

Intercultural cities study visit to Lewisham

9th-11th May 2012



Intercultural cities
Building the future on diversity
www.coe.int/interculturalcities



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Background

In May 2012 Lewisham hosted a study visit for a group of international experts from the Intercultural Cities network. The aim of the visit was to share Lewisham's experiences of diversity and to demonstrate the Council's approach to interculturalism.

The network is funded and promoted by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. Its aim is to enhance intercultural understanding and to build on the potential benefits of diversity. The network is founded on the premise that public institutions and local communities can use the diversity of their areas to encourage innovation and drive successful communities:

'Research shows that enterprises with diverse staff are more innovative, and that diverse teams are better in solving problems if diversity is endorsed and embraced, that productivity and wages are higher in regions and cities with a more diverse population. Diaspora entrepreneurship fosters economic development both in host countries and in countries of origin and immigration increases foreign trade...'¹

In January 2011 an intercultural cities index analysis was carried out² in Lewisham, which focused on these key areas:

- Commitment to interculturalism
- Education policy
- Neighbourhood policy
- Public service
- Business and labour markets
- Cultural and civil life
- Public space
- Mediation and conflict resolution
- Language
- Media policies
- International outlook
- Intercultural intelligence
- Welcoming
- Governance



¹ [About the intercultural cities concept](#)

² [London Lewisham: Results of the Intercultural Cities Index analysis](#)

Experts from the network explored the Council's approach in each of these areas and produced a report about Lewisham's strengths and weaknesses.

In conclusion the analysis stated that: 'Lewisham does better than most other cities in the sample. Its leading practice can provide useful insights and examples to other cities in the field of intercultural commitment and leadership, education, neighbourhood, public services and business.'

It suggests that the Council '...needs to make progress in relation to its policy towards countries of origin of its migrant groups, by working in a more structured and systematic manner on intercultural mediation and in developing initiatives to welcoming new arrivals'.



In its recommendations the report notes that:

- Lewisham might take steps to ensure that the ethnic background of teachers mirrors the population in a larger proportion of local schools.
- The Council may want to explore its housing strategies and neighbourhood policy initiatives to avoid concentration of minority groups in particular areas.
- Lewisham might build on its intercultural communications competencies by funding news media outlets in minority languages and carrying out research to determine how people from different groups perceive each other.

Unlike many of the other cities in the network Lewisham does not have a dedicated intercultural strategy. The reasons for this are multiple. Firstly, use of the term 'interculturalism' has not entered public discourse in Britain to any significant degree. Secondly, the Council has a collection of

other policies and strategies which address the essential issues raised by the notion of interculturalism without making diversity a central issue. Finally, and most importantly, the Council has committed to supporting the notion of interculturalism across all areas of its practice, whilst not necessarily using the term interculturalism. The Council's corporate equalities scheme, 'equality for all', promotes the idea that equality is a central tenet in all areas of Council policy and strategy, as such, an intercultural strategy is felt to be redundant.

The study visit

Thirty five visitors from 15 different countries³ took part in the visit. Officers delivered a programme of events designed to demonstrate the Council's leadership across a range of areas:

Wednesday 9th

Tour of the borough

Welcome by the Mayor of Lewisham

Seminar sessions:

- Local Assemblies
- Faith in Lewisham
- The Young Mayor's programme

Evening meal in Blackheath

Thursday 10th

Seminar sessions:

- The Deptford Lounge
- Intercultural Arts in Lewisham
- Planning and Public space
- Visit to Lewisham Prendergast Ladywell Fields
- Public Health in Lewisham
- Intercultural Business
- Well Park Forest Hill pools case studies

Evening meal in Blackheath

Friday 11th

Intercultural politics, policy and strategy in Lewisham (group session)

Lunch

Departure

³ Japan, Russia, Ukraine, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Greece, Spain, Ireland, Holland, Sweden, France, Switzerland, Norway, Poland and the Council of Europe



Evaluation

Following the study visit, participants were asked to answer some questions about their time in Lewisham. The questions were sent by email, along with the resources from the trip. Participants were invited to provide feedback on their experiences in Lewisham. They were also asked to suggest ways in which the Council might improve its practice. To date just under a quarter of visitors have returned their evaluation forms. Answers to the evaluation questions have been summarised in the following sections:

Q: What were your impressions of Lewisham before the study visit?

'I have never been to Lewisham before this visit. All I saw before were a couple of videos on YouTube which suggested that it wasn't very safe place to be... I didn't expect too much, I admit.'

Lewisham views itself as a leader in the network. The Council is not the highest placed locality on the intercultural cities index but this area of London has a relatively long history of incorporating diversity compared to some of the other intercultural cities. Many of the cities in the network are looking to maximise on the potential benefits of new influxes of people, whereas Lewisham has, to a degree, come to terms with the plurality of its established population of people from diverse ethnic, national and cultural groups.

Q: What is your impression of Lewisham after the visit?

'Lewisham seems like a good borough, it's beautiful and has so many parks... it looks completely safe! I am very impressed by the number of really good projects that you have there.'

'Lewisham is one of the cleanest places we have ever been in, we were told that the authorities make it №1 priority in order to make inhabitants perceive the borough space as part of their own home and raise their responsibility. It is also interesting to note that general atmosphere in the streets of Lewisham is quite friendly and peaceful, there is no tension and stress while you walk around, and in this relation Lewisham stands well in contrast with some other European cities within ICC network.'

'As a matter of fact I met a very open and enthusiast staff of people working in the borough. my impression is that the policy of the mayor is to support an open minded atmosphere. But I realise that we mainly met people working for the city council, and less people "in the streets".'

'Very positive, part of London without all the confusion and noise'.

Q: What do you think Lewisham does well as an intercultural locality?

During the study tour visitors frequently mentioned the quality of Lewisham's open spaces and the enthusiasm for improvement demonstrated by officers. The local assemblies programme was also highlighted as an area of exceptional strength and innovation:

'I think you care very much about the people who live in your borough and that's where everything starts. It's so good that the locals are involved in decision-making and city-planning, it makes them feel important and heard.'

'First of all, managing Local assemblies and Young Mayor programme contributes well to the image of Lewisham as an intercultural place, your experience serves as a good example for us in building a democratic community. Then, it is very important to see that every member of the authorities' team feels strong responsibility and motivation for providing equal access to services for all social groups, so it seems to us that Lewisham is one of the advanced areas among the participants of ICC programme in terms of implementing an intercultural approach.'

'The Council staff we met are a testimony to this themselves. The impression is that intercultural aspects are naturally taken on board in everything you do. The repeated use of public consultation was a very positive surprise.'



Q: How do you think Lewisham could enhance it's intercultural approach?

'Contact – Be in touch with other member cities of the Network not only through the study visits and meetings, but in every other way, there's a lot to learn from others.'

'In our opinion, Lewisham is doing great, however, the only thing we could mention is to pay more attention to youngsters and their needs and opportunities as they play a crucial role in building an intercultural community.'

'Perhaps you're too optimistic about developments in the future in Europe. Working in a direction in which interculturality is no longer separate field of policy can be a change to improve things. Working on consciousness of participants and social cohesion will be a big task for the future. Bring in all the consistent actors in your cities, sports, schools, religious groups, etc. and make more and good use of the valid and organic contacts they have in society. Try to make them your 'ears and eyes' in Lewisham!'

'Is it possible to find the word intercultural on the public discourse of the city'

'I do think it is important to keep the discussion and planning active in meetings and discussions between administration and citizens. Maybe this tool could be used on topics related to intercultural policies in addition to the one presented on city planning matters.'

'I have mixed feelings because on the one hand I noticed there is a plan, and the city is holding on to the plan. But I also think it is more the plan of the policymakers and less of the people who the policy is addressed to.'

Q: What did you learn on the visit?

'Where should I start?

I learned that in some places of this world, the interculturality isn't just a word.

I learned that, if you want to help people, you have to be very patient and attentive and listen closely to what they have to say in order to understand their needs. They don't always know what they want.

I learned that the exchange of experiences between people who deal with similar issues is extremely important, because it stimulates the creativity and innovation and opens up new perspectives in problem solving.

I learned that interculturality is a process that keeps evolving and transforming itself in different shapes, that it needs time and energy and determined people to put it in place, but in the end it gives beautiful results.

I learned that not only Lewisham, but London is probably the most diverse place that I have ever been to...

All the sessions were significant for us, your visit proved our own ideas on building an Inter-faith Center, so we are in the process of discussing this project now with all interested parties in the city taking into consideration Lewisham experience.

'I noticed that most of the participants are open minded and concerned in their working fields. On the other hand I realised how vulnerable this field of policy; diversity and interculturality, can be.

'I am interested in the interfaith approach although I do have questions about the public sphere entering this (to me rather) private area. What matters in the end is the actual involvement between the politicians/administration and the inhabitants and how this supports participation and cooperation. One person can make a difference . That is your mayor, but that it also makes the policy very vulnerable.'

Q: What did we do well on the visit?

'You planned the whole visit in a way that the participants could have and have benefited from it in every way. The tour of Lewisham, the choice of seminar sessions, the plenary on the third day – everything was made so we could learn about what you do there and exchange the experiences. '

'I admired your hospitality very much. Immediately I felt a member of a big company. You organised things on a proper way. The choice you made on the very first morning, to make a tour around the borough, was a very good one. It gave an impression of developments and problems you have to deal with. Besides that it was the best opportunity to meet fellow participants, make contacts, etc.'

Q: How could we improve a future visit?

'Next time try to present some bad aspects of the borough or the Council too, I left with an impression that everything was perfect.'

'We would kindly think of organizing a meeting with migrants who would share their experience with participants of the study visit and talk about their needs and opportunities.'

'The workshops had interesting themes, but mainly they were focussing on 'information transfer' of all the impressive things that Lewisham is doing. I missed the possibility to bring in experiences from other cities. What are they doing? What experiences do they have on the separate fields? How do they evaluate the things they are working on?'

'As an overall, great food, exception was the traditional English'

'3 out of four meals were good or very good. The typical London dinner was a must, but from a culinary point of view it was not a success.'

Q: Do you have any other comments about the ICC visit to Lewisham?

'Thank you for organising and for your nice guidance. We met a lot of enthusiastic and involved members of your staff and the projects Lewisham. I really hope that there will be a possibility in future to improve the relationship with other participants and to visit Lewisham in other times.'

'I was very impressed by the way the school organised our visit. We spoke very open-minded as well with teachers as with students. there was not any moment that teachers run away for answers in presence of the students; they were seen as fully equal. I really hope that there work will be as successful as they can be, in this way you're working on a concerned and responsible future generations.'

'In the program I missed the possibility to bring in our experiences and projects. I hoped that there was a possibility to learn from other cities in this field, but, as I said above, it stuck a little bit in informing us. Perhaps a recommendation for a next meeting?'

'Thank you for the possibility, hospitality and enthusiast guidance of this programme. Most of all I felt inspired and encouraged after the programme in Lewisham.'

'I wish you, and your colleagues all the best for the future!'

'I am happy to conclude like I did on the visit: The best study visit I have been to.'

Lessons learnt

Comments received on the visit and in the evaluation suggest that the scheme was successful at highlighting Lewisham's good practice to members of the network. In addition, Council officers from a broad range of teams took the opportunity to share ideas and discuss best practice in other cities. For example during the session on the Deptford Lounge officers used the opportunity to ask members of the network to think about potential future areas of work for the centre management team at the Lounge. In the session on the Wells Park youth centre and Forest Hill pools, project managers from Sweden shared information about their plans for a youth centre in their Stockholm suburb and suggest ways in which the Council might continue to deliver effective consultations with young people and the community as a whole.

The visit enabled participants from the network and officers from the Council to view similar issues from different perspectives. The use of public space is a key issue across the network, as is the importance of consultation and engagement with the community. The role of officers in relation to community leaders and convenors of local groups was also raised as an issue of interest. Discussions were open and frank. Issues were debated from both practical and theoretical perspectives.

Practical arrangements

The tour on the first day of the visit was well received. Participants felt it gave them an overall sense of the geography and composition of borough before the seminar sessions, discussions and visits arranged for the rest of the exchange. Participants were able to meet each other in a relaxed environment and ask questions of officers outside of the formal context of group discussions.

The seminar sessions were delivered by groups of officers from across the Council. They were designed to be part master class and part group discussion. The principle aim of these sessions was to demonstrate how Lewisham approaches the issue of interculturalism through its policy and practice. They were well received and participation in discussions was high. However, in light of feedback from some participants the session might have been designed to be more collaborative, ensuring that each group of officers highlighted the links between their area and areas covered in other seminar sessions.



Next steps

Officers have the opportunity to visit other cities in the network in order to build on the links created on the Lewisham study tour and to explore best practice in other intercultural cities. The network has already invited Lewisham to be involved in visits to Italy and Ukraine. Further visits are planned to Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Denmark in the future.

The development of an intercultural strategy

On the final day of the tour, the Head of Policy and Partnerships delivered a presentation about the Council's new comprehensive equalities scheme. The scheme is based on the concept of 'equality for all' it is designed to incorporate the Council's legislative responsibilities into an overarching vision for the borough, which emphasises the importance of equality for all citizens.



The comprehensive equalities scheme is based on the concepts of interculturalism but it doesn't use the intercultural cities terminology. The scheme emphasises the importance of equality as a driver for innovation and ideas. It highlights the need to tackle inequality in order to build a strong and fair society for all citizens and it sets out a programme for monitoring the Council's performance yet the notion of interculturalism is not discussed in the new scheme.

Some experts from the network have asked why the Council does not develop an intercultural strategy. As mentioned above, the notion of interculturalism does not carry a of currency in British discussions about integration. The Council might consider positioning itself as an innovator in this field by using the language of interculturalism in discussions with citizens. However, the Council also tends to ensure that its communications are open and based on language that is easily understood by citizens. Therefore, it is more likely that the Council will continue to develop interculturalism in its day to day practice and policy without creating a separate intercultural policy.

Future interactions with intercultural cities

The opening of the new Deptford Lounge presents Lewisham with an opportunity to promote Deptford as an intercultural centre. As with other elements of the Council's practice, the regeneration is based on the principles of interculturalism in practice if not in name. Officers involved in the Deptford Lounge project were given the opportunity to meet with experts from the network in Sweden to discuss the role of intercultural centres. This work has helped to develop the vision for the future operation of the Lounge. The network's interest in the young Mayor's project

has already led to collaboration with members of the intercultural cities network in Sweden and given the level of interest in the innovative approach Lewisham has taken to local assemblies, there may be further scope for work in this area with international partners.

Officers/partners involved in the visit:

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Ruth Hutt
Livia Lacamera
Sumaira Tayyab

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Layton Thompson (ICC Youth Photography)
Nick Gunner (ICC Youth Photography)

Jackie Millar (Deptford Lounge)
Senay Gaul

Jordana Malik (Renewal)

Ben Gidley (Compas: University of Oxford)