**NFCC Staff Networks Toolkit**

1. **Introduction from the NFCC**

The National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) is committed to support Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) to embed Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in all that they do.

1.1 The diversity of our communities has changed and will continue to change; the diversity of our workforce has changed and will continue to change. Better delivery of our services depends on understanding our communities and workforce better. Open discussions and supporting the EDI strategies within our own services through staff networks is an important and integral part of supporting our communities, our workplace and ourselves.

1.2 This toolkit looks specifically at EDI from the perspective of staff networks. It includes information on what a network can support and what it can represent. We hope it will be a helpful resource for anyone looking to establish a staff network, support a staff network or reinvigorate a staff network.

*1.3* ***“The best employers understand why all their employees should feel welcome, respected and represented at work. They know that inclusion drives better individual, business, and organisational outcomes. And they believe that staff must be able to bring their whole selves to work” (***[***Stonewall UK***](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/)***).***

1.4 Staff networks can fulfil a variety of functions, for its members and for the organisation. At its heart, a staff network aims to provide members of staff a safe platform and a voice within the organisation. These are usually members of staff who identify with a protected or disadvantaged group but can also include those who have specific interests that relate to equality, inclusion, and diversity.

1.5 Different employers will have different ideas on what it means to establish and support staff networks in their workplace. For some, networks will be discussion forums to share experiences and provide support in an informal environment; for others, they will be platforms for raising awareness, providing scrutiny, and advocating issues facing these groups.

1.6 The experience of underrepresented or minority demographic groups in the workplace can differ significantly from one another; staff networks can provide peer support, raise awareness and be a critical friend to the organisation. It is essential that networks engage actively with the rest of the organisation to participate in positive change and to promote inclusion and celebrate diversity.

1.7 This toolkit will explore ideas and provide a range of information for organisations to be able to determine the most effective ways to establish, support or develop their staff networks as real vehicles for employee voices at an individual and group level.

1. **The role of a network -** ***Advocate – Educate - Influence***

2.1 The role of a staff network can cover many functions at different stages. They may start as a safe space for staff to talk about issues and offer support, or they may serve as a critical friend to the organisation. A staff network will usually fall into the below categories, either a mix of all three or focussing on one or two of the areas -

* **Advocate**: A source of support for staff and underrepresented groups
* **Educate**: Raising awareness of issues to the wider organisation
* **Influence**: Be a critical friend to the organisation

2.2 The role of a staff network can focus on supporting the group and individuals, provide a safe place where they feel valued, can contribute, and feel respected for their knowledge. This will enhance the value put upon staff that their contributions matter and their views and concerns are listened to. Staff should feel comfortable in bringing their true selves to work, that the workforce is authentic and engaged. The advocacy role of a staff network will focus on supporting individuals and groups facing challenges at work and offer a safe space for discussion and will offer practical support and expertise.

2.3 A Staff network can take on the role of raising awareness, to other colleagues and to the organisation. The network could take on the role of educating people and use the group as a platform for promoting diverse engagement. staff networks can inspire, they can focus on engaging with staff in a meaningful way to represent issues and community concerns. A network is in the unique position of understanding the challenges and experiences faced by a range of colleagues and could provide a collective voice for the workforce.

2.4 A Staff network can also act as a critical friend to the organisation, be a collective voice to promote changes in policy and agendas. They can influence policy by engaging in scrutiny and consultation and raise awareness of issues within the wider organisation. staff networks have the advantage of having a unique insight into the barriers underrepresented groups face and can work together to devise and suggest solutions, helping the organisation grow and advance.

2.5 Whatever the role of a staff network, the drive to support and promote the equality agenda for staff and for the organisation should be a priority.

1. **Content of meetings**

3.1 A successful staff network will have [*Terms of Reference*](https://www.mycommittee.com/BestPractice/Committees/Startingacommittee/TermsofReference/tabid/251/Default.aspx) (ToR) and regular communication between its members. This is usually in the form of meetings. Meetings are a great way to come together, discuss issues, discuss ideas, and grow as a network. They work best when they are practical in essence. Although time should be given over to general discussion and raising issues; if the entire meeting is given over to free-form discussion, it is likely the same issues will come up repeatedly with little progress being made. A section on the agenda for time allocated for general discussion could be a regular feature for each meeting.

3.2 It is recommended that the meetings have a clear *Agenda* and *Timeframe*; that the meetings are regular, and the *Chair* keeps the meetings to time and to the items being discussed. The staff network will need to determine their *Aims* and *Objectives*, establish what they want their *Role* to be within the organisation and discuss what they want their agreement on the relationship with senior leaders to be. The agreement will make clear what the staff network is for and what it will and will not do.

3.3After the practicalities of the meeting have been agreed with members, opportunities for learning and awareness can be incorporated, workshops, speakers, themes, constructive scrutiny of the organisation, question, and answer with senior leaders etc. The meetings can include a variety of agenda items varying from review of policies affecting equality issues to discussion and action plans for specific issues brought in by members. Best practice is to make sure attendees are aware of what is going to be discussed. If any papers need sending out, to circulate in good time and if any information or input is needed, that members are prepared so they can fully participate in the meeting. A whole meeting can be dedicated to an outside speaker coming in, or training and development talks and sessions. Successful meetings are varied and can focus on themes at specific points in the year such as Black History Month and LGBT+ History month.

3.4 Meetings should be booked in with consideration to members, for example avoiding certain times of the day that may conflict with childcare or part time working; it may be worth considering religious holidays and the impact these may have on members attendance such as Ramadan and other religious holidays.

3.5 The Chair has a responsibility to ensure that everyone in the meeting feels included and gives members space to discuss and contribute as much as they are able, they should be able to anticipate and dissipate any domination of the meeting and steer conversations to constructive discussions. Members may want to speak up in the meetings or bring issues to the chair direct or submit questions or issues anonymously; consideration can be given to ensuring there are different avenues and methods that allow all members to participate as fully as they are able.

**3.6 Summary**

* Develop Aims and Objectives.
* Determine role within the organisation.
* Determine relationship with the organisation.
* Appoint a Chair or a rotating Chair.
* Agree standard Agenda items; keep members informed.
* Be aware of times/location and considerations of members.
* Be varied; invite outside speakers, invite leaders, dedicate time to develop.
* Leave space and time for general discussion.
* Give space and encouragement for all members to participate in the way they feel comfortable.

1. **The importance of buy-in from senior leaders**

4.1 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 and others, supported by the figure with responsibility for diversity and inclusion at board level. All should commit to take a personal interest in the work of the network and commit to attending meetings in person at least periodically. This is a fundamental role for senior leads wanting to support inclusion for their service, supporting staff led networks to increase visibility and continually improve the inclusive culture of the organisation.

4.2 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.

4.3 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.

1. **Terminology and inclusiveness**

5.1 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.

5.2 [The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities) [report](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities) (March 2021), Recommending the separation of the term ‘BAME’ - Stop using aggregated and unhelpful terms such as ‘BAME’, to better focus on understanding disparities and outcomes for specific ethnic groups.

5.3 Acronyms in general can be confusing when not everyone recognises their meaning, and the thinking now is that ‘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 Traveller groups. Including Irish Travellers. Similarly, for the LGBT+ community, different organisations use varying terms, including:

* LGBT – acronym for lesbian, gay, bi and trans.
* LGBTI – acronym for lesbian, gay, bi, trans and intersex.
* LGBTQ – acronym for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer or questioning.
* LGBTUA – acronym for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, undefined, asexual, or aromatic.
* (+) refers to others who experience similar forms of prejudice and discrimination.

5.4 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.

5.5 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 can feel that their network uses a term that most staff are comfortable with.

5.6 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.

1. **Supporting staff**

6.1 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.

6.2 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 wellbeing team, the trade union, HR, line manager or legal support as appropriate. Organisations may also have other departments staff can reach out to e.g., [Freedom to Speak Up Guardians](https://nationalguardian.org.uk/), a confidential service for staff to raise concerns without fear of reprisals, given reassurance of being listened to and action taken when needed.

6.3 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.

1. **How to discuss sensitive issues**

7.1 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.

7.2 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.

7.3 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 kindness, courtesy and respect during meetings.

7.4 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.

1. **Working with other network groups**

8.1 An area for consideration is how a Staff network can work with other groups to

support the network’s aims and objectives. Working with other staff networks and groups can make the Staff network stronger by providing support to discuss and further issues

that cut across the different groups and impact on intersectionality; providing support to those who fall into one or more equality groups. Working together, meeting together and discussing issues together can build partnerships and provide an overall scrutiny platform that can tackle wider impacts on equality issues; this can be achieved by regular joint network meetings, one off meeting to discuss wider issues and inviting observers to regular meetings.

8.2 Working with other network and groups can promote an environment of shared learning and development. Joint meetings can focus on sharing best practice, discussing what works well and what lessons have been learned. Coming together and working together can also give staff networks a sense of feeling connected to other parts of the organisation, of promoting understanding and inclusiveness and gaining a wider insight into other issues that affect equality. There is also the opportunity to recruit allies, those who can advocate on the network’s behalf, to identify issues that may impact on the equality groups.

8.3 Understanding the issues that may affect other network groups can help in providing a stronger voice when raising issues to the organisation. Networks working together can represent the entire workforce and can provide a stronger platform to raising collective issues with the relevant committees and forums.

1. **Key recommendations**

* 9.1 Establish the role and responsibilities of any staff network group within the organisation. Ideally this should be written down in a Constitution/ToR.
* 9.2 Ensure networks have clear long-term objectives.
* 9.3 Individual meetings of the network should be clearly structured and have their own objectives that sit within the framework of broader aims.
* 9.4 Meetings or events should be regular (anything from monthly, bi-monthly, or quarterly works well) following a clear agenda for each meeting to help to keep the network focused.
* 9.5 Meetings should be opportunities for learning, awareness-raising and tangible change.
* 9.6 Ensure that staff from the full range of different groups in the workforce all get a fair chance to contribute to meetings.

9.7 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.

9.8 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.

9.9 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.

9.10 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.

9.11 Once organisations support for each staff networks are in place, it’s important to consider joint events and activities in recognition of the intersection of protected characteristics and multiple discrimination factors. Intersectionality is the concept that all oppression is linked. It is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people e.g., gender, non-binary identities, race, class, sexual orientation, disability, mental health, and wellbeing. First coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw back in 1989, intersectionality was added to the Oxford Dictionary in 2015 with its importance increasingly being recognised in the world of women’s rights and beyond.

9.12 One can experience homophobia and racism at the same time. Others may experience gender or class discrimination. Having an intersectional lens, helps drive forward our efforts to tackle inequalities in the workplace, and in our communities. Make time for joint planning meetings and space for networks leads and Senior Sponsors to discuss and review roles and responsibilities.

1. **Showcase Success**

10.1 Record and monitor your activities. You may be asked to contribute to organisational reports. Your organisation may be registered with a national EDI Professional body to demonstrate your activities, engagements and learning on an annual basis e.g., [Stonewall Workplace Equality Index](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/creating-inclusive-workplaces/workplace-equality-indices/uk-workplace-equality-index), [Gender and Race pay gap reporting](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/gender-pay-gap-reporting), your evidence as a network would contribute to the organisation reporting their commitments, progression, and future.

10.2 Utilise opportunities for Senior Sponsors, network leads and members to be recognised through local and national EDI Awards e.g., through the [Asian Fire Service Association](http://www.afsa.co.uk/) Awards ceremonies, [Women in the Fire Services](https://wfs.org.uk/) Awards, [Excellence in Fire and Emergency Awards](https://www.fire-magazine.com/fire-event/efe/awards-home) and [Stonewall Awards](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/search/awards). Remember the small wins are as important as the big successes, so utilising the organisations appreciation platforms, thank you correspondence from senior leads, and celebration events for staff, all enable staff and volunteers to feel valued, respected and a sense of belonging that goes a long way to promote everyone bringing their whole self to the workplace every day.

1. **Recommended Reads/Source materials:**

**Literary sources**

The Incredible Power of Staff Networks Paperback – 27 Jan. 2015 (Cherron Inko-Tariah MBE)

Staff Support Groups in the Helping Professions: Principles, Practice and Pitfalls Paperback – Illustrated, 23 April 2009 (Phil Hartley)

**Online sources**

[Developing peer support in the community: a toolkit](https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4247/peer-support-toolkit-final.pdf)

[Standing Together Toolkit](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/projects/standing-together/toolkit)

[Promoting race inclusivity in the workplace: a toolkit for organisations](https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/en/topics/hr-and-people-management/promoting-race-inclusivity-in-the-workplace-a-toolkit-for-firms)

<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/best-practice-toolkits-and-resources>