

REPORT TITLE: Equity Strategy Update

To: Services, Climate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 21st September 2026

Report by:

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Wards affected:

All

Director Approval: Director, Sam Scharf confirms that the report author has sought the advice of all appropriate colleagues and given due regard to that advice; and that they are content for the report to be put to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

1.	Introduction
1.1	This item is within the remit of the Committee (Communities) and was added to the Work Programme in July 2026 by the Chair & Vice-Chair following officer discussions. What function of scrutiny is being fulfilled (tick all that apply)? Holding the Executive to Account ☐ Policy Development or Review ☒ Performance Monitoring ☐ External Scrutiny ☐ The Committee is asked to consider the recommendations in Paragraph 2 to discuss, challenge, and influence the next steps in the development of the Council's Equity Strategy.
2.	Recommendations for Scrutiny
2.1	It is recommended that the Services, Climate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee: 1. Notes the progress made in developing the Equity Strategy

	2. Reviews and comment on the engagement methodology used to reach marginalised people and the themes identified in the engagement 3. Provide feedback on the proposed strategic direction for the Equity Strategy, focussing on the following questions: - Based on your expertise and experience, which areas can the Council have the biggest impact? - How can the Council use its position to leverage systemic change? 4. To provide support, in principle, to proposals in the equity strategy action plan.
3.	Attendees
3.1	Sam Scharf, Communities Director Keryn Jalli, Strategic Resettlement and Community Equity Lead Helen Crowther, Equity and Community Power Manager
4.	Alternative Options Considered
4.1	<u>1. Allow Equalities Objectives to expire</u> This option was rejected, as it does not comply with our legal requirements under Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 201) to “publish one or more equality objectives at least every 4 years”. Allowing the objectives to expire, does not align to the Council’s Corporate Plan or its vision of “One Cambridge, Fair for All” <u>2. Review Equalities Objectives</u> This was rejected as whilst it would enable the Council to meet its statutory duties under the Equality Act, these objectives have been set by the Council, not in consultation with residents. This approach would not align to the Council’s Community Wealth Building Strategy (2024)ⁱ, or the Council's approach to community engagement and democratic involvement.

5.	Background and key issues
5.1	<u>Cambridge Context</u> Cambridge is one of the UK's most economically successful cities, with high growth, where most residents enjoy a high quality of lifeⁱⁱ. We are rich in community organisations and community action, with a diverse and accepting population. Whilst Cambridge is a prosperous place, not everyone is able to access the city's opportunities. Cambridge is one of the least affordable cities in the country, with the highest levels of income inequality (as measured by the Gini coefficient of income inequality)ⁱⁱⁱ. The disability employment rate is lower in Cambridge than the national average and our gender pay gap has increased from 11% in 2023 to 18% in 2024. There are areas of deprivation within the city, children living in poverty and noticeable inequalities in health, educational outcomes and employment opportunities.^{iv}
5.2	<u>Council context</u> Under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Council has statutory duties to: a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010; b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it. Within the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Council is also required to “publish one or more equality objectives at least every 4 years”. Cambridge City Council is committed to addressing the inequality in our city, as outlined by our organisational vision “One Cambridge, Fair of All”. We have clear, cross-party commitments: - That Trans rights are human rights - To tackle racism and structural inequality - To build trust and good relations with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities - That recognise care experience as a protected characteristic

The Council's [Equality Values Statement](#) and [Comprehensive Equalities and Diversity Policy](#) provides strong ethical and cultural foundations for equalities work across both workforce and service delivery and the Council has a history of working alongside marginalised communities, including:

- Our commitment to veterans through the Armed Forces Covenant
- Understanding the lived experiences of tenants affected by domestic abuse, to improve our services, which has contributed to our Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance Accreditation
- Delivering a regular drop-in that enables access to services for Travelling Communities

Whilst the Council has a record of working with marginalised communities, our overall approach to working with marginalised communities not been reviewed for over 20 years.

In 2025, through the Our Cambridge transformation programme, the Council committed to providing the capacity and neighbourhood infrastructure to facilitate work on engagement and enablement, led by diverse voices and organisations of the City. This commitment builds on those in the Council's Community Wealth Building Strategy to enable community decision making, collaborate with communities and build community capacity. The Council made an intentional decision to focus on equity instead of just equality. Equality is about ensuring that everyone is given an equal opportunity and is treated in a fair manner, often meaning that everyone gets access to the same resources. Equity focusses on access, opportunity and justice. It recognises the structural, economic and societal advantages or disadvantage that people can experience and that they therefore have different needs/ requirements to obtain equal opportunities, which in turn will require different levels of resource.

Through the Transformation Investment Fund, approval was given for a comprehensive equalities programme review. This review has enabled the Council:

- to understand the needs of residents affected by marginalisation and discrimination
- identify solutions that work for communities
- identify where service improvements can be made, to ensure the Council is meeting the needs of all the residents we serve

	- build relationships and trust with marginalised communities and enable opportunities for greater citizen involvement It was agreed that the outcome of the review would be a new Equity Strategy for the Council. The strategy would include our statutory obligations for equality objectives, but crucially be based on residents lived experience, to set out a clear direction for the Council's work to address inequality in the city.
5.3	<u>Our approach to engagement</u> To understand the experiences of residents, the Council funded trusted community organisations within the city which we co-designed the engagement with. These were: - Cambridge Ethnic Community Forum - Cambridge Rape Crisis Centre - CPSL Mind - Support Cambridgeshire - The Care Network - The Expert on Myself (TEOM) - The Kite Trust - The Sun Network To address inequality through the lens of equity our collective engagement focussed on hearing from those who are most marginalised in our city to understand, what community means to them, what already exists that gives people a sense of belonging or helps them to thrive and what needs to change. The basis for focussing on belonging and thriving within communities is core to the purpose of the Council's Communities Group "to enable people in the City to thrive; fostering an inclusive, healthy, and safe Cambridge". This basis is supported by evidence from The Belonging Forum, whose work outlines how belonging is the foundation of a thriving society, rooted in four dimensions: people, place, power and purpose^v. To reach those most marginalised and often not heard through traditional forms of engagement, the engagement was co-delivered with community organisations, utilising the trusted relationships community organisations have with residents to engage with them through both new and existing community events. Community organisations were

	provided with funding for co-designing, delivering and facilitating the engagement. The engagement methods were based on how best to reach communities, they consisted of a mix of focus groups, questionnaires and attendance at public events. Residents who contributed to the engagement were provided with vouchers or the opportunity to enter a prize draw. The intention of the engagement was to build on, not duplicate recent engagement with marginalised people. Since 2024 there had been a number of engagement activities to capture the views of young people, refugees and people seeking asylum. These included; • Cambridgeshire County Council's 2024 Youth Survey which reached 397 young people in the city, • the City's first ever Youth Assembly, which trained young leaders who held 370 conversations with young people in the city, developed campaigns about the changes young people wanted to see and how the Council can help to address them, • engagement with 45 marginalised young people as part of the Included Programme, to understand what inclusion means to them, with a focus on youth employment, • engagement sessions with 55 refugees to understand their lived experience of resettling in Cambridge, what has supported their journey to settle and feel belonging in Cambridge and the barriers that they face. These engagements provided the Council with rich insights and clear actions which will be incorporated into the Equity Strategy. It was therefore decided to focus on reaching other marginalised communities over the summer of 2026 to better understand their lived experiences. The equity strategy engagement took place from 5th March to 27th July and reached approximately 573 people across 32 community activities (see Appendix A for full list).
5.4	<u>What we found out</u> The engagement revealed a strong sense of pride in Cambridge and a deep appreciation for its diversity, community spirit, cultural opportunities and environment. Many people

described Cambridge as welcoming, inclusive and a place where they feel able to be themselves. However, these positive experiences are not shared equally.

Alongside the city's strengths, residents identified a range of structural, economic, physical and social barriers that limit participation, belonging and access to opportunities. Whilst some challenges are experienced widely across the population, others disproportionately affect specific communities, particularly disabled people, women, LGBTQ+ people, refugees and migrants, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, older people, young people and people on low incomes. The impact of these barriers to participation, belonging and opportunities were compounded and magnified for those who experienced discrimination and marginalisation. Themes from the engagement focused on:

Community and Connection

"Belonging is not simply about being physically present. It is about being able to participate safely, being treated with dignity and having your own account of your body and needs taken seriously." – Disabled participant

"If you are part of the community, you become someone providing and giving support to it, which encourages a lot of autonomy for people" – Jewish participant

"The world sort of opens up to you". – LGBTQ+ participant

People valued community, for the care, acceptance, safety, mutual support and opportunities it brings. Broadly people felt that Cambridge was a welcoming and accepting place, but for some the communities they were part of, were the only places where they felt safe and accepted. Deaf people shared that most hearing people don't try to interact with them, and neurodiverse people talked about the judgement they felt from others. The value of community was hugely important in enabling people to find solace from the discrimination and marginalisation they face and provided a strong sense of belonging.

Transport

"Change the way transport is set up so I can use the taxi or a bus, so I can travel as a human being rather than travel as a problem." - Disabled participant

People valued the walkability of Cambridge and how easy it is to cycle. Public transport

within the city was viewed more positively than the surrounding villages. Buses are the most used form of public transport. They serve a vital role within communities, connecting people to key public services, such as schools and hospitals, local amenities and work.

Issues related to reliability of busses, space on buses, accessible taxi options, poor road and pavement conditions, lack of disabled parking and e-scooters blocking pavements. These issues were acutely experienced by disabled people who shared how these issues reduced their independence and participation in community life, created barriers to accessing employment and education, and made it harder for them to access healthcare and support services.

Pace and scope of change

“I now feel like a fish out of water” – Older participant

Cambridge is the fastest growing city in the UK by population, with significant economic and housing growth.^{vi} Some communities raised concerns about being left behind by the nature and pace of growth in the city, and that growth will exacerbate existing inequality in the city. Residents shared deep feelings of loss and frustration that spaces such as the Grafton Centre and Beehive, seen as affordable spaces geared toward local residents, were being redeveloped into laboratory and office spaces. Many participants felt that new development receives more investment than existing services and spaces, and infrastructure investment was not keeping pace with growth or meeting community needs.

There were also worries about the pressure being put on local services and facilities by the growth, and a feeling they are not receiving the investment needed. Specific issues raised related to amenities like bins and seating being removed, and facilities like public toilets, were raised by disabled participants who may rely more on these facilities due to their access needs.

Inequality and cost of living

“Cambridge is becoming a city for the wealthy” - Pride participant

Multiple communities shared concerns about the unaffordability of living in Cambridge

and how this impacts their ability to participate in community life. People specifically spoke about the increased cost of living, high rental costs, the cost of transport and childcare as well as a lack of free spaces where people could come together. Nationally, the cost of living has a disproportionate impact of disabled people who are twice as likely to live in poverty as those who are not disabled. In addition, living with a disability costs more due to medical equipment, higher energy bills and specialist support, with disabled households needing an extra £1,095 a month on average.^{vii}

Many people felt that the benefits of wealth and privilege were not shared across the city. People specifically spoke about the relationship between Cambridge University and the rest of the city, particularly in relation to what is driving the investment and development in the city. Some people were positive about Cambridge's reputation because of Cambridge University and the opportunities relating to this. However, many people felt that there was a general divide between the University and the rest of Cambridge, which impacted on their sense of belonging.

Natural environment and physical space

"It has a village feel to it, and [is] cosmopolitan at the same time" – Sabr participant

"If I could change one thing about Cambridge, it would be the constant conflict between preserving the city's heritage and ensuring everyday accessibility. – Disabled participant

Cambridge is fortunate to have numerous parks, commons, and open green spaces, as well as the River Cam, with 93.5% of households having access to green space.^{viii} The engagement highlighted how much people valued the city's physical features and natural environment. Access to nature and green spaces has positive impacts on mental health, physical health, and social connection. Because these spaces are important to people, people care about how they are maintained. This came through strongly in the engagement at Abbey Big Lunch and Arbury Carnival, where people spoke about issues such as rubbish, fly-tipping and overgrown bushes.

Disabled and older people identified issues regarding access, such as needing specific facilities like accessible toilets, and benches to rest due to being less mobile. Physical barriers like narrow pavements, lack of dropped curbs, loose paving slabs, uneven and

blocked pathways create danger for those using mobility aids, and for blind and partially sighted people, who noted they often feel unsafe and are drained because they have to pay attention all the time. Cambridge's historic streets and design made it feel it is not set up for disabled people.

Cultural and leisure opportunities

"I can walk out of my door and in 20 minutes be standing in front of a Monet!" – Pride participant

"Cambridge has a lot of things for those [who can] afford it" – Travelling Community participant

Cambridge has a fantastic offering of activities, cultural sites, and things to do. This variety of cultural and leisure activities came through as something people enjoyed about Cambridge. Cultural events help to build a sense of belonging, enhance local image and identity, develop social capital, strengthen valuable networks and social inclusion.^{ix} While there are many cultural and leisure opportunities in Cambridge, access to them is not without barriers for some communities. There was a desire for more free community events and activities due to the increased cost of living, women shared the need for more free or affordable childcare to enable them to access activities, disabled and older people shared how inaccessible venues and transport issues create barriers to participation. Communication and finding out what events are happening was identified as a difficulty by several groups who were concerned that opportunities exist, but people do not know about them. Through the engagement residents highlighted how accessible communication methods would address this, recommendations included information in multiple languages, use of verbal communication for people with lower literacy levels and information shared in non-digital formats.

Access to services

"People that are supposed to be helping us need to make sure they know our ways." – Travelling Community participant

"Don't just do things in writing all the time". – participant

Travelling Communities, women, refugees and Deaf communities highlighted both the

importance of accessing services and the barriers that can prevent this. When people cannot access support or services are unable to meet their needs, the impacts often extend into other areas of their lives. Disabled people described difficulties obtaining reasonable adjustments, leaving them feeling unheard and unsupported. Women, Travelling Communities and refugees emphasised the need for more trauma-informed approaches, while Travelling Communities and refugees also stressed the importance of services understanding people's cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. For migrant and Deaf communities, communication barriers were a significant source of exclusion, whereas accessible information, language support and community-based connections were seen as vital in enabling inclusion, confidence and wellbeing.

Mental health emerged as a particular concern for some communities. Participants highlighted challenges accessing timely, free mental health support. These barriers have greater impacts on those already experiencing discrimination and marginalisation.^x Given these challenges they valued non-clinical, community based mental health and wellbeing services, at places where they felt, accepted, supported and were places from which they were able to build themselves back up.

Safety

"It feels safe most of the time" – Chat and chai participant

"Queer friendly spaces. I feel safe." – Pride participant

The engagement highlighted that people generally felt that Cambridge was a safe, welcoming and accepting place, where diversity is valued. However, communities that experienced hate, violence and discrimination felt unsafe in the city. Women explained that they often change their behaviour to avoid harassment, and that this impacted women's freedom of movement, capacity to participate and contribute to community life. They valued women's only community activities and spaces, as places where there was a shared understanding about the impact of male violence against women and girls.

LGBTQ+ shared the importance of declarative statements, backed up by action, openly stating that LGBTQ+ and/or trans people "are welcome here" as they are experiencing increased hate and hostility, which is particularly directed at transgender people.

Examples included exclusionary interpretations of the Equality and Human Rights Commission code of practice by some public services and community associations.

Racially minoritised and faith communities shared the impact of international and national events on their feelings and experiences of safety. The engagement highlighted how Jewish and Muslim communities are very concerned about safety and having to employ security staff in mosques and synagogues during worship to keep their congregations safe. Jewish communities shared concerns about anti-Semitic posters across the city, and how this made them feel unsafe. Refugee communities shared that they felt very safe in Cambridge, because of its welcoming culture and ethos, but expressed concern about anti-migrant rhetoric and protests in other areas of the country.

Communities shared how they felt safest in spaces where they felt acceptance, respect and understanding. Safety was seen as a fundamental to being able to participate in community life and belong.

Education and Employment

Cambridge has a highly skilled and educated workforce, and a knowledge-intensive and highly productive economy. For this reason, it is essential that marginalised communities are not left behind and are able to access good work in Cambridge. Racially minoritised and migrant communities we engaged with shared the importance of support to access employment opportunities. This included support with learning English, not only to access employment, but as an essential way to develop community connection.

Youth provision

“Who is this city for?” – Young person, Included focus group

“We need space yes, but also the people, the people you can trust like family” – Young person, Included focus group

“You can’t put square pegs in round holes, we need a more diverse offer for young people” – Young person, Included focus group

The desire for more support and provision for children and young people came up in many groups. Older participants were concerned that opportunities they used to have are

	no longer available for today's young people. People shared the need for greater support to enable young people to access job opportunities. Most themes in the equity engagement, such as the pace and nature of growth, education and employment opportunities echoed those raised by young people in engagement to develop the Included Programme, which took place in spring 2026.
	<u>What are we going to do?</u> Our engagement shows that Cambridge's communities are rich in strengths, relationships and diversity, that people value the culture, leisure and natural environments within the city, but structural barriers can limit opportunities for people to participate, connect, belong and thrive. These barriers are especially present for those most marginalised but crucially can be experienced differently by different communities. Cambridge has strong local leadership and grass roots action focussed on tackling inequality. Throughout the city, communities and community organisations are delivering work and developing solutions to tackle inequality, such as Papworth Trust's Routeway to Work employment programme for young people with disabilities and Abbey People's Food Pantry. Anglia Ruskin University's "ARU in the Community" approach sets their role as a focal point for the community, with key pillars such as safe and inclusive communities, health and wellbeing^{xi}. In 2025, Cambridge University developed its civic priorities, rooted in the principles of equity, inclusion and belonging, that moves us "beyond the traditional 'town and gown' divide and foster a more inclusive civic identity".^{xii} As a Council, we've invested in Greater Cambridge Impact focused on improving the lives of people facing the greatest disadvantage. We have committed to citizen involvement and building the infrastructure that can enable our communities to thrive. To address the systemic and structural barriers our residents face, we need to build on our strengths and to go further. A high-level theory of change has been drafted to underpin our new approach, which is in the process of being updated following feedback from the voluntary sector (Appendix B). Written in a community focussed way, it sets out what communities have told us, the enablers that are needed for change, with high-level activities, outputs, outcomes and the lasting impact we will have.

Core values that drive that this approach to change are:

1. Lived experience is valued, it shapes and challenges our thinking
2. Communities have the power, influence and confidence to shape decisions that affect them
3. We value, listen to and trust in community leaders and organisations
4. We work as a system to deliver change
5. We focus on equity, not just equality
6. Community wealth, skills and resources are retained, developed and shared locally
7. We recognise our role in creating barriers and take action to address them

We are proposing that the Council embeds this theory of change, by developing actions plans for each strategic theme identified through the engagement. These action plans will incorporate the principles of inclusive service design, provide clear actions for the Council to directly affect change, set out progress measures and make use of the Council's partnerships to enable system wide change.

The action plans will enable us build on existing community strengths, working alongside communities to develop solutions to cross-cutting issues, as well as those specific to certain groups and build trust by feeding back on what we are doing.

We are currently working to develop these action plans; actions we are exploring include:

Theme	Proposed actions
Community and Connection	Work alongside communities to create opportunities for different communities to come together
	Continue our community grants, to help build a fairer, greener and more inclusive Cambridge, where everyone can thrive, contribute and belong
	Explore the development of Community Hubs, where residents can access a range of information and services
Transport	Develop an Inclusive Service Plan ensuring that taxi and private hire services are accessible, inclusive, and safe for all

		users
		Work in partnership with and provide resident insights to the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) to inform future Transport Strategies
	Access to services	Increase awareness of reasonable adjustments and how to offer them to residents
		Work alongside residents and community organisations to conduct accessibility and inclusion audits of Council services
		Work alongside community organisations to develop the Council's response to the Equality and Human Rights Commission's updated code of practice for public bodies, so that no one is excluded from public services.
	Pace and scope of change	Listen to and co-design with communities when we're proposing change, fund them for their involvement and build trust by feeding back what we have done
		Continue our "Shaping Neighbourhoods" approach, enabling residents to input into and influence Council developments.
		Build the evidence base for more community space within the Local Plan, future-proofing community infrastructure in the city
	Inequality and cost of living	Deliver the new Inclusion and Equity Panel, enabling residents and community organisations to directly inform Council decisions
		Build 1,400+ new council homes, with at least 60% of these at social rent
	Culture and Leisure	Continue our offering of free cultural activities, such as Music in the Parks programme and Out of the Ordinary Festival
	Natural environment and physical space	Provide the right public toilets in the places where they are most needed
		Explore how Council assets can be used to enhance the benefits they bring our communities, as part of our Asset Review
	Safety	Promote active bystander training, to give people the confidence to stand up for victims of hate

		Continue urgent removal of offensive graffiti
		Work as part of Cambridge's Community Safety Partnership to tackle hate and support community cohesion
	Education and Employment	Fund English classes and employment support for refugees who've made Cambridge their home
		Support investment into the Included Programme; building clear pathways to fulfilling careers in Cambridge, from early years to early adulthood
	Youth Provision	Support investment into the Included Programme; building clear pathways to fulfilling careers in Cambridge, from early years to early adulthood
		Support investment into Creative Futures, which provides opportunities for young people within the creative industries
		Continue the "Hello Summer" programme, funding community organisations to provide free activities for children, young people and families.
6.	Corporate Plan	
6.1	Within the Council's Corporate Plan is Priority 2: Tackling poverty and inequality and helping people in the greatest need, which the equity strategy will support delivery of.	
7.	Implications and Risks	
7.1	Relevant risks	
	<u>Financial Implications:</u> Support for both the Included Programme and Creative Futures is likely to require additional funding, to be submitted through budget bids. <u>Legal Implications:</u> Development of the Equity Strategy fulfils the Council's legal requirements under Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 201) to "publish one or more equality objectives at least every 4 years".	

	<u>Equalities and Socio-Economic Implications:</u> The Equity Strategy will strengthen the Council's approach to addressing inequality, including socio-economic inequality. <u>Climate and Environmental Implications:</u> There are no climate or environmental implications of the equity strategy <u>Community Safety Implications:</u> The Equity Strategy will have a positive impact on community safety, as there will be a focus on addressing hate, discrimination and enabling community cohesion.
8.	Background documents Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985
8.1	i Community Wealth Building Strategy - Cambridge City Council ii State of the City: 2025 update - Cambridge City Council iii Inclusive-Innovation-in-Cambridge-2025.pdf iv State of the City: 2025 update - Cambridge City Council v Global Charter for Belonging – Belonging Forum vi City Monitor Centre for Cities vii Disability Price Tag 2025 Disability charity Scope UK viii Cambridge & Peterborough Combined Authority.pdf ix The role of sport, arts and culture in supporting community cohesion Local Government Association x MHF TFR Tackling mental health delphi study report.pdf xi ARU in the community - ARU xii civic-engagement-report-cambridge-university-22-10-25.pdf
9.	Appendices
9.1	Appendix 1 – List of Engagement events Appendix 2 – Draft Theory of Change