

"There were no ways staff could challenge decision makers"

When the pandemic hit, the hospital trust bolstered its inclusion efforts to ensure staff would feel supported

The events of 2020 acted as a catalyst for many changes in the world of work – with a renewed focus on inclusion and diversity high among them. Kettering General Hospital NHS Foundation Trust – which provides acute healthcare across north Northamptonshire and south Leicestershire – like many other organisations, already had numerous equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) networks in place to support staff from varying backgrounds and walks of life, but when the pandemic hit, it realised many staff were simply not aware of them or the support they offered, says Carol Verner, the trust's interim head of EDI.

With around a quarter of its 4,000 employees having an ethnic minority background, and an "urgent" need for extra support because of the additional challenges stemming from working on the front line of the pandemic, one of the first things the trust did to continue to put employee welfare front and centre was to relaunch its BAME EDI network, Verner explains.

As well as relaunching the BAME staff network, the trust also boosted its other networks, including groups for disabled and LGBTQ+ staff. "We wanted to ensure there was a safe space for people to talk and get the support they needed, so they could address issues when they happened rather than let them escalate," says Verner.

But Verner, who took up her interim post just before the first lockdown, did not stop there. She and her team devised an equality and diversity strategy after noticing that there was no clear process for staff to challenge leaders.

"I'm someone who likes to ensure there are structures and processes in place and I didn't see one where staff could challenge managers or decision makers," she says, adding that this was important to her because of experience at previous organisations. "I've been through discrimination. I've cried in toilets, I've been upset about the way I was treated. But those experiences helped me balance my views and the decisions I make," she explains.

Verner, who has a background in project management, took on the task of

overhauling equality and diversity offerings as a change initiative. Her strategy, which was approved by the trust's board, included rebranding some of the EDI networks and introducing a training programme designed to promote an inclusive culture.

This year, the BAME EDI network was renamed REACH – short for race, ethnicity and cultural heritage – after an article that was circulated by the government came to light about ongoing discussions over the use of the term 'BAME', explains Verner.

"Some people felt the phrase 'BAME' is self-discriminating, so it was renamed," she says. "Although NHS England hasn't yet told trusts to stop using 'BAME', it has said that they can choose an alternative while it decides what umbrella term to use. We felt 'REACH' was more inclusive."

REACH started with seven members, but is now one of the largest EDI networks with more than 400 staff signed up.

In line with the intent to be more inclusive, other networks were also renamed, and a new gender equality network was formed. Each one was



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restructured so it has a co-chair – who gets one paid day per month to dedicate to running the group – a committee, a board sponsor and a terms of reference, which Verner highlights didn't exist previously. The idea, she says, is to "make everyone accountable in the process" and to allow busy surgeons or doctors allocated time away from their day-to-day duties.

But to make people truly accountable, they need to understand what is considered unacceptable behaviour, Verner points out, which is why her team has also set up numerous training programmes.

"It's easy to say 'we want a diverse board', for example," she says, "but people have to be developed to get to that level. It's a journey – and no-one wants to be a tickbox. So while we are progressing towards that, we need to raise awareness, because what one person might consider as acceptable behaviour might be upsetting or offensive to someone else."

The aim of the training programme, which is now part of the employee starter kit, is to give staff the skills to better manage any issues that might arise.

As part of this, the organisation has introduced inclusive recruitment champions, who are trained to spot unconscious bias and help managers make more informed decisions, explains Verner. "We now have more than 30 trained inclusive recruitment champions and since September, all job roles at Band 7 [manager level] and above, as well as all medical and dental posts, will have a champion on the interview panel."

Verner's overhaul of the trust's EDI strategy has proven successful with both its workforce and NHS England; a 2020 staff survey by the national body rated the trust 9.1 out of 10 for its policy.

With the initiative now entering its second year, Verner says she hopes to start seeing "some real culture change", but caveats that change takes time, and for EDI to be successful in any business, it's important that HR continues to work collaboratively so everyone has a sense of belonging. "This helps create an organisation where people really want to work," she says.