

REPORT OF THE CABINET

D. LEICESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S EQUALITY STRATEGY 2020-24 AND EQUALITY ACTION PLAN 2020-2021

Introduction

1. This report sets out the outcome of the consultation on the revised Equality Strategy 2020-24 and seek approval for the Strategy and the first annual Action Plan.

Background

2. The Equality Act sets out three core duties for public bodies and the County Council is required to produce an Equality Strategy to evidence how it is meeting these core duties. The Equalities Strategy is part of County Council Policy Framework.
3. Under the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) Regulations 2011, local authorities must also:
 - Prepare and publish one or more objectives they think they should achieve to do any of the things mentioned in the aims of the general equality duty, by 6 April 2012, and at least every four years thereafter (by April 2020)
 - Ensure that those objectives are specific and measurable
 - Publish those objectives in such a manner that they are accessible to the public.
4. The Council is required to produce an Equality Strategy to demonstrate how it is meeting its statutory duties regarding equality and diversity. The current Equality Strategy was approved by the County Council in June 2016.

Draft Equality Strategy 2020-2024

5. The revised Equality Strategy 2020-24, which is appended to this report at Appendix A, provides a policy context for the Council's activity around equality, diversity, community cohesion and human rights. It sets out how the Council will meet its legislative duty and the intention to develop equal and fair decision-making processes, policies and services for all employees and residents. It reflects developments and progress over the course of the previous strategy as well as setting out key aims for future equality-related work.
6. The two aims of the draft Equality Strategy were:

- a) Leicestershire County Council will continue to be recognised for its leadership and high performance in advancing equality of opportunity and celebrating diversity and inclusion; and
 - b) The Council wants Leicestershire to be a place where there is equality of opportunity and good relations with and within its communities
7. The Strategy will be reviewed and refreshed in line with the Council's statutory duty to periodically prepare and publish one or more equality objectives. When the County Council is presented with the final Equality Strategy 2020-24, it will also be asked to approve the 2020-21 Action Plan. Future Action plans will be developed and implemented by the Chief Executive, following consultation with the Lead Member for Equalities, using existing delegated powers which enables chief officers of the County Council to make amendments to plans previously agreed by members in order to ensure they remain current and fit for purpose.
 8. A draft Equality Action Plan 2020-21, appended to the report as Appendix B, has been developed to support the first year of the Equality Strategy 2020-24. It sets out the primary actions, responsibilities and timescales for each of the proposed equality objectives that are led at corporate level by the relevant services. The final plan informs, and will be supplemented by, departmental actions plans which will reflect more bespoke equalities work and priorities.
 9. The annual action plans enable progress to be monitored regularly and work adjusted as necessary in the light of changing circumstances. This progress will be reported to the Cabinet and Scrutiny Commission.

Consultation and engagement on a refreshed Equality Strategy for 2020-24

10. The draft Equality Strategy 2020-24 was the subject of a 12-week consultation exercise which took place between 11th November 2019 to 2nd February 2020. A questionnaire was available to respondents online through the 'Have Your Say' consultation pages on the Council's main website, accompanied by the draft Equality Strategy 2020-24 document and an 'easy read' version of the draft Strategy and consultation questionnaire. There was also a link on the Council's 'Have Your Say' consultation pages to a British Sign Language Video explaining the main aims of the draft Equality Strategy 2020-24. All the documents (draft Strategy, easy read version and consultation questionnaire) were available in different formats and languages upon request.
11. In addition, face-to-face meetings and presentations were arranged with a range for interested groups. These included Age UK, the Gypsy and Traveller Engagement Project, Healthwatch, the Leicester LGBT Centre, Voluntary Action Leicestershire, the County Youth Council for Leicestershire and the Leicestershire Partnership Trust.
12. Similar engagement took place with communities of interest / practice within the Council including young people's services, the local area coordinators, the

Learning Disabilities Partnership Board, all departmental senior management teams and local equalities groups and Trade Union equalities representatives who were encouraged to promote the consultation within their membership.

13. Representative and umbrella groups directly notified by email to take part in the consultation included the Leicester Shire Equalities Forum, Leicestershire Equalities Challenge Group (LECG), Leicestershire Inter Faith Forum, voluntary and community sector organisations, town and parish councils, and local and national charitable bodies representing disability and other protected characteristic groups.
14. The consultation was promoted on social media through the Council's main Twitter and Facebook feeds whilst internally the consultation was promoted to all staff and County Councillors through appropriate communication channels including from chief officers and the Council's Equalities Board and Departmental Equality Groups.

Consultation Response

15. There were 213 responses to the consultation comprising 210 responses to the online questionnaire and three 'easy read' responses posted as hard copies to the Freepost facility provided. Of these, 67% (142 people) responded in the role of an employee of Leicestershire County Council, 23% (48) responded as a member of the public, 3% (7) as a representative of a voluntary sector organisation, charity or community group, 2% (5) as a representative of a business, 2% (5) as a councillor at any level, while 2% (4) chose 'Other' including a supplier of services to the council, a former employee and an academy student. A report detailing the consultation findings is appended to this report at Appendix C. A summary is given below.

Aims

16. Participants were generally supportive of the aims and direction of the new Strategy in relation to the financial circumstances that the Council now operates in compared to four years ago. Respondents emphasised the importance of the council considering accessibility issues as services' digital presence increased, recognising that a 'one size fits all' technological solution was not always appropriate. Responses also iterated the need to do more to remove barriers to stigmatised or stereotyped groups; and strengthening awareness amongst service providers of their responsibilities regarding equality and diversity.
17. In reference to the first aim which stated that the Council would continue to be recognised for its leadership and high performance in advancing equality of opportunity, some respondents interpreted the wording to imply that the Council was more concerned with the appearance of working towards equality outcomes rather than delivering them, while other respondents questioned by what standards the Council wished to be recognised.

18. Several respondents suggested that the second aim should go further than stating that “The council wants” to make a more positive commitment to equality of opportunity and good relations with and within the community.

Objectives

19. The consultation also sought views on five proposed equality objectives:
- a) The council will improve our understanding of the people we serve to make informed, evidence-based decisions which deliver the best outcomes for all;
 - b) The council will foster good relations with and within our communities, inform and involve our citizens to increase participation, particularly of under-represented groups;
 - c) The council will deliver inclusive and responsive services to improve equality of outcomes and satisfaction amongst the people we serve;
 - d) The council will show leadership, work with others and celebrate and promote our success;
 - e) The council will develop a skilled and committed workforce that reflects our communities.
20. Three-quarters of all respondents supported these objectives, however some of the respondents raised a number of issues and queried the meaning of the questions, including the practical effect of the strategy and objectives (especially against a backdrop of funding and resourcing pressures) on citizens, service users and members of specific protected characteristic group, how progress and outcomes would be measured and communicated.
21. Respondents were also asked to offer suggestions on other relevant equality objectives or workstreams that the Council should consider. Reassuringly, a significant number of responses reinforced areas and issues that the Council are already aware of or working towards including in future action plans:
- a) Reviewing specific policies and practices to ensure that they effectively support employees in a range of circumstances;
 - b) The promotion, operation and visibility of the Workers’ Groups;
 - c) The use of other forms of equality and staff satisfaction benchmarking;
 - d) Follow-up analysis of workforce data both for the established target groups and under or unrepresented groups (for example, to identify secondary forms of discrimination);
 - e) Providing new or improved interventions for particular conditions or types of disadvantage;
 - f) Clearer and simpler communication and information provision;
 - g) More emphasis on celebrating diversity and community cohesion;
 - h) More inclusive and accessible engagement and consultation by the Council.

22. A small number of general comments were received on the presentation of the draft Equality Strategy 2020-24 document, mostly in relation to a need to include more detail about actions and progress against past strategies to show that the Council's equalities work is ongoing and effective.

Comments of the Scrutiny Commission

23. The draft Equality Strategy 2020-24 and outline Equality Action Plan 2020-21 was considered by the Scrutiny Commission on 11th March. A full minute from the meeting is included as Appendix D.
24. The Strategy and Action Plan were generally well received and there were some compliments and several positive comments on the Council's ongoing commitment, reputation and approach to equality and diversity.
25. The Commission suggested some specific changes to the draft Strategy, including increased reference to the County Council's Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Network, consideration of the way in which people with a disability were referred to in the document and the responsibility of everyone under the Human Rights Act to respect the rights of others. Amendments have been made to the final version of the Strategy in line with these comments.

Changes made to the Equality Strategy 2020-24 as a result of the consultation

26. The Draft Equality Strategy has been amended in light of the consultation responses. Amendments include changes to the Strategy's two aims which now read:
- a) Leicestershire County Council has high levels of leadership and works to continually improve its performance in advancing equality of opportunity and celebrating diversity and inclusion through its operations.
 - b) Leicestershire is a place where there is equality of opportunity and good relations with and within its communities
27. Two of the objectives have also been slightly revised (to reflect the responses that called for the council to be more open to all, especially those individuals the council must work harder to reach and for the council to encourage other organisations to follow its lead on equalities.
28. The two revised objectives are:
- a) The council will foster good relations with and within our communities, inform and involve our citizens to increase participation across all groups, addressing barriers to participation of under-represented groups;
 - b) The council will show leadership for equality, work with others and celebrate and promote success.

Equality Action Plan 2020-21

29. The Equality Action Plan sets out the primary actions, responsibilities and timescales for each of the proposed equality objectives that are led at corporate level by the relevant services.
30. The Plan reflects the five key issues that have emerged through progress under previous action plans, the public consultation, internal and external stakeholder engagement and other planning processes. A copy of the 2020-21 Action Plan is appended to the report as Appendix B. In summary the five key issues are:

Improving equalities evidence and its application

Build on progress already made, ensuring the available evidence is used more often and more consistently across the organisation. Updating the Council's Equality Monitoring Policy is a key element of this approach.

BAME staff progression

Workforce representation trends, Staff Survey results and consultation responses indicate a need to review the pathways and opportunities for BAME staff to progress within the Council.

Equality and Human Rights Assessments (EHRIA)

Work to improve the Council's processes, template and information to guide decision makers when completing EHRIAs will be undertaken.

Accessible Information

A review of current practice and recommendations for new policy and guidance on making information accessible to everyone is included in the 2020-21 Action Plan.

Leadership and celebrating success

Throughout the engagement and consultation, comments reinforced the importance of celebrating diversity, championing equality and promoting acceptance and inclusion through strong leadership and highly visible communications and campaigns. This is a key area of work that needs to be included in every action plan for the 2020-24 period.

Equality and Human Rights Implications

31. An Equality and Human Rights Assessment screening was undertaken which concluded that a full EHRIA was not required as it is anticipated that the Equality Strategy will have a positive effect as its purpose is to ensure that the Council fulfils its general and specific duties under the various equalities legislation and meets the requirements to provide a consistent and coherent approach to achieving equality and diversity for each of the protected characteristics.

Resource Implications

32. The Strategy will be progressed utilising existing resources and therefore no additional expenditure is required

Consideration by the Cabinet

33. The Cabinet on 28th April considered the revised Strategy and Action Plan and its decision is set out in the motion below.

Motion to be moved:-

That the Equality Strategy 2020 -2024 and Equality Action Plan 2020- 2021 be approved.

Background Papers

Leicestershire County Council Equality Strategy 2016-20

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/field/pdf/2017/1/30/equality-strategy2016-2020.pdf>

Equality and Human Rights Commission 'The Essential Guide to the Public Sector Equality Duty'

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/essential-guide-public-sector-equality-duty>

Appendices

Appendix A: Leicestershire County Council Equality Strategy 2020-24

Appendix B: Equality Action Plan 2020-21

Appendix C: Draft Equality Strategy 2020-24 Consultation Findings Report

Appendix D: Comments from the Scrutiny Commission and response thereto.

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