

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET**

**19 September 2023**

## **Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2023/24 Report of Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
  - a) Agree to respond to the recommendation contained in the body of this report, and
  - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendation, or until it is completed (if earlier).

### **REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND**

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Performance and Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and its recommendation.

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

3. The Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy and Action Plan for 2023/24 at its meeting on 21 July 2023.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Michael O'Connor, Cabinet portfolio holder for Public Health and Inequalities, Cllr Glynis Phillips, Cabinet portfolio holder for Corporate Services, Lorna Baxter, Director of Finance, and Steven Fairhurst-Jones, Senior Policy Officer for preparing and introducing the report, and for attending to answer questions.

## SUMMARY

5. Steven Fairhurst-Jones was invited to introduce the report. It contained three elements – the Council’s 2023-24 Action Plan for its equalities, diversity and inclusion activity, the ‘Including Everyone’ strategy, and the RACE Equality Code.
6. Under the Public Sector Equality Duty the Council was required to have a 4-year strategy for tackling inequalities, and an annual action plan to implement it. The action plan in the report and is the Council’s live plan for the current year.
7. “Including Everyone”, the council’s EDI strategy, was likely familiar to members, having been adopted in 2020. The Council could point to a number of successes achieved in 2022-23, including being awarded a Stonewall gold award in 2023 in recognition of our commitment to LGBTQI+ inclusion at work, running a successful campaign to recruit on-call fire fighters from different backgrounds – as a result women now make up over 10% of the service’s operational workforce, and supporting 51 people with long-term health issues or a disability to gain or maintain employment. Good work aside, inequalities remain, and the Council’s 2023-24 action plan seeks to focus on the actions which would make the biggest difference, or which most effectively act on feedback from the Council’s staff, Staff Networks or residents. The strategy is due for renewal by October 2024, and whilst councillors would have additional opportunities to comment, they were invited to give early feedback.
8. The RACE Equality Code was introduced as an external source of accreditation around racial and ethnic issues, an area in which the Council’s own staffing diversity did not necessarily mirror the county’s population. Senior officers were keen that the accreditation be earned as a means of addressing this issue.
9. Councillor O’Connor further introduced the details of the action plan; the Council’s main areas of focus were fostering inclusive communities, inclusive service delivery and an inclusive workforce. An area of particular interest was whole-Council approaches to delivering these actions, particularly the outward looking ones, such as the promotion of social value and tackling inequalities through the way the Council procures its goods and services. The proposed RACE equality code accreditation was welcomed based on its high level of accountability and clear actions needing to be taken. Councillor Phillips referenced the latter paper on the workforce report to highlight to the Committee the distance the Council needed to travel if it wished to have a representative workforce. According to the 2021 census data, 23.2% of the Oxfordshire population were from non-white backgrounds, compared to 9.85% working for the Council. In view of the scale of the challenge, contributions needed to be made to its achievement across the entire organisation.
10. In response to the presentation the Committee discussed issues around the accessibility of the action plan, the Council’s relationship with Stonewall, positive discrimination, digital connectivity, the Council’s approach to co-

production and how the plan would be monitored. From these, the Committee makes a number of observations to pass on to the Cabinet for information. The Committee makes one recommendation in relation to the Council's relationship with Stonewall.

## OBSERVATION

11. Although not a formal recommendation, the Committee requested that the following observation be made, which summarises much of the meatiest discussion.

**Observation 1: Delivering meaningful change on equality, diversity and inclusion requires consistent attention to detail, awareness and ongoing accountability across the entire organisation.**

12. It is necessary as a Scrutiny function to remember the ongoing balance that needs to be struck as a 'critical friend'. To that end, it is important to note that the Committee was strongly supportive of the level of granularity of the Action Plan, with SMART targets and named Senior Officers. This is commendable as it provides a very clear line of responsibility for who owns an issue, and an equally clear set of criteria as to whether it has been completed. The Committee does note, however, that whilst excellent practice, it is only a first step and that the Council must continue to monitor and hold those with responsibilities accountable for their performance to see changes realised.
13. The difficulty of realising changes to organisational culture to enable the organisation to become more diverse and inclusive was illustrated by the report received by the Committee. Almost half the members of the Committee commented on the fact that they had found it difficult (and in some cases impossible) to read the text of the Action Plan owing to the font size. It is not constructive for Scrutiny to make a big issue out of a good faith mistake, and that is not the point the Committee would wish to make. Rather, it shows that even within the team which coordinates the Council's EDI activity mistakes can be made. Even those with a predisposition towards EDI activity can miss things, meaning that whilst a pro-EDI mindset is necessary, it is not sufficient to see the organisation realise its ambitions. The Committee makes no recommendations in this area but provides an avenue for further thought: how can the Council bolster its awareness of EDI issues in its everyday practice across the organisation?
14. One final issue which was raised over the accessibility of the Action Plan concerned not the text size, but the language. It is a common refrain from Scrutiny that the language used to express the Council's policy can be alienating or inaccessible. References to 'co-production', 'special characteristics data', 'equity audit', 'stretch target' or 'a Market Position Statement which sets out our commissioning intentions' may be clear for those working within local government but they are not necessarily so clear for members of the public. This reduces the level of accountability and transparency the Council shows to its residents by publishing this data. It is

understood that that an action plan must by nature be concise, and that officer time is limited. However, the problem of inaccessibility does remain, and the Committee challenges the Council to develop ideas as to how this may be improved in future.

## RECOMMENDATION

15. Section 6.01 of the Council's EDI Action Plan states 'We are proud to be a Gold Award holder in the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index. We will develop an action plan during Q2 to ensure that we continue to improve our workplace for LGBTQIA+ employees based on the feedback we have received from our previous submissions'.
16. In introducing the report, one of the notable successes highlighted to the Committee in the sphere of equalities was that of receiving the Gold Award. This suggests that the Council is proud about providing an LGBTQIA+ inclusive environment. Over the last two or three years, however, Stonewall has become increasingly controversial, with a founding member concluding the organisation has 'lost its way'.<sup>1</sup> Many high-profile organisations have reduced or stopped their involvement with Stonewall, including the BBC, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, OfCOM, ACAS and the DVLA. The view of the Committee is not to take a particular stance one way or another as to involvement with Stonewall, but rather that it is important to acknowledge the controversy surrounding it, to engage meaningfully with the issues which are controversial and to reach a rational conclusion. If the Council is proud of its relationship with Stonewall the Committee would like to be assured that this process of full and considered engagement has been undertaken. Little information was provided at the Committee meeting. It therefore recommends that the Council provide an appraisal of the Council's relationship with Stonewall as part of the response to this recommendation and, relatedly, the Council's justification for its decision to have a continuing relationship with it as an organisation.

**Recommendation 1: That the Council, as part of its response to this recommendation, provides an appraisal of the Council's relationship with Stonewall and the justification for continued involvement with it.**

## FURTHER CONSIDERATION

17. The Committee does not intend to consider the EDI Strategy and Action Plan again in the current civic year though it has asked for a bigger print version of the Action Plan to be distributed.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/stonewall-should-stay-out-of-trans-rights-war-xcz25nhdt>

## LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

18. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power:  
'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
19. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex:	Pro-forma Response Template
Background papers:	None
Other Documents:	None
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