

**Committee and Date**

Cabinet

20<sup>th</sup> November 2024

Item

Public



# Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan 2024-2028

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## 1. Synopsis

The Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan 2024-2028 is being presented to Cabinet for approval in order to enable compliance with specific duties under the Equality Act 2010. Approval will also facilitate demonstration of good practice in regard to equality.

## 2. Executive Summary

2.1 Shropshire Council, along with other public authorities, must act in a way that is compliant with the **Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)** set out in the Equality Act 2010. This includes publication of the Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan every four years.

2.2 The PSED may be described as the duty on a public authority, when carrying out its functions, to have what is called **due regard** to three equality aims.

These equality aims are listed below.

- Eliminating discrimination, harassment and victimisation;
- Advancing equality of opportunity;

- Fostering good relations.

The Armed Forces Act 2022 is also of pertinence in terms of the Council giving 'due regard' in decision making processes to the needs of veterans and serving members of the armed forces and their families.

2.3 As a local authority, we must comply with both a general equality duty and with specific duties, as set out in the Act.

- To demonstrate full compliance with the **general duty**, we are required to publish annual information about our workforce and about service user diversity. These are published on the website every year, enabling progress to be charted against the three national aims and our own local objectives.
- To demonstrate full compliance with the **specific duties**, we are required to publish one or more equality objectives which we think we should achieve. The frequency for these objectives to be published is a minimum of every four years. Publication enables us to review overall progress and set objectives for the next four years.

2.4 In terms of alignment with the Shropshire Plan, approval of the Strategic Equality Objectives Plan 2024-2028 will enable the following key aspirations to continue to be progressed, alongside further embedding of the three national equality aims within Council policy and practice:

- A. *Healthy economy: We'll develop Shropshire as a vibrant destination that attracts people to live in, work in, learn in and visit.*
- B. *Healthy environment: We'll enable safer, sustainable, diverse and inclusive communities that pull together by reducing anti-social behaviour and risk of harm;*
- C. *Healthy organisation: We'll enable a skilled, happy, healthy, diverse, inclusive, empowered, and proud workforce that influences and leads change, addressing any inequalities.*
- D. *Healthy people: We'll work with partners to develop, commission and deliver the right services and support that meet the needs of children, young people, adults and families in the right place, at the right time.*

2.5 This is because approval of the Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan 2024-2028 could be considered to have potential positive environmental, economic and societal impacts for the wider community across Shropshire, as well as equality and health and wellbeing impacts for people within and across the nine Protected Characteristic groupings as currently defined in the Equality Act 2010.

### 3. Recommendations

3.1 Cabinet agrees to the publication of Shropshire Council's Equality Objectives Action Plan for 2024 to 2028, (as set out in Appendix A) in order to meet legal requirements for compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty placed upon the Council through the Equality Act 2010.

# Report

## 4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1 The Equality Act 2010, together with the Human Rights Act 1998 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, forms a framework of protection for equality, diversity, social inclusion and human rights. The legislation specifies that a listed authority must publish its equality information and equality objectives in a manner which is accessible to the public and may publish this information within another published document. Our annual diversity reports are on the Council website, along with the equality objectives action plans for 2016 to 2020 and for 2020 to 2024. To not meet our legal obligations would be to risk intervention by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).
- 4.2 If the Council did not publish this action plan for 2024-2028, it would not be in a position to readily demonstrate compliance with the PSED. This would represent a major risk, not least in reputational terms, as it would involve breach of legal obligation, affect more than one group of stakeholders, attract the medium-term attention of legislative or regulatory bodies and potentially attract significant adverse media interest.
- 4.3 Another risk, were the Equality Objectives Action Plan to not receive endorsement, is that the Council could be seen as ignoring the needs of the vulnerable and those at risk of social exclusion, including rural communities and those on low incomes. This is despite the fact that such individuals form wider groupings of people who need to be identified and who may need support either as individuals or as groupings.
- 4.4 It is also a legal requirement, laid upon us as a public sector body through the Equality Act 2010, for local authorities to assess the equality and human rights impact of changes proposed or made to services. Carrying out impact assessments helps us as a public authority to ensure that, as far as possible, we are taking actions to meet the general equality duty placed on us by the Equality Act 2010, and to thus demonstrate that the three national equality aims are integral to our decision making processes.
- 4.5 As reinforced in Government guidance updated in November 2023, it is up to us as an authority to decide what form our equality impact assessment may take. By way of illustration, some local authorities focus more overtly upon human rights; some include safeguarding. It is about what is considered to be needed in a local authority's area, in line with local factors such as demography and strategic objectives as well as with the national legislative imperatives.
- 4.6 We need to be in a position to be able to demonstrate to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) that we have made every effort to carry out our equality impact screenings, and that we have done so at every stage where it would be appropriate to do so. Our ESHIA screenings set out to ensure that "due regard" is being given to equality, equity, social inclusion and health and wellbeing.
- 4.7 As well as considering impacts for the nine Protected Characteristic groupings, our ESHIA screenings therefore set out to ensure that "due regard" is being given to

equality, equity, social inclusion and health and wellbeing, in line with our local aspirations as set out in the **Shropshire Plan** as well as our national legal obligations.

- 4.8 A Stage One Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA) has been carried out on the draft Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan 2024-2028 and is attached as Appendix C. This indicates that a medium positive impact is anticipated for all groupings within the community and thus for the whole community, as the Council's equality objectives action plan sets out to meet the three national equality aims set out in the general equality duty placed upon local authorities under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). There is intersectionality across the Protected Characteristic groupings as well as for the additional groupings we consider in Shropshire. This term is growing in usage, to indicate that a person will inevitably belong to at least three groupings, ie Age and Ethnicity, and the Sex to which they were assigned at birth; and that during the course of their lives they may then describe themselves as belonging at one time or another to one or more other groupings as well, eg Religion or Belief eg Marriage or Civil Partnership. This strategic-level ESHIA also notes that, within the Disability grouping, conscious efforts are being made for ESHIAs in regard to service change proposals to consider the likely impacts for people with sensory disabilities, people with neurodiverse conditions, and those with hidden physical disabilities including Crohn's disease.
- 4.9 The workforce of the Council is a key target group in the Council's equality endeavours, as are the elected Members of the Council as community leaders. The assistance of all staff across all service areas, in taking account of equality considerations in their everyday actions and in applying such considerations to planned changes to services, will help the Council to proactively meet its PSED as well as mitigate against any risks of non-compliance. We will continue to publish information in ways that are visible and accessible, seek to take due regard of needs, in particular recognising intersectionality between groupings, and target efforts at finding out where there may be barriers to accessing particular services, and how this might be addressed in ways that will promote health and well being. This will be reported upon in the annual Service User and Workforce Diversity Reports published online.

#### Risk table

<i>Risk</i>	<i>Mitigation</i>
Non-compliance with our Public Sector Equality Duty and associated legislation, leading to potential intervention action by the Equality and Human Rights Commission	Approval of the Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan for 2024-2028; continued compliance through publication of annual service user diversity reports and workforce diversity reports online.
Reputational risk at local and national level due to non-compliance, including negative media interest	Approval of the Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan for 2024-2028; continued compliance through publication of annual service user diversity reports and workforce diversity reports online
Perception that the needs of vulnerable groupings are being ignored	Approval of the Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan for 2024-2028; continued compliance through publication of annual service user diversity reports and workforce diversity reports online

Not carrying out impact assessments and therefore not demonstrating that due regard is taken of the needs of people in Protected Characteristic groupings in our decision-making processes.

Carrying out impact assessments helps us as a public authority to ensure that, as far as possible, we are taking actions to meet the general equality duty placed on us by the Equality Act 2010, and to thus demonstrate that the three national equality aims are integral to our decision making processes

## 5. Financial Implications

5.1 Shropshire Council is currently managing an unprecedented financial position as budgeted for with the Medium Term Financial Strategy approved by Council on 29 February 2024 and detailed in our monitoring position presented to Cabinet on a monthly basis. This demonstrates that significant management action is required over the remainder of the financial year to ensure the Council's financial survival. While all Cabinet Reports provide the financial implications of decisions being taken, this may change as officers review the overall financial situation and make decisions aligned to financial survivability. Where non-essential spend is identified within the Council, this will be reduced.

This may involve:

- scaling down initiatives,
- changing the scope,
- delaying implementation, or
- extending delivery timescales.

5.2 The principal resource in terms of equality, diversity and social inclusion is officer time, met from within Resources Directorate and including the Rurality and Equalities Specialist and other officer input eg from HR and from Communications Team. There is not, and has not been for a decade, an equalities budget. Efforts are put into optimising and updating existing materials, working in partnership with other organisations, and making best use of online resources.

## 6. Climate Change Appraisal

6.1 With regard to the planting of trees, there is a complementary action to carbon offsetting in that there is anticipated to be a low positive outcome in relation specifically to the growing of a Holocaust Memorial cherry tree orchard of remembrance across Shropshire. One tree is planted each year, with a primary school, and the aim over time is for a cherry tree orchard covering all quadrants of the county. This is by definition a gradual process, initiated in 2015, notwithstanding a growth spurt in 2016 that saw an additional five trees planted with secondary schools. The trees are sourced from a local supplier and procured through the County Arboriculturist Team. The 20th tree will be planted in 2025.

6.2 There is anticipated to continue to be a neutral to low positive outcome in relation to the following aspects of climate change mitigation, with efforts to introduce and maximise online resources matched by efforts to improve digital connectivity and reduce social isolation across the county. Any energy efficiency changes to the fabric of community assets and buildings that improves their energy and fuel outputs will be

of benefit to the communities that make use of them, as well as to the wider environment, just as better use of local buildings that reduces or obviates the need to travel other than on foot or by bicycle will also be of benefit to the wider environment. This also thus links into Active Travel policy.

- Energy and fuel consumption
- Renewable energy generation
- Climate Change adaptation

## 7. Background

### 7.1 The legal background

7.1.1 Publication of the Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan is a legal requirement under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) set out in the Equality Act 2010. Its production enables the Council to not only frame our proposed actions for the next four years but also record and reflect upon progress made in the last four years. This is being achieved despite financial constraints, with a focus upon joint working and best use of resources within the Council and across organisational boundaries.

7.1.2 The Action Plan serves to continue to demonstrate our commitment to tackling racism and other forms of discrimination, harassment and victimisation, to fostering good relations across communities, and to advancing equality of opportunity, through our actions as a Council and in partnership with others. This includes support to our workforce as well as to communities, with examples given in the annual service user diversity reports and workforce diversity reports that are also published as per PSED requirements.

7.1.3 Publication of an approved Equality Objectives Action Plan 2024 to 2028 will thus enable up to date positioning of the Council to assist in efforts to meet its PSED. It will also facilitate timely links with other local and national policy and strategy developments in the arena of equality, diversity, and social inclusion.

### 7.2 The local context: geography and demography

7.2.1 Being an inland county brings its own challenges. There is a dependency on a limited number of key arterial transport routes, for trade and supply including freight through the county to Wales and Ireland, or up to the North West, as well as for everyday transport for local communities and businesses. It is also quite literally exposed to extreme weather conditions, with roads that are liable to flooding, and a lack of viable alternatives leading to congestion and lengthy diversions. The physical terrain poses practical challenges for digital and physical infrastructure, as well as the high service delivery costs and access issues associated with a dispersed and ageing population.

7.2.2 It is within this geographical context of cross border travel patterns, for residents, visitors, and businesses, that we develop and deliver services with

and for our diverse communities. The exigencies of adjusting to external factors of climate change and political change, including energy costs, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and the economic and social upheaval continuing to be caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, are allied to the challenges of preserving and maximising our natural capital and seeking to address cost of living worries.

- 7.2.3 If the pandemic has shown us anything, it is that we are more dependent upon each other and more vulnerable to a greater range of factors than could perhaps have been imagined. A reflection on this genuinely universal truth, and a collective and cohesive approach towards the structures that we use to develop and deliver public sector services, should bring in an improvement in social mobility opportunities across the whole country, alongside environmental initiatives around green energy, alongside reduced physical travel and greater recognition of hitherto hidden deprivation and dependencies.

### 7.3 The quest for equity

- 7.3.1 It is a fact that the Council has been significantly underfunded under successive governments when compared to urban areas. This is an equity issue. The Council joins with other rural local authorities to campaign through channels such as the Rural Services Network (RSN), the Britain's Leading Edge (BLE) grouping of rural and coastal local authorities, and the County Councils Network (CCN), for a fairer distribution of the funds which the Government decides to allocate to support local government services, so that historical imbalances do not continue. The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Rural Affairs is also a potentially very useful mechanism through which to engage and communicate with the new Government, and includes local MPs.
- 7.3.2 The dominant theme in feedback from our communities, gained through public consultation exercises, is rural inequality and concerns about the impact of service changes on older people, people with disabilities and/or limited mobility and people on low incomes. With rural issues to the fore of the minds of respondents, this indicates that the Council's ongoing efforts as a rural authority to seek equity of funding are not misplaced. Additionally, in seeking to factor social inclusion and socio-economic considerations into decision-making processes, the Council's endeavours again appear to align to community needs and aspirations as well.
- 7.3.3 Complementary to community feedback, members of the Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee (now Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee) had highlighted concerns about rurality and access to health and care services through their work. This Task and Finish Group was commissioned to draw together the key points and observations that had arisen through the work of the committee during 2022/2023, to review the latest local and national evidence on rural proofing, hear from local system providers and take the opportunity to learn from other areas of the country. The report of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee which adopted the report of the Rural Proofing in Health and Care Task and Finish Group, set out key findings, conclusions and recommendations of their work considering delivering health and care services to rural communities. The

Group also heard from the Rurality and Equalities Specialist, who advised that whilst Rurality is not in itself a Protected Characteristic as set out in the Equality Act 2010, rurality is considered as part of economic assessment within the ESHIA process, in regard to the circumstances in which people find themselves as individuals or as households, including issues such as fuel poverty, lack of access to services and facilities, and lack of opportunities for training and employment

- 7.3.4 The Group recommended that rurality and the accessibility factors that are associated with it becomes a key consideration for Shropshire’s health and care system (including Shropshire Council) when adapting or introducing a new service or policy and recommend the use of the Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit to achieve this. At Cabinet on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2024, Shropshire Council accepted the recommendation to adopt the Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit written by Rural England CIC, with input from the Nuffield Trust. It was a joint commission with the National Centre for Rural Health & Care. The Group also recommended that an evaluation be undertaken by Shropshire Council in their role as commissioner and Place co-ordinator to understand how the Council’s intelligence and data gathering function can contribute to discussions and research on how to identify small pockets of deprivation in rural communities. Through the JSNA process, Shropshire Council is committed to a more localised understanding of need and intelligence gathering, which links well into ongoing and draft equality actions around analysing data in ways that are consistent and coherent. In addition, the Council will continue to work with research partners, including universities and other rural authorities, the Centre for Rural Studies, and regional partners, to explore opportunities to enhance research in this area
- 7.3.5 An emphasis on inequalities within society and within communities, including access to decent and energy efficient housing, healthcare, education and employment, whether by public or private transport or via digital means, should also include better national recognition of geographical and societal interdependencies rather than a separation out of different strands of policy. Equality legislation necessitates compliance but also provides opportunity for reflection on local progress and recalibration towards where we want to go in addressing inequalities and achieving equity of opportunity for all our communities, whether they live in rural areas or in our market towns.

## **7.4 Progress made 2020-2024**

7.4.1 We currently have three main strategic action areas

- Publish more visibly
- Collect data more proactively
- Work together more jointly

7.4.2 As may be seen from the update table, progress has been made in each action areas.

Highlights include:



### A. Publish more visibly

Action: increased publication of press releases and digital materials to mark celebrations and commemorations, and to raise awareness and understanding amongst the community and amongst the workforce of what these events and dates mean to different groupings.

This has included material to mark religious festivals and dates, such as around Chinese New Year, Christmas, Diwali, Easter, Hanukkah, Ramadhan and Vaisakhi. The Council has also publicised the efforts of Community Pride volunteers during Pride Month, promoted UN International Women's Day and UN International Day for People with Disabilities, and used payslips to promote Show Racism the Red Card Day and the White Ribbon campaign against domestic violence.

### B. Collect data more proactively

Action: embedding health and well being impacts into ESHIAs

The proactive gathering of intelligence from local and national sources is now linked into the priorities within the Shropshire Plan and to the use to be gained through input to and findings from public consultation exercises. As such, data and analyses now form a more in-depth resource for service areas and for reports to Members as well as for publication on our website. Data and findings form an integral part of ESHIAs in terms of helping to assess the likely impact of proposed service changes upon people in different groupings

In December 2021, we added in an impacts table on health and well being, which affected not only the content but also the title for the impact assessment template, to now refer to it as the Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment, or ESHIA. In June 2023, we updated it further, in order to amplify not only the health and well being element but also the duty that now applies in law to have due regard to the needs of veterans and serving members of the armed forces and their families. This brings us to April 2024, with changes to now show armed forces as a distinct grouping, and care leavers as a distinct local grouping. The current templates are available on the website and on the Council intranet, together with examples and latest Government guidance.

Our additional efforts to consider impacts of decisions through the screenings that we undertake thus involve considerations around social inclusion, around health and well being, linked to health impact considerations; around environmental impacts, linked to climate change considerations; and around economic impacts.

None of these are currently legal requirements under the Equality Act 2010. Together, they add value or at least ensure that the Council is visibly seeking to take an holistic view of impacts: and as importantly for our service areas is taking a proportionate and time efficient way in which to do so through use of a single template.

### C. Work together more jointly

Action: growing a cherry tree orchard of remembrance to mark the Holocaust and other genocides, partnership with inter faith forums, local primary schools, and local elected members as community leaders.

There are 19 trees in the orchard, being grown in different locations across our rural county, with a new tree planted each year. This includes the planting of a Remembering Srebrenica tree in 2021 by the Armed Forces memorial outside Shirehall, to remember the humanitarian role of the local armed forces in the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and in genocides since that time. The Council's efforts on Holocaust and genocide commemoration work with children have been recognised by the national HMD Trust with a feature in their 2023 annual publication. These efforts are not only around ensuring that the Holocaust and other genocides are never forgotten but also around providing opportunity for children to work with representatives of a range of faith communities and grow their own understanding of world faiths.

Action: evaluate increased understanding amongst officers and elected Members about the challenges faced by people with Protected Characteristics and people at risk of social exclusion.

This action has changed in scope towards awareness raising efforts allied to specific campaigns or place-based activity. Awareness raising efforts have included the following: terminology changes such as no longer using BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) as a generic acronym, recognising the diversity of our many small ethnic minorities including from Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Poland, Syria, and Ukraine; being an ally, particularly for the Protected Characteristic groupings of Race, Religion or Belief, and Sexual Orientation; visible 'due regard' being taken of the needs of neurodiverse individuals within ESHIAs; and use made of poetry and narratives as a way to help people to think about commemorations and celebrations including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month, Race Equality Week, and South Asian Heritage Month.

## 7.5 Next steps for 2024-2028

7.5.1 The three broad action areas have served us well over the last eight years altogether but now warrant changing whilst retaining intent. This is partly as we have made progress and partly as efficiencies may be gained through scoping things more toward use of what we have already and use to be made of online resources, as well as maximising potential for more partnership working.

7.5.2 The action areas will now be recast to the following:

- Publish information in ways that are visible and accessible
- Analyse and utilise data in ways that are consistent and coherent

- Work together in ways that are collaborative and cost efficient

Highlights would include:

#### A. Publish information in ways that are visible and accessible

Action: Maintain online resource materials on equalities, diversity and social inclusion in one location on the external website at [www.shropshire.gov.uk](http://www.shropshire.gov.uk)

Utilising one main location has enabled information to be presented as logically and visibly as possible, with links to further external material that may be helpful, including the website of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). Use of these pages has facilitated ready links to be made to press releases and resources elsewhere on the website, including committee papers, and to other related websites including Shropshire Archives.

The annual service user and workforce diversity reports required to be published as part of our PSED are added to the website each year. These provide extra depth and layers of information about not only the needs of people across and within groupings but also the heritage and cultures of diverse communities in Shropshire, including amongst our workforce.

The focus remains on the website, for internal and external audiences alike, whilst efforts continue to recognise the need to provide additional support and advice via email enquiries and telephone

#### B. Analyse and utilise data in ways that are consistent and coherent

Action: Analyse and present contextual equality and health and well being information in a range of ways and through local and national opportunities that arise, in order to strengthen collective understanding about issues and needs, and optimise use to be made in partnership, Council and service area policy and strategy development of all opportunities to aid understanding of equality, diversity and social inclusion issues

This is an ongoing action involving use of a wider range of in depth analyses published on the website, including Census 2021 analyses and public health data. There is also a greater awareness of the complexities of health inequalities for different groupings, including those which emerged during the pandemic; and those which remain for people we may describe as vulnerable. This includes people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness; veterans and serving members of the armed forces and their families; and young people leaving care. Future plans include further assessment of inequalities (both health and otherwise) through the embedding of select aspects of the Health Equity Assessment Tool within the ESHIA process.

#### C. Work together in ways that are collaborative and cost efficient

Actions: to work with local NHS organisations and Telford and Wrekin Council through the Integrated Care System, on the following areas:

For the workforce: equip managers with the confidence and competencies to recognise and tackle racism and other forms of discrimination, including sexism and misogyny, through targeted training and briefing, and equip all employees to act as allies.

For service users and the community: implement communication campaigns to address misinformation and raise awareness of how to recognise and report hate crime in all its forms, allied to communications about standards of respectful behaviour and language towards the workforce.

## 8. Additional Information

8.1 Cabinet agreed in 2020 to receive a progress report on equality developments at local and national level at a timely future date, at which point further recommendations might be tabled, specifically with regard to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic upon groupings and communities in Shropshire. An inquiry spokesperson said the unequal impacts of the pandemic would be at the forefront of its work. With the inquiry still ongoing, we are not in a position to report further at this time. Instead, the intention is that we will link this into actions with partners to address inequalities, to build upon national research and intelligence, and follow on from the action we had hoped to progress in the 2020-2024 timeframe.

## 9. Conclusions

9.1 The action plan for 2024-2028 sets out to make the most of the feedback we gain from communities, allied to local and national digital resources, and emerging intelligence and data on inequalities, and to utilise events, celebrations and commemorations through which to raise awareness of the rich diversity of our communities. Along with our partners, and through our workforce, we are in a position to frame our proposed actions for the next four years in ways that will utilise the data and evidence that we already hold about groupings and their needs, continue to collect and analyse and share this and use this in our decision making processes, and do all that is possible to engage with and support our communities to live their best lives, wherever they live, study and work in our large rural county.

9.2 In so doing, we may make more local progress over the next four years, with regard to the three national equality aims, as well as improving the health and well being of the communities that we all serve. Approval of the Strategic Equality Objectives Action Plan for 2024-2028, including review of the actions undertaken in the last four years, will serve as a record of our commitment to our diverse communities and to our workforce, and is commended to Councillors on that basis.

**List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)**

**Local Member:** All

**Appendices**

**Appendix A – Draft Action Plan for 2024 to 2028**

**Appendix B - Progress Update of Actions for 2020 to 2024**

**Appendix C- Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA)**