

**SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL****CABINET****DATE: 29 MARCH 2022****REPORT OF CABINET MEMBER: SINEAD MOONEY, CABINET MEMBER FOR ADULTS AND HEALTH****LEAD OFFICER: MICHAEL COUGHLIN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR PARTNERSHIPS, PROSPERITY AND GROWTH****SUBJECT: OUR AGENDA FOR EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN SURREY AND SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL – ONE YEAR ON****ORGANISATION STRATEGY PRIORITY AREA: GROWING A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY SO EVERYONE CAN BENEFIT/ TACKLING HEALTH INEQUALITY/ENABLING A GREENER FUTURE/ EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES****Purpose of the Report:**

In February 2021, the Cabinet agreed a new commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) as well as an action plan for strengthening EDI at Surrey County Council, and across the whole county of Surrey. This was a key building block to the central mission of the council's Organisation Strategy 2021-26 – tackling inequality to ensure no-one is left behind.

Just over a year since this was agreed, the council has taken steps towards its aspiration to becoming a fairer, more compassionate and inclusive council. The progress made in 2021-22 provides a solid foundation for our EDI journey, as there is still much to do to support all residents, Members, staff and partners feel respected, safe to speak up on issues of concern, valued and included.

This paper asks the Cabinet to approve a proposed refreshed version of the EDI action plan for 2022-23 that aims to continue important work started in the last year and refines its focus on the activities that will make the greatest impact for stakeholders.

**Recommendations:**

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Notes the progress that has been made over the past year towards the Council's ambitions to tackle inequality and ensure that no-one is left behind.
2. Endorses the refreshed Surrey County Council Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2022-23.

## 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 all stakeholders so everyone who lives, works and studies in Surrey is supported to thrive.

The updated action plan aims to build on the progress made through the action plan for 2021-22. The focus of the updated plan has been refined to support residents and our workforce with protected characteristics<sup>1</sup>, and those who experience other inequalities (such as socio-economic inequality), to have more opportunities to have improved outcomes.

## Executive Summary:

### Background

1. In February 2021, the Cabinet set out its ambitions for equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) at Surrey County Council and for the wider county of Surrey. They agreed a [new commitment to EDI](#) with an aspiration for the Council to be a fairer, more compassionate and inclusive organisation. This was a key element in supporting the Council's guiding principle to tackle inequality so no-one is left behind.
2. For residents, this means spreading opportunity to help them fulfil their potential and enjoy positive life outcomes. Importantly, we want all residents to feel a sense of belonging in their communities, so this means championing Surrey's most vulnerable residents, including those who suffer prejudice and discrimination. This is also central to how we work with our partners.
3. For Members and staff, we want them all to feel that they belong at the Council and have opportunities to succeed, working with them to identify and remove barriers getting in the way of our EDI ambitions.
4. In addition to this commitment, Cabinet also agreed a new corporate EDI action plan focused on five themes:
  - a. Employee experience
  - b. Leadership
  - c. Knowing and engaging our communities
  - d. Communications and engagement
  - e. Delivering inclusive services.
5. The commitment and action plan were designed to embed EDI into everything we do at the council. This report sets out the progress made against the action plan over the past year, but we recognise that there is still much to do and are still in the early stages of our more ambitious EDI journey. It also supports our pledge to be transparent and open with staff and residents about our intentions and how we would take responsibility to achieve them.

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<sup>1</sup> Protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are Age, including older and younger people, Disability, Gender reassignment, Pregnancy and maternity, Race, including ethnic or national origins, colour or nationality, Religion or belief, including lack of belief, Sex, Sexual orientation and Marriage and civil partnership.

6. A proposed refresh of the action plan for 2022-23 is appended to this report. The plan recognises the need to continue building on the foundations put in place and refines the focus of our EDI work based on discussions with key internal and external stakeholders.

### Progress in 2021-22

7. We have made significant progress since the original action plan was agreed in February 2021. Some notable achievements include:
  - a. **Collaborations with partners to make it easier for protected groups to engage with the council and other public services.** For example, working with the Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, the High Sherriff and Surrey Faith Links to establish the Surrey Interfaith Forum, and we have worked with the Surrey Minority Ethnic Forum (SMEF) to set up a new black and minority ethnic (BAME) reference group. We are also working closely with partners to strengthen EDI capability and capacity across the Surrey system, such as shared training with voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS) organisations and investment in a VCFS EDI Lead role, hosted by The Children's Trust in Tadworth.
  - b. **Championed the causes of vulnerable residents.** In partnership with the charity, Binti International, we became the first county council in the UK to start eradicating period stigma by providing free period products to women, girls and residents who need them in council offices and some libraries.
  - c. **Allocated nearly £1m of funding to support projects specifically designed to tackle inequality, particularly residents the hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.** Projects included funding (from our Contain Outbreak Management Fund) to help set up a domestic abuse refuge for LGBTQI+ victims, developing an online employment portal for disabled people and taking forward recommendations made by SMEF to provide training for faith leaders and marketing to minority ethnic residents to support their mental health.
  - d. **Developed a better understanding of the inequalities that residents face.** The launch of the [Surrey Index](#) was key to helping us identify disparities and inequalities down to neighbourhood level. We are also working directly with residents, such as those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, on issues that contribute to reducing inequality such as literacy programmes, Covid vaccine roll-out and stopping sites across Surrey.
  - e. **Continued to tackle inequalities faced by our workforce.** For example, we carried out a workforce training needs analysis on EDI awareness and developed a centralised reasonable adjustments service, launching in April 2022, to make it easier for Members and staff to procure the right equipment, software or training to meet specific needs. Employee Reference Groups (ERGs)<sup>2</sup> have also been set up by staff and are championed by the Corporate

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<sup>2</sup> Employee Reference Groups (ERGs) are staff networks set up to shape and inform the way the council works to develop a more inclusive environment for our workforce. There are eight ERGs including the Disabled Employees Network in Surrey, LGBTQI+ Network, Minority Ethnic Group and Allies Network, Women's Network, Early Careers Network, Parents Network, Carers Network and Deaf/British Sign Language Network.

Leadership Team and Cabinet.

- f. **Increased resources and capability to support our ambitions.** Two new permanent officer posts are being recruited to – a Head of EDI and EDI Programme Manager – to increase our capacity, capability and expertise to enhance our ability to deliver and maximise the chances of delivering the priorities set out in the refreshed action plan.
8. These are tangible examples of the council’s commitment to EDI in action. They mark a positive start to our journey, and we need to build on this progress to maintain, and increase, momentum around our EDI journey. Some of the issues in this plan are sensitive and complex; progress will take time as we work through these challenges with stakeholders.

### Proposed action plan for 2022-23

9. Focusing on EDI is a crucial enabler for the council’s wider policy agenda so we can prioritise our limited resources on supporting improved outcomes for some of Surrey’s most vulnerable residents.
10. The progress we have made over the last year is set against an ongoing challenging national backdrop including health disparities experienced by black and minoritised ethnic communities, low trust in public institutions, the rising cost of living impacting disproportionately on disadvantaged communities, and a national ‘levelling up’ narrative (as set out in the Government’s recent White Paper).
11. Following extensive engagement with stakeholders (see paragraphs 17 - 18), a proposed refresh of the action plan is attached as Appendix A. This plan represents both a continuation of work started in 2021, coupled with a sharper focus on activities that we hope will make the greatest impact for residents and our workforce.
12. This plan is designed to improve the experiences of residents and staff from all protected characteristic groups, as well as those experiencing inequalities that fall outside those defined by the Equality Act. It also balances the needs of different protected characteristic groups, as well the role intersectionality plays, where different types of discrimination, such as sex and race, overlap resulting in different people experiencing it in unique ways.
13. The plan over the next year will focus on:
  - a. Enhancing our understanding of inequalities faced by our workforce and taking action to respond to them – including enhancing quality and visibility of workforce data, introduction of ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting and preparing more people from protected groups, such as women and minority ethnic staff, to equip them with the tools to prepare for leadership roles and progress their careers.
  - b. Using our position as a major purchaser of goods and services to ensure social value is measured and maximised to support our EDI goals.
  - c. Continuing to invest resource and capacity in supporting our workforce, such as comprehensive training for staff based on the training needs analysis (and

an offer for Members) and support for our ERGs.

- d. Working closely with our partners to enhance EDI across the county, aligning our activities to support Surrey's residents to live in a fair, compassionate and inclusive county.
  - e. Continue to improve accessibility and inclusivity of communications and engagement.
  - f. Securing support from outside the council to validate our progress and enable continued improvement, such as through the Local Government Association EDI Peer Review Assessment process.
14. Focusing on these issues will help structure our approach to EDI activity. At the same time, we will work to address and embed behaviours, attitudes and a culture that support our EDI ambitions that will wrap around these activities to help create conditions for success.

### **Next steps**

15. Should Cabinet approve this action plan, implementation will start immediately to March 2023, and a refreshed plan for 2023 to 2024 will be presented to Cabinet to consider next year.
16. The Council's website will also be updated with the new plan so we are clear, transparent and visible on our priorities with stakeholders.

### **Consultation:**

17. In shaping the refreshed priorities in this plan, a range of stakeholders have been engaged. This includes:
- a. Five staff focus groups in early 2022
  - b. Meetings with all Employee Reference Groups
  - c. Reviewing progress through the cross-council EDI Change Group – an officer-led group responsible for oversight of the action plan's delivery, chaired by the Corporate Leadership Team EDI sponsor, Michael Coughlin
  - d. Engaging partners, such as voluntary, community and faith groups.
  - e. A survey with residents on their awareness of the council's EDI agenda and their priorities for EDI in the county – this is ongoing and we will use the results to refine the focus of our activities.
18. Key to the action plan's success will be continuous, ongoing engagement with residents, staff and partners about the work we are doing and working with them to identify and shape EDI priorities going forward.

### **Risk Management and Implications:**

19. There is a risk that resources and officer time required to support response activities for 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, the council is recruiting for two new permanent EDI posts (see paragraph 7f), and the CLT EDI sponsor will be involved in identifying 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.

20. 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.
21. Some stakeholders may question the council focusing resources on EDI in a time of increasing financial constraints, however we believe that, in the long-term, tackling inequalities will ultimately yield more value to the Council and Surrey as a whole by tapping into the diversity of talent and know-how across our residents and workforce and delivering stronger, more cohesive communities. We will continue to demonstrate our commitment to this agenda 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 not accept any discrimination, bullying and harassment of any kind against our staff, and we will deal with any instances of this decisively.

#### **Section 151 Officer Commentary:**

22. Although significant progress has been made to improve the Council's financial position, the medium-term financial outlook beyond 2022/23 remains uncertain. With no clarity on central government funding in the medium term, our working assumption is that financial resources will continue to be constrained, as they have been for the majority 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.
23. The Section 151 Officer supports the progress made over the past year and the refreshed EDI Action Plan. Costs relating to additional specific posts to deliver the Action Plan and further costs relating to reasonable adjustments, advice and communication resources to support accessibility have been built into the Medium-Term Financial Strategy from 2022/23.

#### **Legal Implications – Monitoring Officer:**

24. The Council's statutory obligations under the Equality Act are already firmly embedded in its decision-making processes and working practices. Accordingly, the Council is fully committed to ensuring that everyone with a protected characteristic is protected from discrimination and unfair treatment in line with current law. This report seeks Cabinet approval of an action plan that will see the Council adopt an approach to equality and inclusion that will put the Council on a firm basis to achieve its equality objectives and deliver on its "no-one left behind" vision.

#### **Equalities and Diversity:**

25. The EDI Action Plan will have specific benefits to staff and residents, particularly those with protected characteristics, as the outcomes in the plan are specifically

designed for this purpose.

26. We will continue to engage stakeholders as the plan is implemented to ensure we are maximising the positive impacts of this plan and involving them as the plan continues to be iterated and developed.

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**Consulted:**

Cabinet Members

Corporate Leadership Team

Trade unions

Select Committee Chairs

Employee Reference Groups

Voluntary, community and faith sector partners

**Annexes:**

Annex A – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2022-23

**Sources/background papers:**

Setting a radical agenda for equality, diversity and inclusion in Surrey and Surrey County Council, Report to Cabinet 23 February 2021

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