



The Department of Health (DH) currently has 11 recognised staff networks spanning most of the protected characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010. The Networks in DH cover: Disability, Race, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender), Religion, Women, Maternity and Flexible working. DH also has a number of Staff Groups that provide targeted support to staff, such as domestic abuse, health and wellbeing and dyslexia.

Staff Networks have not been mandated by the organisation, DH has instead allowed them to develop as the need arose and have encouraged, supported and provided a small amount of funding to further their reach and activities.

Some of these networks are active in raising awareness of the issues faced by certain groups of people, both in the communities we serve and among the colleagues we work with. Staff networks are consulted on HR policies and some NHS policy, where appropriate. Their input is vital to ensure internal policies and processes do not discriminate and are accessible for all our staff.

It can sometimes be difficult to gauge general staff views on how particular policies and processes affect them. Staff Networks provide a forum for staff to air their views in a 'safe' environment. Concerns raised by members are fed back to the appropriate team and consideration is given as to how rectify the problem.

DH's Staff Networks have a lot of successes under their belts. For instance:

- PRISM (our LGBT network) runs annual events to support and highlight LGBT History Month each February, participates in the LGBT Pride parades and celebrations in London and other cities. In addition there are regular social meet-ups throughout the year for DH staff and colleagues from partner organisations. Prism hosts social events across Government departments. Prism also engages in a wide range of educational, cultural and health and wellbeing initiatives (e.g. promoting physical activity, and mental health) and charity fundraising. For the last two years PRISM has been recognised as a 'star performer' by Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index (WEI) and this year has led on the benchmarking submission, where we hope they will retain this prestigious position;
- The Equality Matters Network (our race network) runs annual Black History Month celebrations and over the last couple of years has built strong links to other Government Departments (OGDs) and hosted a cross-government conference, which was well received; and
- Our religious networks host events throughout the year that celebrate, raise awareness of various faiths, and activities in those faiths, that can affect or require consideration in the workplace, such as fasting, time off from work, prayer times, etc

The business benefits include, but are not limited to:

- Supporting compliance of legal requirements under the Equality Act 2010;
- Supporting benchmarking activities;
- Supporting policy development to ensure it is fit for purpose and does not discriminate;
- Encouraging staff to be themselves at work, which can improve overall wellbeing and productivity and reduce absence;
- Being a benefit that is available for employees of that organisation;
- Provides development opportunities for staff;
- Events that are led by staff for staff; and
- Improve and or create other avenues of communication with staff.

However, recently we have identified a need to provide a structure for our staff networks. By allowing them to establish and operate freely, as we have, we are finding that there are a growing number of networks. Whilst we do not want to stifle these networks it has become clear that some form of structure needs to be introduced in order to ensure: all staff are aware of the networks available to them, how DH funds and supports the networks (in the backdrop of austerity and changes to Civil Service HR functions) and how we encourage collaborative working between groups.

We hope that in defining a policy of this nature it will strengthen the networks' ability to continue their activities and ensure that interaction with them is manageable and effective.

The approach we have for this work is to gather information from OGDs on how they operate staff networks, taking advice from our diversity memberships and Kate Nash in order to produce a draft policy. The draft policy would then be shared with the staff networks for any further considerations and/or amendments before being finalised.

External links:

Kate Nash Associates specialise in making and maintaining effective staff networks.

The Department of Health is a member of the following external organisations, who could also be contacted for further information and advice:

- Race for Opportunity;
- Opportunity Now;
- Business Disability Forum;
- Stonewall;
- Mindful Employer; and
- Employers for Carers.

