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A GUIDE TO ESTABLISHING STAFF NETWORKS

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Report

A guide to establishing staff networks

Contents

Acknowledgements

① Introduction

In recent years there has been an increased interest from employers in providing avenues for employee voice, not just for the workforce as a whole but for specific groups of employees from traditionally disadvantaged or minority demographics. This generally takes the form of ethnic minority, women's, LGBT+ or disability networks in the workplace, often as part of a broader workplace agenda to promote diversity and inclusion. In 2020, with the Black Lives Matter movement focusing global attention on the discrimination faced by ethnic minorities, there is an increased urgency in ensuring employers are providing a meaningful voice for their black and ethnic minority staff.

Different employers, however, have very different ideas of what it means to establish a network in their workplace. For some, this is primarily a discussion forum, where staff can come together to share their experiences and support one another. For others, it is a platform for raising awareness of or advocacy for issues facing these groups within management and the wider workforce. In practice, networks can fulfil any or all of these functions. However, if they are to be effective tools in improving inclusivity and tackling discrimination at work, networks need to function as real vehicles for employee voice at an individual and collective level. They need to be able to support organisations in delivering real change, not just existing as a tokenistic nod towards inclusion.

Companies that see the establishment of a staff network simply as a box to be ticked on the path towards a more inclusive organisation are setting themselves up for major problems down the line. In particular, it is vital that networks do not just exist in a vacuum but engage actively with the rest of the organisation. This guide is designed as practical advice for organisations and their employees working to establish, improve or run a staff network. You can also refer to the case studies to see how other employers have worked to set up effective staff networks in their organisations.

② The role of a network

The most important consideration when setting up a staff network is to establish its role within the organisation. Without clear aims and objectives, networks like this can either drift into irrelevance or be the cause of workplace conflict as different people seek to use them for different purposes. Ideally the purpose of any network should be written down in a constitution or articles of operation. This document doesn't have to be very long or formal, but it should make it clear to everybody what this network exists to do (and not do) and how it will operate.

There are a number of different functions networks can perform and a good staff network should be able to manage all of them. The four main aims that can be achieved by an effective staff network are:

1 Provide a safe space for discussion of issues.
2 Help to raise awareness of issues within the wider organisation.
3 Provide a source of support for individual staff who may be facing challenges at work.
4 Offer a collective voice for the workforce to management.

These aims are outlined in more detail below.

First, they can provide a safe space for discussion of issues faced by that group of employees, including the discussion of potentially sensitive or challenging topics such as discrimination within the organisation. Ideally this should include positive celebrations of diversity as well as more negative discussions of problems within the organisation.

Second, networks can help to raise awareness of issues within the wider organisation, by running events, writing blogs and using other social media tools. This can help staff and managers across the organisation to better understand the experiences and challenges faced by their colleagues.

Third, these networks can also provide a source of support for individual staff who may be facing challenges at work. Having friendly colleagues on hand who can empathise with their experiences and provide practical advice and support can be a big help in preventing employees from feeling isolated during difficult moments.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, an effective network can provide not only a venue for the voice of individual staff to be heard, but can itself provide a collective voice for the workforce as a whole. This is the factor that most distinguishes effective staff networks, which act as vehicles for real and meaningful change within the organisation, from those that function merely as echo chambers for their own members.

③ Content of meetings

In order to achieve these aims, networks should be set up from the beginning with clear long-term objectives. It is equally important that individual meetings of the network are clearly structured and have their own objectives that sit within the framework of those four broader aims. Meetings should be regular (anything from weekly to monthly works well) and follow a clear agenda for each meeting to help keep the network focused.

Time can and should be allotted for general discussion of points that staff want to raise, but this should not be the entire meeting. If the entire meeting is simply given over to free-form discussion, the network is likely to see the same issues repeating on loop, meeting after meeting, with little progress being made, mounting frustration and corresponding drops in attendance and interest.

Similarly, while the sharing of personal experiences is an important tool for networks to use, they should be more than just 'moaning sessions' where everyone shares their complaints with each other – rather, these meetings should be opportunities for learning, awareness-raising and tangible change as discussed above.

Instead, it would help to have some regular agenda items, plus some different ones for each meeting, so that different topics can be covered over time. Regular items could include a staff member sharing a recent workplace experience with either a positive or negative outcome and, if senior management are present at meetings, getting them to give an update on what progress the organisation is making on diversity and inclusion issues. General discussion of ad hoc issues staff wish to raise should be left to an 'any other business' section at the end, so that they do not distract from the structure of the meeting.

The varied part of the meeting could follow a particular theme for that month – a celebration of Black History Month, LGBT History Month or Disability Awareness Day, for example, a focus on how to improve diversity in recruitment, a look at barriers to opportunity for advancement, a discussion of unconscious biases at work or a review of representation in corporate publications.

Bringing in outside speakers is something our case studies also found to be good at attracting interest and keeping meetings varied. These speakers could include role models from inside or outside the organisation coming to speak about their experiences, or could include experts on unconscious bias or conflict mediation.

A final point is the importance of ensuring that staff from the full range of different groups in the workforce all get a fair chance to contribute to meetings. Networks need to speak for all staff; if meetings are dominated by staff from only one specific group, other minority groups might feel the network is not for them, leading to a loss of support. Having at least one meeting themed around the celebration or exploration of each of the minority cultures represented in your workplace – and any particular issues faced by those staff at work – is a good way to make sure everyone feels included.

(4) The importance of buy-in from senior leaders

In order to fulfil the fourth aim of staff networks described above – providing a collective voice for staff to management – it is essential to secure buy-in to the work of the network from senior leaders at the very top of the organisation. Ideally the chief executive, HR director or similar figure with responsibility for diversity and inclusion at board level should take a personal interest in the work of the network and commit to attending meetings in person at least periodically.

This buy-in serves several key functions. It provides the network with a greater sense of legitimacy in the eyes of the wider organisation, making sure line managers will take it seriously and helping attract members to meetings if they think their voice will be heard by those at the top. It helps senior leaders themselves to learn and better understand experiences and perspectives within the organisation, increasing the chances that better decisions are made by the board and senior executives with due consideration of the diversity implications. And it ensures that individual issues affecting staff, individually or collectively, can be raised and dealt with at the appropriate level by management.

This also requires those chairing or otherwise leading the network on behalf of staff to have regular access to senior managers in case issues arise between meetings. If, for instance, the organisation is about to release a publication that contains racially insensitive language or change an HR policy in a way that disproportionately impacts staff with a disability, the network's representatives need to be able to reach those responsible and raise concerns at short notice, without having to wait for the next scheduled meeting of the network.

(5) Terminology and inclusiveness

One of the questions often raised in relation to staff networks is what the network should be called and what terminology to use to refer to the workforce groups it represents. Different organisations and people prefer different terminology, and it's a case of involving staff to gain an understanding of the issue and the differing opinions present in your organisation.

The term 'BME' (black and minority ethnic), for example, is commonly used by the media and many employers as a catch-all for all ethnic minorities, but it is worth bearing in mind that some people find the term problematic.

Acronyms in general can be confusing when not everyone recognises their meaning, and there are debates about whether 'BME' or 'BAME' unfairly singles out or ignores the people from black or Asian groups, or isn't sufficiently inclusive of white ethnic minorities such as Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller groups. Some people prefer the more general term 'ethnic minorities' as being more inclusive. Research by the Office for National Statistics has found

that 'ethnicity' is considered a more acceptable term than 'race' by most people and is probably better to use in most circumstances. Zamila Bunglawala of the Cabinet Office's Race Disparity Unit also recommends avoiding general use of the terms 'non-white staff' or 'non-black staff', which are exclusionary and might wrongly forget that ethnic minorities include white minorities – though there might be specific discussions in which these terms are more relevant.

Similarly, for the LGBT+ community, different organisations use varying terms, including:

- **LGBT** – acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
- **LGBTI** – acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex
- **LGBTQ** – acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning
- **LGBTUA** – acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, undefined, asexual or aromantic.

(+) refers to others who experience similar forms of prejudice and discrimination.

It is important to always bear in mind that different groups might have quite different experiences and should not always be lumped together under a single category when discussing issues that might apply to one group in a different way from others.

Beyond this, the actual choice of how to refer to a network is up to each individual organisation. The actual choice of terminology ultimately matters less than that the staff involved have a say on the issue and are able to feel that their network uses a term that most staff are comfortable with. It is a discussion worth having when setting up a network for the first time and it is a good idea to allow people to criticise any terms they are uncomfortable with, but it is also realistic to expect that it might not be possible to find a choice of words that pleases everyone and some people will have to accept that. At the same time, it is not worth letting too much time be taken up by discussion of terminology and semantics – most of the network's time should be focused on other substantive issues in the workplace.

6 **Supporting staff**

When it comes to supporting individual staff with problems they might have, an effective network might rely on having certain dedicated individuals – either a network chair or one or more elected or appointed reps – who can act as a point of first contact, help co-ordinate the work of the wider network, and act as a conduit to management. These representatives will also give the network a more permanent existence between its individual meetings, so that staff can get help whenever it is needed. They can respond to problems facing individual staff and raise these with senior managers, including at short notice.

At the same time, however, it may be better to avoid having the network and its representatives get involved formally in grievance or disciplinary procedures brought by or against staff. A trade union would be a more appropriate group to provide this kind of support where they are present. The proper role of the network in this case is to provide a sympathetic ear to hear people's experiences and to signpost people towards the most relevant source of formal advice and support: the trade union, HR, line manager or legal support as appropriate.

There is a risk of tensions arising between the representative function of the forum – which as outlined above requires buy-in from and working with management – and what could be seen, albeit unfairly, as carrying out a more adversarial function by taking part

in individual grievance cases. Nevertheless, in some organisations where there is no other option such as a trade union present, it may be that the networks feel obliged to perform this role themselves on behalf of their members. In this case, however, it is essential that the network representatives get proper training in how to carry out this additional function. Letting them simply walk into these formal processes blindly, out of a desire to support their members, is a recipe for disaster.

(7) How to discuss sensitive issues

For any network, the discussion of employees' personal experiences, good or bad, can be an extremely powerful tool in raising awareness of issues and tackling stigmas. These discussions, however, can at times get quite emotional and need managing carefully if they are not to cause more problems than they address.

For a start, whoever is chairing the network meeting or forum should make a point to listen privately to any personal stories that staff want to raise before they are aired in a public forum, so that they can be prepared for any emotional stress that might be experienced by the person telling the story, or reaction from others present. It is important that people talking about their own experiences at network meetings can be heard without interruption, but at the same time are provided opportunities to stop or take a break, a glass of water or a tissue, if they are emotionally struggling and need to compose themselves.

At all costs, chairs should avoid meetings developing into heated arguments, exchanges of blame felt to be directed at others present, or the devaluing of others' experiences. They should not be afraid to shut down a discussion if things are getting out of hand, with a suggestion that things be discussed later or more privately. Similarly, chairs should feel free to bring sessions to a close if they have moved off topic or devolved into an unconstructive 'moaning session'. It may be helpful for the network to have a code of conduct for its members which includes treating one another with courtesy and respect during meetings.

It should be borne in mind that managing difficult conversations in the workplace is a skill that often needs training. The effectiveness of a network relies on its members having the skills and confidence to raise sensitive issues and on facilitators having the skills to properly manage them. This is difficult and should not be underestimated or treated lightly. It may be worth employers providing external training for those chairing networks to give them the skills required to succeed.

(8) Working with other network groups

The final area of consideration for networks is how to work with others within the organisation to further the network's aims. We have already discussed the importance of working with senior managers, but there are other parts of the organisation that need to feel connected.

One big question for any network is whether and how to include allies. Overall, it is probably better to include these colleagues if possible – it is more inclusive, better in the long run at raising awareness of issues among the wider workforce and can help further the network's goals. However, the inclusion of allies needs to be handled carefully to ensure that these allies do not take over discussions and are not seen as devaluing the work or experiences of their colleagues.

Networks also will do well to work in partnership with other staff groups, if these are present in the workplace. Often these groups can achieve more while working together, particularly when it comes to addressing difficult workplace issues that may have intersectional impacts and considerations. By working in partnership, these groups can also provide fuller support to those staff who bridge multiple categories.

Senior leaders should take care to divide their time and attention fairly between all these various groups. Organisations should avoid having lots of separate silos all working independently on different aspects of inclusion and diversity issues – having an umbrella organisation such as an overall inclusion forum to tie these networks together can help here, or feeding these different demographic networks into a wider employee voice forum or staff network that represents the entire workforce, if one exists.

9 Key recommendations

- Establish the role of any employee resource group (ERG) within the organisation. Ideally this should be written down in a constitution or articles of operation.
- Ensure networks have clear long-term objectives.
- Individual meetings of the network should be clearly structured and have their own objectives that sit within the framework of broader aims.
- Meetings should be regular (anything from weekly to monthly works well) and follow a clear agenda for each meeting to help to keep the network focused.
- Meetings should be opportunities for learning, awareness-raising and tangible change.
- Ensure that staff from the full range of different groups in the workforce all get a fair chance to contribute to meetings.
- It is essential to secure buy-in to the work of the network from senior leaders so that the network can effectively provide a collective voice for staff. Senior leaders should take care to divide their time and attention fairly between the various network groups.
- Terminology and use of language can be a critical issue, so make sure staff are involved in discussions to gain an understanding of the issue and the differing opinions present in your organisation. Ultimately, the actual choice of terminology matters less than that staff have a say on the issue and are able to feel that their network uses a term that most staff are comfortable with.
- Consider appointing a network chair or one or more reps who can act as a point of first contact with staff, help co-ordinate the work of the wider network, and act as a conduit to management.
- The discussion of employees' personal experiences, good or bad, can be an extremely powerful tool but can at times get quite emotional and need managing carefully. Support and train the members of any networks to have the skills and confidence to raise sensitive issues and make sure that facilitators have the skills to properly manage these discussions.
- To avoid having lots of separate silos all working independently on different aspects of inclusion and diversity issues, consider setting up an umbrella organisation to co-ordinate networks and help them to work together.

⑩ Case studies

Barts Health NHS Trust BME Network, London

Barts Health, an NHS trust based in London, was established in 2012 and runs five hospitals in the City of London and East London. It is one of the largest NHS trusts in England, with over 17,000 staff. The Barts Health BME Network was founded in 2013 to provide an individual and collective voice to BME staff across the trust.

The network currently meets every two weeks, inviting all staff across four of the trust's hospitals. There are two co-chairs who jointly manage the forum, and a site lead at each of the hospitals who takes responsibility for liaising with local hospital management. The co-chairs try to ensure agendas focus on what is happening across the organisation, but also include topical issues such as tying discussion of race equality at Barts to the events around the murder of George Floyd and the wider Black Lives Matter movement.

Keynote speakers are regularly brought in to give talks and there is always time in meetings set aside for 'staff stories' – where BME staff from across the trust can share either a positive or negative story about their experiences, with appropriate celebration or support from the group. These meetings also serve to update BME staff on what is happening in and around the trust and make sure they know what support is available. The network also organises celebrations of different cultures within the organisation, such as Black History Month or key religious festivals, giving staff members from that group a particular platform that week.

The BME Network works in partnership with other employee resource groups (ERGs) such as the Women's, LGBT and Disability Networks, organising joint events or linking up staff that overlap between categories with support from both networks. White members of the network also play an active role in planning and helping with events. Events are advertised as 'all welcome', to encourage participation regardless of ethnic background. The BME Network's webinar on the importance of allies led to an increase in interest from white members.

The co-chairs admit that there is not enough time allocated to support them in carrying out this function on top of their day job. Partly for this reason, the network does not directly support BME staff going through formal grievance processes, though they listen to their story and signpost staff to a trade union or HR to ensure they have the support they need.

In the early years, the network functioned as a safe place for staff to come together, talk about problems and support each other. However, as no members of the trust's executive were present, the BME network's discussions and role were not felt to be taken seriously by the wider organisation. For the past couple of years, the role of the network has been greatly enhanced by bringing the voice of BME staff directly to senior executives.

A member of the executive team is invited to attend all meetings, to listen to staff and answer their questions, and the chief executive also often attends. They gain a better understanding of issues facing BME staff and are able to hold other parts of management to account in dealing with them. An issue around flexible working patterns raised in the BME network, for instance, was then brought up at the board level.

There is also a formal system by which issues can be escalated to the chief executive via the Inclusion Forum at any of the hospitals. This then feeds into the trust-wide Inclusion Board chaired by the chief executive and attended by both the BME Network co-chairs.

The network's site leads in each hospital also liaise with the hospital managers and local directors of nursing to help resolve hospital-specific issues. In this way, the network acts *'as a critical friend to the organisation'*, in the words of one of the co-chairs, raising concerns with management, raising awareness of BME issues, while making sure there are role models and support for BME staff by inviting leading BME figures to the network.

Issues raised through the Inclusion Board include staff progression, training and opportunities for BME staff, disciplinary and recruitment issues. The question of racism in the trust was raised as part of the Black Lives Matter movement – pointing out for instance videos or other trust materials where all staff shown were white. An inclusion ambassador role was also introduced by senior leaders at the BME Network's request, to take part in and scrutinise all job interviews, ensuring there are no more all-white panels. Reverse mentoring for senior leaders by BME staff is another achievement.

Having the support of the executive team was felt to be key to the network's success. *'It's one thing having a network where we're all supporting each other, but we want to take it further and actually make a difference'* – something that the network needs the executive team to help with.

The British Transport Police LGBT+ support network

The British Transport Police's LGBT+ support network (originally called LINK) was formed in 2004 by Sir Ian Johnston, then chief constable of the British Transport Police (BTP). He had contacted two 'out' police officers in the BTP to discuss the culture of silence in policing and, as a result, the employee resource group (ERG) 'LINK' was launched.

The founding members dived straight into the nitty-gritty of internal policies and procedures, taking advantage of the chief constable's endorsement to actively challenge bias or any perceived discriminatory practice.

The culture of silence in policing had been highlighted by the Metropolitan Police's investigation into a string of neo-Nazi attacks in London targeting the LGBT+, black and Bengal communities in 1999. The subsequent campaign to identify LGBT+ police officers who could liaise with a community distrustful of the police, and with whom the force had few strong contacts to draw on, produced little response.

The Metropolitan Police commander at the time sought to actively protect officers who were subjected to homophobic behaviour in the workplace and recommended chief constables of other forces do the same. This ultimately led in 2003 to police officers marching visibly during Pride.

While making social connections in the community through regular meetings, socials and an annual general meeting, they also wanted to ensure LGBT+ voices were heard by HR and that good practice was being implemented at all levels of the organisation.

In 2010 the first formal strategy and action plan for LINK was developed. The aim was to have a direct impact on the delivery of policing services to the public, without the need to segregate themselves and become the only point of contact for LGBT+ victims of crime or operational activities.

The committee felt strongly that officers and staff of all sexual orientations should be comfortable interacting with LGBT+ communities, rather than expecting or calling upon an LGBT+ police officer to do this on behalf of the force. The ERG name was changed to 'LGBT+ Support Network' and rebranded to reflect its new lease of life.

Case studies

Current chairperson, David Rams, told the CIPD: *'It's vital that the LGBT+ Support Network supports its members internally but is also able to add value to the organisation as a whole in terms of the delivery of policing services to the public. In the current financial climate, we will need to work harder than ever to deliver to our membership, the force and the wider community.'*

Over the last 15 years the ERG has become an integral part of the organisation's equality, diversity and inclusion governance, scrutiny and quality assurance policies. By setting out a clear strategy, it was able to focus on achievable objectives. It also became more proactive in proposing changes to policy, guidance or tackling cultural issues, rather than being purely reactive.

The strategy also professionalised the network in the eyes of the organisations' Chief Officer Group and the wider workforce, bringing them added credibility. Head of Inclusion and Diversity Barry Boffy said that *'although not necessarily vital for the success of any network, writing a strategy can help to legitimise a network in the eyes of an organisation and help to build a positive reputation'*.

The ERG continues to influence and contribute to the force's inclusion and diversity strategy and objectives, as well as working alongside other police forces across England, Scotland, Wales and further afield. Though BTP is a distinct and separate police force in its own right, it is hoped the baton will be taken up in other areas of policing.

Capital One's mental health ERG

Capital One, one of the UK's top credit card providers, launched its mental health employee resource group (ERG) in September 2019. It was founded by a former associate after receiving help from a manager when struggling with her own mental health issues. She wanted all employees to receive the same level of support, understanding and kindness.

Since its launch, the group 'Mind Your Mind' holds monthly peer support sessions where people share experiences, as well as monthly sessions that focus on completing particular pieces of work or gaining feedback on specific topics.

An open Slack channel (a messaging platform that separates topics of conversation into channels) was also launched, to share tips, resources and supportive messages, which has proved invaluable when working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

'Remote working has been a particular challenge for the group, which previously met in person in our office spaces,' explains Emma Allen, diversity, inclusion and belonging lead. *'The drive to continue the monthly support group meetings and Slack channel [during the pandemic] has been remarkable.'*

Membership of the ERG has increased by around 30% over the past six months, and a successful online programme of events during Mental Health Awareness Week brought the group to an even wider audience. The programme included a talk from an external speaker on positive mental wellbeing and resilience, daily mindfulness sessions led by an associate, online yoga, internal blogs on kindness (the weeks are themed), and a fireside chat with two senior leaders on mental health.

The group made and shared a video about the stigma around mental health for World Suicide Prevention Day and has drawn on the expertise of several organisations for guidance, such as Inclusive Companies, Nottingham University and This Can Happen.

Members of the ERG have spoken positively about it, with one saying they are *'grateful to have the chance to have an honest and open conversation about how I feel with no fear of judgement and to be there myself if people need to talk'*. Another said they are *'excited about the positive impact that Mind Your Mind can have within Capital One, by starting conversations and removing the stigma around mental health, by providing the right help, support and resources in difficult times, and by encouraging people to look after their mental wellbeing as much as their physical wellbeing'*.

The group has contributed to organisational development and decision-making. Most notably, they have helped develop a strategy for a return to the workplace post-COVID-19 that addresses mental health concerns.

Gemma Fox, one of the current co-leaders, is optimistic about the future of the ERG: *'It's something I'm so passionate about so we're very excited about the progress we are going to make this year in tackling the stigma around mental health, working alongside HR and other ERGs. The group is full of amazing people and together we can make a difference!'*

The ERG members hope to build on what they've started by being unafraid to change and develop their approach as time goes on and they better understand what is helpful. They hope to consolidate burgeoning relationships with HR and senior leaders whose financial support, alongside other funding streams such as the UK Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (DIB) budget, has helped make the ERG a reality.

Network Homes BAME network

Affordable housing association Network Homes relaunched its equality and diversity group with the aim of creating a culture of transformation in the working lives of all their staff, and having a positive knock-on impact for its residents.

Network Homes has 20,000 affordable homes across London and Hertfordshire. They build, sell, rent and manage homes in thriving communities, housing over 38,000 people. They are an independent, charitable organisation and all the money they make is reinvested in building more affordable homes and delivering services for their residents.

Executive Director Fiona Deal is part of the team that has helped to evolve its existing equality and diversity group into the new and more effective 'BAME network'. The previous group had always supported Black History Month and Pride, among other celebrations of diversity. However, despite the good work this group had been involved in, its outcomes were largely seen as transactional.

Network Homes was keen to establish a network that linked to the organisation's EDI 10-point plan.

This plan supported three pillars of the organisation's aims:

- **Equality:** Everyone has equal opportunities to join and progress within our organisation. Everyone we work with and work for is treated with respect and dignity.
- **Diversity:** Our organisation reflects the diversity of the communities we work with. We are made stronger by having a diversity of experience among our people and residents.
- **Inclusion:** We understand the experiences of different groups of employees and residents and the specific issues facing them. We adapt our services so that no one is excluded or ignored.

Increasing equality, diversity and inclusion is seen as critical to fulfilling their strategic objectives. Fulfilling one of their core objectives – to build a great organisation – requires

Network Homes to be an inclusive place where talent is developed. Understanding the equality issues faced by residents will allow them to provide better customer service, make the organisation more reflective of the diversity of residents, and help strengthen trust.
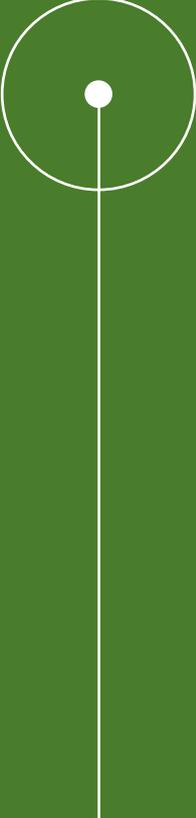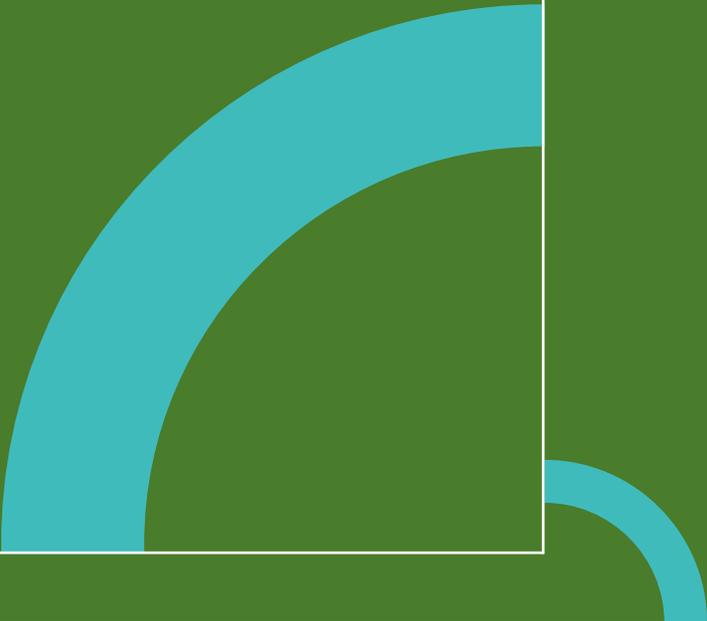
The new BAME network has a 'terms of reference' that enables them to hold the organisation to account for delivering relevant aspects of the EDI 10-point plan. The network will assist in reviewing the impact of all new policies on protected characteristics through equality impact assessments. It will help develop new policies and procedures to promote equality, diversity and inclusion. The BAME network will also play a key role in increasing diversity at board and senior leadership level, in order to better reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

One aspiration of the network is to increase the proportion of women and people from BAME backgrounds on the board and in senior leadership (defined as the top 10% of earners). The aim is for 50% of board positions to be held by women, and 33% of board positions to be held by people from BAME backgrounds, by 2025. This strategic agenda avoids the new network becoming a talking shop where issues are discussed but solutions are not identified. In fact, participation in the regular meetings is based on a shared understanding of the purpose of each discussion point and what actions will be taken as a result of them.

The network welcomes the attendance of all staff, regardless of their background. This was requested by its representatives, as they wanted to create an environment where stories from all perspectives can be listened to. As Fiona states, *'BAME staff wanted to create a listening hub where people could share stories and help to change people's perspectives – this has helped a much broader base of our staff to understand where both conscious and unconscious bias can unintentionally create divisions. This is why everyone is welcome and can feel supported by people from all backgrounds when they feel the need to share their experiences.'*

It has been interesting for people to hear different views about whether the acronym 'BAME' is an appropriate name for the network. Some have mentioned that it is too broad, while others feel that the phrase 'Listening Hub' should be used instead, as it sounds more inclusive. Fiona believes that it is ultimately up to them to define what it should be called and that their decision will be supported by the organisation.

The intention is for the network to produce role models, to ensure that its benefits are sustained and directly lead to better working experiences for everybody. Fiona concludes: *'One important factor that will help us to achieve this is the links we have established with other groups within the organisation, the staff forum for example – this will enable us to effect real change while celebrating the positives we have already achieved.'*

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