

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 21 March 2018

Wards:

Subject: Progress report on implementation of the Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy 2017-21.

Lead officer: Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration

Lead member: Councillor Edith Macauley, Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Equalities and Engagement

Contact officer: Evereth Willis, Equality and Community Cohesion Officer

Recommendations:

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1. That Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission note and comment on the progress made on the implementation of the Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy 2017-21.
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. To provide the Overview and Scrutiny Commission with a progress report on the implementation of the Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy 2017-21.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. The Equality Act 2010 introduced the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires the local authority, when exercising its functions, to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between persons who share a “protected characteristic” and those who do not. “Protected characteristics” are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
- 2.2. The Equality Act 2010 also requires the council to publish equality objectives every four years to demonstrate how it will meet the PSED. The Equality Strategy outlines the Council’s ‘Equality Objectives’ as the following six themes:
 - a. To ensure key plans and strategies narrow the gap between different communities in the borough;
 - b. Improve equality of access to services for disadvantaged groups;
 - c. Ensure regeneration plans increase the opportunity for all Merton’s residents to fulfil their educational, health and economic potential, participate in the renewal of the borough and create a health promoting environment;
 - d. Promoting a safe, healthy and cohesive borough where communities get on well together ;

- e. Encourage recruitment from all sections of the community , actively promote staff development and career progression opportunities and embed equalities across the organisation;
 - f. Fulfil our statutory duties and ensure protected groups are effectively engaged when we change our services.
- 2.3. The objectives aim to narrow the gap in outcomes between residents, in particular between the East and West of the borough. A cross-departmental approach has been taken to deliver some of the commitments such as Hate Crime and Domestic Violence.
- 2.4. Council approved the Equality Strategy 2017-21 in March 2017. The strategy is a four-year strategy that sets out what we will do to tackle discrimination and inequality and promote equal opportunities and community cohesion in Merton.
- 2.5. The accompanying action plan sets out the actions we will take to meet our equality priorities both corporately and departmentally.
- 2.6. The activity in the action plan is closely linked to the council's performance framework as commitments are aligned with departmental service plans. This will ensure the strategy is embedded in service plans across the council to ensure effective implementation. The aim is to set smart targets and, where no baseline information exists, improving data collection and analysis will itself become a target.
- 2.7. Departments are currently reviewing Service Plans and Target Operating Models (TOMs) and these will inform the action plan's priorities in early Autumn 2018.

Progress on the implementation of the strategy

Overall, the update in Appendix 1 shows good progress has been made to implement the commitments in the Equality Strategy, in particular key achievements to note include:

- Good progress has been made on the work to reduce health inequalities in the East of the borough, notably the proposed development of the Wilson Hospital Campus received approval from NHS England in December 2017, and the work with schools and other agencies to successfully deliver the Child Healthy Weight Action Plan 2016-18.
- An increase in library usage by 11-16 year olds from a CR4 postcode.
- A 20% increase of learners enrolled on employability or family learning courses coming from deprived wards in the East of the borough.
- The Local Welfare Support Scheme has provided support to approximately 250 residents, also between April 2017 and December 2017 the Welfare Benefits Advisor has secured over £270,000 in benefits for Merton residents.
- Our schools continue to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups. Provisional outcomes at Key Stage 2 for 2016-17 show that 66% (9% increase on the previous year) of pupils attained the expected standard.
- At Key Stage 4 Merton has the highest Average Progress 8 score in the country.
- Excellent partnership work between the Educational Welfare Service and schools has continued to create a culture of good school attendance. The

recent Ofsted inspection reports highlights that *‘Education Welfare staff are persistent in their tracking of children missing education, an example being undertaking unannounced visits at known addresses. They liaise and share information effectively with other local authorities and within the council, and escalate cases to social care when necessary, overseen by the multi-agency children missing education panel.’*

- As at June 2017, 47% of new requests for Educational Health Care (EHC) plans were completed within 20 weeks, raising to 49% year to date in July. This is an improvement as at the end of 2016-17 where 19% of new requests for EHC plans were completed within 20 weeks.
- Merton’s Stonewall (Workplace Equality Index) rating has improved to 1st in London and 13th out of 39 local authorities who took part across the country. As part of Anti-Bullying Week 2017, a half-day conference took place showcasing students from Ricards Lodge who addressed issues around Transgender inclusion in education.
- During the current financial year the provision of housing advice and assistance has successfully met the target to prevent homelessness in 450 cases. The target will have been exceeded by year end.
- A draft Autism Strategy has been developed and signed off for public engagement 5th Feb-19th March. An action plan for its implementation is being developed during this public engagement period.
- Wimbledon Park station is step free from January 2018 and we are working with transport partners to make all stations step free.
- A review of polling places was undertaken in November 2017 and March 2018 to make sure that all polling stations are accessible ahead of council elections in May 2018.
- A Work Experience Scheme 2018 will shortly be launched with 32 placements being made available to Merton Schools.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1. The Equality Act 2010 requires the council to prepare and publish equality objectives and subsequently at least four-yearly. Failure to do so would mean the Council is not fulfilling its legal obligations and could be subject to legal action.

5 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 5.1. The Joint Consultative Committee with Ethnic Minorities will be given a progress report on the Equality Strategy.

6 TIMETABLE

- 6.1. None.

7 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. Delivery of the Equality and Community Strategy 2017-21 action plan is with in existing resources.

8 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. On 6 April 2011 the Equality Act 2010 introduced the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires the Local Authority, when exercising its functions, to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between persons who share a “protected characteristic” and those who do not. “Protected characteristics” are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
- 8.2. Delivery of the commitments in the Equality Strategy action plan and the publication of an Equality Strategy setting out our equality objectives assists with working to fulfil the Council’s on-going legal obligations relating to equalities legislation.

9 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. By setting out its equalities commitments in the Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy 2017-21 the Council is re-affirming its commitment to human rights, equality and community cohesion.

10 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. There is a risk of increased hate crime activity directed towards certain groups if there is no commitment to eliminate discrimination and harassment.

11 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. There is a risk to the Council’s reputation if it fails to produce and publish equalities objectives. Additionally there is a risk of claims of discrimination based on age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

12 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- Appendix 1 – Progress update of the Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy 2017-21 Action Plan
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13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1. Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy 2017-21.

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