

Equalities at Broadland District Council and South Norfolk Council

# Public Sector Equality Duty Annual Report 2022/23

# The Public Sector Equality Duty

The Equality Act 2010 gave a formal requirement to all Local Authorities to comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). That is, in the exercising of our functions, Broadland District Council and South Norfolk Council must have due regard to the need to:

1. **Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act;**
2. **Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it; and**
3. **Foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it.**

There are **nine** protected characteristics contained within the Act;

* **age**
* **disability**
* **gender reassignment**
* **pregnancy & maternity**
* **race**
* **religion or belief**
* **sex**
* **sexual orientation**
* **marriage & civil partnership** (only relevant to Aim 1 - eliminating discrimination)

To ensure transparency of this duty, the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) Regulations 2011 requires public authorities to publish information to demonstrate their compliance with the general equality duty. This report should pay particular reference to employees and people affected by the policies and practices of the Councils, who share one or more of the above protected characteristics. In addition to treating people fairly, justly and with respect, our duty is to find ways to support those who are disadvantaged or excluded, promote inclusion and celebrate diversity.

The Act requires local authorities to provide a service which is equally accessible to all their customers and a workforce which promotes diversity and equality. The benefits of a diverse workforce go beyond political correctness. Bringing in people with different backgrounds and perspectives can lead to better decision-making, greater innovation, higher engagement in the workplace, and can bring fresh ideas. It may also improve an organisation’s reputation and make it easier to attract top talent. Companies that embrace diversity and inclusion report higher engagement, lower turnover, and increased income.

Equality considerations should be at the centre of policy formation and not merely a tick box exercise. Decision-makers should be aware of their obligations in order to comply with the Act, ensuring that mechanisms are in place so that relevant equality impacts can be taken into consideration along with other factors when they come to make their decision. There is a requirement for due regard to be given to removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics and sometimes this might entail treating a disadvantaged group more favourably than others. However, there will be times that, after consideration, decisions may be made which do not meet all equality issues and, in these cases, there should be a well-documented trail to demonstrate that issues have been raised and given due regard to ensure that compliance with the Act has been achieved.

This report demonstrates just some of the ways in which Broadland District Council and South Norfolk Council have complied with their Public Sector Equality Duty during 2022/23.

# How we complied with the Act during 2022/23

## 1. Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.

### For our residents:

## Help Hubs

During the last year, the Councils, via the Help Hubs have worked hard to maintain effective collaboration between partners to ensure that those who are most vulnerable, and likely to be victimised, have the benefit of a multiagency partnership to share information and support.

Examples of where we have made a difference:

* *Child A is 14 and has cerebral palsy, she uses a wheelchair and is non-verbal. Through ongoing discussion with her parents, child A is welcomed to attend Tots2Teens sessions. Consideration is given to adapting the activities so that child A can benefit from sensory experiences and the company of others. The staff team have learnt how child A is able to communicate their choices using their eyes and offer this as frequently as possible. A private area is made available at all sessions to allow for Child A’s parent to change them during the day. Personal care is given by the parent who returns to the session to give this.*

Isolation, abuse, and lack of confidence can affect people with protected characteristics and can often be barriers to fulfilling potential and seeking assistance to overcome discrimination and harassment. The help hub’s strength is helping people to help themselves, as well as working closely with partners to ensure information and support is shared and coordinated.

## Equality Impact Assessments

The Councils provide many different services for Broadland and South Norfolk residents – from housing to planning and from community work to the care of people using the services of the help hubs. Indirect discrimination can occur when a policy or procedure is put in place which applies to everybody but puts those who have a protected characteristic at a disadvantage. Therefore, when we plan and develop policies and services, or propose changes to services, we consider it essential that due regard is given to whether there are any potential negative impacts upon individuals and/or groups of people with protected characteristics. Risk and Equality Impact Assessments are undertaken by officers and their findings are documented and reported to enable decision-makers to take any issues into account as part of the decision-making process.

***Council Tax Allowance Scheme***

*During 2021, the Councils reviewed their new Council Tax Allowance Schemes.*

*A consultant assessed the Schemes and, after officers had undertaken a full Equality Impact Assessment for each of the Councils, it was agreed that there were no impact or adjustments needed for Broadland. The South Norfolk Scheme included differing levels of maximum Council Tax Allowance so officers considered how they could resolve the issue of parity within the Scheme.  Several options were considered but ruled out as they would be costly, resulting in a negative impact upon other services provided by the Authorities.*

*The other option considered was for the Councils to lower the maximum level of Council Tax Allowance from 100% to 84% for lone parents with children under 5, but this would result in their average award decreasing by 16.5% compared to the current scheme in 2022/23.  It was calculated that this would adversely affect approximately 650 lone parent households and it was noted that most lone parents, with children under five, were female.  However, in order to mitigate this negative impact, it was proposed to disregard child maintenance payments for all claims and, to utilise the discretionary pot for those affected customers who did not receive any child maintenance but were experiencing financial hardship.*

This scheme was continued into 2022/23. This example demonstrates that, when developing and changing their policies, the Councils are dedicated to giving due regard to removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people, due to their protected characteristics.

**Safeguarding**

The Councils, through their members and staff, are the eyes and ears within our communities, at all times. We are aware that the impact of Covid-19 and rising cost of living has been felt most by our more vulnerable residents. We are trained to spot signs and raise any concerns about any safeguarding issues where an individual may be at risk. Any concerns raised are dealt with by our Safeguarding Officers who make the appropriate investigations, involving our partner organisations, as necessary.

### For our staff:

## Bullying and Harassment

The Councils are committed to creating a work environment free from bullying and harassment, where everyone is treated with dignity and respect. In this vein the Councils do not tolerate discrimination, harassment or victimisation within its premises, by anyone associated or employed by the Councils, or by anyone pursuing prospective employment of the Councils.

## Grievance

The Councils’ grievance policy allows for all employees to have the right to raise a problem, complaint, or concern in relation to any workplace matter. The Councils will investigate and provide a fair, timely and transparent outcome for any instances of discrimination, harassment or victimisation, and these types of complaints are taken extremely seriously. The policy ensures clarity and equality for both employees and managers and requires that any special measures, along with reasonable adjustments, will be considered to ensure equality of access to the process for staff who possess one or more of the protected characteristics, as detailed in the Act.

## Conduct

The Councils are committed to promoting equality and fairness amongst members of staff. In addition, employees must treat all members of the local community, councillors, suppliers, customers and residents with due regard to fairness, trust and integrity, creating a positive working environment in which to operate. The Councils ensure that understanding is promoted, with education on key areas a priority in preventing prejudice and forming positive relations between individuals and groups.

## Staff and Member Training

The Councils have sourced and provided online, mandatory training courses via Skill Gate to ensure all staff and elected members have a good understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion, and are made aware of their duty under the Equalities Act. These modules are: ‘The Importance of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion’, ‘Modern Day Slavery’, and ‘Unconscious Bias’.

## Transgender Policy

We are strongly committed to equal opportunity, eliminating discrimination, promoting good relations, and valuing diversity through fair treatment in all aspects of the Councils’ activities. The Transgender Policy aims to ensure that everyone is treated with equal dignity, fairness and respect, regardless of their gender identity. Our aim is to ensure the safety, comfort and integration of transgender or gender non- conforming employees whilst promoting equal opportunities. As part of the Councils’ overall commitment to equality of opportunity, we are fully committed to promoting a supportive and harmonious working and service provision environment where every employee and member of the community is treated with respect and dignity. Our aim is to create an environment in which all employees and members of the public feel equally valued and welcome in accordance with the Gender Recognition act (2004).

## New and expectant mothers

In order to ensure the health and wellbeing of new and expectant mothers, the Councils ensure that risk assessments are undertaken, in partnership with the pregnant employee, to assess and manage risks and identify suitable modifications and alterations to work activities and patterns. Since 2020, these have included the consideration of COVID-19 and the risks associated with this disease. Government guidance is followed, and risks are assessed appropriately, in line with this guidance.

## Disability Confident Scheme

South Norfolk and Broadland District Councils have been awarded the Disability Confident standard. The Councils committed to working with the Job Centre and the Department of Work and Pensions to support and promote people who identify as disabled in the workplace. This commitment includes:

* ensuring our recruitment processes are free from discrimination and available through a range of channels;
* making job advertisements accessible which includes providing information in accessible formats, if required;
* offering interviews to those candidates who have a disability and meet the essential criteria for the role, as detailed in the job description; and
* making reasonable adjustments as required.

To read more about our aims under the scheme, please view the following link:

[Disability Confident scheme](https://www.norfolkjobsdirect.org/southnorfolk/southnorfolk/GenText.aspx?page=Page33).

## Domestic Abuse Champions

South Norfolk and Broadland District Councils have several Domestic Abuse Champions across the One Team. These staff are available for anyone who needs to discuss any issues in confidence and/or access the help they may need. Staff can also, of course, access assistance through the Help Hub if they do not wish to speak to a Champion.

## Staff Consultation Forum and UNISON Representation

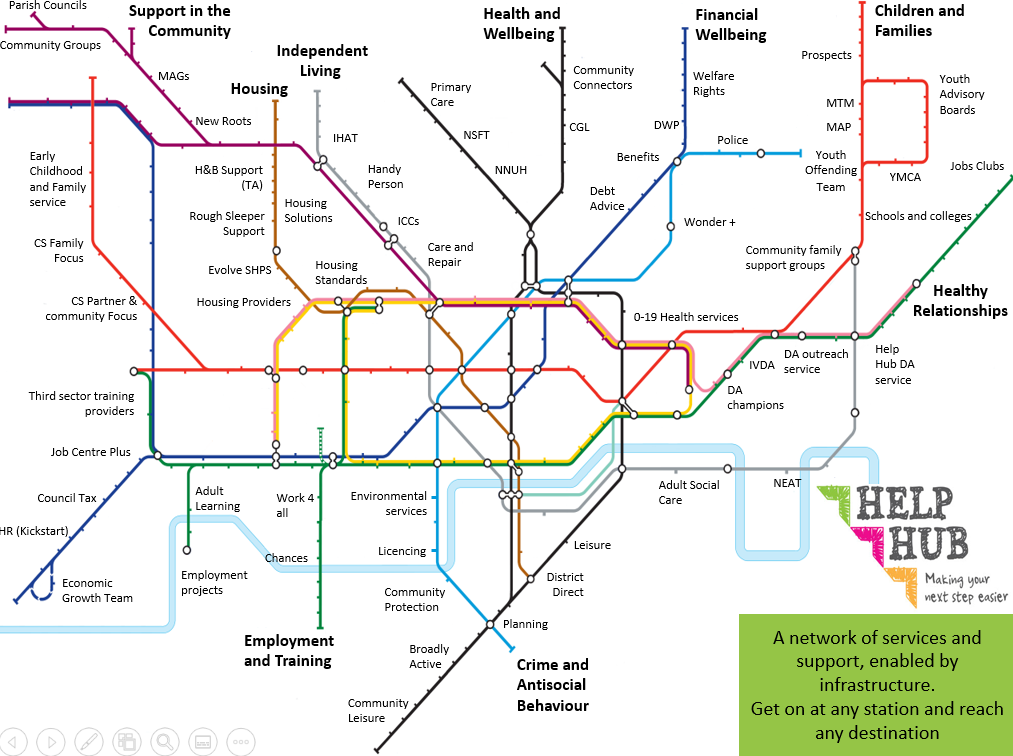
The Councils operate a Staff Consultation Forum where employees can bring their views to the attention of management. The Staff Negotiation Forum is comprised of staff with representatives from UNISON and the management team. Membership of the group is diverse, and its representation encompasses staff who possess a variety of the nine protected characteristics, which ensures all staff are represented.

## Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

### For our residents:

## Help Hubs

The Help Hub is a service which is accessible to all through a variety of channels, meeting a diversity of needs appropriate to each individual. The aims of the Hub are to improve wellbeing, reduce and prevent crises and empower people to help themselves and their communities. It consists of a network of local resources that work together to support an individual or family. Organisations, including domestic abuse services, the Police, the NHS, Children’s Services, the voluntary sector, and the Councils’ teams are able to share information and work together to avoid duplication and provide holistic support. The diagram below demonstrates the many different needs of our customers and how the Hub can provide a joined-up solution to individuals who may require help from several services. This takes away the pressure on residents to attempt to navigate through the various providers, which can be difficult for anyone but, in particular, our more vulnerable residents who may be older or who have a disability.

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During the period covered by this report, we supported over 4,500 vulnerable residents via our discretionary prevention services.

## Housing

The Councils’ Housing Standards Team provides services which particularly benefit those who are elderly or disabled and to a lesser extent, residents who possess other characteristics as the elderly and disabled are more likely to need physical adaptations, and the BAME community in general are more likely to be in lower income roles, renting and in poorer quality accommodation, and more likely to be discriminated against.

The Councils continue to undertake proactive work around Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). Throughout COVID-19 a number of unlicensed HMOs were identified which were proactively targeted. A proactive HMO project is currently in progress to identify HMOs and licence those which are required to be licensed and take enforcement action against unlicensed properties, where necessary. By requiring licences, we are ensuring that properties meet the standards required by law and we can ensure that people from poorer communities receive the same level of protection and support as those from wealthier communities. Examples of support:

* *We have supported a homeless individual who is also profoundly deaf. We have made reasonable adjustments to the way that we have communicated with them, ensuring that as much as possible is done in writing or on a computer. We are also supporting them through their GP and the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital and also assisting with shopping, food deliveries and booking taxi’s etc. In addition, to ensure the help received was instant at the point they became homeless, we removed our verification process to protect this elderly resident from ever having to rough sleep.*
* *We supported an individual who had recently undergone gender reassignment to find accommodation. We became aware that they were living in a touring caravan with no utilities and inadequate heating. We went out and did a visit to the caravan, the caravan had a leaking roof, boarded up windows, no heating, no water, no toilet and the weather at that time was very cold. We accommodated them under the Severe Weather Emergency Procedures (SWEP). With the right support and advice we were able to secure affordable social housing through our housing register. We provided support throughout the customers stay in temporary accommodation, including helping them apply for help to set up home through the Norfolk Assistance scheme and we are continuing to support them as they settle into her their new home.*

## Warm Homes

The Councils also have a compressive Warm Homes procedure. This assists residents with advice and financial packages to upgrade the thermal capacity of their proprieties, reducing bills and increasing internal temperatures. A large part of delivery affects vulnerable residents often elderly with associated health conditions.

## Disabled Facilities Grants Scheme

Another role of the Housing Standards Team is administrating disabled facilities grants and other discretionary grant assistance which focus predominantly on helping residents, who are older and have physical or mental disabilities, to remain independent in their own homes. We proactively seek out those who are in need and work with partner organisations. In 2022/23, we supported over 1,000 people to live independently. We can support residents in a variety of ways, with our key focus being on DFGs that enable us to physically adapt properties to meet the needs to the individual. Additionally, the Council’s handyperson scheme offers small household repairs and minor adaptations.

## Elections

It is essential that all residents are able to exercise their democratic right to vote in elections and the Councils make every effort to ensure people with difficulties and/or protected characteristics are able to do so.

The Returning Officer has provided alternative formats for some election documents on request. These have included large-scale forms, letters and electronic poll cards to meet the specific needs of the individual. Elections staff have made special arrangements with care homes to ensure residents are registered and are given the option of a postal vote, if desired. During election time, polling station staff have received training on how to assist people with disabilities and any other person who requires help. Staff have also made adjustments for candidate briefings to make sure they are accessible to people who are unable to attend in the usual manner, due to their protected characteristics.

At polling stations, Returning Officers are currently required to provide a tactile voting device (TVD) which can be attached to a ballot paper in order to assist blind or partially sighted voters to mark their ballot paper. Whilst these devices are helpful, some voters feel that it does not allow them to vote unaided and the Government has been legally challenged to implement changes.

Therefore in 2021, we tested some equipment in conjunction with the Cabinet Office and the RNIB during the Police and Crime Commissioner and Norfolk County Council elections in a few wards where we knew there were voters with visual impairments. Feedback from the exercise was passed to the Department for Levelling Up, to help inform changes for the forthcoming Elections Bill. Following this exercise, we were approached by Pakflatt, the company that produces the TVD, as they wished to enhance their equipment and were interested in the testing that we carried out in 2021 and feedback from voters.

In 2022, we worked with Pakflatt to test a new piece of equipment – the McGonagle Reader - and suggested some enhancements. We then tested this equipment at three by-elections which were held in 2022. This testing involved us hosting a meeting with Pakflatt and RNIB representatives so that the equipment could be demonstrated and tested before the by-elections. Our polling staff also attended this demonstration so that they could be trained to use the equipment. The feedback from voters was more positive as the equipment gave them more, although not complete, independence. Following this test, Pakflatt is intending to make further enhancements to their product, to take into account the feedback (where possible) received from us and voters.

The Returning Officer and his staff will continue to work with others including the Cabinet Office, Electoral Commission and RNIB to endeavour to offer solutions that work for all to advance equality of opportunity for people with disabilities. We hope that the new Elections Bill will include appropriate and reasonable measures to ensure that the voting process is accessible for people with a wider range of disabilities and other protected characteristics.

## Accessibility of Website

Since 23 September 2018 it has been a legal requirement for public sector bodies to provide accessible digital content to both internal and external customers and employees. Statistics show that around 20% of people have some form of disability, such as vision or hearing problems, cognitive difficulties, dyslexia, ADHD, motor difficulties etc, and a further 20% are older people. In addition, customers may have temporary illnesses or disabilities, such as a broken arm which could make typing or scrolling through a website more difficult.

The Councils work hard to ensure that content on their websites meet with this requirement to remove disadvantages impacting on people with a disability. Bespoke training has been developed and delivered to staff. This included a demonstration of how a screen reader interpreted our own website, to make staff aware of the challenges faced by customers who need to use technical aids to navigate and read digital content. There are dedicated officers within the Councils who provide technical assistance to staff who send communications and update the website, and we have ensured that all staff complete a digital accessibility training course, via Skill Gate, to help ensure that our services are equally accessible to all our residents and customers.

## Community Connectors

Our Community Connectors work hard to ensure that residents with any of the protected characteristics can enjoy the same quality of life as those who do not. They work with other partners to ensure that residents receive the support and assistance most suitable for their needs. This decreases the stress for the resident as they do not need to go back and forth between different organisations in order to deal with their separate issues.

### For our staff:

## Equal Opportunities

The Councils are committed to ensure equal opportunities exist on properties owned by the Councils or by anyone associated or under employ of the Councils, or by anyone pursuing prospective employ of the Councils.

The Councils have various employee-based schemes, aimed at instilling a culture of equality and equal opportunities for individuals who share, or do not share, a protected characteristic. These include:

* Dementia Friends. The Councils are registered with Dementia Friends which provides external resources and support for employees wishing to have more information, or who have friends or family affected by dementia. Many of the Councils’ staff have undertaken training to become Dementia Friends;
* Early careers / transitional careers support through our commitment to supporting Apprenticeship and graduate placement opportunities which provides opportunities for people at the start of their careers or anyone wishing to retrain.
* Flexible working policy. The Councils’ flexible working policy is aimed at helping staff find the right balance between their professional and personal lives. This policy promotes equality and wellbeing amongst our employees, preventing personal circumstances from obstructing their professional careers;
* Maternity and paternity policies. The Councils’ Maternity/Paternity Policies provide an opportunity for parents to take time away from work and return to their roles at the end of the period of leave;
* HEAR domestic abuse campaign. The Councils have signed up to the HEAR pledge which helps victims of domestic abuse. The Councils have employees who are registered as domestic abuse champions and are able to provide confidential support and advice to employees seeking help;
* Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy to support employees and a Wellbeing and Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan. The Councils have also developed a policy to refer employees who are absent due to mental health to occupational health for support from day one and have created a discussion form to promote conversations on mental health and wellbeing as part of the formal ‘return to work’, discussion; and
* Menopause Policy and Menopause Champions. Many useful resources are available for managers and staff to upskill and learn more about menopause to ensure that women are able to continue to enjoy the same opportunities when they are dealing with the many symptoms which can occur when in menopause.

## Mental Health Awareness and Support

A person is considered to have a disability under the Equality Act 2010 if they have a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities and can include depressive and anxiety-related impairments. One in four people will experience a mental health problem of some kind each year in England, whilst one in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem (like anxiety and depression) in any given week in England.

The Councils are committed to creating an environment where employees can be at their best and have committed to providing mental health support. This has been achieved through investment in Mental Health First Aiders, providing advice and guidance to managers to encourage wellbeing conversations and or/ sign posting staff to where further help could be accessed.

## Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

The Councils have an active partnership with Care First, who provide an employee assistance programme and wellbeing app for all staff. Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) offers advice and support for employees for many of life’s challenges. It supports our employees’ total wellbeing by giving employees a safe space to talk, and resources for reducing stress. The EAP provides people with a further option of support, and helps to create a culture that cares, providing support, guidance and advice.

## 3. Foster good relations between people who a share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it.

### For our residents:

## Help Hub

The Help Hub continues to assist and support people with protected characteristics who have difficulties in integrating with others. One example where the Help Hub provided such support is as follows:

* *Taverham Day Care Centre is a registered charity and community group that supports older people including those with early stage dementia. Up to 30 older people attend the centre every Tuesday for refreshments, organised activities, meals and occasional coach trips. The Help Hub supported the centre twice in 2022. Firstly by assisting the group to find a new replacement exercise instructor for their morning seated exercise group then secondly, with a Keep It Going Grant to help them to pay for DBS checks for new volunteers. The Help Hub received a referral for an older person in the Taverham area who was socially isolated and developing health problems. Alongside other support, the individual was referred into the Centre and has thrived from creating new interactions with other local residents. The individual particularly enjoyed the exercise class and contacted the Help Hub to discover if there were other physical activity opportunities nearby. This led to a referral to Broadly Active, the Council’s exercise referral scheme.*

## Support for Community Groups

Over the past year, the Councils have supported over 287 community groups including six different community transport schemes. All of the community groups, to which we provide funding, commit themselves to be inclusive but don’t necessarily draw specific attention to this to avoid alienating groups or individuals. There are 38 Mutual Aid Groups set up across the two Districts. They formed a vital lifeline during the pandemic to ensure those who needed food, medication etc. were supported to remain at home. This has had the knock-on effect of providing a vital support service to disabled residents and those who struggle to travel with ease.

## New Community Groups

Since the conclusion of lock down at least 26 new community groups have been set up across the Districts. These include:

* *A community kitchen set up by Hethersett Hearts for isolated older residents. Participants are collected by volunteer drivers and are provided with a hot meal and social activity;*
* *Dopeamine Shred – a initiative to promote good mental health and help address social anxiety through snowboarding; and*
* *An Autistic Spectrum Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Support group in Diss that offers support and advice to parents alongside a place for their children to socialise*.

## Norwich Pride 2022

The Councils continued their active support of Pride during 2022. In addition to several events for staff, as detailed later in this report, inJuly 2021, an LGBT+ Awareness presentation was provided by the Norfolk LGBT+ Project: [norfolklgbtproject.org.uk](https://norfolklgbtproject.org.uk)

The aim of the presentation was to make staff more aware of LGBT+ issues, which helps us to provide improved services, foster good relationships between people, and appreciate, understand, and embrace the diverse needs of our customers.

### For our staff:

## Staff Supporting Staff - In-house Mental Health First Aiders

We have a diverse range of Mental Health First Aiders that are available to provide support to employees across the Councils as needed. We continue to shine a light on mental health and the importance of getting help through various awareness day and campaigns throughout the year.

## Promotion of Equalities Events

The Councils have advertised and promoted many varied events to the One Team, via broadcast messages, emails and on Connect, encouraging staff to get involved with activities which promote and raise the awareness of equalities issues. Below are some examples of some of the events we have offered:

# Bespoke Mental Health through Mental Health Awareness Charity, Lions Barber Shop Collective (LBC), we have hosted several barber shop events at our offices as well as the Waste Depot with a further event planned at our Leisure Centres. The teams engaged highly with the event and shared personal experiences of their own struggles with the mental health trained barbers, in a safe, non-judgmental space. We have had great feedback from all involved.

# World Mental Health Day

# ‘Here to Talk’ training. HereToTalk trains professionals regardless of the industry they work in to recognise the signs of poor mental health, ask direct questions, listen with empathy and without judgement and help to signpost people to the help that they need.'