

ITEM

Disability Review

Report of Councillor Hamilton

Recommended:

1. That **OSCOM** endorses the findings of the review.
2. That **Cabinet** adopts the approach contained within the report as a way of working when reviewing equality issues with a range of groups.

SUMMARY:

- This report brings together the findings from a programme of work that has sought to explore how the Council can further develop appropriate mechanisms in which to review equality issues, as part of an evidence-led approach to decision making.
- The primary focus for this review has been to initially consider issues relating to disability.
- The recommendations within this report will enable the Council to further embed and strengthen its approach aligned to the Equality Objectives.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report brings together the findings from a programme of work that has sought to explore how the Council can further develop appropriate mechanisms in which to review equality issues as part of an evidence-led approach to decision making.
- 1.2 The purpose of the review has been to initially focus on how the Council can most effectively engage with people with disabilities on a variety of issues, and to draw the lessons from this that can then be applied to working with groups from across the protected characteristics. In particular the review has explored what works best in terms of engagement practice, and to develop a deeper understanding of the range of issues that are of interest to people with disabilities. Engagement with both public and voluntary and community sector partners has also formed part of the review in order to take a more holistic view of wider issues.

2 Background

- 2.1 At the outset of the review an informal survey was undertaken to identify some of the hot topics that were most important to people with disabilities. This survey highlighted a number of areas of interest which included:
 - (i) Transport
 - (ii) Access to facilities / buildings /public toilets and shops
 - (iii) Pavements

- (iv) Access to benefits, support and advice
- (v) Caring support

- 2.2 The breadth of issues highlighted in many cases went beyond just the Council's remit and related to a wider body of public sector partners. Therefore, in April 2018 following the survey, partners of the Test Valley Partnership met with residents who were able to share their thoughts on key issues from a disability perspective. This also included how the constituent members of the Partnership could involve people with disabilities as they develop and implement policy.
- 2.3 Following the initial survey work and the focus group with partners, the Council has sought to develop this model of engagement further and invite people with a range of disabilities to a series of focus groups on key topics. The first opportunity to do this formed part of the approach to developing the new Corporate Plan.
- 2.4 In addition, a strand of work that has also emerged through the review has been how the Council can continue to ensure its buildings are accessible and to explore opportunities for how the views and experiences of people with disabilities can be sought.

3 Developing new approaches to engagement: Focus Groups

- 3.1 During the focus group with the Test Valley Partnership, the following key topics were discussed:
- Access to facilities
 - Social inclusion and tackling isolation
 - Access to services
- 3.2 Throughout the discussions, many of the learning points for partners focused on the value of being able to hear real-life accounts of how people with disabilities experience challenges to accessing facilities and services. It was within this context that the Partnership reflected on the importance of public service providers and businesses consulting before making changes to the way services are provided. As a result, partners felt that the Partnership could organise an annual focus group with disabled people to hear their views and organise ad-hoc meetings as and when service changes were being considered as a way in which to talk through proposals and gain feedback. Other ideas proposed included each organisation, within the partnership, nominating a disability champion who could help promote key issues and be a contact point for other partners and groups representing disability issues.
- 3.3 The feedback from partners at its subsequent meeting in October 2018 was that the opportunity to engage with groups in a dialogue where issues could be explored and perspectives sought, was a positive way in which to review a range of equality issues.

- 3.4 Following the success of the session with the Partnership, the Council was keen to explore this approach further. Councillor Hamilton as the lead for this review and Councillor Phil North, Leader of the Council hosted two disability focus groups in the north and south of the Borough as part of the community engagement programme for developing the Council's new Corporate Plan in summer 2018.
- 3.5 The purpose of these sessions was to gain an insight from people with disabilities on the broad range of issues that groups and residents from across the Borough were being consulted on during this period. This was not a targeted survey; it was about creating an appropriate inclusive mechanism in which people with a range of disabilities could take part.
- 3.6 During these sessions unique insights were gained into some of the key issues for the Borough such as, the future of town centres, accessing leisure and cultural activities including green spaces and countryside, as well access to housing, support and people being able to fulfil potential. The findings from the two sessions formed part of the wider evidence-base that members considered as part of the development of the Councils new (draft proposed) Corporate Plan – Growing Our Potential.
- 3.7 Participants from the focus groups expressed an interest in coming together again in the future on an ad-hoc basis to engage with the Council on key issues and topics. As a result, in early 2019 a group met to review the proposals put forward by the Post Office regarding the move to new premises in Andover. The focus of the discussion was to provide feedback on accessibility matters regarding the new post office location.
- 3.8 In early April a further session will be taking place regarding the proposed development of the Riverside Park at Town Mills in Andover. It is also anticipated that as the summer consultation for the development of a Masterplan in Romsey is undertaken, this will also include a focus group for people with disabilities.
- 3.9 As part of this review, each of the focus groups have provided an opportunity to reflect on what works and how the Council can utilise this approach in the future to engage with other harder to reach groups who reflect the protected characteristics. In particular the lessons that have been learned so far include:
- Focus Groups do not have to be large events in terms of numbers
 - To ensure accessibility and inclusivity when working with a group with a wide range of needs, it is important to ensure there is an appropriate level of support available to host the session and consideration of the venue is critical.
 - Timing of sessions is an important factor – when bringing together people with disabilities for example, one of the key messages was that sessions should not be held in the morning as this is often one of the most challenging parts of the day.

- Supporting the ongoing development of staff and councillors to be able to work with groups who have a diverse range of needs is important to ensure that sessions are tailored, well supported and facilitated appropriately.

4 Implementing the Council's Equality Objectives and new Corporate Plan

- 4.1 Embedded within the Councils Corporate Plan are the Equality Objectives. They provide a focus for how the Council will work to ensure that the needs of all residents are understood and catered for. Equality Objective 2 focuses on strengthening the Council's evidence-led approach to developing policy and services by establishing a suite of engagement tools and processes to enable those with protected characteristics to have their views understood and shared.
- 4.2 As the Council seeks to take forward its strategic priorities that form the new Corporate Plan through the delivery of the Corporate Action Plan (CAP), it will be important to consider ways in which equality matters can be reviewed in the most effective way within the individual CAP projects.
- 4.3 The work undertaken through this review has helped to further shape the Council's understanding and future approach it can take to meet its corporate priorities in keeping with the equality objectives that it has set itself. As a result, the Council's understanding of the experience of service users will therefore be strengthened and embedded, ensuring the perspective of those who have a protected characteristic is heard.

5 Resource Implications

- 5.1 None

6 Legal Implications

- 6.1 None

7 Equality Issues

- 7.1 This review has been undertaken to explore ways in which the Council can ensure that it has a good understanding of the issues and perspectives of people from across the protected characteristics. Although the primary focus for the review has been focused on disability matters, many of the lessons learned can be utilised when seeking to review a wide range of equality issues.
- 7.2 The report recommendations will provide a basis on which the Council can continue to develop and embed its commitments to meeting the Public Sector Equality Duty as expressed within the Council's Equality Objectives.

8 Other Issues

- 8.1 Wards/Communities Affected – All

9 Conclusion

- 9.1 Overall this review has highlighted the strengths of working in a collaborative and inclusive way. Throughout the review a number of approaches have been developed, but what has been most important has been the opportunity to work alongside residents in exploring these issues and how the Council can further build upon its track record of engaging communities.
- 9.2 The work undertaken through this review has helped to further shape the councils understanding and future approach it can take to meet its corporate priorities in keeping with the equality objectives that it has set itself. As a result, the Council's understanding of the experience of service users will therefore be strengthened and embedded ensuring the perspective of those who have a protected characteristic is heard.
- 9.3 The recommendations within this report will enable the Council to further embed and strengthen its approach.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:			
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