



Equality & Diversity in Local Councils

1. Introduction

The Diversity Ambassador Network held its "Next Steps" workshop on Wednesday, 14 May 2025, hosted by Mid Ulster District Council at Pomeroy Forest Park.

The session began with the introduction of the newly appointed Co-Chairs, who will serve in this role for the first year:

- Councillor Noeleen Hayes, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council
- Catherine Christy, Belfast City Council

Both Co-Chairs introduced themselves and outlined their vision for the future direction of the Network.

Paula Hamilton from the Local Government Staff Commission provided an overview of the results from the feedback survey distributed to all Diversity Ambassadors in November 2024. The survey received 12 responses. Key findings from the survey are included in the attached PowerPoint presentation.

The workshop was attended by 13 Diversity Ambassadors, representing all 11 Councils. Participants included Elected Members from 3 Councils, as well as Officer Diversity Ambassadors from equality/policy, good relations, and HR functions.

2. Objectives of the Workshop

The purpose of the workshop was to:-

- Agree the Terms of Reference for the Diversity Ambassador Network.
- Understand the current Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) landscape within local government.
- Identify collective strengths and weaknesses.
- Begin development of an action plan to set measurable goals and identify three key impact areas for future focus.

3. Agreement of Terms of Reference

During the workshop there was discussion on the Terms of Reference (TOR) which had been drawn up following the November 2024 workshop. A number of minor amendments were suggested. Participants were keen that the vision for local government in the TOR reflected the Council's role as a public service provider as well as an employer.

The revised TOR are attached at the end of this report.

4. Group Discussion: Understanding the Landscape

Participants engaged in group discussion to explore the environment in which Councils currently operate regarding EDI. This included identifying existing strengths to build upon and recognising weaknesses and challenges that need to be addressed. These are summarised below in section 5.

5. Identified Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths

- Access to training and e-learning resources raising awareness.
- Clear identification of impact areas and opportunities for collaboration.
- Elected Members actively checking that equality screening forms are being completed and taking some great positive actions.
- Good legislation through S75.
- Great practice from services e.g. Leisure and Community.
- Gender-Based Budgeting pilot initiatives.
- Increasing visibility and prioritisation of EDI across Councils.
- Lived experience showcases and Council motions calling out key EDI issues.
- Media engagement that supports diversity networks.
- Peer-to-peer sharing of experience and best practice.
- Strong commitment from some Diversity Ambassadors ("We're here" ethos).
- The existence of both staff and public EDI networks.
- Wider understanding – who doesn't have equality in their job.

Weaknesses

- Risk of burnout among group members.
- Controversial or contentious issues often avoided.
- Cultural misunderstandings and lack of awareness.
- Disconnect between equality and good relations functions and some functions not recognising their potential contribution to good relations.
- EDI seen as a low priority in some areas.
- Equality screening is not meaningfully or consistently embedded across Councils.
- Fear of speaking out or taking initiative.
- Gaps in subject knowledge – many Ambassadors have expertise in only one area.
- Hierarchical focus on certain Section 75 groups at the expense of others.
- Ignorance of important EDI issues.
- Inappropriate language and behaviours, including some from political figures.
- Increased public expectation – what can equality do for me.
- Lack of engagement from Elected Members, reducing support from senior management.
- Limited or no funding available to support initiatives.
- Media responses can hinder Council efforts and progress.
- Misuse or abuse in EDI efforts/equality can be manipulated.
- Over-reliance on isolated examples of good practice.
- Undefined purpose of reporting to the ECNI.
- What does the Diversity Ambassador role do in Councils and how can the role add value.

6. Key Workshop Outcome: Development of an Action Plan

The central focus of the workshop was the development of a practical and impactful action plan. Discussions centred on establishing goals at three levels:

- **Individual level** – empowering Diversity Ambassadors in their roles.
- **Council level** – embedding EDI more deeply within structures.
- **Collaborative level** – ensuring shared goals and learning across all Councils.

Participants were asked to think of 1 or 2 personal actions that they could implement in their own Council. In groups, they also discussed and proposed suggestions or areas for action that would form the basis of an action plan to be further developed and refined in upcoming sessions. These are summarised below in section 7.

7. Ideas/Suggestions for Actions and Key Areas for Network Focus

- Bring Diversity Ambassadors together to disseminate information.
- Continue to strive for inclusive community engagement.
- Cultural Awareness (Livingstone and Thompson).
- Develop a better understanding of personal stories of inequalities.
- Disability positive benchmarking information day.
- Explore connections – structures, knowledge, communication – WHO are Diversity Ambassadors.
- Consider having another best practice event but limit to 3 or 4 presentations to enable more in-depth discussion.
- Media requests to support network.
- Neurodiversity workshop.
- Push boundaries at political level.
- Raise profile of Diversity Ambassadors internally/elected member's motion.
- Training/Workshops/Video – Lived experience/hard to reach areas.
- Understand the people we deliver our functions to – our stakeholders, by S75 characteristics.

8. Conclusion and Next Steps

The Next Steps Workshop was a great chance for open, honest conversations, reflection, and planning for the future.

It was agreed that a summary of the workshop and the updated/finalised TOR would be circulated to all 52 Diversity Ambassadors requesting that they promote within their Council and to key local government structures e.g. Equality and Diversity Group and Statutory Duty Network.

From the list, the group need to agree 3 key areas to take forward. Some of these can also be progressed individually by Councils, alongside the collaborative efforts of other points.

After reviewing the list in section 7, please send your top 3 preferences to Paula Hamilton at paula.hamilton@lgsc.org.uk

Our next workshop will be held on Wednesday 15 October, hosted by Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

