

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 10 March 2015

Wards: All

Subject: Progress report on implementation of the Equality Strategy 2013-17

Lead officer: Yvette Stanley, Director of Children, Schools and Families

Lead member: Councillor Edith Macauley, Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities.

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Recommendations:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission discusses and comments on the progress made on the implementation of the Equality Strategy 2013-17.

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1. To provide the Overview and Scrutiny Commission with a progress report on the implementation of the Equality Strategy 2013-17.

1.2.

2 DETAILS

Background

Progress on the implementation of the Equality Strategy and action plan

2.1. The Equality Act 2010 introduced the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires the local authority, when exercising its functions, to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between persons who share a “protected characteristic” and those who do not. “Protected characteristics” are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

2.2. The Equality Act 2010 also requires the council to publish equality objectives every four years to demonstrate how it will meet the PSED. The equality strategy outlines the Council’s ‘Equality Objectives’ as the following five themes:

- Tackling Inequality
- Service Access
- Improving Engagement
- Promoting Community Cohesion
- Workforce Development

- 2.3. Council approved the Equality Strategy 2013-17 in February 2013. The strategy is a four-year strategy that sets out what we will do to tackle discrimination and inequality and promote equal opportunities in Merton. The strategy also sets out the council's equalities objectives as required by the Equality Act 2010.
- 2.4. The Equality Strategy Action Plan sets out the actions we will take to meet our equality priorities both corporately and departmentally.
- 2.5. The approach of the strategy is a departure from the structure of the previous Corporate Equality Scheme. Instead of including objectives against each protected characteristic, generic themes have been identified and they in turn were informed by using available statistical evidence and priorities highlighted in departmental service plans.
- 2.6. Delivery against the Equality Strategy action plan is monitored by the Corporate Equality Steering Group through regular updates from departmental equality representatives, and the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) with Ethnic Minority Organisations also monitors implementation of the strategy.

Progress to date

- 2.7. The Equality Strategy action plan (attached at Appendix I) includes activities that are linked to departmental service plans.
- 2.8. Key developments to note include:
 - Merton School Improvement (MSI) Service's continued programme of support to primary and secondary schools to identify, track and extend the progress made by individual pupils from target groups in key subjects (maths, writing and English) has had a positive impact on outcomes. Provisional results from 2013-14 show that at Key Stage 2, progress made in maths by Black pupils has increased to 89% from 87% in the previous year and has met the target. The progress made by Pakistani pupils in writing has increased to 100% from 91% and is above the target. Progress at Key Stage 4 in maths by Black pupils has remained stable at 73%, and the progress made by Bangladeshi pupils in English has increased to 92% from 78% and is above the target set.
 - As part of the work to develop a Local Offer under the Children and Families (C&F) Act, a programme of consultation and engagement of families with children with SEN and disabilities has been underway since October 2013. Results of this work were reported in June and concluded that parents felt meaningfully involved by the local authority and that their views have been listened to and used to inform developments. In order to continue the positive engagement of families two information sessions were delivered to parents about the Local Offer, which went live on 1st September 2014, and the provisions of the C&F Act overall. Brightwell Children's Centre continues to be a good quality short breaks provider as the recent Ofsted inspection showed. The service was judged as providing an 'outstanding' quality of care and as being 'good' overall.
 - Children's Centre services continue to show good take-up by families from deprived areas and is on course to achieve the 77.7% target by end of the year.

Recent Ofsted inspection of the Acacia Children's Centre service judged it to be 'outstanding' in all areas. The report highlighted its success rate in helping parents into employment and also emphasised the very positive user feedback about the centre. Take-up of 2 year-old funding is on target and the service is progressing its work on engaging with eligible families, and with practitioners who work with families, in order to raise awareness of the programme. This year's results show that 43% of our FSM children achieved a 'good level of development' (GLD) in the Early Years Foundation Stage - an increase on last year (33%). Work is continuing with nurseries in target schools to maintain improvements seen and to further close gaps in attainment seen between FSM and non-FSM pupils and other children from deprived areas.

- Recruitment of suitable in-house foster carers remains a key priority for the department. A Sufficiency assessment is refreshed annually to target our understanding of types of cares needed for our looked after children. This year, we have delivered 8 new foster carer approvals - of these, one was from a 'targeted group' with a further 17 potential carers in assessment at the end of Q3. As well as continuing with our recruitment strategy, there are new initiatives being pursued with Merton churches and other faith groups. Within existing resources, a dedicated management structure has been created to drive forward the recruitment strategy for 2015/16.
- Activities to support and develop participation and governance opportunities for young people continue to take place. The department's young people's participation and engagement functions have been reviewed and a new strategy for youth participation prepared, including a model for engagement with the MSCB. Youth Parliament contributed to work programme planning of the council's Scrutiny Panels at the start of the year - in late October, four young people carried out a programme of interviews to inform review of the proposed new risk and resilience service.
- The Children in Care Council (CICC) continue to meet monthly and report to the Corporate Parenting Board. Agenda items this year have included – development of a new website for children in care and care leavers, buddy scheme, Jigsaw 4U advocacy service and discussions on 'what makes a good [social work] visit'. In addition, two representatives from the Children in Care Council made a presentation to the Merton Safeguarding Children Board in May as part of an initiative to strengthen links to enable looked after children's voices to inform the work and priorities of senior managers and executive leads. An advert has been developed to encourage membership – work to engage younger members will be a priority for 2015-16.
- Good progress is being made in reducing the numbers of First Time Entrants into the Young Justice System with Q2 data showing 34 first time entrants to the youth justice system against a maximum entrance target of 80 at year end. Data on out of court disposals have shown an upward trend. Work has maintained a focus on early intervention and prevention. This year, the Family & Adolescent Service (FAS) have continued to implement a range of projects including gangs prevention/exit work, employment of a dedicated gangs worker, and the Phipps Bridge Project to keep the rate of re-offending low.

- To ensure that Community and Housing managers and staff are confident in their ability to meet the requirements of the equality act, the department has undertaken additional training with an external consultant in order to raise awareness and understanding.
- Community and Housing believes equality impact assessments should be robust and fit for purpose and as such has requested further training on this particular area. As well as building in a scrutiny process amongst the community and housing equality group whereby equality impact assessments can be assessed early on in the savings process.
- Member development has included briefings to members of the Leader's Strategy Group and the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on the need to have due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty. The briefings included information on the importance of members understanding the equalities implications of proposals that they are making decisions on and the need to consider Equality Analyses.
- Senior managers received a briefing on equality analysis from the Equality and Community Cohesion Officer on the role of equality analysis in managing risk around decision making. The session was very well received
- The use of equality analysis is embedded in the service planning process and savings proposals have been accompanied by an assessment of the impact of proposed changes on the protected characteristics.
- An audit to review the services to Domestic violence victims has been commissioned across the council and partnership. The review aims to improve the offer of service to victims.
- Annual surveys of disabled clients' use of transport services are being undertaken, and the learning points built into strategic plans for future operations.
- There has been an increase in the number of young people in apprenticeships (the council currently employs 51 apprentices). This has had an impact on the workforce profile and supported some of Merton's vulnerable residents into sustainable employment.

2.9. The following areas are a key focus for the remainder of 2013/14 and will continue to be addressed in 2015/16:

- Improve outreach to Small/Medium Enterprises and BAME organisation by holding an event in Autumn 2015
- Delivering a programme to bring 95% of bus stops up to accessible standards by 2016.

- Continue to raise the priority for disabled access to Raynes Park and Motspur Park stations with Network Rail. (Should Crossrail 2 move forward, pressure to increase these station's facilities will increase as both stations are likely to be served by Crossrail 2 services).
- Strengthen Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Voice and representation by supporting the development of a new organisation
- Refresh the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual and Transgender (LGBT) Forum, by identifying and supporting new community representatives to rebuild a strong forum.
- Encourage staff to update their equalities data, this will enable the council to have more accurate information on the workforce profile.
- Refresh of the equality and diversity training across the organisation with a specific focus on mental health in organisational change. There is a need to raise awareness of mental health issues to ensure all employees and managers have an understanding of the impact in the workplace.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1. The Equality Act 2010 requires the council to prepare and publish equality objectives and subsequently at least four-yearly. Failure to do so would mean the Council is not fulfilling its legal obligations and could be subject to legal action.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1. The Joint Consultative Committee with Ethnic Minorities will be given a progress report on the Equality Strategy.

5 TIMETABLE

- 5.1. N/A

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. Delivery of the Equality Strategy action plan is within existing resources.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. On 6 April 2011 the Equality Act 2010 introduced the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires the Local Authority, when exercising its functions, to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between persons who share a "protected characteristic" and those who do not. "Protected characteristics" are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

- 7.2. Delivery of the commitments in the Equality Strategy action plan and the publication of an Equality Strategy setting out our equality objectives fulfil the Council's legal obligations relating to equalities legislation.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. By setting out its equalities commitments in the Equality Strategy the Council is re-affirming its commitment to human rights, equality and community cohesion.

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 – Progress update of the Equality Strategy 2013-17 Action Plan

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 12.1. Equality Strategy 2013-17
http://www.merton.gov.uk/council/plansandpolicies/equality_strategy_2013-17_final_v2.pdf