



Equality Objectives Annual Report 2021

April 2022

Introduction

The Council is a public body which, under the Public Sector Equality Duty in the Equality Act 2010, has a specific duty to publish one or more equality objectives to demonstrate how the Council is meeting the aims of the general equality duty.

Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 places a general equality duty on the Council to have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it

The characteristics protected under the Act are:

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

Under the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) Regulations 2011, the Council is required to publish one or more objectives we think we should achieve to do any of the things mentioned in the 3 general duties.

In December 2019, the Executive published a new suite of Equality Objectives for the Council, for the period 2020 to 2024. These are available at on the [Equality pages](#) of the Council's website.

Scope and structure of this report

This second annual report provides an update on activity in relation to the agreed Objectives.

For each Objective an update is provided against the broad activities that it was agreed in December 2019 the Council would focus on.

Covid-19

At the time that the new Equality Objectives were agreed, no-one could have forecast the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic would have on our residents, business and Council services.

In 2020, the need for the Council to mobilise an extensive emergency response meant that a number of our business-as-usual activities were impacted. Whilst the requirements of responding to the pandemic did not reach this extent in 2021, there continued to be a significant role for the Council in supporting residents in the face of Covid, and a related ask upon key Council services throughout the year.

As identified in last year's report, the pandemic also highlighted the central role that the Council plays in supporting the borough's communities and demonstrated our ability to provide support and make a positive difference to our most vulnerable residents. These activities, and their relation to our equality objectives, continue to be reflected within this report.

Equality Objective 1: Using data and local intelligence better

The focus of this objective is to continue to improve our equality data and use local intelligence and data insight to inform future service planning and formal decision making.

Areas of activity

A) Building our data and insight capability within the organisation

2020 saw the Council establish a new Data & Insight Team. The work of this team was refocused in the summer of 2020 in response to the pandemic, to provide a centralised resource to collect, collate, analyse and present data to help the Council make informed decisions about Covid response and recovery. This work enabled us to help make support available as soon as possible to those with the greatest potential need. As we have progressed through the subsequent stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, the team has continued to provide this support, including tracking reported infection and vaccination rates, local outbreaks, and wider regional and national trends.

The team is also working to assist the Council's understanding of our service users, including the most vulnerable, as reported elsewhere in this document. The team now includes the Council's consultation and engagement function, which helps us to effectively involve people of all backgrounds to ensure that their views and opinions are reflected in the way we conduct our activities (see below).

In addition, the team has been conducting an internal review of the Council's data maturity as an organisation. This has included reviewing the organisation's approach and attitude to the use and consideration of data. Following the conclusion of this review, the lessons learned will enable the team to steer the Council towards how it can increase its effective use of data, through improvements to such factors as systems, culture, and integration with existing processes.

B) Improving the availability of equality data, and raising awareness of service users' needs to inform service design across the Council

Workforce equality data

In 2020, as part of a wider review of the accuracy of employee data held by the Council, staff were encouraged to update their personal details on the Council's HR system. Although remaining optional for staff to complete, this information helps us comply with our Public Sector Equality Duty in relation to workforce reporting. Updated [workforce equality information](#) is now published on the Council's website and is available to all those officers involved in service design across the Council. The data was most recently updated in December 2021.

Borough equality data

An overview of the [Borough Equality Characteristics](#) is published on the website, providing useful borough and ward level information about those in the borough with protected characteristics. It remains the case that for much of this information we are reliant on 2011 Census data; however as explained elsewhere in this report work is ongoing to improve the data we have available. The Council also assisted the Office for National Statistics with 2021 Census, including supporting them in securing participation from harder to reach groups in the borough.

The initial results of the Census are due for release in 2022, and these will provide essential information to enable us to further develop the core equality information for the borough. Awareness of the numbers and geographic distribution of residents with protected characteristics across the borough will inform service development, helping to ensure both that services take account of local needs and guiding the focus and direction of future service offers.

Data and insight about our most vulnerable residents and those needing extra support

As a result of the response to the pandemic, the Council has developed a greater understanding of the needs of our most vulnerable residents. This data (in anonymised form) provides valuable additional insight which can help inform how the Council may need to focus

services in the future. The specific information gathered also means that along with our partner organisations we are in a better position to protect vulnerable people (including the financially vulnerable) in responding to future emergencies working with other public sector partners. Examples of the use of this data include developing additional capacity to support the most common homelessness needs, anticipating the challenges faced by families and individuals and providing early support, and providing additional information to help steer community development work to match local requirements.

Future Focus

The ongoing impact of Covid-19 has continued to consume a proportion of the Data & Insight team's focus in the last year. However, the team is also seeking to provide support across the Council to assist in the delivery of corporate objectives, including insight in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion in the borough. This work will build on and explore in more depth the data already held by the Council, including through the aforementioned data maturity assessment. This work is likely to initially comprise one or more pilot projects as quantified opportunities for using data are identified.

There are also plans to improve understanding and effective use of data across the organisation, as the Council develops its capacity. These will be supported by the Data and Insight team working in conjunction with officers across the organisation, and will be able to draw from emerging information such as the results of the 2021 census to enhance our local knowledge.

Equality Objective 2: Supporting good community relations

The focus of this objective is to develop a greater focus on promoting social inclusivity across all the Council's services and fostering good community relations

Areas of activity

A) Supporting communities through the work of our frontline teams and in partnership with other relevant organisations

Covid-19 response

In much of 2021, as in 2020, the work of our frontline teams, and a large element of our partnership working, was partially tied to responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our response was concentrated on providing welfare support and assistance to all vulnerable residents

within our communities, not just those with protected characteristics, whilst recognising that factors such as age and disability could potentially contribute to support requirements.

This work has included almost 1500 calls to provide both proactive and response support to residents, awareness raising through Community (Covid) Champions, and support to coordinate volunteering and assist the roll-out of the national vaccination programme. Work with public health colleagues on a Covid-19 vaccine project resulted in an area around Preston and Tattenhams moving from one of the areas of lowest uptake to being in line with the rest of the County

There also continued to be significant work in conjunction with local partners, including charities and businesses, to ensure that everyone had access to food throughout the borough, including food clubs, school holiday meals, and emergency food packs. Similarly, our money support team has offered support to over 200 residents throughout the year, helping provide advice and information on available resources to address challenges around cost of living, such as those at risk of fuel poverty – there have also been emergency fuel top-ups available to support those in greatest need.

Community Development

The Council's Community Development Workers (CDWs) have been active throughout the year. The team has worked from five key localities across the borough, incorporating Horley, Merstham, Preston, Redhill, Woodhatch and Whitebushes. The CDWs have worked in conjunction with local community members and organisations to build on the strengths of local areas and address challenges faced by residents, including those with protected characteristics.

Work of particular relevance to this report has included:

- Improvements to youth provision in Horley, in partnership with the YMCA, with activities operating from the Old Fire Station in Albert Road.
- Dementia network meetings, where work with local and wider partners has supported the compilation of a directory of available services and local awareness raising.
- Bereavement advice and support, supported by volunteers from St John's Church, Brigitte Trust and Redhill Baptist Church, in conjunction with the Workers Educational Association, Voluntary Action Reigate and Banstead, and our community workers.
- Work to address social isolation, including work with Merstham football club to establish a walking football group, and a Christmas card project with Age Concern.
- The construction of a new multi-use pump track in Sandcross Lane, Woodhatch, developed with accessibility in mind, and to meet the needs of young people in the area for use by bikes, skateboards and others.

The team also plays a vital function in maintaining our connections with local residents, and voluntary, community and faith sector organisations. The health sector has also been a key local partner, particularly in the last years, and this has been supported through measures such as the 'Growing Health Together' health creation programme with GPs attending neighbourhood partnership groups, funding from East Surrey Place to support community development work, and attendance at joint regional training sessions. The importance of strengthening and utilising all these channels has been highlighted by recent events, and they form an essential component of understanding and responding to local equality needs.

B) Incorporating consideration of social inclusivity in service-level strategies, service design and delivery

To meet the Council's equality obligations, the work of the organisation must incorporate consideration of equality matters and social inclusivity throughout its work. This forms part of the day-to-day work of the Council, as well as being included in development of strategies and longer terms plans.

An example of this practice was seen in the consideration and consultation on the Council's annual budget for 2022/23. As part of this process, equality impact assessments and feedback from residents and community groups showed that potential reductions in spending on community support offers such as taxi vouchers would have been significantly problematic for many service users with few suitable alternatives. As a result, whilst the budget did make some savings in grant offerings, other elements, such as the Council's taxi-voucher scheme, were maintained and continue to support the mobility needs of local residents. The outcomes of the budget consultation and the comments received have helped inform subsequent work in respect of our service planning

Other areas of work include work on Reimagining Horley with Surrey County Council, and efforts to improve accessibility in a number of areas. The work on Reimagining Horley has sought to incorporate strong elements of inclusivity into its work and to ensure that engagement work reflects feedback from all members of the local community, not just those who are most readily contacted. Social inclusivity considerations have been particularly pertinent in a number of recent areas of work, such as those below.

Community Centres

In 2021, the Executive approved plans for the transformation of borough community centres, with a vision of three vibrant multi-use community centres reaching residents of all ages. This vision aims to continue to fulfil the centres' current role as a social hub for existing users, along with expanding the user base to include a wider range of ages and groups within the community.

The operation of our Community centres was significantly disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, although remote activities continued throughout the year to support residents in need. As restrictions have been lifted, there has been a return to in-person activity, with options including activities for under-fives and grandparents, and exercise classes for all abilities. The new community centre offers have received positive feedback from both existing and new users, and user levels have increased steadily since April 2021, from under 500 monthly visits to almost 4000 by the end of the year.

Refugee Support

The Council has been providing ongoing support for refugee resettlement for families from Syria and Afghanistan, and have more recently been coordinating assistance for those displaced from Ukraine. This work is providing assistance to 12 families from Syria and Afghanistan at the time of writing, who are being supported with finding initial accommodation, language learning, and securing employment and education.

Our work with the families is aimed towards assisting them towards securing their own independence, including in participating in local communities. As part of the programme, we hosted the Syrian Feast even in October 2021, which showcased Syrian food and recipes. With the event attended by over 150 guests, and over 200 copies of the accompanying recipe book sold (with money received reinvested into more support for the families involved), activities such as these help support the inclusion of new arrivals into local communities, and demonstrate the mutual benefits which can be gleaned.

Future Focus

The Council's work towards supporting good community relations in 2022 will need to build on the foundations of recent years. Connections with local partners made and strengthened through the pandemic will help support ongoing work to reach and understand residents, and to provide assistance through measures such as food banks and advice services, in conjunction with those local organisations. Community development work will also need to take account of the developing national context, including challenges around cost of living, which can often particularly impact on those with protected characteristics.

The plans to transform community centres will also be coming through, as we work to achieve the goals for expanding the range of users and making the centres appealing to everyone within local communities. Work is also beginning on a new Leisure and Culture Strategy, which will incorporate the lessons of the Council's equality objectives into shaping leisure, arts and entertainment options for all of the borough's residents.

Equality Objective 3: Accessible information and services

The focus of this objective is to ensure that Council services, information, consultation and engagement opportunities remain accessible to all residents, particularly those with protected characteristics.

Areas of Activity

A) Better understanding of the nature of our customer contact

Work on a formal customer contact mapping exercise was paused in March 2020 in response to the pandemic, as referenced in the 2020 Equality Objectives report. However, with the demands of the pandemic response now significantly alleviated, work on this project has resumed. When completed, this will provide the organisation with a fuller picture of residents' preferred ways of engaging with the Council, including regarding their requirements for accessing necessary information. This knowledge will then enable the Customer Contact Team and the organisation as a whole to more effectively match our contact offer to resident needs and demands, and ensure that Council information and services are as accessible as possible to all those who need them.

A more general residents survey was conducted in March 2021, and included elements on resident communication preferences and behaviours. The findings from this survey were considered with those of the September 2020 survey to provide an interim assessment of resident needs and to inform the balance of our customer contact channels. These include providing a variety of options, incorporating both digital and physical media, to meet the range of requirements. In conjunction with experience gained from work during the pandemic to monitor and respond to the needs of residents, particularly those in vulnerable categories, this has provided a solid groundwork for the ongoing review and our future approach.

B) Making sure services and information are accessible for those with protected characteristics

Communications

The council uses a wide variety of communication methods to make information and news available to as many as possible within the borough. This includes both electronic and digital media (see website accessibility below) along with more traditional forms, such as printed borough news and placement in local media. The most recent borough magazine also included a focus on health and happiness, and included a range of ideas, options and resources for readers to support their health and mental wellbeing, helping to make this information available to nondigitally enabled residents. Customer contact is also supported

through phone lines operated locally by Council staff, and print media is available in a range of languages and accessible formats [upon request](#).

The lessons of the pandemic emphasised the need to ensure information is available to those who do not use digital channels, although these are increasing in popularity. This is supported by the maintaining a network of local knowledge and connections, and working with local organisations, community development workers and champions to disseminate information and awareness. Physical sites, such as community centres, also help provide news and information for visitors. As part of the continued response to the pandemic in 2021, the Council also contacted potentially vulnerable individuals directly, through phone calls or socially-distanced in-person visits where required.

Consultation and engagement

As set out in last year's report, equality and diversity considerations are explicitly incorporated into the design of Council consultation and engagement projects. This includes considering the needs of participants and utilising the most appropriate methods to enable them to both access and respond to the process. As an example of this, paper copies of the consultation on the Council's annual budget were provided, and were supported by freepost availability for responses, to ensure that those responding by mail were not disadvantaged. This approach also extends to internal consultation exercises, such as through the provision of a British Sign Language interpreter to support internal feedback processes.

In line with data privacy regulation, and with participants' consent, data such as gender, age, ethnicity, and long term health and disability is collected to monitor how well we have reached different demographics within our consultations and other engagement. This enables us to boost participation in under-represented groups where possible and, where appropriate, we can analyse responses according to these groups to provide insight into the different perceptions and experiences of sections of our community.

Website accessibility

All online material published by the Council must be compliant with national accessibility regulations. This means that all users should be able to access online services, and all new content created should be fully accessible.

Following the introduction of UK legislation in website accessibility regulations in September 2018, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) public website was audited by the Cabinet Office in February 2022. RBBC were advised to update its accessibility statement. Therefore, the new accessibility officer (in post from March 2022) has developed a new accessibility statement currently being re-audited by the Cabinet Office.

Additionally, significant progress in the application of GDS (government digital service) compliance has been made with new accessibility training being provided to document publisher and other officer. All new documents (PDF and Word) uploaded to the public website, have been accessible in accordance with GDS compliance. Furthermore, accessibility software is regularly used to audit sections of the website, with timeframe targets being applied to fix any older documents. The new accessibility statement for the website is published at: www.reigate-banstead.gov.uk/accessibility-statement.

Future Focus

As we have emerged from the pandemic, work has resumed on improving our understanding of resident needs and preferences in accessing information on Council services. This work will continue in 2022, helping us to make sure that our services are accessible to all, and the information we provide matches the needs of local people. Whilst digital media is increasing in popularity, we will also ensure that news and information remains accessible to those without digital access.

The Council's website and online services will continue to be updated to reflect accessibility objectives, and understanding of these needs will be expanded across the organisation. These considerations will also continued to be reflected and maintained in the wider work of the organisation, including both specific consultations and engagement and the day to day work of services. We will seek to continue to build on the lessons of the pandemic, and use our strengthened connections to local communities and organisations to enhance this approach.

Equality Objective 4: Working for the Council

The focus of this objective is to continue to seek opportunities to build inclusivity into the Council's internal policies and procedures.

Areas of activity

A) Reviewing – and as necessary updating – relevant internal policies and procedures

Corporate Equality Policy

Following a review in 2020, the Council's Corporate Equality Policy was updated to ensure it remained fit for purpose and properly reflected the Council's duties and obligations. This process was supported by consultation with Unions and the Staff Association as well as the

Council's Corporate Governance Group. This policy has remained current in 2021, and [is available](#) on the Council's intranet and external-facing website.

Equality Impact Assessment template

Similarly to the Corporate Equality Policy, the Council's Equality Impact Assessment template was updated in 2020. The template supports the completion of Equality Impact Assessments, which ensure Council services and decisions take account of equality considerations. As identified in the 2020 report, the updates included making the template more user friendly, including better signposting to equality information and data sources, including more emphasis on opportunities to taking a proactive approach to ensuring equality of opportunity, and enabling consideration of impact on all vulnerable residents (not just those with protected characteristics). The template has remained current in 2021 and is used to support the Council's formal decision making process and project management approach

B) Reviewing – and as necessary updating – resources and training for staff, and member learning and development resources, in relation to equalities issues

Resources and training for staff

The Council's intranet was updated with additional and clearer information on equality, diversity and inclusion in 2020. Resources available to staff include the Corporate Equality Policy, the Council's Equality Objectives, and borough and workforce equality information. The intranet pages were also updated to include better signposting to an expanded range of training and learning opportunities, and external resources providing more information and guidance. This information has remained current, and these pages have been maintained in 2021.

In the first half of 2021, we also ran an internal communications campaign for staff about diversity and inclusion. This included information on the updated policy and resources, along with personal messages from a number of officers about their experiences with equality, diversity and inclusion, and doing the right thing for everyone.

Member learning and development

Training on equality, diversity and inclusion is available and encouraged for elected Members each year, supported and facilitated by the Local Government Association (LGA). Additional information is also readily available through the Council and the LGA. The most recent workshop was held in January 2022, and included information on a range of topics, including common challenges faced by Councils, public sector equality duties, and addressing any systematic issues to create an inclusive Council.

Training and information is also made available to all new Members as part of the induction process, with additional training on employment law available, and required for those serving on the Council's Employment Committee.

Future focus

The Council's internal policies and procedures are up to date, and will continue to be implemented across the organisation throughout 2022. Where new information or guidance emerges, they will be reviewed and updated as appropriate. Signposting to supporting information and data will be updated as new material becomes available, such as the 2021 census outcomes.

Training for Council officers and elected Members will continue to be maintained and refreshed throughout the year. Additional resources will be made available in specific areas, such as the continued expansion of website accessibility training. As with the Council's policies and procedures, training and resources will be updated as appropriate in response to new regulations, guidance or information, and feedback from ongoing training and engagement will help to inform and shape future activities.