

To: Cabinet
Date: 16 March 2022
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

| Summary and recommendations | |
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| Purpose of report: | To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion report |
| Key decision: | Yes |
| Scrutiny Lead Member: | Councillor Liz Wade, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee |
| Cabinet Member: | Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities |
| Corporate Priority: | All |
| Policy Framework: | Council Strategy 2020-24 |
| Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report. | |

| Appendices |
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| None |

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 02 March 2022, the Scrutiny Committee considered the Cabinet Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy report.
2. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet portfolio holder for Inclusive Communities, for presenting the report and answering questions, Ian Brooke, Head of Community Services for authoring the report and supporting the meeting, and Stephen Gabriel, Executive Director for Communities and People for attending in support also.

Summary and recommendation

3. Cllr Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities introduced the report. The report was in response to a statutory duty, but the Council wanted to go further than the statutory minimum to ensure equality, diversity and inclusion was at the centre of all work. It set out some ambitious challenges to the Council in terms of how it was working on equalities and had been developed on the back of welcome calls for change on equalities issues.
4. Ian Brooke, Head of Community Services set out how the Strategy development work had been conducted, which had included the use of focus groups in order to understand communities' lived experience. Stephen Gabriel, Executive Director for Communities and People outlined the importance of governance arrangements and highlighted that he chaired the internal Equalities Steering Group. He gave assurance that equality, diversity and inclusion was high on the agenda and that the strategy would provide the framework to drive the agenda forward in the future.
5. Unsurprisingly for an overarching framework, the Committee's discussion was very wide, taking in issues such as Scrutiny's future contributions to this agenda, modern slavery, statistics and monitoring, member and officer training, and inclusive language. In total, five recommendations are made relating to i) specific policy recommendations, ii) wider equality, diversity and inclusion issues relating to faith communities, and iii) textual amendments to the Strategy text itself.

Specific Policy Recommendations

6. On page 13 of the policy the Council undertakes to perform certain actions, including 'Champion digital inclusion and accessibility as we move towards 'digital by default' services, working with partners to ensure there is access to devices, connectivity and skills development. Where appropriate, we will use Council funding and infrastructure, such as free community centre Wi-Fi, to support residents to get online, so that no one is excluded as we move towards fully digital service delivery.'
7. The Committee is in absolute agreement with the view expressed in the strategy that access to the internet is a basic necessity to function in modern society and that digital exclusion does exist and is highly detrimental to an individual's wellbeing. The Committee notes that provision of free community centre wi-fi is presented as an example of how the Council might address this problem. However, the way it phrased means it is caveated by the need for wifi to be appropriate. There are alternative ways to interpret this, so this suggestion may already be in train. However, in case, given that the technological and financial challenges are very low, the benefit to residents high, the Committee seeks assurances that free wi-fi will be provided at community and leisure centres as a matter of course.

Recommendation 1: That the Council provides free public wi-fi in all its community and leisure centres.

8. On p.13 bullet point 2 the Strategy references the Council's intention to go cashless. The Committee understands the financial imperative of making the savings available by doing so, meaning that it accepts this policy. The Strategy itself touches on the Committee's concerns. 'We recognise that some people may need more support than others, and we aim to provide information, advice and support to ensure they are not disadvantaged as we make the transition.'
9. Concern for those left behind by the move to cashless has been the subject of a number of recommendations by Scrutiny over recent years. It is often the case that those who struggle with electronic payments are those who are financially vulnerable, and many of the Council's services operate to support and provide opportunities for people in those circumstances. Exclusion arising from a policy of going cashless, even if unintentional, stops the most vulnerable from accessing things they badly need.
10. The Committee recognises that the Council is aware of the issue. However, it would simply like to reinforce its concern. The document being agreed is a strategy document, which does not go into specifics. Nevertheless, it must be fully recognised that there will be individuals for whom going cashless is simply impossible. The implication of the reference in the Strategy to ensuring that nobody will be disadvantaged as the Council makes the transition is that there is an expectation that everybody will eventually go cashless and the challenge is in supporting individuals in making the transition. This is not the case. The Committee's view is that a dedicated plan to address this as an ongoing challenge is necessary, and that long-term mitigations are required rather than simply transitional support.

Recommendation 2: That the Council ensures that potential exclusionary impacts of moving towards cashless provision on relevant vulnerable residents are mitigated on a long-term basis.

Wider Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Issues

11. The initial framing in discussion of the following recommendation was over the recent request by the Hindu community for support in finding a permanent temple space, which prompted discussion around the needs of faith based communities and ensuring that the Council understands in more detail the nuanced needs of faith based communities. In discussing this, the Committee recognised that within any asset based community development approach faith groups are key. They are often the first place their members look for support, their members are more likely than average to be part of an ethnic minority and so need more help to traverse systemic challenges, and are usually motivated to make a positive difference in their localities. The Committee's view is that closer working relationships with these communities - to understand, enable and coordinate with – is a vital plank of an effective EDI strategy. The Committee does not make a

specific recommendation, but highlights building relationships and understanding with faith communities as a preferred area for further work.

Recommendation 3: That the Council undertakes additional engagement with faith communities to understand their needs and support their contribution towards asset based community development.

Textual Amendments to the Strategy

12. In addition to suggested changes to policy within the Strategy, the Committee also makes two recommendations to make the text reflect existing Council policy more closely.
13. The first of these is the fact that the Council deliberately does not offer leisure provision on the same basis as a private sector provider. Instead, it seeks to broaden access as much as maximise its return. The Committee's view is that this is an important differentiator between municipal and private sector providers. Given that it is a significant provider of leisure facilities locally, the Council's approach of making leisure provision inclusive and accessible is a meaningful contributor to its overall equality, diversity and inclusion objectives. The Committee recommends making reference to this inclusive provision, particularly examples such as the provision of women-only classes, crèche provision and free of subsidised activities.

Recommendation 4: That the Council explicitly references in its policy the need for inclusive leisure provision, particularly women-only classes, crèche provision at leisure centres, and free or subsidised activities.

14. Finally, the Committee raises a suggested amendment to the wording of the draft Strategy. The fifth bullet point on page 10 of the draft Strategy states that the Council will 'Support community groups to access spaces and places where they can come together to enjoy common interests and create new friendships. Where groups want a dedicated space, we will offer them advice, but we will not be able to provide separate facilities for different community groups.' The Committee understands what is meant by this but feels that this is an oversimplification of a complex situation. The Council does provide dedicated space to some organisations. Likewise, the Committee expects that if a community group came forward with a compelling proposal in the future that it would be considered on its merits and not rejected on a point of policy. The Committee's view is that the Strategy may simply be improved by omitting this bullet point altogether and avoiding the complexities and tensions that the statement as written could raise in the future. It is recommended that it is removed.

Recommendation 5: That the Council removes bullet point 5 on page 10 of the draft Equality, Diversion and Inclusion Strategy.

Further Consideration

15. Scrutiny members, the Cabinet member and senior officers were all in agreement that it was important that Scrutiny should review the progress of this work on an annual basis. This will be taken up in the next civic year. Scrutiny is particularly keen that the report evidences the efforts made to report back to the numerous communities consulted with as part of the development of this strategy to maintain two way communication between and shared ownership of tackling equality, diversity and inclusion issues between the Council, community groups and other key stakeholders. Likewise, it also wishes to see evidenced tangible improvements to Council policy based on the learning from the consultation.
16. Whilst the following is contingent on a number of issues proceeding as expected, it is well to flag to members of the Cabinet that Scrutiny is likely to devote additional capacity to equalities issues in the coming civic year. This does depend on two things: firstly, Council agreeing to the proposals of the Constitution Review Group to enable simultaneous meetings of the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group and the Companies Scrutiny Panel. This will free up greater officer capacity to facilitate other work. Secondly, how Scrutiny decides to prioritise its work next year will be up to the new Committee and is dependent on their agreement. Nevertheless, it seems more likely than not that it will happen. The expected form of this work would be a short – probably four meetings – review of one or two key equalities and access topics but is subject to agreement by the future Committee.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 02/03/2022 concerning the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities, Councillor Shaista Aziz

| Recommendation | Agree? | Comment |
|---|---------------|---|
| 1) That the Council provides community wifi in all its community and leisure centres. | Partially | The Oxford “free” Wi-Fi service from BT has been renewed for one year, through to March 23. The service is designed only for a few customers at a time in any one location. There will be cost implications to continue after this that we are currently working through; we will then pull together a business case. |
| 2) That the Council ensures that potential exclusionary impacts of moving towards cashless provision on relevant vulnerable residents are mitigated on a long term basis. | Yes | |
| 3) That the Council undertakes additional engagement with faith communities to understand their needs and support their contribution towards asset based community development. | Yes | |
| 4) That the Council explicitly references in its policy the need for inclusive leisure provision, particularly women-only classes, crèche provision at leisure centres, and free or subsidised activities. | Yes | |
| 5) That the Council removes bullet point 5 on page 10 of the draft Equality, Diversion and Inclusion Strategy. | Yes | |

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