

## Cabinet – July 2024

### Draft Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy 2024-2029

**Portfolio:** Councillor Lee

**Related portfolios:** All

**Service:** Council Wide

**Wards:** All

**Key decision:** No

**Forward plan:** Yes

#### 1. Aim

1.1 The report presents the draft Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2025-2029, '*Ensuring Equity*', for review and for approval of the strategy going out to public and partner consultation during the summer and early autumn. The aim of the strategy is to strengthen the Council's approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion through a clear, coherent strategy and the development of an associated work programme.

#### 2. Summary

2.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty places a requirement on Councils to publish their equality objectives and outline the work and activities being undertaken to demonstrate their compliance with the Equality Act 2010. The draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy outlines Walsall Council's objectives towards EDI and articulates our great strides in improving EDI across workforce, policy, services and community in recent years.

2.2 The draft strategy is aligned to the Local Government Association Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) to ensure that we can benchmark ourselves, measure progress and easily learn from best practice across the sector.

2.3 The Strategy has been developed from extensive feedback from Council staff, Walsall For All community workshops and best practice knowledge from across Local Government. Following Cabinet agreement, the strategy will go out for an eight week period of consultation to seek partner, community, and resident views before coming back to Cabinet for final approval in December.

### 3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That Cabinet note and approve the draft EDI strategy for public consultation.
- 3.2. That Cabinet note the future plans and work already underway to strengthen EDI across the Council aligned to the EFLG.
- 3.3. That Cabinet agree to the inclusion of Armed Forces as a local characteristic for EDI to be included within the Equality Impact Assessment process, alongside the existing 9 statutory characteristics and the existing local characteristic of care leavers.

### 4. Report detail - know

- 4.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, the Council has a statutory duty to ensure that equality and diversity are considered and embedded across our services and functions. The supporting Public Sector Equality Duty requires that Councils consider how people will be affected by decisions and services, prepare and publish specific and measurable equality objectives (at least every four years), and ensure that public services meet the needs of all different groups of people.
- 4.2 The Council has reviewed its current approach to EDI in recent months and carried out extensive engagement with staff, staff equality networks and community groups through Walsall for All partnership to understand and determine refreshed objectives within a new Council wide EDI strategy and aligned to the newly developing Council Plan.
- 4.5 The draft strategy has been developed to align with the Local Government Association's Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG). The framework offers a useful guideline for the Council's continued improvement journey with respect to EDI. It contains four main thematic areas of focus with supporting considerations:
  1. Understanding and working with communities.
  2. Leadership and organisational commitment.
  3. Responsive services and customer care.
  4. Diverse and engaged workforce.
- 4.6 The objectives currently within the new draft strategy are:

**Communities Objective:** To work in partnership with our communities to build a borough where people belong and thrive.

**Leadership Objective:** To embed equitable and inclusive policy and decision making at the heart of the organisation.

**Services Objective:** To design and deliver accessible services that meet the needs of our diverse population.

**Workforce Objective:** To be an inclusive organisation, with staff at all levels who represent the diversity of our borough.

- 4.7 These draft objectives align closely to the four themes of the EFLG, which means that as a Council we can map our current activity against the framework, identify any gaps, and determine what is needed to progress against three levels – ‘developing’, ‘achieving’ and ‘excellent’. Within the strategy we have outlined our ambition to ensure we are ‘achieving’ across all elements of EDI within 2 years, seeking Local Government Association EFLG accreditation to validate and confirm that position and to support the Council to then move towards ‘Excellence’.
- 4.8 Within the strategy we outline the nine statutory characteristics the Council must consider when designing services, implementing policy and have due regard to when consulting: age, sex, gender reassignment, race, disability, pregnancy/maternity, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and marriage/civil partnership. In April 2024, Cabinet agreed to the adoption of a local characteristic, care leavers, to highlight the importance the Council places on supporting our care experienced young people.
- 4.9 Alongside these existing characteristics the Council, through the Armed Forces Covenant, has already agreed to a local duty to consider Armed Forces in relation to housing, education, and employment. Within the draft strategy it is proposed that this be widened to ensure that Armed Forces are adopted as a local characteristic so due regard must be given to armed forces personnel and families across all Council services. Around 2.2% of the Walsall population is identified as a veteran and this equates to around 6,500 people (Office for National Statistics, 2021).
- 4.8 The draft EDI Strategy highlights the good work that is already underway across the Council against each objective. The associated ‘We will’ statements outline our plans for continued improvement and development across the four facets of EDI. Examples of great activity underway and planned include:
- Review of Council governance and refresh of EDI governance to ensure service and customer have a clear role in shaping the EDI work across the Council.
  - Development of staff networks to ensure all staff can have a voice.
  - Extension of Equality Champions across the Council to ensure EDI is at the heart of all directorates and the work we do.
  - Developing ‘health in all policies’ work to ensure addressing health inequalities is considered in policy and service design and delivery.
  - Ensuring newcomers are welcome to the borough and supported to integrate and belong.
  - In line with We are Walsall 2040 aims, that we celebrate our heritage and culture and champion the diversity and strength of Walsall.
  - Review and refresh of EQIA process including addition of new locally chosen characteristic of carer leavers and armed forces.

- 4.9 This strategy has been developed alongside the refresh of our Council Plan 2025-2029. 'Ensuring equity' is an underlying principle in the draft Council Plan, identified as being an essential consideration that will enable us to deliver our corporate vision and ambitions. The title of the draft EDI Strategy therefore emphasises this alignment. In developing both the EDI Strategy and new Council Plan we carried out a range of consultation and engagement. We have consulted with our workforce, stakeholders and partners during the development phase. We reached out virtually and through online surveys and provided opportunities to consult in-person for staff at drop-in sessions at Walsall Council and the locality centres across the borough.
- 4.10 An Engagement Toolkit was designed for the workforce which provided an opportunity for all teams across Walsall Council to discuss and feedback their thoughts on the how we can drive forward greater equality, diversity and inclusion and the areas of inequality they feel the strategy should address.
- 4.11 Following agreement from Cabinet the strategy will be circulated to partners across the Borough for comment and feedback. The strategy will also be publicly available on the Council website and hosted on Commonplace engagement platform to enable us to seek structured feedback from residents, staff, and partners. We will also ensure accessibility by all groups, and availability of hard copies in a variety of locations across the borough with residents able to request a hard copy. Formal consultation on the draft strategy will be open for a period of eight weeks over the summer and early autumn. Following consideration of all feedback the strategy will be amended as required and come back to Cabinet in December for final approval.
- 4.12 The strategy will have a supporting clear work programme with actions for delivery included within an annual EDI Action Plan. This work programme will be monitored through the Council's Corporate Equality Group and regular updates provided through the Portfolio Holder briefings process – equality is now included as a key functional area within the Cabinet portfolio of Cllr Lee. Furthermore, the Council has a requirement under the Public Sector Equality Duty to produce an EDI Annual report for publication in March each year. The next report in March 2025 will provide a public outline of progress at that point against the new strategy/objectives.

### ***Risk management***

- 4.13 There are no significant risks associated with the EDI strategy or associated work programme.

### ***Financial implications***

- 4.14 There are no direct financial implications related to the report.

### ***Legal implications***

- 4.15 There are no direct legal implications from this report. The draft EDI strategy outlines new objectives and approaches for the Council against EDI to ensure compliance against the Public Sector Equality Duty, Armed Forces Covenant and Equality Act 2010.

***Procurement Implications/Social Value***

- 4.16 There are no direct procurement implications from this report.

***Property implications***

- 4.17 There are no direct property implications from this report.

***Health and wellbeing implications***

- 4.18 There are no direct implications in this report.

***Staffing implications***

- 4.19 There are no direct staffing implications from this report. Staff have been engaged in the development of this strategy and staff will be asked for their views as part of the public consultation on the strategy and associated objectives.

***Reducing Inequalities***

- 4.20 Our EDI activities highlighted in this strategy strengthen the delivery of Our Council Plan and We are Walsall 2040 borough plan which both have reducing inequalities and addressing social justice at their heart.
- 4.21 The EDI strategy is aligned to the new draft Council Plan which has Ensuring Equity as a core foundational principle at its heart to ensure we remain focussed on reducing inequalities.

***Climate Change***

- 4.22 There are no direct implications.

***Consultation***

- 4.23 The report highlights that the new EDI Strategy has been shaped from extensive staff, community, and customer feedback and will be subject to a formal consultation in the summer to seek clear views from staff, residents, and partners on the objectives within the draft document.

**5. Decide**

The report presents a draft EDI Strategy for consideration and approval by Cabinet. The report also asks Cabinet to agree that Armed Forces becomes a local Equality Characteristic for Walsall Council to expand on current duties within the Armed Forces Covenant.

## 6. **Respond**

The Council is already undertaking programmes and activities that strengthen EDI across the Council. This existing and planned work will continue alongside some new actions identified through the EDI strategy. Governance for EDI sits with the Corporate Equalities Group with a line up to Corporate Management Team to ensure strategic fit with wider corporate priorities.

## 7. **Review**

The EDI strategy will be monitored and reviewed regularly through Corporate Equality Group. Furthermore, the Council's EDI Annual Report, which is approved at Cabinet in March each year, is an annual document highlighting our progress towards our equality objectives. The next report in March 2025 will outline our progress to date against the EDI objectives and our plans.

## **Background papers –**

### **Annexes:**

Appendix 1 Draft EDI Strategy

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Signed

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June 2024

*Edward Lee*

Signed

Councillor Lee  
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09 July 2024

