

Equalities Objectives and Action Plan – Update

Final Decision-Maker	Policy and Resources Committee
Lead Head of Service	Angela Woodhouse, Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
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Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the current Equalities Objectives and Action Plan. The action plan was revised in 2020 in response to COVID-19 and the challenges faced in tackling disadvantage in Maidstone.

This report is for discussion and noting.

Purpose of Report

To note the progress update to be taken to Committee.

This report makes the following recommendations:

1. To note the progress on the Equalities Objectives and Action Plan update at appendix 1 to the report.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
CLT	5 October 2021
Policy and Resources Committee	20 October 2021

Equalities Objectives and Action Plan – Update

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place <p>Accepting the recommendations will materially improve the Council’s ability to achieve all 4 strategic priorities.</p>	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is Respected <p>The report recommendations support the achievements of ‘Heritage is Respected’, ‘Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced’ and ‘Deprivation and Social Mobility are Improved’ cross cutting objectives by proposing actions which support their delivery.</p>	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Risk Management	Please refer to paragraph 5.1 in the report.	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Financial	All of the proposals set out in the recommendations are within approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation.	Section 151 Officer & Finance Team
Staffing	We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing.	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance

Legal	Accepting the recommendations will fulfil the Council's duties under the Public Sector Equalities Duty. Failure to accept the recommendations without agreeing suitable alternatives may place the Council in breach of Equality Act 2010.	Legal Team
Privacy and Data Protection	Accepting the recommendations will increase the volume of data held by the Council. We will process data in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018.	Corporate Insight, Communications and Governance Team
Equalities	Reviewing and reporting on the progress of the Equalities Objectives and Action Plan.	Equalities and Communities Officer
Public Health	We recognise that the recommendations will have a positive impact on population health or that of individuals.	Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	No impact identified.	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance
Procurement	No impact identified.	Head of Policy, Communications and Governance

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Equalities Policy was approved by Committee in 2017, setting out the Council's commitments under the Equalities Act 2010 and the way in which it will fulfil the Public Sector Equality Duty. The Objectives and Action Plan are monitored, reviewed, and reported on, on an annual basis. There have been no recent legislative changes, therefore the Policy does not require review.
- 2.2 The objectives and action plan that support delivery of the Policy were reviewed in 2020. Greater context was provided on the Council's responsibilities and the actions were aligned with the roles and objectives in 2020. This approach provides greater transparency for how the Council meets its Public Sector Equality Duty.
- 2.3 The Council has three clear roles which frame the objectives: Community Leader, Employer and Service Provider.

- 2.4 The framework helps to provide transparency and understanding on the Council's approach. It is important that staff understand how the work that they do contributes to the delivery of these objectives and in relation to the organisational aims set out in the Strategic Plan.
- 2.5 The actions detailed in the action plan reflect current workstreams or areas where development was required in services across the Council.
- 2.6 The actions have been closely monitored over the course of the past year and this report (and appendix) provide an update on what has been achieved.
- 2.7 The way in which the Council supports and engages with its communities has strengthened in the past year. The Council's Recovery and Renewal Strategy underpins this commitment and includes a specific Communities workstream to be delivered. It is important that this Strategy is referenced with the action plan.

Update on actions

- 2.8 COVID-19 restrictions have impacted the way in which we deliver our services and engage with residents. Whilst significant progress has been made against the actions set, there are areas that require renewed focus and improvement. A complete update on all actions can be found at appendix 1.
- 2.9 The Council has adapted well to the challenges of the last year and a commitment can be seen across all three roles and objectives. It is important that it remains focused on understanding the needs of its communities to be in a position to respond to their needs.
- 2.10 The Council's response to the pandemic has led to a strengthening of its relationships with the Community and Voluntary Sector and with Parish Councils. There has been extensive public and staff consultation during the past year, some of which has been business as usual but there has also been an increased need to understand the impact of the pandemic on its communities, businesses and staff to inform decision making. Positive progress has been made and this includes:
- The Development of a Community Group Repository which has facilitated wider engagement with Communities.
 - Creation of a single point of contact for Community Groups and Parishes at the Council. This offer includes a dedicated email address for the Voluntary and Community Sector and Parish Councils.
 - The provision of funding via the Winter Grants Scheme, administered by the Community Hub.

- There were a total of 23 consultations completed in 2020/21; 14 were external resident or stakeholder surveys and 9 were internal staff or Member surveys. There have been 15 consultations for 2021/22 to date.
- Support for staff working at home has adapted with learning and development delivered online. This has included regular sessions focused on mental health and well-being. This is in addition to the Employment Assistance Programme and Mental Health First Aiders already in place.
- Rough Sleeping initiative implemented to provide mental health outreach provided by the Housing team. The scheme has been a success and has been extended to March 2022.
- Access to Services Member Review. Members have had 6 meetings covering the Website Accessibility, Online Services, Digital Inclusion and Communication and Engagement. The review is at a learning and evidence gathering stage, however a number recommendations have already been made to support digital accessibility via the Council's website and vulnerable groups affected by digital inclusion. These included recommendations to support Councillors' understanding and use of digital services, a digital process on the website for users to report issues or seek assistance and advice with online accessibility, a review of the Community Group Repository provided by Involve and an agreed process to review and maintain the repository on quarterly basis to ensure it is fit for purpose and a commitment by the group to support Digital Inclusion as workstreams develop in this area. This includes the reuse of ICT equipment to support the digitally excluded. An [update report](#) was taken to CHE Committee in April 2021.

2.11 The past year has been challenging and the Council's resources have been stretched with Officers having to support other service areas in order to respond to the needs of residents and businesses. It was not only the Council that was affected, partner organisations and the Community and Voluntary Sector were also impacted heavily. There are therefore areas within the action plan which are less developed. This is reflected in the action plan. Progress is noted in Appendix 1 but where it has not been feasible, the planned actions for the coming months are highlighted in the column 'next steps'. This includes:

- Compassionate Borough Status. The Council agreed to work with Heart of Kent Hospice on a legacy to the Elmer trail. This has been delayed by a year. Work on this project has recently restarted with Council Officers working with the Hospice to form a steering group for the project. In the interim the Heart of Kent Hospice and Council recognised the achievements of the Community via the Compassionate Maidstone Awards.
- An Equalities Officer Group has been formed to create join up across key areas through shared learning and the development of shared resources. The scope of the group has been limited as work around public engagement and events has not been possible and are areas where its expertise are valued.

- A shared diversity calendar aligning events from services across the Council is planned but work has not been completed.

Looking Forward

- 2.12 The Council's commitment to the Armed Force Covenant is referenced within the Action Plan. The Equalities Armed Forces Bill 2021 is likely to bring changes that will need to be reflected in work on the Equalities Impact Assessments and guidance. It is recommended that due regard to this is embedded in current progress including the EqIA. Progress will be noted as part the action plan monitoring.
- 2.13 Further changes to the Equalities Objectives and Action Plan are not recommended as whilst some progress has been made the actions, the workstreams remain relevant and ongoing.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 3.1 Note the Equalities Objectives and Action Plan and continue to monitor the actions set to enable the organisation to continue to improve on the way in which it fulfils the Public Sector Equalities Duty.
- 3.2 Do nothing. This course of action is not recommended because it has a statutory duty under the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- 3.3 Revise the Equalities Objectives and Action Plan. This course of action is not recommended because actions and supporting recommendations remain relevant and ongoing.

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 To note the progress made on objectives and actions as detailed in Appendix 1.

5. RISK

- 5.1 The Council has a statutory responsibility under the Public Sector Equality Duty to report its progress on annual basis. The Equalities Objectives and Action Plan were agreed by Committee in 2020. No changes are recommended.
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6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

6.1 None.

7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

7.1 The action plan will continue to be monitored by the Equalities and Communities Officer.

8. REPORT APPENDICES

- Appendix 1: Progress Update on the actions included in the Equalities Objective and Action Plan 2017-21
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