

<b>Meeting</b>	Executive
<b>Portfolio Area</b>	Communities, Community Safety and Equalities
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## EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION POLICY AND STRATEGY

### KEY DECISION

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### 1 PURPOSE

This report presents Stevenage Borough Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy (Appendix A) and EDI Strategy (Appendix B). These documents set out how the council will continue to promote equality, diversity and inclusion across its services, communities and workforce over the next 4 years (2022 – 2026) and in-line with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) of the Equality Act (2010).

### 2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is recommended that the Executive:

- 2.1.1 Approve the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy (Appendix A)
- 2.1.2 Approve the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (Appendix B)
- 2.1.3 Request that an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan be brought back to the Executive for consideration and approval in autumn 2022

### **3 BACKGROUND**

#### **3.1 The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy (2022-2026)**

3.1.1 The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy (2022-2026) (Appendix A) reaffirms the council's commitment to fulfilling the requirements of the Equality Act (2010).

3.1.2 The EDI Policy contains a new set of EDI objectives which build upon the strong foundations laid down in the previous EDI Policy 'Encouraging an Equal & Diverse Town & Workplace to 2021'. It supports commitments set out within existing strategies, plans and programmes. Including but not limited to, the ambitions of 'Future Town Future Council (2026-2021)', the Workforce Strategy 'Future Town Future People (2020-2023)'; the 'Arts & Heritage (Cultural) Strategy (2018-2028), and the 'Community Safety Strategy (2021-2024)'.

3.1.3 In the EDI Policy the council are:

- Publishing a clear, updated set of equality objectives in-line with the council's responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duty requirement
- Reaffirming the council's commitment to the publication of equality information relating to people with protected characteristics<sup>1</sup> (employees, services users and residents) every year, including reporting and publishing of gender pay gap information about its workforce, in-line with the Public Sector Duty requirements

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<sup>1</sup> age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief/non-belief; sex; sexual orientation

- Reaffirming the council's commitment to the completion of Equality Impact Assessments (as assessed against each protected characteristic group) when there is a new or revised policy, procedure, function, service or where there is a withdrawal of a service
- Committing to extending regular consultation and engagement with local community groups to ensure that their views are represented in the implementation of equality, diversity and inclusion objectives
- Reaffirming the council's commitment to the 'Inclusion and Wellbeing' theme of the Workforce Strategy: Future Town Future People (2020-2023) specifically the nurturing of a progressive, inclusive safe and healthy working environment.

3.1.4 The proposed set of objectives have been developed through the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Working Group and take into account:

- Feedback from our residents, communities and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) stakeholders
- The views of staff obtained through online surveys and workshop events
- The views of members who attended the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group meeting in February 2022
- The good practice criteria set out in the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG)
- Benchmarking against other public sector bodies' approaches to delivery of the requirements of the Equality Act (2010).

3.1.5 The proposed objectives for 2022-2026 are set out in Figure 1.

**Stevenage Borough Council will work together with our partners, to:**

- **Understand the diverse needs of our communities and how to meet them effectively**
- **Actively engage, encourage and support local people, groups and organisations to participate in local democracy to improve opportunity and inclusion**

- **Promote equality, diversity and inclusion through our strategic partnerships, service delivery and supply chain(s)**
- **Use local data to shape services so that the needs of our diverse population are met**
- **Aim to improve the diversity of our organisation at all levels so that our communities are represented**
- **Ensure staff have the values, skills and knowledge to maintain a positive and inclusive workplace culture that values all employees equally**

Figure 1

## 3.2 Consultation

- 3.2.1 The objectives in Figure 1 have been shared with local VCSE groups, staff and residents for comment via an online survey. The survey was open for responses between December 2021 and February 2022. The survey was promoted across a number of social media platforms. The questions were available in a variety of formats (braille, large-print and translated) and respondents were also invited to contact the Corporate Policy & Research Officer to request a face-to-face meeting. 103 local VCSE sector groups were contacted directly by email and this was then followed-up with an email/telephone call and/or a visit by officers from the Community Development Team.
- 3.2.2 Thirty responses were received and a good balance of views obtained with the aims of the objectives agreed by ninety-four per cent (94%) of respondents. Most commented that the objectives were “positive”, “realistic” and had the “right focus”. Whilst the council is delighted with the feedback, it is acknowledged that the number of responses is lower than hoped and reinforces our commitment to maintaining a dialogue with the local community and workforce going forward.
- 3.2.3 As part of the consultation and engagement, and in addition to seeking local views on the new objectives, the council also sought suggestions on equality, diversity and inclusion activities and areas of focus that could be

introduced over the next 4 years. The recommendations received from residents, staff and local VCSE groups are covered in more detail within the Strategy section of this report.

### **3.3 Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs)**

3.3.1 In response to the recommendations received as part of the consultation, the council is proposing the publication of all future Equality Impact Assessments (EqIA) on the Council website. EqIAs are a tool to help council officers and members ensure that any new policies, practices and changes to services are fair and do not inadvertently discriminate against any protected characteristic group. For example, if a policy shows a possible 'adverse impact' on any group, the council must consider how this might be reduced.

3.3.2 The policy commitment to publish EqIAs will ensure that the council continues to promote transparency and accessibility as part of the decision-making process. It will indicate to staff and residents the importance of EqIAs and the role they play in delivering equitable services. It will fulfil best practice requirements as set out in the Equality Framework for Local Government (ELFG) criteria and demonstrate the council's commitment to delivering robust and meaningful assessments.

3.3.3 Underpinning the commitment to publishing EqIAs online will be a new EqIA template, toolkit and process. This suite of documents will clarify the EqIA process and reaffirm the importance of the impact assessment as part of the council's function under the Equality Act (2010). The new documents will include guidance on completion of the assessment, and also the role of Corporate Policy & Business Support as a critical friend. The refreshed EqIA documents will be launched to staff in summer 2022.

### **3.4 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy**

3.4.1 The EDI Policy, as proposed, will be sufficient to meet the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty, however, in-line with the council's Cooperative Principles the council are keen to strive beyond this. To fully embed the aims of the objectives across services and the workforce, the council is proposing the publication of an EDI Strategy (Appendix B). The

EDI Strategy will be accompanied by an annual EDI Action Plan which will bring together all strands of EDI work across all existing strategies, services and programmes. It will allow the council to monitor and centralise ongoing EDI activity in a consistent and meaningful way.

3.4.2 At the outset, and key to identifying realistic and attainable EDI Action Plan deliverables, it is proposed that a self-assessment of current council EDI activity is undertaken against the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG)<sup>2</sup> criteria. The purpose of the EFLG is to help organisations review and improve performance against best practice criteria and the ‘Developing’, ‘Achieving’ and ‘Excellent’ levels. The council has previously assessed itself against the Achieving level criteria. By using the EFLG as a self-assessment tool the council can establish a baseline from which progress can be monitored. It will ensure that the activities and ambitions in the Action Plan are realistic and attainable. It is proposed that this work will begin in April 2022 and it is expected that the outcome will provide clear parameters from which the council can move its EDI work forward.

3.4.3 Establishing a clear baseline through the self-assessment work will allow the council to consider, for future inclusion, additional EDI activities that compliment existing commitments. It is proposed that the excellent suggestions received as part of the online survey be considered for inclusion during the initial stages of the action planning process. This would include a commitment to explore:

- the council’s approach to digital inclusion as more services move online
- initiatives that could be implemented to address community safety fears within the local night-time economy
- current debates concerning safe spaces for women in public places
- staff EDI training so that staff are provided with the tools to confidently tackle discrimination (e.g. a racial literacy module)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/equality-framework-local-government-eflg-2021#underlying-principles>

- the council's approach to encouraging diversity through its recruitment methods (e.g. building on the councils blind recruitment practices through the introduction of unconscious bias training)
- HR Policies so that they incorporate feedback from the LGBTQ+ workshop, including the council's position on adoption, fertility treatment, and medical leave for transgender staff
- the socio-economic impact of the pandemic alongside the rising cost of living across all protected characteristic groups

3.4.5 As well as consultation and engagement activities with the local community and workforce, in February 2022 the EDI Working Group attended the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group to discuss its proposals and gather member views on the objectives and next steps. Feedback from the session was positive and members were in agreement that the EDI Policy and Strategy should be progressed, with particular support expressed for the following:

- Publication of Equality Impact Assessments on the council website to aid transparency and accountability
- Introduction of the Senior Leadership Team Equalities Champion to promote visibility of the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda.
- Findings from the Stevenage Equalities Commission to be discussed for inclusion in the Action Plan
- The Overview and Scrutiny Committee to have an ongoing role in the scrutiny of the Action Plan.

3.4.6 As indicated, the findings of the Stevenage Equalities Commission will be integral to how the council tackles inequalities experienced by residents of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) heritage. The Commission was established in summer 2021 to undertake a strategic assessment of the nature, extent, causes and impact of race inequality in Stevenage. The outcome of this work will be the publication of a final recommendations report to the Stevenage Together Board in July 2022. The forthcoming

Commission report will be central to determining BAME EDI activities throughout the duration of the council's EDI Strategy.

3.4.7 In the development of the EDI Action Plan the council will also use existing research to help shape our conversations with residents and local community groups. This includes but is not limited to:

- Stevenage Ward Profile Reports (2020)
- Annual Diversity and Equality Report (2021)
- Office of National Statistics 2021 Census data
- Residents Survey (2021)
- Tenants Survey (2021).

These data sets and the subsequent conversations will help the council steer work on inequality, as well as demonstrate the results and impact of work to advance equality. It will allow the council to develop a better understanding of the diversity of our community and some of the challenges and opportunities this brings.

3.4.8 Central to the advancement of the council's EDI work, is recognition that dialogue with residents, community groups and staff must be maintained to ensure that the activities are meaningful. This is why; following self-assessment against the EFLG framework, it is suggested that further consultation activities with staff, residents and local community groups regarding the content of the proposed EDI Action Plan takes place. This consultation work will include a mix of online surveys, face-to-face interviews and network meetings, as well as attendance at larger events such as Stevenage Day in June.

3.4.9 Following the self-assessment and consultation work it is proposed that the EDI Action Plan is presented to the Executive for approval in autumn 2022, and that activities be reviewed annually throughout the duration of the EDI Strategy. After the first year, an EDI Progress Report will be presented alongside the Action Plan for information. To demonstrate transparency,



promote accountability and outline progress against the EDI objectives, the council is committed to publishing the Action Plan and the Progress Report on the council website.

### **3.5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Governance**

3.5.1 As per the current arrangements, the EDI Policy will be overseen by the Portfolio Holder for Equalities. The Portfolio Holder for Equalities will chair the Equality and Diversity Governance Group (EDGG) and membership will include the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People, as well as senior officers within the council. Further work will be undertaken to expand the membership with consideration being given to the role of external stakeholders.

3.5.2 The EDGG will meet quarterly and it will monitor progress against the aims of the policy objectives and the actions within the annual EDI Action Plan. The EDI Progress Report will be reported back to the Executive, alongside the Action Plan, on an annual basis.

3.5.2 Central to the new governance proposals will be the introduction of a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) Equalities Champion whose role it will be to:

- Provide visible leadership and promote good practice on equality, diversity and inclusion
- Help to promote all aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion within our community to help improve visibility of the council's approach to EDI
- Regularly communicate the benefits of Equality and Diversity, and promote any council success within that agenda to the Senior Leadership Team and the workforce
- Champion the timely use of Equality Impact Assessments at the start of a change in service/policy/project and identify (via the SLT sign-off process) where this has not been done
- Liaise regularly with the Portfolio Holder for Equalities and attend the EDGG

- 3.5.3 The day-to-day responsibility for the EDI Action Plan and its implementation will be overseen by a newly created Officer Equality Group (OEG). Membership of the OEG will consist of representation from officers from across the council who will help to champion and implement delivery and monitoring of EDI activities. Further work will be undertaken to develop the group membership so that it is representative of all services within the council and brings together all strands of EDI work. The OEG will be responsible for providing a quarterly progress update on the EDI Action Plan to the Equality and Diversity Governance Group (EDGG).

## **4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS**

- 4.1 Publication of the EDI Policy alone would be enough to fulfil the requirements of the Equality Act. However, whilst this would be sufficient, this would not allow the council to build upon the good work it has delivered under 'Encouraging an Equal & Diverse Town & Workplace to 2021'. Approval of a Strategy and Action Plan, alongside the EDI Policy would allow the council to clearly indicate its commitment to strive beyond the fulfilment of its EDI objectives and meaningfully advance equality, diversity and inclusion ambitions across services, communities and the workforce for the next 4 years.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial Implications**

- 5.1.1 Any financial implications that are identified as a result of the Strategy will be incorporated into priority growth requests for the 2023/24 budget setting process.

### **5.2 Legal Implications**

- 5.2.1 The approval and publication of the EDI Policy (Appendix A) will ensure that the Council continues to meet its responsibilities and duties under the

Equality Act (2010), whereby all functions must be carried out in a way that gives due regard to:

- Removing discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is unlawful under the Equality Act (2010)
- Promoting equal opportunities between people who have a protected characteristic(s) and those who don't
- Encouraging good relations between people who have a protected characteristic(s) and those who don't

Under the EDI Policy (Appendix A) and in-line with section 149 of the Equality Act - the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), the council are committed to publishing:

- equality information relating to people with protected characteristics (employees, services users and residents) every year, including reporting and publishing of gender pay gap information about our workforce
- a clear set of equality objectives every 4 years setting out what we need to achieve in order to fulfil the requirements of the Equality Act (2010)

### **5.3 Risk Implications**

- 5.3.1 If the council does not fulfil its Public Sector Equality Duty through the publication of EDI Policy objectives and the Annual Equality & Diversity Report, then there would be reputational and financial risks in regards to compliance and potential enforcement action by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

### **5.4 Policy Implications**

- 5.4.1 The objectives set out in the EDI Policy reaffirm the council's position on equality, diversity and inclusion in-line with the requirements of the Equality Act (2010). This position is applicable to all policies, strategies and plans across the council. The Borough Solicitor has advised that the council's formal documents be updated to include a pro-forma equalities section

setting out the formal legal requirements of the Equality Act (2010) and the EDI objectives contained within the Policy. It is proposed that this work is taken forward as part of the EDI Action Plan.

## **5.5 Environmental Implications**

- 5.5.1 The position set out in the EDI Policy regarding the publication of EqlAs is expected to improve transparency around the council's decision-making process. This would benefit understanding of the impact on protected characteristic groups in regards to raising energy prices, fuel poverty and the drive towards net zero targets.

## **5.6 Staffing and Accommodation Implications**

- 5.6.1 The proposed activities and actions will primarily be delivered as part of the core responsibilities of staff within the relevant services. Any unforeseen implications for staff resulting from the implementation of this policy and action plan will be fully considered at an appropriate time, and with consultation and engagement as required.

## **5.7 Human Resources**

- 5.7.1 The proposed recommendations will bring together the existing and forthcoming workforce EDI activities as set out in the Workforce Strategy. This approach seeks to advance equality, diversity and inclusion activities across the workforce.

## **5.8 Equalities and Diversity Implications**

- 5.8.1 The EDI Policy, alongside the proposed EDI Strategy and Action Plan will form the framework by which the council promotes equal opportunity in all aspects of its work. The framework includes a range of actions that are designed to challenge discrimination, advance equality, diversity and inclusion, and ensure that impacts on protected characteristic groups are considered throughout all stages of the council's decision-making process.

## **5.9 Service Delivery Implications**

- 5.9.1 Service delivery implications will emerge through implementation, development and agreement of the EDI Action Plan. It is anticipated that the approach to delivery, engagement and governance will continue to sit within the current operating model.

## **5.10 Community Safety Implications**

- 5.10.1 The Community Safety Strategy 2021-24 has a core objective of tackling hate crime and this has been embedded into the Stevenage Community Safety Partnership (CSP) Action Plan. The OEG will seek member representation from the Community Safety Team to ensure that existing and forthcoming activities are captured within the EDI Action Plan. It is anticipated that this work will have positive implications for community safety aims.

## **5.11 Safeguarding Children Implications**

- 5.11.1 It is anticipated that the EDI Policy, Strategy and Action Plan will have positive implications for safeguarding children, enhancing our approach to community engagement, and fulfilment of our responsibilities under the Children Act (2004).

## **5.12 Other Corporate Implications**

- 5.12.1 Communications: To promote openness and transparency around the decision-making process, the Strategy, Policy and Action Plan as well as all future EqlAs will be published on the council website. A dedicated EqlA page will be set-up to sit alongside the existing EDI web pages.

## **Background documents**

All documents that have been used in compiling this report, may be available to the public, i.e. they do not contain exempt information, should be listed here:

Arts & Heritage (Cultural) Strategy (2018-2028)

<https://democracy.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/s4794/20170123-Cultural%20Strategy-Appendix.pdf>

Community Safety Strategy (2021-2024)

<https://democracy.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/s28848/CSC%20-%20Appendix%20A%20-%20SoSafe%20Community%20Safety%20Strategy%202021.pdf>

Encouraging an Equal & Diverse Town and Workplace to 2021

<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/equality-and-diversity/equality-and-diversity-policy-to-2021-acc.pdf>

Future Town Future Council Corporate Plan (2016 - 2021)

<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-the-council/plans-and-performance/corporate-plan-future-town-future-council>

Our Cooperative Commitment (Stevenage Borough Council 2020)

<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/about-the-council/co-operative-commitment.pdf>

The Equality Act (2010)

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

The Public Sector Equality Duty

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-equality->

## **APPENDICES**

- A. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy
- B. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy