

Committee: Council

Date: 7th February 2024

Agenda item:

Wards: All

Subject: Equality Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2024 - 2026 – draft for consultation

Lead officer: Polly Cziok, Executive Director, Innovation and Change

Lead member: Cllr Eleanor Stringer, Cabinet Member for Nurturing Civic Pride

Contact officer: Susan Botros, Interim Equalities and Community Cohesion Lead

Recommendations:

- A. That Council endorses and adopts the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2026 and the supporting action plan.
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The Equality Act 2010 requires the council to publish equality objectives every four years to demonstrate how it intends remaining compliant with the Public Sector Equality Duty. The requirement to publish every four years was introduced from April 2018.
- 1.2. This report sets out a refreshed Equality Strategy and Action Plan for 2024-26 that Council is asked to endorse and adopt. It outlines Merton's commitment to tackling inequalities and remaining compliant with the Public Sector Equality Duty. The refreshed Strategy has incorporated feedback from public consultation, which ran from 16 August 2023 to 13 November 2023. An overview of the consultation is also included in the report.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. The refreshed strategy is a key way in which the Council demonstrates that it is meeting legislative requirements to publish equality objectives every four years.

Approach

- 2.2 The draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy (appendix 1) outlines the following four Equality Objectives:

1. **Tackling poverty, the structural differences in social circumstances and the resulting differences in access and outcomes**
2. **Promoting Community engagement to empower our residents, improve understanding of the issues faced by local people and develop services to meet the differing needs.**
3. **Promoting a safe, healthy and cohesive borough where communities get on well together**

4. Improving our evidence base to inform our decision making

- 2.3 The strategy is appended by an action plan setting out the Council's commitments against each of the four equality objectives. The actions in the implementation plan are linked to the Council Plan and other key Council Strategies and delivery plans. The actions are also linked to consultation feedback.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1. The Equality Act 2010 requires the council to prepare and publish equality objectives and subsequently update these objectives at least four-yearly. Not having an Equality Strategy would put the Council at serious risk of legal challenge and potentially damage the Council's reputation.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1. Extensive consultation was undertaken with a range of stakeholders which included meetings with user groups and a web-based survey. As part of this exercise and to ensure equitable engagement with underrepresented and marginalised communities, focus groups and interviews were conducted with racially minoritised communities, as well as LGBTQ+ and disabled groups. (Consultation feedback is outlined below). Public consultation ran from 16 August to 13 November and outlined below are the questions in the online survey:

- The Strategy identifies four main objectives, please tell us how you rate these objectives.
- Please tell us if you think there is priority that should be included that was not in the draft strategy.
- Please tell us how you would rate the activities in the implementation plan for each priority?
- Please tell us if you have any other suggestions for actions that will help implement our objectives.
- Please tell us if there anything you feel we should be measuring in order to understand how successful we are being in delivering the strategy?
- Please tell us if there are there any sources of evidence relating to particular Protected Characteristics that you feel we haven't taken sufficiently into account in the strategy?
- Intersectionality as a term refers to the unique experience of discrimination and oppression that individuals experience based on their individual characteristics. Please tell us if the focus on this as an issue in the strategy is about right, too much or too little?
- Looking towards 2026, when we next update the strategy, please tell us if there is any particular research you feel we should be

undertaking over the next two years to improve our understanding of inequality and discrimination in the borough?

- Please tell us if you have any other comments about the strategy?

4.2. 106 respondents accessed the online consultation. The four equality objectives were rated good or very good by between 62% and 72% of respondents. Further discussions about the draft strategy took place with the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) with Ethnic Minorities, MertonPlus (the LGBTQ+ community group), MCIL, and additional BAME community groups.

4.3. Overall the draft strategy has been well received and it was felt that we are broadly focusing on the right things. In terms of specific feedback, there were some consistent themes which are set out below. We have endeavoured to incorporate this feedback, wherever practicable, into the final draft attached to this report. Specific issues raised include:

- Protected characteristics not equally recognised – particular reference to LGBTQ+, disability and women
- The need to improve services on basis of community feedback; better co-production with the community is needed
- Accessibility was not recognised, in particular reference to disabled groups
- The need to address the disparities between the affluent and deprived geographical locations of the borough

4.4. The emerging issues will be discussed with departments and the responses have been integrated into the final draft version of the strategy. Additional and/or improved actions in the implementation plan incorporates this feedback. For example, disability and accessibility considerations have been mainstreamed throughout the strategy; there are now additional actions concerning the LGBTQ+ community in particular reference to safety. Particular reference to the council's approach to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is now featured in the strategy. Equality objective 4 concerning improved evidence base has additional actions on improving data. There is reference to conducting needs assessments, which are able to holistically capture any further research required into the needs of protected characteristics. There are actions to specify the integration of community inclusion and forums in council decision-making processes.

5 TIMETABLE

5.1. The action plan which supports the Strategy will be delivered over the period March 2024 to March 2026.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. None for the purposes of this report.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1. The legal and statutory implications are addressed above in this report.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1 By setting out its equality, diversity and inclusion commitments in the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Strategy the Council is re-affirming its commitment to human rights, equality and community cohesion as well as demonstrating ongoing compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. There is a risk of increased hate crime activity directed towards certain groups if there is no commitment to eliminate discrimination and harassment.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. There is a risk to the Council's reputation if it fails to produce and publish equalities objectives. Additionally, there is a risk of claims of discrimination based on age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

Appendix 1 - Draft EDI strategy

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1. None