

21 JANUARY 2021



## Tackling inequality and improving diversity and inclusion for Surrey and Surrey County Council

**Purpose of report:** To present a draft action plan to radically improve equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) for Surrey residents and Surrey County Council staff, and a draft refreshed EDI policy statement

<b>Introduction:</b>
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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 of our work– tackling inequality in Surrey by focusing on ensuring no-one is left behind. Four new equality objectives were also agreed in the Strategy. These support a statutory duty under the Equality Act 2010 to set equality objectives which aim to eliminate discrimination and harassment, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people with protected characteristics and those that do not have one.

2. One of these new objectives was:

**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.**

3. This report presents the Committee with a draft plan setting out how this objective will be delivered. It will also complement the Organisation Strategy's other equality objectives, such as our work to make it easier for all residents to take part in local democracy, service design and decision-making. The report also describes the oversight and governance of the work and how we will monitor and communicate progress to stakeholders.
4. The Committee is also presented with a draft refreshed EDI policy statement, which includes our commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, discrimination and harassment.

## Why a radical approach is needed

### Vision for EDI and context

5. Over the previous decade, our policy development and decision-making has primarily 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.
6. While securing greater equality for these groups remains important, we are starting to take a broader, more radical approach to EDI. This means not only changing the processes, systems and behaviours that prevent the council providing the best possible experiences for all residents and staff, but also ensuring that EDI is embedded into everything we do.
7. We also know that the Government has started setting out its thinking on equality, and we need to understand the implications for our work. The Minister for Women and Equalities, the Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, made a speech on 17 December 2020 which set out the Government's thinking on the inequalities that need to be tackled in the UK. The key points the Minister made included building a stronger evidence base on inequality, a greater focus on geographical and socio-economic inequality and the limited effectiveness of certain current initiatives to strengthen EDI, such as unconscious bias training.
8. The Government's intention to build a more robust evidence base is welcome, and we will prioritise this. Recognising the influences of geography and socio-economic factors are important, but protected characteristics also influence how the experiences, opportunities and outcomes of residents and staff are shaped

and so it will be recommended to Cabinet that our focus on these characteristics remains.

9. We also continue to find ways to improve our offer to support staff to deliver their EDI responsibilities. For example, unconscious bias training is just one element of a broader training package that will be commissioned and delivered this year.
10. As the Government's policy position on equality takes further shape, we will continue to assess the implications of this for our own EDI work.

### **The case for change**

11. There is a strong case for Surrey County Council to take a radical approach to EDI. Appendix C highlights some key data that supports this.:
  - a) **There is a moral imperative:** We have a moral obligation 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:** A better understanding of diversity will lead to more efficient and effective services, and a more productive workforce with a varied range of talents, skills and backgrounds.
  - 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. For example, the Community Impact Assessment, considered by Cabinet on 24 November, highlighted disproportionate impacts on some residents, such as greater feelings of isolation, stigma and exclusion among Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) residents.
  - 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 nearly 10% of our staff are from BAME backgrounds, which is broadly representative of Surrey's 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.

- f) **There is a legal imperative:** 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.
12. There are clear benefits for residents, Members and staff from our focus on EDI. We will work with all residents to provide them with opportunities to have the same chances for a high quality of life and feel they belong in their communities. Most of our resources will prioritise supporting Surrey's most vulnerable residents and strengthen relations within and between different groups in Surrey's population.
13. In addition, all Members and staff should feel welcome at the council, and that they belong and have the same opportunities to succeed as everyone else. Through our action plan, we will continue to engage them to identify and remove any barriers to such inclusiveness. Importantly, we will ensure that everyone who works with the council feel they are able to bring their full selves to work.

## EDI Action Plan

### Developing the plan

14. The draft action plan presented with this report (Appendix A) sets out a vision for EDI at Surrey County Council, and the actions we will undertake to deliver it. The origins of the plan started to be shaped in 2019 when the late Dave Hill, former Executive Director for Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture and previous EDI sponsor, facilitated a comprehensive staff engagement exercise, known as the Talking Diversity Tour.
15. The Tour was comprised of 11 face-to-face focus groups with 250 staff across the council's main sites, including targeted sessions with younger employees aged 25 and under, women, black and minority ethnic (BAME) and LGBTQ+ staff. A staff survey was run in parallel, which attracted 150 responses. Trade Union representatives have also provided input to the plan's development.
16. Staff feedback showed that, for them, EDI means helping all residents and colleagues feel they belong at the council, and they were made to feel welcome, supported and included. All colleagues would feel enabled and empowered to fulfil their potential. Having a diverse council would also lead to a higher performing organisation, better services and value for money.
17. They wanted EDI to be integral to how the council operates instead of being perceived by some staff as an additional consideration for their day-to-day work. They also wanted more visible leadership from Members and senior

officers on the agenda, policies that take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and discrimination and more support to have sensitive discussions with colleagues on EDI issues.

18. Some activities in the plan have been inspired by best practice of other local authorities who are recognised for their EDI work. Examples include:
  - a) The London Borough of Hackney has produced an inclusive language guide for their staff to help them not cause offence to colleagues and residents when having sensitive discussions;
  - b) The Mayor of London has an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Panel, where representatives from community and equality organisations advise the Mayor on inequalities facing residents in the capital and hold him to account for delivering initiatives to address them;
  - c) Bristol City Council, which has achieved an 'Excellent' rating under the Local Government Association's (LGA) Equality Framework, uses data on grievances and disciplinary cases to act where there may be evidence of bias.
  - d) In addition to gender pay gap reporting, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets also introduced pay gap reports for disability, race and sexual orientation.
19. Most of the best practice we reviewed was from local authorities who have been awarded "Equality Excellence" under the LGA Equality Framework. These authorities participated in a voluntary self-assessment exercise, followed by a peer challenge to receive this award. We are considering taking part in this process to support and challenge ourselves to make even more progress and secure better outcomes through our EDI journey.
20. The evidence from colleagues and best practice research has supported development of the plan presented to this meeting, and, going forward, we will continue gathering evidence to support and shape the plan to evolve.

## **EDI Action Plan 2021-22**

21. This action plan sets out a new vision and activities for strengthening EDI at the council. Our new vision for EDI is for the council to **have a fair, compassionate and inclusive culture that genuinely values difference and makes everyone feel safe and belong.**
22. To achieve this vision, activities are grouped under five themes.

- a) **Employee Experience:** Strengthening workforce diversity and moving to an inclusive culture that values difference, where all staff feel they belong and have opportunities to succeed. Activities to support this theme include mandatory EDI training for staff, support for Employee Reference Groups (ERGs), 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 our 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 these inequalities and maximise participation of all residents in local democratic processes;
  - 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;
  - e) **Delivering inclusive services:** We want our services to be responsive to individual needs so all residents can access services easily and fairly, giving them the best opportunities to improve their outcomes. These activities focus on strengthening EDI across our front-line and support services, so all residents have high quality services, no matter their background. It covers a wide range of issues, 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 with our EDI aspirations.
23. For this plan to work, 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. Cabinet and CLT are fully committed to driving this agenda. Katie Stewart, the Executive Director for Environment, Transport and Infrastructure, is the CLT sponsor for this work.

24. 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 to make progress against the actions in this plan:

- a) Colleagues across the council, with the support of HR and OD, have established seven Employee Reference Groups (ERGs). These are staff-led networks, that champion the interests of diverse colleagues and raise issues with the council's leadership. Each of these networks 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, with support from their leadership sponsors, and act as a sounding board for council services as they develop policies and services.

So far, we have a Women's Network, Disabled Employees Network, Minority Ethnic Group and Allies Network (MEGA), Deaf/BSL Network, Young Employees Network, Parent and Carer's Network and LGBTQ+ Network. Some of them are new, while others have been supported to increase their influence at the council.;

- b) A new staff training offer for EDI is starting to be rolled out across the council, which includes unconscious bias training. There has been high demand among staff to attend the course. As of December 2020, 42 unconscious bias training courses have been run with 470 colleagues attending them. A further 59 course dates have been arranged with 542 people booked on and 173 more staff members on the waiting list. We are also running 'train the trainer' schemes, so some staff are trained to deliver unconscious bias training to make this more sustainable. Race Relations training has also been delivered in Children's Services to 65 employees.
- c) A new continuous training and development offer on EDI for Members is being developed. Member Seminars are being planned for early 2021 to raise awareness with Members on our radical EDI agenda and outline how they can support it. The wider development offer will be rolled out following the county council elections in May;
- d) The council website is being reviewed, and webpages updated, to ensure the content 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.

## **Governance and communications**

25. Delivery of this plan is overseen by the EDI Change Group, chaired by Katie Stewart, and progress will be reported to CLT, Cabinet and this Committee. We will also regularly engage with the ERG chairs and trade unions to discuss

progress and seek to address any new issues that emerge as the year progresses.

26. The plan will be reviewed within a calendar year of Cabinet endorsing it, accompanied with a light-touch annual report covering progress and highlighting best practice, such as through case studies.
27. We are developing communications and engagement programme to continue to raise awareness of our progress, initiatives and achievements so residents, Members, staff and partners are part of our journey towards becoming a more inclusive, diverse organisation.

### **Updated commitment to EDI**

28. In addition to the action plan, we have also produced a refreshed policy commitment to EDI (Appendix B). This sets out 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.
29. The purpose of this document is to provide a visible and accessible statement that shows residents, Members, partners and staff the seriousness that we take on EDI. It demonstrates that our approach to EDI underpins everything we do, reinforcing the message that EDI is the responsibility of everyone connected to the council.

<b>Conclusions:</b>
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30. The action plan presented in this report is a key contributor that supports the council's mission to ensure no-one is left behind. Focusing on EDI will help us provide the best services possible for residents, attract the best talent to the council, and build our reputation as an inclusive employer.
31. We need a radical approach to drive the council towards being more inclusive for all residents and staff. The action plan will drive a major programme of work to make EDI integral to how the organisation functions and the responsibility of all Members and officers to practice.
32. We have already started to act to change the culture of the organisation. The action plan will continue to evolve, with the EDI Change Group leading delivery and working with Cabinet and CLT to adapt the plan as circumstances change.
33. The updated EDI policy commitment is an important tool that sets out our aspirations for this agenda, improve the experiences of all residents and staff



and sets out the activities we will carry out to deliver on the commitment. For this to make an impact, and signal our intent to stakeholders, we will share it widely with residents, staff and partners as the start of a broader programme of communications and engagement in 2021.

<b>Recommendations:</b>
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34. It is recommended that the Committee:

- a) Reviews and provides feedback on the draft action plan (Appendix A).
- b) Reviews and provides feedback on the draft SCC commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (Appendix B)

<b>Next steps:</b>
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The action plan and policy statement will be presented to Cabinet for endorsement on 23 February 2021. We will continue to deliver key activities identified in the plan, which the EDI Change Group will oversee and regularly report progress to CLT, Cabinet and this Committee.

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### **Report contact**

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### **Appendices**

Appendix A – Draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan

Appendix B – Draft ‘Surrey County Council’s Commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion’ Policy Statement

Appendix C – Key EDI resident and workforce statistics

### **Sources/background papers**

Covid-19 Community Impact Assessment

Organisation Strategy 2021-26

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