



Gender Equality Scheme April 2008

Introduction

The Gender Equality Duty came into force for public organisations in April 2007. The Housing Corporation passed this duty on to housing associations to ensure they had a scheme in place by April 2008.

Grand Union Housing Group (GUHG) which comprises Aragon Housing Association, MacIntyre Housing Association and South Northants Homes, already has in place a Disability Equality Scheme, as well as an Equalities Action Plan, which integrates all the diversity strands of disability, gender, race, religion & belief, age and sexual orientation. The purpose of the gender equality scheme is to promote equal opportunities regardless of gender and to ensure that the Group takes action to overcome discrimination.

Achievements to date

GUHG strives to ensure services are tailored to meet the needs of customers regardless of whether they are representatives of minority groups. There have been a number of initiatives which have resulted in changes being made to improve customer access to services, such as a review of services to minority groups, however many of the benefits realised, cut across all the diversity strands, with few being solely gender specific (full details of these outcomes are detailed in the disability equality scheme). Detailed below are some changes implemented which are solely gender specific:

Aragon attended Bedford College's "Women in Construction" event, a day designed to promote construction, a previously male-dominated industry, as a growing career area for women. In addition we have been involved in setting up a partnership and course with the college.

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

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

Our Domestic Violence policies are gender neutral and all applications to join the housing register are treated equally regardless of gender.

We have 13 members of staff undertaking professional qualification training = 4 males and 9 females.

GUHG fully complies with all employment equalities legislation and family friendly legislation and has in place maternity, paternity, unpaid leave, parental leave, flexible working and flexible working hours policies as part of staff terms and conditions, all of which aim to improve working arrangements and help to accommodate individuals' needs. We have accommodated 4 formal requests under the staff terms and conditions for changes in working: compressed hours following maternity leave, converting to job share, increase in hours following a reduction in hours due to child care reasons and working from home with compressed hours. We have also made minor changes to hours on informal requests from part-time staff.

Staff have the option of accessing a childcare voucher system, which has a tax benefit on take-up, which is open to male and female employees. There are 4 members of staff currently using this system.

Aragon and MacIntyre support the EDGE Forward programme which was launched in February 2005 to provide support in career development to people who work in the housing sector. The scheme is open to any housing employee in our region who has been put forward by their organisation. EDGE Forward has been developed to support and encourage diversity within the housing sector. It is a fully inclusive scheme which seeks to assist employees to overcome barriers to career progression. Approximately 30 people benefited from the programme in 2005-6 and more than 40 are participating in the current year. Aragon have put forward 6 members of staff for this year's programme = 2 males and 4 females.

Reimbursement of childcare costs is paid to customers attending panels and forums and transport is provided when required, which may be of particular help for those that may feel vulnerable attending evening meetings. Aragon stages a childrens' Christmas party each year.

All policies at review have an equality impact assessment (initial screen) carried out and where indicated, a full assessment via the Equalities Forum. There is a Group Equality and Diversity Policy in place.

Development of the scheme

During the summer of 2007, Aragon began creating a database of customers, prospective customers and staff who would be interested in taking part in equality and diversity initiatives and joining a new forum to be called the Equalities Forum. All members are representatives of minority groups. The Equalities Forum is an ad hoc group which holds a series of meetings to work on a particular task. Membership of the forum varies according to the topic, with appropriate people from the database being invited to work on a specific project.

The forum's membership for the gender equality project included customers and staff with a balanced mix of male and female members. Additionally some of the attendees were representatives from the previously mentioned diversity strands.

Initial discussions at the first meeting were around steps Aragon has already taken to address gender equality. The group spent some time discussing gender issues with regards to staffing and attendance by a member of the Human Resources team was extremely helpful in clarifying current policy and practice as well as Government legislation relating to employment. A lengthy discussion was held around maternity rights and benefits, with views of several fathers adding a different perspective to the discussion.

The group felt that another area for development was that of attracting more females, particularly from younger age groups, to become involved customers. Work and home commitments may be a barrier for some women, so more innovative ideas were put forward to address this issue.

The group agreed a number of initiatives which they felt would result in improvements and these were incorporated into the Equalities Action Plan.

The draft action plan and scheme was shared with staff and stakeholders for comment, which included Bedfordshire PCT, Bedfordshire and Luton Partnership Trust, Bedfordshire County Council and Mid Bedfordshire Council.

Monitoring

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

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April 2008*