

INTRODUCTION

The Grand Union Housing Group (GUHG) consists of Aragon Housing Association (AHA), MacIntyre Housing Association (MHA) and South Northants Homes (SNH). The group owns and manages around 10,000 properties across mid Bedfordshire, south Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas.

GUHG strives to ensure that equality and diversity are at the core of its business. We will ensure our targets deliver services that are both responsive to the needs of communities and individuals and promote social inclusion. We are committed to taking positive steps to ensure that equality of opportunity and effective management of diversity are reflected in all of our activities. As such, GUHG is committed to developing an organisational culture across the group, involving all sections of the community and acknowledging the contribution each individual can make to our work. Through the implementation of this strategy we will actively assist disadvantaged groups to benefit from our services.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

- To actively consult with different individuals, communities and internal and external partners to ensure we deliver services which reflect the specific needs of all our customers, including those who are elderly, vulnerable, hard to reach, socially excluded, disabled and from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, in ways which promote equality and inclusiveness and reduce disadvantage.
- To deliver services which effectively address key issues, such as anti-social behaviour, harassment and domestic violence.
- To tackle financial exclusion, implementing measures to help ensure residents can enjoy homes which are cost effective in terms of utility costs and supporting those who require assistance with their financial management.
- To take vigorous action against perpetrators of any form of harassment to its residents or staff.
- To have a diverse workforce that reflects the relevant population.

KEY POLICIES AND DOCUMENTS

GUHG believes that equality and diversity is “about everybody and for everybody” and aims to promote an understanding and appreciation of equality and diversity, through the implementation of this strategy, both within our organisational culture and the communities we serve. The strategy provides a framework which is supported by a number of other key documents/initiatives:

- Corporate Plan
- Money Advice Policy
- Anti-social Behaviour Policy
- Aids and Adaptations Policy
- Protection of Vulnerable Adults Policy
- Customer Care Policy
- Customer Feedback Policy
- Recruitment and Selection Policy
- Disability Equality Scheme
- Gender Equality Scheme
- Equalities Action Plan
- Financial Inclusion Strategy (under development)
- Access and Customer Care Strategy (under development)
- Harassment Policy and Procedures
- Human Resources Strategy
- The Equalities Forum (staff and customers)
- The Equality and Diversity Customer Panel
- Community Development Strategy
- Resident Involvement Strategy
- Resident Involvement Statement
- Independence and Empowerment Strategy (under development)
- Involvement and Empowerment Strategy
- Code of Conduct

OUR CUSTOMERS

Our primary areas of operation are mainly rural, with a fairly low ethnic minority ratio – Mid Bedfordshire 5.37%, South Northamptonshire 4.4% (Census 2001).

We recognise that different communities and neighbourhoods have different needs and our aim is to treat everyone fairly. We are committed to providing equality of opportunity in all areas of our business – service delivery, customer consultation, employment and governance. In order for us to be able to effectively deliver customer focused services, we are undertaking a customer profiling exercise during 2009/10, which will enable us to better understand customer needs and requirements. GUHG is committed to eliminating discrimination on the grounds of:

- Class
- Age
- Disability
- Colour, ethnic origin, nationality, race
- Gender
- Marital status
- Faith
- Sexuality

OUR STAFF

- GUHG aims to achieve an organisational culture which values people from all sections of society and has a workforce which reflects the relevant local populations and the communities with which we work.
- We regularly review and report on all our recruitment, selection, training and other employment policies and procedures ensuring that they are fair and reflect current best practice.
- All staff are given mandatory equality and diversity training and refresher training. Disability Awareness training is to be provided for staff during 2009/10.
- We require our staff to have appropriate training before taking part in recruitment and selection.
- We maintain appropriate records in respect of recruitment, training and employment, including disciplinary and grievance procedures, and report on and use this information as a means of identifying areas of inequality.
- We have developed vigorous harassment, bullying and dignity at work processes and aim to achieve a working environment where individuals can feel confident enough to bring complaints without fearing prejudice.
- We assist all our staff to realise their full potential by ensuring that they receive fair consideration of their training and career development needs and opportunities.
- Wherever possible, we will modify employment practices and procedures to reduce barriers experienced by members of disadvantaged groups in seeking, and during employment.
- We will carry out Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks (ISA checks, once this system is implemented) on staff who have dealings with vulnerable customers.
- We train managers and staff to give them awareness and confidence to support people with a disability where needed.
- We will continue to employ, where practicable, employees who become disabled during their employment and assist in their re-training.
- We guarantee people with a disability an interview for any employment vacancy for which they meet the minimum essential criteria.

OUR BOARD, COMMITTEES, PANELS AND FORUMS

- We will encourage applications from under-represented groups for Board recruitment.
- We aim to achieve representation from a full cross-section of the community, (across the diversity strands of age, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation) on all our Boards, Committees, Customer Panels and other working groups, which is reflective of the communities we serve.
- Recruitment to our governance structures is fair and transparent and we will regularly review membership and seek ways to improve under representation, based upon local census data.

- The Boards are committed to lead by example to promote equality and diversity and all Board, Committee, Panel and Forum members receive information on and training in equality and diversity issues.
- We aim to work with BME communities and increase confidence among BME communities that GUHG is led by a Board that promotes racial equality and embraces diversity.
- All new Board and Committee members have full access to training and support to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities.
- The involved customer annual training programme includes an E&D session.
- We ensure that Residents Groups include a commitment to the principles of equality and diversity in their constitutions.

OUR CONTRACTORS

- Grand Union Housing Group will promote its Equality and Diversity Policy to all consultants, contractors and suppliers and include a copy of the policy with tender information and contracts for work, services or supplies.
- We require contractors, consultants and suppliers to have in place an equality and diversity policy for service delivery and employment practices and to submit a copy before any contract can start. For those that do not have a policy, we ask that they sign up to ours.
- GUHG will take action against any contractors or consultants employed by any member of the group who discriminate against or harass any of its customers or staff in the delivery or access of services.
- GUHG will routinely carry out and report on regular customer satisfaction surveys on the work and services provided by consultants, contractors and suppliers.
- GUHG will offer Equality and Diversity training to contractors, consultants and suppliers on a regular basis.

OUR SERVICES

- GUHG will ensure that the principles of equality and diversity are applied to all groups in terms of access to housing, quality of housing allocated and the services provided.
- To this end we will work with our customers during 2010, initially through the Equalities Forum, to produce a single document outlining how we will meet our statutory obligations to all groups. This document will cover all diversity strands and is called a Single Equality Scheme (SES). We will further develop our equalities action plan, produced from our disability and gender schemes, to incorporate all our planned actions to address all diversity strands.
- We will ensure that when developing new services they are accessible to all minority groups.

- We will use information we have about customers to help us tailor our services to meet their needs.
- We will analyse customer profiling data within our supported housing services to enable such services to be actively marketed to harder to reach and/or under represented groups.
- We will work with local authorities and other organisations to research and prioritise the housing and service needs of minority communities and other groups experiencing discrimination and/or exclusion.
- GUHG participates in the CORE (Continuous Recording of Lettings) scheme and uses the CORE classifications. Regular assessments are made of the needs of all groups in the local community.
- In order to ensure that we are providing housing on an equitable basis, we will maintain a record keeping and monitoring system, covering all applicants and nominations, which enable us to report on access and equality for all groups. Choice Based Lettings has been successfully launched in Bedfordshire and provides customers with greater choice and flexibility.
- Monitoring will be used to enable us to review the situation of particular groups to ensure the allocation priorities are being met and to measure outcomes against a profile of local minority and disadvantaged groups.
- In order to ensure that we are providing housing services on an equitable basis, we maintain a monitoring system to report on the feedback received from tenants on the services provided and particularly on whether they believe the service was in any way affected by their ethnic origin, gender or disability.
- Where support services are provided to tenants based on an eligibility criteria, this process will be made clear and transparent to the tenant and any referring agency.

DEVELOPMENT

- GUHG has a Sustainability Strategy which is published on our website for community groups, local authorities, partner organisations and individuals to access. Key aspects of the strategy address how we will manage the changing environment, work effectively with partners and deliver quality outcomes for customers.
- The GUHG Business Development Strategy was developed and is reviewed with input from stakeholders to determine appropriate housing solutions within the resources available.
- An appendix to the Business Development Strategy to specifically relate to South Northants Homes is to be developed during 2009/10 with input from stakeholders.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOU

- GUHG aims to communicate with all customers in a variety of ways to ensure that everyone is able to access information about our services. For individuals requesting information in another format, we will discuss their specific needs to enable us to assist in the most appropriate way (which may include large print, audio, interpreter etc).
- GUHG will ensure it provides interpreters for communication between customers and the Associations within the group as appropriate.
- We will take steps to ensure our websites are up to date and customer friendly, using for example 'Browsealoud' capability, background colour change options and large font.
- We will be exploring different methods of communicating with customers during 2009/10 – eg texting, email, interactive digi TV.
- When booking venues for external meetings staff will ensure the venue meets the needs of those attending, taking into account accessibility etc and considering individual's needs if providing refreshments.

DEALING WITH HARASSMENT/HATE CRIME

Harassment can take many forms, happens on a variety of grounds and could be directed at one person or a group of people. Harassment is described as unwanted behaviour that a person finds intimidating, upsetting, embarrassing, humiliating or offensive and could include:

- i) Unwanted physical contact
- ii) Jokes, offensive language, gossip, slander, sectarian songs and letters
- iii) Posters, graffiti, obscene gestures, flags, bunting and emblems
- iv) Isolation or non co-operation and exclusion from social activities
- v) Coercion for sexual favours
- vi) Pressure to participate in political/religious groups
- vii) Intrusion by pestering, spying, stalking
- viii) Physical assault
- ix) Damage to property
- x) Arson
- xi) Threatening or abusive behaviour

GUHG will not tolerate any form of harassment to customers or staff and will take action against all perpetrators and the Harassment policy and procedures set out in detail the process we will follow in any such event.

EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS (EIA)

Delivery of services which meet our customers' needs will remain at the top of our agenda. To help us to make sure we consider all our customers needs we have formed a panel – The Equalities Forum – consisting of customers, potential customers and staff, all of whom represent minority groups.

Policies

All our policies have an initial EIA screen. Where indicated as necessary by the screening process, a full assessment is carried out by the forum. The forum meets on an ad hoc basis, but has been used in the past for development of new policies, considering significant changes to existing policies and the development of our disability and gender equality schemes.

Service Delivery

If we are considering the development of a new service or the cessation of an existing service we will ensure that an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is carried out to determine whether the decision will have a negative impact on any particular section of the community. We will use an EIA tool for an initial screen and where indicated by this process, a full assessment will take place which will involve the forum.

Examples of full assessments which have been carried out by the forum include Bedfordshire-wide Choice Based Lettings Policy, Anti-social Behaviour Policy, Responsive repairs Contract.

MONITORING AND REVIEW

This strategy will be reviewed annually, in line with the group's policy review programme. Implementation of the Equalities action plan will be monitored and reported quarterly to the Executive Management Team.

Customer Consultation: Policy Reading Group November 2009
Customer Committee (SNH) December 2009

Equality Impact Assessment carried out: initial screen

Person responsible for review: Governance & Performance Manager

Date of creation: February 2010

Next review due: February 2011