

# Walsall Council

## Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Annual Report 2023/24



Walsall Council

PROUD OF OUR PAST OUR PRESENT AND FOR OUR FUTURE

# Walsall Council

## Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Annual Report 2023-2024

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## Our commitment

Walsall Council is committed to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). Our Council Plan 2022-2025 vision is that 'Inequalities are reduced, and all potential is maximised'. Promoting equalities, tackling inequity, and fostering good relations across our diverse communities is at the heart of our work across the borough and is at the forefront of We are Walsall 2040- our collective borough wide strategic ambition and vision for what we want Walsall to be in the future.

A strong Council focus on equality is vital to ensure that we have the right services at the right time and in the right places to help our communities navigate the challenges of worsening inflation and uncertainty. Covid-19 hit our most vulnerable communities in Walsall hard exacerbating already existing inequalities and had a disproportionate effect across different equality characteristics and communities. The Council has worked a lot with, and in communities, to ensure that our services continue to be a vital lifeline and that we develop a deeper understanding of what is needed to ensure we meet our future ambitions for Walsall.

Walsall has a lot to be proud of with a rich diversity of peoples and cultures. Our cohesion and integration work through the Walsall for All partnership highlights the strength and resilience and joy of such diversity in shaping the Walsall of today and tomorrow.

Our 2040 ambitions enshrine our commitment and focus on EDI with a clear and coherent partnership vision that ensures we must work collectively across anchor organisations, community groups and with residents to ensure all people no matter their characteristics have equality and equity of opportunity and improved life chances.

*"Walsall in 2040 will be the most improved borough in the region, a vibrant place where people are proud to live and residents in all neighbourhoods have the same life chances".*

Many of the outcomes to be achieved in partnership by 2040 have a clear EDI focus with an aim to see improvements for carers, children, and young people, those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, those experiencing health inequalities and to improve opportunities to celebrate diversity and ensure inclusion across the borough.

We are Walsall2040 EDI related outcomes include:

- By 2040 Walsall will have narrowed the gap in health inequalities.
- By 2040 all carers will be supported to meet their needs and maintain their quality of life.
- By 2040 Walsall will be known as a place of cohesion where communities work together, and diversity is celebrated and respected.
- By 2040 child poverty will be significantly reduced and children will feel safe and secure in their homes and neighbourhoods

- By 2040 we will see improvement in education levels across the borough with a narrowing of the gap in outcomes for vulnerable children and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- By 2040 Walsall will be a borough of opportunity for young people with broad options for apprenticeships, graduate roles, and pathways for careers in local business.
- By 2040 Walsall will have increased skill levels to close the gap on the national average and have a workforce that is ready to meet the needs of the future economy
- By 2040 we will be a financially inclusive borough with reduced debt levels and high levels of financial literacy.
- By 2040 Walsall will be a digital borough where all residents can access digital services and are confident and capable in a digital world.
- By 2040 we will continue to build on our heritage and identity within the Black Country and celebrate our shared stories and legacy.
- By 2040 our communities will come together to celebrate their diversity and traditions in an inclusive way.

We cannot achieve these outcomes as a Council operating alone and must work with our partners and local voluntary and community groups and residents to ensure we all play our part to achieve the desired ambitions, address inequalities, and improve life chances.

As well as having highly diverse communities, Walsall Council too has a diverse, proud, and hard-working staff, many of whom are from the communities we serve. Over the last 12 months we have worked with staff to ensure that those with EDI characteristics have a voice and can be heard. We have reviewed our approach to workforce equality issues and structures and strengthened our governance and approach. We were delighted that our strides in EDI were recognised this year by the LGA peer reviewers as the Council undertook its 5-year LGA Corporate Peer Challenge. Our good start to consolidate EDI across the organisation was acknowledged when the peer team visited us in January 2023. Providing a more co-ordinated approach to EDI and making the workforce more representative of the communities we serve was highlighted as key areas of focus for the Council from the reviewers. The Council used this recommendation as a call to action and subsequently have progressed EDI under our new workforce strategy, supported new staff networks and pushed ahead with plans for a new EDI strategy.

During the '6 months on' revisit in October 2023 the LGA team were pleased with the momentum on EDI and commented on 'the significant progress' and 'strong examples' of EDI work across the Council. We are energised because of this acknowledgement of our progress and trajectory and passionate about driving forward a new culture of continuous learning and improving with equalities at its heart. Our new EDI strategy will reaffirm our commitment to Equality, equity and inclusion and will set out our long-term EDI vision for the council ensuring that we put EDI principles at the forefront of how we operate and make decisions.

We are excited to outline in this report the excellent work that has been achieved on our continuing improvement journey this last year and our next steps as we move into the next phase of equality.

## Our approach

### The Equality Act

The Council has a statutory duty to ensure that equality and diversity are considered and embedded across our services and functions. This is required by the Equality Act 2010, which 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

### The Public Sector Equality Duty

The Equality Act is supported by the Public Sector Equality Duty, which requires that public bodies such as Councils consider how people will be affected by decisions and services and to ensure that public services meet all different people'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;
- And foster good relations between people.

Under the Equality Act, Councils also have specific duties and must:

- publish information to demonstrate their compliance with the Equality Duty annually. This information must include information relating to employees;
- 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.

## The Equality Framework for Local Government

The Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) has been developed by the Local Government Association to help Councils to meet their obligations and duties under the Equality Act. The framework helpfully outlines key objectives and actions that Councils could consider in fulfilling their Public Sector Equality Duty. The framework is composed of four themes and Walsall Council have taken the decision to align our current and future EDI work to the framework. This means that we have a clear objective standard against which to set objectives and monitor progress, and it enables us to benchmark against other local authorities. This report has been organised with achievements and case studies mapped against each of the four EFLG themes and our future EDI strategy (in development) and delivery plan will be aligned to these themes.

**Theme 1:** Understanding and working with our communities

**Theme 2:** Leadership, partnership, and organisational commitment

**Theme 3:** Responsive services and customer care

**Theme 4:** Diverse and engaged workforce

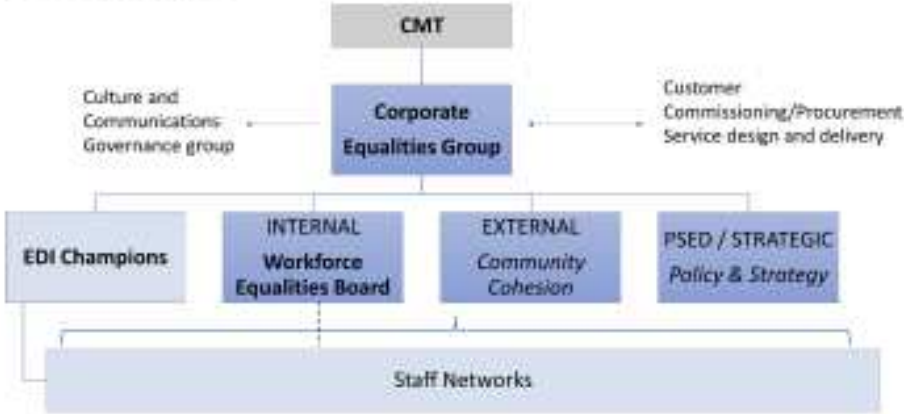
## Our current objectives

The Council's current equality objectives are:

1. We will promote inclusion and commit to understanding the individual experience throughout our work.
2. We will engage and empower local communities to resolve equality issues.
3. We will strive to have a diverse workforce at all levels.
4. We will treat people and agencies that we work with, fairly, justly and with respect, by being open, inclusive, and collaborative.
5. We will find ways to support those who are disadvantaged or excluded.

We are reviewing these objectives as part of ongoing work to develop a new overarching EDI strategy and delivery plan alongside a refresh of our Council Plan for 2025. The new objectives are anticipated to be aligned to the Equality Framework for Local Government.

### EDI Structure



The Council has a clear governance structure and processes in place on the officer side to ensure EDI is embedded at the heart of our service design, delivery, workforce, and strategic decision-making.

**Corporate Equalities Group (CEG)** is the key governance group whose role is to oversee that the Council meets the requirements of the Equality Act, Public Sector Equality Duty, and Human Rights Act in:

- setting equality outcomes and monitoring progress against them;
- advancing equality of opportunity, as far as is reasonable within its resources and business need;
- eliminating unlawful and unfair discrimination;
- fostering good relations between people who share one or more protected characteristics and those who do not share them;
- monitoring the composition of its workforce and the take-up of its services and take positive action to redress inequalities;
- meeting equality legal requirements in commissioning and procurement.

CEG is currently chaired by the Council Chief Executive alongside a workforce champion Trade Union representative. It consists of key officers with responsibilities for EDI across policy and strategy, community cohesion functions, communications, and HR/OD as well as representation from staff networks, and trade unions. Its Terms of Reference will soon be updated to strengthen the roles and responsibilities and ensure customer and service representation and voice from across the Council. This will give CEG a clear remit in taking key decisions around EDI and ensure it is embedded even further in service design, commissioning, and delivery. CEG sits underneath the purview of the Councils Management Team (CMT) which is



composed of the senior leaders from across the Council's management and statutory officers. As CEG is chaired by the Chief Executive it highlights the emphasis and importance that Walsall Council places on putting this agenda at the heart of decisions.

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, concerns and promote opportunities, learning and share diversity. The staff network chairs have a seat at the Workforce Equalities Board to ensure there is clear route upwards to CEG to cascade any issues or concerns.

Alongside this the **EDI Champions** play a crucial role within and across services to be the lead and 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 agenda. Alongside this we also have mandatory annual 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 Walsall communities



Walsall borough is made up of six towns – Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston, Walsall and Willenhall – each with their own distinct identities. And our 20 wards and numerous neighbourhoods also have their own diverse characteristics. 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.

Walsall overall was ranked as the 25th most deprived local authority in England (in the Indices of Deprivation, 2019). However, 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 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.

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

The most recent national census of population was conducted in 2021 and the information it gathered is invaluable for understanding equality and diversity right down to 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. For the first time, the 2021 Census included (voluntary) questions on sexual orientation and gender identity alongside questions on age, sex, ethnicity, religion, and marital status. This gives us an opportunity to understand all aspects of our residents' identities, providing a full and timely picture of inter-related protected characteristics.

- Walsall has a **resident population** of 284,400, which has been steadily growing over the past two decades, with a median **age** of 38.
- Those who are **married or in a civil partnership** account for 45% of residents (aged over 16) but the proportion who have never been married (38%) is increasing.
- Although the majority of people identify their **ethnic group** as being White (71%), this has decreased over the past decade and around 1 in 3 residents is 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.

- Many residents still claim to have a **religious affiliation**, although the proportion with 'no religion' is now close to a third (30%). While the largest religious group remains Christian (45%), this has been falling. Conversely the proportion of residents who are Muslim (11%) and Sikh (6%) has increased over the past decade.
- Approximately 20% of residents are defined as **disabled** due to experiencing a long-term condition that limits their daily activities – with just under half of those people being significantly limited and the other half being limited only a little.
- The new data collected on **sexual orientation** shows around 1 in 50 (2%) residents aged over 16 identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual – very slightly below the national average.
- We now know 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.

This information about our residents and communities is helping us to understand the variety of needs that exist across the borough and shape and target our services appropriately. We can then use this information to monitor the effectiveness of the work we do.

## Our achievements

### Theme 1: Understanding and working with our communities.

Understanding our communities is vital to ensure that we can identify resident needs and priorities and ensure everyone in Walsall has an opportunity to participate and thrive no matter their background or belief.

#### ***Key achievements this year include:***

#### **We Are Walsall 2040 Engagement**

In 2022/2023 more than 10,000 residents and businesses were asked their views about what they want Walsall to look like and be like in 2040 and beyond. Development work included co-produced activities with community and focus groups, surveys (postal and online) with residents and businesses, vox pops, and council presence at community events such as Pride and jobs fairs. Feedback cards were used to gauge views at leisure, culture venues and libraries across the borough. This was the largest consultation the council has undertaken with communities and shows our ambition to create a borough that works for everyone. We heard from new, established communities, and carried out extensive engagement with faith communities, carers, and young people with over 1600 responses from children in schools across the borough. The consultation received helped shape the development of a new Strategic framework for the Borough 'We are Walsall 2040' which was signed off by Cabinet in June 2023.

#### **Children's Strategy Consultation**

Following on from our successful engagement with young people last year for We are Walsall 2040. The 'Big Conversation' took place in early 2024 to follow up and further understand the aspirations, concerns and views of children and young people across the borough.

A total of 7 workshops with 251 participants were conducted across 5 schools covering localities of varying socio-economic profiles and with fantastic engagement from minority community pupils (48%).

71 young people between the ages of 5 – 19 took part in activities whereby they were asked to live (virtually) in Walsall both in the present day and in 2040 (in line with Walsall's 2040 ambitions). And to build ways that they would improve Walsall.

Views were sought from children (via practitioners who work with them) on how they viewed Walsall, both today and in the future. Questions centred around topics such as belonging, having the best start in life, and barriers to having a 'good' life. 177 responses were received in total from a wide variety of backgrounds including Care Experienced (9%), SEND (15.8%), Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (9.6%).

In total over 500 responses were collected from children across the borough during the 'Big Conversation'.

### **Cohesion and Social Integration: Walsall for All Legacy Project**

The Cohesion and Social Integration team successfully relaunched the Walsall for All Legacy project with a new chair and renewed membership. Amongst the priorities remain 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 partnership organised a very successful Town that We've Built conference in 2023 attended by representatives and speakers not only from all parts of Walsall but also from West Midlands and national agencies. As a result, more closer partnerships with public and voluntary and community sector were created around reducing poverty and supporting some 'seldom heard communities,' for example our deaf communities.

Walsall for All also sponsored creation of the very first Independent advisory group for Contest ensuring representation from diverse faiths and cultures of Walsall. They also co-funded the St Nicholas Day for children and families in Palfrey attended by over 300 local people and British Sign Language courses in Moxley.

The Community Cohesion and Integration Service continues to provide a speedy, professional service in relation to consultations with diverse groups and reducing potential for community tensions. This is done through raising awareness of 'rights and responsibilities' amongst our residents as well as listening. For example, this service was instrumental in creation of the Temporary Stopping site by engaging with Gypsy and Traveller representatives from the region and sharing the best practice. They are currently supporting reduction of community tensions in Blakenall, engaged our faith communities with the Knife Angel project and are searching for solutions to serious youth violence, for example through the Lionheart challenge.

### **Cohesion and Integration Engagement**

In September 2023, through discussions with the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Resilient Communities and Walsall For All board members, a decision was made to have a 10-year Inclusion and Integration Plan driven by the priorities communities decide are most important to them.

This is the next stage of the continuation of the national Integrated Area Programme which Walsall was recognised as best practice and which funding ended in 2022. Planned sustainability underspend from the programme was used to develop the Walsall For All board and next steps, of which the consultation is a key element.

A targeted approach was decided rather than a generic broad-brush inclusion and integration approach owned by a broad range of stakeholders rather than just by

Walsall Council. The rationale to this is that different groups will have different priorities to make life more inclusive and to offer integration.

Since then, the Community, Equality, and Cohesion Team from Walsall Council, alongside the Walsall for All team, have made substantial progress in engaging the voluntary sector, community groups, and active individuals in the borough using various consultation methods. This has included Facebook survey on targeted locality-based pages, focus groups delivered by community groups to their peers, google form with QR card, one to one interviews, interviews with elected members, interviews, and groups sessions at all the Community Associations and locality hubs and considering findings from other related conversations. Already we have increased insight into the experiences and challenges for our diverse residents. A priority is to ensure that 'seldom heard' voices are included in this process, including the White deprived communities.

Engagement will be completed by March 2024, and a launch is planned for the new financial year for a Walsall For All Integration and Inclusion Delivery Plan 2024 – 2034. The findings will also inform the new EDI Strategy for Walsall in 2024.

## **Ward Walks**

Since starting in her role in October 2023, the Chief Executive has made it a priority to better understand the diverse communities of Walsall and the challenges they face first hand. The Business Insights team have worked with services across the organisation as well as partners to pull together a detailed set of Ward Profiles, which have been used to inform a series of 'Ward Walks.' These visits to each ward, where the Chief Executive is accompanied by the Ward Members, have been a valuable opportunity to explore the areas and the local facilities, and to meet lots of local community representatives as well as individual residents. So far 9 wards have been visited: Pheasey, St Matthews, Brownhills, Streetly, Birchills Leamore, Willenhall North, Pelsall, Bloxwich East and Pleck. The remaining wards will be visited in the next municipal year.

The differences displayed across Walsall wards require deep understanding to best serve the communities and residents who live and work within them. Ward Profiles are a key product to support staff to understand these differences and harnessing this insight results in improved decision making and outcomes for all.

## **Domestic Abuse**

Walsall Council and partners undertook a Domestic Violence Strategic Needs Assessment during 2023 and sought to understand the scope of domestic abuse and violence in the borough, particularly its impact on gender, race, religion, and culture. This data will be used to help plan service delivery and partnership approaches to support those suffering abuse.

A new refuge has been opened within Walsall specifically for South Asian victims of Domestic Abuse and the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board (DAPB) is planning an Awareness Conference in 2024 whereby information will be shared on domestic abuse particularly known to be present within ethnic minority communities, such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Forced Marriage, Honour-Based Abuse, and Faith-Based abuse.

## **North Locality – Violence Prevention Partnership Arrangements**

In addition to the existing business-as-usual partnership arrangements that target violence, violence against women and girls, and youth violence; there have been several new forums established to tackle specific ongoing issues in the borough's North Locality (namely Bloxwich, Blakenall, and Mossley). Partners involved include the Police, Council, the Violence Reduction Partnership and Health and seek to strengthen presence in the borough and target initiatives towards specific areas in need, for example briefing schools and headteachers concerning high-profile incidents of violence within the borough and their potential impact on communities.

## **Films about young people's lived experience in Walsall**

Walsall Youth Justice service this year commissioned a documentary 'Reformation 2 The System' in collaboration with Open Lens Media about the disproportional challenges faced by black and mixed heritage boys in the Walsall Youth Justice System and the solutions needed. In Walsall during 2019-2021 black young people were more likely to receive one of the two most severe outcomes that young people can get when they have offended. The film discusses in detail the factors, causes and solutions and explains what strategies and plans are being developed locally to address disproportionality.

Walsall Council Children's Services also commissioned a further film to explore the lived experiences of young people leaving care in Walsall and the barriers they face. 'It takes a village' 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.

## **Using a behavioural insights approach to understand choices for women in Walsall**

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 information gathered is informing our health and care teams on how best they can remove the barriers and improve information for those mothers that are considering breastfeeding.

Work is also underway to scope out how the Council can 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.

### **ROMA Health Mediators Project**

The Council's Public Health team have been working with health colleagues in Walsall Together – our health and care partnership, as well as Tumende Walsall Association to support residents from the Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller community.

The 'Sastipen' project bridges the gap between the health community and eastern Europeans from Roma, Gypsy and Traveller heritage and provides support for those who have complex issues, a language barrier and minimal confidence. Services offered include interpretation and translation access to health and medical treatments, career help, guidance counselling and language/skills courses as well as social interaction for confidence and training courses available in multiple languages. To date 175 residents have been supported through this initiative.



## Theme 2: Leadership, partnership, and organisational commitment

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

### ***Key achievements this year include:***

#### **Celebrating Black History month**

During Black History month in October 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. This year, there was a focus on literature from inspirational black female authors and personal stories on Black history from Caribbean migrants. Lichfield Hub library hosted a pop-up library session in the Council's Civic centre for staff to borrow books with stories associated with Black History and Council staff heard personal stories and experiences from colleagues from the black community.

#### **South Asian heritage**

In July, the New Art Gallery in Walsall hosted a day of stories, activities and performances displaying South Asian culture, history, and community. This year's official theme was 'Stories to Tell,' and the Gallery was full of people sharing their stories, history, and heritage - stories of immigration and living in the Black Country, shared by local Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim community members.

The free event was an opportunity to share and listen, learn about the multiple mix of countries and diverse traditions of the subregion as well as sample activities such as Tai Chi demonstrations, traditional poetry, stories from Sikh, Hindu and Muslim families, a South Asian fabric map decorating workshop, community stalls, and much more.

The Gallery's current major exhibition of contemporary art, 'The World that Belongs to Us' brings together many artists from the South Asian diasporas of the UK, USA, and Canada.

#### **Disability History Month**

During November and December, the Council encouraged staff to reflect on the triumphs, challenges, and contributions of individuals with disabilities throughout history and promoted the month raise awareness and promote inclusivity by acknowledging the diverse experiences within the disabled community.

## **International Women's Day**

On the 8th of March, the Council held a panel conversation in celebration of International Women's Day at the Civic Centre which delved into various aspects of the journey of womanhood. The panellists were made up of staff from diverse backgrounds each offering a unique perspective on the challenges and triumphs encountered along the path of womanhood. Topics explored include balancing motherhood and work, climbing the career ladder, juggling education, work and family life, menopause, and autism awareness.

## **Armed Forces**

An Armed Forces Covenant with updated pledges was re-signed at a community networking event at the Council House in Walsall in November 2023. The Cabinet previously approved a voluntary local Armed Forces Covenant in 2013 and has now reaffirmed its commitment to supporting our armed forces community across the borough. The Armed Forces Act 2021 placed a new statutory duty on the Council, to have regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant in our policy development and decision making. The Council will be reviewing Equality processes and procedures over coming months and will strengthen how armed forces communities are considered.

In June we celebrated Armed Forces Day- valuing and honouring our local veterans and the serving members of the community. The Mayor of Walsall, Councillor Chris Towe, hosted the ceremony and the short service recognised and celebrated the contribution of all those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces.

## **Faith Covenant**

The Leader of Walsall Council, Councillor Mike Bird, signed the Faith Covenant for the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) in September 2023 on behalf of Walsall Council. The Faith Covenant brings together faith leaders, local council leaders, and faith organisations to formalise a joint commitment to a set of principles that guide engagement, and to promote open, practical partnership working on all levels. The covenant will be implemented through the Walsall Faith Leaders Network, which launched earlier this year. As part of the network, faith leaders held a Walsall Faith Summit in November 2023 which highlighted what faith communities offer in Walsall during Inter Faith Week (12-19 November 2023).

## **LGBTQ+ Art Exhibitions**

2023 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the gift of the Garman Ryan Collection to the people of Walsall. This is a collection of 365 artworks and artefacts formed by Kathleen Garman and her close friend Sally Ryan in the 1960s. Kathleen grew up in Wednesbury and despite spending most of her life in London, she wanted to gift her collection to the Black Country, believing it was important for culture to exist outside

the capital. Sally Ryan, co-founder of the Garman Ryan Collection, lived as an openly gay woman at a time when it was not commonplace to do so.

***Here&Queer***, exhibition ran through to May 2023 and focussed on LGBTQ+ issues. Produced by Julie Brown, Collections Curator and a community panel made up of members of the LGBTQ+ community, the temporary exhibition gave the opportunity for members of the public to take ownership of the Gallery's Collections, re-interpret works from a queer perspective and increase the visibility of queer lives in the Gallery. As a result of this project, the Gallery has received funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to continue this embedding diversity work, as well as the Queer Heritage and Collections network to develop more digital content for *Here&Queer*. The Collection trail, created for the project, will be available to explore for many years to come. *Pride & Privilege*, which opened in July 2023 and runs to May 2024, extended the exploration of LGBTQ+ narratives and explores identity, disability, and class within the Gallery's Collections.

### **Changing the Lives of Young People with Learning Disabilities**

Walsall Council has launched Endless Possibilities a supported internships pilot programme for work placements that commenced in October 2023. It is designed to support young people with learning disabilities or autism gain experience in the world of work, provide them with additional skills to help prepare them for adulthood and secure skills valued by employers. It is a fully funded programme giving individuals the opportunity to learn on the job whilst undertaking education/training and will run for 9 months.

### **Walsall Carers Festival**

As part of celebrating Carers Week (5-11 June) Walsall Council Arboretum played host to a carers festival. Led by The Walsall Carers Hub -funded by Walsall Council; the occasion was an opportunity for unpaid carers in the Walsall community to get-together, find support, and gain information as well as a chance for them to take part in fun wellbeing activities like massage and Tai Chi in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. The Walsall Council Healthy Spaces team and Midland Mencap also attended to help family members and friends who need some extra support. The Walsall Carers Hub runs support groups, providing practical, financial, and emotional support to unpaid carers living in Walsall or providing care to someone living there.

### **Asylum Seekers Integration through Football**

In the spring of 2023, a cohort of asylum seekers from Afghanistan were housed, temporarily but indefinitely, in a hotel within Walsall. The new, exclusively male, group of residents had been placed in an area that was completely unknown to them and were often seen congregating within the grounds of the club and the surrounding area. Similar placements in other parts of the country had been carried out which had

led to tensions between asylum seekers and existing residents. Considering this, and with a view to supporting the new cohort to feel welcome in their new community, a partnership led by Walsall Together, The Council's Public Health team, Walsall FC Foundation, the Refugees and Migrants' Centre (RMC) and Active Black Country (ABC) was developed to explore the potential of engaging the young men in positive opportunities.

Sessions started in June 2023 with two weekly 1.5-hour football sessions and a 2-hour classroom slot for English language classes (ESOL). The sessions were facilitated by Walsall FC staff and took place over a 12-week period. All sessions took place on-site at Walsall FC, providing easy access for the hotel residents. Whilst many residents had travelled from Afghanistan, there were several different languages spoken amongst the group and it was hoped that the football sessions would encourage social interactions and help facilitate relationships.

### Theme 3: Responsive services and customer care

The Council is committed to improving outcomes and the customer experience. 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:***

#### **Locality-based Support for Voluntary and Community Organisations**

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 are now able to 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.

#### **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.

Throughout 2022, over 7600 healthy meals were provided to children and young people at Easter (1633 total), Summer (2074 total), and Christmas (2393 total). The HAF programme has also been a valuable mechanism for consulting with residents to inform the design of services and strategies.

#### **Web Accessibility**

As we move towards providing more services online, web accessibility is crucial to ensure that websites and online content are usable by individuals with disabilities – including those with visual, auditory, motor, or cognitive impairments. It promotes

inclusivity, equal access to information, and a better user experience for everyone, aligning with the principles of equality and diversity in the digital age. The Web Accessibility team audits Walsall Council's digital services and applications following the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), to ensure that our services are compliant with regulations, and advise on how to further improve the experience of our staff and customers to allow everyone the opportunity to navigate and interact seamless with online content. Their blog provides a gateway to understanding how slight changes in design and content can benefit both users and content creators.

To tie in with ADHD Awareness Month in October, the team's blog focussed on ways to make digital work more inclusive and accessible for neurodivergent people. This included highlighting the features or design decisions that can create barriers to a good experience for people with ADHD – including time limits, distracting layouts and design, or unpredictable behaviour such as 'auto-play' – and providing practical recommendations for creators to make their content more accessible.

## **SEND Offer**

The Department for Education has recognised the efforts of Walsall's Local Area to improve the quality of its offer to children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND). Following an inspection from Ofsted and CQC (Care Quality Commission) in June 2019, and June 2022, an accelerated progress plan (APP) was agreed by the council, NHS England, and the Department for Education, which set out key areas where the council needed to make more progress, and identified actions on how the plan will be achieved.

A progress review took place in November 2023, which concluded the council no longer needs to be formally monitored against the plan, due to the positive progress that has been made. Key highlights from the visit showed the strong partnership working in Walsall, with parents and carers, the Integrated Health Board, front-line staff in health and social care and schools, who are all working as one to support children with special educational needs and disabilities. The visit also highlighted progress that has been made to develop a Walsall-focused Local Offer, which parents and carers found accessible and easy to understand.

## **Support in the Cost-of-Living Crisis.**

In September 2022, Walsall Council was selected as a case study by the Local Government Association (LGA), for our comprehensive support to residents throughout the cost-of-living crisis. The Council has worked in partnership with businesses and voluntary organisations across the borough in delivering several initiatives to help reduce the burden of the cost-of-living crisis on residents.

From April 2023 through March 2024 the council will have provided £5.6 million in support across the borough through the **Household Support Scheme (HSS)**. This funding is essential for many residents struggling with the ongoing cost of-living crisis, this alongside key council initiatives such as Walsall Connected help ensure

residents are signposted to support and can access much needed grants and resources.

### **Walsall Connected**

Walsall Connected is a collaboration between the council and its partner organisations to build resilient communities across the borough – helping over 10,000 residents in 2023.

There are 29 Connected ‘hubs’ across the borough, with each local hub offering services aimed at developing residents’ digital literacy, increasing access to first-line Council services, and creating a strong and sustainable community network.

Walsall Connected has expanded from its initial focus of reducing digital exclusion across the borough, with the initiative now used to raise awareness of important local assets such as libraries and community groups.

Throughout 2023 there has been an increase in individuals accessing connected hubs, with three of the most common inquiry types, Food Banks (343), Homelessness (866) and the Household Support Fund (909) evidencing the reliance of vulnerable individuals on these hubs.

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

Launched in 2012, Walsall Works is Walsall Council’s award-winning initiative that helps local people to find jobs, apprenticeships, and access training – while also supporting local businesses that are looking to expand and invest in their future workforce.

Initially focused on young people, the Walsall Works offer is inclusive and now extends to residents of all ages who are actively seeking employment, as well as those employed in low-waged jobs or with an aspiration to develop their workplace skills. The team work closely with local employers to understand the demands of Walsall’s labour market and bring forward local employment opportunities to residents.

Qualified Advisors support people to improve employability through key skills (such as timekeeping or team working) as well as improving CVs, job searching and enrolling to skills courses. The team also promote job vacancies and arrange opportunities for participants to meet employers and training providers.

The programme initially targeted support to young people and demand from the 16-24-year age group remains high. During 2023, Walsall Works secured 665 positive outcomes for participants, ranging from employment, apprenticeships, part- or full-time training, self-employment, and work placements. Of these, 83 positive outcomes were secured for young people aged 16-18 and 142 positive outcomes for those 19-24 years. The team’s skill and experience in supporting young people remains crucial

for tackling youth unemployment, which remains high in Walsall post-pandemic. The people they support are often faced with a complex range of barriers to getting into work or training, including physical and learning disabilities, cultural differences, or socio-economic disadvantage.



#### Theme 4: Diverse and engaged workforce.

This year the Council developed a new Workforce strategy which enshrines EDI at the heart of ensuring we support and develop our workforce. We will continue to ensure staff are seen, heard, and included and provided effective support, training, and development.

#### ***Key achievements this year include:***

#### **Our Workforce Strategy 2023-2026**

We have progressed with EDI under our new workforce strategy through recognising the future challenges our workforce can face from internal and external pressures and have reviewed and strengthened our approach to improve any workforce equality issues.

Under our new workforce strategy, we continue to support EDI in the workplace through taking actions to welcome and develop a diverse mix of individuals who are from a diverse workforce that is representative of the Walsall Borough and is inclusive of different backgrounds, heritages, genders, socioeconomic, disabilities and cultural diversity.

We will also 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 what the work that they do. Promoting equitable career progression, also remains as one of our key aims. To support this, we have also strengthened our governance structure, staff networks and are focussing on the development of the new EDI strategy and will continue to aspire to have a diverse workforce at all levels.

#### **Staff Networks**

Staff networks at Walsall Council were initiated during the pandemic and continue to be a crucial and useful platform to allow every voice to be heard and valued. Currently there are networks for Black and Asian staff in Children's Services and Adult Social Care directorates, and a corporate LGBTQ+ network that has raised its profile over the past year. Whilst the existing staff networks in specific service areas and those that are council-wide are established and operational, consideration has been given to developing this platform further by providing focus to other potential themes such as gender, disability, or neurodiversity as the workforce desires.

Following a staff development event last year with 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 have continued with our journey to explore what other corporate staff networks our workforce would be interested in which are focussed and accessible to all staff council-wide.

To move forward with our commitment to develop this initiative further, our workforce has been invited to participate in the Corporate Staff Networks Survey during February 2024, which will help gauge their interest and preferences regarding the establishment of various corporate staff networks and how they can help shape these to ensure they reflect the needs and interests of our diverse workforce.

We are committed to our intention of expanding our corporate staff networks by obtaining suggestions for potential themes and identifying areas where additional support and resources may be required through the staff survey to continue with our passion in creating a more inclusive and connected workplace community. The survey closes at the end of February 2024 and the feedback will be analysed to devise a proposal reflecting the results of any proposed staff networks, any additional support, or resources the workforce may desire and any proposed structures across the Council.

### **Corporate Employee Survey 2023**

The corporate employee survey for 2023 was held during October to November. The survey is undertaken every two years to help us understand how employees feel about working for the Council, our strengths as an employer and where we need to improve, so that priorities for change and improvement can be implemented. It also captures individual views about equality and diversity, line and senior management, communications, organisational change, health and wellbeing and harassment and bullying whilst assisting the ongoing development of key HR strategies.

Key findings from the survey will help shape an action plan, be reported to staff and help the Corporate Management Team understand the needs, concerns and aspirations of employees on a range of different issues thus allowing us to monitor trends, make informed decisions, engage with staff and create a workplace that truly reflects our shared values and our Proud Promises.

### **Accelerating Diverse Talent Programme**

Walsall recognises the many benefits of having a representative workforce at all levels throughout the organisation, such as increased creativity and innovation, and alternative views and perspectives – and in turn this will influence positive outcomes for our citizens. However, colleagues from minority backgrounds have been underrepresented in our leadership roles for some time (with just less than 10% of our senior leaders from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds). In response we piloted a programme to develop the full potential of our Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic employees; the aim was to help them to realise their career ambitions and elevate their careers into senior leadership roles, helping them to overcome some of the barriers they encounter when trying to progress their career.

The programme began with an introduction session in February 2023, and was completed by 11 delegates from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds who took part in four masterclasses over a period of four months, supported by access to coaching, mentoring, and shadowing opportunities. This blended learning approach gave delegates the opportunity to get to know themselves, set personal goals, and develop skills to help them make the leap from team member to team manager.

Together with the Learning and Development Team, the programme has been fully supported by colleagues in other service areas who have been sharing their experiences, as well as information and advice to support delegates through their journey. Following the successful pilot, the programme will be continued into 2024, supporting our efforts for Walsall Council to be an inclusive employer, where individuals from all backgrounds can thrive and contribute meaningfully to the organisation's goals, and can see themselves represented at leadership level.

## **Equality Champions**

Incredible strides have been made to assemble an Equality Champions network to support the positive impact we can collectively make towards fostering a culture of equality, diversity, and inclusion within Walsall Council. Equality Champions are paving the way within the Council to ensure a culture where everyone is empowered, respected, valued, and listened to.

This impeccable and transformational journey so far supports our commitment to break down barriers and build bridges to engage with the workforce through fostering an inclusive, thriving, and harmonious work environment irrespective of their background or identity.

In addition, through the collective efforts of this network, we will continue to advocate for inclusive policies and provide this platform for staff to address matters relating to EDI and support initiatives that promote equality and a more inclusive work environment across the Council.

Equality Champions have been equipped with the knowledge and skills to deliver their role through undertaking a six-week training programme. A great deal of interest has been achieved and we continue to increase the Equality Champions network through providing ongoing training and development opportunities to help drive positive changes within the Council.

## **Unconscious Bias Training**

The Council has introduced unconscious bias training for all managers to foster a more inclusive and diverse work environment through increasing awareness, understanding of unconscious bias, and equipping participants with practical strategies for recognising and mitigating unconscious biases. Alongside this recruiting managers are asked to undertake specific recruitment training on unconscious bias to ensure any personal or societal biases are challenged and recruitment is inclusive.

The Council has several resources and videos available for staff on eliminating bias, why we need emotional diversity at work and inclusion.

### **Connected Working**

Walsall Council Connected Working team provides staff a fantastic resource to help engender and promote a learning and continuous improvement culture and develop a high performing team. Teams can be provided a series of tools, training and wrap-around coaching to support and develop people managers and manage teams through change and performance issues. This ensures staff at Walsall are supported and empowered to work in high performing teams with a positive culture.

### **Menopause Champions**

Over the last year Walsall Council has carried out a lot of promotion to support our female staff with menopause awareness and support. Historically, the menopause has been seen as something of a taboo subject, however, thanks to many high-profile celebrities and public figures candidly now discussing it, and thanks to our Menopause Champions this is changing for the better at Walsall Council.

The menopause is a health and wellbeing concern for all staff, and it is important that everyone is aware that menopausal symptoms can affect all colleagues at any time. Walsall Council is committed to creating an open culture where all staff feel comfortable to speak up if they are struggling with the menopause, both physically and emotionally. Our Menopause Champions provide confidential support to colleagues within their directorates. This is a voluntary role that can be undertaken by any member of staff after appropriate training.

### **Diversity 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/include to staff and residents and ensures we can 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.

### **Our future plans**

We are proud of our commitment to embed equality, diversity, and inclusion in the way we work. 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 by refreshing our Council Plan for 2025 putting equality, diversity, and inclusion at its heart. We want staff and residents to

understand that Council services will meet EDI requirements and are shaped by feedback and data from our residents and communities.

We are currently reviewing the Council's equality objectives to align to the Equality Framework for Local Government. These new equality objectives will be developed as part of a new all-encompassing EDI Strategy and delivery plan. The new EDI strategy aims to consolidate all streams of EDI work across policy, workforce, and external resilient communities' cohesion activities. This ensures that there is a clear One Council vision for Equalities aligned to our new Council Plan and helping drive forward delivery of our overarching borough vision We are Walsall 2040.

To support this, an action plan will be aligned to each of the four themes of the EFLG which is pivotal for us to deliver and meet our obligations and duties under the Equality Act. The delivery of the action plan 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.

We are also refreshing the Council's equality impact assessment toolkit which includes resources, advice, and guidance necessary to assess any adverse impact that our policies, projects, or decisions could have on equality groups. The Council 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.

In addition, to support and advance our commitment to the public sector equality duty, the Council's equality impact assessments have incorporated and give due regard to additional duties placed on the Council such as the Armed Forces Covenant have enabled us the opportunity to strengthen how armed forces communities are considered. We will be reviewing our equality toolkit and processes to strengthen how we continue to judge and mitigate impact on all equality groups and will be considering additional local characteristics such as, carers, carer experienced and those experiencing health inequalities.

The Council will continue to support and promote cohesion and inclusion through supporting events and activities that foster understanding and good relations. We have a strong foundation of co-production and engagement with communities and will continue to build on that legacy in the year to come.