

Committee: **Corporate Overview & Performance Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **14th March 2024**

Report Subject: **Strategic Equality Plan 2024-28**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr S. Thomas, Leader / Cabinet Member Corporate Overview and Performance**

Report Submitted by: **Sarah King, Head of Democratic Services, Governance & Partnerships**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
	29.02.24	05.03.24			14.03.24		21.03.24	

1. **Purpose of the Report**
To present the Council's proposed Strategic Equality Plan for 2024-28.
2. **Scope and Background**
 - 2.1 Under the Equalities Act 2010 the Council has a statutory duty to prepare and publish a Strategic Equality Plan with equality objectives every four years. The plan must show due regard how the Council can contribute to a fairer society by advancing equality and good relations in our day-to-day activities.
 - 2.2 The Equality Act (Wales) 2010 legally protects people from discrimination, victimisation, and harassment if they share one or more of the following protected characteristics; age (older people, children, and young people), disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnerships, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation and pregnancy and maternity.
 - 2.3 This will be the Council's fourth Strategic Equality Plan and will set out the Council's commitments for meeting its statutory aims to:
 1. Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation.
 2. Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not.
 3. Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - 2.4 Since our last Strategic Equality Plan was published in 2020 the Welsh Government have set out comprehensive and specific commitments in light off the inequalities that were highlighted and intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is our intention that specific actions where relevant from the national plans will relate directly to action plans for each of the strategic objectives within our new plan, this will demonstrate our accountability and

commitment to helping to achieve the national commitments and goals set out by the Welsh Government.

- 2.5 Our new Strategic Equality Plan for 2024 to 2028 will focus on the outcomes that matter to the community and people who use Council services. We want it to be about services that are accessible, delivered effectively and on an equitable basis. The Plan will take into consideration the findings from our engagement and consultation activity undertaken specifically for this plan, which has involved people with lived experience from across the identified protected characteristics.
- 2.6 We know that many of the barriers facing people with protected characteristics are long-standing and entrenched and it takes long-term commitment to be fully addressed. Therefore, the equality objectives which we had in place during the previous plan 2020-2024 have been reconsidered and refined rather than replaced.
- 2.7 The equality objectives are 'themed' as we acknowledge that many of the key equality issues, we have identified are not isolated to one specific 'protected characteristic' – we recognise intersectionality for people living in our area. We feel the themed approach will help to tackle relevant issues, and therefore we are sure that the steps we want to take to deliver the objectives will also deliver positive equality outcomes for people covered by one, or more of the protected characteristics. Our themes cover:
- Organisational Culture and Leadership.
 - Workforce Inclusivity and Diversity.
 - Fair and Inclusive Learning.
 - Inclusive Engagement and Participation.
 - Community Cohesion.
 - Tackling Disadvantage caused by Poverty.
- 2.8 To create a Strategic Equality Plan that is relevant to those living and working within Blaenau Gwent, public engagement has been crucial. Key phases have included a public engagement programme which has involved 160 people with lived experiences from across the identified protected characteristics and a formal consultation process which took place in January 2024. Furthermore, we also consulted through our internal management structures on the proposed objectives and confirmed that they agreed with the knowledge and information shared by professionals in relation to equality.
- 2.9 Following formal consultation, the Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2028 has been developed (Appendix 1). The plan contains our Equality Objectives which are:
- Equality Objective 1: We will be a fair and equitable organisation.
 - Equality Objective 2: We will be a workplace that champions diversity and inclusion.
 - Equality Objective 3: We will create a fair and inclusive learning culture for all children and young people with a focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion.

- Equality Objective 4: We will promote and support inclusive, safe and cohesive communities.
- Equality Objective 5: We will ensure effective engagement and participation for people with protected characteristics.
- Equality Objective 6: We will strive to reduce inequality caused by poverty.

2.10 The plan is supported by our 2024/25 Action Plan (Appendix 2) which outlines a set of prioritised actions we will carry out to help us achieve our objectives, and 2023/24 SEP Annual Report (Appendix 3) which provides a summary of progress made in 2023/24 against our previous plan for 2020-24.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 **Option 1** - That the Committee considers the proposed Strategic Equality Plan and supports prior to approval at Council.

Option 2 - That the Committee considers the proposed Strategic Equality Plan and make specific recommendations to prior to approval at Council.

4. **Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**
The report relates to the Council meeting the specific duties identified under the Equality Act 2010 (Statutory Duties).

The Strategic Equality Plan will also support the Council in meeting other statutory duties set out within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 which set a national well-being objective to create “a more equal Wales”.

The proposed equality objective relating to strive to tackle disadvantage caused by poverty will also put the Council in a strong position to be able to meet the Public Sector Equality Duty named the ‘socio-economic duty’ (2021).

Since our last Strategic Equality Plan was published in 2020, the Welsh Government have set out comprehensive and specific commitments in light of the inequalities that were highlighted and intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, national strategic plans and key action plans have been developed and published by the Welsh Government to tackle the existing inequalities experienced by individuals and communities.

These plans include:

- LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales (2023)
- Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan (2022)
- Age Friendly Wales Strategy (2021)
- Children and Young People's Plan (2022)
- Violence Against Women and girls, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) strategy (2022)

5. Implications Against Each Option

5.1 **Impact on Budget (short- and long-term impact)**

There are no direct financial implications as a consequence of this report. The publication and translation of the report, on behalf of the Council, is met within existing budget of the Governance and Partnerships.

5.2 **Risk including Mitigating Actions**

Failure to develop and publish a new Strategic Equality Plan and Equality Objectives by 31st March 2024 would result in the Council failing to comply with its statutory requirements and specific duties of the Equality Act 2010.

This risk has been mitigated by effective project planning to develop equality objectives and the supporting action plan (with prioritised actions), and by ensuring timely professional and political approval.

5.3 **Legal**

The Council has a legal requirement to develop and publish a Strategic Equality Plan and Equality Objectives by 1st April 2024.

5.4 **Human Resources**

There is a duty across the organisation to comply with the Act and proactively support the implementation of the Strategic Equality Plan. The Policy and Partnerships Team will oversee this responsibility via the Professional Lead for Engagement, Equality and Welsh Language.

The plan commits to a quarterly Equality Oversight Group, which will be member led (by our Equality Champion), whereby appropriate representatives from across the colleague will consider progress made against the prioritised actions.

5.5 **Health and Safety**

This report has no direct implications towards Health and Safety matters.

6. Supporting Evidence

6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

Underpinning the development of the Strategic Equality Plan and Equality Objectives is intelligence and research including:

- Understanding each of the protected characteristic;
- Information, data and statistics considered at a local, regional and national level;
- National Research undertaken by the Equality and Human Rights Commission: Is Wales Fairer? (2023);
- Feedback received from interested parties through our formal consultation and engagement work.

6.2 **Expected outcome for the public**

A more equal Wales: A society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances (including their socio-economic background and circumstances).

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

To create a Strategic Equality Plan that is relevant to those living and working within Blaenau Gwent, extensive public engagement has been undertaken. The initial step taken was to review the 2020-24 plan to influence the creation of a public survey, we wanted to know what people thought of our previous objectives and what we should be prioritising. The results were collated and used to shape our proposed objectives outlined in the Consultation Document.

The new Strategic Equality Plan for 2024 to 2028 focuses on the outcomes that matter to the community and people who use Council services. The Plan takes into consideration the findings from our engagement and consultation activity undertaken specifically for this plan, which has involved 160 people with lived experiences from across the identified protected characteristics.

Furthermore, we have had forty-eight individuals participate via an online questionnaire, to encourage people to share their views and experiences, and talk to us broadly about equality, diversity, and inclusion.

We gathered and analysed the results of the consultation and used them to create proposed objectives in the Consultation Document. We asked the public again if we had reflected their feedback in the proposed objectives through a second survey.

Besides the public consultation, we also consulted through our internal management structures on the suggested objectives and confirmed that they agreed with the knowledge and information shared by professionals in relation to equality.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

The objectives will be in operation until 2028 and will be monitored annually to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and considers future trends and needs.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

The plan works to ensure that no person is discriminated against now or in the future.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The plan has been developed with the involvement of key stakeholders and partners and this activity will continue, as part of the delivery of the plan.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

The plan is to be linked to the implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations Act to ensure alignments and avoid duplication. The action plan linked to the plan will be integrated into the Business Planning process of the Council to ensure all service areas are effectively taking into consideration the requirements of the Act and our identified equality objectives.

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

This report has no direct implications towards decarbonisation or reducing carbon emissions.

6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)***

The IIA for the policy development of our Strategic Equality Plan 2024/28 is included at Appendix 4. The assessment process identified no adverse impacts to be mitigated.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

The Council is obliged to carry out an annual reporting process to outline how progress has been made against the plan. The report is published on the Council's website and sent to the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Additionally, the annual report is taken through democratic processes via the Corporate and Performance Scrutiny and Cabinet Committees.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

Appendix 1 - Blaenau Gwent Strategic Equality Plan 2024/28

Appendix 2 - Blaenau Gwent SEP Action Plan 2024/25

Appendix 3 - Blaenau Gwent SEP Annual Report 2023/24

Appendix 4 – Integrated Impact Assessment for SEP 2024/28