

**Improving staff equality
networks through
partnership working: A
good practice guide**

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Introduction

The NHS Staff Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group (EDIG) has produced this best practice guide to support joint partnership structures to work together with staff networks.

This guidance was developed following a survey and workshops with HR and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) representatives, staff-side chairs and staff network chairs. Access the summary of survey results for more detail on the responses we received.

NHS England and NHS Improvement has encouraged all NHS bodies in England to establish staff equality networks and to effectively support them to be a source of staff engagement and key feedback. Support for staff equality networks also forms part of the NHS People Plan's actions to promote staff health and wellbeing for all.

This guidance uses the term BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic), this means everyone who self-identifies their ethnicity as other than white British. Staff networks will use their own terms as agreed by the network themselves.

Roles and forums

To help understand how joint partnership structures can support staff networks we have included an outline of key roles and forums.

Staff networks

Staff networks are a group of colleagues, often with a shared heritage, experience or a characteristic, that come together to support each other and work with the organisation to improve staff experience. They exist in many different formats across organisations in the public, private, third sectors and the forces and are known by many different names and acronyms.

For example, in Parliament, they are called workplace equality networks (WENs). The most popular networks in most organisations are affinity groups that are linked to the protected characteristics of the Equality Act (2010) covering age, disability, race, religion, sex and sexual orientation.

EDIG's research found that the top five main areas of focus for staff networks in the NHS were:

1. being a safe space to raise concerns
2. the experience of staff at work, analysis of data, for example, local NHS Staff Survey results, Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) and Workforce Disability Equality Standard (WDES) (England sources)
3. action planning
4. peer support
5. disseminating best practice.

Joint negotiating committee (JNC) or joint partnership group

This is a body within an NHS organisation that is made up of elected, recognised, trained independent trade union representatives known as the staff side and management side representatives including HR. The JNC meets to discuss and consult on issues relating to staff, to negotiate and agree local policies and the implementation of nationally agreed terms and conditions of employment.

Trade union representatives have a range of legal rights to protect their independence and employers have a range of legal and collective agreement obligations to consult and negotiate with their recognised unions. The joint negotiating or partnership forum is the main vehicle for this.

It is good practice for JNCs to include a regular EDI agenda item and to analyse data, including local NHS Staff Survey results and equality data such as the WRES and WDES in England, and support action planning to improve the experience of staff at work.

EDI steering group/committee

This is a free-standing committee that brings together stakeholders such as staff side trade unions, EDI leads, network chairs and board members to advise on and co-ordinate the organisation's EDI strategy.

Trade union (TU) self-organised group

A network within an individual trade union which enables members with experiences in common to have a voice within the union, and to come together to support and work with each other to challenging discrimination and promoting equality in the workplace.

Health and safety committee

The health and safety committee is a formal committee that includes, managers and trade union safety representatives, working together to keep staff safe and healthy at work, removing potential hazards and reducing incidences of injuries, sickness absence and stress in the workplace.

The board

The board is an organisation's senior decision-making body, made up of executive and non-executive directors and charged with the effective stewardship of the organisation.

A staff-side chair is a leader elected for a set period of time by the recognised trade union representatives who form the staff-side. Most staff-sides will have their own terms of reference and constitution. The role of the staff-side chair is to act as the spokesperson for the trade union group, providing leadership and representing the views of the group and their members fairly and leading negotiations and engagement with the organisation's management. They also support effective partnership working, engaging with stakeholders and staff to ensure a diverse range of voices are engaged and that negotiation and consultation processes are properly followed.

Trade union (TU) equality representative

An elected representative in individual trade unions who focuses on equality. The role involves promoting fairness at work by encouraging employers to ensure EDI is prioritised within an organisation and ensuring that every member of staff receives fair treatment.

Freedom to speak up ambassador/guardian

A role employed in all NHS trusts in England to provide an alternative way for staff to raise concerns, acting as an independent source of advice,

They are supported by voluntary freedom to speak up ambassadors who act as champions for the agenda. They also ensure issues are raised at a senior level of an organisation. The freedom to speak up role was

introduced as a result of recommendations from the Francis review of Mid Staffordshire Hospital.

Facility time

This is time off from an individual's job, granted by the employer, to enable an elected trade union representative to carry out their role. Trade union workplace representatives have a legal right to paid time off for the purpose of carrying out their duties. Duties include collective bargaining on terms and conditions of employment, redundancies, job evaluation, policy development, disciplinary or bullying and harassment as well as representing individual trade union members in disciplinary and grievance proceedings, information and consultation, meeting with management and keeping trade union members informed about negotiations.

Guidance to joint partnership structures

With the focus on strengthening the role of staff networks, it is likely that most organisations will be looking to set up new networks or review existing ones. Joint partnership structures are well-placed to offer expertise and support to their employer in this work.

This guidance sets how joint partnership structures can work together to facilitate the creation of strong staff networks. This includes establishing effective ways of working across the organisation with clear lines of accountability and understanding of respective roles and responsibilities. This can also support the sustainability of networks, as it ensures that structures are established if staff network or partnership forum representatives change.

1. Set up

Joint partnership structures should offer advice on the following aspects of setting up or reviewing networks.

Maximising participation

Networks need to be inclusive and draw membership from across the whole workforce.

Joint partnership structures can play a role by:

- identifying gaps in demographic data and agreeing actions to improve data levels
- advising on how to get information about the networks to under-represented groups
- getting agreement that all eligible staff are entitled to time off to participate in network meetings and dealing in partnership with any issues or difficulties that arise with this

networks.

Support and resources

For networks to be sustainable and effective they need to be supported and resourced.

Joint partnership structures can advise on:

- setting a budget and accounting processes for the network and how admin support will be provided
- drawing up agreements on protected time and backfill for network leadership positions, being clear that this protected time is separate and distinct from trade union facility time, and in situations where these positions are filled by TU reps, this time will be in addition to time off for their trade union role
- other facilities to help networks be effective including access to technology, communications channels, meeting space and events organisation
- identifying and meeting training needs for leadership roles.

See our top 10 tips detailed in the 'getting started' chapter. These tips may help network leads think through their role and how to get started.

Leadership

Networks require leadership teams who can organise the work programme and represent the network in engagements with organisational structures, including the board, the joint partnership forum and other committees.

For networks to thrive, leadership needs to be inclusive and sustainable with attention to succession-planning.

Current practice shows there are a range of different leadership roles in use, including chair, vice-chair secretary, management committees and approaches to filling them, including elections from among the staff

eligible for the network, secondments, development time, or creation of specific posts and recruiting to them.

Joint partnership structures can advise on pros and cons and a range of issues which may arise depending on the model chosen:

- Good practice around terms of office, which balance time and space for individual development, against the need to refresh and bring through new leaders.
- The fair and democratic processes for running elections.
- Taking account of the role in appraisals and objective setting.
- Job evaluation issues where specific posts are created – and assessment of the impact of paid roles on ability to speak up.
- Mentoring and support arrangements for leaders – staff side and management-side chairs could play a role in this.

Terms of reference

Joint partnership structures can advise on terms of reference and good practice around reflection and review. Those responsible for setting up a network may want to use our detailed checklist found in the annex.

Joint partnership structures will have particular expertise to offer in areas such as, decision-making and voting, confidentiality and information governance and meeting organisation.

2. Ways of working

EDIG's research found that the majority of staff network chairs felt that their network would benefit from the support of both HR/EDI and trade union representatives. We also found that when EDI was included as an

agenda item at JNCs, that overwhelmingly, the relevant staff network chair was invited to contribute. This provides a good link and can ensure that work programmes complement each other and areas where closer working could be of benefit are identified. At the workshops EDIG ran we often heard about the good relationships in workplaces that have meant potential issues could be resolved quickly.

We also found that many staff network chairs had dual roles such as, trade union reps and freedom to speak up ambassadors, creating natural links between these forums and areas of work. Where this isn't the case there might not be a formal link between networks and other forums. Setting up a formal relationship between network chairs and joint partnership groups ensures there are structural links which remain, whoever is in post.

Joint partnerships can establish these links in a variety of ways:

- through regular check-ins with management side and staff side leads
- a regular agenda item with contributions from network chairs at JNC meetings
- at relevant sub committees, for example EDI or policy steering groups.

It will also be helpful to agree mechanisms for networks to bringing relevant issues to JNCs, both formally and informally.

Many networks have specific membership positions for staff-side leads which means they can ensure good links and information flow between structures and offer their expertise and support to network members.

Links with health and safety structures

Health and safety committees are another forum where links with staff networks may usefully be established. Bullying and harassment will often be a key health and safety concern for staff networks and one where health and safety committees may well be supporting wider work to

change organisational cultures. The NHS Staff Council Health, Safety and Wellbeing Partnership Group has produced useful information on bullying at work: Bullying in healthcare - NHS Employers.

Access to trade unions

While much of the support to networks can and should be provided jointly, it is also beneficial for network leads to have access to staff side leads to seek advice and feedback on areas of concern or intelligence that they may not feel able to raise formally and directly with the employer. Trade union engagement with network members will help identify issues which are more appropriately dealt with as casework rather than networking or peer support.

In England direct channels through to freedom to speak up guardians will also be helpful.

Access to the organisation's board

Networks will be most effective if they have visible and high-level support and engagement from the board of the organisation. This could take the form of board director sponsors or champions, and regular attendance and reporting at board meetings.

Joint partnership forums can facilitate and support this by ensuring board engagement takes place and ensuring board-level understanding of respective roles, responsibilities and work programmes and how they interact.

3. Work programmes

Staff networks need to identify the priorities their members wish to work on and agree objectives and work programmes which are realistic and achievable. EDIG's survey found that the areas of their work that network

leads felt would most benefit from the support of trade union and EDI/HR support were:

- disseminating best practice and initiatives
- helping to identify members to carry out specific roles such as mentors, recruitment panel members
- pre-emptive vetting of disciplinary proceedings.
- Consultation with Joint partnership structures to establish how network work programmes interact with joint partnership agendas will be key.

There will be key areas of joint negotiating and consultation work to which partnerships may wish to seek input from networks. These include:

- reviewing HR policies
- issues on relevant pay, terms and conditions
- raising concerns
- issues with bullying, harassment and violence
- health and wellbeing.

It's important to agree how this input will be sought including timelines and channels for exchange of information and submission of views. For example, draft policies might be shared with network leads for comments, staff aside and management side might attend network meetings and run engagement sessions on a particular topic.

Organisational action planning around issues of workforce race, disability and other equality strands should be done in partnership. Engaging unions and staff networks as sources of information and feedback on staff experiences and providing opportunities to influence and shape action plans

Joint partnership structures should engage the views of staff networks in assessing and monitoring effectiveness and impact of action plans and formulating changes and improvements.

Getting started

Top 10 tips for network leads

Be clear on your super objective – what is it you want to change or make happen, consider a timeline to maintain focus?

Map out who your stakeholders are/ who you need to influence?

Articulate who your members will be – map out the membership.

Develop your terms of reference.

Establish your governance structure.

Map your actions to address measurable change – check against your organisation's inclusion and diversity strategy.

Develop a communications plan – to attract members and to work on the activities.

Welcome everyone and listen to their ideas.

If you are the founder of the network, always bring the work of the network back to the core objective.

Remember, your role is more to signpost to support, than to solve issues.

Advice on drawing up terms of reference

Things to consider include the following:

1. Aims

- A name for the staff network.
- Its role and responsibilities.

- Who is eligible to participate? Is it only for staff with the relevant protected characteristic or experience, or is it open to allies?