Walsall Council

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Annual Report 2024/25

Walsall Council

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Annual Report 2024-2025

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Introduction: Our Commitment to Ensuring Equity

I am delighted to present our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Annual Report highlighting the significant progress that has been made to strengthen our approach to equality, diversity and inclusion over the last year.

One of our key achievements this year includes the development of our new overarching *Ensuring Equity: Walsall's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2029* and refreshed equality objectives, reinforcing our commitment to promoting equality, tackling inequity, and fostering good relations through involving residents, community groups, and staff to recognise and address EDI challenges through our borough-wide operations and decision-making.

Recognised by the 2023 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge, the strategy aligns with the *Council Plan 2025-2029, 'Pursuing Excellence'*, and builds on the *We are Walsall 2040* vision. It is underpinned by the cross-cutting principle of 'Ensuring Equity' and reflects our long-term EDI vision and strategic approach in delivering equity within our services, workforce, and communities.

Our borough-wide priorities for delivering EDI have been shaped through intensive feedback from residents, communities and council staff and this report highlights some examples of the great work accomplished over the past year and work that is currently underway to accomplish our EDI priorities.

I am pleased about the significant strides that have been made to support our communities right across Walsall, to support our workforce in better representing the communities we serve, to strengthen our governance around EDI, and to ensure staff voices are heard at all levels.

We remain dedicated to continuing on our journey to reduce inequalities, maximise potential, and improve the health and wellbeing of all Walsall's residents.

Cllr Lee: Cabinet Portfolio Holder Internal Resources

Our Public Sector Equality Duty

The Council has a statutory duty to ensure that equality and diversity are integrated into all our services and functions. The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in society and within the workforce. This Act introduced nine 'protected characteristics' and made it unlawful for people to be discriminated against based on these characteristics.

The protected characteristics are:

- Age
- Sex
- Gender reassignment
- Race
- Disability
- Pregnancy/maternity
- Sexual orientation
- Religion or belief
- Marriage/Civil partnership

In addition, from 2024, Walsall Council has adopted additional locally defined protected characteristics that complement our commitment to ensuring equity for all:

- Care experienced
- Armed forces (building on our statutory commitments under the Armed Forces Covenant)

We have also committed to considering health inequalities as part of our equality impact assessment process, reflecting the corporate 'health in all policies' approach.

The Equality Act is supported by the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), which requires that public bodies such as local authorities consider how people will be affected by decisions and services and to ensure that public services meet everyone's needs. As a public body, under the Equality Act 2010, the Council must have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010
- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it
- foster good relations between people

Under the Equality Act, councils must publish information on an annual basis to demonstrate their compliance with the PSED. As well as information relating to employees, we must also prepare and publish one or more specific and measurable equality objectives (at least every four years) which will help us further any of the aims of the Equality Duty. Our objectives are set out in this report, along with the progress we have made over the past year and some of our plans for the future.

Our Walsall Communities

Walsall borough is made up of six towns – Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston, Walsall and Willenhall – and is home to 288,700 residents[1]. Each of our twenty wards has its own distinct identity and diverse populations. This brings a vibrant character to the borough, but also means we need to understand the range of needs faced by those living within all our communities.

Deprivation

Walsall borough was ranked as the 25th most deprived local authority in England[2]. Deprivation can be seen as an individual or community's lack of resources, opportunities and ability to live a happy, healthy life. The experience of life in the borough varies for residents across different neighbourhoods. There are pockets of extreme deprivation in some areas and over a quarter of neighbourhoods (44 of 167) are amongst the most deprived 10% in England – an increase since 2015. The wards in the centre, south and west of the borough are typically much more deprived than those to the east, however pockets of deprivation exist even alongside the more affluent parts of the borough.

Inequalities

The geography of deprivation directly maps onto a wide range of inequalities including poor educational attainment, unemployment, ill-health and higher rates of crime with some groups more impacted by the effects than others. For example, Walsall is the authority with the 17th highest levels of income deprivation affecting children out of 317 Local Authorities (IDAC1 2019). Many of the most deprived neighbourhoods are around the town centre, which is also the focus of our newly arrived migrant communities.

Health Inequalities

Health inequalities are avoidable, unjust, and can create systematic disparities in health and wellbeing among different groups of people. These inequalities disproportionately affect individuals with protected characteristics, those in vulnerable and marginalised groups, as well as people living in more deprived communities.

In Walsall, health inequalities significantly impact residents' health outcomes. For example, our most affected communities experience higher rates of obesity, poorer mental health, and lower life expectancy. As well as these direct health outcomes, health inequalities have an impact on an individual's ability to access appropriate health and wellbeing services, leading to a higher prevalence of long-term illnesses and a poorer quality of life.

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[1] ONS Mid-year Population Estimates, 2024

[2] MHCLG, English Indices of Deprivation, 2019

Resident Characteristics

The information gathered from the 2021 Census has been invaluable for understanding equality and diversity down to a neighbourhood level. The questions asked capture many of the defining characteristics of our population: who we are, how we live and what we do. This is vital for assessing need, setting priorities, and developing strategy. This gives us an opportunity to understand all aspects of our residents' identities, providing a full and timely picture of inter-related protected characteristics. For some protected characteristics (such as gender identify and sexual orientation) this is the first time we have had access to any robust data about how our residents identify themselves. The Census, alongside other data sources, has been used to build up a picture of Our Characteristics in Walsall.

Our Characteristics

Resident Population

- As of mid-2024, Walsall's **resident population** stands at 288,700[3] with population expected to increase by 13% in 2040.

Sex

- This resident population consists of 51% (147,200) **women** and 49% (141,600) **men**.

Age

- Walsall's resident population has a median **age** of 38 which is a decrease of one year from the 2011 census.
- Life expectancy in Walsall is 77.9 years for male residents and 81.7 for female residents[4].
- In Walsall females have a lower healthy life expectancy than males, living in good health until 55.1 years, compared with 56.2 years for males[5].

Marital Status

- Those who are **married or in a civil partnership** account for 45% of residents (aged over 16) with the proportion who have never been married (38%) increasing.

Sexual Orientation

- 1 in 50 (2%) residents aged over 16 identified in the 2021 census as gay, lesbian, or bisexual – very slightly below the national average.

Ethnic Groups

- Although most people identify their **ethnic group** as being White (71%), this has decreased over the past decade and around 1 in 3 residents are now from a minority ethnic group (i.e. non-White British).
- The second largest ethnic group remains Asian, which has increased to 19%, and residents from Black (5%) and Mixed (3%) ethnic groups have also increased.

Disability

- Approximately 20% of residents identify as **disabled** due to experiencing a long-term condition that limits their daily activities.

Religion

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[3] Office for National Statistics, Mid-year Population Estimates, 2024

[4] Office for Health Improvement and Disparities

[5] Walsall Council, *Healthy and Well: Adding Life to Years in Walsall. Director of Public Health Annual Report 2024*

- Many residents still claim to have a **religious affiliation**, although the proportion with ‘no religion’ is now close to a third (30%).
- The largest religious group remains Christian (45%), although this has been falling with Muslim (11%) communities the second largest faith community, followed by Sikh (6%) which has increased over the past decade.

Gender and Gender Reassignment

- There are just under 600 residents whose **gender identity** is different to the sex they were registered with at birth.
- Of those providing further detail, around 200 identify as trans men and 200 as trans women.

Care Experienced

- As of January 2025, the total number of **children in care** within Walsall is 590 and the number of **care leavers** is 295. This is line with a national picture of an increase in children entering care over the past decade.

Armed Forces / Veterans

- Around 2.2% of the Walsall population is identified as a **member or veteran of the armed forces,** equating to around 6,500 people – many of whom will also have families who fall within the Armed Forces Covenant.

Carers

- Among Walsall adults, 11.4% **provide unpaid care** for a family member, friend or neighbour who has long-term physical or mental health conditions, or problems related to old age.
- Over half of these unpaid carers (6.3% of all adults) are providing over 20 hours of care a week

Ensuring Equity: Our Walsall Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy 2024-2029

Throughout 2024, we have worked across the organisation and with our partners to develop a new EDI Strategy setting out our refreshed equality objectives. *Ensuring Equity: Our Walsall Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2029*, reflects Walsall Council's commitment to ensuring equity within our services, workforce, and communities. We strive to reduce inequalities and maximise potential across the borough, reinforcing our dedication to fostering an inclusive and fair environment for all.

Our EDI strategy was developed alongside the refresh of *Our Council Plan: Pursuing Excellence (2025-2029)* and so equalities underpin our corporate vision and priorities, with 'ensuring equity' established as a cross-cutting principle of how we work across all our services. Our Council Plan in turn builds upon the strong foundations laid down in the *We are Walsall 2040 Strategy* – the partnership-owned strategic vision and ambitions for the type of borough we want to be in the future.

Our new EDI Strategy has been developed through extensive engagement and consultation feedback from our residents, communities and staff and draws together all the elements of EDI into a coherent set of four objectives that have been developed and aligned to the Local Government Association Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG). This framework outlines key objectives and actions for Councils to consider in fulfilling their Public Sector Equality Duty. The framework is composed of four themes, and we took the decision to align our current and future EDI work to these. This means that we have a clear objective standard against which to set objectives and our monitor progress, and it enables us to benchmark against other local authorities and learn from best practice elsewhere.
Through continuous improvement, we aim to ascend the three Levels of Achievement for each EFLG theme through all our objectives and their associated activities, with an aspiration to reach 'Achieving' level across all elements by the end of 2026. We will then work towards becoming an 'Excellent' EDI Exemplar in local government and the wider public sector.

Our EDI Objectives

The Council's new equality objectives are:

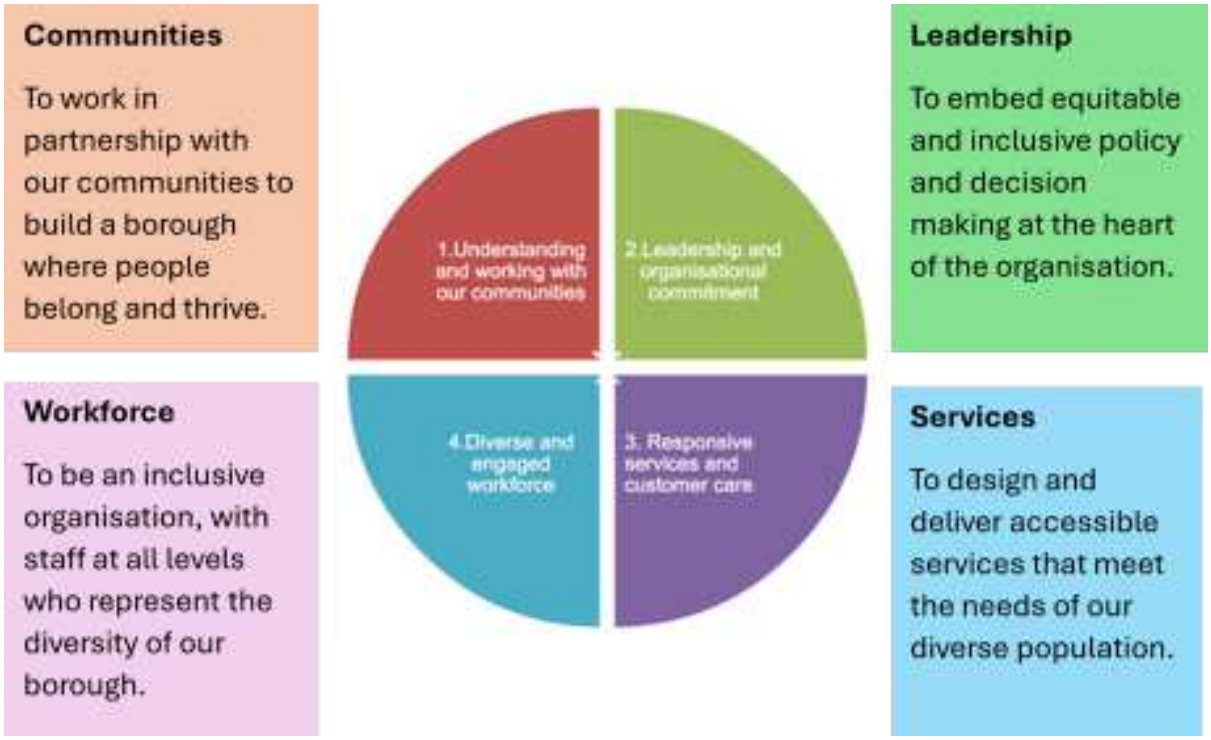
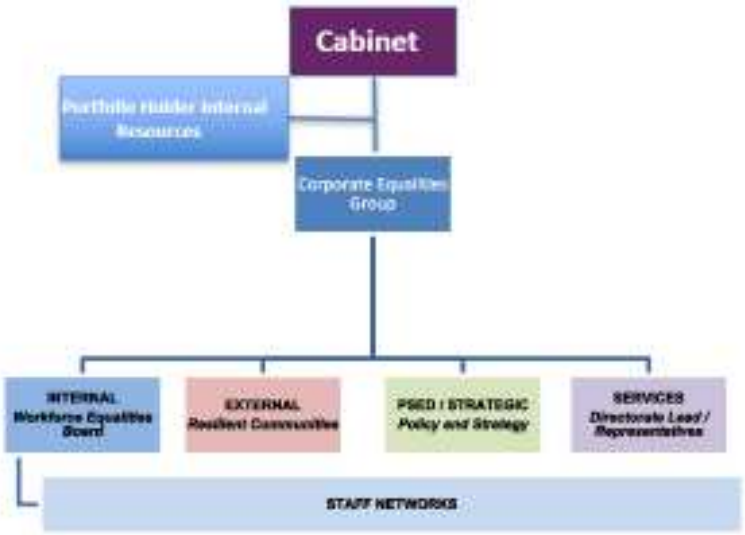


Figure: Walsall Council Equality Objectives 2024-2029

Our Governance



During 2024 we embedded a clear governance structure to ensure the EDI objectives are at the heart of our service design, delivery, workforce, and strategic decision-making. Our Corporate Equalities Group (CEG) governs EDI to ensure that the Council meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, Public Sector Equality Duty, Human Rights Act and to monitor the delivery of the EDI Strategy actions. CEG comprises senior managers and leaders from across the Council with responsibilities for various strands of EDI, ensuring we represent all aspects of our equality objectives with a broad service perspective. CEG reports into the Corporate Management Team (CMT) which is composed of Executive Directors and Directors and is chaired by our Chief Executive - highlighting the emphasis placed on putting this agenda at the heart of our decision-making.

From the start of the 2024/25 municipal year, the Cabinet Portfolio for Internal Resources has included responsibility for Corporate Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Councillor Edward Lee has been able to advocate for the importance of ensuring equity at Cabinet, Scrutiny and Council meetings.

Reporting to CEG is the Workforce Equalities Board, which oversees workforce and HR related EDI issues. Supporting this across the Council is a myriad of diverse staff networks that cover a range of equality characteristics. These networks enable staff to have a voice and discuss any workforce issues or concerns and promote opportunities, learning and share diversity. The staff network chairs have a seat at the Workforce Equalities Board to ensure there is a clear route upwards to CEG to flag any issues or concerns.

The EDI Champions play a crucial role within and across services to be the lead eyes and ears for EDI within their teams, services, and directorates. Champions advocate for EDI issues, share knowledge and learning and act as ambassadors for the EDI agenda. Alongside this we also have EDI training for managers and staff to ensure everyone working at Walsall Council understands the importance of an inclusive and diverse workforce and services to meet our community's needs.

Our Achievements

Objective: Communities

To work in partnership with our communities to build a borough where people belong and thrive

We have continued to work in partnership with our communities and partner organisations to understand and address local inequalities and use that knowledge to shape and transform services that drive positive change, especially as Walsall becomes richer in diversity. Our approach supports our *We Are Walsall 2040* ambition that people belong, thrive and are both happy and healthy.

Following on from last year, the Council has worked with its communities and partners to reduce the impact of any inequalities from a social cohesion perspective and provided opportunities to involve diverse communities, young people and partners through providing opportunities for social integration and partnership work. This has enabled everyone in the borough to work together collectively in building a borough where Walsall is not just a place to live, but also a place to belong, thrive and live healthy and fulfilling lives.

Key achievements this year include:

Community Cohesion

Walsall For All

Walsall for All partnership established in January 2019 aims to improve social cohesion and integration in the borough. Members of the partnership include local organisations and groups that work in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors, as well as public sector providers (including housing, health and others). Walsall for All works with diverse cultures, faiths and communities and listens to their views and finds solutions to any challenges they may have accessing services and living in Walsall. One of Walsall for All's goals is to promote neighbourhood level partnerships between existing communities and new emerging communities.

Walsall Community Cohesion Strategy 2025-2035

The *Walsall Community Cohesion Strategy 2025-2035*, published in February 2025, is a 10-year strategy driven by the priorities that communities and residents told us are most important to them. The strategy has been developed in partnership between Walsall for All and Walsall Council and the findings have directly informed the new EDI Strategy for Walsall. It merges Walsall for All's vision for Walsall to be a friendly and diverse borough with the Council's vision to make social cohesion a foundational policy that creates a 'sense of belonging' for all our residents. This vision is a crucial part of our joint Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion approach.

Some of the strategic themes which emerged through the consultation last year included cost of living, isolation and loneliness, gender inequality, mental health, and cultural understanding of new and existing communities.

Walsall for All believes that our borough is prepared for a bold vision that will foster a feeling of inclusion and more fairness for everyone in our Walsall communities. The strategy includes a list of actions which will be led by officers and strategic partners. The actions are themed under ten headings and include: Children and Young People, Faith, Race, Hate Crime, Addiction, Cost of Living, Gypsy Traveller and Roma, LGBTQ+, Disability, Gender, Newly Arrived Individuals/Communities and Social Isolation and Mental Wellbeing.

Cohesion and Social Integration: Walsall for All Legacy Project

The Cohesion and Social Integration Team, alongside partner organisations, continued with the Walsall for All Legacy project to work on the key priorities of social mixing between different communities and geographical areas, improving learning English as a Second Language (ESOL), welcoming new communities and tackling hate crime, prejudice, and harmful extremism.

Walsall for All in partnership with Walsall Council continues to lead the Independent Advisory Group for Contest (Walsall Resilience Forum), ensuring representation from diverse faiths and cultures of Walsall. There have been numerous meetings with a focus on a locality.

The Community Cohesion and Integration Service has continued to provide a speedy, professional service in relation to consultations with diverse groups and reducing potential for community tensions. This has been achieved through raising awareness of ‘rights and responsibilities’ amongst our residents as well as listening.

Railway Club Neighbourhood Project

Walsall's White British communities have been working with ethnically diverse community groups and partners to promote more integration among different groups and communities. The LMRCA Railway Club is a sports and social centre based in the Palfrey area of Walsall and is home to ISSA FC. The club has been a great resource for Walsall communities, opening up opportunities for underprivileged groups, schools, young people, and children, and making sport accessible to those most disadvantaged.

Funding for the club was obtained from Crowdfund Walsall for their 'Grow to Donate' project to grow food in the allotment onsite and donate it to disadvantaged communities, families, and schools. The club is linking with Hillary Primary School and Palfrey Junior School, to allow pupils to visit the allotment to learn how to grow, cook, and eat the food, and to learn about global warming. This opportunity will be taught by two retired and experienced teachers. The allotment area is ready for use, and the schools have agreed to send 20 pupils a week for PSHE lessons.

Emerging Communities

Our community engagement and networking opportunities have allowed us to identify further African communities from Cameroon, Nigeria, Tanzania, Congo, and Rwanda who have settled in Walsall. We have worked closely with Dr Victorine Ngamsha, who has been knighted as a Queen for African tribal communities living in UK and Europe by a tribal King of Cameroon. Dr Ngamsha has been key in connecting and engaging with the African communities across the borough and has supported us through consulting with these communities as part of the inclusion consultation. Dr Ngamsha will be hosting a women's football tournament in Walsall, where we are expecting over 250 people attend from diverse backgrounds and from all walks of life. Victorine's goal is to honour women with sport.

Five hundred African Christians who worship at Manor Farm Community Association were supported to hold Christmas and New Year worship at Central Hall. Most of the group are professionals within health, education, law, and technology, reflecting the new national immigration policy targeting highly skilled professionals to meet national skill gaps.

Libraries and Learning

Community Libraries

Walsall Community Libraries continues to be an accessible service open to all - providing spaces and resources to local communities across the borough. All libraries have information resources that are accessible in a wide range of languages and formats, comprising books, E Books and E-Audio books, newspapers and magazines, local and tourist information. Additionally, libraries are a key player in supporting customers through the Walsall Connected programme, where our staff are on hand to support and refer, enabling customers to access council services. Our Libraries are registered as Warm Spaces, enabling our residents to have a safe space to enter. A successful Libraries Improvement Fund bid in 2024 has allowed improvements in studying facilities and new technology. 2025 will see additional enhancements to our service provision to support us becoming dementia friendly libraries.

The Home Library

The Home Library service provides a vital service to the housebound community in Walsall. The monthly visit carried out by a trusted member of library staff is often the only contact that some residents have and provides an essential link to accessing other services. For the isolated and lonely the regular contact can be a source of comfort or even a lifeline in dark times.

All libraries offer a comprehensive programme of groups and activities to both children and adults, from under 5's sessions and their parents/carers, to Reading Friends groups, supporting inclusion and community cohesion. Our partnership work is starting to grow and expand, engaging with specific groups within the community. For example, Autistic Adults is run in partnership with Autism West Midlands, Zebra Access, ESOL, English and maths classes (at selected libraries) free computer sessions run in conjunction with Walsall College and working with training providers to offer supported internships. The overall aim is of reducing digital exclusion and supporting the vulnerable and isolated within our communities. Our libraries have

continued to participate in the HAF programme, offering enriching activities and free meals to children, and the national Summer Reading Challenge campaign encouraging children's literacy to be maintained through the holidays, additionally working in partnership with Family Hubs to deliver PEEP support to parents.

In 2024, Walsall Community Libraries linked in with supporting the important Knife Angel Legacy by promoting the James Brindley Foundation's mentoring scheme within libraries and are continuing to work with the community safety team to start to install bleed kits and defibrillators at all library sites.

Walsall Skills for Life (ESOL)

The Walsall Skills for Life programme has had over 500 learners accessing provision across the South of the borough. Part of this skill-building included developing English language skills, activities supporting mental health and wellbeing, managing home finances, cultural awareness, and confidence building. Skills for Life embedded numeracy skills in sessions to support with the current cost of living crisis for learners to be able to manage their finances and learn how to budget. Sessions have also included educating learners about the availability of key health check-ups, such as amongst South Asian communities for whom take-up is traditionally low.

Children and Young People

Youth Bus

Walsall Council has launched its own Youth Bus. The bus is fitted with creative media equipment and tours communities in Walsall. The tour ran alongside Youth Work Week during November 2024, an annual celebration week organised by National Youth Agency which celebrates all things youth work. The bus tour provides the council with the opportunity to listen to and understand the views of children and young people about growing up in Walsall, and what they think are the challenges and opportunities young people face.

Shaping Our Tomorrow Project

As part of our work within the Alliance and to continue to listen and respond to our communities, work on the Shaping Our Tomorrow Project has commenced. This long-term project aims to follow the lives of young children now and in the future towards 2040. These children will be adults in 2040. We have chosen a group of families, from different boroughs, communities and from different socio-demographic backgrounds within Walsall. Ongoing, planned engagement and consultation activities with these families will aim to inform the Walsall Right for Children and Young People's Strategic Alliance on key issues, challenges and successes for our families connected to the four ambitions. The initial introduction workshops have taken place in November 2024 and already show clear areas to explore as part of the work of the Alliance.

Youth Justice: Reducing Disproportionality

We have worked with a local organisation to create a documentary about the experiences of Black and mixed heritage boys in the justice system which was premiered in Black History Month at the local cinema. A partnership recommendations report was released to improve outcomes for Black and mixed heritage boys before they enter the justice system, and a dedicated employment pathway was developed for Black and mixed heritage boys involved in the justice system. A mentor for Black and mixed heritage children at risk of entering the secure estate and to improve their resettlement outcomes was commissioned and our Disproportionality Forum for YJS practitioners was continued to explore issues of overrepresentation and drive forward practice improvements.

Family Hubs

Walsall has utilised the implementation of the Family Hubs Programme as an opportunity to build on the strong foundations of our locality model. Our four integrated locality Family Hubs and our ten family community hubs were launched in July 2023. Family Hubs provide a welcoming space where children, young people aged 0-19 and up to 25 for those young people with additional needs, and their families can get advice and support when they need it.

Our Family Hubs are in the heart of vulnerable local communities where services have come together providing one ‘front door’ access to get help, activities, programmes and to talk to someone in a safe space. The implementation of the Family Hub programme has now met all the minimum expectations of five core service delivery areas. The Family Hubs have co-located partnership services operating from our 4 Integrated Family Hubs.

We are working with partners to decide priorities for The Family Hubs year 4 delivery plan 25-26 focussed on embedding the services against the national expectations and closing the gap on inequalities. We have utilised the recommendations from our December 2024 “Open Lens Media Company” Insights project report commissioned to explore reasons for children and families not engaging with partnership services to produce an inequalities risk reduction plan within the Year 4 activity Delivery plan.

Building community capacity, capability, resilience, and social value has been included in all contracts and policies generated by the programme to enable us to have the right support available to families that is accessible at a locality level and delivered at the earliest opportunity.

Best Start for Life Offer

Our ‘Best Start for Life Offer’ Website, including a service directory and activity programme, was launched in May 2024 after mapping one hundred local organisations delivering services aligned with our Family Hubs offer. The website is translatable into different languages and has had 9473 views with 1667 active users of walsallfamilyhubs.co.uk.

We have developed support offerings aimed at disadvantaged and seldom heard groups, including fathers and caregivers, who now benefit from additional services provided by the Statutory and Voluntary & Community Sectors. For example,

sessions delivered by an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Midwife and our Parent Infant Emotional Wellbeing Champions.

The programme has 39 active volunteers from a variety of backgrounds to provide a range of timely and high-quality support which complements the delivery of the Early Help offer including support for peer-led parenting, fathers, SEND, healthy eating, and breastfeeding. Our volunteers have offered Family Support to 48 families since October 2023 and have delivered three peer-led “Empowering Parents Empowering Communities” sessions.

Early Language and Home Learning Environment

School Ready Officers Local Authority Delivered Activities have supported 341 children on an early intervention model. Speech & Language Therapy Family Hubs Funded Activity has supported 927 children through programmes to reduce waiting times and has positively impacted school readiness outcomes including confidence by parents to support their child’s language and communication needs.

Health and Wellbeing

Infant Feeding Project

The Council have been using behavioural insights to understand infant feeding behaviours, attitudes, and experiences of mothers in Walsall and how best to support and encourage new mothers who want to breastfeed. We aspire to be a breastfeeding friendly borough and understanding the barriers and challenges to infant feeding choices is important to ensure we can provide the right level of support for expectant women and mothers. Surveys were carried out to better understand the barriers, sources of information about infant feeding, reasons for their chosen method of feeding and the types of support mothers would like to have around infant feeding. Mothers of all age groups and ethnicities were invited to participate in the survey, which was online and through face-to-face Family hub community settings.

The insight gained from the behavioural science work was included in the Walsall Infant Feeding strategy and contributes to actions set within the strategy and taken forward by the infant feeding strand of Family Hubs.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Insights

Work is also underway for the Council to engage with women in different communities to better understand behaviours relating to contraception use and barriers to access. The focus will be on understanding how women make choices when it comes to contraception, attitudes and beliefs, use of long-acting contraception and barriers to accessing and using contraception. This engagement over coming months will help us make better choices around service support and communications.

Cultural Events

Walsall Art Gallery: Equal+Able =Not a Label

The New Art Gallery Walsall held an exhibition ‘Equal+Able =Not a Label’ first established in 2021. Panel members from the community selected artworks from the Gallery’s Permanent Collection that reflect on themes around disability, neurodivergence and mental health. A podcast called ‘Voices in Collections’ on Spotify was also delivered. This exhibition was part of a Heritage Lottery Fund Dynamic Collections funded project and focussed on what Ableism means to people.

Pride Events

Two Pride events took place this year. The first event was ‘Picnic in the Park’ during July 2024 and the second event was the annual ‘Walsall Pride Festival’ during August 2024. Both events were free to attend and included live music and entertainment.

Continental Street Market

The much-loved continental street market returned at the end of May 2024 and there was an array of diverse craft and food stalls representing various cultures and cuisines for everyone to enjoy. It showcased the rich diversity within the local community and provided an opportunity for residents to enjoy a unique cultural experience.

Objective: Leadership

To embed equitable and inclusive policy and decision making at the heart of the organisation.

Following on from last year, the Council has continued to produce some key strategies through co-production, engagement and consultation with residents, staff, and key partners to ensure equitable and inclusive policy and decision making is at the heart of the organisation. Some examples include the new Council Plan 2025-2029 and the new Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2029.

The Corporate Equalities Group's (CEG) Terms of Reference was updated to strengthen the roles and responsibilities and ensure customer and service representation and voice from across the Council. This has provided CEG with a clear remit in taking key decisions around EDI and ensure it is embedded even further in service design, commissioning, and delivery.

The Council's leadership at both an officer and Member level embraces and positively promotes and champions equality, diversity, and inclusion across the borough.

Key achievements this year include:

"Pursuing Excellence: Our Council Plan 2025-2029"

The new Council Plan, *Pursuing Excellence: Our Council Plan 2025-2029*, has been approved at Full Council in January 2025 and is aligned to the *We Are Walsall 2040* Strategy. It has 'ensuring equity' as one of its cross-cutting principles so that it applies across everything we do to enable us to embed and deliver our EDI objectives more effectively. Promoting equalities, tackling inequity, and fostering good relations across our diverse communities is key in reducing inequalities and improving life chances.

Ensuring Equity: Walsall's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2029

This year, we developed our *Ensuring Equity: Walsall's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2029*, alongside the Council Plan. The EDI strategy has been shaped using the new Community Cohesion and Integration Plan co-produced by Walsall Council and Walsall For All and using the feedback obtained from our communities, partners and staff through varied engagement and consultation opportunities held during April to October 2024. The consultation allowed residents, community groups and partners to provide feedback on the draft 'Ensuring Equity' strategy and provide their thoughts on the objectives and the associated 'We Will' statements. Supportive and positive feedback has been gained with the final version of the strategy being approved at Cabinet in December 2024 with a lived experience item.

Renewed Equality and Health Impact Assessment Forms

Over the past year, we reviewed our council's decisions and strategies to ensure they address not only inequalities for those with protected characteristics but also health inequalities. As part of this effort, we updated our Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) to include health inequalities, renaming it to Equality and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA).

The new Equality and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA) forms have been developed as a self-assessment tool to help us determine any likely positive and negative impact that our work could have on residents, communities, partners, and staff regarding equality of opportunity in service design and delivery. A screening form has been developed to help services determine whether a full EHIA is required and two further new EHIA forms have also been developed for proposals that are operational or relating to policy, procedures and services to ensure that we consider any adverse impact our work could have on equality groups and locally protected characteristics. This allows us to ensure we eliminate and minimise any negative consequences for equality groups. The forms have recently been trialled during the budget proposals consultation process and will help strengthen the EDI self-assessment process.

Our equality toolkit and underpinning processes are under review to strengthen how we continue to judge and mitigate impact on all equality groups, including those experiencing health inequalities. We will continue to review and improve these processes to support effective equality analysis to ensure there is no unlawful discrimination for any equality groups from inception. To ensure the council strengthens the consideration of health inequalities in plans, strategies, and decisions, the Public Health team has planned to deliver training for members and officers next year.

Locally defined protected characteristics

We have also incorporated and given due regard to additional duties placed on the Council such as the ‘Armed Forces Covenant’ and ‘Care Experienced’ to ensure any adverse impact is considered through equality and health impact assessments. During 2024 Walsall Council adopted additional locally defined protected characteristics that complement our commitment to ensuring equity for all. Cabinet agreed to the inclusion of Care Experienced, Armed Forces and health equity to consider wider health impacts on equality groups.

These local characteristics including health equity have been agreed for inclusion within the renewed ‘Equality and Health Impact Assessments.’ Our EHIA assessment documents have been renewed to incorporate these additional local characteristics alongside the existing nine statutory ones and the existing local characteristic of care experienced. Inclusion of the Armed Forces as an additional locally defined protected characteristic helps to deliver on our statutory commitments under the Armed Forces Covenant.

The EHIA also incorporates a Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach. This ensures that the effects of strategies and policies on the health outcomes of our diverse communities are thoroughly considered in partnership with our public health officers. Within the EHIA document, factors such as mental and physical health, social and economic inequalities and access to services have been added for further consideration. The HiAP approach has also been integrated into the equality analysis toolkit to prioritise health equity and increase awareness of wider health impacts when developing strategies, policies, or modifying services. This enables us to actively minimise and reduce any adverse impacts on individuals experiencing health inequalities and to consider the impact of our proposals on the wider determinants of health.

Portfolio Holder Responsibility for EDI

Equality is now included as a key functional area within the Cabinet Portfolio for internal Resources. The current Portfolio holder, Councillor Edward Lee, is now kept informed with regular updates and has been able to act as an advocate for EDI-related items at Cabinet, Scrutiny and Council. The EDI strategy will be monitored and reviewed regularly through Corporate Equality Group with regular updates on progress provided to CMT and through the Portfolio Holder briefing process.

Lived Experience

Our Leader of Walsall Council Councillor Garry Perry is passionate about local engagement and empowerment and is dedicated to ensuring that the lived experiences of Walsall's residents continuously inform and improve service delivery. Recently, items for Cabinet have had a lived experience element that has provided an opportunity for Walsall Council to invite people directly impacted to attend Cabinet and provide their true lived experience perspectives to help Walsall Council shape and improve service delivery based on the lived experiences of individuals.

Some examples of recent lived experience items at Cabinet include two of Walsall’s care leavers who attended Cabinet during April 2024 to explain some of the everyday challenges and prejudices they face. Lived experience perspectives were also provided on the EDI Strategy item during December 2024 from a Walsall Council staff network member and a member from a partner organisation. The lived experience opportunity has allowed enhanced engagement and the opinions of local people to be valued and heard.

Transgender and Non-binary Equality Policy

The Gender Reassignment guidance has been replaced with a new Transgender & Non-binary Equality Policy which covers the following:

- The provision of further information / support available to transgender and non-binary employees / workers and including preferred use of names and pronouns.
- Recruitment requirements.
- Introduction of a wellbeing support plan and review meetings, to ensure the right support is in place.

Children and Young People's Strategic Alliance

Walsall's Children and Young People's Strategic Alliance was formed in 2022 with key partners and anchor institutions, including health, police, community safety, voluntary and community sector organisations. It is critical to driving new ways of thinking and new ways of working and is driven by the voices of children and young people with a focus on improving the lived experiences of children and young people in Walsall.

The 'Big Conversation' took place in early 2024 to understand the aspirations, concerns and views of children and young people across the borough. In total, over 500 responses were collected, covering varying socio-economic profiles and with fantastic engagement from minority community pupils (48%). Also, as part of the co-production work, a Youth Summit and Youth Debate at Walsall College took place attended by 200 young people alongside Council leaders. The Children and Young People's Strategy was finalised in October 2024 and was presented by our young people at Cabinet.

Walsall Learning Alliance

The Walsall Learning Alliance has been formed with the common purpose of improving the education and wellbeing of children, young people, and families across Walsall through collective accountability. Each sector of the education system is represented on the Walsall Learning Alliance, which acts as the strategic forum for raising and solving system wide issues.

A Belonging Conference, facilitated and hosted by the Walsall Learning Alliance, took place on 26th April 2024. The aim of the event was to challenge system leaders to think differently about children's experiences of learning, and how as a system the outcomes and lived experiences for children and young people can be improved.

170 Leaders attended the event with the full range of education providers represented as well as early years providers, and colleagues from police, health, and the voluntary sector. Delegates heard powerful messages from children across Walsall and young people about what 'belonging' means to them, and some of the issues local Headteachers deal with every day and shared examples about what is working well in Walsall. Delegates were also presented with clear evidence from national experts about the positive impact of belonging, for staff as well as students.

Walsall Right for Children

In December 2023, Children's Services began to review the Walsall Right for Children (WR4C) vision, foundations, and priorities to ensure alignment to the Council Plan and the We Are Walsall 2040 borough-wide plan themes comprising of 'Child Friendly Borough' and 'Feel Safe'. During January and February 2024, our Big Conversation programme took place - a series of activities listening to what 503 individual children and families said about what they think are the important actions to be taken to ensure the best outcomes are secured for children and families in the Borough.

In addition, the voices of young people from two thematic engagement programmes were captured. ‘Reformation 2’ – the system is a documentary produced with young people in the Youth Justice system setting out the issues around disproportionality and calling on the system to make changes and ‘It Takes a Village’ is a documentary produced with our young people leaving care which sets out the system change that needs to happen to ensure care experienced young people have better lived experiences and opportunities.

Some of the views of our young people showed that those from deprived areas feel more negative about growing up in Walsall and about future opportunities and felt racism was a part of their everyday lives. Some children identified having good and sustainable networks of support provides them with the foundations for the best start in life, feeling safe and developing into successful adults. It was evident that children are concerned about being safe, their environment, green spaces, good educational opportunities, and the availability of jobs for the future. Children want to be an active part of making change. This feedback has allowed Children’s Services to publish their refreshed aspirations, priorities, and foundations to continue to deliver better outcomes whilst ensuring every child’s voice is heard.

Expansion of We Are Walsall 2040 Partnership

During this year, new partners from the community, business and education sectors have joined the We Are Walsall 2040 Partnership to expand its breadth and depth. These include Walsall FC Community Foundation, Walsall Community Network, Federation for Small Businesses, Walsall Learning Alliance, and the Multi-Academy CEO Forum.

To strengthen the strategic partnership, joint funding for a Partnership Manager role has been raised by partners to allow a Partnership Manager to commence their role in 2025. A Walsall 2040 Communications Group and Walsall 2040 Delivery Group have also been formed to help delivery of the Partnership’s ambitions.

Children and Young People Participation Strategy

As part of our consultation work with children and young people in 2024, work has commenced on developing a Children and Young People Participation Strategy and a Parent and Carer Participation Strategy. Both strategies are at an early stage of development, and we intend to have finalised strategies by the Summer of 2025. Ensuring our children and young people have a voice and are heard is a key element of ensuring equity for all.

Leaders’ Responses to national unrest

Walsall Council’s senior leadership team has been proactive and committed to ensuring the mental and physical wellbeing of staff and residents. This dedication was evident during the planned protests in August 2024, which targeted minority groups within the borough. The Council’s Chief Executive, Executive Directors, and Leader of the Council promptly reassured colleagues and residents, working closely with the police, community, and local groups to provide up-to-date information, dispel any rumours, and implement well-rehearsed plans to protect everyone involved.

Objective: Services

To design and deliver accessible services that meet the needs of our diverse population.

The Council is committed to design and deliver accessible services that meet the needs of our diverse population through a detailed understanding of our residents, service users and their needs. We deliver a range of services and support across the borough. Our approach is aligned to our corporate values, which highlight how the Council works with local communities and businesses and influences choice, behaviours and the ability to access appropriate support and resources.

We want services in the Council to understand what residents want and need to enable us to design and deliver an excellent service user experience, make reasonable adjustments for service users, reduce inequalities and health inequalities, be fair, and provide good customer care for the diverse range of people we serve.

We have carried out extensive work across our services to ensure they are accessible to all customers and are exploring how we leverage social value to ensure our commissioning and procurement provide local opportunities and value to Walsall residents.

Key achievements this year include:

Walsall Connected

Walsall Connected is a collaboration between the Council and its partner organisations to build resilient communities across the borough. The 29 Walsall Connected Centres, created through Walsall Council's partnerships with libraries and community organisations such as Bloxwich Community Partnership, provide essential digital support and training to help residents access council services online. Whether residents need help finding council information, ordering a bigger bin, applying for a blue badge, or learning digital basics, Walsall Connected is there to make digital access simple and local.

We continue to see an increase in individuals accessing connected centres, common inquiry types, Food Banks, Housing register applications, Blue badge applications and the Household Support Fund evidencing the reliance of vulnerable individuals on these hubs.

This year, our Walsall Connected Service has been recognised and won the PENNA (Patient Experience Network National Awards) Award for Patient Care Excellence for our innovative partnership with Walsall Manor Hospital. This is a significant achievement that highlights the remarkable progress we have made in enhancing digital access and delivering better services to the residents of Walsall.

Walsall Works Expo

This year's Walsall Works Expo was a great success and is one of the largest jobs fairs in the West Midlands, with almost 1,000 job seekers able to seek support and advice from 70 employers, recruiters and training providers. Some of the new businesses in attendance this year and offering new job openings and training courses included: Morgan Sindall, Lidl, One Stop, Walsh Funerals & Memorials, Mission Accomplished, Althaus Digital, Titan Recruitment, Tudor Employment, Ibstock, CECOS and Tag Construction.

Walsall Works: developing skills and creating job opportunities for our residents

Walsall Works established in 2012 through an initial Council investment, continues to address high levels of youth unemployment and supports people who are unemployed, economically inactive, are recent migrants and those who face multiple barriers to getting into work or training. Walsall residents are supported to gain skills and qualifications to progress into sustainable employment and apprenticeships. Successfully bidding into multiple external funding streams has helped to spark economic growth in the town and support job creation. Expert guidance is provided along with professional support to enhance our resident's employability skills, create paid work placements, promote training, and connect residents with the right skills for jobs and apprenticeships. Qualified Advisors are co-located in 20 community settings, which include jobcentres, libraries, family hubs and community centres.

During 2024, the demand for our support has continued to be high, with 1,800 residents engaged with our services and over 1,200 positive outcomes for participants, ranging from employment, apprenticeships, part or full-time training, self-employment, and work placements. Demographic data is captured on our participants including age, gender, location, ethnicity, physical disability, learning difficulties and mental health issues including information on their support needs such as social-economic needs and language barriers.

Walsall Works leverages social value

Walsall Works actively leverages social value from major contracts to benefit our residents, local businesses, communities, and schools. This ensures that commitments made through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are directly linked to those who would benefit most from our services such as our residents. Our proactive approach ensures that social value is not just a checkbox, but a vibrant and impactful part of our business community.

We continue to play a key role in scoring and moderating the social value elements of major public funded procurement, both during and after the contracts are awarded, Walsall Works engages with the contractors to monitor and facilitate contractual commitments and provide further support with innovative ways to positively impact local communities.

Our key focus now and in the future is to retain and grow the Employment and Skills offer and have a positive impact on the lives of our residents. Whilst also making significant reduction on the social and economic challenges faced by participants residing in the borough. Through our energetic and committed efforts, Walsall Works

champions the cause for positive action schemes, to transform the lives of our local communities.

Our Economic Strategy focuses on building a positive future by increasing the number of local businesses, expanding local employment and skills, and leveraging our geographic advantages, connectivity, robust industrial sectors, and collaborative efforts with anchor institutions. Additionally, we are finalising an Employment and Skills Strategy in partnership with local stakeholders to further support this growth aligning with our Place Based Strategy.

Community Advisors

Six community advisors have been recruited from different cultural backgrounds who provide 16 hours each of sessional time per month of cultural competency advice to the public sector, the NHS and the Council to reduce some inequalities faced by the new communities. One of the advisors specialises in working with White British communities in the most deprived areas of Walsall.

Enabling Technology

Digital Inclusion and Accessibility

This year, significant progress has been made in improving digital accessibility as part of our equality, diversity, and inclusion commitments. Following the introduction of WCAG 2.2 legislation, a comprehensive audit of all digital applications has been completed to assess risks and enhance compliance.

Global Accessibility Awareness Day

To support and promote understanding and awareness within the Council, Global Accessibility Awareness Day was marked, using it as an opportunity to engage and educate colleagues about the importance of digital accessibility. We have focused particularly on raising awareness among those managing our digital applications or publishing web content, including PDFs. This work has strengthened our organisational understanding and commitment to creating a more accessible digital environment for all and is making a noticeable improvement for our customers and staff.

Customer Experience Enabling Technology

During 2024, new translation technology has been introduced within the webchat and telephony systems, transforming the way our Customer Experience Advisors engage with non-English-speaking residents. CX Translate is an innovative tool, an app that translates real-time typed message conversations, helping us provide great customer service in any language. The introduction of CX Translate and the enhancements to our chatbot and live chat services have significantly improved our customer interactions, making our services more accessible, inclusive and efficient.

Chatbot (WALIS) updates

Customer feedback has enabled our Chatbot (WALIS) to be updated with new features now available to our residents and staff. Previously, WALIS could only return information on FAQs, and customers had to phone or email for further information. WALIS delivers much more and has expanded FAQs to create a much

larger knowledge base. Initially, over 800 articles were created, and through continuous review, there are almost 1,500 articles now.

Live Webchat

Residents can also connect with one of our Customer Experience Centre (CXC) advisers for real-time interaction through our Live Webchat. Advisers have access to a bespoke knowledge base accessed through a feature called ‘Agent Assist,’ allowing them to search for information while chatting with residents online, ensuring correct and most up-to-date information is provided. Users have highlighted the convenience and effectiveness of real-time help.

Since August, we have provided enhanced interactions providing ID verification, intent, or knowledge to our customers, as well as handling 1928 ‘live’ chats, 97% of the total amount of requests across services including clean and green, community protection, schools’ admission, free school meals, revenues, and benefits. The knowledge base has also grown by 49%, with the number of articles increasing daily. This growth reflects our commitment to continuously improving the resources available to our residents. Initial feedback from residents is positive with some suggested improvements to the chatbot icon, and we are currently testing new designs to enhance user engagement.

Service Channel Management

The introduction of new translation technology within the webchat and telephony systems has transformed the way our Customer Experience Advisors engage with non-English-speaking residents. Below is what some of our advisors had to say about using the technology:

“I used the chatbot to have a conversation with a Polish gentleman. Using the translator made it so much easier for me and less stressful for him—he could express what he needed without struggling to translate it into English. I found the translator very accurate.

This demonstrates how technology can provide a step toward a more inclusive service and enhance our ability to serve all residents, particularly those who may feel isolated due to language barriers.

MS CoPilot

Feedback from users has highlighted that the implementation of M365 Copilot has enhanced efficiency and inclusivity for users with visual impairments and dyslexia, in document creation, meeting summarisation and data analysis. We continue to explore options to expand its use for automating complex workflows and are working with Microsoft to improve accessibility features.

Windows 11

Windows 11 now has accessibility features such as Voice Control, which can open and switch between apps, browse the web, read, and author emails, and more all without a mouse or keyboard. This supports accessibility for those with inclusion needs.

Accessibility Software

DaTS Customer Services are responsible for the installation and support of various pieces of accessibility software such as Dragon Naturally Speaking and Read & Write to fulfil Access to Work requests. The accessibility software is useful for those with accessibility needs.

Tech Enabled Care

DaTs and Adult Social Care are working together to provide a range of digital solutions that will support customers with additional needs or vulnerabilities to live more independently. Initiatives such as 'Ask Sara' will allow citizens to self-serve their immediate needs. The Walsall virtual house will be relaunched to enable residents to virtually explore care solutions in both a TEC and conventional sense. Tools such as Brain-in-Hand in our Learning Disability and Mental Health teams will transition from Pilot into BAU and working with suppliers to deliver Digital assistants to support users through home automation, passive monitoring systems and virtual care visits.

We are also exploring opportunities to use generative AI solutions to assist colleagues to turn around reports and assessments in shorter time frames allowing quicker response to the service user around Care.

New British Sign Language Video Interpreter Service

A new service has been launched to make it easier for users of British Sign Language to access services. Walsall residents can now access an on-demand video British Sign Language (BSL) Service, in which an interpreter will translate a conversation between council staff and the caller. During a call, an interpreter can communicate with a staff member from any of the Council's service areas on the phone, and sign with the BSL user on a live video call. The service is accessible from any internet-connected device with a camera. This has proven to be invaluable as a member of our DaTS team has been able to use the service whilst working as a poll clerk for the General Elections.

Walsall Energy Action Project (WEAP)

The Walsall Energy Action Project is a three year, borough wide partnership initiative, operated in collaboration with Community Hub partners to offer direct support to Walsall residents to not only assess and reduce household energy spending during the cost of living crisis, but also to educate and share knowledge on how we can all play a part in improving our communities and the wider environment through positive climate action. Services include 1-2-1 energy advice sessions, home visits and community events. WEAP is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

This year, WEAP has set up pop up Energy Cafés across the borough. These welcoming spaces provide residents with valuable advice on saving energy, reducing carbon footprints, and cutting household costs. The cafés are a one-stop hub for practical, impactful advice and offer residents the opportunity to become more aware of how they can contribute to positive climate action. The cafes have increased engagement with our residents.

Adult Social Care: Pathway to Independence

The Adult Social Care team have now launched the Pathway to Independence initiative. The initiative is based on three core principles with overarching goals and objectives. This initiative aims to support adults who need social care services to achieve their personal goals and live as independently as possible for as long as possible in their own homes. Thirty-two new members of staff have been recruited for this new team and training has taken place.

Following an initial assessment by a Neighbourhood Community Officer, the assessor will work with the individual to identify how their outcomes can be met through the provision of equipment, adaptations and/or assistive technology. There may also be signposting and connecting with local community groups and services to promote community engagement and reduce social isolation. Community Reablement is a hybrid model with the internal and external teams working collaboratively to deliver an outcome-focused approach, aiming to build the individuals confidence and skills to maximise their independence.

Transition and Leaving Care (TLC) Team

The TLC team works with all care experienced children in the borough, supporting them from 17-25 years old, and in some instances beyond. The team operates from the TLC Hub in Pleck, which continues to operate an open-door policy to young people. Hot food and drinks are available as well as laundry facilities, emergency food pantry, free Wi-Fi, plus free sanitary and baby products. The hub fosters a multi-agency approach, with drop ins being hosted by partners such as NHS colleagues, Walsall Works, DWP and Walsall Virtual School, giving care leavers access to specialist advice and support when they need it.

Last year a documentary film was commissioned, ‘It Takes A Village’ to explore the lived experiences of young people leaving care in Walsall and the barriers they face. This film delivers an honest insight into the daily challenges and focusses on independence, accommodation, and mental health. The film highlights solutions needed for young people as they transition away and celebrates the steps they have taken after leaving the care system. The film has raised awareness about the need for the formation of a Children in Care and Care Leavers Alliance, expansion of the Local Offer for Care Leavers, an increase in social events and opportunities for care leavers to connect and a need for securing funding for a National House Project in Walsall. The team has been recognised for their excellence at the West Midlands ADCS Team Excellence Awards in 2024.

Locality-based Support for Voluntary and Community Organisations including social enterprises

Walsall Council, in partnership with NHS Black Country Integrated Care Board (ICB), this year launched a new locality-based model of support for Walsall’s voluntary and community organisations across the borough. This new model aims to provide more locality-based support to the voluntary and community sector, championing them and enabling their voice to be heard.

Organisations can access support, training and advice on policies and procedures and external funding in four locality-based hubs based in Walsall, Bentley, Bloxwich and Rushall. This support ensures that local community and voluntary groups can

continue to grow and flourish providing much needed support to Walsall communities. In addition, the new model brings groups together to help tackle issues such as loneliness and isolation in the elderly, children, and young people.

Pension Credit specialist support for residents

In October 2024, a cohort of low-income pensioner households were contacted to encourage the take up of Pension Credit. They were identified from our LIFT dashboard and advised they could supplement their income and retain their Winter Fuel Payment if they made a claim. This was followed up in November 2024 with more specialist support provided where surgeries were held. Our Housing and Welfare Team provided a telephone support service.

When the Household Support Fund was announced in October last year, we allocated £300,000 to support low-income pensioner households who may have lost their Winter Fuel Payment. Over 700 households have been identified fitting the criteria. Letters are sent to households inviting them to call us and a direct one-off payment is issued of either £200 or £300 dependent on their age where applicable.

Holiday, Activities and Food (HAF) Programme

The Holiday, Activities, and Food (HAF) Programme is a free programme for children and young people aged 5 – 16 who are eligible for benefit-related free school meals. The Department for Education (DfE) funded programme runs over Easter, Summer, and Christmas school holidays.

The programme is centred around several aims which include healthy eating, being active, supporting development and wider educational achievement, being safe and not socially isolated, and greater engagement with school and other local services. The HAF programme has been a valuable mechanism for consulting with residents to inform the design of services and strategies.

The Council works with over 80 activity providers in the borough to offer children and young people, fun, locally based activities, while providing the opportunity for learning and developing new skills or having new experiences. Over the year, the HAF programme has continued to grow, and during summer, more than 6200 individual places were booked onto the programme for the summer holidays of 2024. Eligible families were able to book activities running between 29 July until 22 August 2024, giving many children an opportunity to try to learn and develop new skills. The current round of funding ends on 31st March 2025.

Corporate Parenting

The Corporate Parenting Team is focussing on continuing to extend the Local Offer for Care Leavers alongside realising the potential of the Protected Characteristic status and supporting our first cohort of young people through the National House Project.

The National House Project will involve working with a cohort of 8-10 young people at the age of 16 to equip them with a high level of independence skills, whilst also supporting them to form a community together as they move into their own home. Three members of staff will support this project.

Objective: Workforce

To be an inclusive organisation with staff at all levels who represent the diversity of our borough.

This year we have proceeded with implementing the Workforce Strategy 2023-2026 through ensuring we support and develop our workforce. We continue to ensure staff are seen, heard and included and provided with effective support, training, and development opportunities.

We continue to focus our efforts on recruiting a skilled and diverse workforce that has a sense of safety and belonging, feels valued, recognised, and rewarded for the work that they do. Promoting equitable career progression also remains as one of our key aims. To support this, we have strengthened our governance structure and staff networks and continue to aspire to having a diverse workforce at all levels. The EDI team continues to grow, with a new member of the team recently employed.

Key achievements this year include:

Corporate Staff Networks

Following a review of our previous staff network structure, which included carrying out a whole council staff survey and undertaking additional training from Cherron Inko-Tariah MBE, the experienced civil servant and CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) professional and author of *The Incredible Power of Staff Networks*, we widened the range of networks available by introducing the six new Corporate Staff Networks, thus creating safe spaces for connection and dialogue. These networks reflect the needs and interests of our staff:

- Our LGBTQIA+ Network
- Our Emerging Professionals Network
- Our (Dis)Ability Network
- Our Parents and Carers Network
- Our Ethnically Diverse Network
- Our All-Workers Welcome Network

Network membership has been positive. Over 170 staff members have joined the networks so far. We are seeing and hearing the positive impact these networks are having across the council. The networks connect people that would not normally work together, including those working remotely. As a result of these meetings, there have already been several items and suggestions that have been taken back to CEG for consideration. All networks have an Executive Leadership Team sponsor, ensuring that each network has a direct link with leadership.

Voices From Within Platform

We have launched the Voices From Within platform during June 2024. This is a platform where employees report concerns, ensuring employees' voices are heard and issues are addressed promptly and effectively, fostering trust and transparency across the council. Employees can also speak directly to an Equality Champion.

Concerns raised via the Voices From Within Platform have all been successfully resolved.

Equality Champions

Since the launch of the Equality Champion programme in November 2023, Walsall Council has made significant strides in promoting equality across the organisation. The programme now includes 73 Equality Champions across the Council.

Equality Champions are paving the way within the Council to ensure a culture where everyone is empowered, respected, valued, and listened to. They are equipped with the knowledge and skills to deliver their role through undertaking a six-week training programme.

As a result of the Equality Champions, staff have more confidence to raise concerns and have seen positive actions to resolve them. Champions have provided advice and guidance on how to, for example, access Occupational Health and have supported a vulnerable member of staff facing racial abuse from service users.

The Equality Champions Network supports the positive impact we can collectively make towards fostering a culture of equality, diversity, and inclusion within Walsall and break down barriers to engage with the workforce. There are a range of materials available to promote the champions internally including logos and MS TEAMS backgrounds.

We are also very pleased to have been recognised for our Equality Champions work having been one of the finalists in the LGC Workforce Award 2024 for this initiative.

Organisational Champion Newsletter

Our Organisational Champion Newsletter has been created and delivered to staff on a quarterly basis to keep staff up to date with EDI developments. The newsletter contains information on quarterly champions, upcoming events and training opportunities.

Mental Health - Our Employee Assistance Programme

Our Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provider Vivup hosted a live webinar during October 2024 to coincide with World Mental Health Day, focusing upon how the service can support employee wellbeing, and covering a wide range of support on offer.

In addition, the Mental Fitness – “Movement for Wellbeing,” has been promoted where we offer staff a drop-in 1 hour session. This session provides staff with an opportunity to share and listen to other’s experiences, insights and knowledge.

New EDI eLearning

A wider range of EDI courses and resources have been added to our workforce online learning platform, making vital resources accessible to all. The new courses include: ‘Understanding Racism’, ‘A-Z of Anti-Racism’, ‘Understanding Privilege’, ‘Microaggressions’ and ‘Allyship’.

Bespoke Sector Training

This year we have developed and delivered bespoke EDI training identified as a need by senior managers. The themes for the training include Inclusive Language, Transgender Awareness and Inclusive Practices.

Diversity and Inclusion Calendar

Our Diversity and Inclusion calendar is available to all staff to view on the Council intranet. The calendar informs the Council's communication plans in terms of which events to promote, share and include to staff and residents and ensures we have effective planning time. Communication and promotion involve raising awareness, sharing colleagues' voices and stories to demonstrate inclusivity and to educate, inform and provide information on events across the Council and borough.

Celebrating Autism Pride Day: Embracing Neurodiversity

On Autism Pride Day, we came together to celebrate the unique perspectives and strengths of individuals on the autism spectrum. This day was about awareness and pride - pride in the diversity that makes our community and our Council vibrant and strong. By recognising and celebrating the varied experiences of autistic individuals, we foster a culture of acceptance and understanding. It is a day to highlight the importance of inclusion and to advocate for the rights and dignity of all autistic people.

National Inclusion Week 23-29 September 2024: Impact Matters

National Inclusion Week (NIW), founded by Inclusive Employers, celebrated inclusion and work towards building more inclusive workplaces. This year's theme was #ImpactMatters: highlighting the importance of making a tangible difference.

Throughout the week, leaders across the Black Country Integrated Care Board (ICB) hosted a range of events, including live presentations and pre-recorded videos. Key sessions covered topics like compassionate leadership, equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategies, and the role of staff networks in advancing equality.

Black History Month Celebration

During Black History month in October 2024, the Council hosted a range of activities and events to share experiences, stories and knowledge about the rich diversity and heritage of our Black communities. During October 2024, 200 people attended the Black History Month Celebration event. Our fostering service and local charity, Walsall's Black Sisters Collective (WBSC), hosted a free event at Walsall Arena with live performances, including singing, dancing, poetry, workshops, talks and a fashion show.

There were two virtual cafes providing a great opportunity to connect with colleagues, share stories, and support one another in creating an inclusive workplace. The focus this year was on using inclusive language in our everyday conversations. This was an opportunity to raise awareness and support for those going through menopause, as well as their colleagues. The day encouraged open conversations and better understanding of the challenges faced by those experiencing this natural phase of life. It also included promotional materials, two-hour awareness sessions for teams, and a training session for managers on promoting positive mental health and drop-in sessions.

Men's Health Awareness Month

November 2024 marked Men's Health Awareness Month, but also International Men's Day which took place on Tuesday 19 November. The theme for this year's Men's Day was Positive Male Role Models. A member of staff shared his story for all council staff to read.

Disability History Month

Disability History Month took place from November to December 2024 and the theme was Disability, Livelihood and Employment and it promoted disabled people's rights and their struggle for equality past and present.

Awareness of Hidden Disabilities

This year, we have worked hard to raise awareness of hidden disabilities within our workforce to ensure greater visibility and support. In total, 91 employees now have sunflower lanyards for their hidden disabilities.

Aspiring to Excellence in Management Programme

As part of the programme, the workforce EDI team has ensured that each cohort of 'Aspiring to Excellence in Management' is both equitable and representative. Waiting lists are not managed on a first-come, first-served basis; instead, they are reviewed comprehensively to ensure a diverse mix of individuals within each cohort.

We continue to analyse data to highlight where specific targeting is required for underrepresented groups within the application process.

In addition to this we are delivering training opportunities for 'Applying for an internal position' and 'Interviewing for an internal position', both of which are open to all staff.

Armed Forces Covenant

The Armed Forces Covenant Induction new eLearning modules are available to all staff to raise awareness of the Armed Forces Covenant. They aim to help staff understand and apply the principles of the Covenant with confidence.

Menopause Awareness

In 2024, significant strides were made in promoting menopause awareness at Walsall Council. We have rolled out a substantial training programme covering topics such as barriers around menopause, coping strategies, and HRT awareness. All training and activities have significantly increased awareness among staff and led to more open conversations. There is a better understanding of the challenges faced by those experiencing menopause. The focus on mental health and wellbeing, particularly during Menopause Awareness Week, has equipped some managers and staff with the tools to support each other effectively. This should contribute to overall staff wellbeing.

In addition, the number of Menopause Champions increased to 43 and Menopause Champions Catch-up Sessions have been delivered to refresh their knowledge and

skills. The Menopause Champions provide a vital support network, offering advice and signposting to additional resources. This should help in creating a more supportive and inclusive work environment.

Our Future Plans

We are proud of our dedication to embed equality, diversity, and inclusion in the way we work and deliver services. We will strive to continue making considerable progress with our equality, diversity, and inclusion work across the Council over the next year. We will move forward with our ambitions in our new Council Plan and new EDI Strategy, which puts equality, diversity, and inclusion at its heart and aligns to driving forward our overarching borough vision for We Are Walsall 2040. We want staff and residents to understand that our Council services are committed to embedding EDI across services that are shaped by feedback and data from our residents and communities.

To support this, our action plans are aligned to each of the four themes of the Equality Framework for Local Government which are pivotal for us to deliver and meet our obligations and duties under the Equality Act. The delivery of the action plans will enable us to identify areas for improvement and growth and implement rigorous performance monitoring and benchmarking processes to assess our efforts in resolving inequalities and delivering a more coordinated and inclusive approach to EDI in the Council. This will continue to be our priority as we strive to consolidate and improve our current position and move beyond 'achieving' as a Council.

We will continue to reinforce our commitment to EDI through reviewing Council governance; strengthening the role and membership of our Corporate Equalities Group and ensuring responsibility for tackling inequality sits at every level across the Council. Collaboration with our partners, residents, community groups and the workforce during this journey is key as these stakeholders play a key role in influencing and shaping the Council's approach to a more inclusive Walsall.

We will also strive to develop our approach centred around fostering a culture of EDI through collaborating with our stakeholders when developing and implementing equitable and inclusive policies whilst addressing inequalities through implementing solutions promptly. An inclusive and person-centred approach will support the Council to understand the drivers of inequality and how to tackle these to sustain our journey in promoting EDI.

Key ambitions for 2025/26 include:

- We will begin to understand the rich equality data and information we have across the Council and look at how we use it to make better service design and delivery decisions.
- We will look at our processes around commissioning and procurement to ensure we meet our social value policy.
- We will continue to develop our Lived Experience programme ensuring that real voices from our communities can be heard to inform decisions and services.
- We will assess and improve staff exit data to include protected characteristics (where available) to allow identification of patterns/trends in relation to the reasons for leaving that can be used to inform targeted actions.
- We will continue our engaging workforce equalities programme, piloting a reverse mentoring scheme, hosting inspirational talks, supporting our staff networks and including Equality champions on recruitment panels.

- We will leverage our partnerships and relationships with the VCSE to ensure all key decisions within the council are inclusive and collaborative.
- We will undertake more staff engagement including a council wide staff survey to hear from all our staff and ensure their views shape the culture of the Council.
- We will develop a clear EDI performance framework to ensure we monitor and track the implementation of our new EDI strategy.
- We will continue to work with partners across the community to promote cohesion and integration and support community events and activities for all.
- We will look at a consistent approach to the inclusion of equality objectives in our service planning and strategy development across the Council.