

Stevenage Borough Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (2022 - 2026)

Introduction...

This strategy sets out Stevenage Borough Council's ambitions for the advancement of equality, diversity and inclusion across its services and workforce between 2022 and 2026. It builds upon the strong foundations laid down in 'Encouraging an Equal & Diverse Town & Workplace to 2021' and sets out how the council's equality, diversity and inclusion activities will be progressed and monitored over the period of this strategy.

Underpinning this commitment is our ambition to make Stevenage a great place to live, work and visit for all. This is central to our Future Town Future Council Corporate Plan. In achieving these ambitions we recognise there is enormous strength in diversity and that by bringing people together from a wide range of backgrounds we can enhance our understanding, broaden our perspectives and improve the quality of life for our residents.

This strategy is in response to feedback from our communities. We know from local debates arranged by the Stevenage Equalities Commission that further work is needed locally to address the inequalities experienced by Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups. We know from consultation with residents that national debates on the gender pay gap and the safety of women in public spaces has brought about an ever sharper focus on inequalities between men and women. We know from our staff survey that we need to do more to give our workforce the tools to tackle discrimination with confidence. We know that the pandemic and recent increases in the cost of living will hit groups within our community hard.

Our communities' expectations have understandably been raised, and through this strategy we are committed to working with our local community groups, residents and staff to identify and address these challenges.

The Legal Background...

The Equality Act 2010 is the legal framework by which the rights of individuals and the advancement of equality of opportunity for all are protected. As a public sector body we are required to carry out functions 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

The nine protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act (2010) are:

- age;
- disability;
- gender reassignment;
- marriage and civil partnership;
- pregnancy and maternity;
- race;
- religion and belief;
- sex;
- sexual orientation.

Whilst the Equality Act (2010) does not include a socio-economic duty, it is the councils policy position that elected members and officers consider the impact of their decisions on people who are less fortunate because of their social/economic background.

As a public sector body we are also required to publish:

- 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).

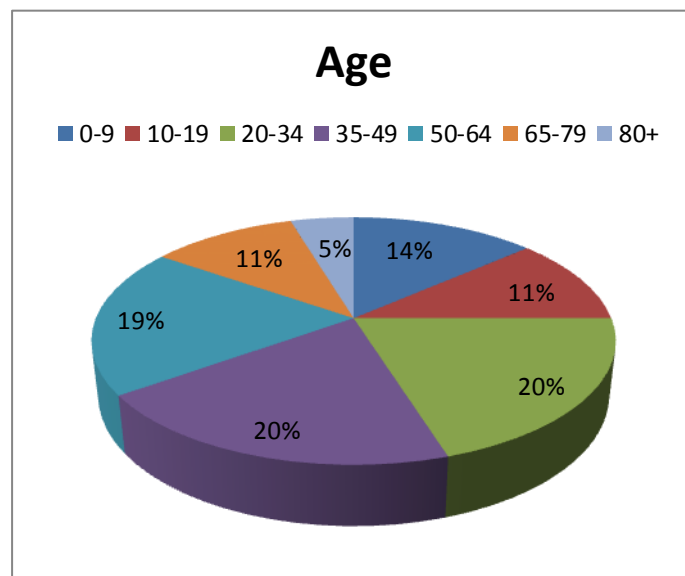
We fulfil these requirements through the Annual Equality and Diversity Report and a four-yearly Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy which includes our objectives.

Diverse Stevenage – what does the data tell us?

We know that people who share certain characteristics will have differing experiences and life opportunities. To build our understanding of local community groups and shape our services in response to this it is important to consider the data.

Here are some examples which demonstrate the diversity of Stevenage against each of the protected characteristic groups.

Age – Stevenage has a slightly younger age demographic than both Hertfordshire and England. This is most easily seen in the 65-79 age range, where the Stevenage percentage (10.7%) of total population is below both the county (12.0%) and the national (13.4%) level.

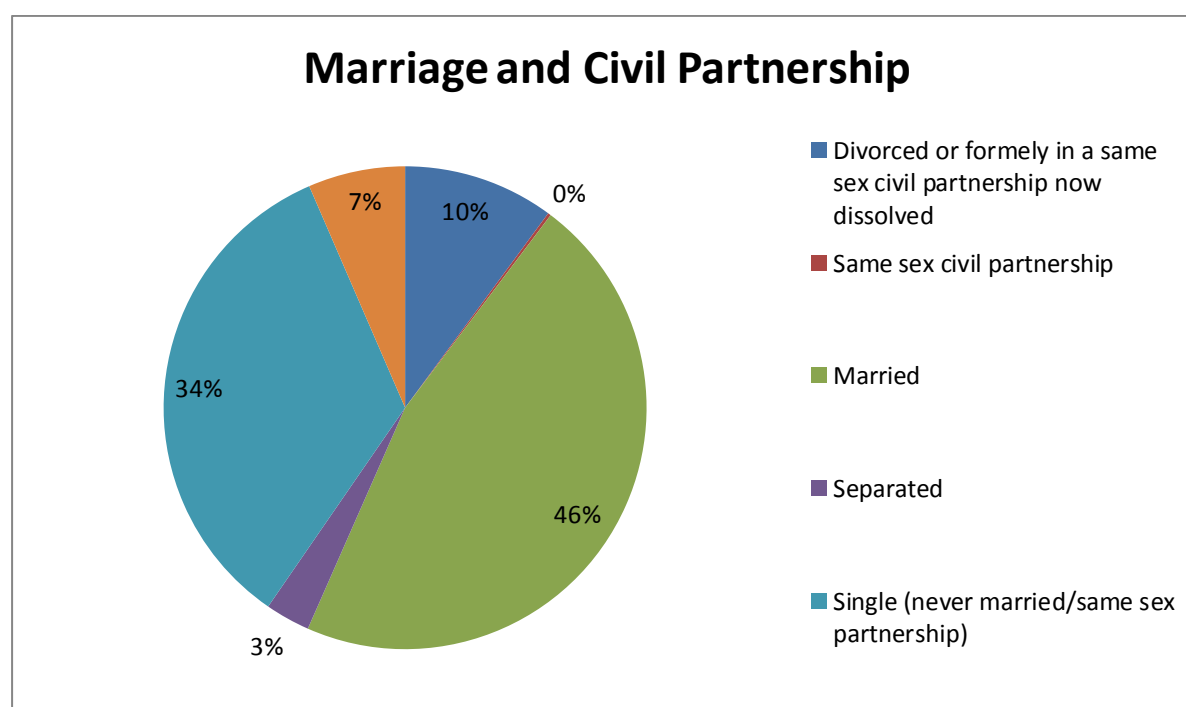


The under twenties are one of the largest age groups in Stevenage (21,941) and represent 25% of the local community.

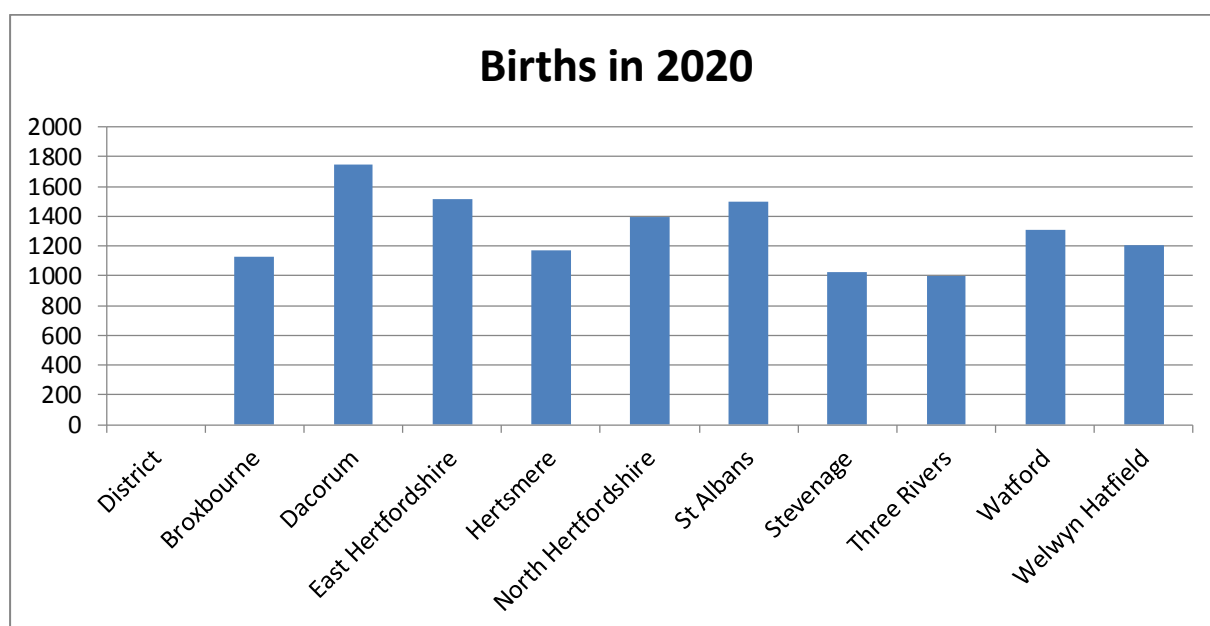
Disability - In 2011, 7.5% of all Stevenage residents had a disability which limited their day to day activities. This is above the county (6.2%) level but below the national level (8.3%).

Gender Reassignment – Gender Reassignment data is not currently available at the local level but will be available following the upcoming publication of the Office for National Statistics 2021 census data.

Marriage and Civil Partnership - In 2011, 46.3% of Stevenage residents aged 16 and over were married and 0.2% where in a civil partnership. 34% of people over 16 in Stevenage were single (the highest in Hertfordshire), 3% were separated, 0.1% were divorced and 6.5% were widowed



Pregnancy and Maternity - There were 559,728 babies born in NHS Hospitals nationally during 2020-21. In 2020 there were 1,021 births in Stevenage which is the second lowest number of births compared to other districts in the county.



Race - According to the 2011 census, 83.1% of Stevenage's population was white British, which was higher than the Hertfordshire and England averages of 80.8% and 79.8% respectively. The Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) population of Stevenage had increased from 8.52% in 2001 to 16.9% in 2011.

Religion and Belief/Non-Belief – In 2011, the majority of responses (54.4%) indicated that Christianity was the most practised religion. This figure is slightly below the Hertfordshire (58.3%) and England (59.4%) levels. Stevenage also has a significantly higher than average amount of individuals responding with No religion (34.1%).

Sex - In 2020, 49.6% of the population of Stevenage was Male with Females representing 50.4%.

Sexual Orientation – Data on sexual orientation is currently not available at any areas lower than regional level. Office for National Statistics sexual orientation data from 2019 estimates that in the East of England 95% of the population would identify as Heterosexual/Straight with 2% not knowing or refusing to answer and 1% as either Gay or Lesbian, 1% as Bisexual and 1% as Other.

What our Communities and Residents have told us...

As a council we are committed to undertaking regular consultation with local community groups and residents to ensure that their voices are reflected in the actions we take. This is why hearing local residents, staff and community group's views on our proposed equality, diversity and inclusion objectives, and our previous equalities work has been central to the development of our EDI policy and strategy.

The EDI Objectives Survey was open for responses between December 2021 and February 2022. We contacted 103 voluntary, community and social enterprise groups using a mix of direct email, telephone and in-person or online meetings. We also promoted the survey to residents and staff via various social media platforms. We would like to thank everybody for their contribution and their willingness to make their voices heard. We will continue to maintain an ongoing dialogue with our residents and local community groups, and the feedback received will inform and shape our EDI activities for the duration of this strategy.

The findings indicate that the majority of respondents (94%) were in favour of the proposed EDI objectives; with most agreeing that the aims of the objectives were “positive”, “realistic” and with “the right focus”. Respondent’s feedback also indicated that there is a real appetite in Stevenage for the council to address specific EDI issues, such as:

- exploring how the council can support residents as services move online - this includes supporting people who may not have the knowledge, skills or opportunity to access IT equipment
- annually identifying a selection of causes which reflect the diversity of Stevenage and dedicating resources to arranging and publicising events to promote these
- reviewing how the EDI objectives are reflected across the council’s Corporate Plan – Future Town Future Council and other key strategies
- exploring the safety of the local night-time economy for workers and identifying initiatives that could be implemented to address community fears
- consider current debates concerning safe spaces for women in public places and commit to exploring this further
- reviewing the socio-economic impact of the pandemic alongside the rising cost of living across all protected characteristic groups

What the consultation work with stakeholders and communities has told us is that there is more we can do. The broad range of recommendations provided in response to the survey gives a good indication of key local issues and we are committed to exploring the recommendations provided through continued dialogue with residents and local community groups throughout the duration of this strategy.

Alongside our resident and community group engagement activities, we have also been working with the Stevenage Equalities Commission to focus on the disproportionate impact of inequalities on the lives of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) individuals and communities. The Commission was established in summer 2021 to undertake a strategic assessment of the nature, extent, causes and impact of race inequality in Stevenage and to make recommendations for tackling them.

Central to the Equalities Commissions approach to exploring race inequality has been the focus group events which cover the following themes: Health; Criminal Justice; Education; Employment and Business; and Community, Culture and Sport. The outcome of this work will be the publication of an Equalities Commission Final

Report to the Stevenage Together Board in July 2022. The forthcoming report will be central to determining how we take forward EDI activities to tackle race inequality in Stevenage.

What our Staff have told us...

In addition to our consultation work with residents and local community groups we have also engaged with staff to understand their views on diversity and inclusion in the workplace. A recent survey on this subject indicated that sixty-nine per cent (69%) of staff agreed that inclusion and diversity is a priority for the council. In the same survey, nearly seventy five per cent (75%) of staff felt that people of all cultures and backgrounds are respected and valued. Recommendations from the EDI Objectives Survey suggest that the following activities could help build on current diversity and inclusion activity:

- updating council staff EDI training to include racial literacy so that staff are confident when tackling discrimination
- reviewing the council's approach to encouraging diversity through its recruitment methods, to ensure current practices are robust

Alongside this we also know from feedback following a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) workshop event held in June 2021 that staff feel more could be done to explore the key barriers and enablers that impact LGBTQ workplace inclusion. Recommendations from the workshop varied from:

- changes to HR Policies so that they reflect LGBTQ experience, including the council's position on adoption, fertility treatment, and medical leave for transgender staff
- representation at Senior Leadership Team level in the form of an Equalities Champion who promotes and supports the activities of colleagues committed to advancing the LGBTQ agenda
- creation of a LGBTQ Network to help share learning and identify how we move the LGBTQ agenda forward

In January 2021 we also met with staff of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) heritage to discuss the subject of unconscious bias. It was clear from this meeting that the majority of participants felt the council was progressive in its approach to EDI, but that more could be done organisationally to overtly challenge discrimination and explore the impact of unconscious bias. Recommendations from the group varied from:

- reinforce the council recruitment methods (such as the council's current blind recruitment practices) with unconscious bias training for managers across all services
- continue to actively challenge discrimination through the utilisation of policies and procedures to hold individuals to account, and to be more vocal about this process and the support available for staff who have experienced discrimination
- create a BAME Network to provide support for staff and help move the agenda forward.

As an employer, we recognise that there is further work to do and our consultation and engagement activities indicate that our equality, diversity and inclusion objectives have the right focus for us to do this. We will continue to engage with our staff to build a strong foundation from which we can take meaningful action and support our commitment to the ambitions set out under the 'Inclusion and Wellbeing' theme of the Workforce Strategy: Future Town Future People (2020-2023).

Our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Objectives...

In response to the feedback from our residents, staff and local community groups, the following set of objectives will be the basis from which we will advance equality, diversity and inclusion across our services and workforce for the next 4 years.

We 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
- Ensure staff have the values, skills and knowledge to maintain a positive and inclusive workplace culture that values all employees equally
- Aim to improve the diversity of our organisation at all levels so that our communities are represented

Working Together ...



As a Cooperative Council we want to strive beyond the requirements of the Equality Act. We want to give more say and choice to local people about how we advance equality, diversity and inclusion. We want to help to remove or reduce obstacles which get in the way of every communities

voice being heard. Underpinning this approach are our five cooperative council principles. These are:

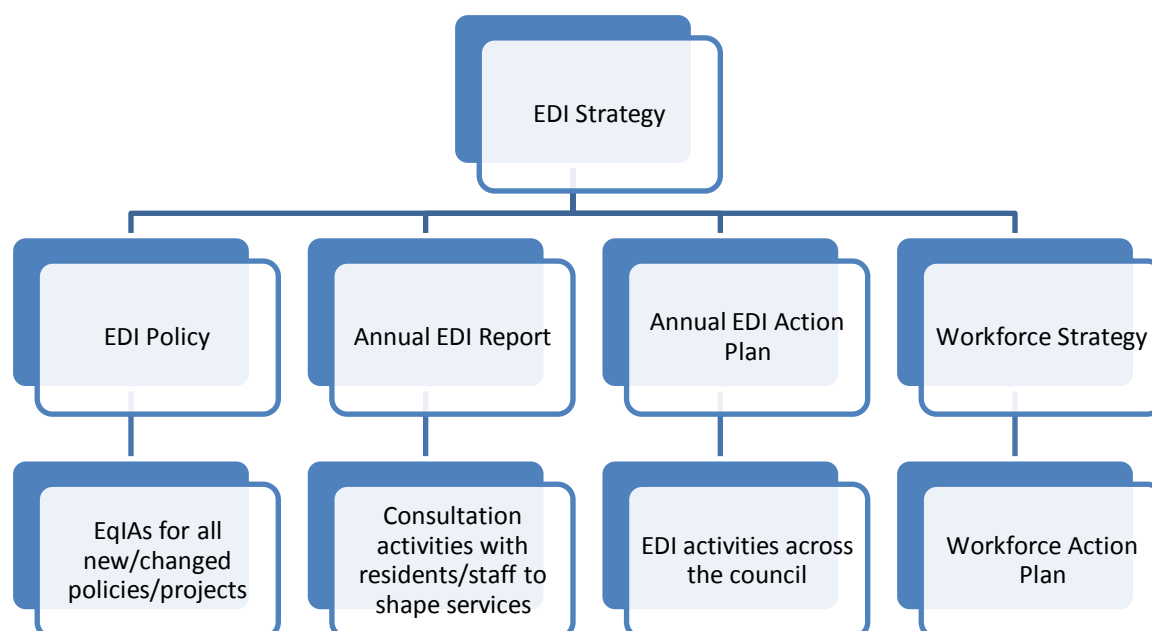
- The council as a strong community leader
- Working together with the community and other agencies to provide services based on needs
- Communities empowered to design and deliver services and play a role in their local community
- A clear understanding between the council and our communities – this is what we do, this is what we will help you to do
- Joined-up and accessible services that offer value for money and focus on the customer.

Following consultation with residents, local community groups and staff we understand that we need to focus on deeds not words, and as such we are committed to the implementation of an annual EDI Action Plan to achieve the aims of our EDI objectives. Throughout the development of the Action Plan we will continue to undertake effective engagement through the application of our Community Engagement Framework, this will ensure that local residents, groups and staff voices are reflected in the actions we take.



Our Commitment...

To advance equality, diversity and inclusion across our services and workforce we will deliver the following:



To ensure effective monitoring, each of our EDI Policy objectives is aligned with one of the four performance themes of the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) 2021. The deliverables within the annual EDI Action Plan will be aligned with the Achieving Level criteria associated with an EFLG theme. The council will provide an update on progress against the theme criteria requirements on a regular basis and this will be published on our website.

Collective Responsibility...

We recognise that equality, diversity and inclusion is the responsibility of everyone and to be successful we need a collective effort to realise our vision. The following sets out the roles and responsibilities of those who will be central to delivering our objectives.

Lead Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Councillor ... A named Councillor will have specific responsibility for equality and diversity and will champion inclusive practices and be held accountable for delivery of actions.

Equality & Diversity Governance Group ... will monitor progress against equality and diversity objectives and the actions within the annual Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Action Plan.

Our Communities ... are vital to the delivery of our objectives and central to our overall vision. Everyone in our community has their role to play in shaping and delivering inclusion, helping us to identify inequalities and working with us to reduce or remove barriers.

Our Partners ...will help us identify inequalities and provide feedback on how we can continue to reduce or remove barriers in the community, as well as identify collective actions to improve outcomes.

Our Employees ... will ensure that where there is any change in service, a new policy or project, effective consultation is undertaken and the potential impacts on different people reported and acted upon.

Officer Equalities Group ... a cross-council officer group that meets regularly to identify and report on progress against the council's EDI Action Plan. This includes workforce, service delivery and community relation activities.

Senior Officers ... will drive the delivery of our equality, diversity and inclusion agenda. A member of the Council's Strategic Leadership Team will be our **Equalities Champion** and will be responsible for promoting good practice on equality, diversity and inclusion; championing the timely use of Equality Impact Assessments across all services and help improve visibility of the council's equality, diversity and inclusion activities.

Reference and Resources

Annual Equality and Diversity Report (Stevenage Borough Council)

<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-the-council/equality-and-diversity/our-community-and-council>

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 (Stevenage Borough Council)

<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/about-the-council/future-town-future-council/corporate-plan-future-town-future-council.pdf>

Equality Framework for Local Government (Local Government Association)

<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Equality Framework For Local Government 2020.pdf>

Our Cooperative Commitment (Stevenage Borough Council)

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

Population Estimates and Live Births (Office for National Statistics)

<https://reports.instantatlas.com/210af72b-a860-49d2-b808-e5aa74bd110f>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/datasets/birthcharacteristicsinenglandandwales>

Appendix 1 – Contributions

As part of the consultation exercise we contacted 103 voluntary, community and social enterprise groups using a mix of direct email, telephone and face to face meetings between December 2021 and February 2022. We also promoted the survey to residents and staff via a variety of social media platforms and our own intranet. We are committed to maintaining an ongoing dialogue with all local residents and community groups about our approach to EDI, and we will continue to use the feedback obtained as part of this survey to inform and shape our EDI activities within the annual EDI Action Plan.

We would like to thank everybody for their contribution and their willingness to either meet with us or provide their responses online. This includes:

Age Concern (Stevenage)

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community (Stevenage North Branch)

Baha'i Faith Group

Bandley Hill Play Centre

BeMe (Black Ethnic Minority Empowerment)

Citizens Advice Bureau

Grace Community Church

Haven First

Irish Network

Junction 7 Creative

Longmeadow Evangelical Church

Pin Green Play Centre

Stevenage Family Support Services

St. Hugh and St John's Church

St. Nicholas Play Centre

Stevenage Equalities Commission