



Equality and Diversity Strategy

2009 - 2011

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1 Introduction

1.1 Stafford and Rural Homes (SARH) values the rights of all people and is committed to developing services that meet the needs of our customers, both now and in the future. We will seek at all times to value diversity and believe that all our customers, staff, board members and other stakeholders should be treated fairly and without discrimination or prejudice.

1.2 Diversity is one of the cross cutting themes that the Audit Commission apply to all areas of service when carrying out an inspection. The Audit Commission KLOE on diversity states:

‘The purpose of focusing on diversity is to ensure that services address the different needs that customers have. Customers’ needs differ for a variety of reasons: these could include age, ethnic background, their ability to access services or their ability to participate in the life of their community.’

1.3 The Housing Corporation (now the Tenant Services Authority) Good Practice Note 8 on Equality and Diversity states:

‘The main reasons for promoting equality and diversity is because understanding the customer is at the heart of delivering good quality services.’

1.4 Our Audit Commission inspection in July 2008 found diversity to be an area where strengths outweighed weaknesses and made no recommendations that needed to be addressed. However, we want to continually improve our services and recognise that there are always further improvements to make. Our first Equality and Diversity Strategy was written pre transfer; and this version is the result of the latest review to ensure that it reflects the changing needs of our customers and the business and complies with all legislative and regulatory requirements and best practice.

2 Our Vision, Objectives and Values

2.1 Our Vision is: ‘To provide quality affordable housing in a safe environment. To strengthen communities in the towns and villages and to provide excellent services for all our customers in partnership.’

2.2 Our objectives

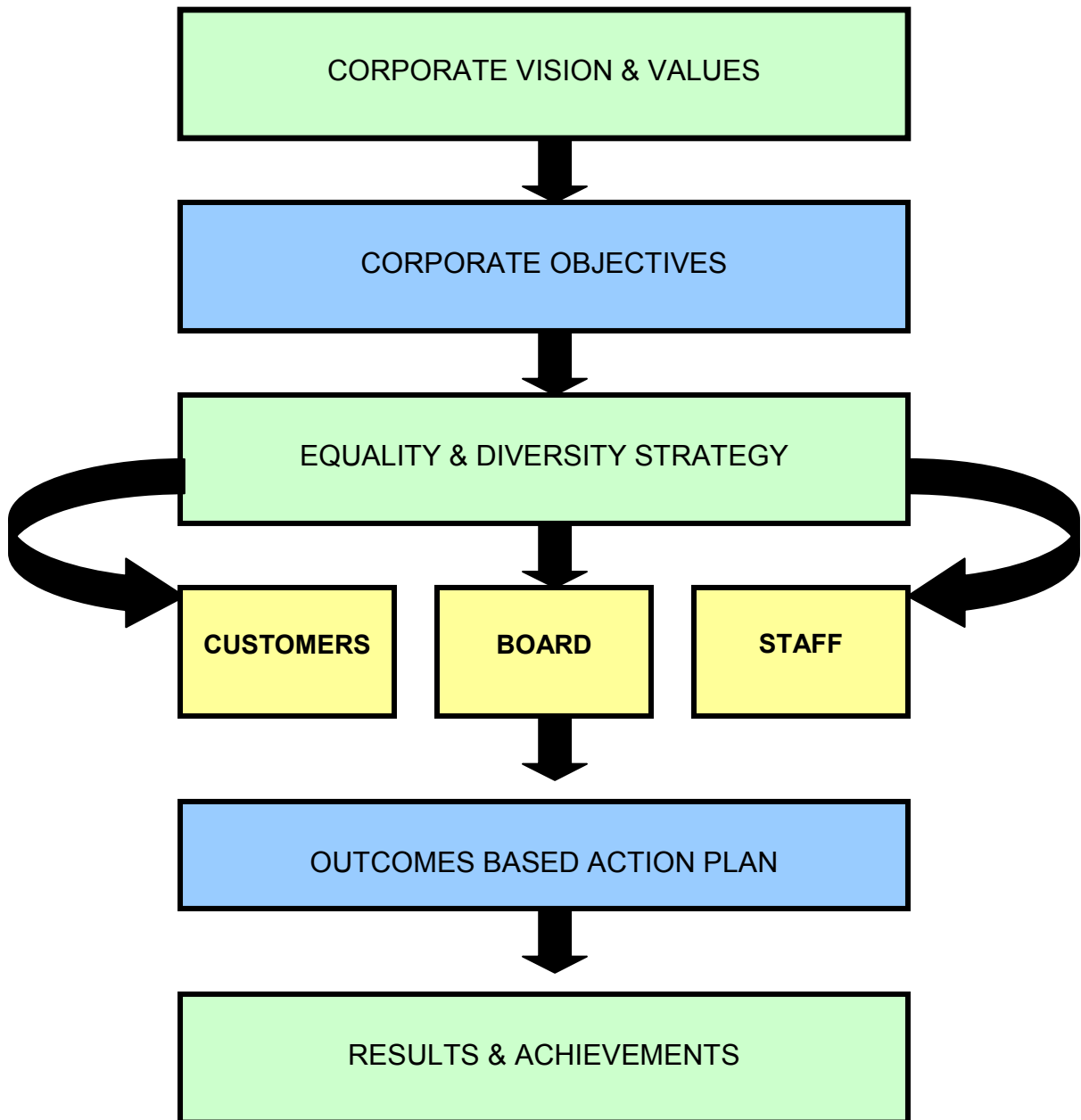
- Deliver the five year promises made at Transfer by 2011
- Deliver an excellent housing service through innovation, efficiency and strong leadership

- Manage our resources efficiently and invest in our staff to make Stafford and Rural Homes a viable company people want to work for
- Meet the needs of our customers by putting residents at the heart of the business, transforming services and aiming for top quartile satisfaction
- Invest in our neighbourhoods by planning future investment, delivering decent homes and localising service delivery to improve local communities in partnership with others
- Manage our business through identifying opportunities for growth, developing a strong corporate identity, sound governance and continuous improvement.

2.3 Our Values

- Communicating with one another in a range of ways that are timely and informative
- Approachable so that people can talk with one another, share ideas, and remain informed
- Respecting of each others' differences, values and opinions, treating everybody as we would wish to be treated ourselves
- Empowering staff, customers and stakeholders to have real and meaningful input into the business
- Supportive of each other, offering only constructive criticism and being willing to help to make the service as excellent as we aspire to.

2.4 The Equality and Diversity Strategy is a key contribution to the achievement of our vision, objectives and values.



3 Equality and Diversity – what it means

- 3.1 Diversity is recognising and respecting any differences between individuals and different groups within the community, and understanding that these differences can be strength. The emphasis is upon opportunities for involvement for all and creating cultural change.
- 3.2 Equal Opportunities is defined as creating fair access to all to our services, challenging and eliminating discrimination, encouraging

involvement in public life, promoting good relationships and taking positive steps to enable all people to take part

4 Legislation and Regulation

- 4.1 There are both legal and regulatory requirements in respect of equality and diversity which we are required to comply with.

A list of the relevant legislation is attached as Appendix 1.

4.2 Tenant Services Authority:

- 4.3 The Tenant Services Authority (TSA) created in 2008 is currently consulting on Building a New Regulatory Framework. The TSA has duties to eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote equality and has indicated that it intends to use the development of National and Local Standards to help to achieve this.

- 4.4 Registered providers will be expected to understand and respond to the needs of tenants and demonstrate how they have taken into account the needs of tenants across the six diversity groups: ethnicity, disability, sexuality, age, gender and religion / belief. We recognise however that people's diversity and their needs may relate to other differences, for example their economic position, which is referred to in our Financial Inclusion Strategy.

5 Roles and Responsibilities

- 5.1 SARH is working to ensure that an understanding of equality and diversity is embedded throughout the organisation. Work on equality and diversity is led by the Board and the Leadership Team.
- 5.2 The Board is responsible for ensuring that SARH discharges its legal and regulatory duties effectively. The board has appointed one of its members as the 'Champion' for equality and diversity, who is responsible for its promotion within the Board and company.
- 5.3 The Leadership Team also ensure that the company discharges its legal duties, and actively promotes equality and diversity within the company, alongside delivering our values. Members of the Leadership Team and other managers are responsible for implementing this strategy and involving all staff in delivering fair services.
- 5.4 The Chief Executive is the 'Champion' for equality and diversity for the Leadership Team, and day to day work on equality diversity is led by the Service Excellence Manager.

- 5.5 All staff are responsible for ensuring that SARH discharges its legal duties, promoting equality and diversity and the company's values, and for implementing this strategy and action plan.
- 5.6 The Services For All Group was formed in 2009, replacing the previous Equality and Diversity Steering Group and the Access and Customer Care Group. It comprises members of staff from all parts of the company and customers, and is responsible for promoting a culture where equality and diversity is embedded throughout the organisation. The group also leads on supporting and developing all parts of the business to make services accessible to all.

6 Key aims of the Strategy

- 6.1 The purpose of the Strategy is to set out our commitment to diversity
- 6.2 Our aims are:
- to promote a culture where equality and diversity is embedded throughout the organisation
 - to provide a framework for ensuring that services are provided fairly and made accessible to all customers
 - to raise awareness of the importance of equality and diversity issues – amongst staff, Board members, customers other stakeholders and partners.
- 6.3 In order for us to understand the needs of our customers we collect relevant up to date information that tells us what these needs and requirements are so that we can tailor our services accordingly. We collect this information through our Fair Service Survey. A key challenge for us is to increase this return rate and keep the information up to date so we have reviewed the format and content of the survey (based on a piece of work done by members of a National Federation of Housing Continuous Improvement Group) and are looking at other ways of encouraging customers to respond. For our new customers we collect the information at sign-up.
- 6.4 Appendix 2 sets out customer profile information from the Fair Service Survey.

7 Implementation – delivering equality and diversity

- 7.1 SARH is continually seeking to improve the services delivered and tailor them to meet the needs of customers. Our Equality and Diversity action plan, which we commenced in 2006 and have reviewed regularly since, sets out the actions required to meet our commitment to our customers and staff in all areas of equality and diversity.

7.2 We will ensure that respect for diversity and equality of opportunity applies across all of our business activities and is an integral part of planning and service delivery. This strategy applies to the following areas of our business:

- governance
- employment
- strategy and policy
- access and customer care
- continuous improvement
- services
- customer participation
- development

7.3 Governance

The Board is fully committed to embedding equality and diversity across the business. It is united in tackling discrimination of any type, wishing to treat all individuals and communities with respect, dignity and in a manner that promotes positive relationships and encourages participation in public life.

7.4 The Board:

- provides effective leadership and a clear vision for equality and diversity
- has appointed a Board 'Champion' for diversity
- is represented on the Services For All Group
- has transparent recruitment policies for board members
- undergoes training and support programmes to help Board members to understand and promote equality and diversity in the organisation
- works in partnership with a range of public, voluntary and community organisations to promote positive relationships within our communities.

7.5 Employment

SARH's recruitment policy is based on employing the most suitable person for the position and the principle of equal opportunities is central to this process. Our commitment to equality and diversity is demonstrated through:

- delivery of our Organisational Development Strategy
- monitoring diversity of job applicants and appointments so that action can be taken where this does not show progress in reflecting the composition of the population of our customers and the local population

- taking positive measures to encourage staff and potential staff from under- represented groups to take up employment and training opportunities
- making reasonable adjustments when we are advised that a job applicant has a disability in order to facilitate selection for jobs on a genuine basis of equality
- recording reasons for selection and rejection of applicants
- ensuring that access to buildings, premises, and services is compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act and related legislation
- meeting the special needs of staff with disabilities, wherever reasonably practicable, including providing adapted equipment and changes of working methods to help to meet those needs
- implementation of Valuing Equality
- maintaining a register of staff with language and communication skills.

7.6 Training and development

SARH:

- collates individual and corporate training needs, sources and delivers learning solutions, and evaluates and reviews the effectiveness of those solutions
- provides the Board and all staff with training on equality and diversity, both as part of their induction programme and regularly thereafter
- provides training on equality and diversity for customers, including the Customer Inspectors team.

7.7 Strategy, Policy and Equality Impact Assessments

We carry out Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) on our policies and strategies to identify and address any actual or potential discrimination (direct or indirect) against any particular group. As we develop and implement strategy and policy with our customers, we will take into account the needs of customers and staff.

7.8 Access and Customer Care

We will ensure that:

- reasonable adjustments are made to services to enable all to access them
- key information is available in a range of formats
- translation services are available when required
- the Fair Service survey is reviewed in line with this strategy and data is held centrally and used to inform service development and new initiatives
- we can signpost customers to a variety of support agencies.

7.9 Continuous Improvement

We will ensure that:

- we aspire to a 100% return from the Fair Service Survey
- we develop relationships with key partner organisations such as those involved in the Community Safety Partnership and Local Area Partnership Group
- we publish meaningful performance information to customers
- we actively raise awareness of support available to customers
- we attain grade 'A' standard on the Supporting People Quality Assessment Framework.

7.10 Services

We will:

- ensure that staff are aware of those customers with special requirements or needs when visiting them in their homes
- consider an Out of Hours reporting system for Anti-Social Behaviour cases
- set up effective and regular liaison sessions with agencies regarding harassment, including consideration of officers on call out
- identify and establish links with service delivery partners
- review the Responsive Repairs Policy to consider faster response times for people with disabilities or specific special needs
- ensure that our Aids and Adaptation Policy and procedures remain fit for purpose and monitor take-up
- ensure that our Asset Management Strategy meets the needs of our customers and reflects best practice, including our approach to affordable warmth and sustainability
- review our communication methods to ensure that good, clear information is provided which enables customers to express their needs
- monitor the implementation of Choice Based Lettings to ensure that no individual or group is being disadvantaged through the new arrangements
- require all our contractors, suppliers and consultants to comply with our commitment to equality and diversity
- continue to work with other agencies to promote equality and diversity and combat discrimination and prejudice.

7.11 Customer Participation

Customer involvement is a key part of our business. SARH wants all its customers to feel that they can be actively involved through a variety of ways and express their views on how services are delivered and improved. Our Partnership Agreement sets out our commitment to

enabling all sectors of the community to be involved and feel that their views are represented.

- 7.12 Our Customer Involvement Statement sets out an A to Z menu of involvement opportunities. SARH welcomes ideas for new ways for customers to be involved in ways that suit them.

7.13 Development

SARH in partnership with Housing Plus Group is working with Stafford Borough Council and the Homes and Communities Agency to identify the housing needs of diverse groups as we work on our programme to increase our stock and provide more affordable homes.

8 Monitoring and reporting

- 8.1 Delivery of the equality and diversity action plan is led by the Services For All Group and monitored by the Leadership Team and the Board. We will continue to review the strategy on a regular basis – every two years or as a result of legislation or changes in best practice.

Appendix 1

A list of legislation that has requirements relating to Equality and Diversity

- Equal Pay Act 1970
- Sex Discrimination Act 1975
- Race Relations Act 1976
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995
- Protection from Harassment Act 1997
- The Human Rights Act 1998
- Sex Discrimination (Gender re-assignment) Regulations – amended the Sex Discrimination Act 1975
- Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000
- Age of Consent for gay men Act 2001
- Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003 and the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995
- Disability Discrimination Act 2005
- Civil Partnership Act 2005
- Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006
- Equality Act 2006 – Gender Equality Duty
- Work and Families Act 2006
- Equality Bill 2009 (which will reduce 9 pieces of legislation and around 100 statutory instruments into one Act).

Appendix 2

Customer profile information

Age: compared to the general population in Stafford, SARH has a high proportion of older customers.

- 16.88% of the population of Stafford Borough is aged over 65 (2001 census).
- 31% of SARH's customers are aged 65 or over (Fair Service Survey September 2009).

Disability: compared to the general population in Stafford, SARH has a high proportion of customers with a disability.

- 4.4% of the population are permanently sick or disabled. (2001 census).
- 57% of SARH's customers have some form of disability (Fair Service Survey September 2009).
- 50% of general needs customers have a long term illness or disability. 59% of sheltered housing customers have a long term illness or disability (STATUS survey November 2008).

Ethnicity: the ethnicity of SARH's customers is broadly in line with ethnicity of the population of Stafford.

- 95.57% of the population is White British (2001 census).
- 91.86% of SARH's customers are White British (Fair Service Survey September 2009).
- 96% of general needs customers are White British. 95% of sheltered housing customers are White British (STATUS survey November 2008).

Religion:

- 79.9% of the population are Christian. The next highest figure is that 0.4% are Muslim (2001 Census).
- 67% of general needs customers are Christian. The number of customers stating any other religion was too low to provide any reliable data. (STATUS survey November 2008).

Gender

- 49.52% of the population of Stafford are male and 50.48% female (2001 census)
- 40.45% of SARH customers are male and 59.08% female (STATUS survey November 2008).

Sexuality

- 67.63% of SARH customers are heterosexual; 0.14% bisexual; 0.2% gay men and 0.2% gay women /lesbian (31.82% preferred not to answer). (STATUS survey November 2008).