

NHS Workforce Disability Equality Standard report 2023

On 18 March 2024, NHS England published the annual Workforce Disability Equality Standard (WDES) [data report](#). This year's report does not, unfortunately, include the same level of intersectional analysis as the [2022 report](#), which was highly beneficial to trusts working toward the implementation of the intersectional high impact actions outlined in NHSE's [equality, diversity and inclusion \(EDI\) improvement plan](#), published in summer 2023.

NHSE recently published the results of the [NHS Staff Survey 2023](#) but the 2023 results have not been included in this most recent WDES report. Where possible, we have included 2023 staff survey data in this briefing.

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

Key findings

- The overall percentage of staff declaring a disability has risen in both the NHS electronic staff record (ESR) and anonymously through the NHS staff survey, at 4.9% and 23.4% (in 2022) respectively. However, the significant gap between staff identifying as disabled within the ESR and NHS staff survey remains.
- Board representation has seen both an increase in the number of disabled members and the number of boards with disabled members, with board members more likely to report a disability than the wider workforce.
- Nationally, there is a no statistical difference in the chances of a disabled or non-disabled applicant being shortlisted as part of recruitment processes, down from a relative likelihood of 1.18 to 0.99.
- However, disabled staff are now over twice as likely as their non-disabled colleagues to be subject to a formal capability process, suggesting that they are over-represented in these processes.
- Concerningly, staff have reported an increase in bullying and abuse from the public, with a third of disabled staff experiencing harassment, bullying or abuse. Experiences of harassment vary by trust type, with those working for ambulance trusts most likely to report these behaviours.
- More positively, bullying among staff or by managers has continued to decrease. Disabled and non-disabled staff are also increasingly likely to report harassment or abuse when it takes place.

- Progression and career development opportunities for disabled staff have improved, with the gap between disabled and non-disabled staff expressing they have had equal opportunities for progression continuing to close.
- Disabled staff reporting they feel they need to work despite not being well enough to do so, referred to as 'presenteeism' in the report, has reached its lowest level in five years, with fewer than a third of disabled staff experiencing this pressure.
- Worryingly, just over a third (35.2%) of disabled staff report that their work is valued compared to 45.0% of non-disabled staff. That both are below 50% highlights a continued need for the NHS to focus on rewarding and recognising the workforce.

2023 report

The below briefing summarises the ten WDES indicators under the themes of representation, equal opportunity, and discrimination and harassment. Data for the WDES is collected via the Data Collection Framework (DCF) in May 2023 and via the NHS Staff Survey. For indicators that utilise NHS staff survey data, that data is from 2022, published in 2023. The most recent staff survey results are summarised in our briefing [here](#).

Visibility and representation

The overall percentage of NHS staff declaring a disability via ESR now stands at 4.9% compared to 4.2% in 2022 and 3.1% in 2019. This is movement in the right direction but 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 (25.1% in 2023, 23.4% in 2022 and 23.2% in 2021) – a difference of 19.9 percentage points using 2022 data. This WDES report also shows that 16.6% of staff disability status is 'unknown' in ESR, a reduction from 25.4% in 2019. Only one trust has an 'unknown' rate of more than 50%, down from nine trusts in 2019.

Increased data granularity shows that there is variation across the NHS workforce, with 5.8% of those in non-clinical roles declaring a disability, compared to 5.0% and 2.2% in clinical and medical/dental roles respectively. The intersectional analysis included in this report shows that declaration rates for disability are lower for senior staff than for other pay bands – for example, 3.9% of staff at Agenda for Change (AfC) band 8c and above have declared a disability compared to 5.2% at band 8c and below. Fewer consultants have declared a disability to their employer (1.5%) compared to 2.8% for other medical and dental staff.

The number of staff declaring a disability via ESR also varies by region, with London (4.4%, compared to 18.1% in the 2022 NHS Staff Survey) and the South West (4.6%, compared to 24.3% in the 2022 NHS Staff Survey) seeing the lowest declared disability rates compared to areas such as the South East (5.5%, compared to 22.6% in the 2022 NHS Staff Survey).

Metric 10 considers board representation, with the data showing a larger percentage of board members identifying as disabled (5.7%) compared to the overall workforce (4.9%). Disabled board members are more likely to be non-executive directors (6.0%) than executive directors (5.4%), but are less likely to be voting members of the board (5.6%) than non-voting members (6.1%). The report also shows that the number of board members with a declared disability has risen by 130 since 2019 to 193. Positively, the number of boards who have no members with a declared disability has decreased to 41.5% from 74.9% in 2019, a difference of 33.4 percentage points. It is important to note that the 'unknown' rate is higher among board members (19.5%) compared to the overall workforce (16.6%).

NHSE EDI Improvement Plan

High Impact Action (HIA) 2 calls for trusts and NHS organisations to embed fair and inclusive recruitment processes and talent management strategies, targeted at under-represented groups. A success metric for this HIA is year-on-year improvement on WDES indicators 1 and 10, which has been achieved since 2019.

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. On average, there is no statistically significant difference between appointment rates for disabled and non-disabled candidates, with the relative likelihood having fallen from 1.18 in 2019 to 0.99 in 2023. However, results for individual trusts continue to vary significantly, with the lowest performing trusts five times more likely to appoint a non-disabled applicant than a disabled one, highlighting the efforts that still need to be made to increase equity at a local level. Additional analysis in the WDES report shows that trusts that statistically favour non-disabled applicants have lower disability declaration rates in ESR when compared to other trusts.

NHSE EDI Improvement Plan

High Impact Action (HIA) 2 calls for trusts and NHS organisations to embed fair and inclusive recruitment processes and talent management strategies, targeted at under-represented groups. A success metric for this HIA is year-on-year improvement on WDES indicator 2. This has been achieved between 2022 and 2023 and must be sustained in the coming years.

Metric 3 looks at the relative likelihood of disabled staff entering a formal capability process compared to non-disabled staff. The likelihood of disabled staff entering this process compared to their non-disabled peers has continued to widen, with disabled staff more than twice as likely to enter the formal capability process compared to non-disabled staff – up to 2.17 in 2023 from 2.01 in 2022, and 1.53 in 2020. This shows that disabled staff are increasingly overrepresented in these procedures. However, the report does note that this dataset is small, which means the data cannot be further disaggregated and makes drawing national level conclusions difficult. Trusts with rates higher than 1.25 are advised to undertake further analysis at a local level to understand potential causes.

Metric 5 uses data from the NHS staff survey, considering the percentage of disabled staff who feel their organisation provides equal opportunities for career progression or promotion. Just over half of disabled staff (52.1%) believe their organisation treats everyone equally, up from 51.3% in 2021. Data from the most recent NHS Staff Survey shows 51.2% of disabled staff agree their organisation offers equal opportunities to all, compared to 58.1% of non-disabled staff.

Metric 8 looks at the percentage of disabled staff reporting their employer has made adequate reasonable adjustments. The proportion of disabled staff who report gaining the adjustments they need has increased slightly, from 72.2% in 2021 to 73.4% in 2022. NHS Staff Survey data from 2023 shows this has again increased to 74.5%. The highest rate recorded since 2018 was in 2020, when 76.6% of disabled staff said their employer had made the adjustments necessary to enable them to do their job. The report notes that top performing trusts on this metric have introduced:

- A process to ensure all line managers are aware of the legal requirements related to reasonable adjustments
- Access to online information via an Intranet to inform staff of reasonable adjustments
- Providing information on Access to Work as part of the process
- Videos to guide managers and employees through the process
- Reasonable adjustment guidance documents
- Training for managers on reasonable adjustments and compassionate conversations.

Bullying, harassment and abuse

The WDES report compares data from the 2022 staff survey, noting the rates of harassment, bullying and abuse for disabled staff from patients, service users and the public (metric 4a). The proportion of disabled staff reporting harassment slightly increased between 2021 (33.0%) and 2022 (33.2%). This is 7.2 percentage points higher than the proportion of non-disabled staff, where just over a quarter

(26.0%) of staff reported harassment, bullying or abuse. Comparative levels of harassment have remained relatively consistent over the last five years for both disabled and non-disabled staff, demonstrating that more must be done to tackle these behaviours for all staff, and disabled staff specifically. NHS Staff Survey data for 2023 shows 30.6% of disabled staff have reported these behaviours from patients, their families and the public, compared to 24.0% of non-disabled staff. Levels of harassment, bullying and abuse by the public are also seen to vary across different types of trust, with staff in ambulance trusts most likely to experience harassment, and community trust staff the least likely.

Metric 4b reports on harassment, bullying or abuse from managers. The proportion of disabled staff experiencing this has seen a sustained fall, from 19.4% in 2018 to 16.1% in 2022. However, as with metric 4a, there is a difference of around seven percentage points in the results between disabled and non-disabled staff, highlighting a continued inequity in experience. Similarly, the proportion of disabled staff reporting harassment, bullying or abuse within ambulance trusts is two times the level seen in mental health or community settings. NHS Staff Survey data from 2023 shows 14.9% of disabled staff report these behaviours, compared to 8.5% of non-disabled staff.

Metric 4c examines the percentage of disabled staff experiencing harassment, bullying or abuse from other colleagues compared to non-disabled staff. The proportion of disabled staff reporting harassment or bullying from their peers has fallen slightly from 25.0% in 2021 to 24.8% in 2022. This is 8.3 percentage points higher than the rate for non-disabled colleagues. In contrast to the previous metrics on bullying and harassment, the proportion of disabled staff experiencing bullying from colleagues is higher in acute trusts (27.0%), compared to 25.2% in ambulance trusts, 20% in mental health trusts and 17.9% in community trusts. NHS Staff Survey data from 2023 shows 24.2% of disabled staff experienced these behaviours, compared to 15.8% of non-disabled staff.

Metric 4d shows the percentage of staff who reported harassment, bullying or abuse on the last occasion that it happened. Disabled staff are increasingly likely to report incidences of bullying and harassment, rising to 51.3% in 2022 from 49.9% in 2021. This is 1.8 percentage points higher than their non-disabled colleagues.

Morale

Metric 6 examines presenteeism, comparing the experiences of disabled and non-disabled staff saying that they have felt pressure from their manager to come to work, despite not feeling well enough to perform their duties. Less than a third (27.7%) of disabled staff felt this pressure, the lowest

level in five years. However, there continue to be higher rates of presenteeism amongst disabled staff than non-disabled staff, with just 19.9% of non-disabled staff reporting feeling the same pressure to attend work despite not feeling well enough to perform their duties. NHS Staff Survey results from 2023 show 26.6%, compared to 18.5% of non-disabled staff. Rates of presenteeism were reported to be more than twice as high at ambulance trusts (40.7%) compared to mental health trusts (19.4%). Trusts that have lower rates of presenteeism among disabled staff have:

- Created a sickness management process based on individual need instead of sickness absence triggers
- Analysed sickness absence records to inform decision making – disabled staff are less likely to be absent when flexible working is available, for example
- Provided guidance and training to line managers
- Created disability and carers' leave policies.

The proportion of disabled staff saying that they feel satisfied with the extent to which the organisation values their work compared to non-disabled staff (metric 7) is relatively unchanged (35.2%) from the rate in 2021 (35.1%), and remains 9.8 percentage points lower than for non-disabled staff. Among both groups, rates of satisfaction are under 50%, suggesting that the NHS needs to continue to focus on recognising staff activity and improving staff morale.

Metric 9a looks at staff engagement with the NHS Staff Survey. Engagement with the staff survey by disabled staff has consistently remained 0.5 percentage points below that for non-disabled staff, with the staff engagement score sitting at 6.4 compared to 6.9 for non-disabled staff in 2022. Both scores have fallen slightly from a high of 6.7 and 7.2 respectively in 2020. NHS Staff Survey data from 2023 shows the staff engagement score currently sits at 7.03 for disabled staff and 6.50 for non-disabled staff. Metric 9b looks at the facilitation of disabled voices in decision making by NHS trusts. All 212 trusts have declared they have taken action to do so in 2023.

NHS Providers view and resources

It is welcome to see improvements on a number of WDES metrics, particularly regarding shortlisting as part of recruitment processes, visibility and representation and the inclusion of disabled voices in decision making.

This report shows an increase in people with a disability on NHS boards compared to previous years, which is very encouraging. However, there is still a worrying disparity between staff declaring a disability to their employer and those anonymously reporting one via the NHS Staff Survey. This

indicates more must be done to ensure everyone who needs to declare a disability feels comfortable to do so.

It is concerning to see disabled staff are more likely to experience abuse from the public than non-disabled staff, which underlines the need for urgent action to ensure disabled staff feel safe at work. There has also been limited progress between 2023 and 2022 on the rate of disabled staff reporting access to reasonable adjustments, which peaked at 76.6% in 2020. It is important that this metric does not stagnate, so it is helpful to have examples of good practice related to reasonable adjustments included in the report.

We have been working closely with NHSE as part of the initial development and implementation of the [EDI improvement plan](#), published in summer 2023. As part of this, we have spoken to 12 trusts, integrated care boards and NHS organisations, including a community interest company, to understand the successes, barriers and challenges they have experienced implementing the plans six high impact actions to date. We will be publishing a final report as part of this piece of work in spring 2024.

It would be useful for national WDES reports to be published closer to the period of data collection to allow alignment with the latest NHS Staff Survey results and to maximise the breadth of data available to trusts and other stakeholders as they work to tackle inequities experienced by their staff. We would also welcome the return of greater intersectional analysis in the national WDES report, as seen in the version published in 2023. This analysis was of great assistance to trusts as they work to implement and embed the intersectional high impact actions outlined in the EDI improvement plan.

For Disability History Month 2023, we published two blogs by the co-chairs of the Disabled NHS Directors Network (DNDN), [Peter Reading](#) and [Kate Smyth](#), sharing their personal experiences as disabled NHS directors.