

# Diversity and Inclusion Policy



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<b>Version:</b>	4
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<b>Issue date:</b>	24 July 2024
<b>Review date:</b>	24 July 2026

## 1. Purpose

This policy outlines Women's Housing Ltd's (WHL) commitment and practices in creating a safe, accessible and inclusive environment for all renters and clients from diverse backgrounds.

## 2. Scope

This policy applies to all clients and renters who access WHL's services, as well as any stakeholders who interact with WHL.

## 3. Values and principles

WHL's values include:

- **Respect:** a commitment to treating all individuals with dignity and respect, regardless of their background, identity or circumstances
- **Equality:** all clients have equal access to housing services regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability or socioeconomic status
- **Diversity:** there is strength in diversity and individuals from different backgrounds bring value to communities
- **Inclusion:** all clients should feel welcome and valued when accessing WHL's service
- **Empowerment:** clients are encouraged to advocate for their needs and rights and will be supported to do this
- **Collaboration:** partnerships and collaboration with diverse stakeholders such as clients, support services and community groups creates better outcomes
- **Continuous learning:** ongoing education and training for staff will ensure safety and sensitivity in service delivery

## 4. Statement of commitment

WHL recognises that social exclusion and discrimination can be a key driver of homelessness and creates barriers for individuals to seek assistance. WHL is committed to providing a service that is equitable, empowering and safe to ensure that clients and renters from diverse backgrounds can access the best outcomes possible.

WHL commits to:

- Recognising individual differences, contributions and needs
- Providing services to clients regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, age, disability, gender, sexuality, criminal justice history, or other identity

- Ensuring staff assess and overcome their own bias so that all clients receive the highest standard of care
- Constantly striving to improve service delivery to clients from diverse backgrounds through ongoing learning, collaboration and training
- Supporting strong and diverse communities by promoting a sense of belonging and respect
- Actively contributing to community network groups, events and celebrations relating to diversity
- Acknowledging, respecting and adhering to the cultural protocols practised by individual communities

## **5. LGBTQIA+**

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Asexual community may experience discrimination and exclusion when seeking services in the community housing sector.

### **5.1 Barriers to accessing housing**

LGBTQIA+ persons:

- Are more at risk of homelessness and are overrepresented in homeless populations
- Often become homeless at a younger age
- Are specifically at risk of homophobic and transphobic violence, harassment, and discrimination while on the streets and while accessing services, and;
- Often have specific safety and support needs which are not being met within the mainstream homeless system.

LGBTQIA+ clients and renters are at risk of being re-victimised when accessing services in the housing sector, which may lead to some feeling less at risk living on the street.

Fear of being rejected by from gender-specific services is also common, especially for transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse people.

### **5.2 How WHL communicates with LGBTQIA+ persons**

WHL will aim to:

- Forms and data entry fields include a 'prefer not to say' option and an option to self-describe one's sexual orientation, gender, pronouns and title
- Staff use gender neutral greetings and pronouns until checked with the client about their pronouns
- Staff use a person's preferred name and do not use their 'dead name' (i.e., name given at birth) unless absolutely necessary and in consultation with the client
- Staff are adequately resourced and trained in how to ask questions concerning LGBTQIA+ status sensitively
- All staff have a high level of understanding of the LGBTQIA+ culture and lived experience and value the diversity that the LGBTQIA+ community brings to the world
- Staff understand the significance of intersectionality
- Staff know that gender, sexuality and the language a person uses to describe themselves can change over time
- Staff check what name, pronoun and titles a client may wish to use in written correspondence, such as referral letters

### **5.3 How WHL creates a safe environment**

To make WHL a welcoming environment for LGBTQIA+ clients, WHL aims to:

- Provide specific accommodation needs such as gender inclusive bathrooms with lockable doors
- Ensure Codes of Conduct are in place to protect the rights of LGBTQIA+ clients
- Display welcoming and inclusive signage and information for LGBTQIA+ clients
- Specifically state that homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and prejudice against intersex people is not tolerated
- Celebrate important dates for LGBTQIA+ people such as Transgender Day of Visibility, Intersex Awareness Day, Pride, and Wear It Purple
- Assess and monitor LGBTQIA+ inclusive practice through client surveys and staff supervision

### **5.4 Family violence**

Family violence can often present uniquely in LGBTQIA+ relationships. Some LGBTQIA+ people can experience forms of family violence that can be referred to as 'identity-based abuse.' This can include behaviours such as:

- Pressuring a person to conform to gender norms or stop them from seeking gender affirming care
- Threatening to 'out' a person's gender or sexuality
- Forcing a family member into conversion therapy
- Exiling a person from the family due to their sexuality or gender

WHL staff will utilise an intersectional lens when applying the MARAM Framework in situations where family violence is suspected in LGBTQIA+ relationships.

## **6. Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)**

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) refers to individuals who have cultural or language backgrounds that differ from the majority or "Anglo-centric" Australian culture. This includes those who communicate in languages other than English.

### **6.1 Barriers to accessing housing**

Individuals from CALD communities are less likely to use homelessness services than other clients. Clients from CALD communities may experience difficulties accessing housing services due to language barriers, culturally unsafe practices, discrimination and racism, and overly complicated processes and systems.

### **6.2 How WHL create a safe environment**

To make WHL a safe environment for individuals from CALD communities, WHL aims to:

- Ensure factsheets, policies and other resources are written in simple terms and not overly complicated
- Ensure WHL staff are available to explain processes and systems to clients in a clear manner
- Develop relationships of trust and cooperation with CALD communities
- Train staff on common cultural customs so that communication is respectful and culturally appropriate for each client
- Offer flexible scheduling options for appointments or meetings where possible to accommodate cultural practices or religious observances

- Educate staff on the significance of religious attire or symbols to avoid misunderstandings or discomfort
- Respect dietary restrictions or preferences when organising events or providing meals
- Train staff to provide culturally sensitive services that respects individuals' beliefs, values and preferences
- Highlight success stories or contributions from the CALD community within WHL through newsletters, network groups or internal communications
- Actively listen to feedback and take steps to address issues raised by the community
- Establish relationships with local community leaders or organisations representing CALD communities to understand their needs and concerns
- Celebrate diversity by organising cultural awareness events or workshops that promote understanding and appreciate of different cultures

### **6.3 Using an interpreter**

WHL will ensure that all clients and renters can communicate in a preferred language. See WHL's *Using Interpreters* Policy for more information about how to access interpreter services when engaging with WHL.

## **7. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are 15 times more likely than non-Indigenous Peoples to be homeless or at risk of homelessness. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples also experience unique pathways into homelessness and often encounter serious discrimination in the private rental market. WHL is committed to creating a culturally safe service that reflects the commitments of its Reconciliation Action Plan.

### **7.1 Barriers to accessing housing**

A history of dispossession, racism, economic disadvantage and cultural oppression has created a culturally unsafe environment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples may encounter barriers to accessing safe and secure housing due to the following:

- Lack of culturally safe services
- Language barriers
- Low incomes
- Confusing systems with demanding paperwork requirements
- Lack of tenancy history
- Geographical limitations, such as moving away from one's Country
- Distrust of Anglo-centric services due to historical injustices

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples also experience tenancy management practices that may not suit their needs, such as differing communication styles.

### **7.2 How WHL creates a culturally safe environment**

WHL aims to shape its service to meet the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander renters wherever possible. This includes implementing practices such as:

- Focusing on tenancy sustainment from early signs of tenancy issues
- Ensuring communication occurs in the preferred method, such as via telephone, email or letter

- Working cooperatively with Aboriginal Support Services with consent of renters
- Asking preferred titles and names
- Training staff in understanding the history of colonisation and its ongoing impacts
- Aligning WHL with best practice cultural safety frameworks
- Participating in network groups and working groups to contribute to and learn about cultural safety in the sector
- To consider the specific impacts of tenancy decisions on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander renters before taking formal action against a tenancy
- To seek feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and renters about how WHL can provide a safer environment
- To address complaints about cultural safety fairly and swiftly
- Implementing WHL's Reconciliation Action Plan
- Participating in events such as NAIDOC and Reconciliation Week

### **7.3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation**

For more detailed information about WHL's commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety, see WHL's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation Policy* and WHL's *Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan*

## **8. Persons with a Disability**

The social model of disability views disability as the result of an environment with physical or social barriers that is failing to meet the needs of the individual. This is different from the medical model of disability which implies the 'problem' lies within the individual themselves. WHL take a social model approach to creating a safe environment for renters or clients with a disability and aims to tailor services to meet individual needs.

### **8.1 Barriers to accessing housing**

People with a disability can experience several barriers to accessing housing, including:

- Lack of physically accessible housing, such as an absence of ramps, elevators or accessible bathrooms
- Inadequate space, layout or egress of housing that hinders the use of mobility aids
- Limited availability of accessible housing options
- Higher costs of accessible housing options compared to standard housing
- Discrimination in the private rental market by property owners
- Negative attitudes and stereotypes about disabilities leading to social exclusion
- Insufficient availability of support services such as health care, community resources or personal care assistance within a proximity
- Lower incomes due to reliance on Disability Support Pension or family members

### **8.2 How WHL creates a safe and accessible environment**

WHL will prioritise accessibility, respect, autonomy and ensure equitable access to housing services by:

- Ensuring modification requests are processed in a transparent and speedy manner

- Communicating with clients / renters in their preferred manner, which takes into consideration alternative communication methods and accessibility, including arranging an Australian Sign Language interpreter where necessary
- Ensuring that information about housing policies is accessible to renters with diverse disabilities, including availability in accessible formats
- Working closely with support services with consent from renters and where relevant to assist renters to sustain tenancies
- Linking renters in with relevant support services to assist them to meet their obligations as renters
- Developing emergency response plans that meet the needs of renters with disabilities, including using evacuation procedures at relevant properties. These may be person centred and specific to the individual's requirements.
- Establishing partnerships with local organisations or service providers to enhance support services for renters
- Seeking and implementing feedback from renters with a disability about WHL's service and accessibility
- Considering accessible infrastructure when identifying property development projects, such as seeking proximity to health care services
- Regularly checking in with renters with a disability to ensure they feel safe in their home
- Training staff on appropriate language and behaviour that is sensitive and empowering for people with a disability

## **9. Older People**

Older women are specifically vulnerable to homelessness and WHL aims to provide a service that considers the unique needs of older renters.

### **9.1 Barriers to accessing housing**

Some of the key factors that drive homelessness among older people include:

- Lack of available housing around family, health practitioners and community groups
- Lack of accessible housing that can meet the physical requirements to live independently
- Lack of financial security, such as limited superannuation or living off the Aged Pension
- Situations of elder abuse, including where it is unsafe for older people to remain living at the current arrangement

### **9.2 How WHL will create a safe service**

WHL will ensure a safe service for older people by:

- Providing information about WHL's services in a simple and straightforward manner
- Engaging with any relevant carers, family members or support services as requested by the renter or client
- Regularly checking in on older renters to ensure they are well supported, including making referrals to appropriate supports if necessary
- Ensuring communication is available in appropriate methods, taking into account the potential for limited technology accessibility
- Responding to modification requests in a timely and fair manner
- Seeking and implementing feedback from older renters to ensure WHL's service is safe and accessible for them

## 10. Criminal History

WHL understand the pathways into the criminal justice system are complex, and often arise from issues of family violence, poverty and drug or alcohol dependence. Further, WHL note that certain populations are over-policed and overrepresented in custodial settings, such as First Nations women and people with an intellectual disability. Persons with a criminal history experience serious discrimination in the private housing market, job market and social environment. WHL aims to empower people who have previously been incarcerated to have successful and sustainable tenancies.

Staff will:

- Avoid using stigmatising language when engaging with previously incarcerated renters and will treat them with the same respect as any other renter.
- Take a coaching approach to ensure that any tenancy issues are handled proactively, and support referrals are available if the renter's tenancy is at risk.
- Clearly set out tenancy expectations from an early stage so that renters know their obligations under the law

## 11. Staff Training and Awareness

WHL is committed to the ongoing training and development of staff to create a safe service for socially vulnerable individuals. Staff will discuss diversity and inclusion in regular meetings and supervision sessions and will attend trainings that are relevant to the sector.

WHL's Diversity Committee will meet regularly to discuss and develop work practices that ensure renters and clients are represented appropriately. This will include identifying gaps in knowledge and training, reviewing communication strategies, updating policies and procedures, and undertaking diversity audits.

## 12. Complaints

Renters and clients are encouraged to make a complaint if they feel that WHL has acted in a discriminative or culturally unsafe manner. WHL's *Complaints and Appeals Policy* contains more information about this process.

## 13. Responsibilities

### 13.1 Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

The CEO, in association with the CFO, will approve the annual staff development/training program

### 13.2 Operations Manager (OM)

The OM is responsible for:

- Determining training priorities based on the legal responsibilities, funding requirements and established strategic directions of WHL.
- Overseeing the training and performance plans of WHL staff; and
- Respond to complaints about diversity and inclusion at WHL

### **13.3 Line Managers**

Line Managers will:

- Ensure that social inclusion and workplace diversity principles are integrated with and underpin all aspects of their work.
- Ensure procedures are implemented that reduce client disadvantage, such as one on one meetings to address any diverse challenged issues with individual staff.
- Ensure this policy is implemented in their workplace.

### **13.4 Staff/Students/Volunteers**

All employees, students and volunteers shall:

- Assess their own prejudices to ensure that all clients receive the highest standard of care; and
- Actively participate in implementing processes that reduce client disadvantage.

## **14. Relevant Legislation**

- *Residential Tenancies Act 1997 (Vic)*
- *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)*
- *Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)*
- *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)*
- *Sex Discrimination Act 1982 (Cth)*

## **15. Related Documents**

- WHL Complaints and Appeals Policy
- WHL Use of Interpreters Policy
- WHL Reconciliation Action Plan
- WHL Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation Policy
- WHL Code of Conduct
- WHL Staff Development Policy
- WHL Customer Service Charter
- WHL Community Engagement Policy