

TACKLING RACIAL INEQUALITY

Good Practice Case Studies

LB Waltham Forest
Safe Space Clinic

The Safe Space Clinic (SSC) is an initiative offering support to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff who felt isolated when they raised issues regarding inequality. The SSC was set up by the council's Race Equality Network which aims to give staff a voice, address inequality and to do so working alongside senior management, grounded within the ethos: change will only happen if we work together.



Problem we were seeking to address:

One of the most pressing issues we found was how Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff felt isolated when they raised issues regarding inequality. This included issues relating to pay, promotion, capabilities, lack of management understanding and HR leaning towards management perspectives rather than adopting a more neutral approach. This created challenges whereby a number of staff from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds did not feel comfortable raising concerns within the management structure or via the grievance process, because they did not believe their voices would be heard. Additionally, and more importantly, these staff found that as soon as they raised an issue, they would become the subject of a capabilities investigation.

The solution or actions/proposed solution or actions:

The Race Equality Network was set up in August 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. The group previously known as the 'BAME group' was in existence but was not active – it has subsequently been revamped into REN. The aims of REN are to give staff a 'voice', address inequality and to do so working alongside senior management, grounded within the ethos: change will only happen if we work together.

Partners involved

LB Waltham Forest

LBWF Race Equality
Network

Safe Space Champions

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Background:

The aim was to move away from just being a 'talking shop' - we knew staff were not happy and as such had to find a way to give them the confidence to come forward. In response, we created the Safe Space Clinic (SSC), a Pilot Scheme and intensive programme that would run from May 2021 – October 2021, with the objective to identify what was happening in respect of the processes in place for staff experiencing difficulties which they believed were directly related to racism.

We knew trust was crucial in progressing the SSC, as such six officers who worked across different directorates volunteered their time to become 'Safe Space Champions' (SSC's). With the help of the Interim Director of Staff Wellbeing in People and Organisational Development, we were all placed on a three-hour in-depth training session in preparation.

[Attached is our Terms of Reference for the SSC \[PDF\]](#)

During the period we dealt with seven cases, each relating to different issues. Although we cannot divulge personal case details, the general overview was topics regarding, pay, inappropriate office banter, dress codes, misuse of probation process, possible bias in favour of management via HR, failure to 'listen' and the mediation process.

Throughout the cases we found that staff did not want to formalise the process through grievances, they just wanted their voices to be heard. Therefore, the SSC's via REN would arrange meetings with Heads of Service and Directors to give those staff the opportunity to speak directly to senior management, in the hope of avoiding matters escalating. These meetings were intensive, but once given the forum staff were more open to sharing their thoughts and feelings in a professional way. At times staff were visibly emotive and upset during this process, but by getting the opportunity to raise their concerns barriers were beginning to break down and the process of change was starting.

It proved vital for senior managers and Directors to have the opportunity to hear and begin to try to understand what was happening within their teams and how they could put measures in place to try and effect change.

The SSC's held monthly meetings to discuss progress of cases and, due to the intense nature of the pilot, it was crucial that we provide each other with support and advice on how to progress cases in a productive way. During the pilot it was challenging to listen to the journey of staff who had experienced immense difficulties and the pain of traumatic experiences, which gave rise to a range of intensive emotions. However, our goal was to get them in 'that room' and ensure they have the opportunity, with our support, to speak 'their truth.'

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It was also acknowledged that all this was being done alongside the day job, but we were passionate about being a part of this process.

Desired outcomes/delivered outcomes:

All cases were shared with the Director of Wellbeing who played a significant role throughout the process and was also in attendance when meetings took place. Each meeting was followed by an action plan – this could result in an additional meeting with those staff concerned to address the issues raised (this would also be monitored by the SSC), and follow up action would also result where senior managers felt that processes needed to be put in place to provide more support.

A key outcomes was that, as the Safe Space Champions, we made an important point of highlighting the importance of senior management recognising staff's talents to ensure they were not overlooked for senior roles or avoid issues when there were raised – it was clear that these situations made colleagues feel isolated or unheard. Senior managers had to be accountable for their teams' actions and take responsibility for impacting change.

Learning/evaluation:

What struck us during the pilot is that staff had never been given the opportunity to have a one to one with their Directors, this demonstrated a remoteness between senior level management and staff in lower grades, which only increased the lack of understanding between them and heightened mistrust. By getting them into the same room, it helped to work towards breaking down barriers, by no means completely but it was a start in the right direction. What also became apparent was senior managers made it clear they had no idea these issues existed, indicating a false perception of challenges and experiences within their own directorate.

Since commencing the SSC, a number of significant changes have taken place:

- We now have a permanent Director of People and Organisation for HR
- We also have a new Assistant Director of HR
- Following the ending of the Pilot SSC scheme, a meeting took place in November 2021, with the HR Asst Director, the Head of Inclusivity and Diversity along with the other Networks - namely the Women's, LGBT and the Differently abled forum - to discuss the SSC's findings. The following points were discussed following the feedback:

Senior managers had to be accountable for their teams' actions and take responsibility for impacting change

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Learning points:

- Lack of trust in the online process/completing the referral form
- Staff are afraid to raise issues formally
- Time constraints – In some cases over 25 hours
- Lack of empathy from managers

What went well

- Able to resolve some issues
- Provides another avenue for staff to raise their concerns
- Some managers were prepared to listen and make appropriate changes
- Provides employees with a voice

Next Steps

- Call to action aimed at widening the pool of Safe Space Champions. This approach will create a robust framework of colleagues across the council equipped to facilitate and support crucial conversations.
- Inclusivity and Diversity manager will lead on reviewing the Terms of Reference for all Safe Space Champions. This will provide transparency on the scope of the role and its responsibilities.
- We would like Safe Space Champions to provide feedback in terms of the EDI courses/initiatives
- HR is currently looking at a review of the mediation process
- Cultural issues – courageous conversations, changes in policies and processes, upskilling managers.
- Further engagement with network to move forward

A further meeting is scheduled for early this year, for updates as to progress.

[REN's response to Race Disparity Report \[PDF\]](#)

[REN's response to Tainting of the England Shirt \[PDF\]](#)

Contact



If you would like to get involved, please email

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