

TITLE	Equality Plan
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Council on Thursday 18 March 2021
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Communities, Insight and Change Keeley Clements
LEAD MEMBER	Leader of the Council - John Halsall

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

This report sets out the Equality Plan for 2021-2025. The Plan seeks to build on the Council's vision by setting priorities and actions to tackle inequality.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council approves the Equality Plan (2021-2025) and associated Action Plan (2021-2022).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Council has a duty to produce how it meets the Public Sector Equality Duties every 4 years. This Equality Plan has been developed in line with the Council's vision and Corporate Delivery Plan (2020-2024). It strengthens how we will enrich the lives of all residents in safe and strong communities and outlines our ambition to tackle inequality.

Insight tells us that we serve an increasingly diverse community with different needs, in both rural and urban settings. The impact of the pandemic has been devastating for many residents and businesses and brought inequality into sharp focus.

The Equality Plan has been informed by consultation which included an online survey and a number of focus sessions with community groups, staff and Members. The qualitative feedback has provided valuable insight to understand what we can do better within the internal workings of the council as well as what we can do to ensure that we can deliver more inclusive services that will lead to improved outcomes for our communities.

The Priorities which will achieve the ambitions of our Equality Plan are set out below. These directly reflect the areas identified through insight into evidence and outcomes from consultation and engagement. It is proposed that for the coming 4 years we focus on three priorities:

Priority 1 - Listen to and learn from our communities and use this to deliver services that work well for everyone.

Priority 2 – Act on our commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion in the way we plan, deliver and shape our services.

Priority 3 - Build a diverse and engaged workforce, where everyone is respected.

An action plan has been developed and sets out how we will seek to ensure that there is progress against each of the priorities through the first year of the plan period. To ensure that we are successful in making a meaningful impact on key measures of equality and achieve the ambitions set out in this plan, we have adopted the Local Government Association Equality Framework. This is an established, credible and objective performance framework to measure our performance and results. Progress and delivery will be monitored to ensure that we progress to the highest levels possible for each element of the Framework. At a future point, we will be able to invite peer challenge and support to ensure that our assessments of our performance and progress are credible and robust.

BACKGROUND

The Equality Plan (2021-2025) builds on the Council's vision for 2020 to 2024; 'to be a great place to live, learn, work and grow and a great place to do business'. This includes everyone and means tackling inequality together. As a public body we have a legal duty to have due regard to the Equality Act 2010. Although we are determined to do more than just fulfil our statutory obligations, this Equality Plan also provides the basis for how we will address the requirements of the Act. The Equality Act places statutory duties on the council to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act are:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

These public sector equality duties mean that we need to take actions to minimise disadvantage, meet needs and encourage participation for people protected by the Act. The Equality Act applies not just to the council's responsibilities as a direct provider of services, but also to our suppliers or anyone working with us.

The impact of the pandemic has been devastating for residents and businesses. It has brought inequality into sharper focus, highlighting the importance of reducing risks to our most vulnerable residents and staff. Amidst an unprecedented year, we have also acknowledged the global commitment to eradicate racism through Black Lives Matter Movement. This landscape gives us even more compelling cause to listen, learn and lead in the vital fight for equality.

BUSINESS CASE

The development of the Equality Plan and action plan has been informed by insight from data, consultation and engagement.

Insight tells us that we serve an increasingly diverse community with different needs, in both rural and urban settings. Although the 2011 Census recorded that 11% of the Wokingham population were from Ethnic Minority backgrounds, this proportion has undoubtedly grown, and will continue to grow, in light of the continuing development in the borough: review of schools and education data shows that the percentage of pupils

in our schools from Ethnic Minority backgrounds has increased from 26% in 2014 to 34% in 2020 (Schools Census). The 2021 Census is expected to reflect Wokingham's growing diversity.

National research studies (Stonewall, LGBT Foundation) estimate that 5-7% of any given local population in the UK will identify as LGBT+. In Wokingham Borough this means that around 8,000-10,000 residents could identify as LGBT+. The Wokingham JSNA sets out that some members of the LGBT+ community are disproportionately more likely to experience discrimination and barriers to good outcomes, including challenges around mental health and well-being. According to research by Stonewall (2018), 11% of 'LGBT' people have faced domestic abuse from a partner. This increases to 17% of Ethnic Minority 'LGBT+' people.

We have an ageing population. 18% of our residents are aged 65 and over. Using data for England as a guide, the proportion of our residents aged 65+ is expected to increase to 20.7% by mid-2028. The fastest growing age group is aged 85 and over, which is likely to double by 2041 and treble by 2066 (ONS). There are implications of an ageing population in relation to health and wellbeing, the effects of loneliness and isolation, and vulnerability to crime.

There are likely to be increasing numbers of residents with disabilities that require support. As our population grows older and young people with disabilities live longer, forecasts show that Wokingham Borough will experience: a 42% increase in people whose day-to-day activities are limited a little or a lot by a disability; a 23% increase in people living in care homes, particularly those aged 85 and over, and a 20% increase in people who are 65 and over and have dementia (POPPI & PANSI). We also know that the number of adults with learning disabilities that we support is higher than in many other parts of the country and is the second highest in the South East.

Trend data shows that the demand for SEND support in Wokingham is increasing. Over the last few years there has been a significant upward trend in the numbers of children and young people with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and numbers of children and young people requiring SEN support in schools. There have been notable increases in demand for support in relation to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Social and Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) in particular. The numbers of younger children (aged 7-11) requiring some form of SEN support has increased significantly over the last three years, partly as a result of changing demographics and needs, and partly as a result of better assessments and more successful early identification and prevention.

The Priorities which will achieve the ambitions of our Equality Plan are set out below. These directly reflect the areas identified through insight into evidence and outcomes from consultation and engagement, and by delivering against these we are confident we will achieve our ambition to ensure that Wokingham is a great place for all our residents; that we deliver best practice in terms of fulfilling our duties under the Equality Act; and will be a great employer that builds a diverse, inclusive and engaged workforce.

It is proposed that for the coming 4 years we focus on three priorities:

Priority 1 - Listen to and learn from our communities and use this to deliver services that work well for everyone.

Priority 2 – Act on our commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion in the way we plan, deliver and shape our services.

Priority 3 - Build a diverse and engaged workforce, where everyone is respected.

We know the best outcomes and changes can only be achieved together. That is why we asked for everyone to share their views and ideas about the proposals through an online survey and we held a number of focus sessions with community groups such as the Voluntary Sector, Involved Tenants, Service Providers, CLASP (a charity that supports people with learning disabilities) and other residents who wanted to share their specific ideas. We also held focus sessions with different staff at different levels within the council and our Elected Councillors. This took place through the: Members Equality Steering Group, Employee Equality Steering Group, Managers Network, Leadership Teams, Commissioning Managers, Ethnically Diverse Staff Network, Adult Social Care Staff, Equality Champions and Customer Delivery Managers. We received 563 consultation responses on key questions relating to the suggested priorities and objectives of this Equality Plan. Engagement sessions built on nearly 1800 comments to highlight areas of strength to build on, and areas for future improvement.

The qualitative feedback has provided valuable insight to understand what we can do better within the internal workings of the council as well as what we can do to ensure that we can deliver more inclusive services that will lead to improved outcomes for our communities. The qualitative feedback is summarised within the Equality Plan (Enclosure A) and has helped to shape the Action Plan for 2021-2022 (Enclosure B). This action plan seeks to ensure that there is progress against each of the priorities and it will be a live and iterative document.

To ensure that we are successful in making a meaningful impact on key measures of equality and achieve the ambitions set out in this plan, we have adopted an established, credible and objective performance framework to measure our performance and results, the Local Government Association Equality Framework. As we implement this plan, we will self-assess ourselves against three levels for each part of the Framework. We will monitor our progress and delivery to ensure that we progress to the highest levels possible for each element of the Framework. At a future point, we will be able to invite peer challenge and support to ensure that our assessments of our performance and progress are credible and robust.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	See ‘other financial information’		Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	See ‘other financial information’		Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	See ‘other financial information’		Revenue

Other Financial Information

The activity set out in this report to strengthen the Council’s initial approach to tackle inequality will be picked up within existing resources and activities. Any additional budget requirements will be sought from Executive as supplementary estimates.
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Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
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Research guided this Plan, through public consultation as well as several focus sessions internally and externally including: Members Equality Steering Group, Employee Equality Steering Group, Managers Network, Leadership Teams, Commissioning Managers, Ethnically Diverse Staff Network, Adult Social Care Staff, Equality Champions and Customer Delivery Managers. Sessions were also held with groups in the community, like the Voluntary Sector, Involved Tenants, Service Providers, Clasp and other residents who wanted to share more specific ideas.

Public Sector Equality Duty

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and is attached as Enclosure D.
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Climate Emergency – <i>This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030</i>

The purpose of this report is to endorse the Councils Equality Plan. Where cross cutting implications are identified the impacts will be given due weight in decision making.

List of Background Papers

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| Enclosure A – Draft Equality Plan 2021-2025
Enclosure B – Appendix 1 Equality Action Plan 2021-2022
Enclosure C – Appendix 2 Summary of Delivery since 2017
Enclosure D – Equality Impact Assessment |
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