



Making our services better
for disabled people

Vicinity Group Disability Equality Scheme

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Chief Executive's foreword

Vicinity Housing Group is committed to the principle that all our tenants should be able to live in communities where they can participate fully and equally. Finding a place of your own is hard enough for anyone but disabled people find a range of additional barriers including lack of suitable accommodation, poorly designed services and a lack of understanding of their needs. It is also imperative that all our staff can fully contribute to the development of our organisation and access the opportunities working for Vicinity offers, on an equal basis.

Our recent tenant survey, dialogue with staff and consideration of a number of other national indicators helped us realise that although Vicinity have made a lot of progress in this area that there is still more we can do to support disabled people.

In order to achieve this Vicinity is committed to signing up to the Disability Equality Duty which has been introduced for the public sector. This new duty will mean that we need to identify even more effective ways of ensuring that disabled people are treated equally.

Our staff and disabled tenants have reviewed the way we currently provide services and support and have identified where we can do better. Following on from this review we have produced action plans which will enable us to provide improved services for all our tenants and staff in the future.

We at Vicinity recognise that disabled people are an integral part of our mainstream activities, not a special group, but people who have the same aspirations to choice, opportunity, quality and comfort that everyone expects. Vicinity is committed to equality of opportunity for all. We look forward to working with both staff and tenants in the future to ensure we continually improve our approach and our services both as a landlord and an employer.

Philip Gandy
Group Chief Executive

Introduction

What this Scheme does

This Scheme sets out what Vicinity Group will do over the next three years to help ensure that disabled tenants and staff are treated equally and receive the same level of service as non-disabled tenants and staff, or an enhanced service where appropriate.

The Scheme sets out our priorities for achieving disability equality, and is supported by detailed action plans. It also sets out how we will measure and report our performance, and how we will assess the impact on disability equality of all of our policies.

Approximately 30 members of staff, including senior managers, have worked on preparing the Scheme. This has helped us make sure we include all of our services, and has increased staff awareness of disability equality.

196 disabled tenants have given their views on how we provide services, to help us write the Scheme.

We will continue to involve disabled tenants and staff in monitoring and reviewing the Scheme.

Why we have prepared a Scheme

In our 2007 tenant survey, over half of tenants (57%) who responded said that they or someone in their household had a long term illness or disability. It is therefore important that we take disabled people's needs into account when we plan and provide our services.

We are also required by law – the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 - not to discriminate against disabled people by treating them less favourably than other people because of their disability, without justification. Possible examples of where we might be justified in treating a disabled person less favourably are if someone's health and safety may otherwise be endangered, or if a disabled person is not able to understand the terms of a legal contract.

As a landlord, we are required by law to change our policies, procedures or letting terms, or provide certain services such as a sign language interpreter or induction loop, if a disabled person needs this to use our services. We have to do this if we are asked to and if it is reasonable for us to do so. Examples of some things we can be asked to do are:

- waive a no pets policy for a disabled person with an assistance dog;
- read a tenancy agreement to a visually impaired person or provide it in Braille, large print, audio tape or on disk;
- spend extra time with a tenant with a learning disability to go through a tenancy agreement and other rules;
- allow a disabled tenant to leave rubbish in another place if they cannot access the designated place;
- provide a temporary ramp for a wheelchair user to get into the entrance of their house.

Landlords are not legally required to make permanent physical changes to properties, such as widening doorways, but disabled tenants should be allowed to do this work themselves if they ask, and if the request is reasonable.

Public bodies have a further legal requirement to promote equality for disabled people – a ‘disability equality duty’. Some public bodies are required to work with disabled people to produce a disability equality scheme setting out how they will do this.

Even though housing associations are not public bodies, the Housing Corporation (the government body that regulates associations) expects associations to prepare a disability equality action plan.

We have decided to prepare a full Scheme, working with disabled tenants and staff, as we think this is the best way of making sure that we make our services better for disabled people.

Achieving equality means that we have to consider disabled people when we are planning or delivering all of our services, rather than waiting for individual disabled people to ask us for support.

We should give due regard to the need to:

- promote equality of opportunity between disabled people and other people;
- eliminate unlawful disability discrimination;
- eliminate disability related harassment;
- promote positive attitudes to disabled people;
- encourage participation by disabled people; and
- take account of people's disabilities, even if this means treating disabled people more favourably than other people.

'Due regard' means that we should give balanced consideration to disability equality, taking all circumstances into account. We should give most consideration to the services or policies that have the most effect on disabled people. It will not always be possible for us to do things which would best promote disability equality, for example because of cost or an unfair effect on non-disabled tenants and staff, but we must make sure we give disability equality proper consideration.

What disabilities do we need to consider?

In line with the Disability Discrimination Act, we have to take account of conditions that will last for 12 months or longer and that have a substantial effect on how someone is able to carry out normal day-to-day activities. Some examples of disabilities we have to take account of are:

- physical or mobility difficulties – for example needing to use a wheelchair;
- sensory impairments – for example sight or hearing difficulties;
- learning difficulties – for example dyslexia;
- medical conditions – for example arthritis, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, cancer and many other long-term illnesses; and
- mental health difficulties – for example depression, an eating disorder, or anxiety.

There are some conditions we do not have to take account of, including alcohol, nicotine or drug addiction and hay fever.

Who Vicinity Group is and what we do

Vicinity Group seeks to provide homes and neighbourhoods where people want to live. Our vision is to be a quality housing provider, making a positive difference to the communities we work in by looking beyond housing to meet the wider needs of all our customers.

Vicinity Group comprises:

- Liverpool Housing Trust (LHT), a charitable housing association with 10,000 homes across Merseyside. Rodney Housing Association joined LHT in 2007;
- Cobalt Housing, a charitable housing association which provides 5,600 homes in North East Liverpool transferred from Liverpool City Council in 2003;
- Beechwood Ballantyne Community Housing Association (BBCHA), with 900 homes transferred from Wirral Borough Council in 2005;
- Atrium City Living, a commercial company which provides homes for market rent and for sale; and
- Jigsaw Neighbourhood Solutions, a company which provides neighbourhood and environmental services to support regeneration.

Currently 476 members of staff work for Vicinity Group.

In early 2008 Liverpool City Council will transfer its housing stock to a new housing association, Liverpool Mutual Homes. Liverpool Housing Trust will be a 'housing management contractor' responsible for providing housing services on behalf of Liverpool Mutual Homes to 8,500 homes in North Liverpool.

Vicinity Group has been selected as preferred partner by Ribble Valley Borough Council for their proposed transfer of 1,200 properties to Ribble Valley Homes, who will join Vicinity Group in 2008 subject to a 'yes' vote by tenants and successful completion of the transfer process.

Our commitment to equality and diversity

Vicinity Group wants to make sure that disabled people receive the same standard of service and have the same opportunities as everyone else.

We are committed to ensuring that our employment practices do not unfairly discriminate against anyone with a disability.

We are committed to achieving the best possible performance on equality and diversity so that we can:

- Understand our customers, ensure that services and products are relevant to their needs and sustain long-term demand.
- Recruit and retain the best staff.
By having a fair and transparent recruitment process we aim to employ a diverse range of staff. Vicinity Group is committed to supporting and encouraging all staff to reach their full potential.
- Secure new business.
Excellent performance on equality and diversity is a key criterion in the selection process for all types of partnerships, including the transfer of local authority housing and working with private developers to provide affordable housing.
- Deliver sound business leadership.
We recognise that our governing bodies and senior management teams need to understand the needs of our customers. We will achieve this by ensuring these bodies reflect the diversity of the communities in which we work.

Our work on disability equality so far

To help us prepare this Scheme we looked at what work we have already done to help meet disabled people's needs or improve equality. Some of our achievements so far are listed below. The Scheme seeks to build on this good practice.

Services to tenants

- Committing to visit all tenants to find out any support or communication needs they have.
- Staff flexibility to prioritise some services for disabled tenants.
- Communicating in a range of ways, including large print, Braille, Typetalk and using British Sign Language interpreters.
- Providing adaptations to tenants' homes.
- Providing support to people to help them maintain their tenancies, both directly and by working with other organisations.
- Providing support to disabled tenants who cause anti-social behaviour, to help the person with their behaviour and maintain their tenancy.
- Letting all purpose built and substantially adapted homes in Liverpool via ACCESS Liverpool, which is an accessible homes waiting list for physically disabled people.
- Advertising all adapted or accessible properties in the Wirral through the Wirralhomes choice-based lettings scheme.
- Encouraging people to report harassment because of their disability, and committing to take action about it.
- Providing a range of ways for tenants to get involved, to help ensure as many people as possible can take part.
- Having an equality and diversity section in all new policies.
- Training staff and contractors on equality and diversity.

Staffing and employment

- Operating the guaranteed interview scheme as part of being positive about disability. All applicants for posts within Vicinity Group who advise us that they have a disability are guaranteed an interview providing they meet the minimum criteria.
- Placing all of our job adverts on the DisabledGo website and sending them to the Shaw Trust who are an organisation that support disabled people into employment.
- Ensuring our interview and training venues are accessible and asking all candidates for interview if they have any special requirements.
- Monitoring all of our recruitment activity in terms of disability and reporting annually to the Housing Corporation.
- Providing support for staff who have long term health issues via regular reviews to identify any support needs. Referral to occupational health for specialist advice is in place and any reports received are shared with staff. For staff who have been absent from work long term we provide phased returns to work on full pay.
- For staff who have a recognised long term health issue and need to attend regular hospital appointments we allow them time to attend those appointments.
- Display screen equipment risk assessments (including computer monitors and where staff sit) are regularly carried out and if any specialist equipment is recommended this is put in place.
- Offering a confidential counselling service for staff.
- Considering all reasonable requests for flexible working.

How we involved disabled tenants and staff, and what they have told us

Our approach

We have aimed to involve as wide a range as possible of people who are disabled and/or have a long term limiting illness (or who live with or care for someone who does) from across Vicinity Group. The work has involved disabled tenants and tenant carers in general needs, sheltered and supported housing and staff who considered themselves to be disabled from across Vicinity Group.

Consultation with tenants

Who was involved

Our approach to understanding what disabled tenants think about the services they receive from Vicinity Group began with analysing existing feedback gained from our Tenants Survey 2007 which involved 1442 disabled tenants. We also used data gathered via LHT's surveys of Sheltered and Supported Housing (2007) which involved 279 tenants. The results have helped to shape the content of the scheme and action plan by understanding the patterns of dissatisfaction between disabled and non-disabled tenants.

A summary of findings from disabled tenants who took part in the Tenants Survey 2007 is outlined in the table below.

Question asked in Tenants Survey 2007	% of disabled tenants satisfied with services across Vicinity Group
Overall satisfaction with your landlord	85%
Overall satisfaction with your accommodation	86%
Overall satisfaction with the condition of your property	80%
Overall satisfaction with your neighbourhood as a place to live	73%
Overall satisfaction with repairs and maintenance	79%
Overall satisfaction with opportunities to get involved in decision making	61%
Overall satisfaction with being kept informed	84%

Analysis of the Tenants Survey 2007 did not show any major differences in the levels of satisfaction with services between disabled and non-disabled tenants. There were some small variations in individual association's results which showed broadly similar or slightly higher levels of satisfaction with services amongst disabled tenants (this was the case for Beechwood Ballantyne and Cobalt). In the case of LHT, tenants were consistently 2% or 3% more dissatisfied with service provision across the board.

The 1442 disabled tenants who took part in the 2007 survey were contacted again to ask if they would like to take part in a more focused consultation over the content of the Scheme and action plan. The 239 tenants who replied were asked what their preferred methods of involvement and communication were and based on this we conducted telephone and face to face interviews for the majority of tenants. A small minority of tenants also requested consultation via email and post but in the end the majority of these were contacted by telephone. This research resulted in detailed feedback from 196 disabled tenants (which included some non-disabled tenants who care for someone with a disability).

Range of people involved

Of the 196 disabled tenants who took part in the consultation exercise:

- the largest number of responses were from tenants aged between 65-74 years old (41%) followed by 45-59 years old (26%) and 75+ years old (18%).
- 62% were women.
- 13% were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups. For BME respondents 58% were women and most were aged between 60-74 years old (50%).

The most common disabilities were:

- a physical disability (55%);
- frailty/poor mobility (36%);
- being hard of hearing (17%).

41% of tenants ticked 'Other' disabilities which included over 50 types of disabilities or health conditions. The most common groupings of 'other' disabilities included heart and circulation problems, joint and bone conditions and respiratory conditions.

For BME respondents the majority (71%) had a physical disability, 21% were hard of hearing and 17% experienced general poor health.

Tenants were asked if it was a family member who was disabled or had a long term illness rather than themselves and 14% said this was the case. 5% of respondents also identified a family member, in addition to themselves, as being disabled. For those tenants who were caring for a disabled member of their household the majority were caring for spouses, older relatives and children.

The findings

The results from the consultation with 196 disabled tenants showed that 35% had experienced problems accessing services. This was the case for 38% of BME tenants. The experience, however, did vary between each housing association ranging from 17% experiencing problems accessing services from Beechwood

Ballantyne and 42% experiencing problems accessing services from LHT (see table below).

Association	% of tenants experiencing problems accessing services
Vicinity Group average for all disabled respondents	35%
Vicinity Group average for BME respondents	38%
LHT	42%
Cobalt Housing	38%
Beechwood Ballantyne	17%

Of the problems experienced in accessing services the main ones identified across Vicinity Group included:

- reporting repairs (10%);
- living in their home (10%);
- contacting the office by phone (6%);
- making a complaint (5%);
- getting involved (4%);
- getting into our offices (4%);
- how we communicate (3%);and
- staff/contractor attitudes (3%).

For BME respondents the main problems they experienced were:

- making a complaint (13%);
- getting involved and attending events (8%);
- applying for housing (4%);
- getting into our office (4%); and
- the attitude of staff (4%).

The detail behind the problem with ‘reporting a repair’ related to how we respond to repairs from disabled tenants and how we prioritise them. The impact of a repair on someone with a disability was summarised by one tenant who said:

‘My back yard is very uneven, making it a safety issue. I can not put out my washing on the line, also the back yard door

needs replacing. The rear yard issue has been ongoing for the past 6 years ... we are always being told it will be seen to'.

The impact of how repairs or investment in our homes are prioritised was explained by one tenant:

'I suffer from arthritis which is aggravated by the cold. I asked about the possibility of central heating being fitted forward of the planned date due to my condition but this was ignored and I waited two and a half years before central heating was fitted in my house'.

The problems with 'living in their home' relate to a number of issues including the provision of adaptations such as level access showers, how quickly adaptations are provided and the waiting times, parking spaces for mobility scooters, support for disabled children and the provision of security in peoples homes.

The experience of one tenant in relation to adaptations summed it up as:

'I have arthritis on my legs so it is almost impossible to use my bath tub. I contacted you to find out if I could have a walk in shower. I was told I would not get one because my property is a three bedroom family house which is not adaptable. My impression is that you are keeping the property in its original state for future letting maybe to someone who will not need adaptations ...'

Respondents also highlighted the need to provide and investigate the types of adaptations provided and to check they are appropriate. In the words of one tenant:

'Maybe assess how disabled peoples homes could be adapted i.e. taps, gas fires, handles which are easily gripped'.

Other problems disabled tenants experienced included the attitude of staff and contractors. This was summed up by one person who said:

'I feel that when staff come to visit they are not sure how to react to me. I feel uncomfortable in my own property when visitors come. You should be a little more objective and empathise with my condition'. (this quote has been paraphrased from a discussion).

Another tenant suggested that a solution to this problem would involve:

'Contractors (and staff) should go on awareness training, not just disability but equality and diversity, ... Contractors need an injection of good manners, close to half are very, very good and others are absolutely appalling. Could have a meeting once a year to share information about contractors, making sure people can access services.'

Communication problems were raised consistently by respondents and included a whole range of issues relating to:

- contacting offices by phone (either because they have difficulty using a telephone or that they couldn't get through and got voice mail or answering machines);
- a slow response to their enquiry ;
- a lack of continuity in dealing with their issues;
- the information provided to explain services; and
- how information is communicated to them (the format, consistency and regularity)

Problems with reporting a complaint were cited by tenants from across Vicinity Group but this was a particular issue reported by BME disabled tenants (13%). The reasons behind this are unclear from the results as this was a 'tick' box option in the questionnaire however indications are that it may be linked to difficulties in being understood and differences in opinion over the resolution of a complaint (i.e. complaining about adaptations taking too long to action).

Consultation with staff

Who was involved

Vicinity Group (with the exception of Beechwood Ballantyne) undertook a staff survey in 2006 which involved 278 staff. The results showed that staff overall are very positive about working for the Group. Despite the results not being analysed by disability the table below demonstrates the overall positive feeling staff have with regard to working for Vicinity Group and it gives a clear indication of the type of culture that exists within the company.

Questions asked in Staff Survey 2006	% of staff across Vicinity Group who gave a positive score
I get support from my manager when I need it	86%
I believe that the organisation is an equal opportunity employer	85%
I am treated with fairness and respect in the organisation	82%
I think the organisation respects individual differences	83%
I would feel able to report any bullying/harassment without worrying that it would have a negative impact on me	71%

Despite this positive culture the general consensus is that the number of staff who declare they are disabled is under reported within Vicinity Group. The reasons behind this under reporting are unclear but the general view is that many staff, although they could be defined as disabled under the Disability Discrimination Act, do not consider themselves to be disabled. In addition some staff may feel uncomfortable declaring to their employer they are disabled, particularly if they do not require any support.

Before the consultation began the 476 staff across Vicinity Group were contacted to request updated information about themselves based on the definition of disability under the Act. The updating exercise which was co-ordinated by Human Resources led to an increase in the number of staff who declared they were disabled from 3 to 23 staff.

The 476 staff were contacted via email by the lead Director preparing the Scheme to ask if they wanted to join in a consultation exercise. 6 staff who declared they were disabled confirmed they would like to get involved. They were invited to a workshop session to find out their experiences of working in Vicinity Group and their recommendations for change. Of these 6 staff 2 attended a workshop and 2 provided feedback via email. The workshop was chaired by a Director with support from a staff member and it was attended by a representative from Human Resources.

In terms of job applicants, analysis of recruitment data showed that for 2006-2007 2% considered themselves to be disabled (this is based on only those applicants who had completed an equality and diversity form with their job application). This is similar to the 3% of permanent staff employed by Vicinity Group who said they were disabled. The consultation did not involve job applicants.

Range of people involved

Of the 23 staff who confirmed they were disabled 96% were white British, 61% were female and 48% were aged between 46 and 65 years old. Of the 4 staff who took part in the consultation exercise one was male and 3 were female. Two of the participants were managers and two were non-management staff. The four staff were from different companies within Vicinity Group.

The findings

The 4 disabled staff who took part in the consultation exercise were asked to relate their experiences of working for Vicinity Group and consider what was good about the company, what needed to change and provide guidance on priorities for action.

Their recommendations fell into nine themes which have formed the content of the action plan, namely:

- leadership in the organisation to drive through changes;
- communication to staff about what is available to them;
- review of policy to reflect legislation changes;
- training all line managers to make sure they are applying Human Resources policies correctly;
- disability awareness training for all staff;

- general awareness raising briefings for all staff on Human Resources policies;
- learning from best practice;
- developing formal links with support agencies;
- putting in place ways to monitor and review support arrangements and involve staff;
- committing to have an impact assessment to make sure our services work for staff; and
- setting up a disabled staff support group or forum.

The general belief during the consultation was that Vicinity Group does not have a clear approach to supporting disabled staff. Generally it was felt that disability was treated in the same way as sickness. Staff also felt that there were inconsistencies of approach by line managers. The staff consulted felt they were at the mercy of whichever line manager they had and how sympathetic they were about their disability. Staff felt that line managers lacked knowledge about what support was available to them from Human Resources. Staff also felt that managers were not using consistently the guidance available about when to use discretion for things like hospital appointments during core hours.

Staff believed that for those disabled staff who had been off work due to their disability there was real concern over return to work interviews following a period of sickness. Some staff who had experienced 'sickness review meetings' had felt victimised by the process (although they said staff involved were very supportive in these interviews). Staff were also concerned about the impact of their sickness record on their relationship with their employer.

It was considered that more could be done to support staff who were carers and that the sick dependants policy needed to be reviewed and made clear.

The view was that communication needed to improve because it was believed that only bad news reached staff about how a colleague had been treated. Staff felt that the support that was on offer from Vicinity Group was really good but that it was not widely known about. For staff that had experience of some of the support services the experience had been very positive e.g. the counselling service and the phased return to work.

Some of the paperwork which staff were expected to complete was believed to be intimidating. In particular the occupational health consent form needed improvement and the role of occupational health needed to be made clear.

Staff generally agreed that colleagues did not want to declare they were disabled because of potential negative reactions and that the organisation did little to promote the positive side of having a workforce which includes disabled staff. They particularly thought this was important given the likely high proportion of Vicinity Group tenants who are disabled.

Challenges in getting people involved and lessons learnt

We learnt a few lessons during the consultation work including:

- Targeting disabled tenants and staff is more difficult if your record of who is disabled is not up to date. This includes sources that help you identify them for example Human Resource records, lists of adapted properties.
- You need to ask disabled people what is the best way for them to be consulted. In our case this was a combination of telephone interviews, face to face interviews, postal questionnaires and a workshop.
- It is difficult to set the purpose of the consultation exercise without raising expectations too high.
- It was difficult for our research staff to investigate the issues and at times it was difficult not to get involved in individual cases.
- You must set in place a method to refer reported problems from tenants/staff immediately (this includes handling complaints, failures in service delivery, reporting repairs etc).
- Encouraging staff to declare they have a disability is difficult and often staff recognise they have a disability but don't want an employer to know until they need support.
- Encouraging more disabled staff to get involved before they are convinced the organisation is supportive of their needs is a challenge.

Key actions identified to improve future consultation

In order for us to improve any future consultation with disabled staff and tenants we have included the following in our action plans.

- Improve the data we hold about disabled tenants via our visiting programme and keep this up to date.
- Ensure we maintain and regularly update the data held about staff.
- Look at how we record 'hidden' disabled tenants who are not the lead tenants (i.e. children, elderly relatives living at an address).
- Improve our leadership and communication about Vicinity Group's support for disabled staff in the workplace in order to encourage participation and staff declaring they are disabled.
- Investigate whether disabled staff want a forum to raise their concerns.

The consultation in itself has improved the profile of disability issues amongst staff and tenants and it has highlighted the need to bring forward some key areas that need to be addressed based on the views of people who got involved.

Our action plan priorities

Based on the staff and tenant consultation, and comparing our services against good practice guidance, we think that the following actions are the most important for achieving disability equality. These will be our priorities for the next three years.

Services to tenants

- Make sure all staff and Board members receive regular equality and diversity training.
- Carry out equality impact assessments on our policies and procedures.
- Raise staff awareness and train them on policies and procedures in relation to what adjustments we can make to meet individual tenant's needs.
- Find out the needs of our existing and potential customers, and target services appropriately.
- Involve our customers in developing and improving services.
- Work in partnership with our contractors and service providers to ensure that their services reflect the needs of our communities and individuals
- Analyse information about customers accessing services to ensure we do not unfairly discriminate against them.
- Tell our customers how we are delivering our services to meet the needs of our community and individuals.
- Provide an aids and adaptations service to deliver best value, and enable individuals to live in their homes for as long as possible.
- Work with our partners to reduce hate crime and anti-social behaviour.
- Explore the feasibility of using 'Lifetime Homes' standards within our new build programmes.
- Explore the opportunity to incorporate inclusive design and disabled persons' access when delivering our investment and improvement programme or environmental works.
- Develop our awareness of the opportunities technology can give to our disabled customers and under represented groups, and provide staff with the technology to deliver an effective and efficient service.

Employment and staffing

- Promote equality of opportunity between disabled and non disabled staff.
- Ensure all our policies & procedures, terms & conditions do not discriminate unlawfully and ensure all Vicinity Group employees are briefed about changes to policies and procedures.
- Promote positive attitudes towards disabled staff.
- Encourage participation from disabled staff within Vicinity Group.
- Support disabled staff needs even if this requires favourable treatment.

The detail of how we will achieve these priorities is set out in our 4 action plans.

LHT, Cobalt Housing and Beechwood Ballantyne have prepared their own action plans to take account of their individual circumstances. These set out how each organisation will improve services for tenants.

The Vicinity Group action plan sets out the actions we will take on employment and staffing.

The actions will be incorporated into team and individual staff action plans to make sure they get done. Overall progress will be monitored by senior managers and Board members.

Our action plans are available on our website www.vicinity.org.uk or we can send a copy to you. Please see page 30 for our contact details.

How we will gather and use information about our performance on disability equality

Services to tenants

Vicinity Group needs to better understand who our tenants are and what their needs are.

To help do this we have started visits to all tenants to find out information about their household. The information will help us to meet tenant's individual needs, design our services, and monitor tenants' access to services.

Vicinity Group regularly asks tenants about their views on our services. We want to make sure that disabled tenants are as satisfied with our services as non-disabled tenants.

We use surveys to reach a large number and wide range of tenants. We will use these surveys to find out if there is any difference in satisfaction levels between disabled and non-disabled people. If there is we will investigate this further and take action if needed.

We ask for tenants' views on our services in other ways too, for example using discussion groups, mystery shopping and tenant panels. We will seek to ensure that these methods involve disabled tenants.

In preparing this Scheme some staff said that they did not know what disabled tenants' views and needs were. Where appropriate, we will carry out specific consultation with disabled tenants to find this out, and ensure that this information is fed back to the relevant staff.

We will report back to tenants on how their views have been taken into account through tenant newsletters and the website, and where appropriate by direct feedback to individual tenants.

As well as measuring our performance based on tenant satisfaction, we will use monitoring information to help ensure that everyone has equal access to our services.

Employment and staffing

All Human Resources policies will be reviewed annually and we will introduce disability impact assessments as part of those reviews. As part of each review we will seek feedback from disabled staff.

The Human Resources Department will carry out an annual exercise to update staff details which will ensure that information about disability is kept as up to date as possible.

The next staff survey will take place in 2008, and will be used to measure disabled staff satisfaction if the response rate is high enough to keep individual views anonymous. The findings will be reported to staff.

We will collect monitoring information on the number of disabled staff and job applicants, to help ensure that people are treated equally.

How we will assess the impact of our policies on disability equality

Our policies set out how we provide services to tenants, or how we manage staff. We need to make sure that our policies do not disadvantage disabled people, and that they promote equality of opportunity. We will therefore do 'equality impact assessments' when we write our policies.

An equality impact assessment means getting information to find out the effect of a policy on different groups of people. These groups can include, for example, men, women, young people, people with a low income, as well as disabled and non-disabled people.

Although our new policies must already have an equality and diversity section, in 2008 we will develop and start using an improved process for equality impact assessments, based on National Housing Federation guidance.

If the assessment shows that a policy will result in one group receiving a worse service than others, or being treated unfairly, we will change the policy if the different treatment cannot be justified. We will also look for any ways of improving equality between different groups, and include these in the policy if this is desirable.

To help identify effects, we will look at staff and tenant monitoring information and satisfaction survey findings. We will also look at information and good practice from other housing associations, the Housing Corporation, the Government and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

We already consult a range of tenants and staff about our policies. If we think we need to, we will consult disabled people specifically on the effects of a policy on them.

Staff will be trained on carrying out assessments, and to help them identify the effects of our policies on disabled people.

In 2008 we will also look at whether we should carry out equality impact assessments when we review services and write strategies and plans.

Next steps

We will publish an 'Easy Read' summary of this Scheme in early 2008.

We will promote the Scheme to tenants and staff throughout 2008.

We will publish progress reports on the Scheme in December 2008 and 2009. These will set out what progress we have made on the action plans, the satisfaction and monitoring information we have collected, and any new actions we are planning to take as a result of this information.

We will review the Scheme in 2010 and publish a new Scheme in December 2010.

We will involve disabled staff and tenants in carrying out the actions in the Scheme, and in monitoring our overall progress on the Scheme.

When we consulted tenants we asked if they would like to continue to be involved in the Scheme. 177 tenants said they would. Over the next few months we will explore with tenants the best ways of involving them. One option may be to set up a disabled tenant forum, which tenants would be able to take part in even if they do not wish or are not able to attend meetings.

We will also ask staff how they wish to continue to be involved and whether they wish to set up a staff forum

If you would like to comment on our services or make a suggestion that you think will improve our services, then we'd like to hear from you.

We would also welcome tenants or staff members getting involved with the Scheme. If you might be interested in doing this, please contact us.

- If you are a LHT tenant, please phone our Customer Service Centre on 01928 796000 or email csc@lht.co.uk
- If you are a Cobalt tenant, please phone Phil Dillon, Resident Involvement Manager, on 0151 633 8096 or email pdillon@cobalthousing.org.uk
- If you are a Beechwood Ballantyne tenant, please phone Alan Walker, Neighbourhood Housing Manager, on 0800 389 0625 or email awalker@bbcha.org.uk
- If you are a staff member, please phone Colin Gibson, Head of Human Resources, on 0151 708 2353 or email cgibson@vicinity.org.uk
- If you would like to write to us, our address is:

Vicinity House
12 Hanover Street
Liverpool
L1 4AA

All information is correct at the time of publication (December 2007)

If other organisations use the content of this Scheme for their own purposes we ask that Vicinity Group be acknowledged.