

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 28 April 2021

Wards: All

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

Lead officer: Chis Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration

Lead member: Councillor Marsie Skeete, Cabinet Member for Women and Equalities

Contact officer: Evereth Willis, Equality and Community Cohesion Officer

Recommendations:

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.
 2. That Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission note and comment on the approach to refreshing the Equality and Community Cohesion strategy 2022-26
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

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 and Community Cohesion Strategy, in particular key achievements to note include:

1. Merton Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2024 was agreed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, with a key principle of tackling health inequalities – especially the East/West health divide in the borough that is driven by social inequality and the wider determinants of health.
2. To support the growing number of people including families experiencing food poverty, Merton Community Fridge Network was set up in collaboration with local VCS organisations, Merton Council and London Food Alliance. Led by Merton Council, the Merton Community Fridge Network since the start of pandemic receives food from the London Food Alliance, via UK charity FareShare for redistribution across the borough. Sustainable Merton are now leading the Community Fridge Network.
3. As part of winter grants programme of funding Public Health and Adult Social Care have funded energy efficiency work by Thinking Works, as part of the Borough's 'Warm and Well' scheme. Thinking Works helps vulnerable people save on their energy bills by helping them switch fuel supplier, make cost saving behavioural changes, access grants for heating and insulation, take up benefit checks and reduce debt. Prior to Covid-19 home visits targeted households in the East of the Borough and between February 2019 and December 2020 57% of Thinking Works home visits were in Mitcham.
4. Public Health are working with SW London STP and housing colleagues to improve the health of rough sleepers. Work has included working with housing to make sure all rough sleepers are registered with a GP practice and promoting awareness of and referral routes into commissioned health services such as healthy living, substance misuse and sexual health services.

5. The Connecting Merton project launched via Merton's libraries. The project loans ICT equipment and provides broadband connectivity along with training for vulnerable residents who have limited or no ICT access in their homes.
6. The council has contributed £271k to the Merton Giving Fund to provide small grants to small groups for COVID-19 support. Grants totalling over £400k have been allocated via Merton Giving for a range of projects tackling issues such as food poverty, isolation, mental health, digital exclusion and providing infrastructure support.
7. To date, we have had 591 Merton residents start the Work and Health Programme – Better Working Futures programme and 65% have found employment. As a direct response to COVID-19 the Work and Health programme delivery was moved from face to face engagement to phone calls and online. This seems to be working well as there has been a steady rise in residents entering into employment over the last 6 months.
8. Adult Social Care has continued to develop its performance reporting mechanisms to now include an analysis of safeguarding activity by ethnicity, which will be refreshed on a regular basis and used to inform future commissioning activity as well as helping us to understand where focused work with sectors or individual providers is needed
9. As part of our response to the issues raised by the pandemic we commissioned BAME Voice to undertake research to understand the 'lived experience' of the borough's BAME communities and build resilience and trust. The research findings and recommendations will be published shortly.
10. We are about to launch a new online recruitment and selection course which we will ensure addresses how to avoid unconscious bias in the recruitment process. Managers will be required to refresh this training every 2 years.
11. Mutual mentoring is being introduced and this programme launches in April.
12. Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the impact of Covid was discussed with the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) with Ethnic Minorities and an action plan developed for BLM as part of the Recovery and Modernisation Programme.
13. In 2020 we launched a Hate Crime Third Party Reporting Scheme so that victims can make a report at various reporting centres in the community if they do not feel comfortable reporting directly to the police. This has switched to an over the phone service during the pandemic. Work is ongoing to expand the Third Party Reporting Scheme to more organisations in the community.
14. During the pandemic we have continued to provide support and community services to victims of Domestic Violence. During the year the One Stop Shop has continued to operate virtually. Regular

communications have continued via social media letting people know how and where to report, or where to seek advice.

15. Merton has been awarded £186,000 PHE section 31 grant designed to increase interventions to reduce drug related harm and offending. This funding will be used to support more targeted and intensive support for some of the most prolific drug related offenders in engaging with recovery focused interventions.
16. Wimbledon Park station has planning permission to become step free (managed by TFL). We continue to press SWT to include Motspur Park step free access in their investment plans.
17. Pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans EHCPs have improved their performance in all indicators at all key stages. Whilst there have been some drops in performance for pupils in receipt of SEN support, their performance remains above the national averages for the same group nationally in all indicators, with the exception of writing progress at KS2 which is in line.
18. During the lockdowns, physical attendance at schools was limited to children open to children's social care and/or those with EHCPs. Post lockdown attendance was voluntary and in selected year groups. Some schools also had to close bubbles due to infections. Attendance in all schools was monitored daily throughout the lockdowns and re-opening and schools were supported accordingly. The council put in place robust risk review processes to ensure the attendance of this cohort of children where by all children with a social worker had their attendance reviewed and challenged by a Covid Children Missing Education panel of senior managers. These processes were praised by Ofsted during a focussed visit in October 2020.
19. Despite the challenges, providers of childcare and education for children aged under 5 in Merton have responded well and have met the many demands face-on. 66% of the childcare remained open in the early phase of the pandemic, and there was a loss of 2 nursery providers situated on school sites.
20. Merton has improved from the 12th lowest NEET in England to the 8th lowest. This performance is achieved through daily tracking, targeted key working, holiday activities, Education, Training and Employment workshops, pre-NEET support in Schools, Careers workshops, Work experience programmes and our employability project.
21. All schools are responsible for ensuring that pupils receive remote education should they need to self-isolate. Merton schools have worked hard to develop their remote learning offer, and whilst this has included trying to ensure that all pupils have access to a digital device to be able to access the learning (as appropriate) online, they are very mindful of the need to ensure those pupils who do not have devices can access the learning in other ways (including, of course, though paper copies).
22. To tackle digital exclusion, many schools have devices available for loan to disadvantaged pupils who need them – indeed one secondary

school already has a policy that ensures all pupils have a school device, and some other secondary schools are following suit, introducing devices year by year as pupils come into the school. This is of course dependent on school budgets. We are lucky to have the Wimbledon Dons (and other charities) locally who are also supplying reconditioned devices to schools. The Dons have worked with almost all Merton schools so far, and their plans are to continue to provide devices as and when they become available. In addition, the Government has/had three schemes to enable some disadvantaged pupils to have devices:

- Year 10 scheme – this happened in the summer term of 2020, and all secondary schools had an allocation for their Year 10 students
- Children with a social worker scheme – this took place in summer 2020, allowing the council to allocate to children known to Children’s Social Care
- Current scheme – schools have been able to order devices from the DfE across this year. Merton schools have ordered their full allocation.

The Council has also committed £20,000 to fund devices and Wifi connections for disadvantaged pupils across the Borough.

23. During the first Covid national lockdown school closure period from 23 March 2020 it became clear that children eligible for benefits related Free School Meals (FSM) should receive their entitlement while at home. This was provided through a national voucher scheme that the government temporarily extended to cover the Easter, May half term, and summer holidays 2020. However, the entitlement was not extended to the October 2020 half term. Therefore Merton Council stepped in and provided this entitlement, funding schools to issue a £15 voucher per child for the week.

24. In November 2020 the government launched the Covid Winter Scheme, which was primarily aimed at families with children for support with food costs. This was originally intended for the period up to 31 March but has now been extended to June 2021, and re-branded the Covid Support Scheme. The council has used this funding to provide, through schools, vouchers for all children on FSM during the school holidays. We were also able to extend this to pre-school children for the Christmas and February half terms, and to provide funding to two Local Food banks.

2.7 During 2020/21 in addition to the commitments outlined in the action plan, much of the council’s work has focused on providing targeted support to residents during the pandemic and has involved tackling inequalities. Notably the Covid-19 Community Response Hub Steering group was established to steer the emergency assistance and practical support with Council, CCG and

key voluntary and community partners. The steering group includes small community organisations that provide a food response, information and advice organisations and services to support with wellbeing. This group also oversees the work of the Covid-19 Community Response Hub, commissioned in the voluntary sector. The Hub provides a tiered level of support to people who are vulnerable, isolated or clinically extremely vulnerable.

Next steps

- 2.8 The Equality and Community Cohesion strategy is due to be refreshed and the aim is to launch the revised strategy in April 2022.
- 2.9 The revised strategy will be informed by many of the issues that have been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic and through the BLM protests. The council is about to launch its largest ever engagement programme to hold a conversation with communities, businesses and partners to understand the impact of the Pandemic and what people want from their borough in the future. In particular, the council is looking to build on the community response to the Pandemic and to strengthen and support those communities hardest hit. This engagement work will inform the priorities and actions in the new Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy.
- 2.10 Additionally Merton is a pilot site for the Workforce Race Equality Standard and the recommendations and the learning from this piece of work will also contribute to the revised strategy.
- 2.11 The equality objectives will be aligned with departmental service plans to ensure the equalities commitments and considerations are embedded into the council's day-to-day business.
- 2.12 The draft strategy will be brought to the OSC as part of the consultation process.

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. The OSC will be consulted during the development of the refreshed 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 within 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 and Community Cohesion Strategy’s action plan and the publication of an Equality and Community Cohesion 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

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

13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1 Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy 2017-21.
[HTTPS://WWW2.MERTON.GOV.UK/COUNCIL/PLANSANDPOLICIES/EQUALITY-STRATEGY.HTM](https://www2.merton.gov.uk/council/plansandpolicies/equality-strategy.htm)

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