



Equality Objectives Annual Report 2020

February 2021

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 www.reigate-banstead.gov.uk/equality.

Scope and structure of this report

This first 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.

The need for the Council to mobilise an extensive emergency response meant that, in 2020, a number of our business-as-usual activities were impacted. But it has 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. Some of the activities we envisaged to achieve our Equality Objectives have been brought into sharper and more immediate focus, as reported in the rest of 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 has seen 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. The team is already actively working to assist the Council's understanding of our service users, including the most vulnerable, as reported elsewhere in this document. The team also now includes the Council's consultation function which helps us to effectively engage with people of all backgrounds to ensure that their views and opinions are reflected in the way we conduct our duties (see below).

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 has now been published on the Council's website and is available to all those officers involved in service design across the Council.

Borough equality data: An updated version of the Borough Equality Characteristics document was published on the website this year, 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.

Data and insight about our most vulnerable residents and those needing extra support: As a result of the emergency 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.

Future focus:

As measures to manage the impact of Covid-19 (including mass vaccination) are rolled out in 2021, it is anticipated that the focus of our new Data and Insight team will be broadened 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 may include additional primary research but will be able to build on and explore in more depth the data already held by the Council, including (where appropriate) that gained as a result of our emergency response to the pandemic. This work is likely to initially comprise one or more pilot projects.

The Council will continue to work with the local representatives from the Office of National Statistics to ensure the success of the 2021 Census, including helping ensure the hard to reach are supported to participate in the Census, and that the results are accurate so that in due course they can inform the Councils' future service planning.

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 2020, the work of our frontline teams, and focus of much of our partnership working, has understandably been on responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our response has concentrated on providing welfare support and assistance to all vulnerable residents within our communities, not just those with protected characteristics. The following provides just a snapshot of the wide-ranging activities undertaken and has been informed and supported by the work of our data and insight team (as explained earlier in this report):

- Responding to requests for assistance from vulnerable residents
- Proactively contacting the most vulnerable residents to understand and assist with any support needs, initially by phone or letter, and as a last resort via welfare visits
- Coordinating befriending calls for vulnerable residents living alone
- Coordinating the delivery of food packages, hot food and medicines
- Signposting to local support and services via a comprehensive web-based resource
- Providing funding and other assistance to local food banks and setting up new food clubs to provide low cost access to food
- Piloting a project to support those in fuel poverty to be able to afford energy during the winter months
- Facilitating partnership working to reduce digital exclusion both amongst local children and older residents
- Working with a wide range of partner organisations to disseminate information and plan and deliver support
- Assisting those facing income difficulties with Council tax payment plans and distributing additional funding for those in most need, including council tax support, and test and trace support payments
- Recruitment of 27 Community Champions to help spread fact-based public health information to our communities with a focus on recruiting members of the BAME and disabled communities.

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

Covid-19 response: Addressing the needs of vulnerable people has been at the heart of the Council's response to the pandemic. This has included (but has not been limited to) providing advice, services and support for older people, those with disabilities (seen or unseen) and those on lower incomes. Specific examples are provided elsewhere in this report.

Residents' Survey: The first round of a new series of Residents' Surveys was undertaken for the Council in September 2020. This included quota controls to ensure correct representation from across our communities. The opportunity has been taken to use the survey to better understand issues of community cohesion. The data that underpins these headline figures will help inform future service delivery. The survey provides information about the extent to which residents feel they belong to their local area; and the extent to which residents agree that their local area is a place where people of different backgrounds get on well together.

Future focus:

As we move into 2021 and beyond, our frontline teams will build on the foundations of strong partnership working that have been strengthened during the pandemic as they continue to provide support to our most vulnerable and hard to reach residents. This will include continuing to develop our partnerships with the voluntary and community sector, progressing our community centre transformation programme, and doing more to encourage greater digital inclusion.

This work can also be informed by the detailed outputs of the Residents' Survey to help understand needs and target future activity: the Residents' Survey will be undertaken regularly so that progress can be tracked.

As things return to a more normal footing, through our improved data and insight (see above) and internal working practices (see below) we will focus on improving the consideration of social inclusivity across our service-level strategies and service design and delivery.

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

Customer contact mapping: As a result of the pandemic, work on a formal customer contact mapping exercise was paused in March 2020. Instead, a more informal piece of research on this topic was conducted which looked (amongst other things) at current customer contact channels, information about residents' contact preferences and data relating to usage of our website, phone lines, social media and SMS text service. This enabled the service to determine that the current customer contact channel mix remains fit for purpose and provides a variety of customer contact options to cater for our residents' needs. The September 2020 Residents' Survey also provides a useful insight into the nature of our customer contact, which will help inform our future focus.

From the outset of the pandemic, monitoring has been undertaken to understand and respond to the needs of customers contacting the Council, with triage systems implemented to ensure timely and effective support could be provided to residents. Further information about the support that has been provided as a result of this is set out elsewhere in this report.

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

Communications during the pandemic: Early on in the pandemic, the Council reviewed its communications activities and put in place additional communications activities to help reach audiences including those who do not use digital channels. This included:

- Paid for newspaper advertising
- Targeted leaflet drops to audiences identified as vulnerable, promoting the support available and a contact phone number for help
- Radio advertising
- Regular slots on local radio
- Selling in stories to broadcast media (including Channel Five)
- Content in our printed resident magazine distributed to all households in the borough,

This range of activities helped to ensure information on the help available and our services was accessible to as broad an audience as possible. During the second coronavirus wave, our communications work has expanded to work with the new Community Champions (see above).

Consultation and engagement: In the consultation and engagement work carried out by the Council, equality and diversity considerations are now explicitly built into project design. This includes identifying target groups of participants and considering the most appropriate

method of engaging with them to ensure consultation activities are available and accessible (for example by providing alternative formats or collection methods where needed).

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 those demographics and to enable us to boost participation in under-represented groups where possible. This means that - as appropriate - we can analyse responses according to these groups to provide insight into the different perceptions and experiences of sections of our community.

Residents' Survey: As noted above, a new round of Resident's Surveys was commissioned in 2020. The first wave of survey work was originally planned for May, however this had to be deferred to September due to the pandemic. As it was not possible to use the planned method of randomised face-to-face contact due to Covid-19 restrictions, a combination of phone and online contact was used. The use of quotas (including relation to ethnicity, gender, age and employment) ensured we reached a balanced cross section of the community. The detailed information provided by the Resident's Survey allows for responses to be analysed by characteristics such as long-term health condition/disability, age group, gender and ethnicity. This information will help inform how Council services are designed and delivered in the future.

Website accessibility: September 2020 saw new website accessibility regulations come into force. Considerable progress has been made during 2020 to ensure compliance of the main website coding with the regulations. Whilst timeframes for delivery of some elements of the website accessibility project have been affected by the pandemic, work is well advanced in also ensuring compliance of third party systems (which lie outside our direct control) and document downloads. In particular, all new website content and downloads created since September 2020 are fully accessible, and for the majority of frequently used previously non-compliant document downloads, accessibility issues have been resolved. Training has also been provided to web publishers to ensure they understand the new regulations and are able to produce accessible content. The Council maintains an up-to-date accessibility statement on the website which provides the latest information about compliance, available at https://www.reigate-banstead.gov.uk/info/20316/about_this_site/723/accessibility.

Future focus:

Communications and engagement: Information from the new round of Residents' Surveys, as well as from our experiences of communicating to residents during the pandemic will help inform future communication activity carried out by the Council.

Customer contact: Building on the experience of the past year, the Council will be updating its customer contact strategy, which will include consideration of the Council's statutory equality responsibilities.

Web accessibility: It is anticipated that the remaining priority non-compliant issues will be resolved by the Spring. The procedures that have been introduced throughout 2020 will ensure that all new web content is fully accessible.

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: The Council's Corporate Equality Policy was updated in 2020 to ensure it continues to remain fit for purpose and properly reflect the Council's duties and obligations. In updating the Policy, consultation was undertaken with Unions and the Staff Association as well as the Council's Corporate Governance Group. The updated Policy is now available on the Council's intranet and external-facing website.

Equality Impact Assessment template: The Council's Equality Impact Assessment template has been updated this year. The updates have included making it 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).

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: This year, the 'Equality, diversity and inclusion' pages of the Council's intranet have been updated. These pages provide a range of resources for staff, including the Corporate Equality Policy, the Council's Equality Objectives, and borough and workforce equality information. The pages now include better signposting to an expanded range of training and learning opportunities, and external resources providing more information.

Member learning and development: Due to Covid-19, the 2020 local elections were postponed, and the usual member induction process did not take place. However, equality training took place with councillors early in the new year (2021). This training was externally facilitated and provided members with a more in-depth opportunity to understand and discuss equality, diversity and inclusion.

Future focus:

It is planned to develop the above workstreams further throughout 2021 and beyond. This will include an internal communications campaign for staff about diversity and inclusion, and ongoing support and (where required) training in respect of Equality Impact Assessments. Feedback from member training will be used to identify future learning and development opportunities for Councillors.