

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL**CABINET****DATE:** 23 FEBRUARY 2021**REPORT OF:** MR TIM OLIVER, LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**LEAD OFFICER:** KATIE STEWART, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND INFRASTRUCTURE**SUBJECT:** SETTING A RADICAL AGENDA FOR EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN SURREY AND SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL**ORGANISATION STRATEGY PRIORITY AREA:** Growing A Sustainable Economy So Everyone Can Benefit/Tackling Health Inequality/Empowering Communities**SUMMARY OF ISSUE:**

The Organisation Strategy 2021-26 makes tackling inequality the central mission of Surrey County Council to ensure that no-one is left behind. Key to this will be the culture nurtured by the council, so that all residents, Members, partners and staff are treated fairly and feel included.

This report asks the Cabinet to endorse a new Action Plan to embed equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) into everything we do at the council. It sets out a new vision for EDI and takes a radical approach that will change the systems, processes and behaviours affecting the experiences of all Surrey residents and staff who work for the council. The plan is a living document that will continue to evolve as we make progress and as our strategic context changes.

Supporting this ambition to embed equality and diversity into everything the council does, a new EDI Policy Statement has also been developed that clearly sets out our commitment to embedding EDI in all our activities. It confirms that the authority will take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, harassment and discrimination and that it will deal with any incidents of such behaviour decisively.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Endorses the Surrey County Council EDI Action Plan 2021-22; and
2. Agrees the new EDI Policy Statement.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

The EDI Action Plan is key to delivering the equality objectives in the Organisation Strategy 2021-26 and plays a pivotal role in supporting the council's wider aim to tackle inequality to ensure no-one is left behind. Moving to a fairer, more compassionate and inclusive culture will inform how we develop policy, take decisions and serve residents so everyone who lives, works and studies in Surrey is supported to thrive.

The updated EDI Policy Statement will provide a clear, definitive commitment to staff and communities against which the council's actions can be held to account in its effort to become a fairer and more inclusive organisation. It responds to feedback from staff that they want EDI to be integral to how we work and for Members and senior officers to show greater leadership on this agenda. It also recognises how EDI needs to underpin all we do to tackle inequalities facing residents.

DETAILS:

Introduction

1. The Organisation Strategy 2021-26, which was agreed at the County Council meeting on 8 December 2020, emphasised the key guiding principle that underpins all our work – tackling inequality in Surrey by focusing on ensuring no-one is left behind.
2. Four new equality objectives were also agreed in the Strategy to support our statutory duties under the Equality Act 2010. One of these new objectives was¹:

Deliver a radical work programme to strengthen the diversity of our workforce and move to a culture that values difference, where all staff feel they belong and have opportunities to succeed.

Context

3. Over the past decade, our policy development and decision making has mainly focused on minimising discrimination and improving equality of opportunity for people with characteristics protected under the Equality Act 2010. These are:
 - a. Age, including older and younger people;
 - b. Disability;
 - c. Gender reassignment;
 - d. Pregnancy and maternity;
 - e. Race, including ethnic or national origins, colour or nationality;
 - f. Religion or belief, including lack of belief;
 - g. Sex;
 - h. Sexual orientation;
 - i. Marriage and civil partnerships;
4. Securing greater equality for diverse communities remains important, but we are also starting to take a broader, more radical approach to EDI. This means changing the processes, systems and behaviours that prevent the council providing the best possible services for all residents and staff and ensuring that EDI is embedded into everything we do as an authority.

¹ The other three objectives are:

- Tackle economic inequality and disparity through ensuring that everyone has the education and skills they need and that the infrastructure of the county is accessible so all residents are able to access jobs, homes and transport needed to share in the benefits of growth;
- Work to close the county's healthy life expectancy gap by focusing our resources on children and adults who need our services most so they can be healthy, independent and thrive;
- Work with communities, through our new local engagement model, to make it easier for all residents to participate in local democracy, service design and decision-making.

5. The Government has recently signalled there will be a change in direction on national equality policy. The Minister for Women and Equalities, the Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, made a speech on 17 December 2020 that set this intention out at a high level, including:
 - a. A commitment to greater use of evidence to better understand inequalities and design effective interventions;
 - b. A greater focus on geographical and socio-economic inequality, and moving away from a primary focus on protected characteristics; and
 - c. A concern about the limited effectiveness of initiatives to strengthen EDI, such as unconscious bias training.
6. We will continue to monitor Government policy, and we will respond the challenge this new policy presents us all to build a better framework for EDI – and, in fact, are in a good position to respond to some of the challenges set out by the Minister already, including the challenge to create a more robust evidence base for this agenda.
7. However, we will not simply await and react to the Government agenda – we will seek to influence that agenda proactively for the benefit of the inclusive and fair authority and county we want to build for the future. As an example, the Council welcomes the opportunity to widen the scope of the agenda to consider geographic and socio-economic inequality, but protected characteristics remain important in influencing how the experiences, opportunities and outcomes of residents and staff are shaped – and the Council remains committed to supporting these characteristics – which, in addition remain protected under the Equality Act 2010.
8. The Council's recent Covid-19 Community Impact Assessment (CIA) demonstrates the relationship and interdependence between the protected characteristics of individuals and socio-economic and geographical issues. The CIA clearly showed that some communities were disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 based on geographical location. Places where there were higher numbers of people aged 80 and over and care homes, such as Banstead, felt the greatest health impacts through the highest numbers of Covid cases, deaths and care home outbreaks. However, the CIA also showed that black and minority ethnic (BAME) residents' health and wellbeing and economic circumstances were more adversely affected compared to Surrey's wider population, from more incidents of racism and discrimination to difficulties accessing financial support.

The case for change

9. There is a strong case for Surrey County Council to take a radical approach to EDI. Annex C highlights some key data that supports this:
 - a. **There is a moral imperative:** We have an obligation to residents and staff to have a culture of compassion, empathy and understanding as it will create a more tolerant, inclusive and happier working environment;
 - b. **Understanding our diverse communities and staff will enable us to deliver better services:** Being able to anticipate and take account of the differing needs, values and experiences of residents and staff will lead to more efficient, effective services, and a more productive workforce. Designing

in accessibility from day one will also enhance value for money by avoiding costly re-work needed later and improve our reputation with residents.

- c. **Diversity is a key driver of innovation:** Differences in thought based on differing knowledge, experiences and values foster greater creativity and problem solving to tackle some of the key challenges facing the county and this council.
- d. **Inequality is having a detrimental impact on our communities:** We know that some of Surrey's residents are experiencing widening inequalities, some of which have worsened as a result of Covid-19. Instances of issues such as domestic abuse, mental health and youth unemployment have all increased as a result of the pandemic.
- e. **Our workforce does not reflect the diversity of our community at all levels:** Our workforce data shows we need to create more opportunities for colleagues from protected groups to further their careers, for instance, while 10% of our staff are from BAME backgrounds, which is broadly representative of Surrey's BAME population (9.6%), less than 1% are in a senior management position. Staff from protected groups are also over-represented in formal HR procedures, such as grievances and disciplinary processes.

Greater diversity will increase our attractiveness as an employer to the best talent from a range of backgrounds and is likely to increase satisfaction among current members of staff.

- f. **We have legal obligations:** We have legal duties under the Equality Act 2010, and the Public Sector Equality Duty, to eliminate discrimination and harassment, strengthen relations between different groups of people and advance equality of opportunity.

EDI Action Plan 2021-22

- 10. The plan appended to this report (Annex A) sets out a new vision for EDI at Surrey County Council, and the actions we will undertake to deliver it. This new vision is to **have a fair, compassionate and inclusive culture that genuinely values difference and makes everyone feel safe and belong.**
- 11. To achieve this vision, we will be taking action across five dimensions:
 - a. **Employee Experience:** We will make our workforce more diverse and deliver activities to support culture change among employees. Activities to support this theme include mandatory EDI training for staff, support for Employee Reference Groups (ERGs) – staff-led networks that champion the interests of diverse colleagues – strengthening workforce data to make better decisions, and reforming staff recruitment to minimise bias and attract the best talent to the council.
 - b. **Leadership:** Members and senior officers will become much more visible champions of EDI, acting as role models and demonstrating their commitment to tackling inequality – particularly through their direct sponsorship of our ERGs. Training for Members and senior officers will support them to lead on

this effectively, and career development programmes will support positive action for colleagues who are less well represented in management positions.

- c. **Knowing and engaging our communities:** Using the best information available and fostering good relations with and within communities, to work with them to address their needs and maximise local participation. This theme focuses on making the best use of data and insight to better understand inequalities across Surrey and working with partners and residents to overcome them. As part of this objective, there is an ambition to establish a Leader's No-one Left Behind Advisory Panel, which will bring together experts from equality groups and voluntary, community and faith sector organisations to shape, influence and guide the county's approach to EDI.
- d. **Communication and engagement:** Promote and raise awareness of our radical approach to EDI to stakeholders, especially to our residents. We will equip colleagues with the tools they need for holding sensitive discussions with residents and staff, such as guidelines for how to communicate with different resident groups, and consistently promote Surrey's diversity and the importance of EDI to the organisation. We will also develop a strong narrative to share with residents and partners about work the Council is doing to tackle inequality, using the Council's equality objectives as a framework.
- e. **Delivering inclusive services:** We want our services to be responsive to individual needs so all residents can access them easily and fairly, giving them the best opportunities to improve their outcomes. It covers a broad range of topics, from ensuring the quality of Equality Impact Assessments for Member and officer decision-making, to how we approach procurement and work with suppliers to align our EDI aspirations.

12. We will commit to being open and transparent with residents, partners and staff about our intentions and how we will take responsibility to achieve them. Katie Stewart, the Executive Director for Environment, Transport and Infrastructure, is the CLT sponsor for this work, and will be the accountable officer for implementing the plan.

Developing the plan

- 13. The Action Plan started taking shape when the late Dave Hill, former Executive Director for Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture and previous EDI sponsor for the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT), facilitated a comprehensive staff engagement exercise in 2019, known as the Talking Diversity Tour.
- 14. Evidence was gathered from focus groups with 250 staff across the council's main offices, including targeted sessions with younger employees aged 25 and under, women, BAME and LGBTQ+ staff; a staff survey; and discussions with Trade Unions.
- 15. One of the key findings from this evidence was, for staff, EDI means helping all residents and colleagues feel they belong in the county and at the council, and that everyone is made to feel welcome, supported and included. It was felt that all colleagues should feel enabled and empowered to fulfil their potential.

16. Staff also wanted EDI to be integral to how the council operates instead of being perceived by some staff as “additional to” their day-to-day work. They also wanted more visible leadership from Members and senior officers on this agenda, policies that take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and discrimination, and more support to have sensitive discussions with colleagues on EDI issues.
17. Since that original diversity tour, the draft Action Plan has been developed by officers based on the evidence available on both community and workforce diversity and impacts, the insight gathered from key partner organisations in the community, and the insight of the emerging and established ERGs. This staff input has been invaluable, and the plan is a result of ideas from officers across all parts and levels of the organisation.
18. The Resources and Performance Select Committee on 21 January have also scrutinised the Action Plan and Policy Statement. Members were very supportive of the plan’s intent and in fact, have challenged the council to be even more ambitious for EDI. The Committee recommended EDI training for Members should be mandatory, and that a Member level EDI Group should be established to encourage collective leadership beyond the Cabinet. Members also recommended that the council should seek accreditation under the Local Government Association’s (LGA’s) Equality Framework.
19. Some of the activities in this plan have been inspired by practice from leading local authorities on EDI, most of whom have achieved ‘Equality Excellence’ under the LGA Equality Framework. For example, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets reports on disability, race and sexual orientation pay gaps in addition to their legal requirement to report on the gender pay gap. Going forward, we will continue to gather evidence and learn from best practice in other local authorities and other organisations to support our journey to transform our culture.

Progress made to date

20. The Action Plan will continue to evolve as we make progress on this agenda, so the focus and emphasis on priorities may change through the year. We have also started making progress against key actions in the plan:
- a. Colleagues across the council, with the support of HR and OD, have established seven ERGs. Each of them is sponsored by at least one Cabinet Member and one Executive Director. In practice, colleagues in the networks will agree priority issues to focus on each year, and with the support from their leadership sponsors, act as a sounding board for council services as they develop policies and services, and provide a network for colleagues to support their wellbeing and connect with others across the council.

To date, staff coming together from across the council have established a Women’s Network, Disabled Employees Network, Minority Ethnic and Allies Network (MEGA), Deaf/British Sign Language (BSL) Network, Young Employees Network, Parent and Carer’s Network and LGBTQ+ Network. Some of these are new, while others are more established but have recently been supported to increase their reach and influence within the council.

- b. A new staff training offer is being rolled out across the council, which includes unconscious bias training. To date, 470 staff have attended these courses. We are also running ‘train the trainer’ schemes, so some staff are trained to deliver unconscious bias training to make this more sustainable, also offering some sessions to our voluntary, community and faith sector partners. Race Relations training has also been delivered within Children’s Services. Alongside these courses, a comprehensive training programme is being procured by HR in the next few months, which will establish a more robust programme of learning for staff.
- c. A new continuous training and development offer on EDI for Members is in development. Member Seminars on EDI were run on 15 and 22 February to help them understand how they can support EDI and to brief them on the Action Plan. Wider training will be rolled out following the county council elections in May.
- d. The council website is being reviewed, and webpages updated, to ensure it is compliant with the new Public Sector Bodies (Web and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations, so residents with visual impairments can access any of our web content easily.
- e. The Council has increased its efforts in promoting diverse communities through communication campaigns and virtual activities around the diversity calendar – including Black History Month (October), Disability History Month (18 November – 20 December), and LGBT+ History Month (February).

Updated EDI Policy Statement

- 21. In addition to the Action Plan, we have also produced a refreshed EDI Policy Statement (Annex B). This policy sets out clearly and succinctly our aspirations for EDI, what this means for residents, Members and staff, and the commitment we undertake to deliver them. It also reinforces the council’s zero tolerance approach to bullying, harassment or discrimination of any kind, and any cases will be dealt with decisively.
- 22. This document provides a visible and accessible statement that shows residents, Members, partners and staff that we take EDI seriously – and importantly, is a commitment against which the Council can be held to account. It demonstrates our ambition for it to underpin everything we do and reinforces a clear message that everyone connected to the council has a responsibility in making it happen.

Next steps

- 23. If Cabinet endorses the Action Plan, the Council will continue to drive forward the actions set out in this plan. A refreshed version of this plan and an annual report will be presented to Cabinet at their meeting in February 2022.
- 24. This Action Plan, and the updated EDI Policy Statement, will be published on the council’s website and communicated to residents, Members, partners and staff.

RISK MANAGEMENT AND IMPLICATIONS:

- 25. In the current circumstances, there is a risk that resources and officer time required to support response activities to Covid-19 leads to lack of capacity to support delivery

of the actions in the EDI Action Plan and slippage against timescales. To mitigate this risk, officers will create a dedicated post to drive delivery of the Action Plan, and the CLT EDI sponsor will identify those activities that are critical to the plan's success and need to continue, and those where the pace of delivery can be slowed or stopped.

26. If stakeholders who are supportive of this work feel the council is not making sufficient progress, there is a risk of disillusionment amongst the community and stakeholders, leading to reputational damage for the council in the form of distrust among some residents and staff, which may in turn, hinder our ability to attract talented staff from diverse backgrounds. To mitigate this risk, the Council will drive forward our communications and engagement activities to demonstrate our commitment to EDI and report progress on our critical activities on a regular basis through communications channels for residents and staff.
27. Some stakeholders may be opposed to the council focusing resources on EDI, particularly those who may not buy in to our aspirations to transform our organisational culture or otherwise feel that the agenda does not require the radical approach we have set out to achieve. The council has made tackling inequalities its central mission, and we will assertively affirm our commitment to this agenda at every opportunity, so all stakeholders connected with the council feel they are treated fairly and are made to feel welcome and belong in Surrey and at the council. We will continue to affirm our commitment to zero-tolerance for discrimination, bullying and harassment of any kind, and we will deal with any instances of this decisively.

SECTION 151 OFFICER COMMENTARY

28. Although significant progress has been made over the last twelve months to improve the Council's financial position, the medium-term financial outlook beyond 2021/22 remains uncertain. The public health crisis has resulted in increased costs which may not be fully funded. With uncertainty about the ongoing impact of this and no clarity on the extent to which both central and local funding sources might be affected in the medium term, our working assumption is that financial resources will continue to be constrained, as they have been for most of the past decade. This places an onus on the Council to continue to consider issues of financial sustainability as a priority in order to ensure stable provision of services in the medium term.
29. The Section 151 Officer supports the EDI Action Plan 2021-22. The training requirements are allowed for within the existing Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). As a key corporate priority, it is proposed that the dedicated resource required to drive forward the action plan is initially funded from the transformation reserve and is then factored into the MTFS from 2022/23 onwards.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS – MONITORING OFFICER

30. The Council's statutory obligations under the Equality Act are already firmly embedded in its decision-making processes and working practices. However, adherence to the legislation may not be enough to ensure that the Council succeeds in its aim that "no-one is left behind". This report seeks Cabinet approval of an action plan that will see the Council adopt an approach to equality and inclusion that goes beyond what the legal framework currently requires of it and will put the Council on a firm basis to achieve its equality objectives.

EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY

31. This report provides a clear statement of intent through the Action Plan and Policy Statement to focus on changing the council's culture on EDI that will support its guiding principle to tackle inequality to ensure no-one is left behind. It is anticipated these will have positive impacts for all protected groups as defined in paragraph 9, and progress will be monitored regularly to assess the degree to which this is making a difference for residents, Members, partners and staff.

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Consulted:

Cabinet Members

Corporate Leadership Team

Trade unions

Resources and Performance Select Committee

SCC Members

SCC staff

Appendices:

Annex A – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2021-22

Annex B – Equality Policy Statement

Annex C – Key EDI workforce and residents statistics

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