CONTROLLED CONTENT

Defra group Staff Networks Policy

Audience: APHA, CEFAS, Defra, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Natural England, RPA and VMD

Contents

1. Purpose and Scope 2
2. All Staff Networks 2
   Audience 3
   What do we mean by 'Staff Network' 3
   Establishing a Staff Network 4
   Key Operating Principles 4
   Constitution 4
   Conduct 6
   Communicating with their Members 7
   Communicating Externally 9
   Events 9
   Time Allocation 10
   Data Protection and GDPR 11
   Misconduct 11
   Disputes and Concerns 12
3. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Staff Networks 12
   Audience 12
   Purpose 12
   Role of EDI Staff Networks 13
   Establishing an EDI Staff Network 13
   EDI Specific Operating Principles 14
   Conduct 14
   Communications 15
4. Defra group organisational policies 16

1. Purpose and Scope

1.1 The Defra group Staff Networks Policy has been adapted from the Cabinet Office model Staff Networks Policy.

1.2 The purpose of this policy is to support Defra group employees whilst engaging in staff network activities.

1.3 The policy seeks to ensure that Defra group staff network members' behaviour and all staff network activity has due regard to the values and standards of behaviour set out in the relevant organisational code of conduct, governing principles and the Principles of Communication and is compliant with the employer's obligations under the Equality Act (2010), including the Public Sector Equality Duty (2011).

1.4 This policy consists of two sections:

- The first section is for all Defra group staff networks and sets out the key principles for all Defra group staff networks
- The second section is additional guidance specifically for Defra group Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) staff networks

1.5 For cross-Civil Service staff networks please refer to the Cabinet Office guidance.

2. All Staff Networks

2.1 Staff networks play an important and valuable role in making Defra group organisations effective and inclusive employers. They can:

- help to foster a sense of community and wellbeing
- provide a source of support and a safe space for discussion between colleagues and raise issues within the organisation for their members on employee matters
- help raise awareness within the organisation of the barriers faced by underrepresented or different groups
- build capability, skill and expertise by sharing effective practice
- improve productivity and support better business connections

2.2 In practice this might be by collaborating with Defra group organisations to help fulfil their obligations to equality legislation or unblocking barriers to progression by providing mentoring to colleagues.

2.3 It is important that staff networks are supported in fulfilling this key role and this policy seeks to provide guidance and support mechanisms to enable this.

Audience

2.4 This policy is for staff network members and their committees, as well as those who advise, sponsor or champion staff networks. This also includes line managers of individuals who are staff network members or part of their committee.

2.5 This policy applies to staff networks that meet during the working day (including non-core hours), on government premises or virtually using government equipment. It also applies to staff network meetings and events outside of the working day and/or outside work premises.

2.6 Network members refers to everyone on a network membership list. Members may also hold roles on the network's committee. The network's terms of reference should set this out along with any further details.

What do we mean by 'Staff Network'

2.7 A staff network is an internal advisory and/or employee support body that formally convenes around a common interest or shared aim. Staff networks are internal to Defra group organisations and membership is inclusive of Defra civil servants and public servants in executive non-departmental public bodies (NDPB's).

2.8 Staff Networks include:

- **Wellbeing networks** - these provide a source of help and support and help to foster community and a sense of wellbeing for example in relation to mental health.
- **EDI networks** - these provide help and support to members and raise awareness of some of the barriers faced by underrepresented groups to help make our workplaces more diverse and inclusive.
- **Work or profession led networks** - these are generally based around a common profession, region/location or theme, such as AI, Tech, policy, climate change etc.
- **Social networks and groups** - this might include book clubs or other groups convened around a common interest/hobby.

  Networks and other groups that are focused on social (i.e. non-work related) and/or common interest issues will find the policy useful in understanding operating protocols and parameters.

2.9 Groups or networks **excluded** from this policy are those which are convened to:

- deliver work-related programmes, government and Defra group policies and/or
- deliver professional capability across the civil or public service or Defra group organisations.

2.10 The Staff Networks Policy does not apply to Trades Union Networks.

2.11 If you are in any doubt, please speak to your departmental/organisational People, HR or EDI Team.

Establishing a Staff Network

2.11 If considering establishing a staff network, it is important to understand what approval may be needed. In the first instance your departmental/organisational People, HR or EDI Team will be able to advise you.

2.12 Depending on the nature of the network consideration will need to be given to:

- how the proposed new network aligns to the delivery of key Defra group or government priorities.
- whether a similar network or group already exists within Defra group to ensure it is not duplicative of other efforts and/or networks already in existence. Requests to set up a duplicate network will not be approved and collaborative working will be encouraged.
- the network's purpose, scope and scale, for example what the business or workforce impact would be of not having a network.
- what the likely organisational or staff demand might be.
- the appropriate level of governance, including network roles, length of tenure of chair/lead and committee members, and how someone joins or leaves a network.
- the organisational benefits of the network and where appropriate how the network impact will be measured.

Key Operating Principles

2.13 There are several key principles that apply to all staff networks and network members.

Constitution

2.14 Where individuals seek to hold a particular role in a network that requires time to be allocated, they must ensure they consult their line manager beforehand.

2.15 Staff networks and their members **must**:

- ordinarily limit their membership to employees of Defra civil service and public servants in executive NDPBs.
- only have membership of agency workers, where they have 12 weeks or more of continuous employment at a Defra group organisation.
- ensure that contractors, retired civil or public servants or anyone who has left a Defra group organisation for whatever reason are not a member of their staff network.
- agree terms of reference for the network and where applicable the process for appointment to key roles and tenure within those roles. The appointment process should be fair and transparent and make provision for succession.

2.16 Staff networks and their members **must not**:

- be affiliated to other organisations that could present a conflict of interest. Individuals with external positions that could present a potential conflict of interest should refer to their organisational conflict-of-interest guidance.

- hold any separate status such as a charity and /or Limited (Ltd) Company, without prior written approval. Holding a separate status alters the governance and accountability to that outside of Defra group organisations and may present a conflict of interest or affect impartiality depending on the charity's or company's activities. Any exceptions will require a business case which has been approved by the appropriate ExCo champion, SCS (Senior Civil Servant) or network senior sponsor/champion following any necessary due diligence activity. Any request to acquire any form of separate external status or affiliation will require Chief Operating Officer and/or Permanent Secretary approval.

- seek to raise funds from members, external organisations or other sources in order to operate, without prior written approval from the appropriate ExCo champion, SCS or network senior sponsor/champion. However, there may be circumstances when Departments may choose to make budgetary provision for certain network activity.

- organising charity events may be permissible with the relevant departmental or organisational written approval and in accordance with the relevant Defra group charitable policy. There may also be exceptional circumstances where external organisations provide hospitality in order for staff networks to host events. In these circumstances staff networks must seek appropriate approval, carry out appropriate due diligence and follow all relevant departmental or organisational policies including on hospitality. Staff networks must not do anything that would bring their impartiality into question or bring Defra organisations or the wider civil or public service into disrepute.

Conduct

2.17 Defra group staff networks and their members should think carefully before engaging in any activity that could compromise their impartial service to the government or any future government. There will be specific circumstances in which it would not be appropriate for a Defra group employee to respond to a government or public consultation, for example if they work in the policy area or have been involved in developing the proposals that are under consultation.

2.18 A Defra group employee who chooses to respond to a public consultation must do so as a private individual, should not draw attention to their role as a civil or public servant or Defra group employee and must not be seen to respond on behalf of the government or a Defra group organisation.

2.19 It may be acceptable for staff networks to provide neutral signposting to ongoing consultations to their members. However, anything which would appear to be generating or encouraging responses (particularly responses from a particular standpoint) may be interpreted as a campaign or an attempt on the part of the network to influence external government policy. If unsure, networks should consult their ExCo champion, SCS or network senior sponsor/champion.

2.20 Staff networks and their members **must**:

- ensure that their behaviour and all staff network activity (including events and all communications) upholds the values and standards of behaviour set out in the relevant organisational code of conduct, governing principles and the Principles of Communication.
- always act in a way that is professional, that deserves and retains the confidence of all those with whom they have dealings.
- respect others at all times, valuing difference and ensuring fairness, opportunity and accessibility for all.
- ensure that all activity uses resources effectively and efficiently.
- set out clear expectations of any member who is invited to represent the network at meetings, external events, comment on draft policies, or represent the network in any other way.

2.21 Staff networks and their members **must not**:

- lobby, campaign or attempt to change or influence external government or public policy or act in a way which would call into question the impartiality of Defra group. Staff networks do have a legitimate role in informing internal Defra group workforce policies, where their feedback has been sought for this purpose or where appropriate.

- use network events or activity as a campaigning platform to influence government policy or an opportunity to promote businesses or products.

- undertake activities that are designed to pressurise, convert or attempt to convert someone from one belief, opinion or religion to another. This does not restrict activities designed to raise awareness.

- design or deliver training interventions or sessions without seeking appropriate approvals from their ExCo champion, SCS or network senior sponsor/champion and learning and development leads. This does not include materials and informal presentations specifically aimed at awareness raising or sharing a lived experience (their personal experience, insight or reflection related to a specific them such as a protected characteristic or career journey).

- acquire goods or services that contravene organisational policies or acquire them in a way that contravenes organisational policy. Networks should also ensure they have the appropriate approvals before using a service or goods.

Communicating with their Members

2.22 Staff networks and their members **must**:

- use internal communications channels or approved channels, such as Defra group email addresses, when engaging with their members and to raise awareness of their network to attract new members. This is to maintain security of personal data, government and Defra group organisational assets. Any exceptions to this will require prior approval on the rationale.

- obtain appropriate advice, approvals and clearance for communications and written materials generated by the network, that they would like to share with their membership and/or within or across departments which are not related to the day-to-day administration of the network. This could be from your ExCo champion, SCS, network senior sponsor/champion or organisational people. HR or EDI team. It is important that appropriate due diligence checks are carried out.

- ensure that any network engagement does not undermine the government's core aims and principles of engagement, which are to maintain public confidence in government, uphold democratic values and protect the rights and freedoms of everyone. Engagement that contravenes these standards may bring His Majesty's government into disrepute, harm public confidence in government, and provide legitimacy to those that seek to undermine our shared values and the rights and freedoms of others.

This could include endorsing or forwarding recommendations, surveys or sharing links to other organisations with their members as outlined in the Government's Principles of Engagement.

2.23 Staff networks and their members **must not:**

- host or use external-facing communication channels such as a website or a social media account including messaging applications (other than approved channels) to communicate with their members or to promote their presence or activities, unless it is agreed by a policy or communication team, cleared by an ExCo champion, SCS or network senior sponsor/champion and clearly aligned to wider Defra group strategy.

- any external presence will be by exception. As websites and social media posts are in the public domain any content published there is a public statement, which could be read by others as the official government, civil or public service or Defra group policy or stance which could risk breeching the relevant organisational code of conduct and governing principles. External communication channels also may not offer the necessary security protections that are required when handling sensitive information.

2.24 Staff network leads or committee members may use messaging services, such as WhatsApp, to communicate with each other on the running of the network or network events. While these communications should comply with the relevant Defra group policies, they do not require comms approval in the same way as 'all member' communications would.

2.25 There may be occasions when networks want to survey their own members. If this is the case, surveys will need to have a clear purpose and be limited to their own members. When constructing the survey, networks will also need to ensure that it is impartial, does not ask questions which direct a response, or preclude an alternative viewpoint, and that it is done in a way that is fair, just and equitable.

2.26 Networks are responsible for handling personal data in accordance with Data Protection and UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

2.27 Survey findings need to be objectively presented, including the complete findings and should never be shared on social media or other external facing communication channels. If a network would like to seek insight that extends beyond their own membership this should be done through and supported by the appropriate ExCo champion, SCS or senior sponsor/champion or policy lead. It might be helpful to speak to your departmental/organisational or local knowledge and information management teams and/or market research teams for advice.

Communicating Externally

2.28 Exceptionally, if speaking externally, including via a third-party website, civil and public servants are deemed to be representing their organisations and/or senior government officials and must only do so with proper authorisation.

2.29 Staff networks and their members **must**:

- follow relevant organisational policies if taking part in outreach activity.
- alert the Defra group press office and obtain appropriate approval and clearance if asked to speak at an event or write an article relating to for example their professional or lived experience.
- ensure that any engagement with individuals or external organisations/groups does not undermine the government's core aims and principles of engagement, which are to maintain public confidence in government, uphold democratic values and protect the rights and freedoms of everyone.

2.30 Staff networks and their members **must not**:

- speak or comment externally on any matters which relate to public policy, in their staff network capacity, including through websites or social media. Members must ensure they adhere to the provisions in their relevant organisational policies at all times. There may be exceptions, for instance if communications have been explicitly endorsed and cleared by a Minister or Permanent Secretary.

Events

2.31 When organising staff network events, it is important to ensure these are in line with obligations under the relevant organisational code of conduct, governing principles, the Principles of Communication and where applicable EDI Expenditure Guidance.

2.32 A staff network event is an activity developed, organised or facilitated by a staff network with the aim of improving understanding or to create opportunities for collaboration and engagement among staff.

2.33 'Events' excludes routine staff network meetings which provide a forum for members to share updates, discuss initiatives, and collaborate on activities that support the network's agreed objectives.

2.34 Event organisers must consider both event timing and appropriate use of resources. Where possible events should be arranged outside of peak business activities and dependent upon the content, attendees would usually be expected to attend network events in their own time (i.e. unpaid time).

2.35 In a circumstance where organisers believe the event could be attended during work time (e.g. if it relates directly to a business outcome or to an individual's learning and development activity) attendees must confirm with their line manager before attending.

2.36 Events must be approved by the network ExCo champion, SCS or network senior sponsor/champion before any arrangements are in place and before events are advertised to potential attendees.

Time Allocation

2.37 A Defra group employee's primary role must take priority. All network activities must be appropriately balanced with wider business and delivery needs. No activity should negatively affect the fulfilment of primary responsibilities.

2.38 Most network activity will be undertaken on a voluntary basis. This is particularly true for networks that form around a common interest, by and for the membership, where there is no direct alignment to organisational objectives or delivery, for example a book club.

2.39 There may however be specific circumstances where individuals in some networks will be granted time to undertake certain duties, such as where activity clearly and impactfully contributes to organisational objectives, people performance or legal compliance, for example:

- an organisation commission to input to policy development and other supporting products.
- an organisation commission to input to civil or public service sponsored communications and people engagement.
- to support individual civil or public servants with specific and timebound needs.

2.40 Where individuals hold a particular role in a network that requires time to be allocated, they must ensure they consult and gain approval from their line manager beforehand

2.41 Allocated network time for staff network chair/leads:

- should ordinarily not exceed 10% of an appointed network chair/lead's contracted hours.
- should only be for a network chair/lead or to meet a specific business need.
- in the instance there is more than one appointed network chair/lead (e.g., co-chair), networks may request one additional time allocation of up to 10% of an individual's contracted hours
- must be agreed by the HR Director

- can be reduced to zero if business needs require that, e.g. where backlogs need to be cleared or at times of pressure, where the focus needs to be on response and delivery
- where specifically commissioned, can be increased where business needs or the specific role held require that, e.g. where a specific issue, event and/or policy development which temporarily requires additional input
- where there are competing priorities, it is important to have early conversations with line managers to identify ways to balance these

2.42 This approach provides flexibility for Defra group to respond rapidly to organisational needs and allows networks to scale activity up or down to align with this. It also recognises that not all activity requires the same level of focus or resourcing all of the time. Where there are competing priorities, it is important to have early conversations with line managers to identify ways to balance these.

2.43 Please note that allocated network time is different to 'facility time' which is granted to trades union representatives to carry out their union duties.

Data Protection and GDPR

2.44 Network members are responsible for handling personal data in accordance with Data Protection and UK General Data Protection Regulation. All networks are likely to be processing personal data under UK GDPR - even if the only data they hold relates to network membership.

2.45 Networks must therefore identify which Defra group departmental Data Controller they fall under and conduct a Data Protection Impact Assessment to avoid personal liability for data protection fines and court claims.

2.46 To determine which departmental Data Controller a Defra group network falls under, networks should consider the circumstances and nature of the network, and which departmental system holds the majority of the network's data.

2.47 Staff networks should speak to their organisational or departmental data protection teams and/or Data Protection Officer (DPO) to agree Data Controllership and for further advice.

Misconduct

2.48 Network members who do not adhere to this Staff Networks Policy and the values and the standards of behaviour set out in their relevant organisational code of conduct policies and governing principles, may be subject to management action, following the policy and procedures of their employing Defra group organisation.

2.49 Defra group reserves the right to stand down a network if there is evidence of repeated or serious breaches of this policy. If a network is stood down, they will no longer receive support or engagement from any Defra group organisation.

They will not be permitted to call themselves a Defra network, nor can they operate using Defra group organisational time or resources.

Disputes and Concerns

2.50 If in the course of their network activity, network members experience bullying, harassment or discrimination, from within their own network, as a result of being a member of, or from, another network, there are a number of routes open to them to raise a complaint or concern:

2.51 Depending on the size, structure and constitution of the network they may wish to:

- refer to any terms of reference for that group on handling complaints.
- speak to a trusted colleague or senior leader (this could be within the network) if they feel comfortable doing so.
- use their relevant Defra group organisational policies and processes to raise the matter, including the dispute resolution process.
- raise a concern using your organisational speak up or whistleblowing processes.
- support their members where there is concern about the conduct of a network

3. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Staff Networks

Audience

3.1 We recognise that EDI staff networks may need additional guidance to that set out in Section 1, to help them carry out their unique and important role. This part of the policy should be read in conjunction with Section 1

3.2 This section is specifically for all EDI staff network members and their committees, as well as those who manage, advise or champion EDI staff networks.

3.3 This includes line managers of individuals who are EDI staff network members or part of their committee.

Purpose

3.4 This section is aimed at EDI staff networks to help build their capability and effectiveness to operate efficiently and effectively and to ensure their activities are aligned to the delivery of the Defra group and other organisational EDI strategies, where applicable.

3.5 This builds on the first section of this policy for all networks to ensure that their behaviour and all network activity has due regard to the values and standards of behaviour set out in their relevant organisational code of conduct and governing principles and is compliant with the employer's obligations under the Equality Act (2010), including the Public Sector Equality Duty (2011).

Role of EDI Staff Networks

3.6 Defra group EDI staff networks

- provide a significant and valuable contribution to ensuring that Defra group organisations are places where everyone is treated equally, with respect, where their skills and talents are valued and where individuals have the opportunity to develop and progress.

- support the delivery of diversity and inclusion initiatives and outcomes in their respective departments aligned to the latest Defra group EDI Strategy and other Defra group departmental EDI strategies where applicable.

- provide an efficient and productive way for Defra group organisations to engage with the workforce, connect with diverse communities and capitalise on the diversity of thought and experiences that exist across the Defra group workforce, to ultimately deliver better quality outcomes for citizens.

- help to create inclusive environments and build a sense of community, where they are uniquely able to:
    - increase understanding of equality issues amongst employees.
    - provide advice and insight to the appropriate team when barriers or issues are identified.
    - provide a variety of perspectives on workplace policies and issues
    - promote collaborative and mutually respectful ways of working
    - share information
    - enable peer support

Establishing an EDI Staff Network

3.7 If considering establishing a departmental EDI network, prior approval must be obtained from the relevant Defra group People, HR or EDI team.

3.8 If considering establishing a cross-Civil Service EDI network, please refer to the Cabinet Office guidance on Gov.uk.

EDI Specific Operating Principles

3.9 In addition to the principles that apply to all networks, there are a number of additional principles important for the effective operation of EDI networks that must be adhered to.

Conduct

3.10 EDI Staff networks **must** ensure that their activity:

- is aligned to the delivery of Defra group EDI strategy in addition to organisational or departmental EDI strategy and initiatives where applicable.
- supports Defra group compliance with the Equality Act (2010) and specifically the Public Sector Equality Duty (2011).
- is conducted in an efficient and demonstrably effective way, is evidence-led and offers best value for the taxpayer, in line with EDI Expenditure Guidance and EDI Impartiality Guidance.
- is aligned with the guidance in the Principles of Communication.
- respects others at all times, valuing difference and ensuring fairness, opportunity and accessibility for all.
- there are some views that might promote harm to others or support or incite serious violence or terrorist activity. These are unacceptable and could impact the safety and wellbeing of others and they may also call into question the integrity of the civil or public service and Defra group organisations and bring them into disrepute.

3.11 It will **never** be appropriate for EDI staff networks to provide a space for views or conduct which:

- promotes or incites hatred or intolerance against others on the basis of protected characteristics as defined under the Equality Act (2010).
- is gratuitously offensive, indecent or obscene.
- constitutes bullying or harassment of those protected under the Equality Act (2010).
- includes threats of, or incitement to, violence.
- includes threats of, or incitement to, or support for, terrorist activity as defined in the Terrorism Act (2000).

3.12 Defra group employees must carry out their responsibilities in a way that is fair, just and equitable and reflects the Defra group commitment to EDI. They must not act in a way that unjustifiably favours or discriminates against particular individuals or interests.

3.13 No single network is the gatekeeper of a particular view on a particular issue. In practice, this means that networks and their members should be aware of their role and promote inclusion across different viewpoints.

Communications

3.14 Staff networks and their members **must not**:

- develop, write and publish guidance, training or policy for Defra group employees without express permission and advice from an ExCo champion or network senior sponsor/champion, the relevant Defra group People, HR or EDI Team and the learning and development team. However, network members may have valuable lived experience that networks can helpfully feed back to the relevant policy teams through the appropriate channels.

- develop policy, guidance or training. The identified need should be fed back via the ExCo champion or network senior sponsor/champion in the first instance. Further discussion may lead to the networks being involved in the development of policy, guidance or training, but this should not be undertaken without the relevant approvals.

4. Defra group organisational policies

Please refer to the relevant organisational policy

Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination

- Cefas - Bullying and Harassment and reporting tool Anonymous Bullying and Harassment Reporting Tool.
- Defra Civil Service (APHA, core Defra, RPA and VMD) - Bullying, Harassment, Discrimination.

Code of conduct

- Defra Civil Service (APHA, Cefas, core Defra, RPA and VMD) - Defra Code of Conduct.
- Environment Agency code of conduct - Code of Conduct.
- Natural England code of conduct - Natural England Code of Conduct.

Communication

- Principles of Communication – This guidance applies to all formal and informal workplace communication channels across Defra group.

Conflict of Interest

- APHA - Conflict of Interest.
- Cefas - Conflicts of Interest.
- Defra - Conflict of Interest.
- Environment Agency - Declaration of Interest.
- Natural England - Register of Interest.
- RPA - Register of Interest.

Data Protection policy

- APHA Data Protection.
- Cefas - What's new in the world of data protection.
- Core Defra Data Protection.
- Environment Agency - Data Protection.
- Natural England – Data Protection.
- RPA (TBC).
- Data Protection Principles - A guide to the data protection principles | ICO.

EDI Expenditure and Impartiality guidance

- EDI Expenditure Guidance
- EDI Impartiality Guidance

Equality legislation

- Equality Act (2010) - Equality Act 2010
- Public Sector Equality Duty (2011) - Equality Act 2010

Gifts and Hospitality policy

- APHA, core Defra, RPA and VMD - Gifts and hospitality policy
- Environment Agency - Conduct at work and Gifts and Hospitality declaration form
- Natural England - Regularity and propriety policy

Governing principles

- Civil Service Code of Conduct (civil servants) The Civil Service code - GOV.UK
- Nolan Principles (public servants) The Seven Principles of Public Life - GOV.UK

Respect at Work

- APHA, core Defra, RPA and VMD) - Respect at Work and Wellbeing
- Cefas - Respect at Work.
- Environment Agency - Respect at Work guidance.
- Natural England - Respect at Work guidance.
- RPA - Respect and Work and BHD Toolkit

Security guidance

- Defra group – Messaging platforms and security guidance
- Defra group - Security SharePoint pages

Speak Up Processes

- APHA, core Defra, RPA and VMD - Defra's Speak Up process
- Cefas - Civil Service Speak Up campaign
- Environment Agency - Whistleblowing
- Natural England – Natural England Speak Up Process