

West Berkshire Council

An Interim Summary of Findings

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Executive Summary

West Berkshire Council (the Council) has commissioned The Equal Group (TEG) to develop an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) framework, informed by the lived experiences of residents. To achieve this, we have engaged with those living and/or working in West Berkshire to gain their perspectives on West Berkshire's current EDI related work, what is going well within that and where improvements are needed.

We launched an EDI survey in October 2022; the survey closed in December 2022 with circa 500 responses (this figure also includes responses to the easy read version of the survey). This level of engagement is a positive signifier of people's willingness to make West Berkshire a better place to live and work, and is testament to the efforts of those who worked to encourage engagement internally. We also facilitated a total of five focus groups in November and December 2022, as detailed below.


The survey and focus group insights revealed very clear and consistent themes. When asked what is going well in relation to EDI, we heard that the commissioning of Educafe has been a really positive force for community engagement and inclusion. It was clear that the community has also been welcoming towards Ukrainian refugees and has embraced diversity. The internal efforts of the Council were also cited, with examples such as the creation of the Equality Forum, a partnership with a local LGBTQ+ charity and policies being available in multiple languages all mentioned. Looking at health services, we heard that outreach centres were set up in rural areas to promote Covid-19 vaccine takeup.

We also heard very clear themes in relation to where the Council should focus its efforts going forward. The most frequently mentioned groups experiencing inequality and/or discrimination were:

- those with disabilities;
- those facing other access barriers, such as rurality, socio-economic exclusion and age-related exclusion (both young and old);
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities; and,
- displaced individuals.

While these are the key findings from the data analysis, we want to also highlight that 18% of respondents indicated that they have experienced bullying, discrimination, harassment or victimisation in relation to a protected characteristic. This was even higher for the respondents to the easy read survey, with 21% reporting such experiences.

In addition, a number of comments indicated that greater clarity on EDI plans and progress is needed, as some respondents did not feel they had sufficient insight on what the Council has done in order to answer questions on the topic.



These insights will be used alongside existing research (such as the previously commissioned EDI needs assessment) and the outputs of collaborative workshops with key Council stakeholders, to inform the next steps, including delivery of a high-level, draft EDI framework.

Background

West Berkshire Council has commissioned The Equal Group to develop an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) framework, informed by the lived experiences of residents. This framework will express a vision, principles, and objectives, with an accompanying action plan to support the delivery of the Council's Strategy.

To ensure this framework is driven by the perspectives and experiences of those living and/or working in West Berkshire, we undertook an engagement process which consisted of an EDI survey (including a separate easy read version) and a series of five focus groups. Focus groups were held with the following groups in November and December of 2022:

- The Equality Forum
- Engaging and Enabling Local Communities
- Public Partners
- West Berkshire Councillors
- Voluntary and Community Sector

At regular intervals, we engaged with key West Berkshire Council contacts, Sam Shepherd and Pamela Voss, to sense-check and discuss what we had heard from respondents, ensuring that any insights taken were accurate and free from bias.

The purpose of this document is to present an interim summary of findings. Following analysis of the data, we identified the following key themes as priority areas for the Council to address:

1. Disability and accessibility
2. Other access barriers: rurality, socio-economic exclusion and age-related exclusion
3. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities
4. Displaced individuals

More information on each of these themes is detailed below, along with a visual representation of survey responses and quotes, where relevant. The confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents is extremely important to us – any quotes included in this report have been selected because they do not contain any identifying or compromising information, but help to highlight people's lived experiences.

Before rounding up with our next steps, we have also included a note on three 'Additional Insights' which came up repeatedly during the data analysis and which encompass overarching threads woven across the lived experience of disparate groups engaging with the Council. While outside the scope of this piece of work, we recommend that these are subject to further exploration and action by the Council.

Key Findings

In this section of the report, we have provided an overview of the key themes that arose from our engagement process. These findings cover both the original survey responses and the easy read survey responses, as well as what we heard in the focus groups. The following key findings are not prioritised according to frequency of occurrence or level of importance - each of the themes should be taken with equal consideration. Below is our summary of all data received.

Disability and Accessibility

Across several questions relating to issues of equity/inequity, themes around disability and accessibility came up several times. Whilst there was some acknowledgement of the Council's efforts in this area (namely, working with businesses to make entry-way alterations and implementation of the Blue Badge scheme), concerns around the accessibility of local amenities were particularly prominent. Some of the examples we heard include: station car park lifts being consistently out of order, inadequate disabled parking at hospitals and taxis being unable to facilitate electric wheelchairs. Numerous comments in the survey and the focus groups suggested that a move towards technology and online delivery (including GP services, Council communications and card-only payments, among other examples) has created barriers to engagement for individuals with learning disabilities.

"Even though WBC and other local services try to be fair and inclusive the reality is the cost of everything, and shortage of public transport and services means anyone who is poor is excluded and marginalised, and this hits people with disabilities harder than anyone else"

There were also a number of references to a general misunderstanding of neurodiversity. An insufficient grasp of neurodiversity (including the impact it can have on individuals, and what it means for the Council's service delivery as a consequence), can create additional access barriers. Survey respondents cited several implications of this, such as indirect discrimination in the education system and difficulty engaging with the Council's website.

Although only mentioned explicitly by one survey respondent, there appeared to be an underlying sentiment that disability is not treated as a priority, but rather 'added-on' after all the thinking has already concluded. The Council should also consider how the above examples may intersect with rurality to compound the sense of exclusion for those impacted. The pie chart below indicates responses to the survey question: 'I feel West Berkshire Council provides a range of services to meet the needs of people from all backgrounds and experiences'. There is significant variation across the responses, with relatively high proportions of neutral and disagree responses.

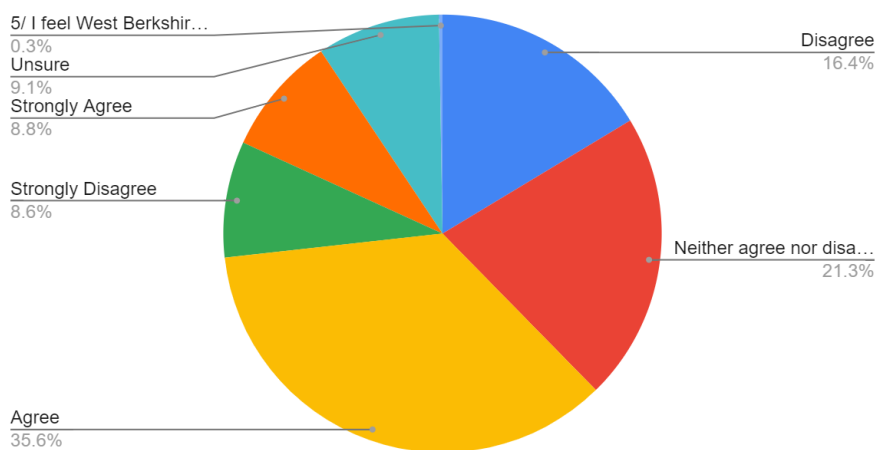


Figure 1: A pie chart showing responses to the question: 'I feel West Berkshire Council provides a range of services to meet the needs of people from all backgrounds and experiences'.

Several respondents made suggestions to improve in this area, with the most common focusing on strengthening engagement with disabled communities. Some examples include: devising a Disability Steering Group within the Council to ensure access considerations remain at the core of decision-making; more free opportunities for daytime socialising for people with complex physical and learning disabilities, and neurodiversity training for service delivery partners (such as GP practitioners).

Other Access Barriers: Rurality; Socio-economic Exclusion and Age-Related Exclusion

Rurality

While protected characteristics should form the basis of any EDI assessment and strategy (particularly for the Council as an organisation subject to the Public Sector

Equality Duty), a holistic approach to inclusion reflects the nuances of the local area, extending beyond what is set out in the Equality Act, where relevant. In West Berkshire, it is crucial to address the relevance of geography in our assessment of equity and inclusion. Our engagement process found significant disparities between opportunities and access for those living rurally, compared with those living in or close to hubs, such as Newbury.

This finding corroborates the outcome of the EDI Needs Assessment the Council had previously commissioned. Living rurally can, in and of itself, produce a heightened sense of alienation – particularly in the absence of strong community ties. This sense of marginalisation may be compounded by insufficient or expensive transportation into main social hubs (ie., community events) or important community services (such as general and dental health care). As indicated by the quote below, it is important to consider the impact that this may have on those with fewer financial resources.

“Living in a rural village, it can be quite isolating for young families that are not as privileged as the majority. The poor public transport links exacerbates this.”

It is also important that the Council considers the ways in which digital exclusion may impact rural communities and their sense of integration. A significant number of respondents indicated that much of the Council’s approach to external communications is conducted virtually, meaning that for those with less access to the Internet, they may have to miss out on community events or Council updates.

Socio-economic exclusion

Tied in with the above, several survey and focus group participants spoke to socio-economic exclusion as an area of significant inequality in West Berkshire. Given the relative affluence of West Berkshire as a district, there is a risk that those from less privileged backgrounds fall under the radar of the majority. This can be particularly damaging for social mobility and equity of opportunity, and serves to highlight the importance of finding suitable means of engaging with groups typically defined as ‘hard-to-reach’.

We also heard that complex physical/mental/emotional outcomes are disproportionately worse in deprived communities. In seeking to create a more equitable place to live, it is crucial that the Council seeks out the underlying causes of these problems. Many of these outcomes are the consequence of being institutionally

underserved¹ and should be explored in more detail to understand the contributing factors.

Some respondents felt that the Council is 'biased towards wealthier areas' due to a perceived lack of efforts towards rural and community village integration. This can, unintentionally, feed the sense of alienation of those living rurally and also experiencing financial hardship.

We asked survey respondents to indicate how strongly they agree with the statement: 'I feel the local area is one that people from all backgrounds can thrive and be part of the community':

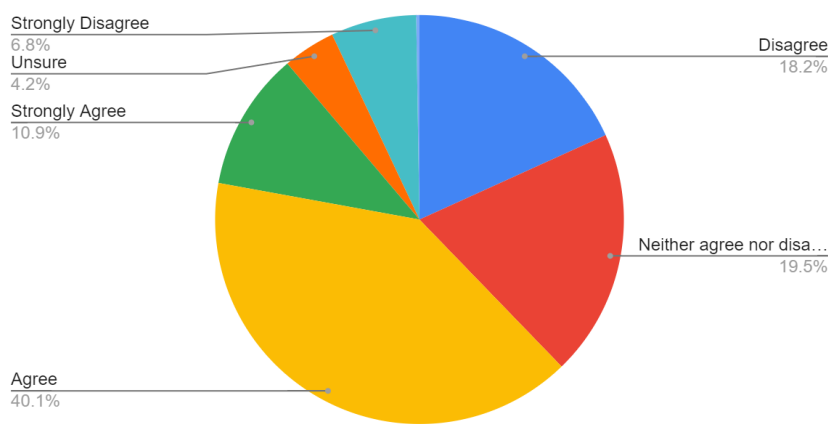


Figure 2: A pie chart showing responses to the question: 'I feel the local area is one that people from all backgrounds can thrive and be part of the community'.

Although the question was looking more broadly, socioeconomic status (as a key indicator of access to resources and opportunities) is strongly correlated with a sense of thriving. Accordingly, we include Figure 2 as a depiction of inequity and disparity, rather than an absolute representation of socio-economic exclusion. That said, the sentiments shared in the survey and focus groups suggest this is a key area for the Council to address.

Age-Related Exclusion

Exclusion based on age was also a prominent theme, both for young people and the elderly. The overarching theme for young people appears to be the reduction in youth services and activities that promote integration. We acknowledge that this is a tricky

¹ N.B, this does not indicate intention. We use the term 'institutionally underserved' to describe the ways in which majority bias and blind spots in people's lived experiences can result in a consistent failure to address the needs of marginalised groups, whether conscious or not.

balance to strike in the face of budget cuts and limited Council resources. Much of the discussion on this topic centred around youth groups and local clubs that would provide social time, and where these already exist, opening up a free option for parents with lower incomes. There were also some concerns that young people experiencing neurodiversity and/or mental health issues are underserved. We recommend that this is subject to further exploration by the Council so that action can be taken to address this priority need.

For older people, the overarching theme appears to be digital exclusion. Several respondents highlighted that it is incumbent upon the Council to reach out to the elderly, who may find the prospect of contacting the Council or visiting the offices intimidating or simply impossible.


“Elderly in villages have very little access to social activities if they have low incomes and cannot afford to pay for social days out involving transport costs as well.”

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) Communities

Our engagement process highlighted significant concerns in relation to the experiences of GRT communities in West Berkshire. Prejudice and discrimination against these communities appear to be rife across multiple aspects of daily life. We heard examples from the education system, the justice system and life in the local community more broadly. One survey respondent described discrimination as 'widespread', while others alluded to the general misunderstanding of these communities among residents and Council members.

“On a monthly basis, I receive unsolicited comments from strangers about how Gypsies are unwelcome in the locality. I have no idea why – perhaps they think I am a Gypsy? My husband (who is White British) never receives these comments. I am staggered at the strength and frequency of these discriminatory comments against Gypsies.”

Some survey respondents made mention of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month in June as a key event that the Council should mark. While the approach does need to be broader in scope than this, such occasions provide an opportunity to raise awareness and promote a greater understanding of minority groups. The broader approach should be grounded in the lived experiences of GRT communities, and



should seek to identify the challenges they are facing, their experiences of discrimination, and what interventions are needed to build inclusion.

It is also worth noting that the Ethnic Minority & Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS) did not receive much mention in the focus groups or the survey. This is a significant area of work with specific interventions aimed at supporting the inclusion of GRT communities, but did not come through very strongly in our engagement process. This sits within an overarching theme (covered under the 'Additional Insights' section on page 10) about publicising what the Council is already doing well in relation to EDI. Highlighting positive contributions is a crucial part of any external EDI communications strategy; ensuring residents are aware of (and can see the progress of) the Council's efforts to address disparities is an important aspect of building trust.

Displaced Individuals

The term 'displaced individuals' in this context refers to any individual who has had to leave their home country due to external pressures on their safety and or stability – it therefore covers both refugees and asylum seekers. Differential treatment of migrant groups was consistently mentioned across our engagements, with a perception that the schemes are not balanced across the various (Ukrainian, Hong Kong and Afghanistan) communities. We understand some of this to be impacted by the Government's categorisations of migrant communities. As such, there are limits as to what the Council can do to influence change on a large scale. Despite this, there are a number of actions that are within the Council's powers which can help to improve experiences at the local level, as detailed below.

It was clear from the survey and focus groups that more support around understanding UK systems and processes is needed to support integration and adjustment. There were numerous mentions of this problem, with those seeking asylum often left to find their own way around health and education systems. Respondents also told us that they would like to see updates to translation services to ensure they reflect changes in the local population. Woven across the themes of displaced individuals and GRT communities was the perception of 'predisposed ideas' and the impact these may be having on the experiences of primary care and education systems. There were some suggestions that multi-cultural awareness training for service providers could help to address some of these issues.

"As a refugee charity we are aware of a lot of discrimination against refugees and asylum seekers. The national 'hostile environment' impacts on everyone in some way. Dispersed asylum seekers are having their human rights abused by the failings of the system in place

to deal with them. This is a national issue, but the local coordination around their support needs to be far better.”

Additional Insights

In addition to the key themes highlighted in this report, there are several other notable insights that we felt were important to address. 18% of survey respondents indicated that they have experienced bullying, discrimination, harassment or victimisation in relation to a protected characteristic. This percentage increases to 21% for those responding to the easy read survey. While it is outside the scope of this work, it is highly recommended that the Council spends some time reflecting on its reporting and communications processes to ensure instances can be captured and addressed.

We also identified a need for greater communication of EDI plans and progress – several respondents described a lack of clarity on what the Council has already done (or intends to do going forward) as limiting the depth of their survey responses. While the publication of the EDI framework should address some of this obscurity, it is worth reaffirming the critical role that communication plays in the success of any EDI strategy. On a similar note, we recommend that the Council spends some time thinking about the tone and language that will sit alongside the Council’s EDI Action Plan. As captured by this survey response, the communications strategy should focus on *“Making the discussion less about falling foul of legislation and more about the positive attributes of EDI to work and performance of community, organisation and teams”*.

Finally, and relatedly, a robust EDI strategy requires all key stakeholders to be aligned on the current position to identify areas of priority focus. During the focus group with Councillors, it appeared that there are quite disparate views concerning the current state of affairs, with some representatives describing West Berkshire as inclusive and others drawing on areas of significant inequality. Throughout this report, we have referenced the need to consistently and habitually engage the lived experiences of marginalised groups – this is crucial to understand where disparity exists and how to address it most effectively.

Next Steps

This report covers high-level themes from the data. Our immediate next steps will be to continue analysing responses and ensuring we have captured all of the most salient points. The findings detailed in this report, as well as the outcome of our collaborative



workshops with key members of the Council, will be used to produce a draft EDI framework. This will be delivered by the 24th of March 2023.

Following feedback from the Council, we will work to produce a final framework that takes into account all comments and suggestions. We will remain on hand to answer any questions and discuss how the framework is disseminated to all West Berkshire Council staff and residents following internal review and sign-off.