

Oxbode Housing Association

Equal Opportunities Policy

Policy Statement

Oxbode Housing Association has a clear commitment to ensuring that in the provision of social housing, a purchaser and provider of services and as an employer, it will seek to ensure equality of opportunity. We see this policy as an overarching statement on our philosophy on our commitment to equality to all groups, and to offering services which are sensitive to diversity and cultural needs.

The Association recognises that in society, groups and individuals have been disadvantaged in the past and as a result of this have not attained equality of opportunity. Therefore Oxbode will seek to ensure that no person or group of persons will be treated less fairly because of their ethnic origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age or health.

The document contains an explicit statement on our proposed strategic approach to identifying and meeting black and minority ethnic (BME) housing needs, as part of our wider equal opportunities policy. However, the principles contained in the rest of the policy are applied to the BME community, as well as all other disadvantaged groups in society.

In the pursuit of the provision of good quality housing services, Oxbode will continue to develop good community relationships based on integrity and equality.

Both as a provider of social housing and as an employer, Oxbode will abide by the statutory requirements, regulatory requirements and identified best practice.

1.0 Policy Objectives

- 1.1 We aim to offer equality of opportunity and treatment for all persons to whom the Association provides services.
- 1.2 We will put in place relevant policies and procedures, reflecting the Association's commitment to equality of opportunity in its role as a provider of social housing, procurer of goods and services, and as an employer.
- 1.3 We will promote our commitment to equal opportunities to the wider public, and where possible, in ethnic minority languages or other appropriate formats, e.g., large print.

- 1.4 We will identify the needs of disadvantaged minority groups in our area of operation, by establishing close relationships with those groups.
- 1.5 We will conduct regular reviews of our policy on equal opportunities and its objectives, to ensure that it is truly effective, and that Oxbode complies in full with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice and its recommendations.
- 1.6 We will monitor our activities to ensure that we achieve equality of opportunity in practice.
- 1.7 We aim to take lawful positive action to redress imbalances and under representation identified in our work.

2.0 Race Equality Strategy

- 2.1 The Housing Corporation requires associations to demonstrate their commitment to equal opportunities. We are expected to work towards the elimination of discrimination and demonstrate an equitable approach to the rights and responsibilities of all individuals.
- 2.2 In addition, associations are expected to take into account the diverse nature of their customers, their cultures and backgrounds. Associations are expected to adopt an equalities and diversity policy which covers all aspects of equality. Specifically in relation to BME people, the policy should incorporate targets in a range of specified areas. Therefore a key part of our Equal Opportunities policy is our approach to working with the BME communities, as outlined in this section.
- 2.3 "The Race Equality Code of Practice for Housing Associations" has been developed in conjunction with the Housing Corporation, the Commission for Racial Equality, the National Housing Federation and the Federation of Black Housing Organisations. It sets out how associations can develop their business to ensure that race equality is promoted and race discrimination tackled. It built on the work of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report that challenged all institutions to:

"examine their policies and the outcomes of the policies and practices to guard against disadvantaging any section of our community"
- 2.4 This Code was adopted by Oxbode in July 2002, and the following objectives were endorsed and now form part of this strategy.

Oxbode aims to ensure that:

- BME communities receive high quality services that are better tailored to meet their needs. These include more appropriate size and type of housing, more sensitive support services and greater community involvement opportunities;

- Equally high levels of satisfaction across all aspects of service delivery regardless of ethnic group;
- Partnerships between RSLs and BME organisations are an integral part of everyday business planning, delivery and review;
- Boards that reflect the communities they serve;
- Staff reflect the communities they serve and are fairly represented at all levels in the organisation;
- The diversity of local communities is reflected in membership of tenants' groups and consultative forums;
- Contractors and consultants reflect the communities they work in.

The steps employed to meet these objectives are outlined in the remainder of this policy.

- 2.5 Oxbode is mindful of the findings of the MacPherson inquiry in 1999, which stressed the part played by institutional racism in the death of Stephen Lawrence. The report defined institutional racism as:

“The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people”

Institutional racism is a problem for any organisation, not just the police, and the failures and ignorance identified by the report poses fundamental questions for a socially responsible organisation such as Oxbode. We aim to overcome this issue through training of staff and Board members, by involving the BME community in our work and monitoring outcomes routinely.

- 2.6 Oxbode operates in a diverse community, with a large BME population. It is essential that we improve our understanding of the nature of the diversity and their needs and aspirations in order to target housing provision and services effectively. Therefore we will undertake consultation with the BME community, our BME tenants, local agencies and the local authority.
- 2.7 Statistics produced at a local and national level have shown repeatedly that the BME community is more disadvantaged than the white population. This disadvantage relates not only to housing, but health, education and accessing services and benefits. This disadvantage needs to be redressed, and the development of appropriate targets and monitoring tools can help us assess how we are contributing to the improvement of the quality of life for a significant section of our community.

2.8 Gloucester City Council's Housing Strategy 2003-08

Gloucester City Council's Housing Strategy states that they "*will tackle racism in all possible ways, take action against racism and support those suffering from racism*". They intend to introduce a programme of action to implement the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, working towards ensuring that they have due regard to equality matters in all of their service delivery. They have adopted a series of objectives to guide their work in this area, and as a community stakeholder, Oxbode will be working alongside the Local Authority to implement these aims.

The council's aims are to:

- Continue to work with BME communities through varied consultative means;
- Recognise that many BME citizens have very strong cultural and religious needs to live within their own communities;
- Work in partnership to establish adequate housing provision for the BME community and if appropriate through a BME led RSL or management committee, especially through the opportunities presented by GHMP.

3.0 Employment and training

3.1 Oxbode recognises that our employment, training and staff development practices need to be open and accountable. We aim to be rigorously non-discriminatory, and we will make use of positive action to redress under representation. We aim to treat all staff fairly, and that discrimination and harassment does not occur in the workplace.

3.2 We recognise that some employment practices may create barriers which can prevent people from obtaining employment, training or career development opportunities. We will therefore take measures to maximise equality of opportunity in training and employment.

We will:

- ❖ Offer the best possible conditions of employment
- ❖ Make positive and clear statements in advertisements about our commitment to equal opportunities
- ❖ Offer access to training for all staff
- ❖ Advertise vacant posts widely, using specialist agencies, community centres etc., to publicise vacancies
- ❖ Monitor our recruitment and training procedures to ensure equal access

3.3 Terms and conditions

All staff in similar jobs will be employed under the same terms and conditions of employment.

The Equal Opportunities policy will be a condition of service, and all members of staff will be expected to abide by it. Breach of the policy could result in disciplinary action.

3.4 Resources

The Association will, wherever possible and practical, provide employees with aids, adaptations or flexible working arrangements to carry out duties on equal terms, where they are required.

3.5 Recruitment

We will advertise all posts widely, using specialist journals and advertising in appropriate locations to maximise the response to the advertisement from the whole community. We will ensure that access to our jobs remains open and that our requirements do not stop people applying for jobs. We will make all selection decisions based on the essential job criteria and person specifications, keeping records of the interview and decision making process.

3.6 Staff development

Oxbode is committed to providing training for its staff which enables the organisation's strategic aims to be delivered, and to develop the full potential of our staff team. As part of its induction process, Oxbode will ensure that all staff receive training on equal opportunities, culture and race awareness, with housing staff having detailed training on harassment procedures.

Training sessions will not place unjustified conditions on staff members which may prevent them from playing a full part.

Staff will be promoted on their merit and ability.

3.7 Harassment

Harassment in the workplace is defined as unwanted behaviour, e.g., inappropriate jokes, language or published material; graffiti, exclusion, withdrawal of communication, discomfort, offence, hostility, bullying or an intimidating workplace environment which may hinder the employee in his/her work performance and affect his/her dignity.

Staff who feel they are suffering from harassment can report the matter under the Confidential Reporting Policy or the Grievance Policy. Staff who are found to have harassed colleagues could be dismissed. The Association will support the victim and take any necessary action to redress the injury.

3.8 Disciplinary Policy

A breach of this policy will be considered a serious disciplinary offence.

Oxbode aims to ensure the well-being of its entire staff. The disciplinary policy exists to give employees clear rules and opportunities to overcome any problems. These procedures are designed to support standards of conduct and capability at work and should act as effective safeguards for all employees.

Disciplinary action will only be used when the matter is fully investigated and when all other ways to resolve the situation have failed. The aim will be to improve unsatisfactory performance rather than punish an individual, and will be applied fairly and consistently. Detailed records of all disciplinary action will be made and monitored against ethnicity, gender and disabled status to ensure the policy is being applied fairly.

The employee will have an opportunity to appeal against any decision made.

3.9 Monitoring, reviewing and record keeping

We will collect data to monitor our performance in relation to employment and equal opportunities. We will keep records on the ethnicity, gender and disability status of:

- ❖ Applicants for jobs
- ❖ Shortlisted applicants
- ❖ Successful applicant
- ❖ Selection process; interview and decision making process
- ❖ Disciplinary actions taken
- ❖ Exit interviews
- ❖ Training undertaken
- ❖ Profile of current employees, by salary levels

This information will allow the Association to decide on action to redress under representation, and to promote best practice.

4.0 Meeting housing needs

We aim to meet the housing and associated needs of the community we serve. We work with Gloucester City Council to offer a fair and open housing service to people, based on their housing need. We

work with the local authority to identify the needs of the different communities, and aim to participate in their black and minority ethnic strategy wherever possible.

4.1 Access to housing

Oxbode has an agreement with Gloucester City Council to accept 100% nominations for all our vacancies. They maintain a waiting list and transfer list on our behalf, along with all other RSLs in Gloucester. We aim to meet regularly with them to discuss the process generally, and the equal opportunities performance in particular.

We aim to publicise our services to the community, especially to those groups of people who are likely to face discrimination. We will aim to record the ethnicity, gender, first language and disability status of new and existing tenants, and use this information to discuss the equality of access to housing with the local authority.

5.0 The housing service

We are in contact with our tenants on a daily basis, to provide a wide range of services as part of our responsibilities as a social landlord. We aim to offer a sensitive range of services which meet the identified needs of all our customers, especially the most vulnerable.

We provide new, purpose built homes, or adapt existing ones for people with physical disabilities or mental health problems. We work closely with specialist agencies to help these special needs.

5.1 Repairs

We work hard to ensure that we offer a responsive and prompt repairs service to our customers. We want to provide a good quality service as a minimum to all, but one that has sufficient flexibility to meet the needs of our more vulnerable customers. This could mean accelerated response times for elderly people who have heating failure in winter, or removal of graffiti if it is racist.

We have introduced ethnicity-monitoring forms that accompany our repairs satisfaction surveys so that we can monitor feedback from tenants amongst the BME community. These findings will be reported to the board along with other repairs satisfaction responses.

5.2 Harassment procedures

We have a policy which offers guidance to staff when dealing with reports of harassment from our tenants. We will be proactive in co-operating with other relevant agencies and will be sensitive to the wishes of the victim. We will not tolerate harassment on our estates, and we will be active in publicising our approach.

5.3 Communications

It is important for the Association to provide information in a clear, understandable format. Where our budget allows, we should provide key documents in the local community languages. To encourage meaningful communication and participation, we will consider developing different structures for meetings and for seeking feedback, which reflect the needs of all our customers.

We will be sensitive to the needs of our customers who do not have English as a first language, and offer translation and interpretation facilities wherever possible.

5.4 Tenant involvement

We aim to involve our customers and stakeholders in our work, listening to their views and responding to their needs. We recognise the diversity of our tenants and potential tenants.

We want to encourage meaningful dialogue with all sections of the community, including the minority and more vulnerable groups, who often are left unheard.

To do this, we will use different methods of consultation, which can be flexible to meet specific needs. We will consult with representative groups and agencies to learn more of the needs of the communities we serve.

5.5 Working with the Local Authority

We are committed to working closely with Gloucester City Council (GCC) to assist them in delivering their strategic objectives. In particular, we will work with them to deliver their Housing Strategy annual targets on:

- ❖ Assessing and meeting housing needs
- ❖ Housing and care in the community
- ❖ Black and minority ethnic housing
- ❖ Making the best use of housing stock

In addition, we will participate in GCC's harassment and anti social behaviour initiatives, and in their working parties to challenge racism in the city, and on race and disability generally.

We will work with the local planners to develop new homes to meet the needs of the community, using designs that reflect best practice and meet a wide range of needs.

6.0 Contracts and partnerships

We expect all our contractors, consultants and partner agencies to have an equal opportunities policy, and to comply with the principles in our policy. This means that we expect them to provide a fair and equal service in terms of their service delivery and in the employment of their staff. We expect them to treat our residents and staff politely, courteously and appropriately at all times.

Any breach of this policy will lead to a formal investigation and could result in the contractor being removed from our approved list.

7.0 Governance

We believe that Oxbode's accountability and responsiveness to our customers' needs is enhanced by the representation and involvement of members of our community. The Board of Oxbode has the responsibility to set and review this policy, and to monitor its implementation and effectiveness.

This commitment at Board level is passed on to staff through the Chief Executive, who is responsible for the day to day operation of the policy and its principles.

All Board members will receive training on equal opportunities and equality issues.

We are committed to ensuring that our Board is broadly representative of the community we serve. Our recruitment procedures will ensure that we advertise for Board members in appropriate venues to encourage membership and involvement from the wider community. Where there is under representation, we will seek to take positive action.

The Board will receive reports on the progress of key performance areas relating to the effectiveness of this policy. The committees will review performance in relation to housing services and personnel matters.