

Briefing Note

To	
From	Lee Cawley (EDI Manager)
Subject	Protected time for equality staff networks
Purpose	To provide structured works time for the running of staff networks
Decision required	Yes
Status	

Context

Bury has four staff equality networks which meet regularly and contribute to workplace culture at the council. The networks have a combined membership of approximately 90 staff from the four directorates and their departments, led by leads elected by network members. There is no structured protected time for network leads or members to lead the network or deliver network activities.

Network Operations

Network leads complete leadership tasks in their own time additional to their day to day work unless they have an agreement with their line manager. Leading involves convening meetings, setting agendas, taking notes and contributing to delivering engagement and awareness events throughout the year. Without leads willing to do this voluntarily, the staff equality networks would not exist or be severely limited in supporting inclusion at the council. Network members attend meetings and engagement events in their own time despite managers being encouraged to facilitate time for staff to attend up to six meetings per year (where this is operationally possible). For this reason, networks tend to hold meetings over lunch times to encourage attendance, participation and engagement.

Network functions

Staff networks are critical to modern workplaces, especially employers like our council with a large, diverse workforces that deliver services to a diverse resident base. Strong and effective staff equality networks contribute to inclusive workplace cultures, strong employee voice and equitable service delivery through:

- Fostering belonging by being a community for their members
- Improve the workplace and services by being a 'critical friend' to the council
- Support inclusivity through lived experience advice and advocacy
- Increase awareness and understanding through education and engagement
- Promoting diversity through role modelling and allyship

These critical functions require participation in meetings, working groups, planning, reviewing practices, developing resources, delivering activities and ad hoc support to individuals and groups.

Voluntary operation of the networks requires network leads and members to have availability in their free time, which severely limits the networks' ability to deliver these critical functions.

This also prevents networks from developing network action plans and development activities which also contribute to driving inclusion, belonging and meeting our statutory requirements as an employer.

Commitment to invest in and support staff networks

The council has committed to investing and supporting our staff networks through local and regional strategies and frameworks. These recognise best practice in providing strong employee voice, driving an inclusive workplace culture and tackling discrimination internally and externally. These strategies and frameworks include:

Bury Council EDI strategy 2024-2028

Bury Council Workforce Representation Plan 2024-2028

Bury Council Anti Racist Organisation Strategy 2026-2028

GM People Inclusion Standards

GM Race Equity Framework

GM Bee Neuroinclusive Code of Best Practice

Disability Confident Leader status

Identified best practice

Protected time for network leads and members to attend meetings, perform network duties and participate in workplace inclusion activity is widely recognised as best practice. With the [CIPD](#), [NHS England](#) and [LGA](#) recognising the most effective staff networks are supported with protected time to operate and become an integral part of an inclusive workplace. [The GM People Inclusion Standards has identified best practice](#) at GMCA, GMFRS, Manchester City Council and the Growth Company who all provide protected time to their staff networks.

How investing time into our networks can support our inclusion ambitions

Our staff networks already contribute to our workplace culture. However, with protected time instead of voluntary time, networks and network leads will show accountability through:

- Developing and delivering network action plans linked to the council's corporate plan
- Give focus to their lived experience consistently throughout the year
- Deliver innovative engagement with colleagues and communities
- Contribute to education and awareness activities for colleagues
- Attend and contribute to the Strategic Inclusion Group
- Advising on workplace policy and practices and contributing to the review of these
- Maintaining engagement of members through regular network meetings and activities

Protected time supports long term network activity planning. Network leads and members can plan ahead with managers for this time to be taken subject to service and operational needs which may take precedence on occasion meaning colleagues cannot be released.

Recommendations

Considering our strategic commitments and identified best practice it is recommended that:

- Staff network activity is considered day to day work of the council
- Two hours per month for network members to attend network meetings and activities
- Network leads are allocated a further half day per month for leadership tasks and supporting wider commitments in our inclusion strategies and frameworks