



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

2021-26

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Foreword by Sovini Group CEO – Roy Williams

The Covid19 pandemic has served to highlight and exacerbate the deep inequalities that divide communities, whilst the 'Black Lives Matter' and 'Me too' movements have shown the scale of systemic abuse of power in our society and the Housing White Paper has highlighted the need for greater customer engagement.

This is why there has never a better time than 'now' to reassess, take stock and reinvigorate our commitments to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in everything that we do in the Sovini Group.

Across the wide range of different companies that make up the Sovini Group, we share a common purpose of 'creating opportunities and changing lives'.

We do this every day through the services that we provide to our customers, our role as great employers, through our supply chain and business partnerships and the contributions we make to local strategic planning forums.

At Sovini we recognise equality, diversity and inclusion is a 'value' that should be embedded in our culture, our policies and our operational practices and is therefore not viewed as a project that can be achieved within a timeframe, with a start and end date. It is a constant that guides us in everything we do and work together to achieve.

Through our collective commitment in living and breathing this 'value' we aim to provide fair and accessible services in strong, diverse and cohesive communities, we aim to have the best people in place and create working environments where there is a sense of family, everyone is welcome and can achieve together and we use our position as an exemplar business Group to lead the way on equalities best practice.

This is the first time we have produced an equality, diversity and inclusion strategy that incorporates all our Group entities but we believe this sends out an important message that this is who we are, this is what we believe in and this is how we will work together to constantly improve because this is the right thing to do.

Roy Williams



Introduction and Operational Context

The Sovini Group was established to bring together a diverse range of entities that work in close collaboration for mutual benefit across a range of interlinked business areas. Listed below are the individual entities that make up the Sovini Group:

- **Sovini Ltd**
- **Sovini Charities Ltd**
- **One Vision Housing Ltd (OVH)**
- **Pine Court Housing Association Ltd (PCHA)**
- **Pride of Sefton – Registered Charity (PoS)**
- **Sovini Commercial Ltd**
- **Sovini Property Services Ltd (SPS)**
- **Sovini Trade Supplies Ltd (STS)**
- **Sovini Homes Ltd**
- **Sovini Construction Ltd**
- **Sovini Waste Solutions Ltd**
- **Amianto Services Ltd**
- **Teal Scaffold Ltd**
- **Sovini Land Acquisition Ltd**

Whilst each entity has its own governance arrangements, management structures and clearly defined strategic aims and objectives there is a common purpose of ‘creating opportunities and changing lives’.

To support this common purpose, a number of cross-cutting strategies have been developed that outline expectations and commitments of the Group as a whole, regardless of the areas of specialism or service delivery.

By giving support and endorsement for this Strategy each Sovini entity aims to promote equality, diversity and inclusion in everything that they do. To achieve this, the Strategy identifies three key areas for action (see below on **Page 5**) and monitoring and continuous improvement.

When viewed together these three areas cover the entirety of business operations both for the individual entities within the Sovini Group but also the collective strength of the Group structure and positive impacts that it has when working together to promote equality, diversity and inclusion.

The content of this strategy has been framed against the requirements of the **Equality Act 2010**. In delivering this Strategy as it evolves and changes over time, the Sovini Group will always ensure it complies with and, where possible, exceeds the prevailing legal and regulatory requirements.

This will include having due regard to 'Protected Characteristics' as defined in the Equality Act 2010, as set out below, meeting all other requirements of the Act and ensuring the relevant entities in the Sovini Group are compliant with the **Charities Commission rules**.

Protected Characteristics:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender
- Race
- Gender Identity / Gender Expression
- Sexual Orientation
- Marital Status
- Pregnancy and Maternity
- Religion and /or Belief

Key Areas for Action

- **Customer Service Delivery**
This will include services that are provided on a transactional or contractual basis e.g. services provided to tenants and leaseholders in rented accommodation or in the provision of internal business relationships between Sovini Group entities and those with external partners
- **Role as Employers**
Recognising that the greatest asset of the Sovini Group are the circa 830 employees, all Sovini entities aim to promote fair recruitment / working practices and opportunities for progression that are available for all
- **Role as Business Entities**
As a significant players in the regional economy, Sovini Group entities recognise their responsibility to promote good business practices internally, in the supply chain relationships they establish / maintain and for the benefit of the wider communities in which they operate

The Strategy, which is the first to incorporate all Sovini entities, projects forward on a rolling basis in five yearly timeframes to fit with the wider strategic planning framework within the Group and will be subject to an annual refresh and review.

Led by our multi-team Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group, the aim of this refresh will be to constantly improve and move our equalities agenda forward, recognising areas where we can do more or do things differently and ensuring the Group entities lead the way as champions of equality, diversity and inclusion.

The refresh process will also ensure there is appropriate read across and synchronicity with wider strategic planning across the Sovini Group and the aims outlined below pervade and guide other plans such as our People and Learning Strategies, Value for Money Strategies and individual entity Corporate Plans.

Through this strategic plan and the operational customs and practice it supports, all Sovini entities will work towards the following high level strategic aims:

Strategic Aims

- Provide accessible services free from any barriers, real or perceived, that are available for all groups, are tailored to individual needs and address inequalities
- Go beyond compliance with all legal and regulatory requirements by developing and adopting best practice
- Promote good relations between all groups with protected characteristics
- Maintain and develop strong working culture where there is equality of opportunity for all groups, everyone feels valued / included and diversity is actively encouraged and appreciated
- Ensure equality, diversity and inclusion are embedded in all business practices and relations, internally / externally and through supply chain management
- Provide strong leadership and influence to promote equalities issues at the local, regional and national scale
- Never ignore – where we see discrimination, victimisation, harassment or differential treatment as a result of personal characteristics we take affirmative, corrective action
- Never stand still and seek year-on-year improvement and innovation

The above strategic aims will be incorporated into our Group-wide Performance Management System and their delivery will be supported by a number of 'objectives' or assigned as actions in team or individual Service Delivery Plans.

This will ensure we are able to monitor and report on progress and take remedial steps if any areas of concern or anomalies are identified.

Where are we now?

The following section provides an overview of the Sovini Group’s current position (May 2021) in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion provisions and achievements.

The overview is broken down across the three **Key Areas for Action** and is applicable to all Sovini Group entities unless there are specific issues that apply to one or more entities, in which case these will be identified separately.

Key Areas for Action		
Customer Service Delivery	Role as Employers	Role as Business Entities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good levels of ‘customer profile’ information available for registered providers existing customers - (equalities information provided on a voluntary basis relating to protected characteristics of lead household members). Ability to analyse information per characteristic and finer level of detail e.g. by ethnic group, against customer satisfaction reporting to identify any anomalies or barriers to service, including complaints, lettings and transactional survey results • All current customer access points (for face-to-face contacts) have been subject to independent accessibility audits and all recommendations have been implemented. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Level access entry points ○ Push button – automatic doors at wheelchair height 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full suite of People and Learning Policies in operation to protect staff and ensure compliance with employment / equalities legislation. Most relevant Policies include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bullying, Grievance and Harassment Policy – setting out Sovini Group’s zero tolerance stance to all forms of harassment in the workplace or associated with work related activities. This Policy has close links with the Disciplinary Policy and the Sovini commitment to fully investigate any allegations of harassment on any grounds and take action where staff are found to be responsible for these types of behaviour ○ Family Friendly Policy – setting out the provisions Sovini entities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No legal or regulatory challenges or prosecutions for breach of equalities legislation on record • Modern Slavery Act compliance actions and statements in place • Chain of custody accreditations in place for timber imports (to ensure all timber products come from sustainable and ethical sources i.e. they are free from exploitative working practices such as forced child labour) • Preferred supplier arrangements require proof of equality, diversity and inclusion commitments and prosecutions and these are monitored for compliance • Equality diversity and inclusion Policies in place for individual entities and commitment backed by Group-wide Policy Statements • Key partner in local strategic forums e.g. safeguarding, corporate parenting etc.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Suitable signage with appropriate colour contrast ○ Appropriate floor and wall contrast ○ Disabled toilet facilities ○ Correct counter height for reception facility ○ Accessible internal turning circles for wheelchair use ○ Hearing loop facility ○ Accessible IT Suite –suitable for a variety of users ○ Accessible interview facilities (Registered Providers only) ○ Telephone interpretation service available ● Wide range of methods available for customer access to services including face-to-face, telephone, email, website and social media with specialist support available for vulnerable customers e.g. home visits and assisted bidding for housing applicants (registered providers only) ● A number of specialist support services are available to sustain tenancies for vulnerable groups e.g. comprehensive aids and adaptations service (assisting customers with disabilities – registered providers only) 	<p>have in place to facilitate maternity, paternity, adoption and surrogacy arrangements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Special Leave and Flexible Working Policy – Including details of Sovini entities response for dealing with flexible working requests (as outlined in the ‘Children and Families Act 2014’) ● High levels of staff profile information available which can be analysed against recruitment / promotion and staff satisfaction results for any anomalies, under-representation or potential barriers to progression ● Mandatory equality diversity inclusion training via e-learning in place for existing staff and as part of induction / on-boarding which is regularly refreshed ● Free to access employee assistance scheme available – with referral to specialist support groups and advice for any member of staff that may be experiencing issues impacting on their wellbeing (either work related or in their personal life outside of the workplace) ● Internal staff surveys / feedback and those linked to external awards and accreditations e.g. Great Places to Work and Investors in People show high levels 	<p>and have played a key role in Local Authority ‘Cell Meetings’ to deliver vital services to vulnerable customers during Covid19 pandemic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● PCHA is a specialist BME housing provider for the Chinese and South East Asian communities in the Liverpool City Region and is a member of the BME National - (A national collective of housing associations promoting equality and diversity in the delivery of housing and support services) ● Provided sponsorship and wider financial support for cultural events and initiatives to promote racial harmony, cultural awareness, celebrating diversity e.g. Liverpool Pride, Community-led Chinese New Year Celebrations, Anthony Walker Foundation community events and the ‘World in One City’ – multi nations football tournament in association with Liverpool County Football Association
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguarding provisions in place to protect vulnerable groups – Sovini-wide, including policies, procedures, staff training and mobile reporting applications (includes areas where there are equalities implications concerns raised in regard to age, gender, race, modern slavery) • No current or historic complaints / legal challenges against Sovini companies on equalities grounds and full compliance with Equalities Act and, where applicable, regulatory requirements e.g. Regulatory Framework for Social Housing Providers (applicable to registered providers only) and Charities Commission compliance (PoS) • Effective policies and procedures in place for tackling hate crime (including office facilities as hate crime reporting centres) 	<p>of satisfaction / perception with equalities provisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-team staff Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group established to drive forward actions and agenda • Regular ‘E &D Focus-On’ communications to all staff to raise awareness of equalities issues and start conversations at team meetings • The Group continues to buck the national trend on gender pay, with a gap of - 6.20% in 2020/21 in favour of female employees (a reduction of 10% in the last four years) • The Sovini Group has been recognised as the ‘UK’s Best Workplace for Women’ three years running in the UK Best Places to Work awards • Strong culture and track record of promoting employee health and wellbeing including mental health as demonstrated by achievement of Investors in People – Platinum Standard • Mental Health Awareness training rolled out to all managers • Sovini Group members are recognised as being Disability Confident Employers (demonstrating an active commitment to employing and retaining disabled employees) and adopted the Mindful 	
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	Employer Charter (outlining the commitment to promote better mental health at work)	
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Where do we want to be?

As with everything we do in the Sovini Group we want to constantly improve and will strive to be the best that we can. The boxed section below highlights specific areas across our role as service providers, employers and business entities where we want to improve and will focus our efforts on but we also believe it is important to highlight ‘why’ do this and what benefits it will bring.

Listed below is the ‘rationale’ or ‘thinking’ behind our support for promoting equality and diversity and inclusion in everything the Sovini Group does:

- We believe, as a Group built on sound ethical principles and commitment to excellent customer services, that promoting equality, celebrating diversity and facilitating inclusion are the right and just things to do
- We believe in diverse communities where everyone regardless of their personal characteristics, background or beliefs is treated fairly and given the same access to opportunities and services, tailored to individual needs
- We believe we can make a positive contribution in eliminating all forms of discrimination, victimisation and harassment
- We believe that diverse workforces with a wealth of cultural influence are more innovative, productive and lead to better decision making
- We believe in our role as influencers and leaders to drive positive change in the communities we represent and work in
- We believe that that promoting equality, celebrating diversity and facilitating inclusion makes good business sense

Key Areas for Action		
Customer Service Delivery	Role as Employers	Role as Business Entities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be recognised by customers as being fair and equitable service providers and attract new customers from diverse backgrounds • Provide a range of services that have been tested and are regularly audited for ease of accessibility for all groups and needs • Provide choice and support to customers who may be vulnerable in any way, helping them to live independent lives, sustain tenancies (registered providers only), take an active part in community lives and add value to those communities • Go beyond legal and regulatory minimum requirements and develop and adopt best practice that is learnt from other providers and by working in partnership with representative groups and advocacy services • Build upon existing customer engagement structures to ensure there are clear lines of influence and feedback between customers and governance arrangements / decision making for Sovini entities, taking lived experiences of equalities issues into consideration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to meet all legislative and regulatory requirements (exceeding statutory minimums) • Attract and retain the best people and increase the diversity of the workforce at all levels (reflecting the make-up of the communities in which we operate) • Continue to narrow gaps and champion a 'levelling up agenda' e.g. our progress in gender pay gap reporting • Increase staff satisfaction / perception of Sovini as a fair and equitable employers and address any areas of dissatisfaction or under-performance with guidance from the Sovini Staff Equalities Steering Group / Champions • Ensure equality, diversity and inclusion considerations are at the forefront of risk assessments / provisions for staff health and wellbeing activity as a result of Group-wide adoption of agile working methods • Retain / achieve awards and externally verified accreditations that demonstrate Sovini commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion provision and commitments and that act as driver of continuous improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure strategic direction of the Sovini Group entities is informed by diverse opinion / lived experience (as more diverse teams are proven to add value to business decision making) • Be a partners of choice for business activity based on our strong support for equality, diversity and inclusion with like-minded companies in supply chain management and any joint ventures • Increase influence at local / regional strategic forums including statutory delivery partners such as local and combined authorities to champion equality agenda and support national campaigns, where applicable

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate how Sovini entities meet (not as a legal requirement but as best practice) Public Sector Equality duties 		
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How are we going to get there?

The flowing section considers the Strategic Aims outlined above on page 6, our assessment of ‘where we want to be’ and translates these into actions or ‘objectives’ that we intend to undertake over the next five years.

As this is the first version of the Sovini Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy to incorporate all Group members, target dates and milestones for completion have yet to be confirmed. The high level actions identified below will be incorporated into cross-organisational annual Service Delivery Plans and when these are established future revisions of this Strategy will include specific time-bound targets where these are applicable.

Key Areas for Action		
Customer Service Delivery	Role as Employers	Role as Business Entities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build on the improved reporting capabilities / analytics of customer profile information established in 2020/21 across a wider range service of delivery areas and make results available for senior management teams, Boards of Sovini entities and customer representation groups Develop campaign to complete datasets of customer profiling information where information is missing across certain categories and improve capture of whole 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop staff led equality, diversity and inclusion support networks and initiatives Retain / achieve awards and externally verified accreditations e.g. Navajo Develop campaign to capture complete datasets on staff profiling information Amend internal staff satisfaction monitoring to ensure it fully captures perception of equality diversity provisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish partnership working with fellow housing providers as part of Liverpool City Region Housing Association Group to share best practice / benchmarking information / promotion of events on equality, diversity and inclusion issues Increase active membership of local strategic forums to influence equality issues Improved marketing of Sovini Group offer with stance on equality, diversity

<p>household information beyond lead tenants (registered providers only)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish customer-led equality, diversity and inclusion focus groups (with interest in specific protected characteristics – where appropriate) or work with existing representative structure to incorporate equality aspects into their remit e.g. Tenant Scrutiny Groups. Work collaboratively with customer representative groups and Sovini Equalities Steering Group on problem solving where any discrepancies or potential barriers to service are identified and develop mitigation measures • Provide equality , diversity and inclusion training for involved customers • Develop greater customer involvement in Equality Impact Assessment process for changes to service provision • Develop better signposting to support networks / partnership working with external agencies • Through marketing and website promote awareness and participation in local cultural events • Provide dedicated funding and administration support for customers to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce regular equality, diversity and inclusion broadcasts via CEO’s Vlog • Establish links with local equality, diversity and inclusion networks and advocacy groups and use to broaden appeal / coverage of vacancies • Review recruitment pages on website to ensure there is clear support / encouragement of more diverse range of applicants • Create online diversity forum via internal communication channels (Ourspace and Microsoft Teams) • Capture equalities information at shortlisting stage of job application • Review manager recruitment training to include awareness of unconscious bias in shortlisting and selection • Establish links with local training colleges to promote ‘Woman into trades’ campaign and develop guaranteed interview scheme for female applicants for trade vacancies • Continue to facilitate equality, diversity and inclusion awareness raising campaigns and participation events • Use National Housing Federation EDI Data Toll to compare workforce to communities in which we operate (registered providers only) 	<p>and inclusion as a selling point for like-minded companies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate strong performance and track record on equality, diversity and inclusion provisions as part of Environment Social Governance (ESG) reporting and in market opportunities with funding providers • Develop sponsorship opportunities to promote local equality advocacy groups and events
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<p>hold their own cultural enrichment and awareness raising events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure customer satisfaction and perception monitoring captures customer opinions on equality, diversity and inclusion performance and benchmark results with peer providers to set targets for improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop race pay gap reporting similar to gender pay gap reporting • Contribute to sector wide reporting being developed by National Housing Federation on equalities monitoring • Develop new Domestic Abuse Policy (registered providers only) 	
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How are we going to measure it?

We know that there will be wider business benefits from delivering on the actions outlined above and additional improvements we identify as this Strategy evolves and progresses. Promoting equality, celebrating diversity and facilitating inclusion will enrich the communities we operate in, make working for the Sovini Group a better all-round experience and will improve performance and profitability.

It may be difficult to attribute some of these wider benefits directly to the actions outlined above although we will monitor the overall impacts over time. Listed below, however, are the ways in which we will be able to assess the direct effectiveness / impacts of our equality, diversity and inclusion actions:

Key Areas for Action		
Customer Service Delivery	Role as Employers	Role as Business Entities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transactional surveys and satisfaction monitoring • STAR surveys (applicable to registered providers) • Focus Group feedback (internal and customer-led) • Benchmarking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff survey results • Diversified workforce – as evidenced by staff profiling information • Collated feedback from job applicants (both successful and unsuccessful) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal / regulatory compliance • 360° feedback from partners / wider businesses