

Brent Council Independent Review: Racial Inequalities

22nd - 27th January 2021

Feedback Report



Contents

Introduction	3
Executive Summary	3
Key recommendations	4
Independent review approach	4
The Independent Review Team	5
Scope and focus	5
Main findings.....	6
Leadership and organisational commitment.....	6
Designing and delivering inclusive and responsive services	6
Engaging and working with local black communities.....	7
Ensuring a diverse and engaged workforce.....	8
Governance and oversight of equality.....	8
Next steps.....	9

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and lockdown began in March 2020, the Local Government Association (LGA) suspended the physical delivery of all peer challenge and independent review work.

To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA rapidly refocused support and adopted a new remote approach. Therefore, this independent review for Brent Council was conducted remotely.

Executive Summary

Following the creation of Brent's Black Community Action Plan, the Local Government Association was commissioned by Brent Council to provide an independent review of racial inequalities in the borough.

The Black Community Action Plan (BCAP) is innovative and is a positive example of a council listening to local communities and acting in response to the communities' concerns and needs. The BCAP is a work in progress and the review team have identified ways in which the plan can be developed further and strengthened. Overall, the independent review team found that Brent Council are doing a lot on the issue of racial inequalities and in many cases doing it very well.

The independent review team found that the Chief Executive and Cabinet are clearly committed to making substantial changes for black residents and staff of the council. This came across very clearly in several interviews with senior officers, Cabinet Members, and frontline staff. The independent review team also noted that Brent Council has a very diverse Cabinet which reflects the local communities in Brent.

The staff at Brent Council are willing and engaged on this issue. They can see changes are happening and welcomed these changes. The staff were also very aware of the importance of reducing racial inequalities and the council's commitment to this aim.

Local communities welcomed the conversation about racial inequalities and want to deepen the relationship with the council, working together to reduce racial inequalities. Partners are also open to working together to tackle racial inequalities. The independent review team believe there is an opportunity for more partnership and joined up working in support of the BCAP.

Staff, community groups and partners all highlighted the need for long-term commitment to reducing racial inequalities. There were concerns that this could be seen as a short-term initiative when the problems require a long-term commitment to change and action.

It is to the council's credit that progression for black and asian staff is improving. However, there are still challenges in terms of progression to Hay grade roles (senior manager roles).

Key recommendations

1. Member leadership is very strong. This could be improved by having a publicly designated Cabinet Lead for BCAP and an annual report to Full Council on progress.
2. As BCAP evolves, the resources to support the programme of change should be revisited, as more resources are likely to be required.
3. There is tremendous commitment from Chief Executive and Senior Management Team. The review team recommends widening the ownership on this issue to all managers, making it everyone's responsibility. The council should ensure that all managers are seen to be leading on promoting anti-racism and addressing inequalities.
4. Build on the impressive work already undertaken and embed anti-racism at all levels of the organisation and into ways of working, making it part of the culture.
5. Take the existing good practice on workforce and embed that good practice into every stage of the employee journey.
6. Strengthen and further develop the Black Community Action Plan (BCAP) by making the actions SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-based). Connect it to the wider social policy development across the borough (education, employment, procurement, criminalisation, etc.).
7. As it takes a village to raise a child, consider developing a multi-agency early intervention strategy for black British boys of Caribbean heritage, aged between 6 and 12. This should address the holistic needs of families and build on the innovative family wellbeing centres initiative.
8. There are some good examples of partnership working and co-production. Take up the opportunity for more, new, and deeper partnership working with other parts of the public sector and the local community, considering co-production and co-design.
9. Consider commissioning academic research into intersectionality and intrasectionality in Brent, to design and deliver better services and tackle socioeconomic inequalities. The council should ensure the research is grounded in the communities' experience
10. Be in it for the long haul. Many of the solutions require long-term commitments, so consider a 10-year ambition with short, medium, and long-term goals.

Independent review approach

The reviewers used their experience and knowledge of local government and racial inequalities to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The team reviewed a range of information to ensure they were familiar with Brent Council, the challenges it is facing and its plans to reduce racial inequalities. The review team spent 3 days conducting the review remotely during in which time they:

- Reviewed information, statistics, reports, documentation, and plans provided by the council
- Spoke to more than 78 people including a range of council staff, representatives from the local community, partners, and councillors.
- Gathered information and views from 19 interviews and focus groups
- Collectively spent more than 212 hours to determine their findings

The Independent Review Team

The make-up of the independent review team reflected the requirements and the focus of the independent review. The independent review team were selected on the basis of their experience and expertise.

The team who delivered the independent review at Brent Council were:

- **Lead Reviewer:** Ian Thomas CBE, Chief Executive, Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames
- **Senior Officer Reviewer:** Sonia Khan, Head of Policy and Strategic Delivery, Hackney Council
- **Member Reviewer:** Cllr Johnson Situ, Cabinet Member, Southwark Council
- **Community Reviewer:** Patricia Wharton, Radio Presenter and Activist
- **Brent Staff Reviewer:** Mohammed Jama, Hubs Manager
- **LGA Shadow:** Esther Barrott, National Graduate Development Programme, LGA
- **Review Manager:** Angela Kawa, Programme Manager, LGA

Scope and focus

Brent Council asked the review team to focus on the following areas:

1. Leadership and organisational commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion for black communities
2. Designing and delivering inclusive and responsive services for black communities
3. Engaging and working with local black communities to tackle racial inequalities
4. Ensuring a diverse and engaged workforce, with support for black people to progress their careers
5. Governance and oversight of equality, diversity, inclusion, and the Black Community Action Plan (BCAP)

Main findings

Leadership and organisational commitment

Brent Council staff described the working environment as a “safe place for staff of colour” and “a place where you can be yourself”. Overall, staff at the council were very positive when speaking about the council and the commitment to tackling racial inequalities. They particularly highlighted the commitment of the Chief Executive, and clearly place a great deal of trust in her. Staff also trust the Chief Executive to deliver change in this area.

The review team found there was clear commitment and consistent leadership from the top of the organisation. The Leader and Cabinet are demonstrably committed to reducing inequalities and very aware of the impact of racial inequalities. The Chief Executive is clearly championing this agenda, but there was some concern from staff and partners about what happens in the longer-term: can the ownership on this be broadened out to other senior leaders?

The council leadership are keen to explore issues of intersectionality and intrasectionality. It is to the council’s credit this is being discussed, as these are particularly complex issues. The review team are of the view that there needs to be a deeper understanding of intersectionality and intrasectionality in order to lead on this. Given the complexity of the issues, and the need to build a greater understanding before being in a position to take appropriate action, the review team have recommended that the council commission academic research into intersectionality and intrasectionality in Brent. This research should then inform council policy and the design and delivery of services in this emerging area.

Whilst there is clear leadership within the council on the issue of racial inequalities, the review team found that the council could also take a leading role on this in the borough. The review team believe that the council should take more of a place-shaping role with partners, and lead on racial inequalities across the community and public sector in Brent. Partners are willing to work with the council to make change and improvements. The council can provide the vision and convene partners to make the changes that will be required to tackle this complex issue, going beyond policy areas and services which are under the council’s direct control.

Designing and delivering inclusive and responsive services

The review team were provided with lots of examples of good practice in service areas. These examples included the impressive work in providing translations on policy documents and the considered focus on how the council targets the community infrastructure levy at the most deprived communities. The review team believe there is an opportunity to do this more consistently across the organisation. We recommend taking this good practice and using it to inform work in other service areas.

The review team found some aspects of the council’s procurement could be improved to support the council’s policy aims. The council has recently revisited its

procurement strategy so that the requirements reflect the needs of local communities. Further work is needed to embed this throughout the organisation. The review team are aware that the council is providing some development support to small local organisations so that they are better placed to bid for work and contracts. This support is valuable and should continue.

Education is a key factor in racial inequalities, and the review team looked at the evidence provided by the council on black boys' education. The council's programme on improving educational attainment has been running for 4 years, there have been some improvements, but black British boys of Caribbean heritage are still at the bottom for attainment. We recommend developing a multi-agency early intervention strategy for black British boys of Caribbean heritage, aged between 6 and 12. This should address the holistic needs of children and families, building on the innovative family wellbeing centres initiative.

The review team were presented with evidence of good working being undertaken on the disproportionate effect of Covid-19 on black communities: health, mental health, economic inequalities etc. The Brent Poverty Commission Report also highlights a number of inequalities and the council has produced actions in response to this and is making progress on the issue. The review team encourages the council to build on this good work.

There has been lots of engagement with the community on BCAP and other key projects. The review team found this engagement could be strengthened leading to more co-design and co-production of services. The review team found some instances in individual service where co-production was beginning to emerge as an approach to some policy development and service delivery. This can be the starting point for the council to adopt this approach more widely. Engagement and discussion with the community will be key to ensuring that the BCAP is successful and continues to be embraced by the community.

Engaging and working with local black communities

The local black communities welcome the engagement with the council and the work being done on racial inequalities. However, the review team believes that more consistent feedback may be required. There were some frustrations from the community and voluntary sector around transparency and funding. During interviews with the review team, local community groups were unsure how to get on to steering groups set up by the council. The council should ensure there is transparency around the process and regularly review the membership of the steering groups.

Local black communities also welcomed the capacity and leadership building support being provided by the council. The local black communities and community groups recognised this as being a positive step forward. However, more support is needed in order for the community to access funding and bid for work. As mentioned previously in this report (in reference to procurement) the council could do more to support local groups to bid for contracts and grants.

Local black community groups expressed a clear appetite for more co-production and co-design during interviews with the review team. Currently the council does not regularly use co-production or co-design of services. Greater use of co-production

and co-design would strengthen and deepen the relationship with local black communities, ensuring their voices, concerns and requirements are not just heard but are taken into account at a far earlier stage.

Whilst the local black communities, faith leaders and black community groups were very positive in their assessment of the council and its work on racial inequalities, everyone the review team spoke to acknowledged that there is still much progress to be made on what are very complex and structural issues. Making changes to structural inequalities will take time, and a long-term commitment from the council and its leadership is needed. It is important that long-term commitment is made publicly, as there was some anxiety amongst local black community groups that BCAP could turn out to be a short-term initiative and not a long-term project. The review team recommends that the council creates a 10-year ambition on reducing racial inequalities, with short, medium, and long-term goals.

Ensuring a diverse and engaged workforce

The review team could see that a lot of work has gone into ensuring that Brent Council has a diverse workforce, reflecting the local communities. In general, the workforce does reflect the local communities in Brent, and this is to be commended.

The review team found that the council workforce is engaged and committed to making improvements. Staff praised the council for its action in this area and for the commitment of the Chief Executive. There was widespread support for the council's drive to support the progress of black staff. However, there was a sense that some staff are not sure other parts of the organisation are as committed as their part of the organisation. The council should continue to develop and promote the good work being done on recruitment, retention, and progression of black staff.

Staff across the organisation praised the mutual and reverse mentoring schemes. The training on cultural competency was also cited as being very positive. Some black members of staff were concerned that job descriptions and qualification requirements may be acting as a barrier to the progression of black staff. The review team raised these concerns with the Human Resources team, who recognised the concerns and that unnecessary qualification requirements can create barriers for progression, and they told the team that they are currently review job descriptions in light of this.

Whilst lots of progress has been made, there is more work to be done in supporting black and asian staff to progress to HAYS (senior manager grades) over the longer-term. Progress for black and Asian staff into this tier of management appears to be slower. The review team recognise that the senior management and political leadership of the council are conscious of this and are continuing to work to change this.

Governance and oversight of equality

The Chief Executive's leadership on this is clearly recognised by staff, partners, and community groups. It is important that the Chief Executive and Senior Leadership continue to have oversight of the BCAP, so this important work is driven from the top. Racial inequalities are by their nature complex and include structural issues that

require the senior leadership of the council to lead change across services and more broadly across the borough.

The review team found that more clarity is required on which Cabinet Member leads on BCAP and racial inequalities. The review team recommends publicly designating a Cabinet Lead for BCAP. We also recommend that there is an annual report to Full Council on the progress of BCAP.

As previously stated in this report, BCAP is innovative and the council is to be commended for its work on BCAP thus far. However, currently the BCAP timescales are not well-defined and the action points are not SMART, therefore it is hard for the council and indeed for the community to evaluate success. The review team believe the BCAP can be strengthened by making it SMART.

It could also appear that the council's commitment is short-term. Currently the BCAP has no actions that go beyond '1 year+', so the review team recommends that the timelines should be revised so that is clear that some of the actions will require long-term commitment. This will also provide reassurance to local black communities that the council is in it for the long haul.

In addition, the review team found that the BCAP was focussed on reporting on actions to evaluate progress rather than focusing on outcomes. The review team believe that outcomes would be a more effective measure of success.

Local black community groups were unclear on how to get involved with the various steering groups for BCAP workstreams and other key projects on inequalities. The review team would encourage the BCAP Co-ordinator to work with the council's communications team to consider what other engagement can take place with local black community groups to increase transparency and participation.

Finally, the review team give their thanks to everyone who took part in the review process. Brent Council are committed to making change for their black staff and local black communities, and we wish them every success in their endeavours.

Next steps

The LGA would like to thank Brent Council for undertaking the Independent Review. The independent review team appreciate that senior officers and political leaders will want to reflect on the findings within this report to determine how the council wishes to take things forward.

The independent review team have identified key recommendations. It is suggested that the Council's response to these recommendations includes the development of an action plan which is sent to stakeholders and published on the council's website. We would be happy to provide a follow-up visit to examine the council's progress.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an ongoing offer of support to councils. The LGA is well-placed to provide additional support, advice, and guidance for development and improvement.

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