

Introduction

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is important to us. It's about access to our homes, services and employment opportunities, how we work with our colleagues, customers and communities, and our culture and values. It's a journey of continuous improvement rather than a time limited project.

This framework sets out an overview of our approach to embedding equality, diversity and inclusion across our business. It highlights the main strategies, activities and responsibilities that together will ensure Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is fully embedded across West Kent.

Our vision and commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

West Kent's mission is to create in Kent a prosperous, strong and sustainable society; a place of opportunity for all; where people can plan for their futures. Our vision is to deliver places to live and space to grow for our current and future residents, and our strategic plan sets out how we will go about this.

To deliver on our ambitions we focus on four objectives:

- **Excellent services;** we want to continue to deliver excellent services in a friendly, solution focused way
- **Successful communities;** we want to provide homes and build communities residents are proud to live in, with better support to sustain a successful tenancy and manage life changes
- **Grow and reshape;** we want to increase our homes in management to 10,000 by 2025 and begin to re-shape our property portfolio to better meet the current and future local needs across Kent and Medway
- **Best in Kent;** we want to be known as Kent's housing provider of choice

EDI is relevant to all four objectives; it's critical to achieving our strategic vision, and it's the right thing to do. We aim for EDI to be naturally embedded in all we do, and our vision for EDI is:

We will do more than meet the legal and regulatory requirements that relate to EDI. We will work with our staff, residents, customers and partners to better understand the issues that matter to them, and how we can work together to improve.

We will design and deliver inclusive and accessible services that meet the needs of the diverse communities we serve, promoting opportunities and tackling discrimination.

We will have a diverse and skilled group of staff, Board members and volunteers whose voices are heard and who feel valued for the different experiences and views they bring.

We will work with our staff, residents, customers and partners to build a culture where people feel respected, included and heard, where prejudice and discrimination is recognised and addressed.

What we mean by Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Equality – we use the word equality to describe equal opportunities in the workplace and in accessing our services.

Diversity – we describe diversity as celebrating differences and valuing everyone. This means respecting and appreciating our colleagues and customers' individuality and embracing alternative views and experiences.

Inclusion – this is about ensuring fair treatment and opportunity for all, making sure colleagues or customers feel able to get involved and valued for their contribution to the workplace or their communities.

The Equality Act 2010 protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in our wider society. It is against the law to discriminate against anyone because of the following (known as protected characteristics): age, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, disability, race (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin), religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

The Equality Act 2010 places additional responsibilities on public bodies. While West Kent is not considered a public body, we carry out some public functions and therefore take these additional responsibilities into account. To deliver our vision, and in accordance with our value of 'integrity', we will:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation
- Advance equality of opportunity between people
- Foster good relations between people

While it's important to understand these terms and the legal framework, this is about being true to our values, treating people fairly and with respect, being aware of our impact on our staff, customers and communities and working with them to do better. We recognise that people aren't limited to one single experience, characteristic or identity and that these can overlap and intersect in different ways at different times. We also know that people face disadvantage due to their socio-economic status, and while this is not a protected characteristic in terms of the legislation, our core business is to help tackle this through the housing and support services we provide. For these reasons our approach to EDI needs to be broad and embedded across the business to help us make a difference.

Our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Objectives for 2021 - 23

To help us develop and shape our objectives, we have had a mini health check carried out by the Housing Diversity Network (including small focus groups with staff and residents) and had discussions with staff working groups and a Board task and finish group made up of Committee Chairs and the new EDI Board Champion. We have reviewed our staff survey results, training records and staff and customer data, carried out equality analysis on some of our key service areas and researched best practice.

We are not stopping there; this is an ongoing process, and in line with our values of honesty, self-awareness and learning we will continue to challenge ourselves. As we work towards achieving our high level objectives over the next three years the detail of what we will focus on to achieve each year will be set out with clear targets in an annual action plan, to make sure we can respond flexibly to what our information is showing us and what staff and customers tell us is important.

Objective 1

To support a skilled, diverse workforce who live our values and feel valued for the different experiences they bring.

The areas of our work that will help us achieve this are:

- Increasing the number of employees who feel comfortable about completing staff profile information, so we can use this information to carry out equality analysis on employment processes and identify any areas of inequality or under-representation
- Putting initiatives in place to address areas of inequality across the whole employee experience; continuing to reduce our gender and ethnicity pay gap; reviewing our recruitment practice to ensure we attract the best candidates and reduce bias in decision making; developing mentoring and development schemes to increase diversity in our senior leadership and ensuring (as a minimum) we are representative of the communities we serve
- Using our staff surveys as well as more informal, ongoing discussions and feedback from a range of networks and groups to understand what EDI outcomes are most important to staff and will strengthen their sense of wellbeing and belonging, as well as how they feel we are performing
- Making sure our workplaces and information are accessible and we consider the different needs of our diverse staff as our ways of working evolve
- Supporting our staff to be confident in sharing feedback and having challenging conversations when necessary so that bias, prejudice and discrimination can be recognised and addressed - as well as celebrating positive change
- Ensure we all understand our roles and responsibilities for EDI and can actively contribute to the delivery of our EDI objectives – see Appendix 1

Examples of related strategies and policies:

Strategic Plan (Best in Kent) and our Values
Remuneration Policy
Wellbeing Strategy / Ways of Working

People Strategy & related HR Policies
Management Standard

Objective 2

To deliver excellent, accessible and inclusive services that meet the needs of our customers and help tackle inequalities in our communities.

The areas of our work that will help us achieve this are:

- Working to fill the gaps in our tenant and customer profile information, and use this information together with our equality analysis on business processes and customer satisfaction to understand how different customers experience West Kent and address any areas of inequality
- Reviewing and improving our Equality Impact Assessment process, developing tools and guidance to help us make best use of them for all key strategies and service improvement/development plans, and consistently following up on actions identified
- Continuing to work with our residents in the design, development and review of our services and ensuring our customer facing strategies and policies contain specific measures around accessibility and inclusion for different groups
- Expanding how we gather customer feedback, ensuring our processes are accessible - making reasonable adjustments or offering extra support to help residents give us feedback on our services or use our complaints process as needed
- Working with staff, customers and partners to prevent and tackle harassment, discrimination, hate crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour in the community
- Considering the tenure, design and accessibility of our projects, schemes and developments and the work we do to adapt our homes to meet local housing related needs (including meeting the needs of an aging population)
- Expanding our services to support those residents who need help to prevent crisis or as life needs change; particularly those most affected by unemployment, food poverty, fuel poverty or digital inclusion issues

Examples of related strategies and policies:

Strategic Plan (Grow and Reshape) and our Values
Resident Engagement Strategy
Development Strategy

Customer Experience Strategy
Community Investment Strategy
Asset Management Strategy

Objective 3

To work with our customers, staff and partners to learn, innovate and promote best practice in equality, diversity and inclusion.

The areas of our work that will help us to achieve this are:

- Expanding our EDI training programme to staff, residents and partners, including specific training for EDI Champions, to raise our awareness of best practice and support the development and implementation of inclusive policy and practice
- Delivering an events programme linked to national awareness events, campaigns and festivals with activities for our staff, residents and partners
- Sharing EDI related stories / case studies through our internal and external communication channels and encouraging staff and residents to do the same
- Encouraging the development of Networks/Interest Groups and support colleagues to participate by making time and funding available
- Ensuring that our procurement and contract management processes are clear on our EDI requirements and shared commitments, and working proactively with our contractors and partners to ensure they have appropriate policies and guidance in place to support them in delivering excellent services
- Continue to work with our local authority partners and others to understand those most in need of support in the wider communities in which we work, and work with them to develop and deliver services that prevent crisis and promote wellbeing, build active and resilient communities and promote employability and enterprise
- Publishing our EDI commitments and progress against our annual action plan targets and the changes we are seeing in our wider data

Examples of related strategies and policies:

Strategic Plan (Successful Communities)
Communications and Marketing Strategy
Procurement Policy and Templates

Resident Engagement Strategy
Community Investment Strategy
Annual Reports

How we will know if we are successful

Our key strategies and plans will contain explicit reference to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, be accompanied by Equality Impact Assessments, and have specific actions and performance indicators related to E D & I that will help us monitor progress across our service areas. These will be measured in the normal way for these strategies and their related action plans.

We will involve a diverse range of our residents and customers in helping us develop and deliver our projects and services, which include elements specifically designed to support disadvantaged groups and tackle inequality. Our customers and partners will know that EDI is important to West Kent, and feel we deliver on our promises.

To demonstrate where we are making progress, we will produce and publish an annual report which includes a summary of the work we have been doing that year, and report on core indicators including the trends/changes we are seeing in our staff and customer profiling data; equality analysis results; staff and customer feedback and training and engagement numbers (targets and measures defined in the annual action plan).

Measuring Progress: Responsibilities, Challenge and Assurance / Accreditation

The Board has the ultimate responsibility for making sure our commitment to EDI is clear, including making sure we have the right policies in place, have objectives we are trying to achieve and are tracking progress against them.

The Remuneration and Appointments Committee is responsible for monitoring and annual reporting on West Kent's EDI plans, and related matters such as the staff survey and pay gap reporting. Other Committees will also be involved, in particular when they review and approve the strategies listed above.

Appendix 1 sets out the roles of other groups across the business in helping make sure we can achieve our goals.

We will have challenge and assurance from:

- Our Scrutiny Panel members, who will receive specific EDI training so they can challenge us about this when they are reviewing our services and performance
- Our Board, ET and staff EDI Champions, who will help West Kent make informed business decisions that take EDI into account and make sure progress is made
- External accreditation and assessment processes, which will ensure we meet best practice and encourage continuous improvement. We will start by achieving the Housing Diversity Network DNA Accreditation, giving us broad assurance across our approach, and build on this with further assessment and benchmarking opportunities which relate to specific characteristics to strengthen what we do

Appendix 1: Roles and Responsibilities

Appendix 2: Annual Action Plan