

## **Somerset West and Taunton Council**

### **Audit, Governance and Standards Committee – 7 September 2020**

### **Equalities & Diversity Update**

**This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member for Communities, Chris Booth**

Report Author: Paul Harding, Strategy Specialist

#### **1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 All public bodies, including the Council, are subject to a specific duty within the Equality Act 2010 (the Act) to prepare and publish equality objectives at least every four years.
- 1.2 The aim of the objectives is to help us better meet the needs of our service users and our staff who are, or could be, disadvantaged or suffer inequality because of their particular characteristics.
- 1.3 For Somerset West and Taunton (SWT), equality objectives were most recently approved in March 2019 by the Shadow Executive for Somerset West and Taunton Council.
- 1.4 On 23 October 2019 the Council's Executive approved a Corporate Equalities Action Plan, with the amendments suggested by the Audit, Governance & Standards Committee at their September 2019 meeting, in order to deliver against these equality objectives.
- 1.5 Progress against the Plan has in some instances been impacted by the disruption caused by Covid19, which has resulted in officer time being diverted to the urgent response needed to the pandemic. It has also impacted the collaborative work and meetings of the Somerset Equality Officers Group, although meetings have now resumed, albeit virtually.
- 1.6 This report provides an update against the Plan and also proposes the creation of a joint officer and member equalities group as a mechanism for providing additional focus on equalities matters.

- 1.7 The agreed Plan is attached at appendix A.
- 1.8 The proposed terms of reference for the proposed joint officer and member equalities group is attached at appendix B.

## 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that the committee:
- Notes the position with regard to the Corporate Equalities Action Plan;
  - Supports the creation of the joint Officer and Member Equalities Group, and
  - Approves the terms or reference of the Group

## 3. Risk Assessment

- 3.1 This equalities action Plan helps the Council comply with the public sector equality duty contained within the Equality Act 2010 and thereby mitigate the financial, social and reputational risks associated with non-compliance. It does not however negate the continual requirement for the council to consider the needs of all individuals who share protected characteristics in our day to day work - in shaping policy, in delivering services, and in how we operate as an employer.

## 4. Background and Full details of the Report

- 4.1 When public bodies, like the Council, carry out their functions, the Equality Act 2010 says they must consciously consider, or think about, the need to do the three things set out below. This is known as the public sector equality duty:
- **eliminate discrimination**, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act;
  - **advance equality of opportunity** between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
  - **foster good relations** between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 4.2 Public authorities also have specific duties under the Act to help them comply with the public sector equality duty. These specific duties include the requirement to prepare and publish equality objectives at least every 4 years.
- 4.3 For Somerset West and Taunton (SWT), equality objectives were most recently approved in March 2019 by the Shadow Executive for Somerset West and Taunton Council.
- 4.4 On 23 October 2019 the Council's Executive approved the Corporate Equalities Action Plan (the Plan), with the amendments suggested by the Audit, Governance & Standards Committee at their September 2019 meeting. The Plan is designed to deliver the agreed objectives.
- 4.5 The Plan contains actions which the Council intend to pursue alone and others

which the Council will pursue collaboratively with the other member of the Somerset Equalities Officer Group (SEOG) of which we are part. The group is made up of representatives from This is a group which is made up of County and the Somerset District Councils, Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group, Taunton Musgrove and Yeovil Hospitals, Somerset Partnership and Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue.

4.6 Progress against the Plan has been impacted by the disruption caused by Covid19, which has resulted in staff's time being diverted to the urgent response needed to the pandemic. It has also impacted the collaborative work and meetings of the Somerset Equality Officers Group, although meetings have now resumed, albeit virtually.

4.7 Some key areas of progress have however been made (numbers in brackets are action references within the Plan):

- Equalities and diversity module of the E-learning tool has been reviewed and revised mandatory training/refresher for staff is underway (1.5 & 4.8);
- Live streaming of Council meetings is in place (2.2);
- Statement of Community Involvement, in relation to how SWT will involve all of the community and stakeholders in the preparation, alteration and review of local planning policy and the consideration of planning applications within the Local Planning Authority area, to ensure the specific needs and concerns of particular groups and individuals are captured and considered has been approved (2.3);
- Accessibility Statement in accord with Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018 was published by the September 2019 deadline and an action plan for SWT to meet the accessibility standard is in place (3.4);
- The Council has applied for 'Disability Confident Committed' level 1 status. Disability Confident is about encouraging employers to think differently about disability and take action to improve how they recruit, retain and develop disabled people. (4.1);
- A number of Mental Health support initiatives for staff are now in place including Mental Health First Aiders, Wellbeing Champions, an Employee Assistance Programme (CareFirst), a weekly wellbeing bulletin as well as Resilience Workshops. (4.7);
- Funding has been established for a temporary Gypsy Liaison role for Somerset (8.6).

4.8 Within the Plan there was an action to create a member and officer Disability Ambassador (2.4 of the action Plan). On reflection, and in discussion with the Portfolio Holder for Communities it was felt that greater value and impact could be derived if instead, a joint member and officer equality group were created. The group would be better placed to consider equalities issues both inside and outside of the organisation and bring a broader range of knowledge and lived experience across the wider spectrum of equalities characteristics, rather than be confined to disability.

4.9 It is therefore proposed to create this joint office and member group.

4.10 The proposed terms of reference for the group is attached as Appendix B.

#### 4.11 The primary purpose of the group is to :

- Supportively challenge the organisation and make sure it is embracing equality and meeting legislative requirements;
- Be proactive; ask what more can be done for staff and customers;
- Create feedback between customer and communities and the group;
- To act as forum to discuss equality issues, and find possible solutions to these issues;
- Act as a forum for discussions around issues that are affecting, or could affect, the services that we provided and the community that we serve;
- Monitor and review the Councils progress on equality and diversity;
- Identify any additional actions to be included within the Corporate Equalities action Plan;
- Identify training and development opportunities for staff and members to promote a better understanding of equality and diversity.

### 5. Links to Corporate Strategy

- 5.1 Embedding a culture of inclusivity and equality supports Priority Outcome 3 of our emerging Corporate Strategy – ‘A Council which informs and engages openly with our stakeholders and which consistently delivers excellent customer service’.

### 6. Finance / Resource Implications

- 6.1 There are no direct costs associated with this report. Representation on the proposed steering group will be within existing budgets and resources.

### 7. Legal Implications (if any)

- 7.1 Working toward the achievement of the Council’s corporate equality objectives will help ensure that SWT is meeting the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- 7.2 The Equality and Human Rights Commission is the regulator of compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty.

### 8. Partnership Implications

- 8.1 The Actions within the Plan will not be achieved by the council alone. We will work with a range of partners including, but not limited to the voluntary sector and the Somerset Equalities Officer’s Group (SEOG), which shares and develops best practice as well as undertakes collaborative research.

## 9. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 9.1 The subject matter of this report is entirely focused on strengthening the Council's position in relation to equalities and diversity matters.

## 10. Health and Wellbeing Implications

- 10.1 Removing any discriminatory barriers to services or employment with the Council, for those with protected characteristics, will impact positively on the health and wellbeing of those concerned.

### Democratic Path:

- Scrutiny / Corporate Governance or Audit Committees – No
- Cabinet/Executive – No
- Full Council – No

Reporting Frequency: ☐ Once only

### List of Appendices (delete if not applicable)

Appendix A	SWT Corporate Equalities Action Plan
Appendix B	Proposed Terms of Reference for Officer & Member Equalities Steering Group

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