

Workforce Disability Equality Standard (WDES) 2021

Introduction

On 10 May, NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSE/I) published its [third annual report](#) for the [Workforce Disability Equality Standard \(WDES\)](#). This year's report sees the addition of complementary analyses to provide a deeper understanding of the impact of CQC 'well-led' ratings and [Disability Confident accreditation](#) on equality and inclusion for disabled staff. It is worth noting that the full report does not include the most recent (2021) data for those WDES metrics taken directly [from the NHS staff survey](#), and instead benchmarks against 2020 staff survey data. In this briefing, we have included 2021 staff survey data, published in late March this year, to provide more up to date information and trends where possible.

Key findings

- There has been an increase in the proportion of disabled staff across the workforce and at board level, however the official recorded rate (3.7%) is significantly below the 23.2% of staff reporting a disability in the 2021 NHS staff survey and the 22% rate of disability disclosure at a national (economy wide) level
- Disabled staff are almost twice as likely to enter a (performance) capability review process compared to non-disabled colleagues (relative likelihood of 1.94:1). This has increased since 2020 (1.53:1).

Visibility and representation

There has been a small year-on-year increase in the number of staff across the entire NHS workforce reporting a disability via the electronic staff record (ESR), reaching 3.7% in 2021, which is up from 3.1% in 2019. While this is a positive direction of travel, it is worth noting the disparity between this figure and the percentage of staff reporting a disability in the staff survey. As highlighted in the WDES national report, this was 20.2% in 2020, however 2021's staff survey results show this has further increased to 23.2%, which slightly exceeds [the 22% reported by the Department of Work and Pensions \(DWP\) across the UK](#). This gap in reporting between ESR and the staff survey is concerning and adds weight to the recommendations on self-declaration included in this year's WDES report.

On workforce and board representation, the report shows:

- Medical and dental staff have lower rates of self-declaration (1.5%) compared to non-clinical (4.3%) and clinical staff (3.9%). 1.1% of consultants have declared a disability

- The overall rate of 'unknown' disability declarations has decreased year-on-year and stands at 21.3% in 2021 compared to 25.4% in 2019
- Declaration rates decrease as salary bands increase, and 5.5% of trusts do not have any staff in a senior position who have reported a disability. This is including Agenda for Change (AfC) band 8c and above, as well as medical consultants and board members
- 3.7% of board members and the wider workforce have declared a disability. As above, this is below the number reporting a disability in the NHS staff survey
- There are now 121 board members who have reported a disability compared to 63 in 2019, an increase of 58. However, a majority of trusts (58.5%) have no board members who have declared a disability
- The report is clear that visibility, particularly at a senior level, is a critical element of efforts to improve disability self-disclosure. This is shown by the high rate of 'unknown' declarations (43%) at trusts that do not have any staff in senior positions who have declared a disability.

Recruitment, progression and development

While the relative likelihood of disabled applicants being appointed from shortlisting has remained largely static over the last three years, it is positive that this rate has improved in 2021 (1.11:1 compared to 1.18:1 in 2020). It is concerning, however, to see that disabled staff are almost twice as likely to enter a (performance) capability review process compared to non-disabled colleagues (relative likelihood of 1.94:1). This discrepancy has increased since 2020, where the relative likelihood was 1.53:1. A gap remains between disabled and non-disabled staff with regard to equitable access to career progression (6.6%) too, while rates have remained relatively static over the period between 2016 and 2020.

Since 2018 there have been year-on-year improvements in trusts carrying out adequate adjustments for disabled staff, with an increase of 2.8% between 2019 (73.8%) and 2020 (76.6%). Unfortunately, 2021 staff survey results show a 4.7% reduction on this metric (71.9%). The WDES report notes that trusts that score well on CQC 'well-led' measures are more likely to use centralised budgets for adequate adjustments, suggesting there is scope for best practice sharing nationally to ensure further local improvement.

Harassment, bullying and abuse

The WDES report compares to 2020 staff survey data noting that rates of harassment, bullying and abuse for disabled staff have reduced between 2019 (26.3%) and 2020 (25.3%). 2021 staff survey data shows a slightly different trend, with disabled staff experiencing a 1.4% increase in these behaviours

from patients and their families, and the public. This represents a gap of 7.2% when compared to rates for non-disabled staff. That harassment, bullying and abuse from managers (17.2%) and colleagues (25.3%) have reduced between 2020 and 2021 is encouraging, yet these rates are still too high, particularly when compared with the experience of non-disabled staff, 9.8% of whom experience these behaviours from managers and 16.6% from their colleagues. This represents a gap of 7.4% and 8.7% respectively.

Morale

2021 staff survey data shows a decrease in disabled staff (30.2%) and non-disabled staff (22.2%) reporting 'presenteeism' – defined here as pressure from a manager to come to work despite not feeling well. The WDES report notes an uptick in reports of presenteeism for all staff in 2020 and suggests a possible link with the pandemic as these figures had been reducing in recent years. The staff survey figures do, however, shine a light on a significant gap between disabled and non-disabled staff that will require targeted work to address. The report also notes:

- 39.2% of disabled staff feel valued by their employer compared to over half of non-disabled staff (50.5%), using 2020 data. 2021 staff survey data shows a further decline in this measure, with 34.7% of disabled staff and 44.6% of non-disabled staff reporting feeling valued by their organisation
- It is concerning to see that disabled staff (engagement score: 6.67) continue to feel less engaged compared to non-disabled staff (7.15) in 2020 and that this trend has continued into 2021. Staff survey results show engagement scores of 6.45 for disabled staff and 6.97 for non-disabled staff. However, it is positive to see that the number of trusts not taking action to facilitate the voices of disabled staff in 2020 has reduced to six compared to 34 in 2018.

Trust progress and key recommendations

The report contains a number of progress updates demonstrating the work trusts have done to date to improve equity for disabled staff:

- 96.8% of trusts participate in programmes focused on disability equality and inclusion, with the Disability Confident scheme being the most popular (91.9%)
- 86.6% of trusts have taken steps to improve their disability declaration rate, with promotion of ESR (88.8%) and internal communications (73.9%) being the most common routes to this
- 50.2% of trusts have run disability awareness campaigns and 50.7% have deployed disability champions to reduce harassment, bullying and abuse of disabled staff
- 15.2% of trusts do not have an adequate adjustments policy, with 20.3% planning to implement one in the next 12 months

- While 56.7% of boards have reviewed their WDES action plan in the last six months, 43.3% have not

The report makes several recommendations for trusts, including:

- Increase awareness of the importance of self-declaration via ESR by:
 - Appointing a board diversity champion
 - Running awareness campaigns, including case studies, blogs and awareness videos
 - Monitoring declaration rates regularly with a view to reducing the number of 'unknown' declarations
- Run active consultation with disabled staff and disabled staff networks, particularly to understand why staff have not self-declared their disability and to understand their experiences of bullying, abuse and/or harassment
- Set an organisational target for self-declaration of at least 4% by 2022 and 20% in the longer term
- Review local data to understand local trends and areas for action. This should include a review of the adequate adjustment processes as well as recruitment and talent management policies
- Develop work experience opportunities for local unemployed disabled people and review learning and development opportunities for disabled staff

NHS Providers' view

Responding to NHS England and NHS Improvement's latest Workforce Disability Equality Standard report, director of policy and strategy at NHS Providers Miriam Deakin said:

"Trusts will welcome this latest report and its focus on good practice. Making transparent the inequalities faced by disabled staff over the past few years has undoubtedly helped organisations in their efforts to improve disabled colleagues' experiences and representation in the workplace.

"It's encouraging to see that the number of disabled people at board level has almost doubled since 2019 and that the chances of shortlisted disabled staff being appointed have improved again this year.

"We are very concerned, however, that disabled staff are nearly twice as likely to be referred to a performance management process, and significantly more likely to suffer bullying, harassment and abuse from patients and colleagues compared to staff who are not disabled.

“Trust leaders and colleagues in national NHS bodies and government must continue to focus on creating inclusive environments. A considerable gap remains between the proportion of staff identifying themselves as disabled anonymously within the NHS staff survey and those who feel confident to do so with their employer. It is vital that this discrepancy is addressed.”