BAME Staff Network: Written Response

We understand that members of the board brought an issue for discussion at the February 2021 board meeting entitled **'Improving the experience and outcomes of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic colleagues at Leeds City Council'**. This was discussed again in September 2021 and it was decided that the Board would receive further updates at the forthcoming meeting on 24 January 2022.

This written response addresses the progress that has been made over the past 12-18 months by reference to the Priorities identified on the Joint BAME/CLT Action Plan and in relation to the experiences of BAME colleagues in general.

The Joint BAME/CLT Action Plan covers an extensive range of issues that need to be addressed to lead the organisation into a position where BAME colleagues feel supported, included and protected within the corporate culture and governance of the organisation. Due to the extensive list of objectives, it would be challenging to focus on them all at once and so we therefore made the decision to focus our efforts on four key objectives taken from the action plan priorities which were voted on by our members at our network meeting held on Wednesday 28th July 2021. These objectives are:

1. The development and implementation of a zero-tolerance policy
2. Representation of BAME colleagues in all roles across all levels/inclusive recruitment
3. Having confident/competent managers who are able to address BAME related issues
4. A grievance policy that is fit for purpose, fair and delivered in an informed, timely manner.

Due to the nature of the challenges BAME colleagues face within the organisation, the role of the network has evolved from that of a space to connect with other BAME colleagues to a more of strategic position. As members have highlighted a range of systemic issues across the organisation, the network now meets regularly with CLT, HR and our Elected Member Lead to support the review of policy and practice to create positive change. We recognise that many of the systems in place to support staff do not meet the needs of BAME colleagues and therefore find that the only place that they feel listened to is directly within the network. Though the organisation has an ambition to be anti-racist, we know that practice and the implementation of policy does not uphold this ambition and so the role of the network has evolved to address this. A significant amount of volunteer hours has been offered by network members to develop a strategy that allows the network to gain a deeper understanding of the issues faced by BAME colleagues and to also provide a safe space for the sharing of lived experiences.

We have devised a Network Ambassador programme to raise the profile of the network at a more localised level to increase engagement and ensure that we are able to afford all colleagues the opportunity to raise concerns and review any delivered activity that has been carried out in line with the joint action plan objectives. There is a lack of trust in the organisation to be able to adequately support BAME related issues and developing a good working relationship with members has been one of our main areas of focus to fully understand the scope of the challenges faced.

We are pleased to see that the profile of creating a more equal system for BAME colleagues is high up on the organisation's agenda. It is great that so many colleagues, services and working groups are requesting the network's involvement in a range of activities and to provide updates within service meetings. We are conscious that we have had to decline a lot of requests due to limited facility time that is only afforded to the chair and increased demand within our day jobs.

We can see the many different initiatives going on within the council and can see that there is possible overlap. It has been challenging to decide on what we should accept or decline as all add value but can run the risk of duplication. We feel that for us all to be as effective as possible, we need to have more structure from our leaders to reduce the risk of this. This in the long run will save time, money and make our approach more consistent.

Below is a brief overview of the progress made and challenges highlighted within the 3 priorities set out in the action plan (Staff Support; Staff progression, learning and development; Communication and engagement). We have not included updates on the fourth priority of the joint action plan as this is the measurement and impact of actions being delivered on behalf of the BAME agenda and this section needs to be coordinated from a corporate perspective:

Priority 1: Staff Support	
Progress made	**Challenges**
BAME Ambassador programme: This has been set up to help to amplify key messages of the Network and to provide a first point of contact for BAME staff if they need support. We see this as a vital tool to support BAME colleagues and are keen to see where these Ambassadors can fit in with other support services available within the Council.	**BAME Ambassador programme:** Some colleagues have expressed concern about being permitted to be involved as an Ambassador alongside their work duties. It would be great if we could see managers across the Council voicing their support for this scheme so that colleagues feel that they are able to take on this role.
BAME Events Calendar: The Network has promoted a wide range of BAME related events throughout 2021, including Black History Month, Islamophobia Awareness Month and South Asian Heritage Month. Our aim was to engage as many Council employees as possible to learn about other cultures. Initiatives included online events via Teams/Zoom, in person events, information on InSite and via staff Facebook Groups.	**BAME Events Calendar**: We often contact external representatives to deliver presentations/content in relation to the events we put on but unfortunately, we are limited by the fact that we are a voluntary staff network without any budget. We would welcome an allocation of funding to assist us putting on some of our larger scale events along with manager support for colleagues to get involved in arranging/attending these events.
Grievance Policy: We have had many discussions with HR regarding the grievance policy and how this could be improved to better support BAME colleagues. HR have committed to undertake a wholescale review of the policy and we have been assured that the Network will be able to actively contribute to this process.	**Grievance Policy:** Whilst there has been a commitment to review the policy, we are concerned that the review has yet to be started and the timescales in the review have not been met. We would like to see further detail as to how and when the BAME Network, along with other key stakeholders, will be consulted and kept up to date during the review. Staff should also be dissuaded from using the grievance policy to deal with allegations of racism.
Manager support regarding racial discrimination: This runs through a lot of the issues that network members raise with us and it was also highlighted within the BAME survey. We are aware that a training session was developed by HR in relation to equality in general. We are also aware that many services have started to introduce their own BAME/equality training for their staff, to help to raise awareness and to develop understanding of others lived experiences.	**Manager support regarding racial discrimination**: Whilst we are supportive of any effort to help to provide support and training to managers on diversity issues, we feel that there ought to be greater involvement from the Networks in sourcing the training. We want a clear package of ongoing training and support for managers in dealing with matters of discrimination, and a tool that gathers feedback to assess the impact of any training delivered with follow up mechanisms to review how learning has been implemented into practice.
Corporate 'Zero-Tolerance' to racism policy: The need for a Zero Tolerance Policy regarding racism in its various forms has been agreed. This would address all areas of the council, including elected members, staff and customers.	**Corporate 'Zero-Tolerance' to racism policy:** We are concerned that, to date, there has not been any progress on putting together a 'Zero Tolerance' policy. We feel that this Policy will greatly assist our members to point out where conduct falls below this standard. We would ask that this policy provides clear pathways for how allegations of racism will be dealt with and investigated, including methodology and

timescales, with a move away from the grievance policy being utilised for allegations of racism.

Priority 2: Staff progression, learning and development	
Progress made:	**Challenges:**
GROW meetings: The Network have launched our own series of training sessions regarding self-development or areas of staff concern. Recent session topics include financial wellbeing and disciplinary/grievances issues with Andy Dodman.	**GROW meetings**: We would welcome explicit support from managers as regards to their staff being permitted to attend these sessions during work-time.
Recruitment initiatives: We recognise that a task and finish group was commissioned in 2020 to identify how more inclusive practice could occur in this area, and BAME steering group members worked with HR colleagues in this area. This resulted in a pilot scheme of 40 vacancies being subject to a recruitment process with an independent BAME panel member. We also recognise that HR have committed to further work to develop the recruitment process. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Recruitment and Progression manager training – this has been led by Nick Simpkins and Paul Leahy from HR but supported by network members to devise the training. There has been a steady influx of delegates undertaking the training and a strong push has been made to ensure that under-represented directorates (City Development, Children's and Families, Adults and Health) take up the training offer.	**Recruitment initiatives:** Work on this agenda has stalled since the task and finish group. We would like to see renewed focus on improving the recruitment process, including independent panel members (with feedback from these members to ensure improvement) and provision of clear and constructive feedback to unsuccessful candidates. We recognise the current recruitment freeze, but recruitment continues in pockets of the council. BAME Network members have highlighted current recruitment culture as a 'bedrock of unfair treatment', and we have received numerous reports from members that they have been overlooked for posts whilst they see their white counterparts progress up the ranks much quicker. We would welcome the introduction of exit interviews, to help inform future policy/practice where BAME colleagues leave the organisation due to racism.
Anti-discrimination training: We are pleased to see that some services have started to recommend anti-discrimination training, with some making it mandatory. We are also pleased to see that the Racial Inequalities Workshop (West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership) is available for colleagues to complete on PALS (the Council's online training platform). We support this training programme as we believe that it is fit for purpose.	**Anti-discrimination training:** We are conscious that this training is not consistent across the Council and so the quality of the training may differ across Directorates/Services. We would suggest that the Racial Inequalities Workshop becomes compulsory for all staff with access to a work computer, with a similar training offering for staff who do not have computer access. This should be alongside any other identified training.

Priority 3: Communication and engagement	
Progress made	**Challenges**
CLT meetings – CLT have shown commitment to our agenda through the quarterly meetings being held where CLT members provide written reports on progress and challenges within their own directorates. Sal Tariq has been appointed as our	Not all colleagues have access to computers or Insite and this limits our ability to engage with all areas of the organisation. Whilst our network ambassadors can assist in engaging with frontline members of staff, we do need corporate support

CLT lead and he will be coordinating a task and finish group to include network members to support all areas of work. We also have scheduled meetings with Sal and Graham Sephton to discuss the coordination of working towards our objectives. This shows a good level of commitment to ensuring that CLT are not only listening to the needs of BAME colleagues but also are willing to act upon these requests. This is big positive and a change from 18 months ago. We now need a formalised structure for coordination to review and report on progress made. This will be devised by Graham and Sal.

Elected Member lead – we have a good working relationship with Cllr Taylor who leads on BAME. The steering group meets with her on a monthly basis in order to share ideas and seek guidance and support where necessary. She provides additional support to network members where relevant and all other support systems have been exhausted.

Race Equality InSite page – An ambition of the network is that both BAME and non-BAME colleagues can access information, key updates and training that supports the BAME agenda in one space. The Race Equality Insite page was set up and is now currently in is Beta stage. There have been significant delays in the development of the page and the layout needs to be more user friendly so that all abilities can access the information. This is being addressed by Graham Sephton and we hope to see the finalised version very soon. There is no timescale for completion at this time.

through comms, updates in team meetings for front line colleagues, posters etc.

There is a duplication of efforts happening across the organisation and a level of Inconsistency / confusion with all the different equality boards etc within the service – this needs to be simplified and we all need to understand each other's roles and responsibilities and how we can help each other.

The ambitions of colleagues to progress are not always addressed and this goes against the ambitions set out int the People's Strategy 2020-2025 which states that colleagues would be supported *'to follow your chosen career path, that matches your ambitions and circumstances'* as well as '*Development routes for both technical and managerial careers'*. We would like to see this conversation introduced and recorded in appraisals and acted upon accordingly.

Some areas of the organisation find it easier than others to make positive conversations about equality common practice. Many colleagues feel unable to speak about racism and discrimination in the workplace and we would like to see a culture shift where people can confident and supported to voice their experiences in a supportive environment.

Where good practice is happening across the organisation, this is not always adopted by other directorates and services and this leaves an inconsistent approach to driving the culture shift needed to make equality, diversity and inclusion common practice.

Conclusion

We are pleased to see that there is a lot of valuable work going on across the Council in respect of improving the lived experience of BAME colleagues within the Council.

- There is a lot of valuable work going on to support the BAME agenda. Input from the Network is requested across the Council and this is largely done by volunteers of the network who are not provided with any facility time (aside from the Chair). Given the importance of this work, the impact on LCC colleagues etc **the network could benefit from additional support**.
- Whilst initial interest and commitment to many of the elements of the BAME Action Plan has been high, **there has been a delay in doing the work needed to get these elements off the ground** and to effect

the change that we want to see. This can be seen in issues such as Grievance Policy, Recruitment initiatives etc.

- There are many different projects / groups being set up with **a lack of overarching guidance**. This leads to inconsistency; a lack of ownership and greater impact being felt in all corners of the organisation. This creates a sense of frustration and mistrust of the organisation amongst network members. Striving for equality in general needs some consistency and whilst there is plenty of good intentions and effort being expended it is not always the most efficient use of these resources.

The theme that runs across many of the challenges highlighted is a **lack of checks and balances**. Where training is being delivered, formalised feedback is not being gathered. Where actions are carried out, they are not supported or governed by a timebound strategy so efforts can seem endless with no structure to knowing what 'good' looks like and when and how we aim to achieve it. Whilst many good decisions are be being made, they are not having wider impact because these checks and balances are not in place. Taking a SMARTER approach to meeting the objectives set out in the joint CLT/BAME action plan would be a better use of time and resources.

The Network's Key Asks:

Grievance Policy Review: We would like to see further detail as to how and when the BAME Network, along with other key stakeholders, will be consulted and kept up to date during the review. Staff should also be dissuaded from using the grievance policy to deal with allegations of racism.

Manager support regarding racial discrimination: We want a clear package of ongoing training and support for managers in dealing with matters of discrimination.

Recruitment initiatives: Corporate commitment to imposition of the following initiatives (along with timescales for implementation):

- (a) independent panel members (with feedback from these members to ensure improvement)
- (b) provision of clear and constructive feedback to unsuccessful candidates.
- (c) exit interviews (to help inform future policy/practice where BAME colleagues leave the organisation due to racism)
- (d) recruitment drive audits, to check that policies are being followed and practice is fair.

Corporate 'Zero-Tolerance' to racism policy: Urgent progress to be made on devising the Council's Zero Tolerance Policy. We would ask that this policy provides clear pathways for how allegations of racism will be dealt with and investigated, including methodology and timescales, with a move away from the grievance policy being utilised for allegations of racism.

Anti-discrimination training: Corporate commitment to mandatory training for all staff in the form of the Racial Inequalities Workshop (West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership) which is already available on PALS.

Formal Support for Network Representatives: The Chair and Steering Group to be allowed facility time in order to plan and deliver network activities.

Engaging Front Line BAME staff: Corporate support to be given to the Network to help reach out and communicate with front line BAME colleagues.

Below are several member testimonials that reflect upon experiences of working within the organisation over the past 12-18 months that are in direct reference to each of the 3 priority areas:

Member Testimonials on Priority 1: Staff Support

During the BAME Remembrance Day display at Merrion House, a white colleague approached and shared how she was so glad that we had this exhibition there for all to experience. She said she hadn't realised just how much BAME people played a part in the first and 2nd world war and she was glad that they were finally getting the recognition. As an Irish woman she had said that Irish people had a similar experience of not being acknowledged as supporting the war effort and that this had inspired her to make a conscious effort to recognise and honour Irish service men and women from now on. This is a great example of how the BAME staff network are driving inclusion through the sharing of our stories for all to share through our events.

During Black History Month a group of volunteers had recognised that we don't do enough to celebrate and share a space for wellbeing. The volunteer group put on a wellbeing session where we had a DJ playing music of black origin and sharing the history of the music. It was great to share this time with colleagues where we could eat, sway to the music, and learn. Having cultural wellbeing sessions like these are most certainly something that we should encourage all council colleagues to take part in.

Staff report that support is lacking in formal processes and therefore have a reluctance to make a formal complaint as this often results in no action. The impact of racism on mental health is not understood and support lacking. The HELP service does not have understanding to deal with racism. There is also a belief that formal processes are more likely to be implemented against BAME staff and senior managers do not see tackling racism on a ground level as a priority.

Member Testimonials on Priority 2: Staff progression, learning and development:

I haven't been interviewed but I have been on the [recruitment] panels and found affinity bias to be a challenge. Many panels are stuck in the way they have always done interviewing with; too many questions, questions that are too long and become a memory challenge, focus on jargon or industry terminology, lack of diversity on panels etc

I felt all the interviewers were very patient and willing to repeat questions which was useful as I was very nervous, everyone on my interview panel was white Caucasian, I got a temporary role as opposed to a permanent role but was made permanent more recently, I was given brief feedback over the telephone and the interviewer that gave me the feedback was actually very pleasant.

A Chief Officer circulated a really good statement about the commitment he has to ensuring that banter in the workplace does not cause offence. It was a great example of leadership being responsive to the feelings of colleagues. I wish my team could follow the same sentiment but when it was raised in a team meeting, it was met with sarcasm and disdain. Being the only BAME person within the team made it near impossible to feel confident enough to feel heard or have my views on the matter respected. I feel more needs to be done to support managers to uphold council values and ensure that colleagues do the same.

There are clear disparities in what is said about racism corporately and what practitioners on the ground continue to share. People share a lack of transparency around opportunities and promotions. Over scrutiny and Micro aggressions continue to feature for BAME staff in their daily work lives.

Member Testimonials on Priority 3: Communication and engagement

I am the only ethnic minority member in my team. We have had discussions in regards to the importance of culture in social work practice and discussions about topics within the news that have been race related that could affect our practice- I do [have these discussions] as I feel we need to be having more race related conversations (it shouldn't be taboo). I have noticed that I feel more comfortable in my team when having a voice or discussing sensitive topics related to race.

Regarding listening circles/discussions regarding race at work, I feel the sessions and discussion were really useful. There has been a small incremental improvement, more notably from managers. we regularly hold a group meeting to discuss topics relating to the wellbeing of BAME staff within the directorate, we also appointed individuals who can act as advocates and support for BAME staff to make them feel comfortable about reporting or just talking about issues that they are facing in the workplace. We also aim to involve more non BAME members join the discussions.

This is common practice with services that have responded advising that conversations are encouraged at team meetings. Feedback from BAME network and other BAME related topics are a standing agenda item at Manager meetings and disseminated across services at Team meetings. We have BAME and carer champions across the services to encourage conversations of equality and diversity including BAME related topics. One to ones and wellbeing conversations are also used as platforms to encourage open discussions.

Member Testimonials: Conclusion

Over the past year we have seen statements coming from our senior leaders pledging their commitment to improving the experience of BAME colleagues within the organisation. As there has been a joint action plan drawn up, we have seen the network leaders work so hard to ensure that there is structure and continuous momentum to bring about cultural and policy changes. Whilst there have been some actions from the organisation, there hasn't been a clear strategic plan that has allowed actions to be reviewed and results measured. We have seen them adopt this approach in all strategic initiatives yet for equality it hasn't been afforded the same level of strategic planning or structure. My hope is that our leaders will adopt the same approach as our network leaders as this will help to develop a sense of trust that our BAME colleagues are valued by the organisation.