

## EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION STRATEGY 2021-24

01 July 2021

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Date effective from:	01/07/2021
Policy approved by:	Board
Review Date:	30/06/2024

EIA Required?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
EIA Completed?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Revision number:	1
Lead officer:	Rob Lloyd

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Stockport Homes Group (SHG) is proud of its commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). The commitment is re-affirmed in this three-year strategy, which aims to build on previous successes in creating a culture of acceptance, inclusion and belonging, where differences are celebrated, and services reflect the needs of diverse communities.

1.2 The Strategy meets SHG's obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The Act brought into force the Public Sector Equality Duty, which was developed in order to harmonise equality duties and to extend it across the protected characteristics. It means that Stockport Homes must, in the exercise of its functions, have regard to eliminating unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those that do not.

1.3 The Strategy takes account of the obligations placed on social housing providers in the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard, which forms part of the Consumer Standards within the Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England. More specifically the Standard states that providers must 'demonstrate that they understand the different needs of their tenants, including in relation to the equality strands and tenants with additional support needs',

## 2. DEFINITIONS

2.1 Although equality, diversity and inclusion are often used interchangeably, they each mean different things. Stockport Homes uses the National Housing Federation definitions, as follows:

- **Equality** – is the absence of discrimination based on a person's protected characteristics. Equality is not about treating everyone the same, but about making sure that people are given equal access to opportunities.
- **Diversity** - is the recognition and value of differences between people. Age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, education, national background and life experiences are examples of our differences.
- **Inclusion** – refers to an individual's experience within the workplace and in wider society. Recognising diversity alone is not enough; inclusion is about embracing diversity, enabling everyone to feel included.

2.2 Equality, diversity and inclusion need to be progressed together, as one cannot exist without the other.

### 3. NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

3.1 Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is a significant issue for the social housing sector, with sector representative bodies, regional groups and research projects publishing findings that reflect EDI progress in the sector. Examples include the National Housing Federation insight review about the experiences of under-represented groups; a Houseproud report that sets out how the sector caters for LGBTQ+ customers; and the McGregor-Smith Review that looks at issues affecting black and minority ethnic groups in the workplace.

3.2 At a national level research shows that people with protected characteristics are more likely to be disadvantaged in society. The Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community, people with disabilities, and people that are lesbian, gay bi-sexual, Trans or Querying (LGBTQ+), are likely to experience disadvantage in accessing suitable and safe accommodation, accessing the labour market, and accessing physical and mental health services. The Covid-19 pandemic has compounded some of the issues, having a disproportionate effect on the BAME community, for example. The Black Lives Matter movement and the outcry at the death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 resulted in a national focus on BAME issues, including institutional racism, the experiences of people from different ethnicities and the disadvantage experienced by sectors of society.

3.3 Accessible housing continues to be a major challenge within the social housing sector. Disabled people face problems in finding adequate housing and this is a major barrier to independent living. There is a shortage of accessible housing across Britain with less than 17 per cent of councils in England with a housing plan setting out strategies to build disabled friendly homes.<sup>1</sup> An increasing number of providers are signing up to Harry's Pledge<sup>2</sup> and asking the government, through the Housing Made for Everyone campaign<sup>3</sup>, to alter building regulations to improve the accessibility of housing.

3.4 At a regional level SHG participates in the Greater Manchester Housing Providers Diversity, Inclusion and Community Cohesion and Equalities (DICE) Group. This has included contributing to research on how providers are tackling equality and diversity and understanding the current position on diversity monitoring. It resulted in a report called 'Equality and Diversity Baseline Survey Report'.

### 4. BOROUGH CONTEXT

4.1 Stockport Homes compares tenants, applicants and other customers with the general population of Stockport to understand the communities it service. As at 2018 the Office for National Statistics estimates the resident

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/being-disabled-britain-journey-less-equal>

<sup>2</sup> <https://harrys-pledge.org.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.habinteg.org.uk/homecoalition/>

population of Stockport to be 291,775. There are trends and patterns within that total. The Stockport Joint Strategic Needs Assessment identifies that there is an ageing population, with increasing and complex needs, and the population of Stockport continues to become more ethnically diverse, especially in younger populations to the West of the Borough. The 2011 census found 7.9 per cent of the Stockport population was from a BAME background. The 2021 census is expected to see the figure reach at least 10%.

## **5. STOCKPORT HOMES CONTEXT**

5.1 Stockport Homes reports annually on the profile of its tenants, applicants and lettings. In the three years prior to this Strategy the analysis showed that:

- Over 90 per cent of tenants are White British. BAME tenants account for an increasing proportion of all tenants at 9.3 per cent, reflected by the fact that 16.3 per cent of applicants on the housing register are from BAME backgrounds.
- 24.7 per cent of tenants are over 65 years of age and almost seven per cent are over 80 years old. The Office for National Statistics estimated that in 2018 Stockport 19.9 per cent of its population over 65 and 2.8 per cent over 85. This shows ageing trends are even more pronounced in the SHG customer base than Stockport as a whole.
- There is a higher proportion of tenants with a disability at 22 per cent, compared to 18 per cent for Stockport as a whole.
- Those under forty make up 61 per cent of applicants and 56 per cent of lettings, as access to housing continues to be a challenge.

5.2 The SHG workforce has increased by 11 per cent in the three years prior to the strategy, standing at 652 employees as at March 2021. This growth has been matched by an increasing diversification of the workforce with 9.8 per cent of employees being from a BAME background, 3.4 per cent identifying as lesbian, gay or bi, and 5.4 per cent declaring that they have a disability.

## **6. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES**

6.1 There have been significant changes in society in recent years. At one level it appears there is greater awareness of inequalities and injustice than ever before; on another, examples of discrimination and disadvantage are never far from the headlines. Customers of Stockport Homes, and the communities it serves, are diverse and include some of the most vulnerable residents of the Borough. The Strategy recognises that Stockport Homes can make a positive impact for customers and succeed as a business by recognising that 'one size does not fit all'. It understands the importance of respecting and valuing people's differences and making sure that customers and staff feel comfortable to be themselves.

6.2 Stockport Homes has developed four strategic objectives on equality, diversity and inclusion. The objectives reflect the ambitions of the Group and the opportunities to make a real difference to the experiences of current and future colleagues and customers. Each aim is accompanied by a set of actions, shown in an appendix, that act as a starting point for achieving each objective. Additional actions will be identified during the life of the Strategy.

### **Objective one – Embed equality, diversity and inclusion into the culture**

6.3 Stockport Homes has a track record of delivering equality and diversity outcomes. Previous strategies have provided the foundations for an equal, diverse and inclusive culture, but more work needs to be done to embed the culture throughout the organisation. Everyone at Stockport Homes Group, from senior leaders to those delivering services, has a responsibility to contribute to an inclusive culture. This can include sharing experiences, attending training and network events, supporting colleagues to attend colleague network groups, and having the ability to challenge instances of discrimination. Changes are already planned in this area, including reviewing Values Charters at a team level and reviewing job roles and guidance to ensure they reflect an inclusive culture.

6.4 Senior Leaders and Board Members need to have the right skills, tools and opportunities to promote an inclusive culture. Stockport Homes already participates in programmes such as the Greater Manchester Housing Provider BAME mentoring programme, which provides shared experience between senior leaders and BAME staff members in the sector. There needs to be a range of opportunities for Senior Leaders and Board Members across a range of diversity themes.

6.5 There are three colleague diversity network groups at Stockport Homes, covering BAME, LGBTQ+ and disability themes. The LGBTQ+ group is well-established, with the remaining two groups being established in 2020. The approach to supporting the colleague diversity groups has changed over time as the groups have become established. There is a senior sponsor for the BAME group, for example. There is senior leadership support for each group, to ensure that the groups can influence and inform decision-making processes. Similarly, Senior Leaders and Board Members support diversity and inclusion initiatives, to set the culture and expectations on inclusion.

6.6 An essential part of achieving the objective is to develop knowledgeable colleagues who understand and embrace equality and diversity. SHG has a track record of investing in training for colleagues on a range of equality and diversity themes. The training is supplemented by information campaigns across a range of protected characteristics, including support for initiatives created by a range of external agencies and solidarity groups. The experiences reported by colleagues in the colleague diversity groups show that more work is needed to create a truly inclusive culture.

6.7 Self-reflection is an important element of developing an inclusive culture. Stockport Homes uses a range of assessment tools, such as Stonewall and Disability Confident to understand where it is doing well and where it needs to

do more work. Periodically such tools will be assessed to ensure they are relevant and continue to provide critical challenge for Stockport Homes.

6.8 There are opportunities for SHG to influence the culture of others through its procurement spend and through its work in the sector more generally. It can do that through adding requirements within the tender process, but also by engaging with markets and supply chains prior to procurement activity, as well taking an active role in Greater Manchester groups.

### **Objective two – Create an inclusive and representative business**

6.9 A workplace that is diverse at all levels is more likely to attract and retain talented people and deliver inclusive services. SHG has a “Be You – Vision for an Inclusive Workplace’ that sets out how it values everyone and embraces similarities and differences. The Vision is supported by a range of initiatives that are designed to create an inclusive workplace. It includes delivering actions from a review of BAME recruitment, engaging with a Greater Manchester Housing Provider BAME mentoring project, creating progression pathways, creating colleague network groups based on protected characteristic themes, and updating policies and procedures to support a diverse workforce. These initiatives are starting to have an impact, but more can be done.

6.10 SHG’s workforce profile is broadly representative of the Borough on some diversity themes such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans or Querying (LGBTQ+), gender and religions other than Christian based denominations. It is not representative on disability. In addition, there are areas of under-representation within the workforce profile that are not apparent in the headline figures. There is under-representation on the BAME and ‘religion other than Christian’ themes within m-band management bands, and a lack of gender diversity in areas of the business that are traditionally male-dominated, particularly within Three Sixty. The situation is even more pronounced at the wider leadership team level, and whilst there is good representation on some themes such as gender, there is a lack of diversity on ethnicity and religion. The subsidiary companies experience similar challenges, with Three Sixty being less diverse on gender for example. However, many of the causes of the disparities in the subsidiaries are societal, such as trades being generally male-dominated. Stockport Homes Group recognises the challenges and is working to address them.

6.11 Stockport Homes attracts talent for its vacancies from a range of areas, most notably from across Greater Manchester. The wider sub-region is more ethnically diverse than Stockport and it provides an opportunity to attract more diversity for vacancies and address under-representation. This will lead to a workforce that becomes more reflective of the sub-region over time. It is important to monitor those changes and the workforce profile should be compared to the sub-region as well as the Stockport Borough.

6.12 The lack of representation in some areas results in a lack of role models within diversity themes. This can further compound the situation, as current or potential colleagues don’t see “people like them” in the workforce or in

management bands. It is a similar case on the Group and subsidiary Boards. Recruitment processes play an important part in addressing the lack of role models and increasing diversity. Work is being carried out to ensure that recruitment campaigns reach a range of audiences, that recruitment activities do no disadvantage any group, and that interview panels are diverse. This is particularly important when recruiting to M-band managers and leadership grades, as there are fewer roles, less turnover, and therefore fewer opportunities to make a difference. Similarly, there are opportunities to plan for Board vacancies, based on succession plans, to increase diversity and engage with under-represented groups. Guaranteed interview schemes are one solution that is already in place for applicants with disabilities that meet the minimum criteria, but it will be expanded to other under-represented groups.

### **Objective three – Understand the diverse needs of customers**

6.13 SHG aims to deliver exceptional outcomes for customers and provide a great customer experience. This can only happen if all customers are treated with dignity and respect. It relies on knowledge about the customers that SHG serves and the issues that affect people and communities. Customer Insight is currently collated and analysed on customer demographics, customer satisfaction, and complaints but there are opportunities to use the information more widely as part of service re-design, decision-making and the development of policies, strategies and procedures. Any documents that have a potential impact on protected characteristics are subject to an equality impact assessment process, which is based on knowledge of customer demographics. The documents are then adapted, or mitigating actions created, to ensure customers are not disadvantaged. In a small proportion of cases the standardised processes will need to be adapted for customers with additional needs. In some instances, it will be more beneficial to do in-depth research with under-represented groups to gain detailed feedback on services so that they can be adapted based on individual experiences.

6.14 New technologies provide opportunities to gather more timely data about customer demographics and gain a better understanding of customer experiences. The new housing management system and the digital transformation project are two examples of change initiatives that create opportunities to increase the quality and accuracy of information about customer interactions. There are many benefits of implementing such systems, but there are also risks to accessibility. Customers that use assistive technologies for example could be disadvantaged by such changes as could those that aren't able to access internet-based technology. There is a role within the digital agenda to understand the needs and experiences of those groups and create solutions that reduce or eliminate any potential barriers.

6.15 Reviews from the perspective of customers, such as customer journey mapping, and working with Harry's Pals<sup>4</sup> to review policies, enable services to gain an understanding of customer experiences from groups with protected

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<sup>4</sup> Harry's Pals is a trust that supports parents caring for children with disabilities - <https://harrys-pledge.org.uk/the-harry-pals-trust/>

characteristics. The process for rehousing is one example, where a redesign of forms could provide a better experience for Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, and Querying (LGBTQ+) customers. Similarly, research on the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) customers could identify improvements to processes.

#### **Objective Four – Support independent living and safe, engaged and inclusive communities**

6.16 SHG delivers support services to customers from a wide range of backgrounds and with a variety of needs. For example, a high proportion Housing Support customer identify as having a disability due to mental health issues. The services have the resource to respond to customer needs, provide support and advocate on their behalf. This has been particularly important considering the Covid-19 pandemic and the disproportionate impact on those with disabilities and those who are digitally excluded.

6.17 SHG supports vulnerable customers and customers with complex needs to live independently. It manages eight sheltered schemes, one 'extra care' scheme, and approximately 600 bungalows and flats for those aged around 55+. The schemes support independent living within active communities, but the older persons service has a wider remit in promoting social and health activities among isolated older people living in all tenures and parts of the Borough. Over the next five years SHG will continue to address increasing need and growing diversity of aspirations among older people. SHG will achieve this by exploring options for the re-modelling and re-development of existing specialist accommodation schemes and the provision of additional extra-care facilities through the development of SHG's first new-build mixed tenure extra care scheme. It will deliver other elements of support linked to the ageing well approach, which is delivered with Stockport Council and partner agencies.

6.18 Delivering new affordable homes to meet the future housing needs of the Borough remains a key objective for SHG. Over the next five years it will work with colleagues, partners and stakeholders to develop homes which help meet identified demand including general needs homes for rent, homes for sale, homes with adaptations, sheltered and extra care housing, and supported accommodation. Homes will be built close to local facilities such as shops, public transport links and doctor's surgeries. The aspiration will be to build homes which accommodate residents' needs leading to long term occupation therefore building sustainable communities. It includes ensuring that new-builds have level access. Where there is enough demand as well as financing then specialist accommodation for those with disabilities will be delivered within the Borough.

6.19 SHG is a key member of the Safer Stockport Partnership and is recognised nationally within the Community Safety Sector as a leader in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour. It has played a significant part in delivering community safety services in Stockport in partnership with the Council, Greater Manchester Police and other stakeholders, and is committed to continuing to do so. New ways of working, which include the transfer of the

Council's private sector anti-social behaviour service to Stockport Homes, simplify the approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour in residential areas. An element of that work relates to investigating and addressing reports of hate crime, which have a direct effect on people with protected characteristics.

## **7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

7.1 This Strategy is the outcome of discussions at the Equality and Diversity Managers Group, Colleague Voice diversity groups, Wider Leadership Team and the Board. External groups that represent customers and work to address the disadvantages experienced by those with protected characteristics have been engaged as part of the strategy development process. They are Disability Stockport<sup>5</sup>, Nexus<sup>6</sup> and Forward<sup>7</sup>. Data and analysis about customers, communities and housing applicants has been considered.

## **8. LINKS TO POLICIES**

8.1 Equality, diversity and inclusion is integral to Stockport Homes' activities; therefore, this Strategy provides a framework to support all SHG policies and strategies. It will have links with HR policies, including the EDI theme in the People and Organisational Development Strategy, neighbourhood management work, development, employment & training strategies and customer service strategies and policies.

## **9. ACTION PLAN**

9.1 The Action Plan includes actions that support the delivery of the four aims. It is included as an appendix to the Strategy and it will be updated annually as part of periodic reporting.

## **10 OWNERSHIP, MONITORING AND REVIEW**

10.1 The Strategy Action Plan will be monitored by the Equality and Diversity Managers Group. The Strategy and Action Plan will also be reported and reviewed at senior management level on an annual basis and an annual update on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion will be provided to the Board.

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<sup>5</sup> Local service user led disabled charity

<sup>6</sup> Nexus is an independent hub which aims to bring together Stockport community groups and the public sector organisations that have an interest in equality and diversity in practice.

<sup>7</sup> A local, inclusive hub for Stockport's LGBT+ community, family and friends