

Full statement from EQuIP on Warwickshire County Council's consultation on the Equalities Services Contract

The Equality and Inclusion Partnership (EQuIP) is deeply concerned by Warwickshire County Council's consultation on the proposed decommissioning of the Equalities Services Contract currently delivered by EQuIP.

EQuIP recognises the significant financial pressures facing local government. We understand that councils are required to make difficult decisions and that all public expenditure must be subject to appropriate scrutiny. We also recognise that Warwickshire County Council faces serious pressures, particularly in relation to demand led statutory services.

However, the case for decommissioning Warwickshire's externally commissioned Equalities Service has not, in our view, been made.

The Council has put forward two main arguments for the proposal: firstly, that the Council needs to make savings; and secondly, that the funding of an externally commissioned Equalities Service is not seen as a priority for the current administration. EQuIP believes both arguments require careful scrutiny.

The financial argument must be considered in context. The Council's own consultation document states that the Equalities Services Contract costs £135,372 per year. This is a relatively modest sum when viewed against the scale of the Council's overall financial pressures and the wider value delivered through the service. The Chief Finance Officer's report identifies the Council's most significant financial pressures as arising from demand led statutory services, including adult social care, children's social care, home to school transport and SEND. The Equalities Services Contract is not identified as a driver of those pressures.

EQuIP does not dispute the need for financial responsibility. However, removing a small, preventative, independent and well-performing service will not resolve the Council's structural financial challenges. What it will do is remove specialist support from residents experiencing discrimination, harassment, victimisation and hate crime; reduce trusted engagement with seldom-heard communities; and weaken Warwickshire's ability to respond to inequality and community tensions.

A saving should not be viewed only in terms of the amount removed from a budget line. It must also be assessed against the cost of what is lost. If the work currently delivered by EQuIP is no longer available, the need will not disappear. Residents will still experience discrimination. Hate crime and hate incidents will still occur. Communities will still need trusted routes to raise concerns. Public bodies will still need insight, training and engagement support. The question is therefore not simply whether the Council can stop

spending £135,372 per year. The question is what the wider financial, social value, legal and operational cost will be if this service is removed.

The Council's own consultation document recognises the risks. It accepts that ceasing to externally commission the service could mean less specialist expertise across the county, reduced ability to support community safety and bring communities together, damage to trust and confidence among VCSE organisations, and the need to consider alternative ways to achieve the equalities objectives set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. These are not minor risks. They go to the heart of the Council's responsibilities around equality, diversity, inclusion, community cohesion and trust.

We are also concerned that the consultation appears to treat the service as expendable because it is described as discretionary. EQuIP does not dispute that the Council may not be legally required to commission this particular service in this specific form. However, describing a service as discretionary does not mean that it is unnecessary, low value or without serious consequences if removed. Many preventative services are discretionary in legal terms but essential in practice. They prevent escalation, reduce harm, support vulnerable residents and help statutory bodies meet their wider legal and moral responsibilities.

The Equalities Services Contract is directly connected to the three aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty: eliminating unlawful discrimination, advancing equality of opportunity and fostering good relations between people who share protected characteristics and those who do not. The Council may have discretion over how it fulfils those responsibilities, but it does not have discretion over whether it takes equality seriously.

This is why the second argument, that externally commissioned equalities provision is not a priority for the current administration, is particularly concerning.

EQuIP is an apolitical charity. We do not take a party-political position. We respect the democratic process and the right of any administration to set priorities. However, equality, diversity, inclusion, hate crime support and community cohesion should not be treated as optional interests that rise or fall depending on political preference. These issues affect residents across every district and borough in Warwickshire. They affect children and families, people with disabilities, older people, women and girls, LGBTQ+ communities, communities experiencing racial inequality, faith communities, migrants, refugees, people seeking asylum, and many others.

Equality is not a narrow agenda. It is about fairness, access, dignity, safety and belonging. Every resident in Warwickshire has one or more protected characteristics, and many people will acquire further protected characteristics during their lives. A countywide equalities service is therefore not a service for "others". It is part of the infrastructure of a fair and lawful public system.

If the Council's position is that externally commissioned equalities provision is not a priority, then the consultation must explain what will replace it, how the same outcomes will be achieved, and how residents and partners will be protected from the risks the Council itself has identified. It is not sufficient to say that a service is not a priority without fully assessing the consequences of that position.

It is also important to note that EQuIP's performance has not been called into question. The Council's own consultation document states that the service is performing well, consistently achieving the outcomes described in its service specification and meeting its performance targets. This proposal is therefore not being brought forward because the service is failing. It is being brought forward despite the service performing well.

That distinction matters.

A well performing service should not be decommissioned without a clear, evidence led value-for-money assessment. EQuIP has not been presented with evidence showing that the proposed saving outweighs the wider risks. Nor has EQuIP been presented with a clear assessment of the cost to other services if EQuIP's work is no longer available. The consultation should therefore provide clear information on:

- the evidence base for the proposal to decommission the Equalities Services Contract, over and above all other commissioned services;
- the anticipated saving after all associated costs are considered;
- the cost of the consultation process itself;
- the cost and impact on other public and voluntary sector services that may need to absorb the work;
- how residents will access independent support if the service ends;
- how hate reporting and support for victims will be maintained;
- how the Council will continue to engage with seldom heard communities;
- how community cohesion risks will be identified and managed;
- and how the Council will meet the practical requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty without an independent specialist service.

These are reasonable and necessary questions.

We are also concerned that alternative options appear to have been discounted before the consultation has meaningfully taken place. The Council's consultation document states that reducing the service, refocusing the service or bringing the service in-house have all been considered and discounted. It also states that stopping the externally commissioned service would mean all activities delivered by the service would cease.

This raises a serious concern about whether the consultation is genuinely open to alternatives. If all other options have already been discounted and the preferred option is to stop the service entirely, there is a risk that residents and partners may perceive the

process as predetermined. For the consultation to command public confidence, all viable options must remain genuinely open to consideration.

The Council's own explanation of why reduction or refocusing has been discounted also appears to strengthen the argument for retaining the service. The consultation document recognises that the different parts of the service — training, advice, information and casework — support each other, and that cutting parts of the service would weaken the overall impact. EQuIP agrees. The service works precisely because it is integrated. Casework provides direct insight into residents' lived experiences. Training helps prevent discrimination and improve professional practice. Community engagement builds trust and helps identify issues before they escalate. Strategic partnership work ensures that local intelligence informs policy, service design and operational responses.

This is not a collection of disconnected activities. It is a single, integrated equalities infrastructure.

Removing that infrastructure would have consequences beyond EQuIP. It would reduce the county's specialist equalities knowledge. It would weaken trusted relationships with communities. It would reduce the independence available to residents who may not feel confident approaching statutory bodies directly. It would risk leaving public sector partners with fewer routes into communities at a time when trust, cohesion and early intervention are increasingly important.

Independence matters. Many residents experiencing discrimination or hate crime will only seek help if they believe the support is independent, confidential and rooted in community trust. That role cannot simply be absorbed into internal council structures without affecting confidence and accessibility. Nor can it be replicated overnight by national helplines, generic advice services, short-term projects or signposting.

EQuIP's work is also preventative. It helps identify patterns, tensions and barriers before they escalate. It supports residents before problems become crises. It helps partners understand the impact of policy and service decisions on communities. It contributes to safer, fairer and more cohesive communities. In financial terms, prevention is often harder to measure than crisis response, but that does not make it less valuable. In fact, it is often the most cost effective work a public system can support.

The potential loss of this service would create serious risks for Warwickshire, including:

- reduced access to independent support for residents experiencing discrimination, harassment, victimisation and hate crime;
- reduced confidence in hate reporting;
- fewer trusted routes into seldom heard communities;
- weaker community intelligence for public sector partners;

- reduced capacity to respond to community tensions;
- increased pressure on statutory and voluntary sector services;
- loss of specialist equalities knowledge and training capacity;
- weakened support for voluntary and community groups;
- damage to trust between communities and public bodies;
- and increased reputational, operational and legal risk for the Council and wider public sector.

These risks are particularly serious at a time when Warwickshire, like many areas, is experiencing heightened community tensions, increased public hostility, online hate, disinformation and growing concerns affecting communities across a range of protected characteristics.

EQulP also wishes to make clear that our concerns about this proposal are not a criticism of all those who represent or work for Warwickshire County Council. EQulP has a long-standing, constructive and positive relationship with many Council officers, senior leaders, elected members and partner agencies. We value those relationships and will continue to work professionally and constructively with all partners for the duration of our contract.

However, as Warwickshire's countywide equalities charity, we have a responsibility to speak clearly when we believe a proposal presents serious risks to residents and communities.

This consultation must be fair. It must be meaningful. It must be transparent. It must not treat equality as a low-priority issue simply because it is politically convenient or because the immediate budget saving appears straightforward. The future of Warwickshire's equalities infrastructure is too important to be reduced to a short-term financial decision or a statement of administrative preference.

EQulP believes that Warwickshire continues to need an independent, externally commissioned, specialist equalities service. If the Council believes the current service should change, then that should be explored through genuine dialogue, transparent evidence and meaningful engagement with those most affected. However, decommissioning the service entirely would be disproportionate, high risk and damaging to residents, communities and public sector partners across Warwickshire.

EQulP is proud of its record and the relationships it has built with communities, partners and public bodies across Warwickshire over many decades. We are proud to stand alongside communities who have too often been marginalised, misrepresented or demonised. We are proud to stand with Warwickshire Pride and other Pride groups across the county, and of our work with LGBTQ+ communities. We are proud of our association with Warwickshire Disabilities and supporting many people with a disability through our casework service and the disability fora that we have established. We are proud of our

work with women and girls, communities experiencing racial inequality, faith communities, refugees and people seeking asylum, older people, younger people, volunteers, and many others who contribute to the strength and diversity of this county.

These communities represent the very best of Warwickshire. They represent compassion, resilience, dignity, service and belonging. They should not be seen as optional, marginal or expendable in times of financial pressure.

At a time when hate, division and disinformation are increasingly visible nationally and locally, Warwickshire should be strengthening its equalities infrastructure, not weakening it.

EqulP will respond to this consultation firmly, constructively and with evidence. We will encourage residents, community groups, service users, volunteers, partners and elected representatives to take part and ensure that the voices of those most affected are heard.

Equality, diversity, inclusion, hate crime support and community cohesion are not optional extras. They are essential to the wellbeing, safety, fairness and future of Warwickshire.

We would appreciate you giving your views on the Warwickshire County Council's proposal. The consultation can be accessed here:

<https://ask.warwickshire.gov.uk/bi/equalities-service/>

The deadline is 6 December 2026

Thank you for time reading this statement and thank you for your continued support.

The EqulP Team