carried out first. It was intended to use the approval of the action plan via the Cabinet and for that to be used as a way to communicate with local residents. It was noted that within the second phase there was the intention to take an anti-racist approach in terms of Harrow Council's services.

Q. What metrics would be used to define representative? Could the breakdown of the makeup of diversity be more specific than black, Asian and multi-ethnic?

The Chief Executive highlighted that it would take time to be completely representative but over time the makeup of Harrow Council staff would be representative of the London Borough of Harrow and that it would become more sophisticated and that it was representative within the most senior staff as possible.

It was added by the Committee Member that the intentions of ongoing improvements towards a more specific and representative makeup of staff should be outlined in future work.

Q. How would all of the issues highlighted within the background papers be tackled, as it would seem not all made it into the action plan? This included various management issues, such as low appraisal rates and poor levels of trust in some areas.

The Chief Executive noted that if the action plan had not addressed those issues in the papers, then it would be reviewed. It was also noted that other work had been planned that would support the improvement of the Council, for example, the corporate organisational development programme had sought to improve factors such as general manager competences and training which would see regular one to one meetings and performance discussions addressed. It was noted that the range of issues should possibly be referenced as being addressed in other strands of work.

Q. With some of the data on ethnicity in the workplace, there was 10% unknown, why was this the case?

An Officer explained that the 10% of unknown ethnicity was a result of missing information on forms from staff, therefore it was a case that this information had not been available for the report.

Q. Within the action plan, in terms of factors to be measured, it doesn't say what the percentage targets were. When would they be set?

An Officer explained that the percentage targets had not been set because there was currently no baseline set. This was because there was an aim to for the percentage increase to be observed as opposed to a defined baseline set. Where there had been a baseline, distinct targets had been set and where there was no baseline in the report was due to unavailable information. However, there were intentions to set baselines once the action plan had been reviewed and when more sophisticated data would be available.

Q. How would the progress of this action plan and framework be captured so that it could be implemented to other protected characteristics?

The Chief Executive explained that a lot of work needed to be done surrounding the overall improvement of leadership and management and within that particular skills or issues would need to be emphasised. It was also noted that this was one of multiple phases of the EDI agenda and it was intended for this work to be applied to other areas.

Q. How would you as Chief Executive going to ensure that each of these staff have protected time to be able to provide good mentoring?

The Chief Executive informed the Chair that a lot of co-production with senior staff had taken place in terms of the development of the action plan. It had been ensured that staff were comfortable signing up to this and so there was confidence that staff would have the right attitude towards this.

The Director of HR and Organisational Development also noted that it was emphasised that mentoring would be quality over quantity as we were sensitive to high workloads.

Q. Was there a plan for an apology to be issued and what form would it take?

The Chief Executive noted that it was in the action plan and that it was intended that subject to Cabinet approving the report the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive would write to staff and also talk to staff through one of the Chief Executive's staff briefings.

The Chair hoped that there would be talk on systemic racism and for this to be understood as an important factor that should be addressed.

The Chief Executive, Leader of the Council and Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanked the EDI and HR team for the work they had done on this report and action plan.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- Had considered and endorsed the Council's strategic approach on race equality in Harrow and the Race Equality Action Plan;
- And for the report to be forwarded to Cabinet for consideration and response.

For Consideration

Background Documents:

Supplemental Agenda of Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 14 September 2021: Report on Race Equality in Harrow Council

Minutes of Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 14 September 2021

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