

Good Practice Briefing



Establishing and engaging with diverse groups

Reflecting the communities we serve can be difficult if we are not engaging with diverse people and groups within them. The wider the engagement, the better the understanding of the issues and therefore the solutions and outcomes. Some housing organisations in Wales have established their own frameworks for reaching out to seldom heard groups of people, including hosting diverse staff and/or tenant groups and using a range of different communication methods to seek views or to share messages. This briefing looks at some examples and top tips from across the sector in Wales following our Welsh Housing Equality Network (WHEN) event in October 2020.



DIVERSITY CHAMPIONS: THE CONCEPT



The purpose of a diversity champions scheme is to create a cohesive group of people at all levels within an organisation who are able to act as **change agents**.

Diversity champions are supported over a period to influence improved diversity practice in their area of work through their teams or departments. Diversity champions are important because equality and diversity is an issue that is played out in day-to-day interactions between people and often, we are unaware of things we do and say in those interactions. By having champions operating at ground level, a '**ripple effect**' can be produced across the organisation. Crucially, there is a broad base of junior, middle and senior management, helping to demonstrate that improving inclusion is something that everyone can help with.

In some cases, each individual will have an Action Plan after training, reflecting their own specific challenges within their work environment.

With the right support, champions can provide a resource to:

- Ensure that diversity issues are raised and kept on the agenda
- Advise their teams on good equality practice
- Challenge constructively bad practice when and where it happens
- Help develop clear objectives to improve diversity practice
- Give feedback to the organisation's senior leaders on what equality and diversity practice is actually like on the ground



“ LIGHTING LITTLE FIRES ACROSS THE ORGANISATION ”

DIVERSITY CHAMPIONS: THE PRACTICE | Bron Afon Community Housing

In looking to encourage conversation among staff members and embed equality and diversity (E&D) into its business practice, colleagues at Bron Afon have introduced the diversity champions programme. The basis is simple: it's having staff and tenants – anyone involved with the organisation – to better understand why there is a strive towards a more equal and fair society. Moreover, senior leaders recognise that while the programme isn't necessarily about metrics or performance standards initially, it's about making a real difference for both those involved in the programme and others that they interact with on a daily basis. Bron Afon's diversity champions are not experts, but instead bring with them a passion and enthusiasm for 'sowing the seeds' of inclusion.

In practice, champions meet regularly and represent all parts of the workforce, including senior leaders through to junior and frontline staff. It's an opportunity to discuss topical E&D issues, whether it be work-related or in the media, and so ensues a conversation about use of language, appropriate responses or ways to raise awareness. In recent times, champions have discussed trans and non-binary issues, cultural awareness, women in trades and the Black Lives Matter campaign.

The diversity champions programme is a useful coaching mechanism that not only enables participants to develop their skills and confidence in promoting inclusion, but ultimately reflects on the wider organisation in encouraging and opening up dialogue among colleagues on what might previously have been considered 'taboo' topics.

Senior management at Bron Afon are hugely supportive of the diversity champions concept; indeed, the Chief Executive has a quarterly briefing with the Equality and Diversity Partner and the group's facilitator.





And there is already evidence of direct impact. One recent session discussed comments from a colleague who felt unable to apply for an advertised job within the organisation as there was no explicit reference to part time or job sharing opportunities. That feedback has been acted on internally and now all job adverts are run with that detail included. Moreover, there have also been changes to the induction process for agency workers so that there is parity with in-house staff, increasing their sense of inclusion in the collective aims and purpose of the organisation. Champions have also reported feeling more confident in chatting with colleagues and being able to challenge constructively where appropriate.

Ultimately, the concept of diversity champions at Bron Afon is viewed as the beginning of a much wider process in ensuring equality, diversity and inclusion is a core part of the culture and behaviour of the organisation.



ENGAGING WITH YOUNG LGBTQ+ PEOPLE

Welsh homelessness charity, Llamau, has a great track record in reaching out to one particular group: young people, in particular young LGBTQ+ people. Together with its End Youth Homelessness Cymru (EYHC) project, it has engaged with young people who have experienced homelessness to better understand the impact on everything from mental health and wellbeing to education and family life.

Throughout the last few months, the challenges presented by the fundamental “stay at home” message – together with a raft of regulations that have prevented social contact, closed venues and limited travel – has brought about a new way of engaging and interacting with young people. Llamau's LGBTQ+ youth group hosted an Online Pride event which involved creating artworks and placards, discussing what Pride meant to them and plenty of on-the-day digital activities such as quizzes, word-searches and badge-making. The group also had Party Packs sent to them in the post. Top tip here: little pick-me-ups through the post, for example, can really help with mental health – anything that isn't a bill or a warning letter! For more tips, get in touch with sianjones@llamau.org.uk

EYHC has made a number of recommendations for local authorities via its 'Out on the Streets' report, covering crucial issues like data collection and staff training. A key recommendation was for the development of LGBTQ+ specific supported housing, like Denbighshire Council, VIVA and Llamau's Ty Pride, which has shown the potential for supporting young people this way. Llamau are very keen to hear from housing partners wishing to collaborate on replicating this model. Please contact hughrussell@llamau.org.uk if interested.

It's also important to consider how housing providers in general can better engage with young LGBTQ+ people

KNOW THE VALUE OF YOUTH WORKERS

They are a fantastic resource and can greatly improve the way that RSLs and LAs work with young people whatever their sexuality and gender identity. Every local authority has a youth work team and CWVYS are the national voluntary youth work representative body. CWVYS are the go-to for information on youth work organisations in your local area or to find out more about qualifications in youth work for your staff. There's great practice out there too: see LiveWest, for instance

GAUGE YOUNG PEOPLE'S OPINIONS

If you are going to engage with young people directly about service improvement, Children in Wales have the seven Welsh Participation Standards for children and young people on their website

LOOK LOCALLY

Establish whether there are LGBTQ+ youth groups in your area that you can link in with – Impact in Cardiff, for instance, or Viva in Denbighshire. Stonewall Cymru's website is helpful. Local groups may be able to help you to train your staff on LGBTQ+ issues and help you make your public facing spaces as inclusive as you can





THE GOLDEN NUGGETS

Below are some key tips based on good practice shared by members at our October 2020 WHENetwork meeting:

LEADING FROM THE FRONT

An express commitment to equality and diversity groups from senior leaders within an organisation is crucial. Not doing so risks the work of the group potentially being undermined or not taken seriously. Good examples included an organisation where a senior leader was open and honest about "not having all the answers" to equality and diversity issues and the need for continuous engagement across all staff bases. At our WHENetwork meeting, this senior leader was described as having "let go of control", being open to challenge and finding new solutions through "buying into" ideas from staff



DIVERSITY IS MORE THAN RACE

Whilst race issues are extremely important, outlining the wider spectrum of diversity can help overcome the often made assumption that it's just about race, ensuring that any E&D groups can look at other strands too



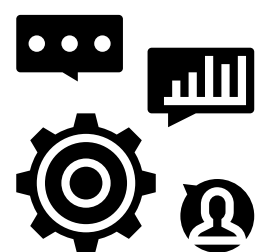
SUPPORTING OTHERS

Some people may be apprehensive about joining E&D groups as a result of experiences of discrimination or prejudice beforehand. Colleagues/tenants will need reassurance and support that E&D groups are safe and inclusive spaces to discuss issues and solutions



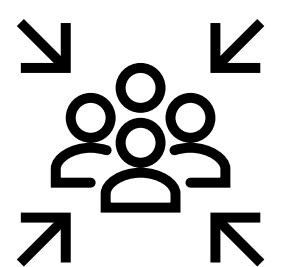
SHARING EXPERTISE

Some organisations have engaged others outside of the sector to bring in specific expertise on E&D issues to support their efforts. It's worth noting, however, that small voluntary groups or community organisations, for example, may not be well-resourced to provide such support and so there shouldn't be an expectation of free support



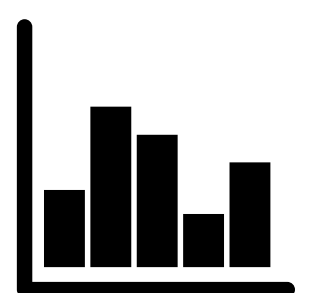
IT'S A COLLECTIVE

Colleagues or tenants from specific minority or diverse backgrounds shouldn't feel pressurised to share their stories or to 'educate' others on their experiences. This is an individual choice and the group is a collective – some people may be comfortable sharing their experiences to raise awareness, while others may not



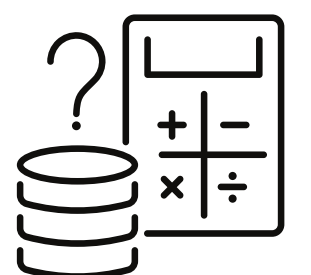
DATA, DATA, DATA

Collecting and using data is key to helping deliver on E&D objectives. Knowing the make-up of your staff and your tenants – and any resultant issues – supports individual professional and organisational development as well as service improvement, striving towards the creation of a fully inclusive culture within an organisation



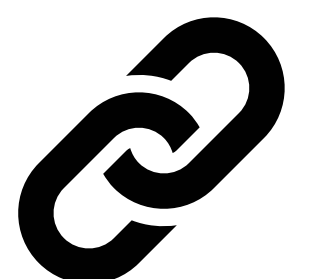
BUDGETS

Colleagues joining or facilitating E&D groups highlighted the need for such groups to have budgets for their activities or for organisations to be prepared for such budgets.



STRATEGIC LINKS

Some colleagues highlighted that their E&D groups and activities are on a par with or are part of wider change management programs across the organisation with equality and diversity issues being a key strategic risk considered as part of governance and board. This helps colleagues and E&D groups drive improvement and initiatives.



DEPARTMENTAL ISSUES

Some departments may not have a culture or history of creating staff or tenant groups, fora or networks, with an example of finance department provided by one colleague. In this organisation, rather than this acting as a barrier, it created more interest from colleagues from these specific departments – as they appreciated an opportunity to feed into E&D work. It is important that such departments are not disregarded in looking for members for staff groups.

