

Equality, Diversity and Customer Care Policy

Introduction

Grand Union Housing Group (GUHG) owns and manages around 12,000 properties across Central Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas. These properties include general needs housing, independent living accommodation, shared ownership, leasehold and market rent properties.

Policy statement

GUHG believes that creating a customer centric culture and ensuring that equality and diversity are at the core of our business are fundamental to delivering high quality customer experiences. Our strategic targets help us to ensure we deliver services that are both responsive to the needs of individuals and promote social inclusion.

We are committed to taking positive steps to ensure that equality of opportunity is reflected in all of our activities. We believe that delivering first class customer service is the responsibility of every member of staff across GUHG regardless of their role or position and we will work together to achieve this important goal.

We are delivering a programme of radical change, called Customer 2020, to adapt to a rapidly changing operating environment and evolving customer expectations.

During the Customer 2020 programme we will examine every aspect of service delivery and test our processes and systems. Most importantly, we will really understand the customer experience across a range of different customer groups. We will:

- Make it **simple** for customers and colleagues to get things done.
- Be **consistent** in our approach to ensure fairness, and transparent when this is not possible.
- Take **ownership**, engendering trust in us to do what we say, and be honest about what we can't.
- Be **agile**, have great customer insight and be able to adapt to changing needs and emerging technology.

Objectives

- To create a customer focused culture across GUHG.
- To improve our customer insight by continually monitoring and updating, the quality of our customer data and providing training for staff on good quality record keeping.
- To understand our customer profile and deliver services which reflect the specific needs of all our customers.
- To engage with different customers and internal and external partners to ensure we deliver services which reflect the specific needs of all our customers.
- To ensure customers know what our services are and how to access them.
- To deliver services which effectively address key issues, such as anti-social behaviour, harassment and domestic violence, taking robust action against perpetrators of any form of harassment to our customers or staff.
- To tackle financial exclusion, implementing measures to help ensure customers can enjoy homes which are cost effective in terms of utility costs and supporting those who require assistance with their financial management.
- To develop a greater awareness amongst staff at all levels about what good customer care looks like and ensure staff are trained in customer service skills to enable us to meet and exceed customer expectations.
- To have a diverse workforce that reflects the local population.
- To meet our legal requirements by ensuring that our contractors fulfil their obligations around equality and diversity and modern slavery and human trafficking, as agreed in their contract with us.

Other related policies

- 2020 Vision Strategy – Corporate Plan
- ASB Policy
- Code of Conduct
- Community Investment Strategy
- Complaints Policy
- Digital Inclusion Strategy
- Disability and Adaptations Assistance Policy
- Harassment Policy and Procedures
- HR Strategy
- Recruitment and Selection Policy
- Safeguarding from Abuse Policy
- Single Equality Scheme
- Welfare Benefits and Money Advice Policy
- Welfare Strategy

Customer insight

Customer insight is a key tool for organisations to re-design services in ways which save money and improve customer satisfaction. Insight can inform all aspects of service delivery, whether it is driving or informing strategic planning or day to day performance, with the ultimate aim of improving value for money and increasing positive outcomes for customers. Insight puts customers at the heart of service delivery, helping organisations to understand who their customers are, what they do, what their aspirations are and what motivates their behaviour. Gathering customer insight makes good business sense.

Our customers

Our customers are tenants, leaseholders and shared owners. Our primary areas of operation are mainly rural, with a fairly low ethnic minority ratio – Mid Bedfordshire 6.2%, South Northamptonshire 3.1% (Census 2011). Around one sixth of our stock is older persons housing, which equates to approximately 2000 properties across the group. We also provide over 500 bed spaces for customers with learning disabilities.

We recognise that different communities and neighbourhoods have different needs and our aim is to treat everyone fairly. We are committed to providing equality of opportunity in all areas of our business – service delivery, customer consultation, employment and governance.

In order for us to be able to effectively deliver customer focused services, we update our profiling on an on-going basis. Our Customer Service team will check customer profiling information whilst speaking to customers, if it has not been checked for three months. Our Allocations team obtain customer profiling information at new tenancy sign up.

Our customers can contact us by various methods including face to face, telephone, email, internet, social media, live chat and text. We will consider new technologies that are available, to enhance the customer experience. We continually seek ways to broaden the current methods by which customers contact us, to cater for all age groups and needs.

GUHG is committed to eliminating discrimination on the grounds of:

- age
- disability
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- gender reassignment
- pregnancy and maternity
- marriage and civil partnership
- sexual orientation.

Our staff

- GUHG aims to achieve an organisational culture which values people from all sections of society and has a workforce which reflects the relevant local populations and the communities with which we work.
- We regularly review and report on all our recruitment, selection, training and other employment policies and procedures ensuring that they are fair and reflect current best practice.
- All staff are given mandatory equality and diversity training along with customer care awareness and customer feedback training and we have Customer Standards and Commitments that all staff work to.
- We maintain appropriate records in respect of recruitment, training and employment, including disciplinary and grievance procedures, and report on as necessary and use this information as a means of identifying areas of inequality.
- We have developed vigorous harassment, bullying and dignity at work processes and aim to achieve a working environment where individuals can feel confident enough to bring complaints without fearing prejudice.
- We assist all our staff to realise their full potential by ensuring that they receive fair consideration of their training and career development needs and opportunities.
- Wherever possible, we will modify employment practices and procedures to reduce barriers experienced by members of disadvantaged groups in seeking, and during, employment and we guarantee people with a disability an interview for any employment vacancy for which they meet the minimum essential criteria.
- We will carry out Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) checks on specified staff who have dealings with vulnerable customers.
- We train managers and staff, where needed, to give them awareness and confidence to support people with a disability (including mental health awareness).
- We will continue to employ, where practicable, employees who become disabled during their employment and assist, as appropriate, in their re-training.

Our Board, Committees and Panel

- We will encourage applications from under-represented groups for Board recruitment.
- We aim to achieve representation from a full cross-section of the community, on our Board, Committees and Residents' Voice Panel and all other working groups, which is reflective of the communities we serve.

- Recruitment to our governance structures is fair and transparent and we will regularly review membership and seek ways to improve under representation, based upon local census data.
- The Board is committed to lead by example to promote equality and diversity and all Board, Committee and Residents Voice members receive information on, and are offered training in, equality and diversity issues.
- All new Board, Committee and Residents' Voice members have full access to training and support to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities.

Our contractors

- Grand Union Housing Group will promote its Equality, Diversity and Customer Care policy to all consultants, contractors and suppliers and include a copy of the policy with tender information and contracts for work, services or supplies.
- GUHG insists on high quality of workmanship and customer care from all its contractors. We require contractors, consultants and suppliers to have in place an equality and diversity policy for service delivery and employment practices and to submit a copy before any contract can start. For those that do not have a policy, we ask that they sign up to ours.
- GUHG requires that contractors comply with a Contractor's Code of Conduct when carrying out works on behalf of GUHG to ensure a high standard of conduct towards their employees, GUHG employees, customers and members of the public.
- GUHG will take action against any contractors or consultants it employs who discriminate against or harass any of its customers or staff in the delivery or access of services.
- GUHG requires that contractors comply with our Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement, which is a condition of our tendering specification.
- GUHG will routinely carry out and report on regular customer satisfaction surveys on the work and services provided by consultants, contractors and suppliers.

Our services

- GUHG will ensure that the principles of equality and diversity are applied to all groups in terms of access to housing, quality of housing allocated and the services provided.
- We will ensure that when developing new services they are accessible to all minority groups.

- We will use information we have about customers to help us tailor our services to meet their needs, providing we comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- We will work with local authorities and other organisations to research and prioritise the housing and service needs of minority communities and other groups experiencing discrimination and/or exclusion.
- GUHG participates in the CORE (Continuous Recording of Lettings) scheme and uses the CORE classifications. Regular assessments are made of the needs of all groups in the local community.
- In South Northamptonshire, housing applicants are put forward for properties; 75% of properties are allocated from the council list and 25% from our internal transfer register. Choice Based Lettings is in place in Bedfordshire and East Northamptonshire and provides customers with greater choice and flexibility.
- We provide our frontline staff with handheld technology that enables them to access data and provide up to date information when visiting customers.
- We will continue to provide facilities in our office receptions, to aid customers with particular needs – for example hearing loops are installed in some interview/meeting rooms and we also have some which are portable.
- Where support services are provided to customers based on eligibility criteria, this process will be made clear and transparent to the customer and any referring agency.
- Our Customer Services team is trained to deal with the majority of calls at first point of contact only passing customers on when they require specific or specialised information.
- We will support customers, in particular those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged, through the implementation of the Welfare Strategy.
- Our Digital Inclusion Strategy sets out steps we are taking to help customers embrace the digital world by offering access to basic computer training and several different avenues for them to contact us and for us to send out messages.

Communication

- GUHG aims to communicate with all customers in a variety of ways to ensure that everyone is able to access information about our services. The 2020 Vision Strategy identifies actions we are working on to improve the ways we communicate with our customers.
- We will work with individuals requesting information in another format, discussing their specific needs to enable us to assist in the most appropriate way (which may include large print, audio, interpreter etc.).

- We will take steps to ensure our websites are up to date and customer friendly, using for example 'Speak IT Plus' capability, background colour change options, translation options and large font.
- We will continue to encourage customers to get involved and we will consider innovative ways of involving customers who are unable to attend meetings e.g. online forums. Consultation with customers will take place regularly to ensure that service standards are being met and changes in service requirements are identified promptly.
- We have developed our social media ability with Facebook and Twitter accounts for customers to communicate with us and we now deliver customer newsletters digitally via email addresses and post them on the website.
- We have a "live" chat facility as another means for customers to contact us.
- We have a texting service to use as appropriate, for customers for whom we have mobile phone numbers.
- When booking venues for external meetings staff will ensure the venue meets the needs of those attending, taking into account accessibility etc. and considering individual's needs if providing refreshments.

Dealing with harassment/hate crime

Harassment can take many forms, happens on a variety of grounds and could be directed at one person or a group of people. Harassment is described as unwanted behaviour that a person finds intimidating, upsetting, embarrassing, humiliating or offensive and could include:

- unwanted physical contact
- jokes, offensive language, gossip, slander, sectarian songs and letters
- posters, graffiti, obscene gestures, flags, bunting and emblems
- isolation or non co-operation and exclusion from social activities
- coercion for sexual favours
- pressure to participate in political/religious groups
- intrusion by pestering, spying, stalking
- physical assault
- damage to property
- arson
- threatening or abusive behaviour.

GUHG will not tolerate any form of harassment to customers or staff and will take action against all perpetrators.

Equality impact assessments (EIA)

Delivery of services which meet our customers' needs will remain at the top of our agenda. All of our policies have an equality impact assessment (initial screen) and we will also carry out equality impact assessments, as appropriate, where we make changes to services. Where indicated, a full assessment will be carried out by, an ad hoc panel formed of customers and staff who are from minority groups.

Monitoring and review

This policy will be reviewed in line with GUHG's policy review programme.

Customer Consultation:	June 2017
Equality Impact Assessment carried out:	initial screen
Person responsible for review:	Director of Customer Experience
Supported in the review by:	Customer Service Manager
Ratified by:	Leadership Team – virtual November 2018
Date of review:	September 2018
Date of next review:	November 2021