



# EDI Action Plan 2023/24 Progress Report

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## 1. Background

### 1.1 Public Sector Equality Duty

Under the Equality Act (2010) local councils have a legal duty to fulfil the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). As a result, Stevenage Borough Council is committed to carrying out its functions through this duty in a way that:

- Removes discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is unlawful under the Equality Act (2010).
- Promotes equal opportunities and encourages good relations between people who have a protected characteristic(s) and those who don't.
- Further the council's fulfilment of the Equality Act (2010), as set out in the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Policy (2022) and Reasonable Adjustment Policy (2024).

To action these commitments, the council reaffirmed its intention to:

- Publish of a series of clear equality objectives every year.
- Annually publish equality information relating to people with protected characteristics (employees, services users, and residents), including workforce gender pay gap information.
- Complete and publish Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) whenever there is a new or revised policy, procedure, function, or service.
- Build upon the 'Inclusion and Wellbeing' theme of the Workforce Strategy: Future Town Future People (2020-2023) and further engagement with staff to nurture a progressive, inclusive safe and healthy working environment.

The EDI Strategy also set out the council's ambitions to go beyond these requirements through implementing an annual EDI Action Plan which would bring together all strands of EDI work across existing council strategies, services, and programmes. The intention would be to establish a clear link between the council's ongoing and planned policy objectives and projects between July 2023 and June 2024.

This report reflects upon and summarises the achievements of Stevenage Borough Council's EDI Action Plan throughout 2023/2024 (Appendix A).

### 1.2 The Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) Self-Assessment

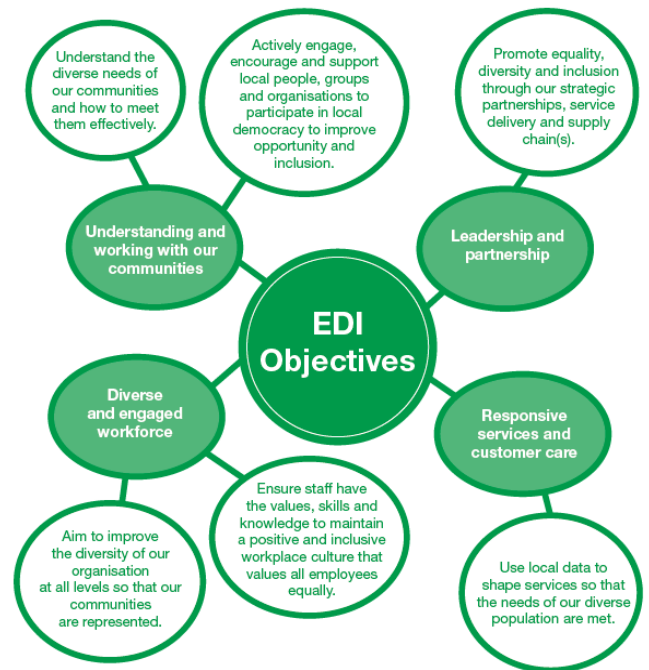
The key to mapping out the council's existing projects and programmes was the self-assessment of council EDI activity against the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG). The purpose of the EFLG is to help organisations review and improve performance against 'Developing', 'Achieving' and 'Excellent' criteria. The council had previously assessed itself against the 'Achieving' level. According to EFLG criteria, there are four modules, 17 themes and 121 criteria in total. The green bubbles in the image below display the four key modules of the EFLG. Each of the council's EDI policy objectives (white bubbles) are then aligned with a module.

The Officers undertaking the self-assessment were required to provide specific examples of existing or future activities against modules and themes within the framework over a period of 10 weeks.

The outcome of the ELFG work indicated that whilst the council comfortably continue to fulfil the 'Achieving' level criteria, there were two areas they could develop further:

- The review of Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) as part of the service planning cycle to inform decision-making and the wider understanding of existing and future community needs.
- The extent to which the council's procured services inform and help to uphold and implement its equality objectives.

Both of the above activities would be delivered through existing corporate functions and explored further through the proposed EDI Action Plan.



## 2. Consultation and Monitoring

The EDI Action Plan was originally shared for comment with Officers and Members of the Equality & Diversity Governance Group (EDGG) and the Officer Equality Group (OEG). Both groups were very positive about the areas of focus and welcomed the identification of existing projects and programmes to help demonstrate work across EDI.

In order to ensure that the proposed actions were meaningful to local people and their communities, attendees at the Stevenage International Day 2023 were also consulted on their views and were given the opportunity to flag any emerging inequality issues for consideration. The majority of respondents could not identify any inequality issues outside of the areas described. For those that could, these were linked to services outside of the council's control, such as Special Educational Needs provision in schools. Overall, respondents felt that the activities identified in the EDI Action Plan had the right focus and breadth.

## 3. EDI Action Plan 2023-24

The EDI Action Plan 2023-24 consisted of 15 actions that each aligned with one of the council's six policy objectives, as listed below and in Appendix A:

- 1) We will understand the diverse needs of our communities and how to meet them effectively.
- 2) We will actively engage, encourage, and support local people, groups, and organisations to participate in local democracy to improve opportunity and inclusion.
- 3) We will promote equality, diversity and inclusion through strategic partnerships, service delivery and supply chain(s).
- 4) We will use local data to shape services so that the needs of our diverse population are met.
- 5) We aim to improve the diversity of our organisation at all levels so that our communities are represented.

- 6) We are committed to ensuring our staff have the values, skills, and knowledge to maintain a positive and inclusive workplace culture that values all employees equally.

The council has made significant progress under these six objectives in advancing equality across the community and its workforce through the implementation of the EDI Action Plan.

15 actions sit within the six objectives and cover a variety of projects and programmes. Teams provided quarterly updates on the development of each of them throughout the year. These updates were then cascaded to OEG and EDGG on a quarterly basis to ensure ongoing monitoring and consultation. These updates are summarised in the following report:

### **3.1 Objective 1: The Council will understand the diverse needs of Stevenage's communities and how to meet them effectively.**

- 3.1.1 Action 1a: Community Safety – 'The Council will continue to foster good community relations and social cohesion through the Community Safety Strategy programme of work'

*Team:* Housing & Neighbourhoods

The council's So Safe Community Safety Strategy programme of work seeks to understand the needs of the community through its close partnership working. Over the past year, this project has grown into the Deprivation Project that highlights the concerns and links with deprivation and domestic abuse. Comparing data from demographic areas and socio-economic backgrounds, this project consults the community whilst also working co-operatively with partners and residents to promote the reporting of crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB). They have five key objectives:

- 1) Divert young people from becoming involved in crime and ASB.
- 2) Provide safe reporting and support to domestic abuse survivors and victims of modern slavery.
- 3) Promote reporting of hate crime and further promote equality in the community.
- 4) Tackle the harms caused by drugs and alcohol.
- 5) Work with partners to encourage reporting of crime and address perceptions of crime.

To embody these aims and objectives, the main focus has been to ensure the voice of the customer is embedded within their actions. To do this, activities this year have included closely working with Hertfordshire Constabulary on a variety of projects. For instance, collaborating on reviewing and improving the service offered to victims of domestic abuse by the police and at their own refuge. Community Safety Officers, alongside partners, have also talked to customers at street meets and during 'The Big Knock' at the Tower blocks to capture opinions on crime, ASB, and community safety. Further, the implementation of a cuckooing protocol to help support some of their most vulnerable clients has also been a highlight of So Safe's collaboration with the police. This protocol has subsequently helped to plot the addresses of victims, assess their vulnerabilities and offer targeted support.

Targeted support has included tackling drug-associated crime in Bedwell through the Clear Hold Build project under the umbrella of Build a Better Bedwell, exploring the links between deprivation and domestic abuse within St Nicholas. A total of 14 sessions held in Secondary Schools across Stevenage on gang violence and County Lines have been supported. They actively work with young people and their families through the No More Service to encourage involvement in new hobbies such as fishing instead of ASB.

Further funding has been secured to host sessions in primary schools to focus on peer pressure, and capturing the “Voice of the Child” more as part of the Safeguarding Action Plan for 2024/25. Due to the ongoing nature of this programme, this action will carry over into next year’s EDI Action Plan for 2024/25 too.

- 3.1.2 Action 1b: EqlA Service Plan Monitoring – ‘The Council will review its approach to how the Equality Impact Assessments through Service Plans are monitored, and how the information is used to inform decision making and the wider understanding of existing and future community needs’.

*Team*: Corporate Policy & Performance

Highlighted as being a key area for development within the EFLG self-assessment, this action was added to this EDI Action Plan to formally commit the council to reviewing its approach to Service Plan monitoring of Equality Impact Assessments (EqlAs).

An EqlA helps us to evidence, understand and mitigate the impact that the council’s decisions might have on different types of people. As part of the council’s approach to understanding the diverse needs of the community, equality objectives are already integrated into service plans across the organisation, with progress towards them managed by key decision makers. This progress is then used to inform decision-making, and steps taken if any deficiencies are identified.

Service Planning was already underway before the creation of this action plan, with each business unit’s schedule for EqlA’s was set out in their Service Plans. This information would then be used to inform EqlA workload planning for 2024/25 including how it would be used to further inform decision-making and potential areas of crossover.

Once the first drafts of Service Plans were approved by ADs, work with ADs and Managers began to refine the content. Once this work was completed, the review was then made available to Equality Officers to map out their workload for the coming year. After all Service Plans were reviewed, a total of 46 EqlAs were identified and provided Officers with a greater understanding of existing and future community needs.

Going forward, these Service Plans will be utilised alongside the Equalities Inbox to monitor the receipt of EqlAs throughout the year. The completion of EqlAs alongside any new policies, strategies, or service changes will also be encouraged through senior leaders, linking into Action 6b. As a result this action will continue into next year’s EDI Action Plan, with a greater focus on the ongoing monitoring of EqlAs through Service Plans and through the Officer Equality Group (OEG).

- 3.1.3 Action 1c: SEC Legacy Group – ‘The Council will continue to champion the work of the Stevenage Equalities Commission (SEC) through the facilitation of the SEC Legacy Group. The Legacy Group will work with partners for 12 months to deliver meaningful change in response to the initial findings of the SEC.’

*Team*: Community Development

The SEC was set up in April 2021 following a motion carried by the council to address racial disparity in Stevenage and to assess the nature, extent, and impact of racism in the town. The

recommendations of the SEC indicated that further work with partners was needed to identify next steps and opportunities for joint working. The SEC Legacy Group was facilitated by the council for 12-month period and a Legacy Group Action Plan introduced to set out the main activities of the group.

Over the past three years, the Commission has attended many events including International Day, Health Action Day, and Stevenage Day, to support communities and provide a point of contact for individuals that want to be involved or want to share their lived experiences. Commissioners have also worked with many other equality-driven groups across the town such as Stevenage World Forum and Junction 7 Creatives to achieve this.

The creation of the SEC Legacy Group was to continue to deliver a year-long programme of targeted events. These events included webinars on relevant topics including education, civic leadership, criminal justice; a “Sounds of the New Town” Art and Culture project; a community conference on health and wellbeing; and the development of a virtual community resource library to be launched at International Day 2024.

The Chair, Errol John, is also a member of Hertfordshire Equalities Board and works closely with the NHS and Mental Health Services in the County to provide support and opportunities for community members. Through external funding, secretariat support for SEC has been provided by the council.

Following a brief break in activities due to the May 2024 local elections, focus groups reformed and SEC confirmed they were working towards monitoring ongoing recommendations, compiling up-to-date data, and creating a road map for the delivery of the remaining recommendations. This also included beginning planning for their very first conference that will be held in the Gordon Craig Theatre in October 2024 to coincide with Black History Month and Hate Crime Awareness Week.

Between the next financial year, SEC also confirmed they will be investing in marketing, social media, webinars, and website development to encourage members of ethnically diverse communities to engage in a variety of topics over a range of platforms and encourage legacy group participation. They will also be aiming to develop SEC into a multi-stakeholder cooperative that will then enable the commission to seek out its own funding and establish itself as a community resource and advocate for members of ethnically diverse communities.

This action will continue into next year’s EDI Action Plan to gain consistent updates on the great work carried out by the SEC.

### **3.2 Objective 2: The Council will actively engage, encourage, and support local people, groups, and organisations to participate in local democracy to improve opportunity and inclusion.**

#### **3.2.1 Action 2a: Housing Management Forum – ‘The Council will strengthen the voice of tenants and leaseholders, including consideration of people’s differing needs, through the development and implementation of a Housing Management Forum’**

*Team:* Housing Management

A new approach to Resident and Tenant Engagement was approved in the July meeting of the Stevenage Borough Council Cabinet. This approach was implemented to encourage the

council's tenants and leaseholders to raise issues and provide challenge to housing policy and procedural changes in a set environment. As part of this, agency for protected characteristic groups was promoted.

The working model for the future of tenant engagement and scrutiny has a focus on tenants being given a wider array of opportunities that aim to capture tenant needs and perspectives, representative of the full tenant base. This information would then be collated and reported into the Executive Housing Working Group.

To support the deployment of the model the growth of the customer pool via a recruitment drive was prioritised, working collaboratively with TPAS. Developing the customer pool involved capturing individual preferences and key tenant profile information to ensure a representative tenant voice, and capturing full tenant profiling data to build a better picture of their full tenant base to understand what a representative voice looks like as currently EDI data such as ethnicity, preferred language, accessibility, religion/belief etc. is not consistently recorded.

To ensure tenant demographics were known to fully understand their differing needs, the Tenant Perception Survey collected responses throughout 2023/24 from a survey base of over 1000 tenants. The results were then discussed with Heads of Services and within team meetings. The notable specific EDI findings of this survey were:

- Satisfaction was higher amongst male tenants than female tenants.
- Satisfaction was higher amongst older tenants aged 65+ and lowest satisfaction was recorded by those aged 25 and under.
- Satisfaction was higher than average amongst tenants from mixed or multiple ethnic groups, Black, African or Caribbean ethnic groups, and 'other' ethnic groups. However, it was lower than average amongst White, Asian those who 'would prefer not to declare' their specific ethnic group.

However, it should be noted that leaseholders were not included in this exercise as this activity was aligned with the council's new regulatory responsibilities that did not extend to leaseholders. As a result, considerations for how best to capture the leaseholder voice will be explored further next year.

A customer facing Resident Engagement Framework was also drafted, which is hoped will generate interest amongst tenants to get more involved in the council's decision making. Further, the Building Safety Engagement Pilot concluded that residents of the council's high rise flat blocks, showed a preference for more informal methods of engagement such as surveys or pop-up events, rather than attending workshops. This is intelligence that will be acted on to capture the information needed to adopt the council's Building Safety Engagement Strategy required by law.

Following initial work on this action, a change in the council's approach to how they wish to strengthen the voice of tenants and leaseholders was made. They commissioned TPAS to develop an improved Resident Engagement Framework with a heavier focus on capturing the broader tenant voice to influence decision making. This approach is in line with best practice and was regarded as a more effective way of ensuring that the tenant voice is reflective of the full tenant base, as it is relied on to drive change and improvements to the council's services.

Finally, a Fair Access workstream was developed within Housing Transformation to build on the Reasonable Adjustment Policy and strengthen the tenant voice. The Fair Access Policy is intended to make the council's services more accessible for all tenants and leaseholders.

This action will continue into next year's EDI Action Plan, with a revision to reflect the implementation of the Resident Engagement Framework instead, as well as extensive work to capture tenant profiles and preferences.

3.2.2 Action 2b: Digital Engagement – 'Digital engagement through the Cooperative Neighbourhoods programme of work (e.g., Proptech funding) will help shape the approach to the development of local community plans and provide opportunities for people, including those who share protected characteristics, to participate in local democracy'.

*Team:* Community Development

The Cooperative Neighbourhoods programme of digital engagement practices are vital in helping shape local community plans. As part of this, protected characteristic groups are specifically targeted within engagement activities to ensure all aspects of the community are represented. As a result, this action sought to track how this analysis is utilised to inform project, policy, and infrastructure spending at a local level, alongside the Resident and Tenant Survey findings.

This engagement cycle first began with Novoville to support the council's Co-operative Neighbourhoods Engagement activities, where they gained over 1,700 resident responses. These responses were then utilised to help build Community Plans to highlight resident priorities at a local level and resulted in the allocation of £275,000 in spending throughout both 2023/24 and 2024/25. As part of ongoing engagement activities, the impact of this investment will be captured alongside the ongoing commitment to understanding resident priorities.

Initial funding finished in October 2022, however the council sought to continue this engagement cycle throughout 23/24. As a result, Co-operative Neighbourhoods programme set the goal of increasing their resident responses from 1,700 to 4,000 by March 2025. Residents were asked open, qualitative questions through which they are able to share their priorities through a mix of physical and digital exercises. They were asked specifically asked demographic information to help identify who they were engaging with, tracking age and gender, as well as noting area response rates to actively target their physical engagement in areas where there was a lower response rate.

These responses were then thematically analysed into 89 different categories down to a ward level and compared with the 2021 Residents Survey. A total of 3,500 resident priorities shared throughout the town were gained, with some responses covering the theme of EDI such as suggestions on how to improve inclusivity for those in the LGBTQ+ and ethnic minority groups. These findings were then shared with ward members through the Co-operative Neighbourhoods programme, as well as the council's commitment to make this an ongoing yearly engagement cycle.

As of mid-April 2024 the programme was paused due to the pre-election period but was planned to reopen following local elections in May. Despite this, the target of 4,000 total responses by March 2025 remained on track, with over 50% completed by June 2024.



This action will continue into next year's EDI Action Plan to gain regular updates on the digital engagement cycle carried out by the Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme.

- 3.2.3 Action 2c: Civic Leadership Programme 'The Council and its partners will work together to establish a Civic Leadership Programme that targets and provides support for underrepresented communities who are interested in political representation and standing for public roles.'

*Team*: Community Development

Targeting underrepresented communities who are interested in standing for public roles through a Civic Leadership Programme was an initiative put forward as part of SEC discussions. The commission includes membership from local Borough Councillors, County Councillors, and former Councillors, and this was a proposal that received widespread support.

The SEC legacy group confirmed they will be working with the council to deliver two webinars on civil leadership as part of their 12-month programme of events. They were also scoping the possibility for an externally funded information session for elected members on unconscious bias to be delivered by members of the SEC legacy group in the new year.

They also outlined that they would work with Operation Black Vote to explore best practice methods for providing opportunities for mentoring and shadowing with elected members to encourage participation in civic responsibility. Discussions have so far included what support and guidance is available, and a desire for an audit/needs analysis of the requirements of the town and its communities prior to committing any significant financial costs. Following the local elections in May 2024, SEC put forward their intention to action the findings. The commissioners then began working on the facilitation a civic responsibility programme in partnership with elected members. Funding detailed in Action 1C for information sharing and resource development is earmarked for this. However, due to the extent of the funding required for some of the programmes, further work will be conducted to look at collaboration opportunities across the county.

This action will continue into next year's EDI Action Plan to document the proposed implementation of the Civic Leadership Programme by the SEC.

### **3.3 Objective 3: The Council will promote equality, diversity and inclusion through strategic partnerships, service delivery and supply chains**

- 3.3.1 Action 3a: Social Value Procurement – 'The Council will review the extent to which its procured services inform and help to uphold and implement its equality objectives'

*Team*: Corporate Procurement

The Social Value Portal has been a great way for the council to understand the themes, outcomes and measures of community needs. Identified in response to the self-assessment against the EFLG best practice framework, this action sought to track EFLG's equality outcomes of monitoring and reporting on commissioned and procured services. These EDI social measures would include monitoring improved opportunities for disadvantaged people;

improved employability of young people; and initiatives throughout the supply chain to identify and manage the risk of modern slavery.

Social Value project procured goods and services were reported to come to the value of over £2 million for Supply Chain Partners and SMEs within 20 miles of the site, representing a Social Return on Investment of £3.98m, 46% of the project's total spend. Hertfordshire-based Supply Chain Partners and SME's accounted for £1,747,938,72 of spend; a Social Return On Investment of £2.14m; 24% of the project's total spend. The Willmott Dixon Project Team undertook and were involved in activities that have supported Stevenage Schools/North Herts College, Herts Homeless and the DWP. These activities represent a Social Return on Investment of £114,168.04, giving a total SRoI of 629%.

This action will continue into next year's EDI Action Plan as it is an EFLG requirement. However, due to the lack of consistent updates received by the team and business unit, this will need to be prioritised and monitored at a more senior level to ensure continued progress is made.

3.3.2 Action 3b: Healthy Stevenage – 'Through its Healthy Stevenage Partnership, the Council will continue to promote activities and events that reduce health inequalities and improve the health and wellbeing of Stevenage residents.'

*Team:* Culture, Wellbeing and Leisure Services

The Healthy Stevenage Partnership fosters collaboration amongst partners to improve health, promote wellbeing, and reduce health-based inequalities locally. This project demonstrates how the council can effectively utilise partnerships to help shape future activities.

This partnership first began when the University of Hertfordshire concluded that communities residing in areas of high deprivation were more likely to face barriers and challenges when accessing healthcare or social care settings, as well as being more likely to face poorer outcomes when it comes to prevention, detection, and treatment of health conditions. As a result, they established an Applied Research Collaboration for East of England to support socio-economically disadvantaged communities. They sought to identify, address, and improve health inequalities faced by communities living in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas across the region, with Stevenage being one of their key populations of focus.

They aimed to achieve their aims/goals through working with partners, Local Authorities, patient-led organisations, and charities. Therefore, the Healthy Stevenage Partnership within Stevenage Borough Council was born to address this finding at a local level, as well as encourage public engagement and active participation in the research process itself.

Quarterly meetings have been held as part of the Healthy Stevenage Partnership over the past year with 42 partner organisations in attendance. The key updates from these meetings have included Everyone Active providing a comprehensive overview of their health and wellbeing services and programmes delivered through their Healthy Hub, Herts Mind Network's ongoing Crisis Café operations, and Applied Research Collaboration's extension of their research initiatives in October 2023.

In February 2024, updates covered the council achieving Dementia Friendly Community Status, the collaboration between Stevenage and the Countywide walking programme to

expand the current walk programme, an overview of Stevenage FC Foundation's 8-week cooking initiative called the Community Kitchen that offers families the chance to learn budget-friendly healthy meal preparation, and Herts Sports & Physical Activity Partnership's Live Longer Better campaign that's designed to use various activities to promote longer, healthier, and happier lives for Hertfordshire residents.

Most recently, April 2024 updates included the rebrand of the previous Stevenage Careline Alarm Service to Care Connect 24/7, Everyone Active Young combining the People's Healthy Hub with the Adult Healthy Hub to give a better offer to all Stevenage residents, Citizens Advice providing key statistics on the wider issues that may impact health for residents, and the development of a revised Healthy Stevenage Strategy by the council.

In addition to these specific updates, the partnership has explored the possibility of joining the UK Network for Age-Friendly Communities, aiming to further support the aging population in Stevenage. Progress on the revised Healthy Stevenage Strategy had also commenced, with consultation with NHS and Hertfordshire Public Health helping to inform the direction of the strategy.

The Council is in the process of renewing the Healthy Stevenage Strategy and the partnership will continue to play a vital role in that development and delivery. Consultation with partners will take place following the General Election in July 2024. As a result, this action will continue into next year's EDI Action Plan to gain consistent updates on the great work carried out by the Healthy Stevenage Partnership.

### **3.4 Objective 4: The Council will use local data to shape services so that the needs of the diverse population are met**

3.4.1 Action 4a: The Equality & Diversity Annual Report – 'The Council will publish the Equality & Diversity Report 2022/2023 and use the information it contains to help shape its services so that the needs of the diverse population are met'

*Team: Corporate Policy & Performance*

As part of the Council's Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), the council is committed to annually publishing equality information relating to people with protected characteristics, this is achieved through the Equality and Diversity Annual Report. Published in last few months of the year, this annual report utilises the most recent Census data, alongside other key data sources, to outline key demographic information about the residents of Stevenage. This information is then used to help shape the council's services, programmes and projects so they reflect the changing needs of the community.

This year the report specifically includes the Office for National Statistics' 2021 Census Stevenage, Hertfordshire and England data. It also contained new sections on Gender Identity, Maternity, Education, and Skills, as well as a new 'Highlights of 2022/23' section demonstrating EDI activities the council had accomplished that year.

A few of the key highlights of the report included a 6.6% population growth; Stevenage has a younger (15-64yrs) resident population than Hertfordshire and England (64.6% vs. 63.9% and 63% in Hertfordshire and England, respectively); employment rate increased (61.7% to 62.2%); increase in residents gaining degrees (22.1% to 29.6%); and as Stevenage is at the

heart of the Golden Research Triangle, the Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM) industry employs the highest rate of Stevenage residents (16.9%).

Following senior leader approval and a presentation given to members at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2023, the report was shared on the internal intranet, external internet, and at tier 4 managers meeting for dissemination.

Due to the Equality & Diversity report being published annually, this action will continue into next year's EDI Action Plan and has also been captured in the team's Service Plan 24/25.

3.4.2 Action 4b: Gender Pay Gap – 'The Council will publish the Gender Pay Gap report 2022 and use it to inform its findings to inform its review of the Workforce Strategy and gender pay parity in the workforce'

*Team:* Human Resources & Organisational Development

The council is committed to annually publishing their Gender Pay Gap report as part of their PSED, and using the findings of the to further inform its continuing focus on inclusive recruitment and retention practices as part of the wider Workforce Strategy.

In line with the financial year ending, analysis conducted in March 2024. It indicated that the council has a downward trend of 3.73 for 2023, compared to 4.23 in 2022. The results were also compared to the ONS survey, calculated for each quartile and in line with guidance published by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service and the Government Equalities Office. The findings were shared with senior leaders and were published publicly on International Women's Day (8<sup>th</sup> March) on the Data Transparency webpage on the external website. This year's report demonstrates a continued improving trend, and insights from this will feed into Workforce Strategy development.

As it is an annual requirement for the council to publish their gender pay gap, this action will be again included in next year's EDI Action Plan.

3.4.3 Action 4c: Workforce Data – 'The Council will continue to review its workforce data and explore opportunities to collate specific ethnicity data that can help identify and address key issues.'

*Team:* Human Resources & Organisational Development

This action was added in response to a discussion at a SEC meeting which suggested that there was a significant absence of local data on ethnicity trends. The council then committed to exploring opportunities to collate specific ethnicity data upon review of their workforce data. However, recording of this data is currently not a statutory requirement, nor is there national guidance. The council currently report workforce data on other protected characteristics, but as it not mandatory for staff to self-report their ethnicity, greater understanding is required of the council's data capabilities.

As a result, HR set out a year-long timeframe involving a data cleanse, specialised investment in system changes, and liaising with key officers to determine what information could be extracted, what data would be required, and what options were available to build a report to track progression/development opportunities internally.

The council's commitment to introducing ethnicity pay gap recording is also in line with the council's pledge to instigate UNISON's Anti-Racism charter. Whilst the majority of charter's commitments are already demonstrated within the council's existing EDI activities, they encourage the introduction of ethnicity pay gap reporting. As a result, the council has publicly committed to implementing this within an action in the council's Gender Pay Gap report, through UNISON's Anti-Racism charter, and through this EDI Action Plan. This action will therefore continue into next year's EDI action plan to ensure this is explored further.

### **3.5 Objective 5: The Council aims to improve its diversity as organisation at all levels to be representative of the communities it serves.**

3.5.1 Action 5a: Build upon the ambitions of the Workforce Strategy – 'As part of its planned review of the Workforce Strategy (2020-23) the Council, informed as well by the findings of the 2022 recruitment audit and national best practice guidance, will continue to develop its response to improving the diversity of the organisation.'

*Team:* Human Resources & Organisational Development

The council committed to continuing to build upon its ambitions of the Inclusion and Wellbeing Theme of the Workforce Strategy: Future Town Future People (2020-2023). This would be achieved by using the findings of the recruitment audit in 2022 to inform targeted action around career development and retention strategies for under-represented groups. It had been running for a year when added to this EDI Action Plan so HR already had a full years' worth of extracted recruitment data to inform the review of the Workforce Strategy.

The analysis process of the recruitment audit was broken down through the ATS system provided the five stages of recruitment from April 2022-2023, this covers Application, Shortlist, Interview, Offered and Rejected. Protected characteristic data on ethnicity, disability, religion, birth gender, gender identity and sexual orientation is then outlined for each stage. However, it should be noted that a number of candidates do not complete all equality opportunities questions and this therefore affects the reliability of any analysis completed.

The recruitment audit alongside workforce demographics were then compared with the 2021 Census data, which reaffirmed that as an organisation the Council are largely reflective of the community it serves. Additionally, and in line with action 4C, further work was identified as being needed to capture the ethnicity of the current workforce in line with governance. As a result, the Workforce Strategy 2024-27 is set to go to September Cabinet with Diversity and Inclusion as a key theme identified within this for the next three years.

In next year's EDI Action Plan, this action will be revised to cover the development of the Diversity and Inclusion theme in 2024-27 Workforce Strategy. More details on this are given in section four of this report.

### **3.6 Objective 6: The Council is committed to ensuring staff have the values, skills, and knowledge to maintain a positive and inclusive workplace culture that values all employees equally.**

3.6.1 Action 6a: Review EDI E-learning Modules – ‘The Council will review the equality induction eLearning package and introduce an updated module on equality, diversity and inclusion’

*Team:* Human Resources & Organisational Development

To increase staff knowledge of equality, diversity and inclusion, the council committed to reviewing the equality induction eLearning package and introduce an updated module on protected characteristics. By reviewing learning, the council aimed to build upon the current training package, ensuring staff had clear expectations of inclusivity ambitions.

After updating the mandatory iLearn equality and diversity training alongside the dignity at work module, this training was considered not all encompassing of what the council would hope it would include, so to enhance understanding amongst the workforce HR stated their intention to carry out comprehensive face-to-face training throughout the year.

As a result, a series of awareness sessions were held amongst operatives that were designed to prompt a shift in mindset, encouraging operatives to reflect on the impact of seemingly harmless banter, nicknames, and derogatory terms. Video content, tailored to the council’s diverse audience and incorporating relatable contexts like football, served as a powerful medium to drive this message home as well as poignant questions such as, "How would you feel if sexist remarks were directed at your daughter, wife, or partner?" A total of 111 operatives over a period of 6 weeks were trained. The impact of these sessions will continue to be monitored through drop-in sessions and creating safe spaces for people to come forward to report any issues relating to the subjects discussed.

Seeking to embed EDI principles in the fabric of the workplace culture, HR also created their very own the "Game of Equalities." This innovative board game engaged teams in discussions around real-life EDI scenarios. The game reinforced positive behaviours whilst also instilling a sense of healthy competition, thereby promoting a workplace where equality is not just a concept but a lived experience. The game received excellent feedback such as “the course was really thought provoking”, “it was fun and inclusive and a great way to learn about scenario’s they had maybe never encountered before”.

HR additionally recognised the need for targeted education, so conducted specialised training for the management team on navigating conversations about menopause. This training was delivered by experts from “Hen Picked”, and equipped leaders with the confidence and tools needed to support female team members during this life stage. They also have plans to expand further on the session by training menopause champions across the council over the next six months, as well as teaming up with Unison to enable us to supply free sustainable & ethical sanitary products across both Cavendish and Daneshill sites for a period of two years, with support from a company called TOTM.

This action will not carry over into next year’s action plan due to the planned review of the EDI e-learning modules being completed. However, engagement with staff through ongoing training sessions will continue to be monitored through the OEG.

3.6.2 Action 6b: EqlA Toolkit Review and Training – ‘The Council will review the EqlA Toolkit and provide updated guidance and training to business units, as well as exploring the addition of an independent review process for EqlAs going forward.’

*Team*: Corporate Policy & Performance

The council continues to provide guidance to staff on the EqlA process, but this action specifically outlined the requirement for a review of the EqlA Toolkit and the publication of updated guidance and training to staff. The introduction of EqlA monitoring as part of Service Plan reporting was proposed to allow the Council to plan EqlA workload and improve how it supported staff through the process. The independent review aspect of this action was added in response to discussions with members of the SEC.

This EqlA review began in February 2024 and was completed by April 2024. The review of the EqlA Toolkit was subsequently approved by senior leaders alongside the planned EDI Policy review, and were all encouraged to promote the completion of EqlAs more widely going forward and to consider all of the protected characteristics in every piece of work they produce. The independent 'critical friend' review offering was consistently offered throughout the year, and would be supported, going forward, with enhanced greater independent review through officers attending OEG. Additionally, a schedule for publishing EqlAs on the website was also agreed. The new EqlA template and associated guidance toolkit was also advertised on the intranet to ensure the wider dissemination amongst staff.

This action will not carry over into next year's action plan due to the planned review of the EqlA toolkit being completed and ongoing completion of EqlAs will be monitored as part of Action 1B within this EDI Action Plan next year.

3.6.3 Action 6c: Champion Workshops – ‘The Council will work with the Officer Equality Group (OEG) to develop individual-led ‘Champion’ workshops that focus on particular EDI subjects. The purpose of the events will be to share understanding and raise awareness.’

*Team*: Human Resources & Organisational Development

The council committed to working with the OEG to develop focused workshops on particular EDI subjects to raise awareness and understanding of each topic. The council also agreed, in partnership with the OEG, to facilitate discussions on Health, Gender Pay Gap, Gender Bias and Work/Life Balance. This was also informed by the findings of the Spring 2023 Inclusion Survey.

A pivotal aspect of the council's EDI programme involved the establishment of networks and safe spaces for its employees. For example, the creation of a Women's Networking Group this past year has offered a platform for discussions on topics such as women's health and imposter syndrome. Further, a LGBTQ+ networking group was recently established to offer a supportive environment to colleagues. This is also the first year the council has adopted a Pride theme for its annual Stevenage Day, as Stevenage has the third highest LGBTQ+ community in Hertfordshire.

Additionally, an Officer Equality Group (OEG) comprised of officers from different business units convenes monthly to discuss equality matters and chart a course forward. This group,

chaired by a senior leadership team member, actively works towards identifying champions for various equality subjects. For example, a Ramadan Workshop was recently held during OEG and resulted in increased attendance from colleagues across the council and . An events calendar had now been established as the awareness grows, they plan to expand the networking groups/champion workshops into different subjects.

A dynamic and inclusive intranet has served as a vital platform for the council's ongoing initiatives too. Regularly published articles, strategically timed during key dates such as Pride Month, Ramadan, and Disability Pride, contribute to fostering empathy and understanding internally. These articles provide insights into diverse perspectives, creating a culture where inclusivity is not only acknowledged but celebrated. A series of officer blogs and training sessions were also posted throughout the year to raise awareness including on Neurodiversity, Passover, Easter and Mental Health Awareness, as well as webinars on Autism and LGBTQ+ Awareness in the Workplace from external speakers to coincide with Neurodiversity Awareness Month and Pride Month. There is also a dedicated EDI intranet page that's designed to store all EDI information including individual stories, educational blogs, toolkits & policies.

The council also continued to host a range of equality-driven events in 2023-24, a number of which were held at the council's Event Island. These included an Older People's Network event and Barrio Fiesta, whereby the Stevenage Filipino community showcased Filipino cuisine and performances with support from the Mayor of Stevenage Cllr Myla Arceno and Ambassador Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. from the Philippine Embassy. Local community centre events such as Bedwell Community Group Spring Event also celebrated the religious event of Easter using Local Community Budgets. The council's annual Stevenage Day also celebrated the cultural diversity of Stevenage in 2023 with a dedicated World Music Stage featuring music and performances from a wide range of cultures alongside over 200 stall holders.

This action will carry over into next year's EDI action plan to continue to monitor the occurrence of EDI champion-led workshops at part of the OEG.



## 4. EDI Action Plan 2024/25

- 4.1 To ensure that the revised version of the EDI Action Plan still included actions that were meaningful to local people and their communities, residents were consulted on their views and were given the opportunity to flag any emerging inequality issues for consideration.
- 4.2 Consultation was held for two weeks between 15<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> July 2024, and was delayed as well as the timeframe it was active reduced due to the pre-election period before the General Election on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2024.
- 4.3 The survey was disseminated to the general public through social media posts on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), during community groups such as the Stevenage Equalities Commission, and internally through the intranet to Officers during the Officer Equality Group (OEG) and to Members within the Social Inclusion Partnership and the Equality and Diversity Governance Group (EDGG) to disseminate to staff contacts and clients. Respondents were given the opportunity to respond online or in-person via a printed copy of the questions. Enhancing consultation efforts with residents has remained a key focus for the council and a future engagement plan is currently under development to ensure the priorities of the community are reflected across the council's services.
- 4.4 A total of 18 responses were gained, with the majority of respondents (61%) agreeing with all proposed actions and made some of the following comments:
- “This action plan is good”
  - “I feel the action plan has everything in place”
  - “The action plan looks manageable and feasible”
  - “Good to see the council does so much on equality”
  - “I agree with [the] aims of the council on this subject”
  - “This action plan covers a lot and I look forward to seeing it all carried out”
  - “Excellent approach and being involved in the Unison Anti Racism charter... working towards representing the community through workforce data at all levels”
- 4.5 For the respondents that thought more could be done to advance EDI within the council (39%), their concerns focussed upon engagement activities and ensuring any planned activities occur both digitally and through in-person events to ensure those who are unable to access online services are not excluded. Respondents who were also SBC employees additionally emphasised their desire to see increased promotion of this action plan internally from managers to staff too.
- 4.6 The EDI Action Plan was also shared for comment with Officers and Members of the EDGG and OEG. Both groups were very positive about the areas of focus and welcomed the identification of existing projects and programmes to help demonstrate work across EDI. Two additional actions were added following these meetings, they cover actioning the results of the 2024 All Staff Pulse Survey to advance inclusion and wellbeing amongst staff, and the council's ongoing collaboration and partnership with Sir Lewis Hamilton's charity Mission 44.

- 4.7 Following the consultation feedback, the draft EDI Action Plan 24/25 has undergone a thorough review and will include a combination of existing programmes of work and newly introduced workstreams. As a result, the overarching six equality objectives will remain in place and will do so until 2027 when they are scheduled for review. Until then, 18 actions are proposed across the six objectives for 2024/25.
- 4.8 12 of these actions will carry over from the 2023/24 EDI Action Plan, these cover the Community Safety SoSafe Strategy, EqIAs, SEC activities, resident engagement, procurement, Healthy Stevenage Partnership, and equality data reporting. Further details on these can be found in section three of this report.
- 4.9 The following three actions were not carried over due to all being standalone reviews that were completed within 2023/24:

5a: As part of its planned review of the Workforce Strategy (2020-23) the Council, in response to the findings of the 2022 recruitment audit and national best practice guidance, will continue to develop its response to improving the diversity of the organisation.

6a: The Council will review the equality induction eLearning package and introduce an updated module on equality, diversity, and inclusion, and explore opportunities for further equalities training.

6b: The Council will review the EqIA Toolkit and provide updated guidance and training to business units, as well as exploring the addition of an independent review process for EqIAs going forward.

Further details on the completion of these actions can be found in section three of this report.

- 4.10 Five new actions are proposed for next year's EDI Action Plan 24-25. These are detailed below:

3c: Through the Council's ongoing partnership with Mission 44, the council will provide opportunities for young people to engage with STEM Education and careers, with a particular focus on those who are facing social injustice. This is linked to the councils wider commitments around Enterprise & Skills which is focused on ensuring that Stevenage residents are able to make the most of the opportunities on their doorstep.

5a: Through the Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan, the council has committed to the cross-cutting theme of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. This will encourage staff to consider the impact on equalities when designing and delivering services.

5b: Following Cabinet approval of the Workforce Strategy 2024-27, the council will have committed to the inclusion of Diversity and Inclusion as a key theme and will use this to continue to develop its response to improving the diversity of the organisation.

6b: The council will support the creation of an LGBTQ+ staff network group to ensure an inclusive workplace through encouraging discussions, events, and initiatives that promote awareness and understanding.

6c: The council will explore the possibility of establishing a Neurodiversity staff network group to ensure an inclusive workplace is in place and informed by discussions, events, and initiatives that promote awareness and understanding.

6d: The council will continue to promote a positive and inclusive workplace culture, and following the results of the 2024 All Staff Pulse Survey, will develop specific corporate actions to advance inclusion and wellbeing amongst staff.

4.11 A complete draft EDI Action Plan for 2024/25 can be found at Appendix B.

## 5. Appendices

- A. [EDI Action Plan 23/24](#)
- B. [EDI Action Plan 24/25](#)

### Table of Abbreviations

ASB	Anti-Social Behaviour
EDGG	Equality and Diversity Governance Group
EDI	Equality Diversity and Inclusion
EFLG	Equality Framework for Local Government
EqIA	Equalities Impact Assessment
OEG	Officer Equality Group
PSED	Public Sector Equality Duty
SEC	Stevenage Equalities Commission
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics