

Motion on behalf of the Liberal Democrat Group

Proposer: Councillor Garry Bridge

Seconded: Councillor Michelle Tatton

Amendment on behalf of Conservative Group

Proposer: Councillor Matt Boughton

Seconded: Councillor Martin Coffin

The demographic of our Borough is diverse in very many respects. Local authorities should welcome and celebrate diversity and difference but at the same time, where necessary, we must ensure staff and Councillors are equipped to understand and respond to the needs of different groups who may have additional hurdles to overcome in accessing services this Council provides and enjoying all our Borough has to offer. We should always be willing to see what we could do to better support and understand those who may be disadvantaged in doing so due to disabilities or inequalities – including those with physical disabilities and frailties, deafness, blindness and sight loss, autism and communication difficulties, and socio-economic challenges.

For some context, the latest Census data reveals that within this authority's area some 15.3% of residents are disabled under the Equality Act; in some sub-areas of the Borough this sits at almost 30%. In terms of poverty, 3 areas of our Borough are in the top 20% most deprived areas in the country; conversely 28 are in the 20% least deprived. Interestingly, in presenting Census data on its website the Office for National Statistics uses Tonbridge & Malling as a case study, noting that in the most deprived neighbourhood 24.9% of people are estimated to be income-deprived. This compares with 1.8% in the least deprived area of our borough. That is a very significant disparity indicating that some of our residents – almost a quarter in some areas – are significantly disadvantaged in some aspect of their lives.

Furthermore, the May 2022 'Facts and Figures' document on KCC's website notes that the number of pupils in Tonbridge & Malling with an Education Health and Care Plan is the second highest in the County at 2820. Obviously, not all children with additional

needs and disabilities will have an EHCP; therefore, it is easy to see that the number of children and wider family groups impacted by disability and additional needs is somewhat greater.

While this authority does not have responsibility for education, we should still be concerned because these children are part of family units that need to access services and facilities, including recreation, within our Borough.

Members may have their own personal experiences of disability or inequality – if not directly then through family, friends, neighbours or acquaintances.

But it is not easy to fully comprehend just what a person living with a lifelong health condition or disability is truly experiencing or just how challenging navigating life can be. Financially, we have all seen our energy bills rise over the last year, but have probably not had to make the choice between putting the heating on or putting food on the table. That is a reality for some of our poorest residents.

We cannot know how to best deliver services for all of our residents unless we engage with, listen to and learn from those who have different life experiences, who face these challenges in their daily lives.

Members of this Council have previously benefitted from an excellent presentation and information session provided by Tonbridge Dementia Friendly Community. This gave an extremely valuable insight into the impact upon people living with dementia, their families and friends.

And, quite rightly, this Council has appointed Armed Forces Champions to raise the profile and needs of the Armed Forces Community. Appointing a Disability and Equalities Champion would similarly raise the profile and needs of those with disabilities and additional needs, and those facing disadvantage and inequality, sending a very clear and visible message that this Council has at heart the needs of disabled residents and visitors and the way in which they and others who are disadvantaged experience our Borough.

Therefore, this motion asks Council to:

- Recognise the difficulties some residents within and visitors to our Borough face in accessing every-day services and facilities due to disability, additional need, and other disadvantage including financial inequality
- Appoint a Councillor as a Disability & Equalities Champion to raise the profile and needs of those with disabilities, additional needs and inequalities within Tonbridge and Malling. The Disability & Equalities Champion will actively engage with disability and welfare groups and charities and interested individuals to ensure their voice of experience is heard and taken into account in decision making
- ~~If there is no existing mechanism, the Borough Council will develop a Register of disability and welfare groups and charities within the Borough and a system for consulting those groups on matters that affect them and those they represent~~
- Demonstrate its commitment to further developing its understanding and approach to disability and equality needs within the Borough by inviting interested groups ~~from the Register~~ through the Disability and Equalities Champion to give presentations and information sessions for Councillors, similar to the Tonbridge Dementia Friendly Tonbridge Community session, to support Cllrs to feel informed and equipped with respect to the challenges faced by those within our community who have disabilities, additional needs or who face inequality