

Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

21 July 2023

Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2023-24

Purpose / Recommendation

1. This report introduces the 2023-24 Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Action Plan, approved by the Strategic Leadership Team on 24 May.
2. The plan provides an opportunity for wider discussion about OCC's work to tackle inequalities, particularly as we move towards the final year of OCC's 4-year Including Everyone equalities framework.
3. Members are recommended to:
 - a. Comment on the EDI Action Plan as a whole, its individual actions and measures, and its effectiveness at demonstrating the implementation and impact of OCC's Including Everyone framework.
 - b. Provide views on ambitions and priorities we might explore in refreshing our equalities framework for 2024-2028.

Executive Summary

4. The EDI Action Plan 2023-24 (Annex 1) was approved by the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) on 24 May 2023. An annual action plan is required by the Public Sector Equality Duty to support OCC's 'Including Everyone' EDI framework (Annex 2). The Action Plan will also complement wider initiatives such as the Workforce Strategy, the emerging Wellbeing Strategy, and the support programmes being put in place to help with the cost of living crisis.
5. The Action Plan contains service-led objectives which align with the ambitions of our Including Everyone framework. This in turn aligns with the council's strategic priority to "tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire". Progress with delivering the actions in the 2023-24 Action Plan is reported quarterly to the EDI Steering Group and via the Business Management and Monitoring Report to SLT and Cabinet.
6. Our Including Everyone framework is due for renewal by October 2024. Officers will begin a review of this strategic document in Summer 2023: members' views on ambitions or priorities for the new strategy are invited.

Background

Including Everyone and the EDI Action Plan

7. The Including Everyone EDI Framework and its first annual Action Plan were approved by Cabinet in October 2020. The framework sets out OCC's ambitions for tackling inequalities in Oxfordshire as an employer, deliverer of public services and influential partner.

8. Including Everyone also contributes to OCC’s compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010). Public bodies are required to produce a four-year equalities framework and an annual action plan. The Equality Duty covers nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, race, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The Duty established a general and specific duty for public bodies to have regard, when exercising functions, to:
- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act,
 - Advance equality of opportunity between people who share protected characteristics and those who do not,
 - Foster good relations between people who share protected characteristics and those who do not.

9. OCC’s Including Everyone framework has three strands, with six goals:

Strands	Goals
Inclusive Communities	We work with communities to help them thrive
	We work with partners to tackle disadvantage in our communities
Inclusive Service Delivery	Our information and buildings are accessible for all
	Our services use good data and engage with users to plan and meet their diverse needs
Inclusive Workplaces	Our workforce is inclusive, reflecting the diversity of the communities we serve
	Our staff have the values, skills, and knowledge to be inclusive

10. In addition to the nine protected characteristics, OCC includes five other groups in our EDI work: i) those living in areas of deprivation, ii) those in rural communities, iii) carers, iv) those leaving care, and v) those in the armed forces community.
11. The 2023-24 Action Plan was compiled with input from directorates, the EDI Steering Group, Staff Networks, Extended Leadership Team, SLT and the Policy Team. The plan covers the breadth of the council and the framework’s six goals, focusing on activities which will most positively impact inequalities. The action plan also includes four pledges from the Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership as agreed by SLT in January 2023.
12. There are many EDI-related activities that are not included in the plan, such as business as usual activities, statutory requirements or those which are not easily measurable. Where possible, actions are SMART and benchmarked. However, equalities impacts are not always straightforward to measure numerically; there is often greater effect in a more narrative reporting of our activities.
13. Progress towards objectives in the Action Plan will be reported on a quarterly basis to SLT and Cabinet as an annex to the Business Management and Monitoring Report. The EDI Steering Group also receives the same quarterly reports and provides constructive criticism.

14. The importance of this being a “living plan” has been emphasised by OCC’s Chief Executive Martin Reeves, a view which has been endorsed in other engagement with officers and members. In addition to measures which will be updated in Quarter 2 following groundwork in Quarter 1, there will be instances where we wish to revise the wording of our actions, ambition or measurement as the needs of our communities or business evolve. Accordingly, the plan will be kept under review and will be updated when new opportunities arise.

Key Issues

Wider approach to Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion

15. SLT has resolved to work towards setting out a more ambitious vision of how OCC might work to tackle inequalities, both in our own workforce and in communities across the county.
16. A review of the Including Everyone framework will be undertaken during 2023-24 as part of its four-year cycle. Through the Action Plan and other work we want to articulate our commitment to delivering organisational change, creating a truly inclusive workplace and supporting our ambition to be an employer of choice.
17. SLT has asked officers to begin work on a review of the council’s activities around inequality with specific regard to race and ethnicity. Our REACH (Race, Equality and Cultural Heritage) Network, one of our five staff networks, has given feedback on ethnic diversity and the representativeness of our workforce, particularly at senior levels, and has also highlighted wider cultural challenges around inclusion and protected characteristics.
18. Work is ongoing to understand these issues in greater detail. As part of this SLT has asked officers to plan for a cross-council race review during 2023-24. This will help us to identify appropriate actions and changes to move OCC beyond statutory requirements, and lead to an accreditation in an area where we know we need to improve.
19. SLT has asked that, subject to an outline business case and an understanding of resources involved, officers look to the [RACE Equality Code](#) (Annex 3), a quality mark that helps organisations take action to improve race equality within the workplace. It is comparable to Stonewall and Disability Confident Employer accreditations. While there are charter marks in place for specific sectors e.g. schools or the social care workforce, the RACE Equality Code is an up to date cross sector benchmark which has been adopted by a number of comparable public sector authorities (e.g. Birmingham City Council, Coventry Council and West Midlands Combined Authority have been awarded the RACE code quality mark).
20. It is proposed that the Council subscribes to the RACE Code and a review is undertaken of how the organisation is meeting the Code’s four principles of Reporting, Action, Composition and Education (RACE). This would lead to an action plan that would form part of the wider EDI Strategy.

21. In parallel with a review, SLT have discussed wider EDI direction, to include:

- A renewed commitment to allyship, particularly among senior leadership to help drive cultural change. Allies are those who do not have a particular characteristic but support those who do; who role model inclusive leadership; and who call out poor behaviour wherever it arises.
- A focus on gathering equalities evidence – data and intelligence, both OCC’s and from external sources – to help identify inequalities and areas of concern, whether in our workforce or among our services and residents.
- Learning from good practice in other councils and in major local institutions such as the two universities and NHS Trusts.
- Ensuring that robust links are in place between complementary plans such as the Workforce Strategy and Wellbeing Strategy. In reviewing Including Everyone, we will think about our evidence base and engagement plans to ensure that the new four-year EDI strategy is robust and focused on the right issues.

Budgetary implications

22. There will be budgetary implications in pursuing external accreditation. The cost of the RACE Equality Code is being confirmed.

23. Officer time will need to be quantified: although it is expected this would be accommodated within existing revenue budgets, additional resource might need to be identified depending on the work’s pace and scope.

Equalities implications

24. None – the Action Plan seeks to tackle inequalities in OCC and in Oxfordshire.

Sustainability implications

25. There are no sustainability implications.

Risk Management

26. Potential risks include reputational risks depending on the outcome of the accreditation. Further risks and opportunities will be given further consideration.

Communications

27. The Director of Communications, Strategy and Insight and the Head of Internal Communications are both members of the EDI Steering Group. Improving the visibility of Including Everyone, its Action Plan and progress reports will be a key part of the EDI Steering Group’s work during 2023-24. Appropriate engagement in reviewing Including Everyone will be given careful consideration.

Key Dates

28. The first report against actions in the 2023-24 Action Plan will be prepared during July 2023, on progress up to 30 June 2023.

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Annexes:

Annex 1 – Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Action Plan 2023-24

Annex 2 – Including Everyone: Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion framework

Annex 3 – RACE Equality Code summary