

Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee - Equalities review

Second Response from METRO Charity

- 1. Are Lewisham resident's equalities needs known in respect of your organisation's area of work? Where equalities needs are known, do you feel these are taken into account by the Council in policy and decision-making? Do you know what your service users/partners/clients think about this?**

METRO mainly works to support the needs and aspirations of the LGBTQ community. Currently our main experience is around the LGBTQ experience in Lewisham particularly around hate crime and safety. The council does fund specific provision e.g. youth clubs, hate crime work and mental health which should be applauded and is more diverse than many other councils. The main issue for LGBTQ people is that mainstream services either stigmatise, discriminate or do not consider the specific needs of LGBTQ people. Currently there is only one day a week of METRO's time to work around equality for LGBTQ people.

As with other councils, equalities monitoring is not as at its best as individuals are suspicious of disclosing their identity (as they fear it may lead to discrimination, meaning that are stopped from accessing services).

Service provision still tends to be 'gender binary' with little recognition of gender non-conformity and transgender identities which means that the complexity of need and relevant provision is sometimes not available, or services are not appropriate eg consultation with the Lewisham Maternity Voices Partnership where a dad's group had been set up. The group was only for people born male and therefore excluded other identities (non-binary and transgender parents) and no other provision existed (apart from birth mother's groups).

- 2. What information gaps do you feel exist, if any?**

Diversity is complex and our feeling is the Council focuses too much on figures at the detriment of the detail around identity eg as stated in our previous submission the African community is incredibly diverse, yet monitoring normally just asks if someone is Black African.

In terms of LGBTQ issues there is a significant lack of appreciation of the diversity of experience and impact of behaviour/demand on services eg chemsex which is a drain on a wide range of services due to lack of specialist support/knowledge

- 3. What action if any do you feel needs to be taken to increase understanding or do you have any examples of work undertaken that has been successful in improving understanding of need?**

Our view is, that to develop services that meet the needs of all communities, the council needs to spend more time understanding needs, undertaking a community development approach so the needs of the wide variety of communities are co-designed. This requires improved capacity within the officer body and improved planning so that officers have the time, confidence and skills to undertake this work

An area of good practice has been the work that has been undertaken with the LGBT forum around sexual health where officers are engaging with this forum around PREP and improving trust in the sexual health services and primary care. This helped in developing/improving the 'Pride in Practice' initiative. This is an example where anecdotal evidence was used and co-design was key to a better service.

4. Where equalities needs are known, do you feel these are taken into account by the Council in policy and decision-making? Do you know what your service users/partners/clients think about this?

The Lewisham LGBT forum has been asked to have a meeting around the democracy review. It was appreciated that the meeting took place and that there is to be follow up. However, clients/communities generally just want reasonable appropriate services and want to know where to go for help, knowing that their issues will be heard and acted upon. Some people may become more active and, in this case, the council should be supporting them and the voluntary sector to 'navigate the system'.

5. Has your organisation identified any barriers to engagement in the communities you work with that you would like to highlight for the Committee to consider as part of its review?

Specific barriers for the LGBTQ communities are:-

- Transgender people generally only trust other transgender people - therefore engagement needs to be with trans people leading. For Lewisham, and many other boroughs, this is difficult to tackle. To our knowledge there is only one trans-specific group in the borough (a swimming group).
- Black LGBTQ people tend to only socialise in black LGBTQ spaces. As with the trans community, there is little available in Lewisham or elsewhere and these groups tend to be hidden (even from the wider LGBTQ community)
- The need to develop trust which takes time (years) and the reluctance of people to give personal information to authorities. Hence the need to work through existing trusted community leaders and groups
- Stereotyping LGBTQ people as 'bar flies' when for most, as with all communities, this is not a primary hobby. Particularly older people, lesbians, parents and carers, people with mental health issues and those who are economically deprived feel invisible and unheard.

6. Are there any particular concerns you would like to highlight in terms of the Council meeting their equalities remit with respect to your particular area of work?

Our particular areas of concern currently are:-

- The lack of availability of benefits advice and support in the borough which adversely impacts on many LGBTQ people, as many need support in this area – particularly if they have identities which include being disabled, as the loss of the Lewisham Disability Coalition has impacted on other services to the point where many can't access timely support.
- Long delays in obtaining mental health support for LGBTQ people. LGBTQ people tend to be more vulnerable to MH issues because of discrimination and negative life experiences and therefore often decline into crisis. This is a particular problem for trans people where IAPT services will not accept referrals even if the MH issue is not around their gender identity. There is also a large problem with MH services as they will not accept referrals from people with substance misuse issues, which is disproportionately prevalent within LGBTQ communities.
- Support to victims of neighbour related hate crime, so that perpetrators are threatened with eviction or evicted rapidly, alongside victims being supported with alternative housing solutions where needed.