

EQUALITIES & DIVERSITY CABINET CHAMPION 2023/24

This Annual Report of the Cabinet Equalities and Diversity Champion Cllr Jib Belbase, provides an overview of the role and expectations for the year, key activity achieved in 2023/24 and recommendations for 2024/25.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This report sets out the work of the Equalities & Diversity Cabinet Champion for 2023/24 in taking forward the activities and priorities listed at Appendix A as agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 1.2 I would like to thank Council Officers who have worked with me over the last year to support the activity listed below.

2. SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND ACTIVITY IN 2023/24

Increase Engagement with underrepresented groups

- 2.1 One of my main priorities was to reach out and engage with underrepresented groups that had little existing engagement with other communities or the Council. I have invested significant time to establish and strengthen links with community leaders from Asian communities, including Afghan and Keralan, and European communities, including Bulgarian and Ukrainian.
- 2.2 Through ongoing engagement with these groups and their community leaders, I have supported them to integrate into local society. This has included involving them in local events and encouraging community participation such as volunteering. It has also involved understanding their needs, especially those who are new arrivals to the UK and face a significant culture change.
- 2.3 By working with the Community Leaders and the Council's Community and Partnerships team, I developed the concept of a Cultural Awareness Event, organised by the Council and delivered on 13th March at the Princes Hall.
- 2.4 This was a targeted, informal event aimed specifically at minority communities I had engaged, including Afghan, Hong Kong, Ukrainian, Keralan and Bulgarian residents. Members of those communities attended alongside a range of key partners including Police, Council, Fire & Rescue, Citizens Advice and local charities. The event helped the community to feel valued and to learn and understand more about UK Culture including:
 - Accessing benefits
 - How to report a crime or ask for help
 - Fire safety at home
 - Local Mental health support
 - Cost of Living support
 - Volunteering opportunities

- It also provided the opportunity for Council officers and partners to learn about other cultures and build networks with previously unknown communities.

2.5 In March 2024 the Council delivered an accessibility workshop, regarding the proposed Cultural & Leisure Hub, engaging residents with physical or mental disabilities to ensure their needs are considered as part of the design plans. Members of Rushmoor Accessibility Access Group (RAAG), including Cllr Mara Makunura, the previous Equalities and Diversity Champion, and local Mental health charities were invited. The Council received positive feedback on the session. Cllr Makunura has maintained an active role in RAAG throughout my year as Champion.

2.6 I have also attended the Rushmoor Cohesive Communities group (RCC) which contributes to the action in the Council's Equality and Diversity Action Plan to broaden engagement with communities across Rushmoor.

Training to Increase Understanding & Awareness

2.7 I recognised a gap for Officers and Members in Gender Identity training. This is an emotive subject that often attracts media attention and I feel that understanding gender identity and being equipped with adequate knowledge is important so that we can continue to support people to the best of our ability.

2.8 I have been working closely with the Community & Partnerships Team and the Council's People team to deliver a tailored programme. Training has been secured to start in summer 2024 for Members and Officers and will be delivered by a charity specialising in Gender Identity, who have experience working with Councils and Parliament. I would actively encourage all Members to take part.

2.9 In December 2023 I also arranged for Council officers to receive neurodiversity training. Neurodiversity awareness training is equality and diversity training designed to help, understand and appreciate the differences in neurodevelopmental conditions such as Autism and ADHD. I felt that it was important for the Council to understand neurodiversity better to help create a work environment that enables neurodivergent people to feel safe and perform at their best.

2.10 The training was delivered by Mustard Seed, a key partner in our borough, and was oversubscribed. Feedback from officers was very positive. An additional Neurodiversity training session for line managers ran on Wednesday 20th March and I have requested a further session for Members.

Equality and Diversity Action Plan

2.11 Over the course of the year, I have met with the Community and Partnerships Team to brief and support them on my work and ensure that the activity listed above has been in support of the Council's Equality and Diversity Action Plan.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

- 3.1 Over the last year I have worked hard to connect with a range of minority communities, many of whom have recently arrived in Rushmoor under challenging circumstances. I would recommend that the Council continues to prioritise engaging with all members of the community and support integration to sustain a cohesive community.
- 3.2 I recommend that the Council continues to review the Equality and Diversity Action Plan taking into consideration the independent work of RAAG. The Council should continue to provide Officer support to RAAG and work closely with the Group.
- 3.3 We have a wonderful, diverse community. In my role as Champion, I have supported underrepresented groups to amplify their voices and advocate for issues that affect them. I am proud that Rushmoor is an inclusive and diverse place to live but we must continue to maximise opportunities and choices of everyone to live fulfilled lives. I recommend that the Council promotes and celebrates our diversity as part of our events programme.
- 3.4 I recommend that the Council prioritises a comprehensive training programme with an emphasis on Equality and Diversity issues for officers and Members.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

Appendix A - Equality and Diversity Champion Roles and Responsibilities for 2023/24

Equalities & Diversity Cabinet Champion

Purpose: Support the delivery of the Equality and Diversity Action Plan and work with partners to promote and celebrate Equality and Diversity in the Borough.

Roles:

1. Increase engagement with under – represented groups across the Borough
2. Work with the Council's Community & Partnerships and Communications teams to identify and promote cultural, religious and heritage festivals and events in the Borough
3. Monitor the Equality and Diversity Action Plan and influence proposals for further phases of its delivery
4. Work to improve awareness of Members and Officers of equality, diversity and disability issues in the Borough
5. Report back regularly to the Council, and especially the Cabinet, on plans, projects and activities

Champion Priorities in 2023/24

1. To represent the Council and Chair the Rushmoor Cohesive Communities (RCC) group.
2. To assist with the development and delivery of RCC priorities – specifically around increasing engagement with under represented groups. To promote the group and share knowledge on culture, issues and barriers to engagement.
4. Support the delivery of the agreed projects from the Equalities and Diversity Action Plan
5. Support the Council's engagement work to improve understanding of satisfaction levels within and needs of minority groups within the Borough
6. Encourage minority communities to be involved with local events organised by the Council and other bodies
7. Arrange appropriate training for Members and Staff to increase understanding and awareness of Equality and Diversity

