



Solihull
Community Housing
Shaping our neighbourhoods



let's do the right thing for Solihull



By washing
our hands



By wearing a
face covering



By keeping
our distance



By getting
a test

Meeting the Equality Duty

March 2021

1 Introduction

This report sets out some of the highlights on how we champion inclusion and diversity through role modelling the right behaviours at all levels because it is the right thing to do.

Solihull Community Housing (SCH) is creating a culture where everyone contributes to meet our vision to **Provide Homes; Improve Wellbeing and Strengthen Communities**.

The Equality Act 2010 protects people from discrimination on nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The 'Public Sector Equality Duty' requires public bodies to:

- a. **Remove or minimise disadvantages** suffered by people due to their protected characteristics.
- b. **Take steps to meet the needs of people** from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people.
- c. **Encourage people from protected groups to participate** in public life and in any other activity where participation is disproportionately low.
- d. **Annually publish relevant and proportionate information** demonstrating compliance with the Equality Duty.
- e. **Set specific and measurable equality objectives** every four years.

2 Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented challenge to everyone across the world. The 'lockdown' that began in March 2020 has impacted everyone and Solihull Community Housing residents, staff and customers are no exception.



Whilst the delivery of services has been exceptionally challenging, the need to come together to support each other has never been greater. The crisis has reinforced the importance of partnership working across teams within SCH, with our residents, between SCH and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) and the local community, voluntary and faith organisations.

The lockdowns since March 2020 meant rapid reaction to amend day-to-day operations. The repairs service, a service most valued by residents, was restricted to emergency and 'life and limb' repairs. We continued to support our vulnerable residents through the well-being and care teams, worked with partners to temporarily rehouse rough sleepers and the street homeless to protect them from the virus. There was no gradual move to 'home working' and 'social distancing' but staff embraced to agile and flexible working arrangements.

The impact of Covid-19 has been enormous on our 'normal' operations and delivery plans. This report reflects our equality journey to ensure a safe, Covid-free environment for residents and staff and play our part to support vulnerable customers.

3 About Solihull and SCH

Solihull is an affluent Borough with an attractive environment, quality of life, aspirational housing and excellent schools. However, there is a challenging prosperity gap between the wards of Chelmsley Wood, Kingshurst & Fordbridge and Smith's Wood in North Solihull and the rest of the Borough. North Solihull has a relatively higher population density, less green space per head and educational attainment, employment and income levels are notably lower. Although the Solihull Place Survey 2020 found that 89% of residents are more satisfied with the local area as a place to live compared with 76% across England, the satisfaction rate drops to 80% for residents in North Solihull where the majority of socially rented properties are.

We manage around 10,000 tenanted homes, 1,200 leasehold properties and 5,000 garages on behalf of Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC), the majority of which are in North Solihull.

We also deliver SMBC's statutory duties on housing options, manage the Council Housing Register, deal with emergency homelessness and provide ASB (anti-social behaviour) services to all Borough residents.

SCH employs around 300 people. Equality is part of the way we work and deliver services so that everyone is treated fairly, and diversity is valued. The accessibility of our services, homes and jobs is routinely reviewed for equality impact and services are tailored to meet individual circumstances.

4 Equality journey during Covid-19

Our response to supporting vulnerable customers to stay safe, warm and well

a. Customer Wellbeing

We provide a range of services, including Safe and Sound, Solihull Independent Living, Assisted Technology Telecare and Home Hazard Assessments to our own tenants and private paying customers living in the Borough.

The Wellbeing Team supports around 2,150 customers. During the Covid-19 pandemic the Team has continued to maintain contact with service users by phone and making home visits where necessary. They were fully briefed and provided with personal protective clothing to keep customers and staff safe.

An example of how we have responded to meet the needs of vulnerable customers includes Mrs J who has early onset of dementia and was cared for by her daughter prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The daughter is unable to look after her mother who was prone to trips and falls and was forgetting to take medication. Our staff assessed Mrs J, arranged a 'Telecare Pills Dispenser' that prompts Mrs J to take medicine at the correct times. We also provided Mrs J with a 'falls pendent' that automatically alerts us when Mrs J falls. Her family are reassured of Mrs J's safety and enables her to live independently.

b. Extra-care housing



Saxon Court is a purpose-built development providing self-contained housing with care and support to 51 older, disabled and frail residents. To keep residents safe from the Covid-19 virus, families and friends were unable to visit residents. A special 'visiting pod' was created so that residents could see their loved ones during the Christmas festive season. The pod has separate entrances for residents and visitors to keep them safe. A booking system was introduced to allow for a good cleaning regime in-between visits.

c. Customer and Community Support Project and Operation Shield

Staff across a range of teams within SCH worked together to contact our most vulnerable residents to find out about their needs such as medical supplies, food, heating, emergency repairs and general resilience.

The initial activity in March 2020 included distributing a dedicated newsletter about Covid-19 for residents and staff, establishing a robust process for incoming telephone enquiries and enquiry escalation procedures to ensure a 'right first time' approach.

We used guidance from the government to identify priority groups to proactively contact 3,570 residents.

CATEGORY	DATA USED	NUMBER IDENTIFIED
Over 70 years of age living in a High Rise	Age and tenancy	233

Over 70 Years of age Not living in a high rise		2,375
Others living in a high rise	Age, tenancy and a system identifier for a known disability	105
Others not living in a high rise	(mobility, mental health, learning, visual, hearing & speech)	857

The number of calls vary regularly to reflect changes in government guidelines on lockdown restrictions and to take into account referrals made by our staff and local agencies. For example, in the November 2020 lockdown we made 293 calls to clinically extremely vulnerable people and 128 calls to vulnerable people. In the January 2021 lockdown the number of calls made to clinically extremely vulnerable people increased to 451. In addition, 94 calls were made to vulnerable residents and 217 people living in high-rise blocks were contacted.

Telephone call scripts allowed for the conversation to establish which agency services customers were previously accessing, how the social distancing restrictions were affecting the residents and generally how they were coping. This steered towards relevant signposting and support activity.

Systems and protocols were put in place to continue with efforts to make contact where calls remained unanswered, including a door-knock from our Neighbourhood Services Team.

Where contact was made, a range of questions were asked to elicit information about support and other immediate needs and identify potential risks for individuals. Outcomes from each call were tiered to the individual needs of each tenant:

- *Safeguarding need for urgent immediate activity*
- *Requires signposting to one or more of the available support routes*
- *No current physical need but feeling isolated and wants regular on-going calls*
- *No current concerns but given the dedicated hot line and email information should things change*

The core referral / signposting offer was around food, medication, hardship, rent and wellbeing. Where appropriate, there was collaboration with other statutory, community, voluntary and faith agencies to provide additional support.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, we have continued to respond to government guidance and reacted to changing situations around lockdown.

The majority of the work was done by existing staff and additional resources were procured in addition to working with 12 trained volunteers from Marie Curie.

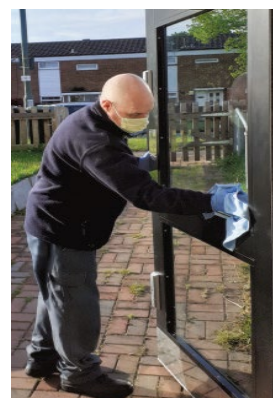


d. **Emergency repairs**



Although our planned maintenance programme has been halted, we continued to carry out emergency repairs in tenants' homes, ensured their gas boilers and appliances remained safe and in good working order, critical adaptations for people with disabilities and health and safety compliance checks.

e. **Communal cleaning in apartment blocks**



Extra cleaning regimes were introduced to sanitise communal areas at apartment blocks, such as door handles, buttons on door entry phones and lifts and other facilities.

f. **Repairs to empty properties**

We continued to carry out essential work in empty homes so that they were ready to let to people living in temporary accommodation and emergency shelters.

g. **Safer homes**

We continue to ensure that our homes remain well-maintained and safe. Examples include inspecting gas heating systems and ensuring boiler safety and completing fire safety checks.

Our estate assistants make regular checks to ensure the stairwells and communal areas in flats are in good order and clear of rubbish. The high rises are fitted with fire doors throughout and these are regularly checked and maintained by our Fire Integrity Team. Lifts are also inspected on a regular basis. Work is underway to install fire sprinklers that help to save lives in the event of a fire. We are working with the Fire Service and Solihull Council to install sprinklers in high rise flats.

h. **Debt management and Money Advice**

Our Money Advice Team, which meets the 'Advice Quality Standards', has supported over 1,200 people to receive over £1.25m of welfare benefits from April 2020 to January 2021 in addition to raising over £200k in Discretionary Housing Benefits payments.

The Team worked with 260 tenants who contacted SCH in the initial period of the Covid-19 pandemic and who collectively owed us £134k of rent. The tenants were self-isolating, furloughed from work, had lost their jobs or were deemed to be vulnerable. We are continuing to work with them to remain in their homes and to keep rent arrears to as low as possible. This includes working with an external company who can arrange emergency fuel payments in crisis situations.

The profile of tenants supported through the Money Advice Team shows that:

- 45% of cases are households with young children
- Over two-thirds of the main tenants are aged 26-55
- 63% are unemployed
- 14% are disabled

- 23% are affected by fuel poverty
- 14% are Black and Asian Ethnic Minority

Examples of people supported include:

- A recovering drug addict who was at risk of self-harm. We arranged for her to have safe cooking facilities and utility supply and seek medical help.
- A customer who was unable to complete welfare claim forms within the required timescales and was at risk of not receiving benefit entitlements. He was provided with a mobile phone to help access fuel top-up vouchers and supported him to buy essential food supplies.
- A vulnerable woman who had got into serious financial difficulties and was unable to cope. We worked with her to deal with water bills so that she could wash and clean and ensured that her electricity supply was restored.
- A customer who had a High Court Enforcement order due to multiple debts for water supply and Council tax. We worked with a charity to deal with the serious arrears and apply for welfare benefits.

i. **Safeguarding people from harm**



Staff were reminded about the need to safeguard people from 'Adult grooming', something that is more likely to happen when people feel isolated. Adult grooming is a gradual process through which abusers pick their

target to build up trust and then abuse people for sexual or financial gain. The process is also known as 'Mate Crime' and 'Catfishing' when it is done via the internet where the groomer pretends to be someone who they are not.

j. **Homelessness/Temporary housing**

The Home Options Team have been carrying out homelessness and housing advice functions remotely. Customers are contacted via telephone and encouraged to use the 'My SCH Account', an online customer portal, to access documentation and letters where possible. We continue to support those in hotel provision with a hot food delivery service three times a week and a food parcel service weekly in partnership with The Renewal Christian Centre and a local catering company. We also continue to support MCHLG's "Everyone in" campaign by supporting people who are sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough with emergency accommodation.

We have worked with St Basils, a special housing charity that supports young people, to develop 'Housing Pathways' to ensure that young people who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, can receive dedicated support. Measures have been put in place to support young adults who are released from youth detention centres/prisons, care leavers, those leaving hospital and people with mental or physical impairment.

Keeping our staff safe

a. **Remote working**

In line with government guidance, our offices have remained closed to visitors. The majority of our staff have continued to work remotely. Customers have been encouraged to contact us via the 'My SCH Account' portal and by email. The telephone Contact Centre has been prioritising calls in three key areas: emergency repairs, wellbeing service and homelessness.

Employees have been provided with tools and technology to deliver services and work collaboratively and continue interaction through virtual meetings.

b. **Safer working**

Where SCH workplaces remain open for field-based employees to access welfare facilities and stores, or for specific operational situations, offices and facilities comply with the Government's Covid-Secure requirements including enhanced cleaning regimes, provision of protective equipment, gloves and hand-sanitisers.

The Board and Committees have met virtually throughout the pandemic.

Staff who visit residents in their home have regular briefings about controls such as seeking information from customers before entering a property, social distancing, wearing of face coverings and other protective equipment.



5 Business as usual

We have continued to do the following:

- a. **Diversity in Board membership:** The Board strives to ensure that it has a diverse range of people who bring different voices and experiences that contribute to decision-making. An extensive recruitment exercise in 2020 resulted in significant interest in a Tenant Board Member position. Applicants represented a balance of age, gender and disability characteristics.
- b. **Remove communication and other barriers:** Customers can access information in different formats such as large print, audio, Braille and other languages and via interpreters. The autumn 2020 newsletter for residents highlighted the availability of the magazine via an audio CD.

We use plain language in all our publications to support people with literacy difficulties and consider the use of Easy Read format where this is requested.

Providing a link to 'Google Translate' on our website enables users to translate information in more than 50 languages.

Where we know a customer's communication needs, we automatically send routine information such as rent statements in different formats.

Our offices have accessible facilities and portable hearing loops.

Although home visits are currently limited, they are offered to customers who cannot come to our offices. We also allow more time for disabled and older people to get to the front door and offer choices for repairs appointments, for example when

people have hospital appointments or to avoid school run times.

- c. **Customer service standards:** We worked with residents and staff to review our service standards so that customers have clarity about the level and quality of service they can receive and when. The work resulted in the development and publication of service standards. Equality considerations formed a key part of the reviews to ensure that services meet the diverse needs of residents and are provided in a way that does not create barriers or unfair treatment.
- d. **Create safer communities:** Our Anti-social Behaviour (ASB) Team is trained to support residents who face anti-social behaviour ranging from noisy neighbours to serious issues such as racial harassment, hate crime, drug misuse and dealing and other criminal activity.

Between January 2020 and January 2021, we handled 13 cases of domestic abuse, a large proportion of which involved victims living in North Solihull.

An example of a domestic abuse case involved a neighbour reporting an incident that they had witnessed loud arguments and the victim's front door being damaged. We worked with the police and social workers to ensure that the victim and their children were moved to a safer environment. We are currently working with the victim to find permanent suitable accommodation that is in a different geographical location to the victim's original home.

We also dealt with 12 reports of hate crime, of which 60% of incidents happened in the North of the Borough. An example involves a victim facing a torrent of racist abuse and

intimidation from a neighbour. Although the abuse stopped after our initial intervention, the pattern of intimidation and abuse returned and was affecting the victim's young children. We are currently working with a range of agencies to support the victim and deal with the perpetrator.

- e. **Create safer communities:** Our Anti-social Behaviour (ASB) Team is trained to support residents who face anti-social behaviour ranging from noisy neighbours to serious issues such as racial harassment, hate crime, drug misuse and dealing and other criminal activity.
- f. **Assess equality impact:** Fair Treatment Assessments are part of major changes in services. For example, we have worked with SMBC to assess how the proposed regeneration of the Kingshurst Regeneration Project will meet the needs of the diverse local population. The outcomes from the assessment are reflected in the planning process.
- g. **Apprenticeships:** In the face of challenging circumstances, we progressed our Apprentice Scheme for which over 70 people expressed an interest. The recruitment resulted in filling all six positions with the successful candidates representing a diverse range of age, gender and disability.



6 Further work

SCH Delivery Plan 2019/20

In our last report we had identified key priorities which have a significant and direct impact on equalities. Work continuing includes:

- a. **Step-change in customer satisfaction and engagement:** The Resident Engagement Strategy has been approved by the Board. Operational delivery arrangements are underway, but some detailed tasks have been delayed in the light of the pandemic.

Examples of consultation activities undertaken include a Well-being survey and the standards of service residents can expect to receive from SCH. Residents were also encouraged to take part in relevant government consultation initiatives, such as Fire Safety and 'See the Person' campaign.

We will be working closely with our 'VIP' Panel of over 340 residents. The VIP Body is diverse:

- The ratio of women is 67% to 33% men.
- 15% of the Panel are Black and Asian Minority Ethnic and 82% are White.
- 15% are aged under 45, 36% are aged between 46 and 64 years and the balance are over 65.
- 29% have a disability.

- b. **Utilise opportunities for stock growth and invest intelligently in current housing stock:** The Board has approved the overall Asset Management Strategy which considers the impact on disabled customers and provides links to key strategies such as fuel poverty.

Background planning work is underway, and the operational delivery is yet to start.

- c. **Embed the 'Safer Homes' as a core theme:** We continue to ensure that homes and communal areas remain safe. Work with external partners such as contractors and the Fire Service ensures that the needs of disabled and vulnerable residents are met.

This work stream continues to be a priority.

- d. **Implement Locality Working:** SCH continues to remain a key partner in Locality Working that is designed to bring together resources from all statutory and voluntary agencies to develop and maintain successful neighbourhoods.

This work stream continues with SCH playing a lead role.

- e. **Build on Staff Development:** SCH's Senior Leadership Team and Frontline Managers continue to receive Management Development Training. A range of training is being provided through SMBC's Learning Pool.
- f. **Increase Digital Engagement:** The SCH portal for customers continues to receive publicity to encourage residents to take up more services digitally.

SCH Delivery Plan 2021/2022

In addition to taking forward work highlighted in section 6 above, we will focus on the following high-level priorities:

- a. **Inclusive Services Register:** Create a framework that identifies residents who are most vulnerable so that we can tailor or deliver services in ways that are most appropriate to meet their needs.

- b. **Housing Allocations Policy:** Work with SMBC to review the Housing Allocations Policy and ensure that the criteria are designed to meet the needs of people in the highest housing need and non-discriminatory.

- c. **Passion in People:** Implement the newly adopted strategy that aims to ensure that our staff continue to feel valued and supported and contribute to delivering excellence.

- d. **Disability Confident Scheme:** Achieve Level 2 of the government's accreditation scheme to demonstrate our commitment to employing and supporting disabled job applicants and employees.
- e. **Gender Pay Gap:** Interrogate the results of the Gender Pay Gap Report and identify actions to reduce the pay gap between men and women.
- f. **Diversity targets:** Develop targets to attract diverse job applicants to improve the diversity profile of employees.
- g. **Property adaptations:** Review our approach to supporting people with disabilities to live independently.



Conclusion

The examples of work done, already underway and planned for 2021/2022 are only a selection of ways in which we work to meet our Equality Duty and promote fairness and inclusion. The principles of equality and diversity have and remain a cornerstone of the way we work. We know that understanding more about our residents, customers, employees and board members will enable us to make an impact not just within SCH but the wider community that we serve.

We believe that equality and inclusion are not a parallel process or something to think about every so often – it is fundamental to our day to day operations. We also recognise that Solihull is becoming more culturally and socially diverse, bringing the benefits of different experiences and perspectives. We welcome the opportunity to work harder to recognise different needs, situations and goals and to remove barriers that limit access and achievement.



More information

If you would like this information in alternative ways or want more information please contact us on 0121 717 1515 or email us at info@solihullcommunityhousing.org.uk

Strategic Aims
Commitments
Values

