

Workforce Disability Equality Standard (WDES) 2022

Introduction

On 5 September 2023, NHS England published its latest [Workforce Disability Equality Standard \(WDES\)](#) national report for NHS trusts and foundation trusts. For the first time, the report includes and analyses intersectional data from WDES metrics in the national NHS staff survey, aligning with the intersectional ambitions of NHSE's recently published [EDI improvement plan](#).

It is worth noting that the full report does not include the most recent (2022) data for those WDES metrics taken directly from the NHS staff survey, and instead benchmarks against 2021 staff survey data. In this briefing, where possible, we have included [2022 staff survey data](#), which were published in March 2023.

This briefing outlines the WDES report's key findings and NHS Providers' view. If you have any questions or comments, please contact Oliver Potter, senior policy officer (oliver.potter@nhsproviders.org).

Key findings

- The overall percentage of NHS staff declaring a disability via the electronic staff record (ESR) now stands at 4.2%, compared to 3.7% in 2021 and a larger percentage of board members identify as disabled (4.6%) compared to the overall workforce (4.2%). There are now 152 disabled board members, up from 121 in 2021
- There is not a statistically significant difference when considering the relative likelihood of a disabled applicant being appointed from shortlisting compared to a non-disabled applicant
- The relative likelihood of disabled staff entering a formal capability process compared to non-disabled staff has worsened year-on-year, increasing to 2.01 in 2022 compared to 1.53 in 2020. However, the report caveats overall case numbers are low
- 2022 staff survey data shows the lowest levels for six years of staff experiencing presenteeism
- Levels of harassment, bullying and abuse from managers (16.4% in 2022) and colleagues (25.0% in 2022) have continued to reduce from 2020, however, experiences of these behaviours from patients and their families have continued to increase and now represents a difference of 7.2 percentage points when compared to rates for non-disabled staff (using 2022 staff survey data).

Visibility and representation

The overall percentage of NHS staff declaring a disability via ESR now stands at 4.2% compared to 3.7% in 2021. This is movement in the right direction, however, there remains a large gap between the number of staff declaring a disability to their employer in ESR and the number of staff identifying as disabled on the anonymous NHS staff survey (23.6% in 2022 and 23.2% in 2021) – a difference of 19.4 percentage points using 2022 data. This WDES report also shows that 19.1% of staff disability status is 'unknown' in ESR, a reduction from 25.4% in 2019.

Increased data granularity shows that there is variation across the NHS workforce – with the percentage of medical and dental staff declaring a disability at 1.7%, the lowest of the staff groups included in this report. The data also shows that some trusts have high 'unknown' rates for disability status among staff in Agenda for Change (AfC) roles at band 2 or below, and among medical/dental trainees. There is also variation between trusts, with three trusts having an 'unknown' rate of over 50%, while 12 trusts have an 'unknown' rate of less than 5%.

The intersectional analysis included in this report shows disability declaration rates for lesbian and gay (37.5%), and bisexual staff (45.1%) are significantly higher than for heterosexual/straight staff (22.2%), while the declaration rate for White British staff is higher (26.2%) than all other ethnicity groups, except for staff from White and Black Caribbean (27.5%) or White Gypsy or Irish Traveller backgrounds (39.7%). As noted in the report, further analysis is required to understand these trends.

Metric 10 considers board representation, with the data showing a larger percentage of board members identify as disabled (4.6%) compared to the overall workforce (4.2%). Disabled board members are more likely to be non-executive directors (5.0%) than executive directors (4.2%), but are also more likely to be voting members of the board (4.8%) than non-voting members (3.9%). The report also shows that:

- 152 board members have declared a disability, compared to 121 in 2021 – an increase of 31
- 50.7% of boards now have at least one disabled member compared to 30.9% in 2021

NHSE EDI improvement plan

High impact action (HIA) two calls for trusts and other NHS organisations to overhaul their recruitment processes and embed talent management processes. Two of the success metrics linked to this HIA are improvement on WDES metrics 1 and 10 across “the life of the plan”, or by mid-2028.

The report notes that, particularly on metric 1 (workforce disability declaration), trust performance improved with a dedicated workstream promoting ESR self-service, that was well promoted in induction materials and on the staff intranet. Strong internal communications and focus group workshops were also key drivers of improved performance on declaration rates.

Recruitment, progression and development

Metric 2 looks at the relative likelihood of a disabled applicant being appointed from shortlisting compared to a non-disabled applicant. Data for 2022 shows that there is not a statistically significant difference, with the rate standing at 1.08, down from 1.11 in 2021 and 1.18 in 2019. Positively, the number of trusts “which statistically favour non-disabled applicants” has decreased year-on-year to 60 in 2022 from 103 in 2020. However, there remains variation between trusts, with data showing non-disabled applicants at some trusts are eight times more likely to be appointed from shortlisting than disabled applicants. The report notes that improved external communications to encourage disabled applicants to apply for vacancies help to improve the relative likelihood of a disabled candidate being appointed, while a number of trusts reported that accepting applications in different formats had also driven improvement. As many applicants do not declare a disability at application stage, the report notes there is work to be done to improve this and to ensure that applicants feel confident to declare their disability from this first initial point of contact.

NHSE EDI improvement plan

High impact action (HIA) two calls for trusts and other NHS organisations to overhaul their recruitment processes and embed talent management processes. One of the success metrics linked to this is improvement on WDES metric 2 across “the life of the plan”, or by mid-2028.

Metric 5 utilises data from the NHS staff survey, considering the percentage of disabled staff who feel their organisation provides equal opportunities for career progression or promotion – 51.3% in 2021 compared to 51.5% in 2020. However, looking at the most recent NHS staff survey data, the rate for 2022 is 51.7%, a minor improvement. For comparison, in 2022 57.5% of non-disabled staff reported feeling their organisation acted fairly with regard to career progression, compared to 57.0% in 2021 – a statistically significant difference to the percentage of disabled staff. The report includes intersectional analysis for this metric, utilising 2021 NHS staff survey data, which shows:

- Disabled female staff (53.0%) are more likely to say their organisation provides equal opportunities for progression, compared to disabled male staff (46.5%)
- Staff survey data provides summary and detailed analysis related to ethnicity – the summary data shows Asian staff have the widest gap between disabled and non-disabled staff on this metric,

while the detailed analysis shows White Gypsy or Irish Traveller staff have the widest gap between disabled and non-disabled staff when it comes to equal opportunities

Metric 3 looks at the relative likelihood of disabled staff entering a formal capability process compared to non-disabled staff – this metric has worsened year-on-year increasing to 2.01 in 2022 compared to 1.53 in 2020. This means that disabled staff are twice as likely as non-disabled staff to enter a formal capability process. However, the report caveats this data, noting that the overall number of cases is very small. It suggests trusts with a rate of over 1.25 should carry out further investigations into why this is the case but that due to small numbers it is “unlikely to be evidence of institutional issues”.

Metric 8 looks at the percentage of disabled staff reporting their employer has made adequate reasonable adjustments – this data is extracted from the NHS staff survey. The report notes a 2021 rate of 72.2%, a reduction on 76.6% in 2020, which was the highest rate recorded since 2017. The most recent staff survey data shows a slightly improved rate of 73.0% for 2022, suggesting that this metric is starting to trend upwards again. However, data shows there is variation between trusts ranging from 89.5% to 48.1%, and there are seven trusts that rate lower than 60% on this metric. The report suggests that trusts with a reasonable adjustment policy perform better on this metric than trusts that do not have one in place, while the provision of a disability/workplace adjustments passport is a key driver in improved declaration rates. Additionally, trusts that utilise a centralised reasonable adjustment budget saw a smaller drop on this metric between 2021 and 2020.

Harassment, bullying and abuse

The WDES report compares data from the 2021 staff survey, noting that the rates of harassment, bullying and abuse for disabled staff from patients, service users and the public (metric 4a) slightly increased between 2020 (31.9%) and 2021 (33.0%). 2022 staff survey data shows a comparable trend, with disabled staff experiencing a 0.1% increase in these behaviours from the same groups. This continued increase is concerning and now represents a difference of 7.2 percentage points when compared to rates for non-disabled staff. NHSE notes this increase could be attributed to the easing of Covid-19 restrictions in 2021, and the subsequent increase in the number of face-to-face appointments.

Levels of harassment, bullying and abuse from managers (16.4% in 2022) and colleagues (25.0% in 2022) have continued to reduce from 2020 (metrics 4b and 4c respectively), which is encouraging. However, it is concerning that when broken down by sexuality, in 2021, disabled lesbian and gay staff

reported significantly higher levels of abuse from their manager (19.5%) than heterosexual/straight disabled staff (16.4%). It is also concerning that the rate of harassment, bullying or abuse from colleagues for disabled staff from a Black ethnic background increased considerably in 2021 to 31.7% (from 29.5% in 2020).

Overall, more disabled staff are reporting incidents of bullying, harassment or abuse (metric 4d), with the 2022 staff survey data showing a 1.3% increase in reported incidents. While these incidents should not be happening at all, it is encouraging that more staff feel able to report them when they do occur. NHSE states that trusts should continue to provide supportive services to allow incidents to be reported and ensure action is taken in response.

Morale

2022 staff survey data shows the lowest levels for six years of staff experiencing presenteeism (28.0% for disabled staff and 20.1% for non-disabled staff) – the experience of pressure from their manager to come to work, despite not feeling well enough to perform their duties (metric 6). Although it is positive to seeing a decreasing trend for this metric, there is a difference of 7.9 percentage points between disabled and non-disabled staff which is still too high, and targeted work is required to address this.

The proportion of disabled staff and non-disabled staff who feel valued by their employer (metric 7) has remained static between 2021 and 2022 (34.7% and 44.6% respectively). Considering this lack of progress, it is unsurprising that disabled staff and non-disabled staff continue to feel less engaged (metric 9a), with engagement scores of 6.40 and 6.92 respectively in 2022 (compared to 6.5 and 7.0 in 2021¹). However, it is positive to see that all except one (1) trust declared that it had taken action to facilitate the voices of disabled staff in 2022, compared to 34 in 2019.

NHS Providers view

Overall, it is positive to see an increase in the number of staff declaring a disability to their employer via ESR, but a significant gap still remains between this and the rate on the anonymous staff survey, demonstrating there is still much work to do to ensure staff feel confident to declare their disability to

¹ WDES data published [alongside the NHS staff survey in March 2023](#) shows 2021 staff engagement scores of 6.45 for disabled and 6.97 for non-disabled staff, while the national WDES report shows 2021 rates of 6.5 and 7.0 respectively

their employer. This is one of the key success metrics in NHS England's recently published EDI improvement plan, which states that improvement must continue in this area year-on-year.

It is also welcome to see an increase in the number of disabled board members to 152 (4.6% compared to 4.2% across the overall workforce), and improvements on relative likelihood of shortlisting as part of recruitment processes for disabled applicants.

Increased granularity in reporting includes analysis by other protected characteristics, which will help trusts focus their efforts in line with NHSE's recently published EDI improvement plan and the intersectional high impact actions contained within. It is, however, concerning to see that Black disabled staff have seen considerably increased rates of bullying, abuse and harassment from colleagues - this is something we will engage on with NHSE and trusts to tackle these unacceptable behaviours.

Looking at NHS staff survey data for 2021 and 2022, these results do show some concerning trends and poorer performance on a number of key metrics, including feeling valued, which has stagnated across 2021 and 2022, and harassment, bullying and abuse from patients and their families, which has also increased in recent years. There is a need for targeted work to close the gap in presenteeism between disabled and non-disabled staff and it is concerning to see a continued increase in the likelihood of disabled staff facing formal capability processes based on their performance at work, however the case numbers overall are low.

NHS Providers will be engaging with NHSE on these findings, and continuing work to support trusts in improving the experience and environment at work for disabled colleagues.