

TITLE	Equality Plan Update
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 6 March 2024
WARD	None Specific
LEAD OFFICER	Sally Watkins, Chief Operating Officer

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The Equality Plan and accompanying annual action plan helps to ensure that the council continues to meet its equality obligations for the Borough and residents, progressing towards the “Achieving” level of the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG).

RECOMMENDATION

That the committee:

- considers progress on delivery of the annual equality action plan
- notes the proposed action plan for 2024/25 aimed at continued progression against the EFLG
- notes the intention to refresh the council’s Equality Plan and objectives ready for April 2025.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

In March 2021, the council approved the Equality Plan 2021-25 to deliver a programme of improvements against the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG). The EFLG is a framework of continuous improvement designed help local authorities build equality into all aspects of service delivery and employment. The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee received reports at its meeting on 23 February 2022, and 15th March 2023, on the progress achieved across the programme, together with the annual action plan for the subsequent year. Similarly, this report presents an update on progress made against this year’s annual action plan and sets out proposed actions for the 2024/25 plan.

A self-assessment against the EFLG conducted in December 2021 indicated that the council was at the ‘Developing’ level of the framework. This means that the organisation had established the building blocks for progression, had made an organisational commitment to improving equality, and was putting in place processes to deliver on equality issues. Delivery of improvement work across the programme has consolidated this position and is supporting progress towards the ‘achieving’ standard, as identified via subsequent self-assessments conducted in October 2022 and October 2023.

The action plan for 2023/24 comprised 17 actions. Of these, 17 actions have commenced, with 15 complete or due to be complete by the end of March 2024 and 2 which will continue into delivery within the 2024/25 action plan. Highlights of the action plan are set out within the report and more details provided in Appendix 1. The proposed action plan for 2024/25 is included as Appendix 2.

Background

In approving the Equality Plan 2021-25, the Council set out its commitment to tackling inequality for all our communities, presenting three priorities and eight objectives to be delivered across the lifetime of the Plan. These are detailed below:

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

- We will improve the collection of data about our communities.
- We will engage and communicate with our residents to encourage participation.
- We will use feedback from residents to identify barriers to equality of opportunity.

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

- We will embed our commitments to equality into the way we plan, purchase, and deliver.
- We will model active community leadership through collaboration and coproduction.
- We will strengthen and improve our use of Equality Impact Assessments.

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

- We will equip staff with the right tools to tackle inequality and meet the needs of our increasingly diverse community.
- We will honour the commitments agreed in our Equality Workforce Monitoring Report.

These priorities and objectives reflect the broad scope of the ambition required to make comprehensive progress against the EFLG. The goal of the EFLG is to mainstream the deliberate consideration of equality issues across the business of the organisation. Put simply, the EFLG aims to make sure we are thinking about the needs of different groups of people in everything that the council does: in our provision of services; in how we work with our partners; and in how we meet our responsibilities as an employer.

There are three levels of award against the EFLG, as follows:

- Developing - The organisation has made an organisational commitment to improving equality. It is putting in place processes to deliver on equality issues and is meeting the statutory requirements.
- Achieving - The organisation has policies, processes and procedures in place and is delivering some good equality outcomes. It is exceeding statutory requirements.
- Excellent – The organisation has mainstreamed equality throughout the organisation and can demonstrate that it is delivering significant outcomes across its services that are making a difference in its communities. The organisation is an exemplar council for equality and diversity.

The EFLG has four improvement modules and 17 priority themes as detailed below:

Understanding and working with your communities

1. collecting and sharing information
2. analysing and using data and information
3. effective community engagement
4. fostering good community relations
5. participation in public life.

Leadership, partnership, and organisational commitment

6. political and officer leadership
7. priorities and working in partnership
8. using equality impact assessment
9. performance monitoring and scrutiny.

Responsive services and customer care

10. commissioning and procuring services
11. integration of equality objectives into planned service outcomes
12. service design and delivery.

Diverse and engaged workforce

13. workforce diversity and inclusion
14. inclusive strategies and policies
15. collecting, analysing, and publishing workforce data
16. learning, development, and progression
17. health and wellbeing.

Detail

2023/24 progress

The 2023/24 equality action plan sought to build on the progress achieved in the first two years of the equality programme, consolidating the 'Developing' position of the organisation by continuing to build the necessary supporting infrastructure, knowledge, and skills.

Appendix 1 sets out the progress made against each action thus far. Of the 17 actions within the plan, 15 complete or due to be complete by the end of March 2024 and 2 which will continue into delivery within the 2024/25 action plan.

It is important to note that as delivery against the Equality Plan continues, the organisation's equality and inclusion infrastructure is being developed, enabling continued focus through business as usual on some of the key areas targeted through our action plans.

Key achievements of this year include:

- Easy read guides for our most visited webpages, produced in-house by our communications and digital solutions teams and reviewed by CLASP.
- New standardised service planning template with a requirement to set out how a service is meeting the Public Sector Equality Duty and/or meeting the Equality Plan objectives.
- Increased range of training available to officers and members including:

- Updated mandatory EDI e-learning for all staff (completion rate of 55% as of 1 March),
- A suite of optional e-learning modules covering topics such as disability inclusion, LGBT+ inclusion, Neurodiversity inclusion, Allyship, Active Bystander Training, and micro-behaviours.
- Additional e-learning module prepared by Digital Experience colleagues on how to produce accessible documentation.
- New six weekly online training sessions on Equality Impact Assessments.
- Ongoing provision of various EDI sessions for members designed with and delivered by the LGA.
- Provision of online training for staff equality network leads
- Wokingham Borough Equality Forum supported to establish sub-groups including an Anti-Racism sub-group and a Violence against Women and Girls sub-group.
- Draft social value policy framework and implementation plan.

Appendix 2 sets out an introduction to and summary of activity of the Equality Forum.

Planning for 2024/25

The proposed annual action plan included at Appendix 3 has been compiled based on an updated gap analysis against the Equality Framework for Local Government, and in consultation with key stakeholders including staff equality networks and union representatives. The relevant EFLG themes are identified for each action.

An important action for 2024/25 is to undertake a review of the Equality Plan (the current plan runs from 2021-25) and the council's equality objectives. It is a requirement on the Public Sector Equality Duty that the council sets equality objectives at least every 4 years. A review of the council's Equality Plan and objectives is also very timely and will enable the plan to align with the Community Vision, the new Council Plan, as well as ambitions regarding our strategic approach to health inequalities/to become a Marmot Place.

Other proposed actions are designed to continue to build on the progress and learning of previous years' activity, including increased equality SME support to the service planning progress, inclusion of individual level equality related objectives within the appraisal process, and prototyping of a combined impact assessment.

Two actions in the proposed plan reflect a continuation of delivery from the previous years' plans in to 2024/25 plan, including the design and delivery of leadership and management training and the creation of an equalities-informed People Strategy and action plan.

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?
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Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£13,768	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£46,498	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	TBC		

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)
This is a cross-council programme requiring commitment and activity across all services.

Public Sector Equality Duty
The Equality Framework for Local Government is an improvement tool which supports organisations to enhance performance in delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty. The actions set out in the attached appendices detail activity that directly delivers against the council’s Public Sector Equality Duty. An equality impact assessment was undertaken for the Equality Plan 2021-25.

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>
There is no direct impact on achieving a carbon neutral borough, however the equality plan will help ensure that this aspiration is achieved in a just and equitable manner across the diverse communities in the Borough, taking regard of the protected characteristics.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
N/A

List of Background Papers
N/A

Contact Emily Higson	Service Insight, Strategy & Inclusion
Telephone No N/A	Email Emily.Higson@wokingham.gov.uk

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