ACKNOWLEDGE
LEARNING FROM AUDIT, INSPECTION AND RESEARCH

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

audit commission

CONTENTS

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SUMMARY

Current information on equality and diversity in local government suggests that councils have a long way to go if they are to meet the principles of best value and their statutory duties on equal opportunities (including the new duty to promote racial equality).

Local councils face an increasingly complex legal framework on equality...

- the amended Race Relations Act places a duty on local authorities to promote racial equality and to produce a Race Equality Scheme by 31 May 2002
- the Government has announced that it intends to extend the 'duty to promote equality' to both gender and disability
- previous legislation outlawed discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and disability
- new EU directives will extend anti-discrimination employment regulations to include sexuality, religion, disability and age

...and their performance on equality and diversity issues was poor in relation to some important indicators in 2000/01...

- around two-fifths of councils in England and Wales had not reached the first level (level 1) of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) Standard on Racial Equality
- the average council in England still had less than one-quarter of its buildings accessible to disabled people, though the proportion has risen in recent years
- some councils were unable to supply reliable data on a number of these indicators

...though performance against other indicators improved.

- performance has improved in terms of the preparation of statements of special educational needs, access to buildings, adaptations to pedestrian crossings and adherence to the CRE's *Code of Practice in Rented Housing*.

The Audit Commission suggests five critical factors for improving equality and diversity.

- *commitment* – understanding the concept, owning and leading the work at the highest levels, and committing adequate resources

- *involving users* – consulting the actual and potential users of services about their needs and requirements

- *mainstreaming equality and diversity* – integrating equality and diversity into day-to-day work, and translating policy into practice

- *monitoring performance data* – ensuring that data gathering and analysis on equality and diversity is part of core performance monitoring systems

- *sustainability* – continuously keeping up the momentum to counter discrimination and promote diversity, reviewing performance and setting new targets

It is the shared responsibility of all those involved in local government, including the regulators, to improve performance in this increasingly important area. This report highlights some key areas for action, and suggests some checklists that councils can use to support improvement.

PREFACE

FOCUS OF THE REPORT

1. This publication is the first of a number of reports that the Audit Commission intends to publish on equality and diversity. It forms part of the AC Knowledge series, which presents lessons emerging from audit, inspection and other research, including performance indicator (PI) data. This report concentrates on the performance of local councils, rather than on other public sector agencies, such as the police and health authorities. It looks at the different levels of satisfaction with council services expressed by women, disabled people and people from black and minority ethnic communities. It suggests critical success factors for local councils when dealing with equal opportunities, drawn from audit and inspection evidence, supplemented by interviews with local authorities. It focuses primarily on issues of gender, disability and race, as these are areas where there is a clear legislative framework and a number of statutory PIs . It is aimed at elected members, officers at every level working within local government, users of council services and Government.

2. The Audit Commission aims to demonstrate and promote best practice in equality and diversity, but, like many organisations, recognises its own limitations in terms of the knowledge, evidence base and models available to enable effective change in this field. In addition to the legislative framework, there is a broad consensus on the key principles of equality, but limited proven good practice in terms of outcomes. On many issues, there are options and choices for action, rather than prescriptions. This report focuses on analysing the existing information from PIs, audit and inspection. There is insufficient information to present a fully comprehensive picture, but there is enough to provide an initial snapshot of performance.

3. Future reports will assess the wider range of more complex delivery challenges facing the public sector and will contain new data, focusing on the delivery of outcomes that meet the needs of our diverse communities. Their brief will extend beyond the equality categories highlighted in this report, and will also include sexuality, age and faith, and the multiple forms of disadvantage faced by many citizens. The next report will cover current ideas of what constitutes good practice in terms of diversity, what outcomes can be expected and how initiatives can be sustained **(Ref. 1)**. Our reports will run in parallel with our own organisational development work to ensure that the Commission's workforce and activities have equality and diversity considerations at their heart.

INTERPRETING THE DATA

4. This study examines evidence from PIs and from a range of audit and inspection reports. In the first instance, PI data is analysed to highlight areas of strength and weakness in local authority performance. In order to investigate the causes of these performance trends, the report then looks at audit and inspection reports for evidence of process-related issues and problems. Only a handful of audit and inspection reports have been published which specifically deal with equality and diversity. However, equality and diversity are covered in a number of other reports, such as inspection reports on customer access, customer services and human resources. Most service-specific inspection reports rarely refer to equalities, so there is little opportunity to examine service outcomes from an equality perspective. Finally, interviews were undertaken with council officers, inspectors and auditors to examine issues of attitudes and behaviour towards equalities.

5. This publication also analyses performance against a range of local authority PIs. From 1993/94 the Audit Commission consulted on and specified a set of statutory performance indicators (ACPIs) for local authorities, including a number that addressed equality and diversity. With the introduction of the best value regime for local authorities, the Government decided to set best value performance indicators

(BVPIs) and introduced a number of new indicators addressing equality and diversity. For 2000/01 (the year for which the most recent data is available and which is analysed in this report) local authorities collected data for both ACPIs and BVPIs. The detailed data on all of these indicators can be found in the 2000/01 Compendia of English and Welsh Councils **(Ref. 2)**. For most of the indicators highlighted within this report, it is not possible to compare performance with previous years. Where such comparisons are made, they are generally with 1998/99, which was the first year of the newest unitary councils, thus enabling 'like for like' comparisons.

6. The PIs presented in this report are by no means perfect – they represent an accumulation of different indicators developed in the last eight years on equality and diversity, and with a disproportionate number of input and output, rather than outcome, measures. The Audit Commission will work with the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the equality commissions to develop a more rounded set of equality and diversity indicators through the Library of Local Performance Indicators.[I] Local indicators can be particularly useful in highlighting the important equality issues in any specific area. Nevertheless, the indicators included in this report do paint the best picture we have of the performance of local councils on equality and diversity.

7. When comparing one council with another, it is important to recognise that PIs alone do not give the full story behind a council's performance. While they may show the differences that exist between councils on these issues, they do not explain why those differences exist. Comparisons should trigger further investigation into the causes of differences or of changes in the level of performance. Throughout this report, councils are grouped and comparisons are made by authority type. So, for example, London councils or district councils are grouped together. For each of the

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I   See Library of Local PIs website: www.local-pi-library.gov.uk

indicators highlighted in this report, the average figure for each authority type and on an all-England (and Wales where appropriate) basis is provided.

8. Auditors appointed by the Audit Commission have undertaken a limited review of councils' arrangements for producing the information in the charts and tables that follow. In the majority of cases, auditors have confirmed that councils have appropriate arrangements. However, in some cases, doubts have been expressed about the reliability of councils' arrangements for producing the information, and these are noted with the statistics presented in the 2000/01 Compendia of English and Welsh Councils **(Ref. 2)**.

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

9. There is some good practice and guidance material available to help local authorities with equality and diversity. In England, the three equality commissions, (the Commission for Racial Equality, the Disability Rights Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission), and the Employers' Organisation, with support from the Audit Commission, have produced the generic Equality Standard for local government, which details the key methods for integrating equality and diversity into policy development, consultation, service delivery and performance monitoring **(Ref. 3)**. A toolkit and guidance on how to use the Standard has also been produced **(Ref. 4)**. A Generic Equality Standard for Wales, supported by the Welsh Assembly Government, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), the equality commissions in Wales, the Welsh Language Board and Syniad has been finalised and is currently being printed.

10. This report was written by Davy Jones of the Commission's Performance Information team and Helen Goulding from the Knowledge and Information team, under the direction of Trish Longdon, Loraine Martins and Paul Najsarek, and with assistance from Nabil Manzoor. The Audit Commission would like to thank those local councils, inspectors and auditors interviewed for the report. The MORI Social Research Institute supplied additional material on user satisfaction with council services. The Audit Commission consulted the English and Welsh Disability Rights Commissions (DRC) and Equal Opportunities Commissions (EOC), the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and its Welsh office, the Employers' Organisation (EO), the IDeA, Syniad, the Local Government Association (LGA), the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), the Welsh Assembly Government, and various Government departments on the contents of this report. Final responsibility for the report and its contents, however, lies exclusively with the Audit Commission.

1. WHY EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ARE IMPORTANT

11. Equality is not a minority issue: it is important for everyone and directly affects the majority of the population. Women represent more than 51 per cent of the population, disabled people around 14 per cent, and black and minority ethnic communities over 7 per cent. In addition to the clear moral case for equal opportunities, there is therefore also a strong business case for sound practice on equality and diversity. The majority of local people served by local authorities, and the majority of the staff they employ, come from groups that have traditionally suffered discrimination and disadvantage. If local authorities are to address fully the three 'E's (economy, efficiency and effectiveness) that are vital to deliver services and staffing issues, then they also need a clear grasp of a fourth 'E' (equality). As the population becomes increasingly diverse, the need to address diversity and equality will become greater.

12. There is an increasingly complex legislative framework for equal opportunities. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which arose in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, placed for the first time a positive duty on public bodies to promote racial equality. Previous legislation on gender (the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975), on race (Race Relations Act 1976), and on disability (Disability Discrimination Act 1995) had focused on preventing discrimination. The Government has also announced its commitment in future to extend the positive 'duty to promote equality' to both gender and disability. In addition, new European Union directives (Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam) will extend anti-discrimination legislation on employment into new areas, such as sexuality and religion, by December 2003, and for disability and age by December 2006.

13. The principle of equality is crucial to the Government's agenda to modernise local government. Local authorities are responsible for

working with their partner organisations to draw up a long-term community strategy that aims to improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of their local community. The recent White Paper reiterated the importance of the community leadership role of local councils **(Ref. 5)**. The development of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and community strategies is likely to highlight the need to address the specific needs of local communities, which will have important equality implications.

14. Under best value too, authorities are expected to consult their local communities in order to identify their needs, and to redesign their services in accordance with those needs. These responsibilities imply careful attention to the needs and rights of all sections of their local communities, especially those who have traditionally suffered disadvantage. The recent Cantle Report into the disturbances in towns and cities in the spring/summer of 2001 stressed the importance of local authorities' leadership role in relation to the diverse, and potentially conflicting, needs of different local communities **(Ref. 6)**. The Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), the Home Office and the LGA have recently issued draft guidance to local authorities on community cohesion **(Ref. 7)**.

15. The Welsh Assembly Government has established a Public Sector Round Table on Equalities, chaired by the Minister for Finance, Local Government and the Communities (who also chairs the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Equality), with representatives from across the public sector, and all relevant equality commissions. An Equalities Unit has also been established within the WLGA, alongside the development of the Welsh Equalities Standard.

16. Equal opportunities, equalities and diversity are often used as interchangeable terms. This can be confusing, and adds to the anxiety that many people experience when they are unsure whether they are using the 'right' term. While values, principles and outcomes are far more important than terminology, the Audit Commission understands the focus of equal opportunities practice as fairness – developing policies and practices that tackle inequalities, aiming to ensure that all staff are treated fairly, and that service

users do not experience discrimination. Managing people and performance in the context of diversity adds a new focus – creating a working environment that captures the potential of each staff member and uses their skills and talents to add value and deliver services that meet the needs, and tap the contributions, of all sections of the community.

17. Managing for diversity acknowledges that one size does not fit all. Public services have a unique role in ensuring accessibility to all who need them. In the current climate of consumerism, people expect services to be tailored to their individual needs. Service providers need to pay careful attention to identifying the complex needs and rights of all sections of their local community, recognising multiple disadvantage and discrimination, and to integrating appropriate responses into mainstream services. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry recognised that discrimination can be institutional and structural, requiring constant vigilance to counter the pressures from society that continually reproduce it. This is not something that is done once and is then finished. The critical success factors identified in this report may help councils to learn from such experiences, and to maintain an ongoing commitment to equal opportunities.

18. Responsibility for addressing equality and diversity and for producing Race Equality Schemes does not just lie with local councils. It is also an issue for all their local partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors. Central government and regulators (including the Audit Commission) also have a responsibility to ensure that equality and diversity are integrated into their policymaking, audit and inspection functions. The Audit Commission will be working with local government and other partners to ensure that equality and diversity are integrated into our core functions of audit, inspection and research, and into important new initiatives, such as the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in England and the emerging Wales Programme for Improvement. Equality indicators are included within the CPA model and as part of the Corporate Governance inspections, our inspectors will be checking that equality and diversity have been adequately addressed and that Race Equality Schemes meeting their statutory requirements have been published and implemented.

2. WHAT DO EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IN SERVICES LOOK LIKE NOW?

19. This section reviews a range of PIs on equality and diversity. As explained previously, these indicators only paint a partial picture of local councils' performance on equality and diversity. There are significant gaps in terms of measuring service outcomes, and fewer indicators that address gender than race or disability. A few of these indicators have been included in the statutory indicators set by the Audit Commission for some years. On these indicators we have shown trends in performance over time. Most of the indicators are new to the set of BVPIs and so they only show a 'snapshot' of performance for 2000/01. A significant number of councils did not submit data relating to a few of these new indicators, or they did submit data but they were qualified as being unreliable.

20. Performance overall improved between 1998/99 and 2000/01 on the four indicators for which such time-series data were available (access to council buildings, adaptations to pedestrian crossings, preparation of statements of special educational needs and adherence to the CRE's Code of Practice in Rented Housing). On the other indicators where time-series data are not available, performance varied widely. The evidence shows that larger urban councils were better at establishing policies and adhering to the CRE good practice codes, and at ensuring that staff are representative of the communities that they serve. Districts and counties generally performed less well in those areas, but they had a better record of adapting their services for disabled people. Indicators highlighted in this report suggest that, to date, Welsh councils are not progressing as quickly as English councils in most of these areas.

ACCESS TO SERVICES

This section looks at three performance indicators **(Ref. 8)** and analyses them below:

- Does the council have a published policy to provide services fairly to all sections of the community? (up to 1999/2000)

- Has the authority adopted the CRE's 'Standard for Local Government'? (up to 1999/2000) / The level of the CRE's 'Standard for Local Government' to which the authority conforms? (2000/01)

- The percentage of the local authority's buildings in which all public areas are suitable for and accessible to disabled people.

21. The accessibility of services to their potential users is a crucial issue for the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equality of public services. For example, at a leisure centre, it may not be economical to ignore the potential loss of income if information on the facilities is not available in languages widely used in the local community. It is not efficient to have service users who are unable to identify appropriate sources of information in council buildings because there is inadequate signage in appropriate formats and languages. It is not effective to identify the local need for services without making specific efforts to target 'hard-to-reach' groups that will have their own important and distinct service requirements.

It is bad that authorities don't have assistance freely available – people shouldn't have to ask for minicoms, etc, and feel singled out – that's not right.
Council officer

22. Access to local authority services is not just about whether the buildings are physically accessible to disabled people. There are also issues about providing induction loops for the hard of hearing, information in a variety of formats, such as audio tape, and information in a range of appropriate local minority languages. Just as important is whether potential users of services are aware of the council and its various services, and whether these services have been designed to cater for the specific needs and rights of different local

communities and individuals. Consultation with all sections of the community (including 'hard-to-reach' groups) on their needs and rights is a crucial component of the best value agenda **(Ref. 9)**.

Staff are afraid of asking access [to services] questions – they worry that they might identify needs, raise expectations, and then be unable to deliver it.
Council officer

23. In addition to an indicator on the physical accessibility of council buildings, this section looks at two other indicators. The first records whether local councils have addressed the need to have an overall policy on equal opportunities. The other assesses how well local councils have adopted good practice processes on racial equality throughout their delivery of services. Both these indicators are important expressions of councils' overall ability to ensure that all sectors of their local communities have access to the services that they require.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES POLICY

24. While the existence of a policy on equal opportunities does not guarantee that an authority delivers services equitably, the most recent guidance on equality and diversity stresses the importance of developing a comprehensive equal opportunities policy as a prerequisite to implementing good practice **(Ref. 3)**. And in its recent publication on the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Home Office made clear that having a publicly stated policy on race equality was a key feature of organisations that effectively promote racial equality **(Ref. 10)**.

25. The Audit Commission specified a PI between 1994/95 and 1999/2000**I** on whether local authorities had an equal opportunities policy across council services. In the first year, just over one-half (54 per cent) of all English councils had adopted such a policy. This percentage rose steadily to 72 per cent by 1997/98. Following concerns about the quality of some of these policies, the Commission amended the definition to prescribe a minimum good practice standard, which councils had to meet in order to answer the question positively. Specifically, the policy had to be comprehensive, covering more than just employment matters, it had to identify how it met the needs of different groups in the local community, and specify how the policy would be monitored. As a result, the percentage of authorities registering that they had such a comprehensive policy reduced. By 1999/2000 the figure stood at 55 per cent, with the highest performance in London (85 per cent) and the lowest in districts (47 per cent).

26. It is disappointing that after more than 30 years of work on equal opportunities in local government, only just over one-half of all local authorities in England and Wales reported that they had a comprehensive equal opportunities policy.

CRE STANDARD FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

27. The CRE devised a good practice standard for local government on race equality, which was published in 1995 and titled *Racial Equality Means Quality* **(Ref. 11)**. The Standard provides a tool for authorities to assess how well they have incorporated good practice on racial equality into different aspects of council activities, such as policy development, service delivery, community involvement, marketing and personnel issues. It specifies different levels that local councils can achieve, (level 1 is the most basic and level 5 is the most

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I   This indicator was discontinued from 2000/01 when the Government took over responsibility for setting BVPIs. At this stage a greater number of indicators addressing equal opportunities were introduced and the DTLR decided that this issue was covered by the indicator showing which level authorities had reached against the CRE Standard for Local Government.

advanced). The Audit Commission introduced a PI for the financial year 1998/99 on whether authorities had adopted the Standard (that is, whether they had agreed at Committee to assess themselves against the Standard). For 2000/01 the indicator was altered to record the level that each council had achieved against the Standard.

28. An increasing number of authorities adopted the standard in the first two years of the Audit Commission indicator **(EXHIBIT 1, overleaf)**. A more detailed report on the growing adoption of the indicator by local authorities, and the levels reached within it, was published last year **(Ref. 12)**. The table shows that for 1998/99 only just over one-third of English authorities had adopted the Standard, though the percentage was much higher in London boroughs (76 per cent) and lower for district councils (24 per cent). By 1999/2000, one-half of all English councils had adopted the Standard (with at least three-quarters of London and metropolitan authorities having done so, but only just over one-third of districts and Welsh councils).

29. For 2000/01 local authorities were asked to report which level they had reached against the section of the Standard covering the delivery of services. The first (and lowest) of the five levels specifies that there must be a corporate written policy on racial equality and a policy for each service delivery area. It needs to incorporate relevant race relations codes of practice, to have been agreed by elected members and been subject to public consultation. Authorities were expected to carry out an audit of their procedures following a methodology approved by the CRE **(Ref. 13)** and to report the level reached, which could not be higher than the lowest level reached by any individual department.

30. Five years after the introduction of the Standard, around two-fifths of English and Welsh councils assessed themselves as not having even reached level 1, with only around one-fifth of English and one-eighth of Welsh councils having reached level 2 or higher **(EXHIBIT 2)**. For London boroughs, the situation was more promising with over one-half at level 2 or higher, whereas one-half of district councils assessed that they had not even reached level 1. Councils that have yet to reach level 1 on the Standard will need to make considerable progress if they are to meet their obligations under the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000.

**EXHIBIT 1** Percentage of councils who adopted CRE Standard

The percentage of councils adopting the CRE Standard increased between 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

■ 1998/99   ■ 1999/2000
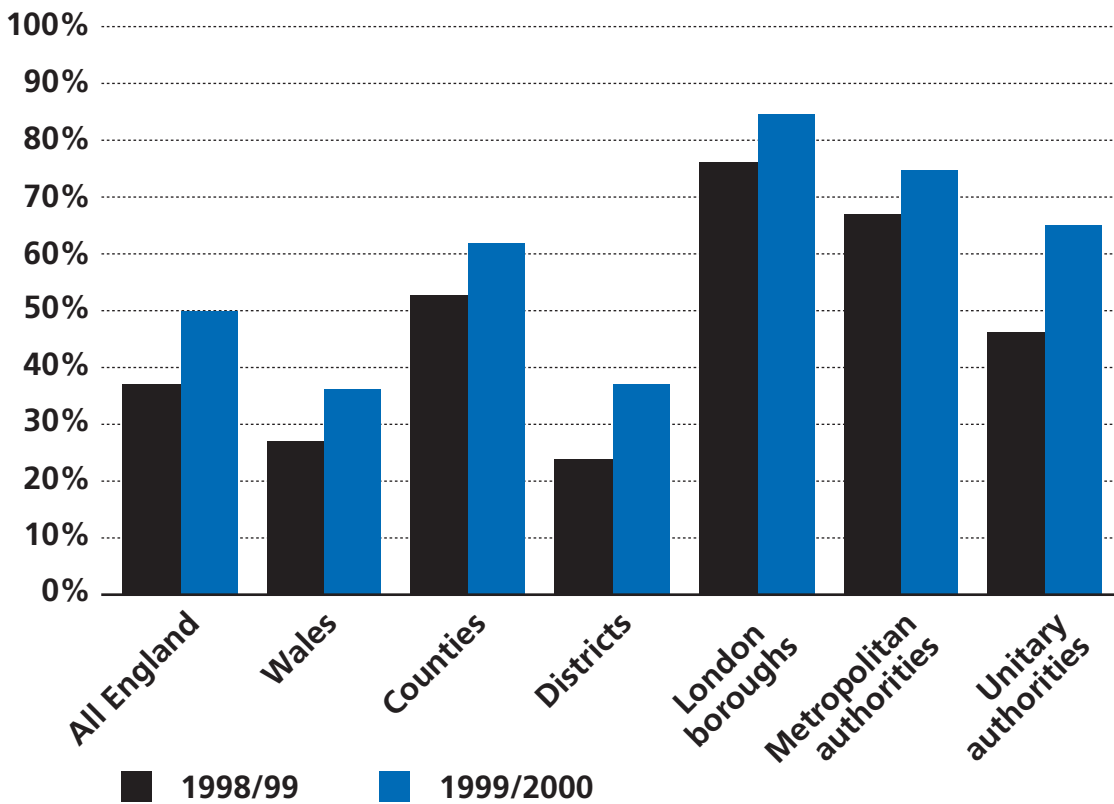
Source: Audit Commission

EXHIBIT 2 Percentage of authorities reaching different levels of CRE Standard in 2000/01

The majority of councils in England and Wales have reached no higher than level 1 of the CRE Standard.

Level 0 Level 1 Level 2 Level 3 Level 4 Level 5 Did not provide the information requested
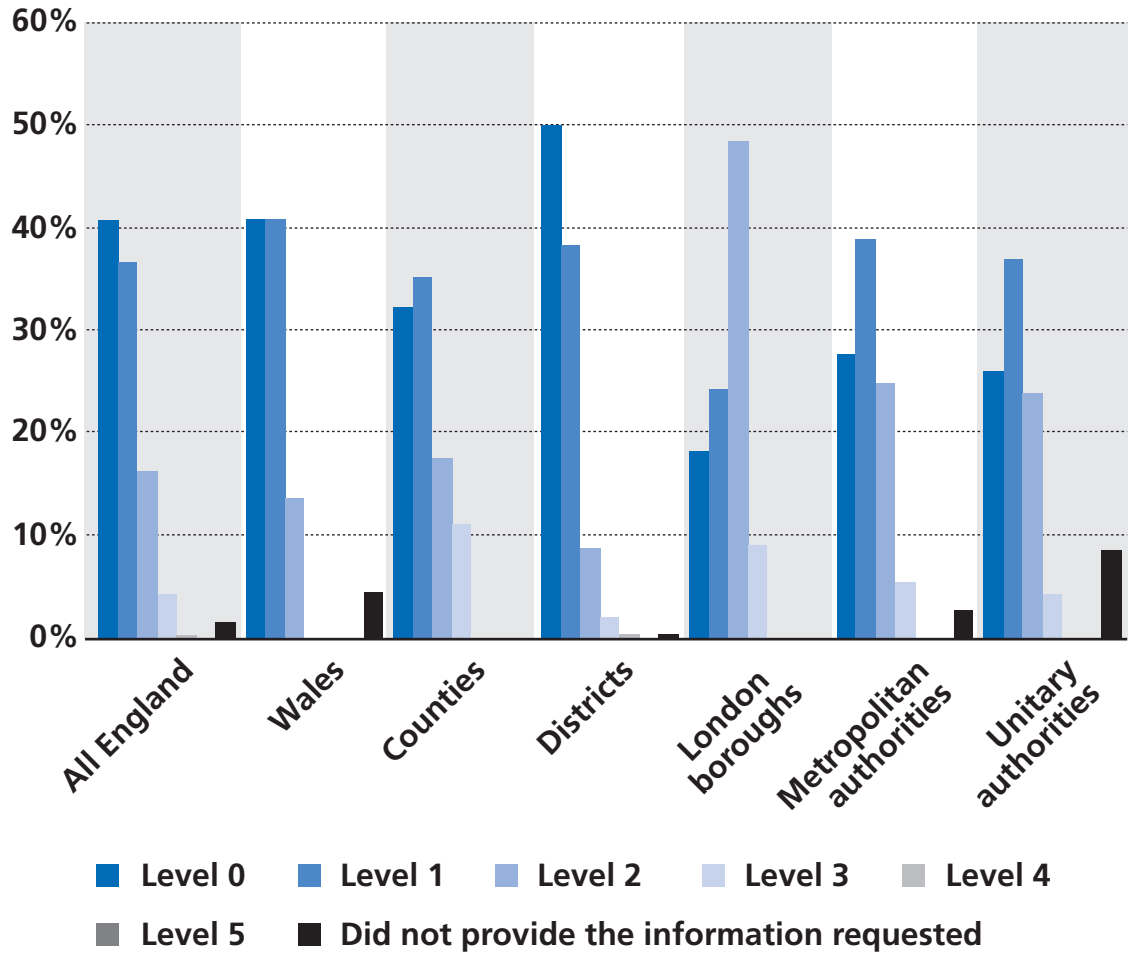
Source: Audit Commission

31. From 2002/03 local authorities in England will have to report the level they have reached against the new generic Equality Standard for Local Government (developed by the CRE, EOC, DRC and the Employers' Organisation). The existing best value PI on the CRE Standard will be superseded by one relating to the generic Equality Standard. In Wales, the existing indicator is being retained for a further year pending discussion on adopting the Welsh version of the generic Equality Standard. The new Equality Standard aims to help local authorities to mainstream equalities into all aspects of

their service delivery and into employment practice. It allows authorities to identify disadvantages associated with gender, disability and race, and to work towards eliminating the barriers that create that disadvantage. It also provides a framework that can be easily adapted to include other areas of disadvantage and discrimination, such as age and sexuality.

ACCESS TO LOCAL AUTHORITY BUILDINGS

32. Most local authorities use a variety of buildings, both for their staff to work in, and to provide direct services to the public. Some of these buildings may be very old, while others may have been built more recently. There are a number of basic physical adaptations that can be made to such buildings to make them accessible to disabled members of the public.

33. The Audit Commission included a PI for local authorities relating to access to buildings from the first year of the ACPIs (1993/94). The indicator uses the Regulation Part M standards of good practice for building design and construction as a yardstick to judge the accessibility of local authority buildings that are open to, and used by, members of the public **(Ref. 14)**.[I] There is some concern that councils that enforce the Regulation M standard more rigorously may therefore record lower figures than other councils. The percentage of local authority buildings meeting the accessibility standard rose steadily each year **(EXHIBIT 3)**. By 1998/99 the average for English councils reached more than 18 per cent (but under 13 per cent in Wales), rising to just over 21 per cent (and

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[I]   Building Regulations 1991: Access and facilities for disabled people, Approved Document M, HMSO, 1991. This document is one of a series approved by the Secretary of State as practical guidance on meeting the requirements of Schedule 1 and regulation 7 of the Building Regulations 1991. Document M specifies that: 'reasonable provision shall be made for disabled people to gain access to and to use the building'. The document deals with matters of access to, into, and use of buildings and also contains more specific provisions for stairs and ramps that need to be suitable for use by disabled people. It also covers the reasonable provision of sanitary conveniences in the building for the disabled.

14 per cent in Wales) in 1999/2000. For 2000/01, the most recent year for which data are available, the average for English councils had risen to 25 per cent (15 per cent in Wales).

People don't look at the cost/benefit – if users can't get into buildings, they can't get to information on, or access to, citizenship. And authorities don't always realise that everyone benefits from wider access – bigger doorways and disabled toilets can be used by everyone.
Inspector

EXHIBIT 3 **Percentage of council buildings accessible to disabled people**

The percentage of buildings accessible to disabled people rose between 1998/99 and 2000/01.

Legend: 1998/99, 1999/2000, 2000/01
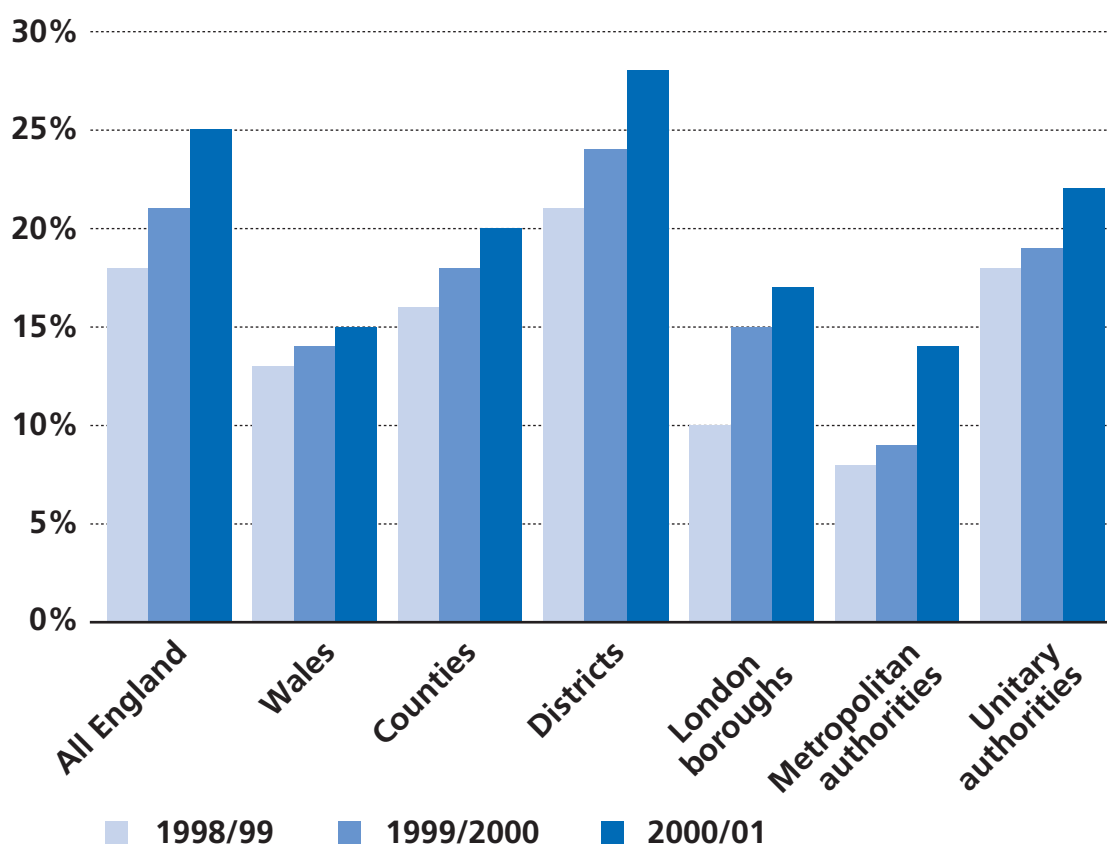
Source: Audit Commission

34. While performance against this indicator may be affected by the age and condition of the council's building stock, the variations between authorities, even similar authorities, are striking. Almost one in eight English councils reported that none of their buildings were accessible, while a handful of councils reported 100 per cent accessibility.

35. Under the Disability Discrimination Act, from 2004 local authorities will have to make reasonable adjustments to the physical features of their premises in order to overcome physical barriers to access. While these reasonable adjustments may not be as demanding as those of Regulation Part M, the figures above suggest that some local authorities may struggle to comply with this regulation within the next 18 months.

DELIVERING SERVICES

36. This section includes a number of indicators that monitor specific services that are designed to address race, gender and disability issues. It also includes a review from an equalities perspective of the satisfaction data that is collected by local councils from best value surveys. Some councils routinely use additional monitoring by ethnicity, gender and disability of some of the performance indicators on a range of their mainstream services. Such monitoring can be a rich source of additional information on equalities in service provision. However, as such monitoring is not part of the statutory set of indicators, we are unable to produce comparative data.

37. For local authorities, equal opportunities and diversity is not just about policies and access to services. It is also about consulting local communities and redesigning services appropriately to meet the diverse needs and requirements of those communities. This means seeing equal opportunities not as an 'add-on' task after the 'real' job of providing services, but as part of the mainstream process of deciding what services should be provided to whom and how. The Home Office identifies this as a key feature of organisations that effectively promote racial equality **(Ref. 10)**.

This section contains the following PIs **(Ref. 2)** and analyses them below:

- The satisfaction of local people with their local council (and the different services it provides), broken down by ethnicity, gender and disability.

- The percentage of users/carers who said that matters relating to race/culture/religion were noted (by social service staff).

- The number of racial incidents recorded by the authority (per 100,000 of the population) and the percentage of racial incidents that resulted in further action.

- The number of domestic violence refuge places per 10,000 population provided, or supported, by the authority.

- The percentage of pedestrian crossings with facilities for disabled people.

- Whether the authority follows the CRE's *Code of Practice in Rented Housing*.

- The percentage of statements of special educational need prepared within 18 weeks (including those affected by 'exceptions to the rule' under the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice*).

HOW SATISFIED ARE LOCAL PEOPLE WITH THEIR COUNCIL?

38. For 2000/01, the Government introduced in England a number of BVPIs to measure local citizens' satisfaction with council services, and the satisfaction levels of users of specific council services. While similar indicators may be introduced in Wales in the future, they were not collected for 2000/01. Local councils conducted surveys of local people and service users to obtain the data, which were also broken down by gender, disability and ethnicity.[I] The data submitted by local councils to the DTLR has been aggregated in this report to local authority type and to national level.

I Detailed guidance was given to local councils on how to conduct the surveys, but, in practice, it is clear that the methodologies for designing the questionnaires, the sampling techniques and the fieldwork varied between councils, making direct inter-council comparisons more difficult.

39. Analysis of the data shows that, generally, women are slightly more satisfied with council services than men, disabled people are slightly more satisfied than those without disabilities, and white residents are more satisfied than those from black and minority ethnic communities. The difference by ethnicity is more significant and complex, with those from all black and minority ethnic communities grouped together being more than one and one-half times as likely to be dissatisfied with the council than white citizens. Analysing the data by specific ethnic minorities, more than 20 per cent of black citizens were dissatisfied with their local council, almost double the proportion of white citizens, whereas Asian and Chinese citizens were more satisfied than white citizens.

40. The results are broadly consistent with previous surveys and with research carried out by MORI **(Ref. 15)**. This research was based on results taken from the Peoples Panel in 1998, and in 2000 with a special booster sample of black and minority ethnic communities. Surveys showed that women and disabled people had a more positive image generally of public services, while the picture for black and minority ethnic communities was more mixed. In addition, women were less likely to say that public services fell short of their expectations, while black citizens were more likely to say that public services fell a long way short of their expectations. The 1998 Peoples Panel research also found that women tended to be more satisfied than men with a range of public and private services, and that disabled people were more positive generally about their local council.

41. Reviewing BVPIs for 2000/01, local citizens are most satisfied with district councils, followed by unitaries, metropolitan councils, county councils and finally London boroughs, regardless of gender, disability or ethnicity. In all categories, except those from black and minority ethnic communities, those living in London boroughs are around twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their local councils as those living in district areas. On average, in every type of council, black and minority ethnic citizens are less satisfied than white citizens. Similarly, women and disabled people are more satisfied than men

and those without disabilities. Such differences may be due to a number of cultural and demographic reasons, possibly the older age profile of disabled people and the younger age profile of black and minority ethnic communities, and social and cultural factors that impact on the propensity of different groups to express dissatisfaction openly.

42. Some important research has been conducted on the factors that contribute to local citizens' satisfaction with council services, showing a correlation between deprivation and dissatisfaction levels **(Ref. 16)**. This is attributed to the fact that service provision is harder in deprived areas, as residents have more complex needs. In addition, those living in deprived areas may feel more dissatisfied generally, and so feel that their authority is not doing enough to help them. Data from the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit show that 70 per cent of all ethnic minority residents in England live in the 88 neighbourhood renewal areas – that is, the most deprived areas in England. So it follows that black and ethnic minority citizens are generally less satisfied with their local council because they are more likely to be from deprived areas than white citizens. The relationship between deprivation, ethnicity and user satisfaction with services is complex and justifies further research.

43. The challenge is for councils to continue to focus on meeting the needs of all sections of their local community, whilst being aware that research shows that deprivation levels, ethnicity and other equality considerations can affect local levels of satisfaction with services **(EXHIBITS 4, 5 and 6, overleaf)**.

44. There is a similar pattern in the responses to other best value survey indicators. On a range of council services, such as the handling of complaints, processing benefit applications, local authority recycling facilities, household waste collection and civic amenity sites, it was men, those without disabilities, and those from black and minority ethnic communities who were less satisfied.

EXHIBIT 4 Percentage of citizens satisfied with their local authority by ethnicity 2000/01
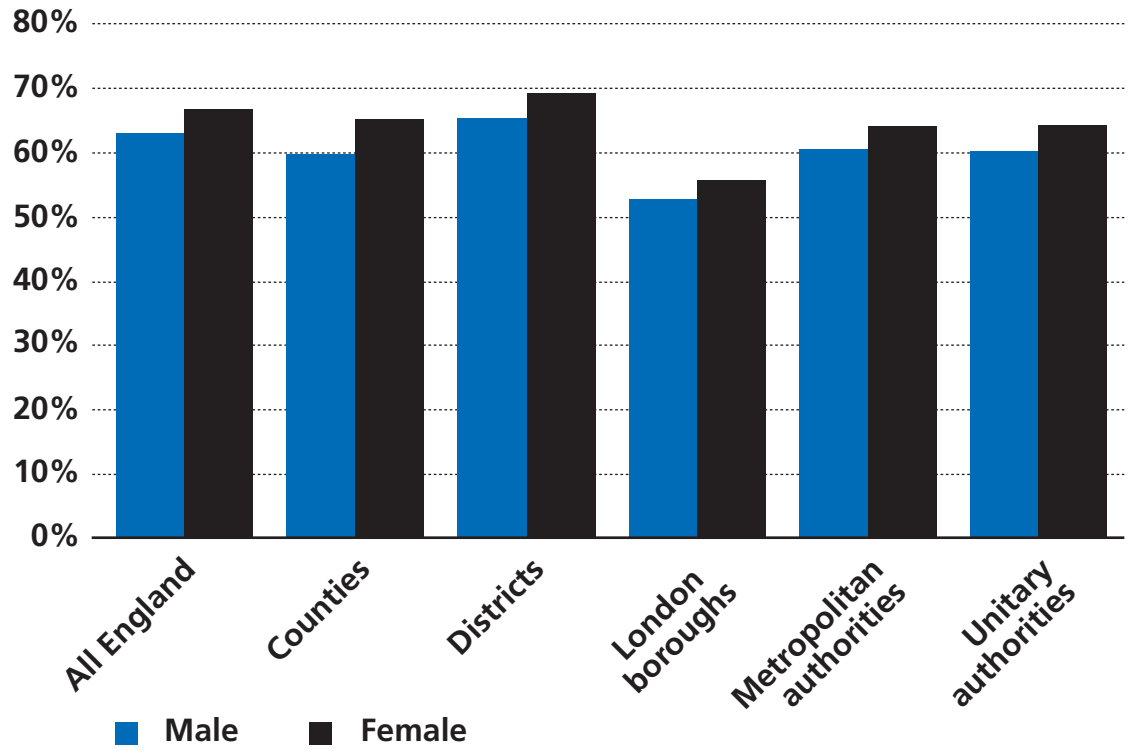
White citizens are more satisfied with their local authority than black and minority ethnic citizens.

■ **White citizens**   ■ **All black and minority ethnic citizens**
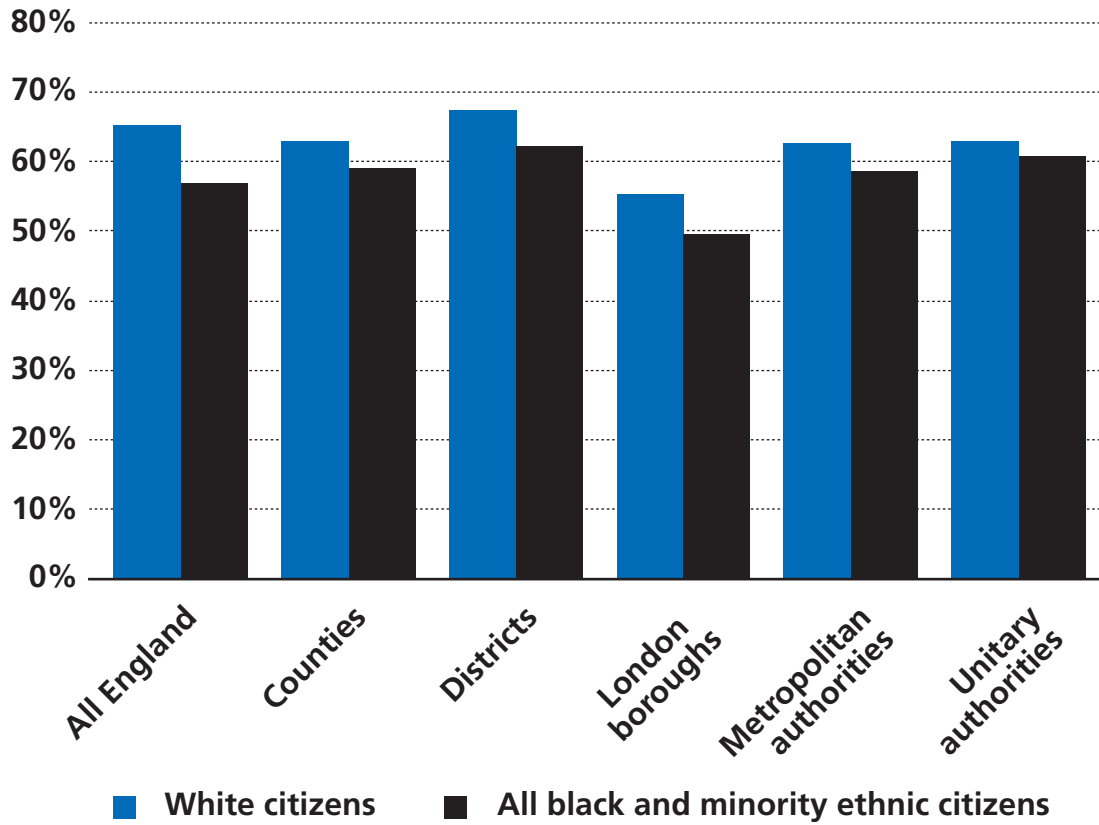
Source: Audit Commission

EXHIBIT 5 **Percentage of citizens satisfied with their local authority by gender 2000/01**
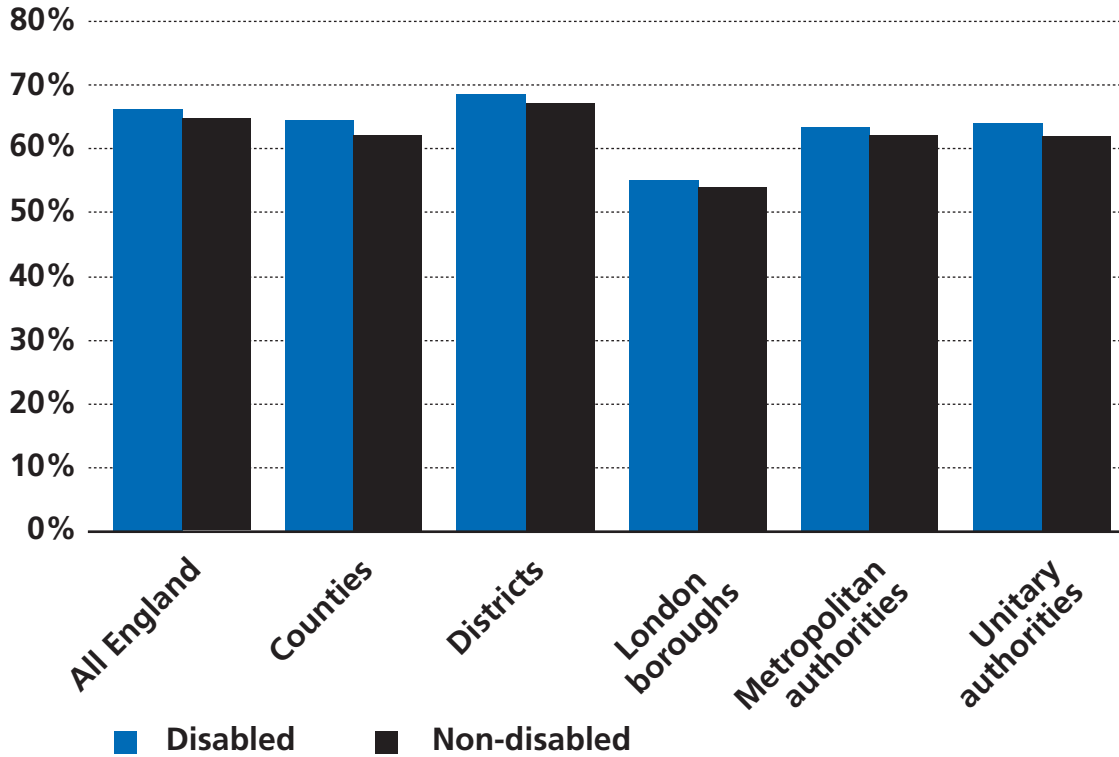
Women are more satisfied with their local authority than men.

Source: Audit Commission

Disabled citizens are more satisfied with their local authority than non-disabled citizens.
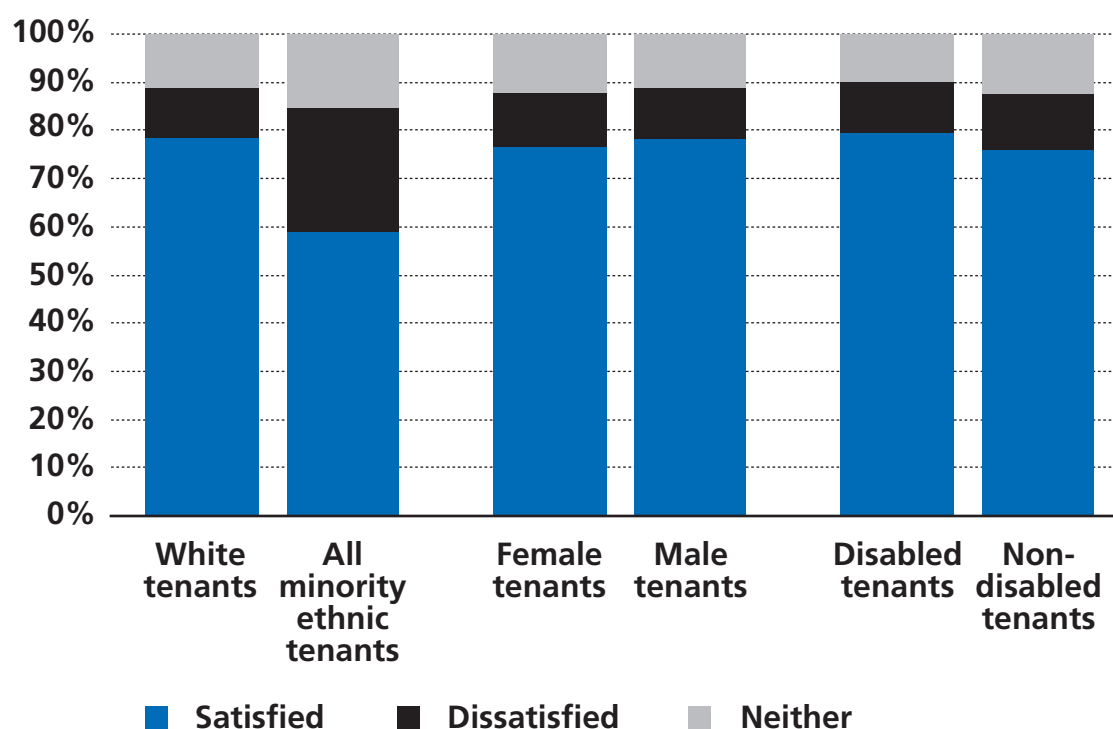

Source: Audit Commission

45. The BVPIs also included two satisfaction surveys of local authority tenants, looking at overall satisfaction with their landlord, and satisfaction with the opportunities to participate in management and decision-making. The results on these indicators showed two important differences to the general national pattern. Firstly, on both of these indicators male tenants were more satisfied with their landlord than women tenants, whereas women were more satisfied than men with council services overall and on most other services. Secondly, black and minority ethnic tenants were significantly more dissatisfied with their local authority landlord than white tenants – on both indicators the proportion of people dissatisfied was more

than double. This is a much bigger difference than that for the indicators concerning satisfaction with other council services or with overall satisfaction with the council **(EXHIBITS 7 and 8, overleaf)**.

EXHIBIT 7 Percentage of council tenants satisfied with overall service from their landlord 2000/01

Minority ethnic council tenants were the least satisfied with the overall service from their landlord.

Percentage of council tenants satisfied with service from landlord

Source: Audit Commission

EXHIBIT 8 **Percentage of council tenants satisfied with opportunities to participate in management and decision-making 2000/01**

Minority ethnic tenants registered the highest dissatisfaction with opportunities to participate in management and decision-making.
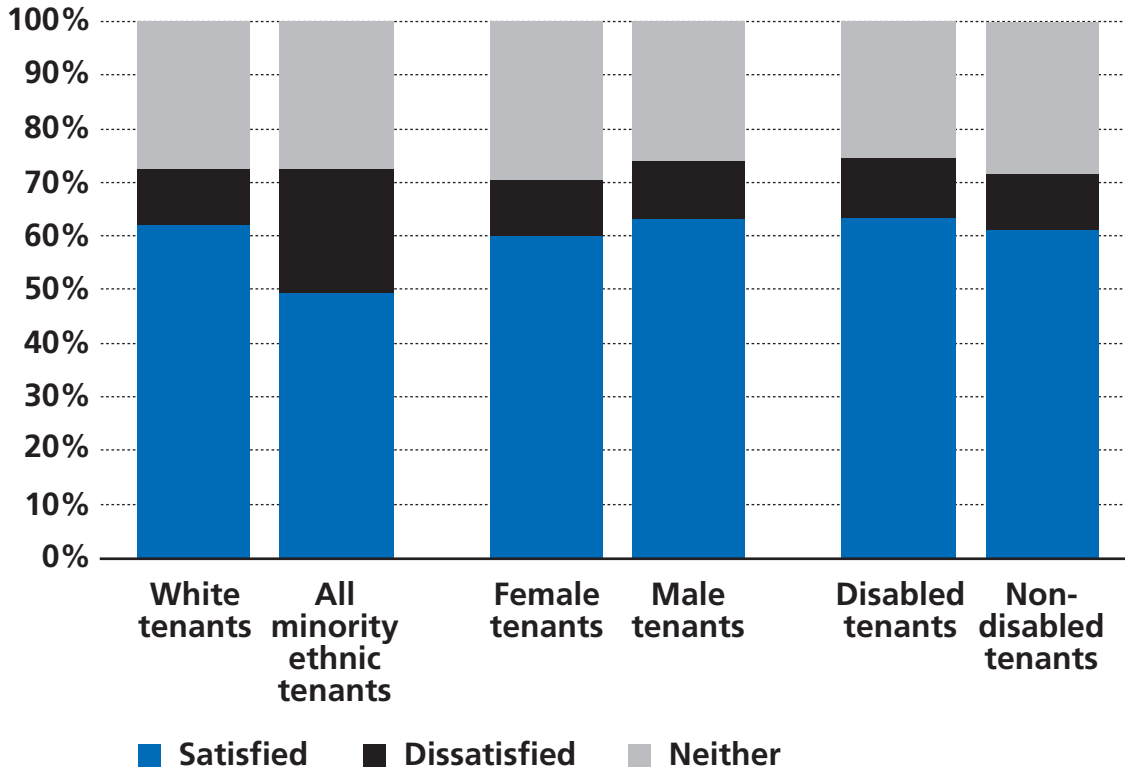
Source: Audit Commission

SOCIAL SERVICE USERS/CARERS AND MATTERS RELATING TO RACE, CULTURE AND RELIGION

46. When social service providers interview clients to establish their needs it is important that, where appropriate, they raise issues relating to race, culture and religion that might affect the client's requirements (for example, culturally sensitive menus from meals-on-wheels providers).

There's this dilemma that because social services deal with disadvantaged groups, they should be much better at equal opportunities than other council departments – but in fact the difficulties with equal opportunities are council-wide.
Inspector

47. The BVPIs for 2000/01 in England included a survey, introduced by the Government, of social service users and carers. The Welsh Assembly Government did not introduce this indicator for Welsh councils. One of the questions asked was whether matters relating to race, culture and religion had been noted, when appropriate, by the social service providers. This indicator records the percentage of users and carers who felt that such issues had been noted by social service staff when appropriate.

48. For English councils, on average only just over one-third of users and carers said that matters of race, culture and religion were noted by local authority social service staff **(EXHIBIT 9, overleaf)**. The figure was higher on average in metropolitan councils at 42 per cent. There was wide variation in the figures reported by local councils, even among similar councils, with, for example, figures for unitary councils varying between 7 and 94 per cent.

EXHIBIT 9 **Percentage of users/carers who said matters relating to race, culture and religion, were noted 2000/01**

Less than one-half of users/carers in all council types said that matters relating to race, culture and religion were noted.
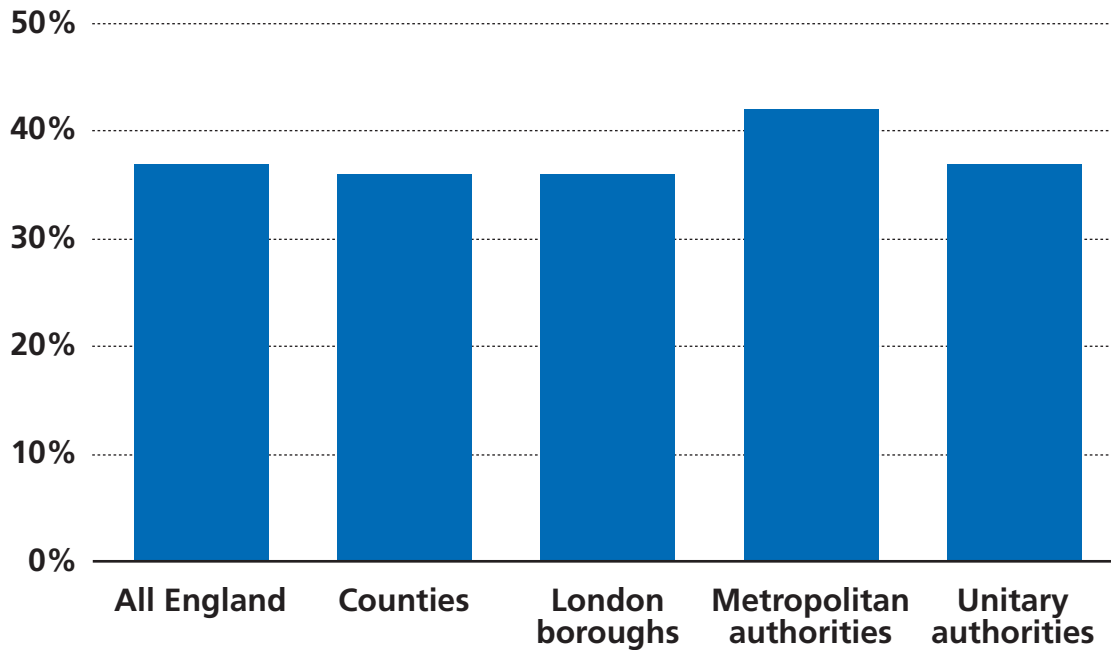
Source: Audit Commission

THE NUMBER OF RACIAL INCIDENTS AND THE PERCENTAGE OF RACIAL INCIDENTS THAT RESULTED IN FURTHER ACTION

49. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry highlighted how important it is for public agencies to have systems in place to deal with cases of racial harassment and violence. It specified that incidents should be classified as 'racial' if any person involved in it specifies it to be so. Racial incidents can have a powerful impact on the lives of those who suffer them, and local authorities can play an important role in combating them. But to do this they must have good information about such incidents – both their frequency and nature, and also their outcomes. The first indicator looks at how many racial incidents are reported, relating to the services provided by local councils. The indicator applies to all services provided by the council, including schools and employment matters. Racial incidents are any incidents

regarded as being such by the person experiencing harassment or anyone else. In order to provide data for this indicator, local councils need a corporate system to monitor such incidents.

There's no consistent approach to monitoring racial incidents across council departments, no co-ordination from the top. If no-one owns and publicises [monitoring], people won't come forward with what they know and you'll never tap all the potential data sources in the council.
Inspector

50. The most significant feature about this indicator is that around one-third of all councils in England, and one-half in Wales, either did not submit data or their data were qualified because doubts were expressed about their arrangements for producing the information. These difficulties may, in part, be due to this being the first year in which the indicator has been used, and to the difficulties that some councils have experienced with setting up adequate monitoring systems. The analysis of the data, therefore, needs to be treated with caution. It is clear that councils need to have monitoring systems in place to produce reliable data if they are to meet their statutory requirements under the new Race Relations Amendment Act 2000.

51. Nationally, on average, English councils recorded 22 racial incidents per 100,000 population. Welsh councils recorded 29 on average. Figures were much higher in London, with an average of 95 incidents, and much lower for districts with an average of 6 per 100,000 population. While high recorded numbers of racial incidents may be a source for concern, it is also important to note that high levels may indicate that the council has good monitoring systems in place that encourage the registration of the incident. There were wide variations between similar councils: with figures for London councils ranging from 3 incidents per 100,000 population to 512; and among metropolitan councils the figures varied from 0 to 413 per 100,000 population. More than two-fifths of district councils registered 0 incidents per 100,000 population **(EXHIBIT 10)**. Our analysis shows that there is no statistical correlation between the

number of recorded racial incidents and the proportion of the local population from black and minority ethnic communities.

52. The second indicator records the percentage of racial incidents that resulted in specified forms of further action from the local council. The forms of such action must be recorded in writing and include such things as:

- detailed investigations, for example, interviews with alleged perpetrator(s);
- referral to the police or other body, such as the CRE or the Citizens Advice Bureau;
- mediation;
- warning to the perpetrator(s), which, if oral must be recorded at the time;

EXHIBIT 10 **The average number of racial incidents recorded by the council per 100,000 population 2000/01**

The number of racial incidents recorded by councils varied widely across England and Wales.


Average number of incidents per 100,000 of population
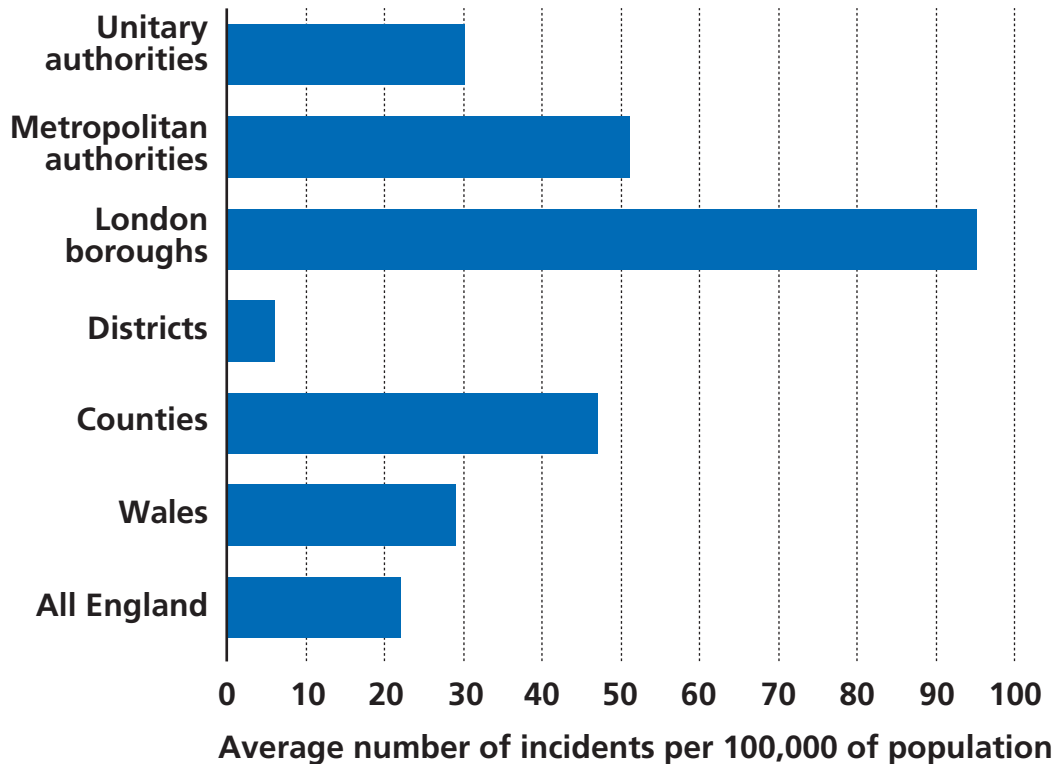
Source: Audit Commission

- relocation of the person experiencing racial harassment; and

- removal of graffiti.

53. On average, around four-fifths of racial incidents recorded by English councils resulted in further forms of action, such as investigation of the incident or different forms of action against the identified perpetrator **(EXHIBIT 11)**. The figure was highest in Wales at 94 per cent, followed by county, metropolitan and unitary councils. However, around one-half of English councils and three-fifths of Welsh councils did not submit data on this indicator or their data was qualified. There is no statistical correlation between the numbers of incidents recorded by the council and the percentage of those incidents that resulted in further action being taken.

EXHIBIT 11 **The percentage of racial incidents resulting in further action 2000/01**

The majority of racial incidents recorded by local councils resulted in further action.
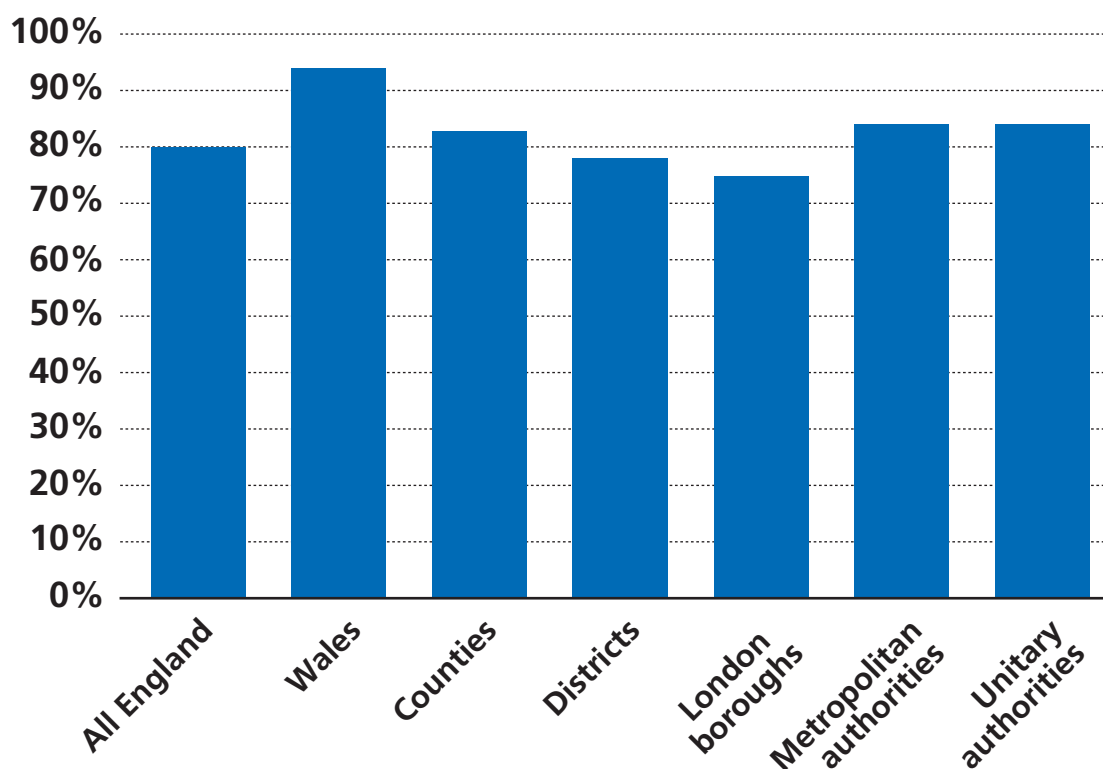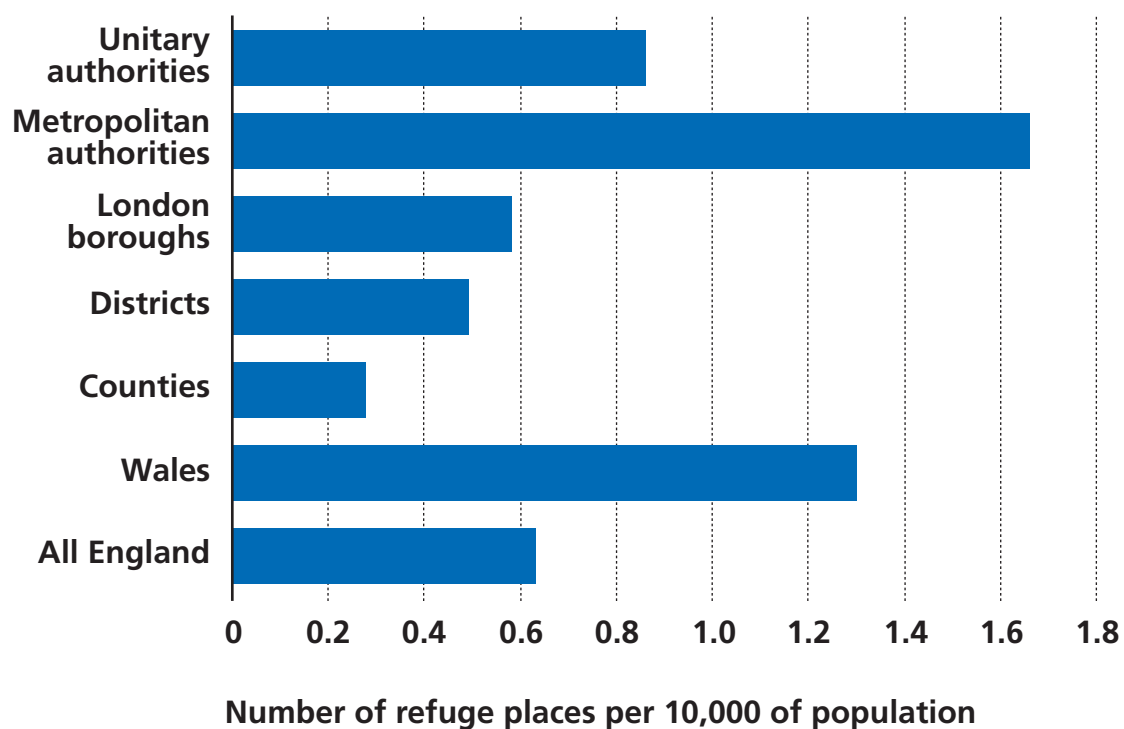

Source: Audit Commission

THE NUMBER OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE REFUGE PLACES PROVIDED OR SUPPORTED BY THE AUTHORITY

54. According to the British Crime Survey of 2000, domestic violence constituted almost one-quarter of all violent crime. One in four women are likely to experience domestic violence at some stage in their life, and between one in eight and one in ten are likely to have experienced it in the past year **(Ref. 17)**. In addition, an analysis of council homelessness acceptances nationally reveals that one in six people were accepted as homeless as a result of domestic violence **(Ref. 18)**. Domestic violence has a significant social and financial impact on local communities. Local councils can play an important role in helping those people who suffer it. Tackling domestic violence requires close partnership working with a range of other agencies and service providers. Good publicity and information about the services provided and providing a range of integrated services are also vital. There are particular issues about providing such services to black and minority ethnic women, many of whom are unaware of refuges and concerned about possible racism within them **(Ref. 19)**.

55. While councils, together with the police, deal with the perpetrators of domestic violence, in many instances local authorities may have to provide alternative (often short-term) accommodation for those experiencing domestic violence. The provision of, or financial support for, refuge places is one of a number of important yardsticks to measure the work of local councils in tackling domestic violence. This indicator counts the number of emergency bed-spaces provided, or part-funded, by the council. These bed-spaces are for women and their children who have been referred for help after experiencing threats to their physical safety.

56. Nationally, on average, English councils provided 0.63 refuge places per 10,000 population. The figure was much higher for metropolitan and Welsh councils at 1.66 and 1.3 places respectively, and much lower for county councils at just 0.28 places. There are wide variations in performance between similar councils, with more than one-third of district councils reporting no places, while a few

reported more than three places. For around 10 per cent of councils, data were either not submitted or doubts were expressed about the arrangements involved in producing it. Our analysis shows that there is no statistical correlation between the number of people accepted as being homeless on the grounds of domestic violence, and the number of refuge places provided, or supported, by the local council **(EXHIBIT 12)**.

EXHIBIT 12 Number of domestic violence refuge places per 10,000 population supported or provided by the council 2000/01

The provision of domestic violence refuge places by councils varied widely across England and Wales.

Number of refuge places per 10,000 of population

Source: Audit Commission

PEDESTRIAN CROSSINGS WITH FACILITIES FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

57. Road safety is a significant concern for disabled people. In recent years, most local councils have installed a number of adjustments and adaptations, such as dropped kerbs, tactile surfaces and sounds advising people when signals have changed. Councils are responsible for maintaining traffic lights and pedestrian crossings (except district councils, where counties look after them, and in London, where Transport for London has responsibility for traffic lights). This indicator measures the percentage of pedestrian crossings with facilities for disabled people.

We now have regular meetings with [disabled networks] and get them to prioritise what they'd like us to change on the streets. They understand we don't have a bottomless pot of money and so they help us to choose what to tackle first.
**Council officer**

58. There has been steady improvement in performance at local councils in terms of this indicator. Nationally, the average English council in 2000/01 had facilities for disabled people at more than three-quarters of its pedestrian crossings, up from an average of two-thirds two years ago. Performance has improved on average for all authority types, with the biggest average improvement in London (up 13 percentage points to 76 per cent). County councils had the highest average at 82 per cent and Welsh councils the lowest at 69 per cent. Nevertheless, significant variations remain, with some councils registering that 100 per cent of their pedestrian crossings have facilities for disabled people, while others have less than 50 per cent **(EXHIBIT 13)**.

EXHIBIT 13 The percentage of pedestrian crossings with facilities for the disabled

The percentage of pedestrian crossings adapted for the disabled has risen steadily in the last few years.


| | 1998/99 | 1999/2000 | 2000/01 |
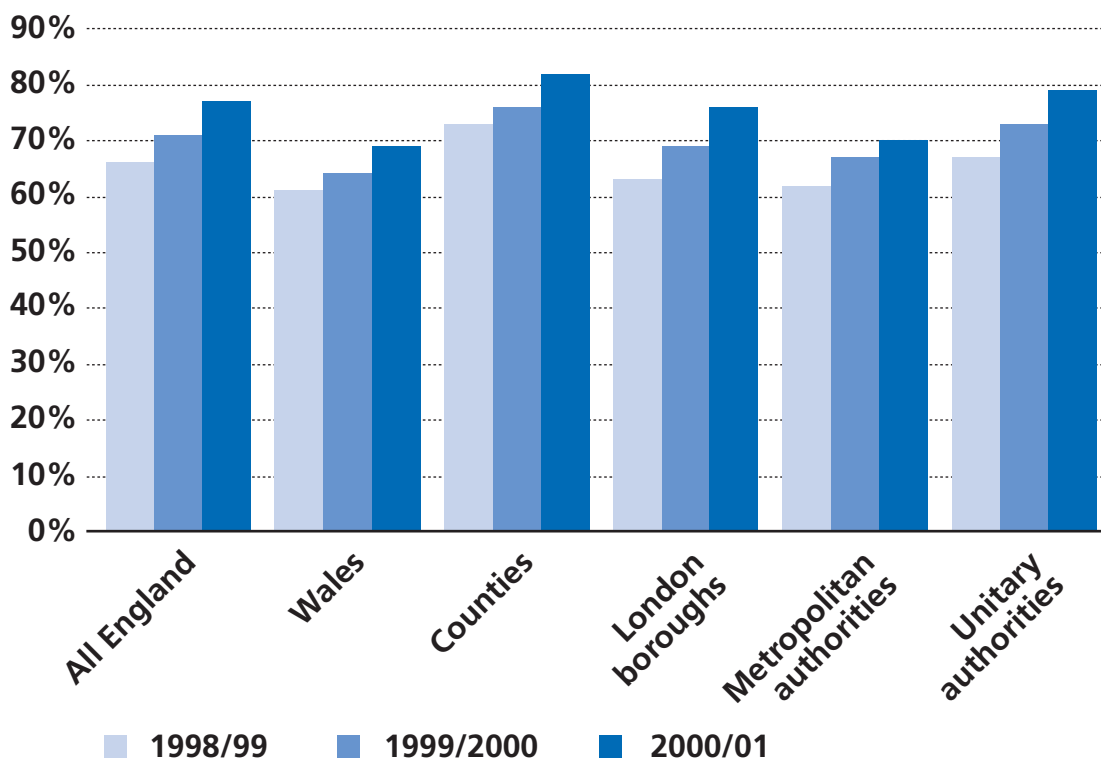
Source: Audit Commission

CRE CODE OF PRACTICE IN RENTED HOUSING

59. In 1991 the CRE issued a *Code of Practice in Rented Housing* **(Ref. 20)**. The code outlines good practice on racial equality in a wide range of housing management functions, including monitoring major features of service delivery by ethnicity. The Audit Commission included a PI on whether councils followed the CRE code from 1994/95 **(EXHIBIT 14, overleaf)**. The percentage of English councils following the code has increased steadily over the last three years from 57 to 64 per cent nationally, although there is wide variation between authority types. Almost all London authorities, and over three-quarters of metropolitan councils followed the code in 2000/01, while just over one-half of Welsh and district councils did so. From 2002/03 the BVPI will be amended to include an assessment of whether authorities also follow good practice guidance on racial harassment **(Ref. 21)**.

EXHIBIT 14 **Percentage of councils following CRE *Code of Practice in rented housing* 2000/01**

Almost two-thirds of councils followed the CRE *Code of Practice in Rented Housing* in 2000/01.
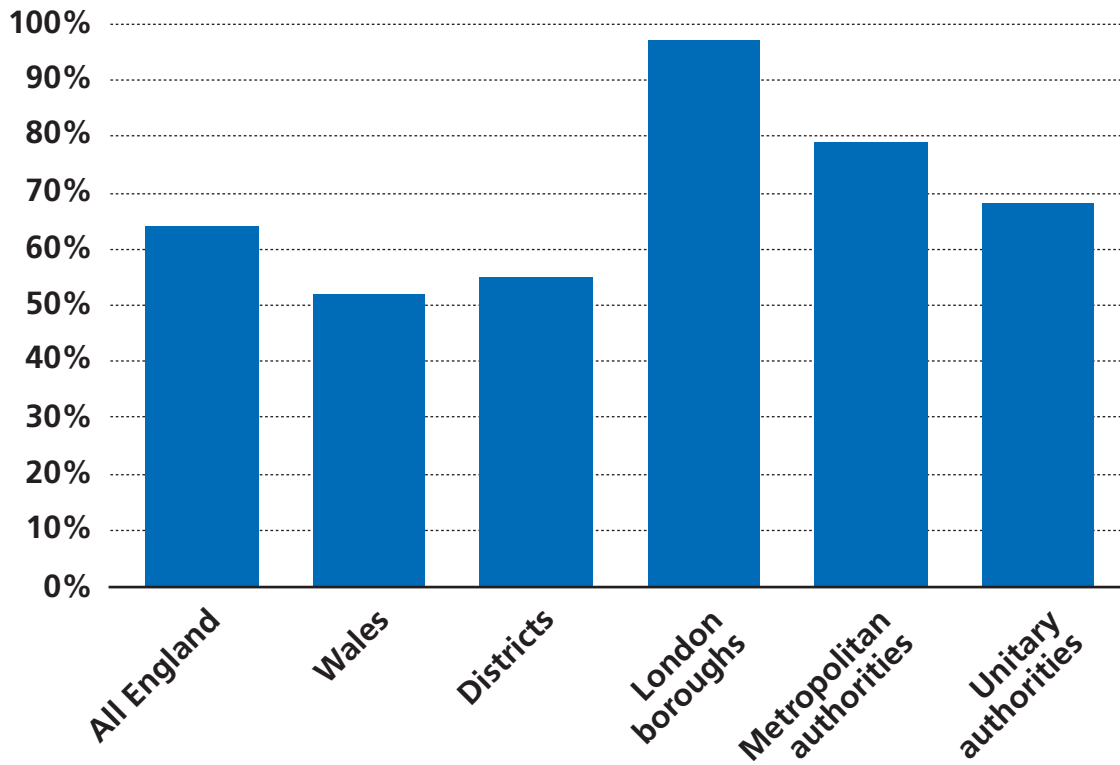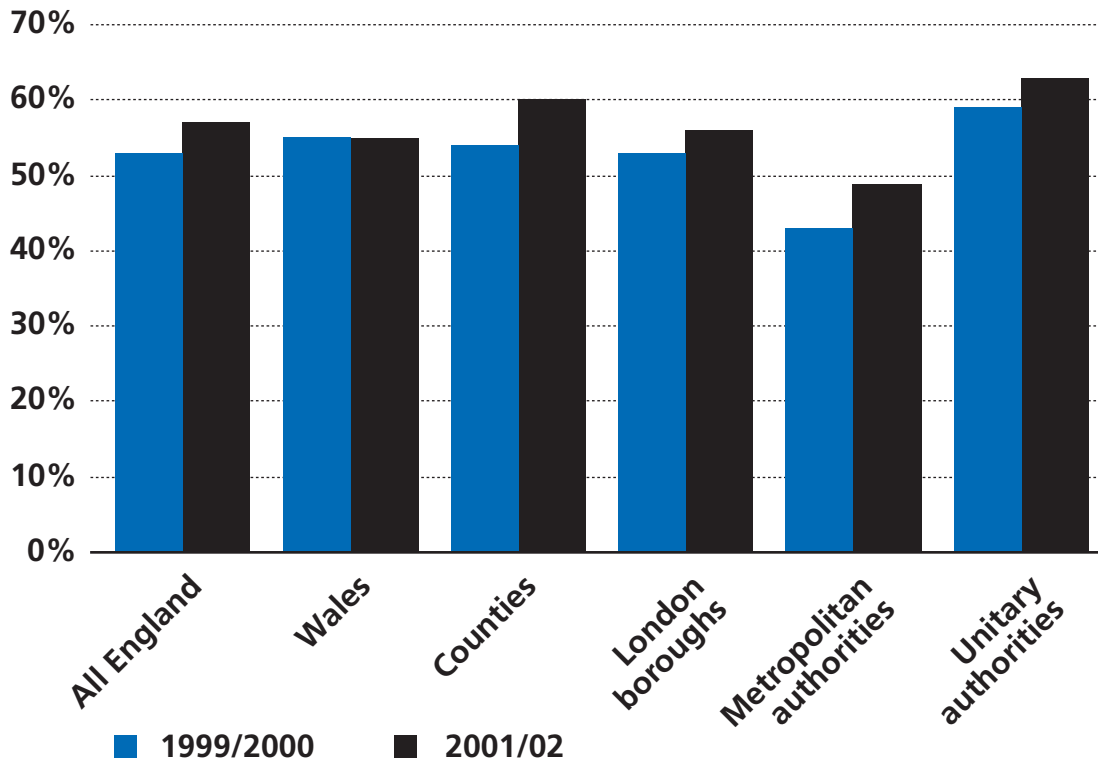

Source: Audit Commission

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN) STATEMENTS

60. Around three per cent of children have statements of special educational needs because, for example, they have learning difficulties, behavioural problems or physical disabilities that mean that their school is unable to meet their requirements without additional support. Where children have a special educational need, the council must conduct a statutory assessment, usually leading to a statement that sets out how these needs will be met. Under the SEN Code of Practice, all councils should aim to complete the assessment and issue the draft statements within 18 weeks. This indicator shows the percentage of draft statements prepared within the 18-week target.

61. The Audit Commission has previously reported **(Ref. 22)** on the steady improvement in the performance of local councils on this issue. Performance between 1999/2000 and 2000/01 has improved nationally and for all authority types, on average, except Welsh councils **(EXHIBIT 15, overleaf)**. Unitary councils performed best, with an average of 63 per cent of statements being prepared within 18 weeks. Metropolitan councils achieved just 49 per cent, compared to the national average of 57 per cent. There are huge variations between similar councils – one north west metropolitan council prepared 93 per cent of statements within 18 weeks, while a neighbouring council achieved just 2 per cent. And among London, unitary and county councils, some councils prepared between four and five times the proportion of statements as others within the 18-week period. The Audit Commission is currently carrying out a research project on children with special educational needs. A report looking at statutory assessments and statements will be published in June 2002 **(Ref. 23)**. A wider report, looking at how well children's needs are being met in the context of the Government's policy on inclusion will be published in autumn 2002.

EXHIBIT 15 **Percentage of SEN statements prepared within 18 weeks**

The percentage of SEN statements prepared within 18 weeks has risen in England, but fallen in Wales.

Legend: ■ 1999/2000   ■ 2001/02

Source: Audit Commission

HUMAN RESOURCES

62. Local councils are frequently the largest employer in their local community. The staffing policies and practices of local councils can, therefore, have a significant impact locally. The composition of the councils' own workforce is an important equality issue. The staffing profiles of local councils should reflect the diversity of the communities that they serve – both in terms of gender, disability and ethnicity. Local councils need to have systems in place that ensure that they continually monitor the profile of their workforce. Monitoring the ethnicity of the workforce is a key feature of an organisation that promotes racial equality **(Ref. 10)**.

This section contains three PIs **(Ref. 2)** and analyses them below:

- the percentage of senior management posts that are filled by women;

- the number of staff declaring that they meet the Disability Discrimination Act disability definition as a percentage of the total workforce; and

- minority ethnic community staff as a percentage of the total workforce.

SENIOR MANAGEMENT POSTS FILLED BY WOMEN

63. This indicator records the percentage of senior council managers who are women. It defines senior managers as staff in the top three tiers of the council (for example, the Chief Executive, Directors and Assistant Directors, or similar positions). The number of such posts varies significantly between different councils, and where the numbers are small, the percentage filled by women may be subject to significant fluctuations. In English councils, on average, around 22 per cent of senior managers were women. The average was highest in London councils at 30 per cent and lowest in Welsh councils, at an average of around 15 per cent. These average figures mask large variations between similar councils. In London, the percentage varied between 0 and 51 per cent, and among districts between 0 and 55 per cent.

People's perceptions of councils tend to be very white, male ... so other applicants worry about fitting in, and also progressing when they actually get there. You need to think about diversity when you're marketing.
Inspector

**64.** A Bristol Business School report shows that in 2001, while 71 per cent of local government staff were women, only 16 per cent of chief officers, 25 per cent of their deputies, and 28 per cent of councillors were women **(Ref. 24)**. The definition of chief officers and their deputies in the survey may not be directly comparable to that for senior management included in this indicator. Nevertheless, the

figures relating to this indicator show that the proportion of female senior managers is significantly lower than the proportion of women in the working-age population as a whole (around 49.4 per cent), and the proportion of local government staff who are women **(EXHIBIT 16) (Ref. 25)**.

EXHIBIT 16 **Percentage of senior management posts filled by women 2000/01**

The percentage of senior management posts filled by women is highest in London.
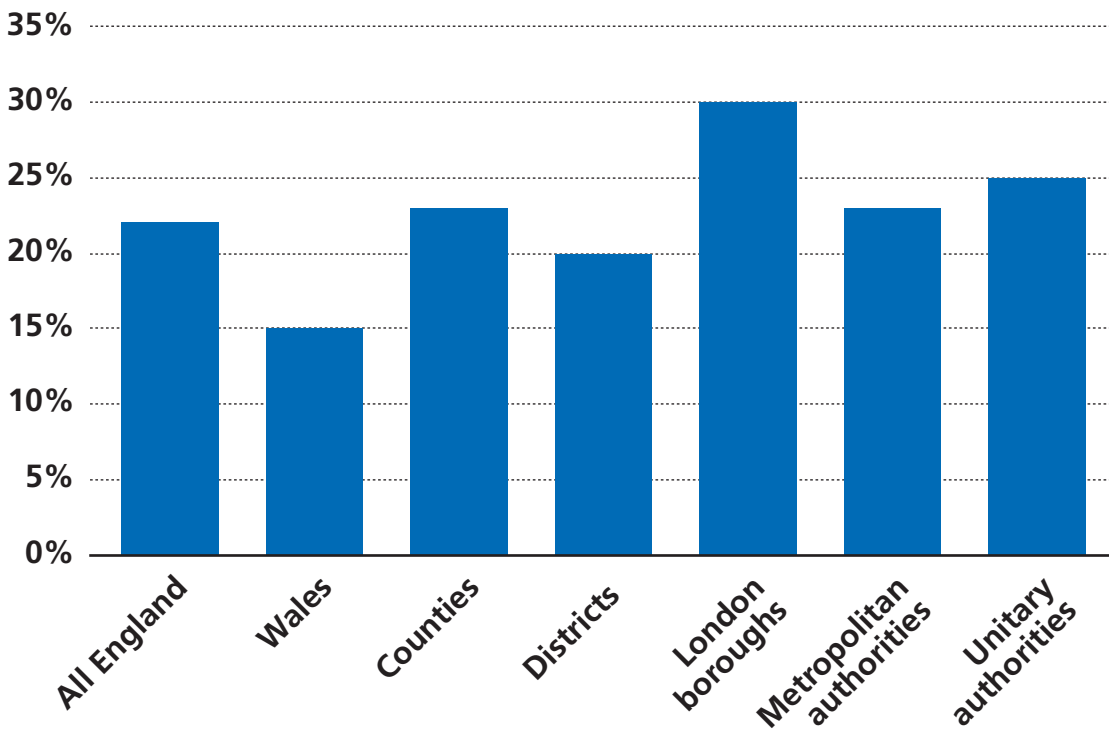
Source: Audit Commission

LOCAL AUTHORITY DISABLED STAFF

65. This indicator demonstrates the proportion of staff working in a local authority that have defined themselves as meeting the Disability Discrimination Act definition of disability.[I]

Authorities need to collect more data on applications – get the profile of people who ask for application packs, then those who actually apply, then those who get to interview...
**Inspector**

66. Nationally, on average, around 14 per cent of the economically active population are believed to have disabilities **(Ref. 24)**. As the proportion of disabled people is broadly similar across most local authority areas, one would expect the proportions of staff with disabilities to be roughly similar. In fact, there are wide variations across councils, including between those of a similar type. The workforces of some councils include as few as 0.02 per cent with disabilities, while others have as many as 14 per cent. The average English council had just over 2 per cent of its staff with disabilities – with district councils registering the highest average at 2.4 per cent **(EXHIBIT 17, overleaf)**. Welsh councils had, on average, just 1.5 per cent. Some of this variation may be due to the fact that staff in local councils respond differently to whether or not they define themselves as disabled.

[I] 'a person has a disability for the purposes of this Act if he has a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. (Disability Discrimination Act, 1995).

EXHIBIT 17 Percentage of posts filled by disabled people

The percentage of council staff with disabilities varies widely.
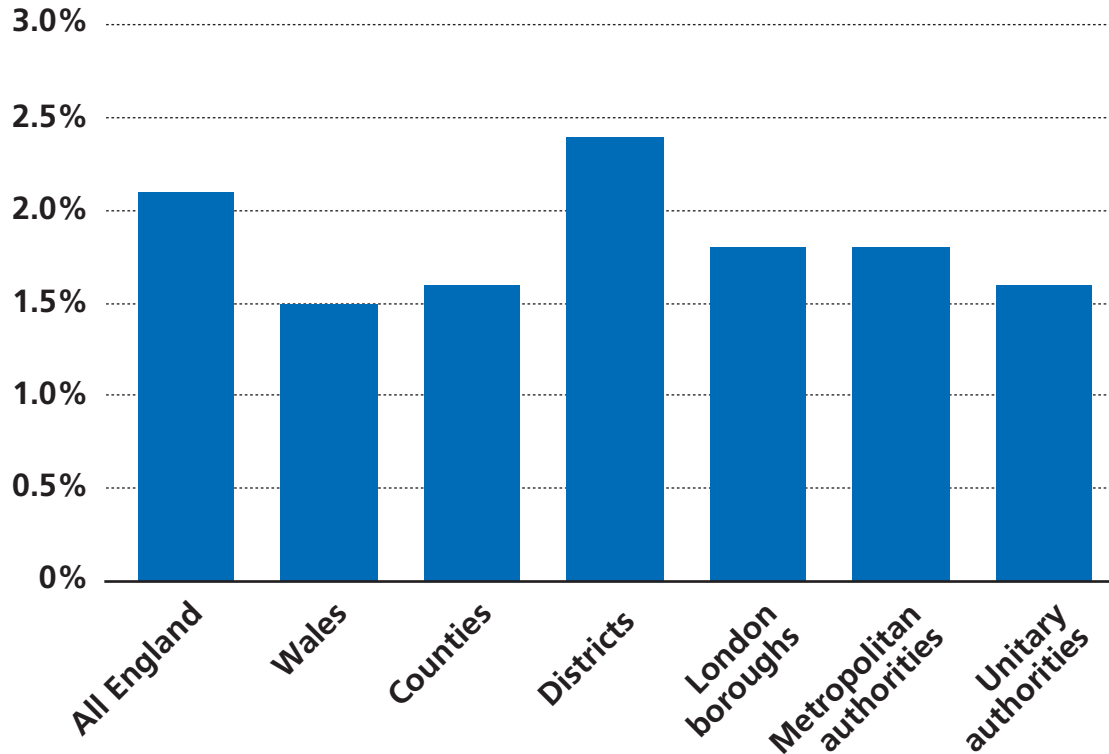
Source: Audit Commission

ETHNIC MINORITY COMMUNITY STAFF

67. This indicator shows the proportion of black and minority ethnic staff for each local authority. Nationally, the workforce of the average council in England includes just over 3 per cent of black and minority ethnic staff. In London this figure was much higher at an average of 17 per cent. The proportion varies enormously between councils – for example, one metropolitan authority has more than 22 per cent while another has 0.1 per cent. These differences are due primarily to the different demographic composition of the population served by the local council. For that reason, we have in this report compared the proportion of staff from ethnic minorities for each local council with the composition of the local population **(EXHIBIT 18, overleaf)**, using recent demographic data to see how representative it is **(Ref. 26)**. The percentages of the population from

black and minority ethnic communities in council areas were based on the 2000/01 annual Local Area Labour Force Survey. The authorities covered are London boroughs, metropolitan, unitary and county councils. Districts were not included because of the small sample sizes. The minimum number of respondents in total per council area was 2,000. The population data is for all age ranges rather than for those of working age (18-65) which may cause a slight distortion in the ratio between the percentage of staff from ethnic minorities and the percentage of the population from ethnic minorities.

We go to ethnic minority job clubs, community centres – and you have to go when they're there, I know it sounds obvious. And you have to advertise and market in the right places. You can start off in schools, at school leavers' careers fairs, universities...
Council officer

68. The pie chart below shows the percentage of all English councils (excluding districts and those with less than one per cent of the population from black and minority ethnic communities) with different ratios showing how closely their ethnic staffing profile compares to their local minority ethnic population. So, for example, if a council has 10 per cent of its staff from minority ethnic communities while these communities comprise 20 per cent of the local population, then it has a ratio of 0.5 (or one in two). There are five bands in the pie chart:

- those with a ratio of less than 0.25 (ie less than one in four);
- those with a ratio between 0.25 and 0.5 (ie between one in four and one in two);
- those with a ratio between 0.5 and 0.75 (ie between one in two and three in four);
- those with a ratio between 0.75 and 1.0 (ie between three in four and one to one); and

- those with a ratio of more than 1.0 (that is, the percentage of staff from minority ethnic communities is higher than the percentage of their local population from those communities).

69. In England, a significant minority of councils (around 42 per cent) have workforces with less than one-half the black and minority ethnic composition that is found in their local population. On the other hand 13 per cent of councils have a higher proportion of staff from black and ethnic minority communities than their local population. County councils and London authorities on average had workforces most closely resembling the ethnic profile of their local population. These figures need to be treated with caution, given the amount of qualifications and gaps in the data. Nevertheless, they show that there is a significant variation in how well councils have been able to ensure that their workforce profiles reflect the black and minority ethnic communities in their local populations.

EXHIBIT 18 Relationship between the proportion of staff from black and ethnic communities and the ethnic composition of the local population

The overwhelming majority of English councils have fewer black and minority ethnic staff than their proportions within the local population.

Less than 0.25 (5%)

More than 1.0 (13%)

0.75–1.0 (15%)

0.25–0.5 (37%)

0.5–0.75 (30%)
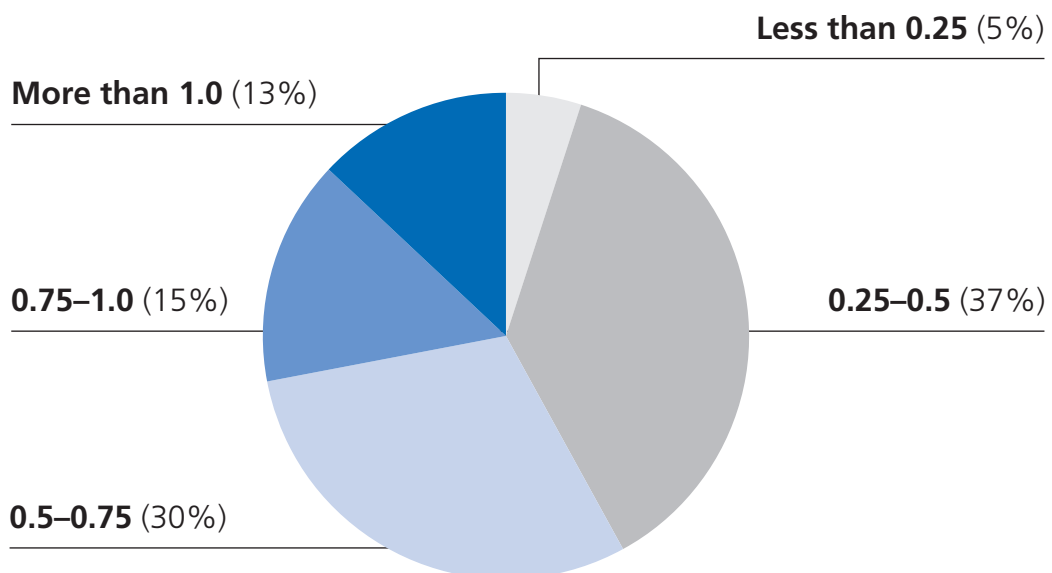
Source: Audit Commission

3. IDENTIFYING CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

70. The indicators examined in the previous section are useful and help to identify areas of strength or weakness. However, they do not give any indication of the underlying causes of performance trends. For this reason, the study team chose to undertake a further phase of work in two areas. In the first instance, the team reviewed over 60 inspection and audit reports, covering both service-specific and cross-cutting areas. This analysis gave an early insight into some of the process-related issues for local authorities getting to grips with equality and diversity. Following analysis of the reports, the team then interviewed a selection of councils, auditors and inspectors, to access some of the tacit knowledge in the area.

71. The interviews, in particular, proved to be a very rich source of information, perhaps because, in an informal setting, respondents felt able to discuss some of the submerged issues of attitudes and behaviour. The authorities contacted were open and honest in evaluating their progress, and it was notable that authorities themselves recognised the same problems and issues as inspectors and auditors.

FINDINGS FROM INSPECTION

72. To date, only two best value inspections specifically dealing with equality and diversity have been published, both scoring 'fair' (one star) and 'will probably improve'. Councils have tended not to include equalities issues in their best value reviews (BVRs) as a matter of course, and because the Audit Commission Inspection Service has not picked up on equalities issues consistently during the course of best value inspections, there is not a wealth of data in the area. However, equality and diversity is often covered, albeit to varying depth, in BVRs of customer access, customer services and human resources or personnel, as well as in some service-specific reports.

73. In line with the PI data, the picture from inspection is a mixed one. **EXHIBIT 19** illustrates the main strengths and weakness commented on in 27 inspection reports on customer access, customer services and human resources. These are discussed in more detail below.

EXHIBIT 19 Comments from inspection reports

The picture of equalities from inspection reports is a mixed one.

Note: Numbers in brackets show total number of comments. A total of 27 reports were analysed.
Source: Audit Commission inspection reports

OWNERSHIP, LEADERSHIP AND VISION

74. Inspectors observed that some councils demonstrated a high level of commitment to addressing issues of equality and diversity. However, in a number of councils, responsibility for equality sat uneasily between a number of departments or individuals, such as equalities officers, and inspectors did not observe high-level vision or leadership. Despite some councils acknowledging particular equalities problems, there was often little evidence of change or willingness on the part of senior staff to take, often difficult, decisions.

COMMUNITIES AND ACCESS TO SERVICES

75. Community consultation is carried out by all councils, but some are more successful in this area than others. During consultation, some councils failed to engage the so-called 'hard-to-reach groups', including key minority ethnic and disabled groups. Where such groups are not being engaged, there are serious consequences for the quality of the service. A council may believe that it is delivering a good service because it gets feedback from existing users, but the service that they believe to be successful may be excluding some people who need it. However, a few councils have begun to forge constructive links with existing local networks and groups through the development of consultation groups. Consultation was generally used to gauge satisfaction with a particular service, rather than being developed into a tool to allow community input to the council's equalities strategy.

76. In terms of the service that customers experienced, a number of inspectors noted disjointed equalities standards between departments, and evidence of 'departmentalism'. More corporate approaches to common standards were very rare.

77. Physical access to buildings for disabled people is improving, with some authorities being commended for providing disabled parking bays, entry ramps, automatic doors, low-level desks, and good sign-posting. But there is much still to be done, especially in terms of installing lifts, wider doorways, and light-weight doors.

78. The geographical spread of buildings can also affect service accessibility. Where many, or all, of a council's buildings are located within an area that is relatively hard to access, with poor transport links, for example, the overall accessibility of services is reduced. This is particularly an issue in rural areas, or in places where, historically, the council has always occupied particular buildings in a limited area.

79. Councils are making better progress with access for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, than for visually impaired people. A number of authorities now have aids such as induction loops, teletype services or Minicom available, and some have signing officers to help deaf and hard-of-hearing customers. However, Braille facilities and large-type documents are still rare.

80. For users whose first language is not English, some councils provide a translation service on request. However, multi-lingual signs in council buildings were uncommon. Service information tended to come in the form of newsletters or leaflets in English, rather than in a variety of languages and formats. This information rarely contained any mention of equality in service delivery.

CAPACITY AND SYSTEMS FOR IMPROVEMENT

81. Many councils now provide equality and diversity training for staff, and in general this is perceived as informative and useful. A range of skills are needed to deal with diversity, such as language skills, cultural awareness and disability sensitivity. These are not commonly found in local authority staff, even among frontline staff. Employing staff from these backgrounds can be a powerful way to raise awareness. A small number have also introduced development programmes for minority group staff. However, training in customer care for frontline staff does not always cover equalities issues adequately, and elected members do not generally receive any equalities training.

82. Data collection on performance is patchy and, even where they are collected, they are not always interpreted and used to inform improvements. In particular, inspectors felt that more data should be collected at the point that users access services.

83. Diversity audits are carried out in a few councils, and those that use them find them a useful tool in assessing current and future diversity needs. However, the majority of councils do not currently undertake comprehensive audits. Inspectors felt that this is a matter for concern, especially in light of the need to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act by 2004.

84. Few councils are taking active steps towards ensuring the widest possible access to jobs with the council. A number of authorities are monitoring applicants and the composition of the workforce, but little analysis of this information is undertaken, and few actions are taken. Monitoring of staff experiences within councils was patchy, but some councils offered exit interviews and monitored grievances or disciplinary actions. A number of councils were exploring the idea of mentoring or management development programmes for minority group workers, although their progression is not yet monitored as standard.

EQUALITIES AS PART OF THE DAY JOB

85. Although the majority of councils have some kind of equality and diversity policy, it is rarely translated into action plans with specific outcomes and challenging targets. Inspectors observed that this made it more difficult for staff to understand how they should be taking equalities forward. A few councils had wide-ranging policies , covering ethnicity, disability and sexuality, and which were supported by action plans and monitoring. However, most councils had no consistent corporate requirement for all departments to consider equalities in all their activities.

86. There was little evidence of regular communication to staff to maintain the profile of equalities issues. In some instances, the only communication involved targets being issued to staff without any supporting information or advice. And where corporate targets were set, for example, based around PI information, staff often had conflicting views on how to interpret these targets.

CRITICAL FACTORS IN EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

87. Drawing together the evidence from inspection and from discussions with council officers, auditors and inspectors, a number of factors emerge that appear to support and underpin success in the areas of equality and diversity. These critical factors can affect equality and diversity both in terms of service delivery and employment:

    • commitment;

    • involving users;

    • mainstreaming equality and diversity;

    • monitoring performance data; and

    • sustainability.

88. This section discusses these critical factors in turn, and provides checklists to help councils to assess whether, and to what extent, they have these factors in place. It is striking that the critical factors that emerged from this research have much in common with the approach outlined in the generic Equality Standard for Local Government **(Ref. 3)**, as well as with the building blocks for best value outlined in *Changing Gear*, the Audit Commission's best value statement for 2001 **(Ref. 27)**. This demonstrates that good practice on equalities does not require substantial new efforts or time commitment: councils should be able to produce it under existing frameworks for improvement.

(I) COMMITMENT

89. While 'equal opportunities' work has been commonplace in local government for some time **(Ref. 1)**, it is clear from inspection findings that a number of officers and members still struggle to understand the key issues. This hampers councils in their attempts to develop a vision for equality and diversity. This vision is vital to ensure that equality is viewed positively rather than as a process that adds to bureaucracy. For this reason it is important that work on equality and diversity is focused on outcomes – what differences will staff and users feel? It is notable that inspection reports have found very few positive outcomes from work on equalities.

90. Most individuals recognise that the issue of equalities is an important one, but some are reluctant to admit their uncertainty because they are afraid of looking ignorant or 'politically incorrect'.

People don't progress issues as they lack the confidence and don't want to own up to [lack of understanding], so they keep silent and hope it will go away.
Council officer

Ownership and willingness to change

91. Although some councils appear to be making progress on equality and diversity, concerns were expressed by both officers and inspectors about the attitude of some staff, particularly those at senior levels. Although few staff members appear actively to oppose equality and diversity, resistance towards change has been observed by inspectors and acknowledged by council officers.

92. There is a lack of ownership due to the belief that equalities and diversity are the responsibility of others, such as specialist officers or the human resources department.

Equal opportunities is seen as a personnel thing.
Council officer

93. There is also a lack of leadership from senior levels, especially leadership by example. There was little mention of the role of elected members in equalities, for example, despite their potential role in scrutiny.

Top-level drivers are vital – with the best will in the world, people will only respond to demands for action from senior people.
Council officer

94. Some councils are complacent about equalities, especially where there are low numbers of minority ethnic citizens in the community.

If there's a small ethnic minority community in the area, there's a tendency to assume there is no problem.
Council officer

95. A number of councils seem to be unwilling to change their attitudes and ways of working. Council officers and inspectors spoke of fears that equality and diversity value and empower certain groups at the expense of others. This challenges entrenched attitudes, and may make some staff feel uncomfortable.

One thing that councils struggle with is convincing everyone in the organisation that equality benefits everyone. It's not devaluing anyone in favour of another group.
Inspector

96. There were also fears that raising the profile of equalities may increase staff/user expectations. If these expectations cannot then be met, some staff may feel that the situation would be worse than before.

Managers are terrified of equal opportunities – they don't have the right tools, such as training and coaching. And there's a view that if you start to raise the profile of equality, expectations are going to be raised and so they think 'Maybe it's just better to keep quiet and do nothing'.
Council officer

97. There was wide acknowledgement that achieving change in a large organisation is not easy. Real change takes time and is about a shift in attitudes as well as processes. However, there is a tendency for councils to focus on the process side, which can seem cumbersome and over-prescriptive for some staff.

The difficulty is changing a large organisation and how this change is brought about. Long action plans can be a tedious tool for getting ideas across.
Council officer

Partnerships

98. Negative attitudes from partner organisations, such as other council departments and external bodies, can hamper change. Inspectors have observed council officers struggling with attitudes in partner organisations that undermine their attempts to raise the profile of equality and diversity.

Equal opportunities among contractors is appalling.
Inspector

99. Inspectors and council officers described a lack of joined-up thinking across different council departments and services. An effective approach to equality and diversity acknowledges the complexity and diversity of individual needs, and where they cut across conventional service boundaries, allows the user to experience a seamless joining of the services that they receive.

I think we could do a lot more across departments to join up equal opportunities initiatives, work together on stuff, share expertise and resources and ideas.
Council officer

Resources following priorities

100. Financial commitment to equality and diversity is also important. Councils often have too little information about how much money is spent on equality and diversity and what impact it is having. Insufficient funds are often quoted as being the reason why councils' progress on equality and diversity is slow. Clearly, some areas require substantial capital, for example, modifying buildings to allow disabled people to gain access. However, some modifications are relatively inexpensive, such as providing assistance for visually

impaired, deaf or hard-of-hearing users through larger type documents, and minicom and teletype systems.

A stair lift for one building cost £50,000! The minicom was very cheap though.
Council officer

101. Because resources are limited, councils must recognise that it will not be possible to achieve everything all at once. They must create action plans with clear priorities that need to be achieved over a specified time period. This also means giving sufficient consideration to equality and diversity when planning their broader service budgets.

102. A diversity audit is a useful tool to evaluate what changes need to be made, and to calculate what resources may be required. However, councils need to balance the cost of conducting such audits with the resources available to make the subsequent changes.

We had to do kind of mini [diversity] audits, not the full ones, to leave some money to actually make some changes.
Council officer

103. Despite the financial implications, some councils view the modifications to their services as essential for inclusion purposes, and share the view of one inspector that the benefits of these modifications far outweigh the costs.

Resources can be an issue, but if for one moment we just put ourselves into the shoes of a disabled person, we would have a sea change of thought and resources would become less important.
Inspector

104. Our research suggests that equality and diversity will flourish where all staff feel committed to and involved in equality and diversity. Senior staff should encourage this through leading by example. Staff concerns need to be discussed openly and addressed, and the difficulties involved in changing attitudes acknowledged. Councils need to ensure that their equality and diversity initiatives join up

across services. And appropriate resources must be committed and prioritised **(CHECKLIST 1)**.

CHECKLIST 1 Commitment

- ☐ Do we have a comprehensive policy in place on equality and diversity?
- ☐ Do we have a vision for equality and diversity including tangible outcomes for users and staff?
- ☐ Do all staff have simple, brief, written definitions of equality and diversity?
- ☐ Do all staff have access to equality and diversity training?
- ☐ Do staff understand that equality and diversity is the responsibility of all staff?
- ☐ Are our senior managers leading by example?
- ☐ Are members committed and are they involved, for example, in the scrutiny of equalities?
- ☐ Are equality and diversity seen as part of the day job, and not as an add-on initiative?
- ☐ Are equality and diversity understood as being important, even when ethnic minority group numbers are small?
- ☐ Are equality and diversity defined as being about valuing everyone?
- ☐ Are staff concerns about equality and diversity heard and openly addressed?
- ☐ Are the best methods of effecting change being used?
- ☐ Are equality and diversity considered during budget planning processes?
- ☐ Have we conducted a diversity audit?
- ☐ Have the likely costs and benefits of any actions and modifications been assessed?
- ☐ Have any 'quick wins' been identified?

(II) INVOLVING USERS

105. For equality and diversity and best value alike, the starting point must be a sound understanding of the needs and requirements of the local community, and of current and potential users of services. This is an area that many councils still find difficult.

Focusing on communities

106. Inspectors observe that many councils are not aware of the current composition of their wider community. Part of the problem seems to be that communities can be fluid, and, once user groups have been established, their compositions may not stay representative over several years.

I was asked which was the largest minority community in the area – and I got it totally wrong. We'd been completely ignoring them … I was mortified.
Council officer

There's a tendency to be complacent in some councils too, and they're still using original and now unrepresentative groups.
Inspector

107. This is compounded by the fact that it can be costly and time-consuming to consult properly.

There's an organisational culture of paternalism, and it's easier to assume or make up user views… some people say that with performance management there's no time to get to grips with who the users are and what they need.
Inspector

108. It is clear that in most councils, levels of consultation with users vary widely across departments, especially where there is no central control or monitoring.

Consultation should be corporately driven but it needs to be devolved to service departments.
Inspector

It would be good to have a unified approach to consultation. There needs to be some sort of consistency and co-ordination or you'll all end up asking the same people by going off and doing your own thing.
Council officer

109. Some officers and inspectors suggested that staff fear that recognition of different user groups in the community may reinforce barriers between them.

It's tough in mixed councils where you see white, affluent areas and very poor ethnic minority areas – the authority can end up reinforcing barriers between communities. The community strategy should address issues of equality.
Inspector

A shared vision

110. Ideally a council's vision for equality and diversity should be developed in consultation with the community so that the community understands the rationale behind particular initiatives. Council officers spoke of service users being suspicious of, or cynical about, new initiatives on equality and diversity generally. They had also observed that service users were often suspicious of requests for equalities-related data.

Monitoring user profiles is tough – you can't assume things about people's backgrounds, but asking them to fill in forms makes people suspicious – people say they would be treated differently.
Council officer

111. Councils do not always act to allay these concerns, in the first instance by informing local communities about the outcome of consultation, even though one of the duties of the Home Office's implementation paper on Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 is to publish the results of consultation **(Ref. 10)**. Councils could also do more to communicate the purpose, rationale and likely outcomes of initiatives to their communities.

Councils don't always help themselves when minority groups aren't happy – they do nothing to communicate their equalities policies and they don't monitor their performance. This reinforces the groups' negative perceptions.
Inspector

112. These issues cut to the heart of the challenge of community leadership. Councils must do more than just responding to individual service users' needs. Attention needs to be paid to the different local communities, and it is the council's job to build trust with and between these communities. The aim of this relationship is to establish a common vision for the local area and meet the priority of local groups. The test of the relationship is that disagreement on particular issues does not lead to the breakdown of the relationship. For the council this means using a range of skills and behaviour, including vision, openness, listening, negotiating and influencing.

113. Our research suggests that equality and diversity will flourish where councils have up-to-date information on the composition of their communities and user groups, and on their opinions. Councils may wish to consider driving user consultation centrally to ensure they are consistent in their approach. Communication with users is essential in order to inform them about equality and diversity initiatives and to build community relations **(CHECKLIST 2)**.

CHECKLIST 2 Involving users

☐ Do we know what communities we serve? Do we measure key groups?

☐ Are our users representative?

☐ Do we ensure that our user focus groups are representative?

☐ Is consultation and monitoring centrally driven? Is it effective?

☐ Do we listen to, and act on, user concerns, and feedback on what we are taking forward and why?

☐ Do we acknowledge that some groups may be suspicious of new initiatives?

☐ Have we made efforts to explain new initiatives to users, and have we been clear about what they can expect?

☐ What do we do to break down barriers between community groups?

☐ Are we involving local people in developing our equality and diversity strategies?

(III) MAINSTREAMING EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

114. Mainstreaming is about bringing equality and diversity into the core of what an authority does. It relates to both service delivery and to the internal workforce.

Service delivery to meet user needs

115. In terms of service delivery, councils currently provide some specialised services (such as some services for disabled people), flexible core services, niche services or various hybrids. When probed about the best way to make services accessible and sensitive to user needs, respondents had mixed views.

116. A number of inspectors saw benefits in offering niche services in certain circumstances...

You need to be clear about the evidence for targeting particular groups – and communicate this clearly. Niche services can work, but they do need to be inclusive or they'll end up feeling segregated rather than integrated.
Inspector

The principle should be that all core services should be able to cater for everyone's needs. But where there are sufficient numbers and an expressed wish, it may be appropriate to consider niche services.
Inspector

117. Some inspectors noted that some services by their nature are specific to particular users, however some council officers expressed reservations about niche services, often based on previous experiences. A number of councils had targeted particular groups with niche services and then come under fire from other community groups for perceived favouritism.

You should start by making core services more accessible – you don't want people to feel intimidated about access. With niche services, how do you know what the most deserving groups are?
Council officer

If you offer different services for one group, other groups become suspicious that something special is being done for the others... they suspect favouritism.
Council officer

118. One view was that all niche services should have a short-term life-span, and that they should gradually be incorporated into more flexible, mainstream services.

You need a kind of in-built obsolescence, so that ultimately, within a few years, everyone has access to the same service.
Inspector

119. Managing services to incorporate diversity acknowledges that one size does not fit all. Service providers need to pay careful attention to identifying the different needs of all sections of the local community, and to integrating appropriate responses into mainstream services. Councils can help themselves by consulting and communicating with all parts of the community about potential and actual initiatives. And monitoring the impact of current and new policies is very important **(Ref. 10)**.

Equalities as part of the day job

120. There is some debate about the best way to raise the profile of equality and diversity within the workforce. Our research shows that the following factors are important for profile raising:

- leading by example;
- a critical mass of proactive staff, which requires staff training and development; and
- an environment that encourages staff to rise to the challenges that are presented by equality and diversity.

121. In the first instance, some departments have engaged officers with specialist knowledge and skills to drive equality and diversity up the agenda.

There is a strong argument for dedicated staffing resources though – then you get appropriately skilled staff who can devote their full time and effort to this difficult area.
Auditor

122. However, these officers are often unevenly distributed throughout the council, and are often based in particular departments. To ensure that departments are all making progress, some people argue that equality and diversity work best when they are driven from a central department.

The differences between services' approaches were significant – they were all running their own show. A greater degree of central drive, monitoring and control is needed, or departments won't all get on with it.
Auditor

123. Clearly some councils will be unable to afford full-time specialist equalities staff. These councils will need to consider alternative ways to gain expertise, such as buying in some consultants' time, perhaps in partnership with other councils or organisations in a similar position.

124. Officers and inspectors identified that effective and regular communication about equality and diversity is important to mainstreaming. They argued that staff need to be given constant reminders of how equalities forms part of their daily work. These reminders should be given in the form of easily accessible, and highly visible, communications.

Communication about equal opportunities can be pretty poor – but you've got to keep doing it, as it needs to be in people's minds if you're to have any hope of mainstreaming it.
Council officer

125. One of the problems appears to be that equality and diversity policies are not being translated into action plans, leaving staff unsure about how they put policy into practice.

Generally we don't have a problem with writing policies – the difficult bit is making things happen afterwards. If you hand out a load of policies, staff just look at you blankly and say 'Yes, but what do I actually need to do here?'
Council officer

126. Our research suggests that equality and diversity will flourish where councils consider carefully the best way to provide minority group users with services that meet their needs. Internally, staff should be appropriately trained and developed, and they should receive regular communications about equality and diversity. Councils should consider the options for mainstreaming, and ensure that policies are translated into strategies and action plans **(CHECKLIST 3)**.

CHECKLIST 3 Mainstreaming equality and diversity

☐ Have we evaluated how to serve women, disabled people and black and ethnic minority communities?

☐ Is responsibility for delivering equality and diversity centralised or devolved to departments? Is our choice proving to be effective? Have we considered the possible options?

☐ Do we have equality and diversity 'champions'? Where are they located? Is this effective?

☐ Do we have sufficient expertise on equalities in-house, or do we need to find another way to access this?

☐ Are we developing a critical mass of knowledgeable and skilled staff that can help to mainstream equality and diversity? What more could we do?

☐ Do we have an equality and diversity strategy? Are staff involved in developing it?

☐ Do we have an equality and diversity action plan? Are staff involved in developing it?

☐ Are equality and diversity built into our vision, and all of our processes including best value reviews?

☐ Do we regularly communicate information on equality and diversity to our staff?

(IV) MONITORING PERFORMANCE DATA

127. Data capture and analysis is important because it allows councils to identify weaknesses in the way that they apply equality and diversity practice, and to identify ways to improve. The duties of the Home Office's implementation paper on the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 include publishing monitoring data about the workforce and about the impact on racial equality of actual or proposed policies **(Ref. 10)**. Yet few councils have adequate data measurement systems in place, and fewer still interpret and act upon any data that they do gather. Many councils are missing the opportunity to collect data at the point at which users interface with services.

Data monitoring systems are important or you can't move forward because you can't be sure about what route to take. And systems are there to feedback successes as well as failings.
Council officer

Decisions are only as good as the information on which they're based – and information on equality and diversity is generally lacking.
Council officer

128. Various types of data are useful to councils. These include broad data to inform decision-making, such as demographic information on local communities, and performance data on service delivery and within the workforce. Evidence from inspection suggests that councils struggle most with collecting performance data. As described in the previous chapter, a number of PIs deal specifically with equalities issues. A significant number of councils were unable to provide the data requested for these indicators, and for some of those that did, the data were qualified by auditors as they expressed reservations about their accuracy. While this may be due in part to the fact that these were new BVPIs in 2000/01, nevertheless, it is noticeable that there were more data problems with some of these indicators than with other new indicators.

129. There are a number of barriers that can hamper councils' performance data collection and interpretation:

- staff may not be clear about the kind of data that needs to be collected and why; and

- the data may not be easy to find – for example, users and staff may be unwilling to give out information on their disabilities and ethnic backgrounds. Councils do not always make it clear why this kind of information is requested, and what will be done with it;

People are under no obligation to pass on information about disabilities – they volunteer it now. We struggle to collect it as people worry about giving that information. Maybe it's a society problem, where people don't want to be labelled?
Council officer

- staff may be unable to understand and use the systems for data collection and analysis correctly, due to lack of training; and

- data collection systems may be inadequate, because they have not been designed to record particular types of information, or they are outdated and cannot process the data quickly, or because they are incompatible with other key ICT systems.

It was hopeless – the only way we could feed data in from other departments' systems was to enter it manually. To be honest, this took so long that in the end we just gave up – there's nothing we can do until we get a better system.
Council officer

130. Even in those councils where data is collected and interpreted, it is not always used effectively. Data should be fed into decision-making processes, and used to assess progress against targets. It is important that staff understand exactly what any data-related targets mean and how they would go about collecting the data to determine whether they have reached them.

Targets may be confusing – is it 4 per cent in every department, 4 per cent average across all departments...?
Inspector

131. Our research suggests that equality and diversity will flourish where there is agreement about what data are needed, where these data can be collected from, and how they can be collected. Adequate data capture and analysis systems need to be put in place. Data should be used to inform decisions about future equality and diversity initiatives, and should form the basis of specific action plans for performance improvement, with measurable and time-limited targets **(CHECKLIST 4)**.

CHECKLIST 4 Monitoring performance data

☐ Have we considered which data would be useful to our decision-making processes?

☐ Have we considered monitoring service delivery BVPIs by gender, ethnicity and disability where appropriate?

☐ Do we have staff and systems that can capture these data?

☐ Do we explain clearly to people the reason why we are requesting this information?

☐ Once captured, do we analyse the data? Are our staff trained to do this?

☐ How do we feedback our performance to staff and users?

☐ Do we use performance data to inform changes to what we do?

☐ Have we set clear targets that staff understand?

(V) SUSTAINABILITY

132. The sustainability of equality and diversity initiatives over time is vital, because it takes time to change the culture of an organisation. Although there is merit in 'quick wins', to effect long-term organisational change, equality and diversity must maintain a profile over many years. Councils need to consider sustainability even when they appear to be performing better than their peers, and to consider future equality and diversity needs during planning processes.

Some councils that have been doing equal opportunities for a while are better, but some of these have now taken their eye off the ball.
Inspector

133. A number of councils and inspectors note that, all too often, the profile of equality and diversity diminishes with time. Concerns have been expressed about initiatives becoming mainstream too quickly, with the result that they become easy to overlook.

…by trying to mainstream things, [initiatives] can lose their profile somehow, and people don't bother so much.
Council officer

134. Where councils had introduced targets and deadlines, there were some concerns that, once they were reached, staff sometimes became complacent, seeing no further need for action. This was a particular concern where resources (staff and money) were under pressure.

When people hit targets, they give up and become complacent, and they take the resources away again.
Inspector

135. In some councils, staff and users have become cynical about new equality and diversity initiatives because of a lack of visible progress over recent years. They have regularly witnessed the introduction of various new, and often short-lived, initiatives, which failed to

demonstrate tangible benefits to the users or to the council. This history of apparent inactivity or ineffective activity can form a substantial barrier to progress.

Another issue alongside mainstreaming is keeping at it. Sometimes equal opportunities suffer from flurries of high-profile activity and then it goes quiet again, so long-term issues are never addressed.
Inspector

136. Finally, there were concerns that some initiatives were being developed in response to data that no longer represented the current picture. If data collection and monitoring over time is poor, creating up-to-date initiatives to tackle real-time problems becomes increasingly difficult.

137. Our research suggests that equality and diversity will flourish where councils include long-term goals in their equality and diversity planning in order to drive continuous improvement. The profile of equality and diversity must be maintained. Councils need to keep monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives to ensure that they are timely and are achieving what they set out to do **(CHECKLIST 5).**

CHECKLIST 5 Sustainability over time

☐ How can we sustain our equality and diversity efforts over time?

☐ How can we ensure that equality and diversity maintains its profile?

☐ Do we have both short- and longer-term targets in place to promote a rolling programme of improvement?

☐ Have we aligned sufficient financial resources and staff to ensure the longevity of our equality and diversity programme?

☐ Are our initiatives timely, reflecting previous progress and current needs?

4. CONCLUSION

138. This report has looked at how well councils are performing in the areas of equality and diversity. PI data and evidence from audit and inspection suggests that local councils need to improve their performance significantly in order to meet their statutory duties and the principles of best value. It is the responsibility of all partners in local government to rise to the challenge posed by the new duty to promote racial equality, and to prepare for future initiatives around disability, age, religion and sexuality.

139. Councils that do not currently have a comprehensive equal opportunities policy need to put one in place. They will find the new generic Equality Standard produced by the CRE, the EOC and the DRC helpful in mainstreaming equality and diversity throughout their work. Councils need to continue their efforts to ensure that the profile of their workforce reflects the diversity of the communities that they serve. And they need to improve their performance monitoring and data collection systems on equality and diversity issues.

140. In order to move towards these goals, our research suggests that a number of factors underpin success in the areas of equality and diversity:

- commitment to equality and diversity – staff should be fully involved and senior staff should lead by example – and adequate resources should be made available;

- service users should be consulted at key stages, and informed about new equality and diversity initiatives and their outcomes. In particular, the more complex service needs of black and minority ethnic communities should be addressed;

- the most appropriate methods of mainstreaming equality and diversity should be considered, and policies translated into action, to help equalities to become part of everyone's day job;

- data capture and analysis systems should be put in place and used fully, and the resulting data must inform decision-making on performance improvement; and

- efforts on equality and diversity should be sustainable over time, through continual monitoring against long-term targets.

141. Equality and diversity considerations should be integrated into all aspects of delivering, monitoring and inspecting services. Councils need to address equalities issues in all their best value reviews and planning processes. The Audit Commission offers this, our first equality and diversity report, as a contribution to the debate and discussion around the challenge that equalities present to all public sector agencies. For our part, we will ensure that equality and diversity are addressed in our core functions of audit and inspection, and we will continue to conduct and publicise research in the area.

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