

Disability Equality Scheme November 2007

Introduction

The Disability Equality Duty came into force for public organisations on 4 December 2006. A similar duty was introduced on race equality in 2001 and a gender equality duty was introduced in April 2007.

Aragon Housing Association (AHA) has a disability equality scheme with an equalities action plan that integrates all the diversity strands of disability, gender, race, religion & belief, age and sexual orientation. The purpose of this scheme and the equalities action plan is to promote equal opportunities for the minority groups, to eliminate discrimination and positively promote diversity among individuals. Any action taken to overcome discrimination will help to improve the performance of the organisation and provide greater customer satisfaction, from all sectors of the community.

Achievements to date

A best value review of services to minority groups was carried out in 2005 resulting in an action plan which has now been fully implemented. The plan included the following actions:

- Additional questions included in STATUS survey to provide more detailed information about minority groups
- Database set up to record customers requiring information in different format (e.g. large print, audio etc)
- Staff skills information updated to record language and signing skills (there are currently 9 members of staff who can sign)
- All literature carries different format/language provision
- Inclusion in corporate induction of equality and diversity in relation to minority groups
- Check list included in the Equality and Diversity Policy to check accessibility when booking external venues
- White paper used in accordance with Royal National Institute for the Blind recommendations
- Printed material to be in font size 14 where possible with a minimum of 12
- Provision of magnifying glasses in reception
- Useful contacts list for customers requiring tenancy support services, given to Tenant Support Officers
- Establishment of a youth tenant panel, AIR, and recruitment of a Youth Participation Officer

Equality and diversity statistics are collected and monitored on a regular basis: all surveys collect ethnicity and minority group data, similar information collected and reported on staff and Board members with the aim of reflecting the ethnicity mix of the local population.

Equality and diversity (E&D) training is mandatory for all staff and provided annually, in addition to inclusion in the corporate induction programme. Aragon also provides E&D training to contractors on an annual basis.

Aragon is a member of the Bedfordshire BME Forum and part-funds and manages the BME Community Development Officer. Additionally Aragon is a member of the True Vision campaign.

The Aragon website was redesigned in 2006 to provide more services and information for customers. All published leaflets are available; customers can interactively search the Mutual Exchange register, report repairs and make online payments; through a secure log in facility they can view rent statements, repairs progress and transfer applications. The opportunity was taken to make the website more accessible, with much of it meeting the W3C Accessibility Standards and Bobby Scheme standards. There is a facility to view the site easily in a range of font sizes, with text-only and printer-friendly alternatives; plus instructions to download a translation service, access audio capability or change background colour.

Aragon has had an Access Audit carried out in the last few weeks, at both the Sandy and Ampthill offices, results of which will inform an action plan to address any issues highlighted.

Aragon has an Aids and Adaptations Policy which sets out the associations approach, ensuring that the adaptations process is managed effectively to include relevant budget levels with this demand led service. A leaflet is now available for customers which sets out the process and explains entitlement.

The entrance to the Ampthill offices is laid with tactile slabs and both receptions have a hearing loop facility, a lift to the first floor and disabled toilet facilities.

The Choice Based Lettings countywide group wanted to ensure their scheme would not unintentionally discriminate against any groups. The Equality Impact Assessment Forum was used to screen the draft policy. Some very detailed feedback was given back to the implementation group which has resulted in a number of changes and amendments to the policy to address some of the issues raised.

Development of the Scheme

Aragon wanted to achieve as broad a mix of members on the group as possible, to include current tenants, customers on the waiting list and staff, all of whom are from minority groups. Initially a feature was included in the summer tenant newsletter, "Intouch", asking for interested parties to get in touch with the Community Development Department. Unfortunately this method did not result in anyone putting their name forward.

The next step was to speak to the Equality and Diversity tenant panel, asking them for expressions of interest in the new group, most of the group were keen to participate.

In order to ensure there was some representation from staff on the group, the Human Resources Manager contacted individuals directly who were known to represent minority groups. A small number of staff agreed to join the group as a result.

Finally, Aragon felt it was important that prospective customers' views were sought in addition to existing tenants, as they would have an interest in helping to shape the way services are delivered and developed, now and in the future. Some customers on the waiting list who represented minority groups were approached and asked if they wished to be involved, resulting in a few of them joining the forum.

Initial discussions of the forum were around steps Aragon has already taken to improve access to services for customers with disabilities, with feedback from the group being that they felt Aragon performs well in this area. There were 2 members of the forum with mobility problems who had found they did not encounter any problems on arrival at the Aragon offices, with facilities enabling them to maintain their independence. One of the group members had had a number of aids and adaptations fitted to his home and he spoke very highly of the service he had received. Additionally the group discussed provision of literature in alternative formats and cost implications for provision of leaflets in a variety of languages. The group felt very strongly that a balance had to be struck between catering for language needs and balancing expenditure across all services. The group went on to identify areas where there is some scope for improvement, which forms the basis for the Equalities Action Plan (available separately).

The draft action plan was shared with the Mid Beds Access Group for comment and their feedback incorporated into the document. Additionally the scheme was shared with stakeholders for comment, Bedfordshire PCT, Bedfordshire and Luton Partnership Trust, Bedfordshire County Council and Mid Bedfordshire Council. Although feedback was limited, comments were considered and incorporated where appropriate.

Monitoring

The implementation of the action plan will be monitored by the Governance & Performance Manager on a 6-monthly basis.