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INTRODUCTION

As an organisation we are committed to promoting diversity and equality for employees and stakeholders.

As an organisation delivering public functions we have a statutory duty to comply with the General Equality Duty of the Equality Act 2010. This Act simplified and strengthened previous anti-discrimination legislation. It provides a comprehensive legal framework to protect the rights of individuals, and to promote a fair and more equal society.

Under this duty we must have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other prohibited conduct;
- advance equality of opportunity between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not; and
- foster good relations between people sharing protected characteristics and those who do not.

The nine 'protected characteristics' are:

- age
- disability
- gender
- gender reassignment
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sexual orientation.
- marriage and civil partnership (with regard to eliminating unlawful discrimination in employment).

In 2016, the specific duties were amended to include a new duty on Board diversity.

This is our first equalities mainstreaming report. We intend to publish further reports on our progress every two years.

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

WICS was formed on 1 July 2005 under the Water Services etc. (Scotland) Act 2005.

In summary, our role is to:

- promote the interests of Scottish Water's customers, having regard to the interests of both today's customers and of future customers;
- ensure that customer charges reflect the lowest reasonable overall cost for Scottish Water to deliver the Scottish Ministers' Objectives;
- comment on Scottish Water's reporting of its performance, challenging Scottish Water to become more efficient and sustainable;
- facilitate the entry of retail water and sewerage providers that wish to supply non-household customers in Scotland; and
- support the Scottish Government's vision of ensuring that Scotland is a Hydro Nation, thereby meeting our obligations under the Water Resource Act 2013.

We are accountable – through the Scottish Ministers – to the Scottish Parliament, and ultimately, to water and sewerage customers in Scotland. We achieve this by being transparent about our work, and by engaging and consulting with others. We also publish information, in our annual report, about the progress we have made against the commitments we set out in our Corporate Plan commitments.

HOW WE MAINSTREAM EQUALITY

Our objective is to mainstream equality into our day-to-day activities and to align equality more closely within our organisational strategy and corporate plan. We have outlined below the steps we are taking to do this.

Awareness raising and support

As a non-departmental public body, we are able to draw on the Scottish Government's civil service learning platform. This platform has been used to provide staff with equalities training; for example, on LGBT awareness. Our aim is to increase the visibility of equality issues, embed the learning in staff and further influence mainstreaming of equality of opportunity in our organisation.

Equalities training will form part of our induction programme going forward, and refresher training will be made available for all staff.

We have set out our equal opportunities policy in our employee handbook. This handbook also includes family-friendly policies to help our staff manage maternity, adoption and paternity leave.

We offer a free confidential Employee Assistance Programme that is available to all staff. This service provides counselling and information to help staff with personal or work-related problems that may affect their wellbeing or performance.

Accessibility and inclusion

We want to make our workplaces and services as accessible and inclusive as possible.

Our Central Office Team makes sure that staff have the equipment they need to carry out their roles as comfortably as possible. The team purchases any specialised equipment that is required, and ensure that any other reasonable adjustments to the working environment that staff require are made.

We strive to make sure that all of our stakeholders can access information they require from us, and that they can communicate with us should they wish to make a specific request. As part of this work we are currently undertaking a branding and website development project that has accessibility at its core. We have been working with the Scottish Government's Digital First Standards Team and our experienced website developers to ensure that our website achieves an 'AA' rating of the W3C accessibility standards.

We will achieve this through accessible design, content, layout and navigation. Each of these areas is robustly researched and tested by seeking the views of stakeholders through research, workshops and online user testing, as well as interactive sessions that specifically explore design and functionality. Our website designers have various technologies and tools available to them to identify and address accessibility issues.

Understanding the diversity of our workforce

We collect and maintain information on how diverse our workforce is.

As of 31 March 2021, we had 28 employees with a split of 46% female and 54% male.

In a bid to recruit a more diverse workforce, we have set out to make sure that our recruitment activities are fair and inclusive, and that reasonable adjustments are made to help those who need them.

Over the years, we have improved both the way we advertise our jobs, for example by posting on social media, and the ways in which we assess candidates. We ensure that our selection panel consists of at least three experienced members, has a balance of genders, and includes people from different parts of the organisation. We use a selection of tools such as in-tray exercises and recorded presentations to help us progress candidates through our recruitment campaigns, rather than focussing on a set-piece interview. Being an inclusive and non-discriminatory employer, we actively monitor, identify and tackle any barriers of unconscious bias within our recruitment process and will work to ensure that our practices align with the Scottish Government's Minority Ethnic Recruitment toolkit.

Work/life balance and flexible working

We recognise that employees have responsibilities and varying commitments outside of work. Flexible and part-time working can not only support employees and their wellbeing, but also helps us to retain skills and experience in our workforce. We offer different flexible working models, accommodate part-time working, and are open to alternative flexible working arrangements in response to employee requests.

Board diversity

The WICS Board is responsible for the overall direction and performance of our organisation, including our efficiency and effectiveness as a public body.

The Scottish Ministers appoint the non-Executive members of the Board. The Board appoints the Chief Executive.

The Board comprises a Chair, three further non-executive members and the Chief Executive. Excluding the Chief Executive, the Board is split evenly with regards to gender.

Fair pay

Committed to fair pay, we follow the Scottish Government's pay policy. The overarching aim of the pay policy is to set pay increases in a way that is fair, progressive, restorative and affordable, protects the lower paid and protects jobs and services. The policy also promotes the wellbeing of public sector workers.

Through the pay policy process, we input directly to the *Scottish Government's Equality Outcomes and Mainstreaming Report*.

Each year, as part of our Annual Report and Financial statements, we publish a "Remuneration and staff report". This report outlines gender split, fair pay disclosure and details about our Board membership, as well as other metrics relating to the well-being of our employees.

Procurement

Our procurement process is in line with the Scottish Government's recommended model. A specific condition of contract clause is included in appropriate invitations to tender documents; the clause makes it a contractual requirement for all successful bidders to adhere strictly to their general duties under the Equality Act. In addition, where tenders are to be evaluated on the basis of the most economically advantageous tender, compliance with the 2010 Act is an award criterion.

Correspondence

During the period of this report, we have responded to two freedom of information requests relating to equality and diversity. We have not received any complaints relating to such matters.

NEXT STEPS

We are currently reviewing our approach to monitoring equality and diversity in the workplace and are considering how we can further raise awareness organisation wide.

We have committed to work with our HR advisors to develop appropriate training material which will be shared with all staff, including our senior management. This material will focus in particular on employment law, protected characteristics, unconscious bias, disability awareness, and the recruitment process itself.

To enhance our knowledge and understanding, we are planning to engage with and learn from relevant charities to gain a better understanding of the difficulties people face during their working career and during employment application stages.

We also intend to investigate the disability confident employer scheme to learn how we can improve the way we recruit, retain and develop disabled people. In addition, we are currently investigating the possibility of being recognised as an employer that is 'happy to talk flexible working'. We are keen to make this clear when we advertise any vacancies in future.