

South Essex Homes

Introduction

Equality and diversity is a key issue for all public organisations. They are faced with inspection regimes that demand detailed evidence of improvement on equality and diversity. Yet measuring your performance and providing the evidence can be enormously difficult. How do you know that the money you are spending on equality and diversity training is improving performance? Are you sure that your staff and community are fully engaged? Can you evidence your improvement year on year?

This is a story of how South Essex Homes, an arms length management organisation (ALMO), used equalityDiversityindex360© to meet these challenges and provide the basis for ongoing improvement.

A new organisation

South Essex Homes was established in October 2005 as a wholly owned, arms length company, of Southend on Sea Borough Council. Its mission was to meet the decent homes target by 2010, engage more closely with its tenants and leaseholders and achieve at least a '2 star' rating from the Audit Commission. For South Essex Homes Chief Executive, Mike Gattrell, a key challenge was changing the culture of the organisation, and equality and diversity was given a high priority. The company developed an equality and diversity strategy, and all staff participated in a comprehensive training programme. However, it proved more difficult to test if perceptions had changed, and whether there had been an improvement in performance.

Putting equalityDiversityindex360© to work

In November 2006 the company were approached by Local Progress Consulting Limited, an index360© accredited consultancy, and asked to participate in a pilot study of a new questionnaire. This involved testing the web based questionnaire on a group of 30 staff working across departments. Staff were given 64 'positive statements' and asked whether they agree. The scores are on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is 'disagree' and 7 is 'agree'. The higher the score the better the result. The results were encouraging for South Essex Homes who quickly realised that this provided them with a simple and effective way of measuring staff perceptions on:

- Strategy and policies
- Leadership and commitment
- Action planning and implementation
- Stakeholders on customers
- Recruitment and promotion practices
- Learning and development
- Respect for equality and diversity

Christine Ranson, South Essex Homes' HR Manager, was impressed with the ease with which index360© was used by staff: *"I was pleasantly surprised at the way in which staff who don't regularly use a computer were able to access the survey. They were given a logon and password of their own, and spent only 20 minutes in answering the questions. That's important to us as we're a busy organisation and staff haven't got lots of spare time."*

Following the evaluation of the pilot study South Essex Homes decided to test staff perceptions on a much wider group of staff covering all departments. A sample of 100 staff was identified including managers at all levels to allow cross departmental and role comparisons. The survey was carried out in April 2007 and the results presented to the management team in June. The results confirmed that the initial impression given by the pilot study was accurate, and that the larger sample had provided improved data that the company could use as a benchmark for planned future surveys.

	2006 Pilot	2007 Full Survey
All questions (mean)	5.37	5.48
Strategy and policies	5.37	5.54
Leadership and commitment	5.41	5.45
Action planning and implementation	5.06	5.29
Stakeholders and customers	5.53	5.65
Recruitment and promotion practices	5.01	5.18
Learning and development	5.61	5.63
Respect for equality and diversity	5.77	5.74

The company has a high number of service users with a disability or long term illness and wants to make sure that any barriers to access are identified and tackled. It was encouraging that the highest scores reflect the organisation's ethos of respect for equality and diversity. They used the initial pilot results to improve internal communication and feed back information about recruitment and promotion, and were heartened that the full survey results reflected the input.

How do South Essex Homes Managers use the data?

The acid test of how well this process improves performance is its use in the workplace. The 2007 survey analysed results by team, including senior management. This allows section heads to take on responsibility for improving their team's performance. It provided clear evidence of differing perceptions across teams and identified a number of management issues that the company is addressing.

Christine Ranson, South Essex Home's HR Manager: *"The survey threw up some areas of concern for us, some of which we were already aware of, but the survey put them in context. It also produced some surprises and the task now is to build on good practice and make sure all our teams improve their performance."*

Mike Gatrell, Chief Executive, South Essex Homes feels that the survey has provided a valuable measure of equality and diversity: *"South Essex Homes used the equalityDiversityindex360© process to evaluate the effectiveness of our training, give us a signpost to what was working well in the Company and show us where we need to do more. An initiative like this enables us to evaluate whether our valuable training budget and staff time is being used wisely; we have identified some helpful learning points; but most importantly it's a useful quality check that we are improving access for our service users. We plan to use this year's results as a baseline so we can measure our progress on a year by year basis. equalityDiversityindex360© is quick and easy to use and has given us a valuable health check in this important area"*.

Footnote: South Essex Homes were inspected by the Audit Commission in 2007 and awarded 1star with promising prospects.



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