

Vectis Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy

1. Introduction

This policy sets out VHA's commitment to the values of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and to the elimination of discrimination in all our dealings as an employer and provider of housing services. It sets out our commitment to EDI, how we will implement the policy and how we will monitor performance

2. Overview

Our overarching objective is to ensure that there will be no discrimination or unfair treatment on the grounds of age, disability, ethnic or national origin, faith gender and gender reassignment, marital/civil partnership race, colour, sexual orientation, social position, social disadvantage or status. We aim to ensure that everybody is treated in such a way as to offer equal opportunity to receive the services and employment opportunities we provide.

We recognise that there are barriers to achieving equality of opportunity, ranging from overt prejudice in favour of, or against, particular groups or individuals to unwitting ignorance of different lifestyles and needs.

On whatever level it exists, discrimination is neither acceptable nor tolerable. Our commitment therefore is to ensure that no group in society is less likely than another to be housed or recruited by us and that the other services we provide, such as housing advice, repairs and rent collection, are carried out fairly.

We will look to develop a positive action culture through which achievement of equality seamlessly underpins all that we do and acts as a "golden thread" to our business. To achieve this we will set objectives for our services that reflect the diverse needs of our residents, measure our performance and take positive action to deal with any imbalances we find. We will work to ensure that appreciation of issues relating to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are embedded throughout the organisation.

Our commitment extends to cover:

- everyone involved in VHA, i.e. staff and Board Members
- partners and stakeholders
- contractors
- residents and service users
- customers

The practical measures that we will adopt to support and deliver the outcomes set out in this policy will be set out in a detailed action plan.

3.2 Explaining our Commitment to EDI

Our commitment to delivering EDI outcomes is based on key business and value-based criteria:

3.2.1 The moral case

The fundamental rationale of the social housing sector and housing associations in recent times has been to deal with and where possible eradicate disadvantage. VHA has fully signed up to this approach and this is endorsed by being at the heart of our core values and business strategy.

3.2.2 The legal requirements on Housing Associations

Discrimination is illegal whether it is direct or indirect. The law requires us to demonstrate our commitment to equality of opportunity in all our dealings, and that we work towards the elimination of discrimination through promotion of good relations with all sectors of the community. These legal requirements are also reflected in regulatory requirements set down in the Homes and Communities Agency's code.

3.2.3 The business case

We deal with a diverse range of customers and staff. Our services and delivery plans have to reflect and respond to a range of different physical, cultural and religious needs which impact significantly upon life style preferences. We are more likely to be effective and efficient if we fully understand and integrate the views and wishes of our residents in the things we do and the way we do them.

We recognise that our employment practices also need to reflect the benefits of achieving a representative workforce with a diverse range of perceptions, experience and skills.

3.3 Our definition of equality is: "To ensure to the best of our ability that all of our residents, customers and potential residents and customers are able to enjoy the same access to VHA opportunities free from discrimination or undue disadvantage."

We view this as process as essentially about breaking down barriers that limit or restrict opportunities for certain individuals or groups of people. We aim to identify and take action to minimise these barriers.

3.4 Our definition of diversity is: "To understand, respect and valuing the differences between people".

Diversity is about recognising that everyone is different and that we all have a different contribution to make based on our life experiences, skills and knowledge. In our view managing diversity effectively means providing as far as we are able to provide all of our staff, residents and customers with the chance to live and work in the way that is best for them and recognises their diverse characteristics and aspirations.

3.5 Our definition of inclusion is: "Inclusion is a sense of belonging: feeling respected, valued for who you are".

Inclusion is largely about feeling part of and having access to the support, facilities and resources that local communities can offer. The absence of opportunity and aspiration is often a result of marginalisation, isolation and a lack of engagement.

4. Legislative Requirements

Key legislative requirements include:

4.1 The Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 consolidated previous equality legislation with the aim of making it more accessible and easier to understand. It refers to nine protected characteristics, for which discrimination, harassment and victimisation are prohibited.

Age

Disability

Gender Reassignment

Marriage and Civil Partnership

Pregnancy and Maternity

Race

Religion or Belief

Sex

Sexual Orientation

4.2 The Public Sector Equality Duty

The Public Sector Equality Duty came into effect from 5 April 2011. It requires public bodies (including Housing Associations in this context) to consider all individuals when carrying out their day to day work – in shaping policy, in delivering services and in relation to their own employees. It requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities.

4.3 HCA Regulatory Framework

Requires that: “Providers’ governance arrangements and approaches to management and service delivery must incorporate and demonstrate principles of equality and diversity, and apply them in a way that is relevant to their organisation’s purpose and context. It is essential that providers understand tenants’ needs including those within the equality strands.”

Equality and diversity is integral to all standards that registered providers have to meet, but is also incorporated specifically in the updated cross-cutting Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard which reads as follows:

“Registered providers shall:

- treat all tenants with fairness and respect

- demonstrate that they understand the different needs of their tenants, including in relation to the equality strands and tenants with additional support needs”

Registered providers are expected to produce an annual report to tenants each year outlining how they comply with the standards, including the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard.

4.4 Human Rights Act 1998

Poor housing can affect a person’s health, work, education, relationships and life chances, which is why the right to respect for a person’s home is covered in the Human Rights Act (HRA). The HRA applies to all of the United Kingdom, so if a social housing provider carries out ‘public functions’ in providing social housing, it must comply with the Act in doing so. Recently, the Court of Appeal decided that a housing association (London & Quadrant Housing Trust) was performing public functions when allocating and managing social housing.

5. Vectis and EDI

We recognize that to develop and implement an effective EDI Policy we need fully to understand the make-up and characteristics of our residents and service users. To date we have general and historical contextual information including Census Data, intelligence from the IoW Observatory, past EDI mapping exercises, and data sets from the National Statistics Office, etc. From a VHA perspective, we have a range of information derived from STATUS survey analysis, satisfaction responses and Tenant Profiling. However, this is incomplete and our operational focus is to fill the gaps in this knowledge.

5.1 What we do know

The Isle of Wight community is:

- predominately white in ethnic terms
- relative balance between male and females
- older than the national average
- has high levels of disability and long term limiting illness
- economically polarised, with a significant body of poverty and unemployment
- has lower than average levels of skills and qualifications.
- Some religious and faith diversity, but no significant critical mass other than Christian

There is much less information available on equality strands such as sexual orientation and gender status.

5.2 Our Tenant Profile

VHA’s residents largely conform to this profile.

The results of our 2012 Residents Survey indicated the following key headline indicators.

Receipt of Housing Benefit	64%	
Employment	28%	(18% part time)
Internet access	48%	
Working Age	66%	
Over working age	30%	
Limiting health problem	64%	

However, this was on a 26% response rate and so may not give a fully accurate picture of the resident body.

Age

The indication from both our Tenant survey and recent profiling exercise is that between a third and a half of our tenants are above working age or retired. However, there are also an increasing number of younger residents, either as tenants or as members of households. Service expectations are usually very different at these opposite ends of the age spectrum and we need to ensure that we understand and where possible respond to their respective needs. In many instances this will not come down to VHA providing additional services in isolation, but rather looking to develop partnerships with agencies having specialist knowledge and expertise in appropriate.

Areas we need to consider further action in relation to age:

- We need a more comprehensive data set for resident ages
- We need to need to review our neighbourhood activities in the light of the needs of specific age groups
- Monitor satisfaction

Gender

From current profiling data, the indication is of a fairly balanced situation in relation to male/female headed households.

However, we understand that it is often the case that women shoulder the caring responsibility for both children and other relatives and this places a greater burden on them and often limits their opportunities for employment. We need to be mindful of areas where we can put facilities in place to support residents in this position.

Issues such as domestic violence and harassment are often disproportionately experienced by women and we must have adequate and up-to-date measures in place to address them. We also recognise that there may be legitimate instances where service users request contact with staff of a specific gender. In such instances we will accommodate where appropriate and possible.

Areas we need to consider further action in relation to gender:

- We need more comprehensive arrangements for monitoring resident gender
- We need to review the Domestic Violence Policy
- Monitor satisfaction

Ethnicity

From what we currently know, VHA residents are overwhelmingly White-British. Of over 100 tenant profile returns received during 2014 only 4 households did not conform to this categorisation. Of these 4, 2 were White- European, 1 Asian and 1 mixed European and Asian. This broadly mirrors the Island population, which comprises 95% White-British, 2% White-Other and 3% Asian/Asian-British.

The ethnic profile of our lettings to new tenants over the past eight years indicates a very low level of ethnic diversity within our stock, less than 2%. This has been a consistent position over a number of years. Our knowledge about ethnicity is built up from a combination of 2001 Census data, two BME mapping exercises of the Isle of Wight in 2003 and 2006, CORE returns, STATUS survey and routine profiling data.

We recognise that being a member of a small, minority community can present significant challenges in relation to potential discrimination, harassment and isolation. We will therefore continue to maintain an on-going dialogue with our BME households to understand their diverse needs as a basis for delivering tailored services and additional assistance where required.

Areas we need to consider further action in ethnicity:

- Arrangement for translators
- Reference to translation resources on website and printed documentation
- Monitoring satisfaction

Disability

Health and disability is a key theme amongst our tenants. Results from the 2012 Tenant Survey indicated 64% with a limiting illness. Of the 230 individuals covered by our existing profiling returns:

8 Were wheelchair users

9 Deaf/Hearing impaired

23 Had difficulty Walking

6 Had Learning Disability

19 Suffered Mental Health

32 A range of other illness/disability

26 households had more than one member with an illness/ disability or multiple disabilities

We recognise that the projected demographic profile for the Isle of Wight is for an older population, with significant increases in the over 75's. As such, it is likely that the trend in frailty and poor health will continue.

We will look to reflect the needs of older people in the publication of our materials, which includes using braille, spoken word and large print facilities where appropriate. We will also ensure that any future consultation events are structured and delivered in such a way as to accommodate different kinds of disability. We have already started to record tenant preferences for materials in larger print, audio materials, braille, etc.

In terms of service delivery, we have an active approach to delivering aids and adaptations, which is set out below.

Areas we need to consider further action in disability:

- We need a more comprehensive data set for resident illness/disability
- Identify arrangements for braille
- Review facilities for partially sighted on website
- Monitor satisfaction

Inclusion

Social and financial exclusion are major concerns among the Island community. A 2014 recent report by the Children's Society indicates that IoW families suffer much higher levels of debt than any other area in the South –East of England. In common with many other housing associations VHA has a large number of residents who are at the lower end of the economic scale and who are among the poorest households on the Island. Social housing has for some time been the only option for those on limited income. This is particularly the case on the Island, where nearly 80% of homes are owner-occupied. The fact that approximately 60% of our residents are in receipt of benefits and the majority are on incomes of less than £300 per week, illustrates the extent of the problem.

Within these overall statistics, there are some households who are even more prone to poverty, such as older people on fixed incomes, disabled people and single parents. From our knowledge, we have a significant number of each of these household amongst our residents. We understand the need to provide advice, support and where possible enhance their quality of life and standard of living. We can do this by ensuring they maximise their benefit entitlements, reduce living costs through fuel efficiency and enhance life chances through skill development and training.

We also recognise our obligations under the Social Value Act 2012 to operate in such a way as to deliver social value through sensitive procurement, offering targeted employment opportunities and supporting the local economy.

We recognise that by supporting and promoting social and financial inclusion we improve the life chances of our residents and of the Island community, but also address our business imperative of collecting rent.

Areas we need to consider further action in inclusion:

- We need a more comprehensive data set of resident circumstances

- Contribute to partnership responses to support Island households
- Promote employment and skills development initiatives
- Develop and financial inclusion action plan.

6. Aims of the EDI Policy

6.1 The aims of this policy are:

- To ensure that we fully understand the characteristics, needs and aspirations of our residents and service users
- To ensure that we provide homes and services which reflect the needs and aspirations of all sections of the communities we serve
- To ensure that our homes and services are accessible and appropriate to the needs of all sections of the communities we serve
- To use our position as a local employer, procurer of goods/services and local stakeholder to promote equality locally.
- To eliminate where we are able, discrimination and harassment as a result of race, gender, gender identity, age, disability, sexual orientation
- To promote awareness, cohesion and harmony within the communities with which we operate.

6.2 To deliver these aims, we will:

- Identify customer needs through effective data collection and analysis – *profiling surveys and satisfaction*
- Ensure effective engagement with residents and potential service users
- Implement recruitment and governance processes which are open and transparent and reflect the characteristics of the local community
- Ensure that SLAs and partnership arrangements deliver outcomes in line with good practice for EDI
- Benchmark current and future services in relation to EDI good practice
- Deliver effective training which achieves appropriate knowledge about EDI issues
- Implement a service delivery plan which reflects our commitment to EDI
- Undertake a regular and effective process of review