

Inclusion Strategy Consultation Report December 2025



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1. Introduction and background

In late summer and autumn 2025, the Council carried out a public consultation on its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to inform the development of a new inclusion strategy, which will replace the EDI strategy 2022-2025. This involved a 14-week public consultation period, including focus groups and an online survey.

The aim of the consultation was to hear people's views, gather their feedback on the existing themes, and understand their experiences to help shape the new inclusion strategy. This exercise is vital to fulfilling our duty to consider how our work, policies and decisions affect diverse communities and to reduce disadvantage for people with protected characteristics. It also helps us fulfil our obligations to protect staff and customers from discrimination.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010) requires us to have due regard to:

- Eliminating discrimination
- Advancing equality of opportunity
- Fostering good relations

The nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

This report outlines the methodology used, the engagement profile of respondents, the main themes from the consultation, quantitative and qualitative analyses of the survey results, and a conclusion summarising the findings.

2. Methodology

The consultation began on 6 August 2025 and ran to 12 November 2025. During this time, Rotherham residents were consulted via a survey (online and print copies) and a series of focus groups and other engagement activities. The online survey was available on the Council website from 22 August to 27 October 2025. It was promoted to staff and residents via e-bulletins, social media, and the focus groups. A total of 12 focus groups were held to ensure a wide range of people from protected characteristics groups could participate in the consultation and provide more in-depth views and feedback.

The focus groups organised around protected characteristics were arranged through local community organisations, as well as internally with staff groups sharing protected characteristics. Full details of the groups involved are outlined in section 3 (engagement profile) below.

The focus groups involved semi-structured and open conversations around inclusion issues. Although the aim of the conversations was to be as free flowing as possible, prompts were provided for facilitators to set the tone for the discussion, or to ensure that certain topic areas were covered. These prompts included:

- Do you have any general comments about inclusion issues in Rotherham? (what does inclusion mean to you?)
- Which issues are most important to you?

- What is your experience of accessing Council services or working with the Council?
- What affects you the most?
- What improvements or changes do you think are important?
- In what ways do you think the council can understand, listen to, and work with Rotherham communities?
- What are the important things to consider when trying to deliver accessible and responsive services that meet diverse needs?
- How can the Council provide leadership and actively promote equality?

Following the close of the consultation, notes and written comments on the survey were analysed by identifying themes across responses, and survey responses were also analysed statistically.

3. Engagement profile

A total of **22** responses were received through the online survey, with 12 (**54.5 %**) respondents providing consent for the Council to use their equalities monitoring information. While the feedback is valuable, the number of responses represents a small sample size and is unlikely to fully reflect the views of the whole borough.

Age (**22.7%** of respondents provided an answer): 0-15 0%, 16-24 0%, 25-64 100%, 65 and over 0%.

Gender (**54.5%** of respondents provided an answer): 27.3% female, 18.2% male, 2.6% other, 45.5% no response.

Gender reassignment (**54.5%** of respondents provided an answer): 4.5% transgender, 4.5% prefer not to say, 45.5% no, 45.5% no response.

Sexuality (**54.5%** of respondents provided an answer): gay/lesbian 18.2%, heterosexual/straight 13.6%, other 9.1%, prefer not to say 9.1%, bisexual 4.5%, 45.5% no response.

Marital status (**54.5%** of respondents provided an answer): married 18.2%, living with partner 13.6%, prefer not to say 13.6%, divorced/separated 4.5%, single 4.5%, 45.5% no response.

Pregnancy and maternity (**54.5%** of respondents provided an answer): no 45.5%, prefer not to say 9.1%, 45.5% no response.

Pregnancy and maternity (**54.5%** of respondents provided an answer): no 45.5%, prefer not to say 9.1%, 45.5% no response.

Disability (**54.5%** of respondents provided an answer): 36.4% long-term disability, 13.6% no disability, 4.5% prefer not to say, 45.5% no response.

Ethnicity (**54.5%** of respondents provided an answer): 4.5% Asian or Asian British – Pakistani, 4.5% prefer not to say, 4.5% White - any other background, 36.4% White – British, 4.5% White – Irish, 45.5% no response.

Religion (**54.5%** of respondents provided a response): 22.7% no religion, 13.6% Christian (all denominations), 9.1% prefer not to say, 4.5% Jewish, 4.5% Muslim, 45.5% no response.

Refugee or asylum seeker status (**54.5%** of respondents provided a response): 45.5% neither, 9.1% prefer not to say, 45.5% no response.

Carer (**54.5%** of respondents provided a response): 22.7% yes, 22.7% no, 9.1% prefer not to say, 45.5% no response.

Focus groups

There were 12 focus groups in total. Three took place online, eight were held in person and one was a hybrid meeting. The focus groups engaged with borough residents and staff, ensuring representation from a wide range of demographics and organisations/service users representing specific cohorts (e.g. ethnicity, sexuality, gender, disabilities, age).

Date	Name of group	No. of attendees	Membership/groups attending	Online/in person
6 August 2025	VCS focus group at Voluntary Action Rotherham	6	Rainbow Project, Voluntary Action Rotherham, NHS Mental Health Community Connectors, Rotherham United Community Sports Trust, Rotherfed	In person
7 August 2025	Sense	50	Sense service users, carers and staff	In person
7 August 2025	RMBC internal staff networks	11	RMBC staff	Hybrid
19 August 2025	VCS online focus group	5	Rotherham Ethnic Minority Alliance, Rotherham Muslim Community Forum, SEND Youth Club, Clifton Learning Partnership, Voluntary Action Rotherham	Online
19 August 2025	Rainbow Project	15	Staff members and service users	In person
21 August 2025	Faith Leaders	6	Faith group leaders from across Rotherham	Online
2 September 2025	Steel City Consultancy	24	Community group focused on supporting women and their families. 2 sessions hosted for service users – one for women (18 attendees) and one for men (6 attendees)	In person
5 September 2025	Sight and Sound	13	Service users and staff	In person

10 September 2025	Youth Cabinet	9	Youth Cabinet members	In person
12 September 2025	Our Borough That Cares	11	Member organisations and RMBC staff	Online
26 September 2025	Deaf Futures	27	Service users, carers and BSL interpreters	In person
12 November 2025	United Multicultural Centre	18	Service users and staff	In person

Any specific issues raised in these focus groups have been fed back to relevant services, and the main themes and findings are outlined in section 4.2 below.

4. Findings from the consultation and engagement methods

The following section outlines the findings from each of the consultation and engagement methods and summarises common themes.

4.1 Online survey

The online survey asked respondents a number of questions, as below. There were 22 responses received in total. To encourage further responses, the survey period was extended and it was promoted through various networks and channels.

Q1. Do you feel that [the current strategy's] priorities are something we should all work towards?	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	13	59.1%
Agree	3	13.6%
Neither agree nor disagree	3	13.6%
Disagree	2	9.1%
Strongly disagree	1	4.5%

Respondents were then given an opportunity to expand on their view, with 14 participants providing additional comments, including:

- Recruitment for a diverse and engaged workforce should be offered to the most qualified applicants, rather than based upon protected characteristics.
- Everyone is important and should have equal access to services.
- The current priorities are too broad; without specific commitments, they risk being open to interpretation and may not lead to meaningful change.
- Women's safety in the workplace should be recognised as a key issue.
- The voices of underrepresented groups must be actively heard and included.
- Delivery and accountability should be central to all Council services.
- Leadership should model inclusive behaviours throughout the organisation.
- Communication aids and tools should be available for vulnerable individuals at Riverside House, such as those who are deaf or visually impaired.

- Greater provision should be made for older people.

Respondents were asked to comment on **objective 1 of the current strategy: “understanding, listening to, and working with Rotherham’s communities”**. Of the 22 survey participants, 14 (63.6%) provided comments, while 8 (36.4%) did not.

Respondents offered a range of suggestions, including:

- Consultation with communities should take place after the strategy’s scope has been defined by councillors and the leadership team.
- Creative industries should be recognised as vital community assets.
- Engagement must ensure all voices are heard, especially those who feel overlooked during previous consultations.
- The Council should be more open, transparent, and welcoming in its approach.
- Promotion of consultations needs to be improved to increase participation.
- Greater support is needed for Council staff equality networks.
- The Council should commit to delivering all priorities outlined in the strategy.
- A clear definition of “communities” is needed to guide inclusive engagement.
- Specific issues such as women’s safety, disability access, and LGBTQ+ inclusion must be explicitly recognised to avoid being overlooked.
- The strategy should include a commitment to equity not just equality to ensure engagement leads to meaningful and fair outcomes.
- Groups most at risk of marginalisation should be explicitly named and considered throughout the strategy.

Respondents were asked to comment on **objective 2 of the current strategy: “delivering accessible and responsive services that meet diverse needs”**. Of the 22 survey participants, 15 (68.2%) provided comments, while 7 (31.8%) did not.

Recommendations for improvement from respondents included:

- The strategy should explicitly reference safety, safeguarding, and protection from harassment, particularly for individuals in public-facing roles or services.
- The Council should actively engage with the community in the delivery and implementation of the finalised strategy.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on in-person support, recognising that many residents lack the facilities or digital literacy to access online services.
- Acknowledge that some community members rely on relatives or support workers to access services at Riverside House, and ensure provision to accommodate this.
- Ensure service information is accessible and clearly promotes the availability of translation and interpretation services for those requiring additional support.
- Provide comprehensive training for staff to better support customers, particularly in understanding and responding to the needs of individuals with disabilities.
- Reword the priority to: “meeting the needs of people and delivering inclusive services.”

Respondents were asked to comment on **objective 3 of the current strategy: “providing leadership and organisational commitment to actively promote equalities”**. Of the 22 survey participants, 11 (50%) provided comments, while 11 (50%) did not.

Respondents offered a range of suggestions, including:

- Place stronger emphasis on equity, accountability, and explicit protections for women and other marginalised groups.
- Replace the word “promote” in the heading of the priority, as its meaning is unclear. Consider using alternatives such as “encourage,” “support,” or “model behaviours.”
- Celebrate cohesive and inclusive communities.
- Ensure that all Council staff voices are heard, potentially through suggestion boxes placed in Council buildings.
- Establish a dedicated equalities team to lead on this agenda and ensure appropriate action is taken across the organisation.
- Promote leadership transparency and accountability, while also inspiring pride among the workforce.

Respondents were asked to comment on **objective 4 of the current strategy: “ensuring a diverse and engaged workforce”**. Of the 22 survey participants, 12 (54.5%) provided comments, while 10 (45.5%) did not.

Recommendations from respondents for improvement included:

- Support unemployed individuals through workplace placements to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to secure employment.
- Improving Council staff skills is essential to ensure service users are successfully supported.
- The best person for the job should be selected based on merit, not on their protected characteristics.
- Staff equality networks are a positive initiative; however, there needs to be clear direction and promotion of the benefits of participation, to enable constructive challenge in the delivery of corporate strategies.
- Develop a workforce that reflects the diversity of the town, including engagement with communities whose first language is not English.
- There should be explicit policies and enforcement mechanisms addressing sexual harassment, sexist behaviour, and gender-based discrimination.
- Monitor representation by grade, level, gender, ethnicity, and disability; track retention, promotion, and reasons for exit; and record incidents of harassment and discrimination.
- The advertising and recruitment process for Council roles is slow, which increases the risk of applicants accepting positions elsewhere.

The final question gave respondents the opportunity to provide additional comments about the consultation. Of the 22 survey participants, 6 (27.3%) provided comments, while 16 (72.7%) did not.

Respondents offered a range of suggestions, including:

- Once the strategy is live, bring it to communities in each ward to invite challenge and share updates on the work being undertaken.

- The current four priorities are too generic and open to interpretation.
 - Clearly define "communities," as it is unclear who the Council is working with to deliver improvements.
 - A question emerged regarding how the objectives will be delivered, as they currently read more like statements than actionable goals.
 - There is no terminology or mention of LGBTQ+ people.
 - Refer to the Tourism Strategy as an example of accessible information and effective community engagement
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4.2 Summary of findings across focus groups

A total of **195** service users, carers, and staff from community equality networks participated in the consultation. While there is a history of engagement on key policies, strategies, and service design, frustrations remain due to a lack of feedback on what has been achieved and what actions are possible based on community input. Despite this, there is a strong interest in working collaboratively with the Council and a sense of optimism that meaningful change can occur.

At the start of each focus group session, participants were asked the question, ***“what does inclusion mean to you?”***. A word cloud has been created to visually represent the responses shared.

Common themes that emerged included feeling connected, having access to opportunities and services, being treated with respect, feeling safe, and the importance of inclusion, leadership, and the Council setting a positive example.



Community experiences of accessing Council services or engaging on matters of inclusion were generally negative.

Key concerns raised include:

- **Lack of transparency and communication:** Feedback from consultation exercises is not consistently shared with communities, and there is limited explanation of how decisions are made.
- **Feelings of frustration:** Many feel unheard and unable to access services that meet their specific needs.
- **Barriers to inclusive service delivery:** There is a lack of appropriate knowledge and understanding among staff on how to effectively support customers with additional needs, which negatively impacts the customer experience.

Recommendations from service users for improvement include:

1. Engage communities early in the process to ensure their voices help shape strategies before they are developed.
2. Establish Inclusion Champions across the organisation to support services in working more effectively and inclusively with all customers.

3. Hold dedicated question-and-answer sessions with customers who have accessibility needs to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers they face and to identify the specific support required to improve their experience.
4. Develop clear, inclusive, and accessible policies that actively promote equity, foster a sense of belonging, and ensure all individuals can engage with services confidently and without barriers.
5. Raise awareness of available translation services to support effective communication of individual needs and ensure people are directed to the appropriate services.

A wide range of concerns were shared in response to the question, “***what inclusion issues are most important to communities?***” These have been visually represented in a word cloud to acknowledge all responses (see below). Where relevant, officers carrying out the consultation contacted specific services on the issues raised, helping to ensure that feedback is acted on. The top 10 issues were:

1. **Accessible communications:** Ensure information is available in different languages, formats, and with text-to-voice assistance on the Council website.
2. **Feeling safe:** Concerns around safety are influenced by several factors, including a lack of visible police and community support officer presence, inadequate street lighting, public disorder, and the negative reputation of certain areas within the borough. These issues contribute to individuals feeling unsafe and discourage them from accessing public spaces, particularly during the evening.
3. **Accessible Council services:** Clear advertisement about service availability, particularly for community drop-in events, is essential to ensure residents know when and where they can access support. It is recommended that contact details be consistently displayed on officer email signatures, promotional leaflets, and across all materials outlining the support offer, to improve accessibility and engagement.
4. **Learning from residents’ experiences:** Communities have shared valuable feedback through consultations, engagement activities, and customer satisfaction surveys to help improve the customer experience. However, there is a sense among respondents that appropriate actions are not being taken, as decisions and outcomes are not consistently reported back to community equality networks.
5. **Advocacy:** To ensure all residents can access Council services equitably, support should be available for completing customer forms, particularly for those who may face barriers. Additionally, the promotion of translation and interpretation services is essential to help residents with language needs engage confidently and effectively with available support.
6. **Revitalisation of towns and villages:** While significant regeneration is underway in Rotherham town centre and towns such as Wath, Dinnington, and Swinton have benefited from government investment, there is a shared view that all areas across the borough should be improved. This would help reduce inequalities and ensure that every community has access to vibrant, well-supported local environments.
7. **Council supporting the integration of communities:** To help ensure that all communities feel connected and have equal access to opportunities, it was suggested that Council officers regularly attend community equality network

1. **Partnering with communities:** Co-produce solutions with communities to ensure services reflect lived experiences and local needs. Embed strengths-based approaches and training to empower both staff and residents in shaping inclusive services.
2. **Accessible communications:** Ensure information is available in different languages, formats, and with text-to-voice assistance on the Council website. Recognise that not all members of the community are digitally enabled - engage through alternative channels such as libraries, schools, and places of worship.
3. **Feedback from consultations:** Consultation feedback is not consistently shared with communities, and there is often a lack of clarity around how decisions are made. This contributes to negative perceptions of the Council and a lack of trust in the consultation process.
4. **Council to lead by example:** As one of the largest employers in the borough, the Council has a vital role in shaping perceptions of the town. It is essential to foster a culture where all members of the community and employees feel valued, supported, and included, ensuring local needs are recognised and addressed through inclusive leadership and practice.
5. **Voices of children and young people:** The Youth Cabinet plays a vital role in representing the views of children and young people across the borough. It is essential that the Council continues to support its work and promote the value of youth participation in shaping local policies and services.

Three top priorities, each receiving an equal number of votes, emerged from responses to the question, ***“in what ways do you think the Council can understand, listen to, and work with Rotherham communities?”***, and aligned closely with the objective, ***“how can the Council provide leadership and actively promote inclusion?”*** These priorities are:

1. **Accessible services and communications:** Ensure services are clearly advertised, including details on availability, eligibility criteria, and the support offered. Collaborate with local partner organisations to effectively communicate key messages to diverse communities.
2. **Perception of the Council:** To strengthen trust and improve perceptions of the Council, councillors, officers, volunteers, and community members should work collaboratively on local issues. Building these partnerships can foster stronger community bonds and demonstrate a shared commitment to inclusive and responsive service delivery.
3. **Council to lead by example:** Empowering the Council’s leadership team to champion inclusion and embed inclusive practices throughout the workplace. The Council must lead by example by developing clear, inclusive, and accessible policies that promote equity and belonging. Host events to commemorate religious and cultural festivals, creating opportunities for people, groups, and communities to come together, share experiences, and foster understanding. Councillors and Council officers to meet regularly with community members to understand their needs and act on concerns shared.

The top 3 important things to consider for the objective ***“delivering accessible and responsive services that meet diverse needs”*** were:

1. **Valuing community facilities and accessible communications:**
Communities rely heavily on local amenities, such as libraries, customer service centres, and community hubs to support overall health and wellbeing. There is a strong recognition of the need for continued investment to ensure these services remain operational and that facilities are well-maintained. Equally important is the provision of accessible communication, including materials available in multiple languages and formats, to ensure all customers can engage with services effectively.
2. **Training of volunteers to support communities:** Volunteers play a vital role in supporting the most vulnerable individuals, offering both practical assistance and emotional support. Investing in their training ensures they are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to respond effectively and compassionately to diverse community needs.
3. **Engage service users in the co-design and co-delivery of services:**
Involving local communities in the development of policies, strategies, and services ensures that their needs are accurately understood and addressed.

The top 3 actions that could be taken in response to the objective “**ensure that the Council and other agencies have a diverse and engaged workforce**” included:

1. **Leadership accountability:** Ensure leadership accountability by integrating diversity and inclusion into performance objectives and evaluation frameworks.
2. **Reputation of the Council:** Equip Council officers with the skills, knowledge, and training needed to succeed in their roles and progress within the organisation. Encourage staff to model positive behaviours within the community. Ensure employees feel heard and valued, particularly when consulted on new policies and procedures.
3. **Workforce diversity:** Share workforce diversity data with internal staff networks to inform and support inclusive recruitment campaigns and workforce planning.

5. Overall summary

The main points that arose across all methods of engagement focused on the following:

Feeling safe, secure and listened to – including how the council works with, listens to and engages with all communities in Rotherham:

- **Partnering with and listening to communities:** Co-produce solutions with communities to ensure services reflect lived experiences and local needs. Engagement must be inclusive and ensure all voices are heard, particularly those who have felt overlooked in previous consultations. A clear definition of “communities” is needed to guide meaningful and inclusive engagement.
- **Feedback from consultations:** Feedback from consultations is not consistently shared with communities, and there is often a lack of transparency around how decisions are made. This contributes to negative perceptions of the Council and a lack of trust in the consultation process.

Promotion of consultations should be improved to increase participation. Engagement with communities should take place after the strategy's scope has been defined by councillors and the leadership team, and there should be an open dialogue to share how the Council has acted on people's feedback.

- **Feeling safe and welcome:** As one of the largest employers in the borough, the Council plays a vital role in shaping perceptions of the town. It is essential to foster a culture where all community members and employees feel valued, supported, safe and included. Local needs should be recognised and addressed through inclusive leadership and practice. The Council should adopt a more open and transparent approach to ensuring that all towns, villages and areas across Rotherham are welcoming spaces for everyone so that people always feel safe.

Accessibility and ensuring council services consider different needs, especially when dealing with individual issues. This included:

- **Customer experience:** Feedback on customer experience was generally negative, with participants reporting difficulties in contacting the Council. Many were signposted to incorrect departments or found that their enquiries could not be resolved promptly. In order to improve the overall customer experience, respondents recommended that Council officers receive additional training on the structure and operations of Council services, as well as on how to effectively support communities requiring extra assistance. There was limited confidence expressed that the Council would deliver meaningful improvements in response to the feedback received through this consultation.
- **Accessible services:** Greater emphasis should be placed on in-person support, recognising that many residents lack the facilities or digital literacy to access online services. Given that some community members rely on relatives or support workers to access services at Riverside House, there should be provision to accommodate this.
- **Accessible communications:** Ensure service information is accessible and clearly promotes the availability of translation and interpretation services for those requiring additional support. Participants also highlighted the need for accessible communication tools to support people with disabilities. One example was the inclusion of a text-to-speech function on the Council's website, which would benefit users with visual impairments, dyslexia, or those who prefer auditory content.

Another theme focused on the council acting as a leader, celebrating and championing inclusivity. This included:

- **Celebrating cohesive and inclusive communities:** Host events in community spaces, such as churches and community centres across the borough to promote inclusion and ensure everyone can access the provision.

- **Leadership:** Encourage transparency and accountability within leadership, while also inspiring pride among the workforce. Ensure all Council staff voices are heard, for example by placing suggestion boxes in Council buildings.
- **Championing inclusion:** Enable the leadership team to champion inclusion and embed inclusive practices throughout the workplace. Establish a dedicated equalities team to lead on this agenda and ensure appropriate action is taken across the organisation.

Internally, suggestions focussed on the empowerment and development of the Council's workforce. Suggestions included:

- **Employment programmes:** Support unemployed individuals and young people through workplace placements to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to secure employment.
- **Learning and development:** Improving the skills of Council staff is essential to ensure service users are effectively supported. Enhance the learning and development offer by integrating mentoring programmes and expanding opportunities for professional growth.
- **Recruitment and selection:** Design recruitment campaigns that attract a diverse range of candidates across various roles and service areas. Selection should be based on merit, not on protected characteristics. Develop a workforce that reflects the diversity of the town, including engagement with communities whose first language is not English.

Address delays in the advertising and recruitment process, which increase the risk of applicants accepting positions elsewhere. Monitor representation by grade, level, gender, ethnicity, and disability; track retention, promotion, and reasons for exit; and record incidents of harassment and discrimination.

- **Equality networks:** Staff equality networks are a positive initiative; however, clearer direction and promotion of their benefits are needed to enable constructive challenge in the delivery of corporate strategies. Leverage these networks to embed inclusive practices and foster trusted, collaborative relationships with Human Resources.