

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY PROGRESS REPORT 2020

REPORT OF: HEAD OF REGULATORY SERVICES
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Wards Affected: All
Key Decision: No
Report to: Scrutiny Committee for Community, Customer Services and Service Delivery
Date of meeting 24th March 2021

Purpose of Report

1. This report provides Members with an update on progress in 2020 against the Council's Equality and Diversity Scheme 2020 – 2024.

Recommendations

2. **The Scrutiny Committee is requested to endorse the Council's approach to meeting its duties under the Equality Act, as evidenced by the Equality and Diversity Progress Report 2020 included at Appendix 1.**
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Background

3. The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on the Council to publish an annual report setting out progress against their Equality and Diversity Scheme. The Council's Equality and Diversity Scheme 2020 – 2024 was approved by Council on 22 July 2020 and it was agreed that annual reports on progress should be provided to this Committee.
4. The Council's Equality and Diversity Scheme has been shaped by the Equality Act 2010, which introduced a number of responsibilities for councils, including a public sector equality duty and a requirement to promote equality of opportunity between those with "protected characteristics" and others. The public sector equality duty means that the Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to:
 - Eliminating unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act
 - Advancing equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not
 - Fostering good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The nine protected characteristics are:

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

The Act also introduced specific duties for public bodies to publish Equality Objectives and equality data to show their compliance with the duty.

5. The Council continues to mainstream its equalities work with our customer service activities, recognising that meeting the needs of individual customers for Council services is consistent with good equalities practice. In addition to considering the needs of those with protected characteristics, our equalities work looks at disadvantage arising from income or skill level and by virtue of where people live.
6. The Equality and Diversity Scheme also covers the Council's work in relation to the Armed Forces Community Covenant to support those who have served in the Armed Forces and their families. The Covenant and achievement of the Bronze Employer Recognition Scheme award shapes the Council's work to support the armed forces community.
7. The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the Council's work to support the protected groups in 2020. The pandemic has especially affected BAME groups, older people who have been most physically at risk from the virus and young people who have had their education disrupted and suffered particular mental health issues arising from the lockdown.
8. Social distancing and lockdown measures have also necessitated changes to how the Council has been able to deliver its support to protected groups. Example include but are not limited to:
 - (a) the Council's Wellbeing Team have been unable to deliver face-to-face interventions and have had to move to a telephone and virtual service.
 - (b) The Wellbeing Team were mobilised as part of the Community Hub to provide support to those in the District who were "shielding".
 - (c) A different delivery model was utilised for the Councils Silver Sundays events to address issues of loneliness in older people.
9. Much of the Council's work to support the protected groups in Mid Sussex involves working with community groups and voluntary organisations. The provision of grants to support the voluntary sector are especially important, given that many CVS organisations face a reduction in their financial resources due to the pandemic, while demand for the services they provide is rising.

Progress Report 2020

10. The Annual Report for 2020 is included at Appendix 1 and sets out progress against the Council's Equality Objectives. Particular areas of progress include:
 - Continuing to use our Grants Schemes to provide for organisations that support vulnerable people.
 - Provision of the £300k Covid Grants Fund Scheme to support community groups and voluntary organisations affected by the pandemic.
 - Working with Citizens Advice to establish a Community Champions Network to engage with local minority communities to improve access to support, information and services linked to Covid.
 - Supporting young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs) through initiatives such as the NEETs Forum and YMCA Positive Placements mentoring scheme.

- Providing a programme of Play Days at Home during school holidays to replace the usual series of Play Days events
- Alternative provision for Silver Sunday, which is intended to mitigate the problem of loneliness amongst older people, saw the Council working with Age UK and Befriended to identify older people who would benefit from a personal treat of an afternoon tea delivered to their home.
- Provision of a new format for the Falls Prevention Programme for older people to improve their strength and mobility in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, through virtual classes and telephone support.
- Investment in our property assets and working to provide facilities with improved accessibility through the new Council Chamber.
- Signing up to the national Citizens Advice Good Practice Protocol and the Council's Revenues team putting people struggling to pay their Council Tax in touch with the Money & Pensions Service, who provide free independent debt advice.

11. The Annual Report provides examples of work that has been done over the past year to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on some of the most disadvantaged members of our community. It concludes that overall good progress has been made in meeting our duties and highlights further initiatives to be developed in the year ahead.

12. In addition to service developments for those with protected characteristics, the progress report comprises information about the composition of the Council's staff with regard to age, ethnicity, disability and gender. This includes the Council's gender pay gap and related information, which is required to be published under the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties and Public Authorities) Regulations 2017.

13. Members are asked to consider the Annual Report and advise whether there are any areas of the Council's Equality and Diversity activity that require further emphasis.

Policy Context

14. The Annual Report demonstrates progress against the Council's Equality Objectives. The delivery of these objectives will make a major contribution to the priorities set out in the Corporate Plan.

Other Options Considered

15. The report updates on progress to the Equality and Diversity Scheme, which is designed to set out a programme to meet the Council's statutory requirements under the Equality Act. No other practicable options were identified.

Financial Implications

16. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

Risk Management Implications

17. The Progress Report helps the Council to continue to demonstrate that it is meeting the public sector equalities duty under the Equality Act and to avoid the risks associated with non-compliance.

Equalities and Customer Services Implications

18. Customer service and ensuring equality of access are of continuing importance, especially with regard to meeting the needs of those who are vulnerable or may find it difficult to access our services. The report sets out steps to meet the needs of vulnerable groups and refers to the Council's programme of impact assessments, which are designed to promote equality and to identify and address the barriers that may prevent people accessing its services.

Other Material Implications

19. None.

Background Papers

20. None.