

Report to Full Council

18 January 2022

Subject:	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Update Report
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1. Recommendations

1. That the success of the equality-based initiatives delivered by the Council be noted.
2. That the draft work programme of the Equalities Commission Board is acknowledged by members.

2. Reasons for Recommendations

This report provides an update of the work that has been conducted so far to help achieve the Commission's ambitious agenda on equalities. In addition, the Board's aspirations is also detailed through a draft work programme of activities, highlighting the salient pieces of work we intend to conduct at the start of the new year, which will be supported by the new equalities team.



3. How does this deliver the objectives of the Corporate Plan?

3.1 The Corporate Plan is at the heart of everything that the Council does.

Providing the Board an update on the different pieces of equalities work the authority is conducting will help ensure they are aware of the progress being made and that it remains a key priority for the Council to meet its legal obligations under the Equality Act (2010). This in turn will contribute to the successful delivery of each of the priorities that make up the Corporate Plan.

4. Context and Key Issues

4.1 Background

4.1.1 Sandwell Council is committed to celebrating and promoting the rich and diverse backgrounds and cultures of its employees and residents across all six towns in the Borough, and imbedding equality in all that it does.

4.1.2 In line with many public bodies in Britain, including the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), the national government and our neighbouring authorities, Sandwell Council recognises it is time to have a fundamental look at what equality and diversity means to the Sandwell. From how inequalities and discrimination are addressed to where improvements can be made for the benefit of all the Borough's residents, particularly in light of recent events such as the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movement.

4.1.3 To help achieve this, the Sandwell Equalities Commission has been established to drive and support this endeavour, and since its creation a number of equality initiatives have been conducted to help realise its vision of being an open, fair and inclusive Borough that embraces and celebrates Sandwell's rich and diverse communities, cultures, and traditions.



4.2 Staff Networks

4.2.1 One of the key equality initiatives which have been resounding success this year has been the creation of new staff networks to sit alongside the established disability group. The primary aims of these groups are to enable staff to share their experiences and provide advice and support in a confidential safe space. We currently have three staff networks, which are as follows:

- 1 Disability Staff Network
- 2 LGBT+ Staff Network
- 3 Ethnic Minority Staff Network

In addition, a women's group is also being considered and conversations are taking place with Trade Union colleagues to see whether there would be an interest from employees to form one.

4.2.2 Since the first Commission Board meeting in late July, all groups continue to meet and have positive dialogue about their future purpose, which includes working in collaboration with the Board. More recently, the Ethnic Minority Network has recently appointed a new interim Chair, Vice Chair, Engagement and Communications Officer and Secretary - they had their first official meeting on the 15 November with these new roles, which was well received.

4.2.3 Each network also has their own intranet pages, including Terms of Reference to help promote their aims and objectives to new and existing members. Furthermore, corporate communications have also been used to raise awareness about the groups across the authority – this was deemed a great success because a number of employees have either enquired or joined a staff network as a result.



4.3 Special Events

- 4.3.1 Each staff network is eager to support the work programme of the Board and help shape its future direction. This notion was clearly demonstrated through Black History Month, where Black Employees from the Ethnic Minority Network formed a project team to lead on the corporate based celebrations in October (2021).
- 4.3.2 The project team were instrumental in creating a website and liaising with local speakers to deliver live or pre-recorded events. In addition, a powerful short video was created of our Black Councillors describing what Black History Month means to them. See appendix 1 for the Black History Month branding that was used across various Council communication platforms.
- 4.3.3 Black History Month was a great success and positive feedback was received throughout the month from Councillors, Senior Leaders and employees across the Council. It was also acknowledged that a considerable amount of momentum had been gained through this event, and this positivity was especially reflected by the comments made by Black employees.
- 4.3.4 In addition to Black History Month, the Council also celebrated LGBT History Month in February with various social media messages and internal communications to staff. As a Council we were unable to undertake any in-person events due to the pandemic, but still raised awareness on how to report LGBT hate crimes, spotlighting prominent Sandwell figures, sharing history and supporting services. We used this same approach for Pride month with the addition of publicising same-sex fostering, same-sex marriages at our registrars.
- 4.3.5 Furthermore, the LGBTQ+ Network has continued to identify prominent awareness days throughout the year and contribute to the content, events and messaging. In May, through the help of Cllr Jones (Chair of the Equalities Commission) we also lit up Lightwoods House in rainbow colours to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexphobia and Transphobia.



4.4 Work Programme

4.4.1 In addition to the work that has already been carried out to help meet the eight objectives of the Commission (see Appendix 2 for Terms of Reference). The Board needs to decide on the key areas of work they would like to focus on first due to the significant breadth of the programme. For this reason, it is paramount that while any work initiatives need to be substantial to deliver positive change, they are not spread too thinly, so very little is achieved.

4.4.2 For this reason, initial discussions about the Board's future work programme were held with both Councillor Carmichael (Leader of the Council and Cabinet member for Neighbourhood and Communities) and Cllr Jones to help formulate a plan of action. This concentrated on the following key work streams:

1. Inclusion Calendar
2. Equality Policy
3. Borough of Sanctuary
4. Definitions for Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism
5. Equality and diversity workforce action plan

While the Board's work programme will evolve over the short, medium and long term, it was acknowledged that five work streams should be considered first based on the gaps that have already been identified - this is discussed in greater detail below.

4.5 Inclusion Calendar

4.5.1 The Inclusion Calendar aims to show the Council's commitment to creating an equal and inclusive working environment, where we can celebrate our individual diversity and feel confident to challenge inequality. Staff can use the calendar to raise their own awareness of equality and inclusion and to help plan and celebrate events in an inclusive way.

4.5.2 A draft calendar has already been created and the special days and events have been chosen to represent the diversity of our workforce and community, although this is not an exhaustive list. We have highlighted festivals for which staff might reasonably ask for adjustments to their work in order to meet their religious obligations.



4.5.3 Barring any further iterations, we aim to launch the calendar this January across the wider Council. Thereafter, work will begin in earnest to transfer this concept onto our intranet site, so it can become a dynamic and interactive document. Over time we hope to personalise the calendar by using images and pictures of our own Council employees.

4.6 Equality Policy

4.6.1 The Council's equality policy was published in 2011 following the enactment of the Equality Act. At that time the Council, in accordance with its obligations under the Equality Act, also consulted on its equality objectives. It consulted further in 2016 in relation to its objectives for 2016-20. These objectives were:

1. we will build strong and prosperous communities by talking to people and involving them in what we do;
2. we will ensure that people can use our buildings, services and information;
3. we will ensure that we meet individual needs in the range of services we secure.

4.6.2 In light of the Commissions remit and scope, it is now time to review this document and our objectives to ensure it still meets the needs of the Council and that we comply fully with our legal obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty.

4.7 Borough of Sanctuary

4.7.1 Sandwell is a place that welcomes everyone, and we recognise and value the contribution of refugees, migrants seeking asylum in Sandwell. We want to ensure that all people seeking sanctuary within the Borough are made welcome and that they have the opportunities to achieve their potential. That's why we are committed to becoming a recognised 'Borough of Sanctuary', through the national charity 'City of Sanctuary'.



4.7.2 Obtaining chartership status will also support a key objective found in the Commissions Terms of Reference, namely:

‘To promote, embed and protect the rights of Sandwell residents to fairness, dignity and respect along with encouraging community cohesion across the Borough’.

4.7.3 Both Councilor Carmichael and Councilor Jones are keen for the authority to explore this further along with the Director of Housing to understand how we can obtain full chartership. In addition, this will then need to be coordinated with a number of external organisations across Sandwell who have already signed up to the charter, to ensure we can collectively build a culture of inclusivity across the Borough.

4.8 Definitions of Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism

4.8.1 As part of the work programme the Council would also like to adopt the nationally recognised definitions for islamophobia and anti-Semitism. To help achieve this, it's incumbent on us to review the way we work, to ensure this piece of work is not just a tick box exercise, rather it is fundamental in promoting equality and challenging discrimination and intolerances in all its forms. For this reason, further work needs to be conducted to understand how the Council can embed these working definitions in their working practices, policies and processes.

4.9 Equality and Diversity Workforce Action Plan

4.9.1 The Equality and Diversity Workforce Action Plan was signed off by the Leadership Team and Emergency Cabinet in 2020. This document was mainly drafted through the engagement of ethnic minority, disabled and male and female employees. To ensure the plan continues to meet the requirements of all underrepresented groups across the Council a review will be conducted, with the engagement of staff networks at the heart of it, so that actions remain fit for purpose before they are implemented.



4.10 Resourcing

4.10.1 Along with the work programme of the Board, full Council noted that it was paramount for the Commission to be adequately resourced to deliver on its broad remit – see mission statement below:

“To promote equality and challenge discrimination and intolerances in all its forms. To break down barriers prohibiting an inclusive society by confidently tackling unfairness caused by inequality and encouraging community cohesion through increased understanding and awareness.”

4.10.2 To support this extensive agenda, it is imperative that there is a dedicated core team which meets the needs of the Commission and the ongoing work being conducted. This would ensure no momentum is lost, and that the onus of responsibility to carry out the work does not solely fall on volunteers across the Council.

4.10.3 A decision was made by full Council on the 29 September to fund the Equalities Team so that it can drive this significant agenda forward. While there was no specific allocated/approved budget for the cost of this new team, sufficient budget had been identified in reserves to meet the cost for 2021/22, with further funding to be secured for subsequent years as part of the forthcoming budget setting process.

4.10.4 Currently, jobs for all seven posts have been advertised internally, so that at risk and Council employees can apply first, if there no successful candidates adverts will then be posted externally. To date, some job roles have been successfully filled through the internal applications process, while others will need to be advertised externally this January. For this reason, it is envisaged that the new team will be fully in place by the close of March 2022.



5 Alternative Options

No alternative options were considered as the equality's requirements are statutory.

6 Implications

Resources:	There are no direct financial and resource implications arising from this report.
Legal and Governance:	The Council must adhere to the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and avoid discrimination. It must also comply with the Public-Sector Equality Duty.
Risk:	If the Council does not comply with the provisions within the Equalities legislation, then it runs the risk of legal challenge and reputational damage.
Equality:	Such implications are set out in the report. An equality impact assessment has not been carried out as it is not considered necessary. The report provides an overview of the equalities work being conducted along with a work programme for the Commission Board to consider and agree.
Health and Wellbeing:	There are no direct health and wellbeing implications from this report.
Social Value	There are no direct social value implications from this report.

7 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Branding for Black History Month

Appendix 2 – Terms of Reference for Sandwell Equalities Commission

8 Background Papers

These are included as part of the agenda.

