SURREY

People, Performance and Development Committee
9 September 2024

Update On Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) at Surrey County Council

Purpose of the report:

This paper provides a progress report to the People, Performance and Development Committee on the Local Government Association (LGA) equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) peer review and the three Surrey County Council (SCC) EDI Employee Experience Reviews which were commissioned in 2023. It also outlines the approach taken to incorporate recommendations into the 2024/25 EDI Action Plan and People Strategy Delivery Plan.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Committee note the progress made to respond to the recommendations from the EDI reviews.

Introduction:

The LGA Peer Review

1. The LGA undertook a Peer Review of our EDI work in 2023 against the LGA Equalities Framework. We provided a comprehensive self-assessment to the Peer Team, who also reviewed key policies and documents and conducted interviews with over 120 staff, partners and Members to assess work against four key themes:

    - Leadership and organisational commitment
    - Understanding and working with your communities
    - Responsive services and customer care
    - Diverse and engaged workforce

2. The review team recognised many strengths in our approach to EDI, noting that we have made a significant cultural shift as an organisation since this work started in 2018. They praised the strong leadership commitment that had been shown by SCC, and the commitment to reduce inequalities as expressed in our guiding mission of 'no one left behind'. The review recognised our strengths in using, collecting, sharing and analysing data, and pointed to areas of good practice where we have used co-production approaches to developing services. They supported our approach to priority neighbourhoods for tackling geographical disadvantage and recognised the benefits of our locality-based teams such as Community Link Officers and Local Area Coordinators.

3. Regarding EDI and our workforce, the team again recognised much progress has been made in recent years. They noted that we have shown clear leadership and commitment to being a more inclusive and equitable employer through the People Strategy, with a clear commitment to improving the diversity of our workforce. Some positives highlighted in terms of employee experience included our Inclusive Staff Networks, and our work to achieve nationally recognised accreditation in areas such as family, carer and disability friendly practice. They praised our new approach to providing workplace adjustments (although noting the time to implement these can still be too long) and our 'disability passport', as well as our inclusive recruitment guidance and policies on bullying and harassment. They also noted our commitment to carrying out the 3 reviews of the experience of underrepresented staff groups, which were still in their early stages when the LGA team visited.

4. The team also noted some areas where more progress is still needed in SCC. From a community-focused perspective, they noted that we do not have a shared understanding of, and strategy to reduce, inequalities experienced by our residents on the basis of things such as age, disability, ethnicity or sex. They also commented on the need to strengthen working relationships with our voluntary and community partners around EDI.

5. We are responding to this recommendation by developing a shared strategic framework which draws together the evidence we have on inequalities experienced by people in our communities. We will use this framework to bring partners together to develop shared priorities and actions to address inequalities faced by our residents.

6. In terms of our role as an employer, the team also highlighted several areas for further development. They noted that while we have good policies and strong leadership on workforce EDI, this commitment is not always consistently applied across the organisation and through all tiers of management. They recommended a review of the training provided to staff, managers and Members on EDI to ensure that we embed our ambitions in this area fully across the organisation. They noted a need for improved ways for staff to raise concerns around issues of discrimination and that some groups are overrepresented in formal HR processes.

7. These issues were also all reflected in the response to the three staff reviews and we are amalgaming the recommendations from the LGA review into the response to the staff reviews. Some key issues, notably the need for better confidential reporting of concerns and the need to improve inclusivity of

managers, are being taken forward in the delivery plan for the People Strategy in 2024/25. The remainder will be picked up in the response to the staff reviews as set out elsewhere in this report.

8. The Peer Team also noted issues around accessibility for disabled staff both in terms of the built environment and to digital and online information and services. In response to the review, we set up an Accessibility Forum to ensure that these issues are being addressed and have recently recruited a temporary (22 month) Accessibility Officer.

EDI Employee Experience Reviews

9. The 2023/24 EDI Action Plan included a commitment to commission external and independent reviews of the experiences of LGBTQ+, Disabled and Ethnically Diverse employees. The aim of these reviews was to provide SCC with clear, evidence-based recommendations that the council can take to improve the experience of these three minority groups, and for these recommendations to form the basis of the 2024/25 EDI Action Plan.

10. After procurement processes, the following organisations were commissioned to undertake the reviews:

    - Business Disability Forum: Disabled employees
    - Business in the Community (BITC): Ethnically Diverse employees
    - Business in the Community (BITC): LGBTQ+ employees

11. In line with the tender specifications, each review included: a tabletop review of workforce data; review of an agreed range of relevant SCC policies; and engagement with employees through both facilitated focus groups and surveys. To ensure maximum participation in the reviews, they were staggered over autumn and winter of 2023.

12. Each review was guided by a Steering Group, which included representation from the relevant Inclusive Staff Network, Trade Unions and EDI and People and Change colleagues. The Staff Networks and Trade Unions were instrumental in helping promote the reviews and encouraging participation by reaching out to their members. This communication was supported by corporate emails and promotion in senior leader blogs. Staff without SCC email addresses received details of the reviews by letter to ensure that all staff were given the opportunity to participate.

13. The reports for the reviews were received by the council as follows:

    - Disability Review: September 2023
    - Ethnically Diverse Review: December 2023
    - LGBTQ+ Review: February 2024

14. Each report has been presented to and discussed by the EDI Programme Board and Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and shared with the relevant Staff Networks. The reports are included as appendices to this paper.

Review findings and themes

15. Each review identified themes under which their recommendations have been summarised. Whilst each review identified specific issues related to the subject of their review, there are several shared themes, which are summarised below:

Theme	Disabled Employees	Ethnically Diverse Employees	LGBTQ+ Employees
People and Change Policies	X	X	X
Application of People and Change Policies	X	X	
Recruitment and onboarding	X	X	X
Workplace Adjustments	X		
Line Management and skills development	X	X	X
Career and development opportunities	X	X	
Organisational culture and behaviours	X	X	X
The built environment	X		
Learning and development	X	X	X
Diverse and representative leadership		X	X
Wellbeing		X	X
Strategy and action plan		X	X
Workforce data		X	X
Allyship		X	
Communication			X
Decision making and Equality Impact Assessments			X
Disclosure and authenticity			X

Conclusions:

The 2024/25 EDI action plan

16. Following receipt of all three reports, the findings, and recommendations (alongside feedback from SCC's Carer Confident and Working Families accreditation submission) have been analysed by EDI practitioners to prioritise the actions, identify whether work is already underway that will address them, and identify action leads and timescales for completion. This work has enabled us to identify how the recommendations can be responded to within the 2024/25 EDI action plan and the People Strategy Delivery Plan and support the development of the EDI Workforce Development (training) plan.

17. Key recommendations from each review which have been identified as high priority are summarised as follows:

- **Disabled Employees Review:**

- Review of policies to ensure that reasonable adjustments are considered, including Agile/Hybrid, Bullying and Harassment, Equal Opportunities and Performance Improvement. It should be noted that a process to review People and Change policies has already begun and therefore that some of the recommended actions have been completed. The Agile Working Policy was reviewed before the council's adoption of the Hybrid Working Policy, for which an equality impact assessment is being completed.

- Implementation of the recommendations of the evaluation of the Workplace Adjustment Service and development of a Workplace Adjustment Policy. The reviewers were very complementary about this service and felt that agreeing a policy to support it would enable it to be an example of excellent practice. We are already developing the policy with stakeholders and it is anticipated to be ready for ratification in July 2024.

- Organisational culture, leadership, and line manager relationships: Work is underway to design an Inclusive Leadership programme in response to feedback from all three reviews, from our Staff Networks and other sources. The report also recommended that senior leaders make personal commitments to diversity and inclusion.

- The Built Environment and accessibility: we have recently appointed an Accessibility Officer to provide subject matter expertise on these issues, and established an Accessibility Forum to ensure that accessibility issues are identified and addressed at the earliest opportunity.

- Decision making and Equality Impact Assessments: Equality Impact Assessment processes have been reviewed and promoted, whilst an e-learning module and surgeries to provide advice are now in place.

- **Ethnically Diverse Review:**

  - Organisational culture, leadership, and line manager relationships

  - Review of the Bullying and Harassment Policy

  - Decision making and Equality Impact Assessments

  - Developing under-represented staff: we are currently working on a Career Development programme and reviewing options for a bespoke leadership programme for minority and under-represented groups to support SCC's ambition to improve diversity in all levels and areas of the workforce. This will be supported by the ongoing work to ensure our recruitment processes are as inclusive as possible.

- **LGBTQ+ Review:**

  - Review of Bullying and Harassment Policy

  - Organisational culture, leadership, and line manager relationships

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- Decision making and Equality Impact Assessments

- Data collection: the review identified limitations on Unit 4/My Surrey regarding the options for staff to report their gender and sexuality, and that these had contributed to the substantial number of staff who prefer or choose not to report this information. Work has already begun to review all the protected characteristics categories on My Surrey. When this work is complete, a campaign to encourage staff to review and update their personal information on My Surrey will be launched.

18. The council achieved Carer Confident Level 2 status last year, and feedback from Working Families as part of their accreditation process. Feedback from these two reviews made similar recommendations regarding line manager relationships and inconsistency in approaches to flexible working and recommended that the council reviews its Flexible Working Policy. It also highlighted the need to improve employee data collection via My Surrey. As a result, revised definitions of carer status have been added to My Surrey.

19. In summary, the LGA review has provided assurance on the progress we have made on our journey to become a fairer and more inclusive organisation but also highlighted some areas for further development. The employee reviews have provided the council with valuable insight into the challenges faced by disabled employees, LGBTQ+ employees and ethnically diverse colleagues. Together, these are the focus areas of the council's EDI action plan. Following engagement with our Staff Networks, the proposed action plan was discussed and agreed at the May 2024 EDI Programme Board.

Next steps:

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20. The EDI Programme Board will oversee delivery of the 2024/25 EDI action plan to make sure the recommendations from all four reviews are addressed.

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Sources/background papers:

Our equality objectives 2021 - 2026 - Surrey County Council (surreycc.gov.uk)

Appendix 1: Disabled Employees' Experience Review – Business Disability Forum
Appendix 2: Ethnically Diverse Employees' Experience Review - BITC
Appendix 3: LGBTQ+ Employees' Experience Review - BITC