Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy to 2025

Labour
Relations
agency

improving employment relations

for everyone

Message from Chair and Chief Executive

This Strategy is for everyone.

It is for all our colleagues, both current and future. They deserve to work in a vibrant organisation where they can flourish and bring their whole selves to work, safe in the knowledge that difference is welcomed and celebrated. It is about ensuring we are an organisation that recognises and values our colleagues' individual and collective brilliance and harnesses this for the benefit of our customers, economy and society.

This Strategy is also for all the people and organisations we serve. This strategy is about ensuring we create a sustainable organisation that is accessible to – and reaches – everyone who might need our services. We do this by ensuring our staff are representative of the society we serve and understand different needs; we do this by working with other organisations to harness their expertise and insights to reach the most vulnerable in employment.

We are already a successful and well-respected organisation, but there is more to do before we can be truly considered exemplary. For example, we employ people from four generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z). However, 80% of my colleagues are from the older two generations and we need to do more to attract younger people. While most of my colleagues are women, none are in senior leadership roles. And, few are from minority ethnic backgrounds.

In terms of our customers, our surveys and stakeholder engagement show lower levels of awareness among younger people, people from minority ethnic backgrounds, and those in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations, or unemployed. We are also aware that people from certain communities, such as LGBT+, are less likely to assert their rights at work to the detriment of themselves and their employers. People in these groups are potentially in more precarious employment situations and therefore most in need of the Agency's services.

This Strategy is our next step in our journey in tackling these issues.

Gordon Milligan
Chairperson

Don Leeson
Chief Executive

Introduction

Our work at the Agency has meaning and purpose because it has a strong public impact and our services are fundamental to our economy and society at large. Therefore, our responsiveness to the needs of our customers must be shaped by a full understanding of the diversity of human experiences and backgrounds. Committing to and valuing greater diversity in our own workforce will enhance our ability to promote and deliver good employment relations services for the public, particularly to reach vulnerable and marginalised groups of people.

This Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)[1] Strategy provides a road map as to how we will drive systemic change and build a diverse, inclusive environment in which our personal differences are cherished and where everyone can thrive. In addition, we all have a role to play in considering the impact that we have on the community we serve, and ensuring that our customers feel included, valued and respected.

Being intentional about achieving EDI in the workplace serves an important purpose in retaining and attracting talented, skilled and knowledgeable people from a range of backgrounds, with fresh perspectives and different experiences. Therefore, the Agency will strive to ensure that we have high performing teams and individuals, and that staff feel empowered and treated with dignity when they are at work. When we harness the skills and expertise of all our people, they feel included, they bring their true selves to work and perform to their full potential. This improves employee wellbeing, staff retention, and increases employee openness, trust, motivation, satisfaction, innovation and productivity.

While the Agency is proud of what it has achieved to date on compliance with equality obligations, there is work to be done in creating an inclusive culture and becoming the exemplary organisation we strive to achieve. This Strategy envisages that our Board members, Senior Leadership Team, Senior Management Team, HR Team and line managers will be responsible for leading in its implementation. However, all staff are responsible for embracing, promoting and embedding EDI principles in our service delivery and everyday practice, with particular emphasis on inclusion of every individual. Through ongoing commitment and continuous review, EDI should be at the core of all we do and form an integral part of the Agency's culture.

Our Vision is to be widely recognised as Northern Ireland's leading authority in promoting productive working relationships for the benefit of individuals and organisations and to support the creation of a thriving and inclusive economy. Creating a diverse and inclusive organisation is essential for achieving these objectives.

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1   **Equity** in the workplace is about ensuring fairness in an environment where individuals or groups of people are not disadvantaged or treated less favourably due to bias, and where all staff have the same opportunity to participate and fulfil their potential. **Diversity** is about valuing difference of background, perspective or experience. It means taking into account and celebrating all the unique characteristics that make people who they are. This includes, but is not limited to, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, language, national origins, race, colour, disability, sexual orientation, gender identify, socioeconomic status, family structure and caring responsibilities. **Inclusion** is about creating and maintaining a culture where people feel empowered and valued for who they are and what makes them different. An inclusive workplace is one in which people can be authentic and bring their full self to work, in order that they can reach their full potential.

Our Purpose is to improve employment relations, promote best employment practice and resolve workplace disputes through the delivery of high quality, impartial and independent services.

To achieve our vision and purpose, our **values** are to be:

Progressive: *Forward thinking, outward looking, and creative, harnessing all insights to find better ways to support the economy and society.*

Ethical: *Always acting with integrity, impartiality, equity and utmost professionalism, and demonstrating openness and accountability.*

Exemplary: *Challenging ourselves to be the best we can be and a role model in how we conduct employment relations and equity, diversity and inclusion.*

Responsive: *Listening to our customers and our staff and adapting to ensure our services meet their needs.*

Our Approach

We are already making our organisation more diverse and inclusive, but wish to challenge ourselves to work towards embedding EDI in the Agency. In order to build a fully inclusive organisation and make the impact we wish to see, we will broaden our scope of EDI by focusing on multiple diversity characteristics and initiatives.

Our Story So Far

Statements of intent/policy

- We have Equality of Opportunities and Dignity at Work policies, which are explained to new staff during induction training. EDI is a strong thread throughout all other policies, including Absence Management;

- We have signed the Diversity Mark NI Charter, which is our commitment to implementing structural and cultural changes to help advance diversity, and achieved the Bronze Award through an action plan to promote gender diversity;

- We have attained Investors in People (IiP) Gold, which is recognition that we seek to improve performance and realise objectives through effective management and development of our people. We have committed in our Corporate Plan to achieving IiP Platinum by 2025 (we anticipate being the first public body to achieve such recognition);

- We have attained the Customer Service Excellence Award, which is our commitment to improving and delivering professional, high-level customer service;

- We have signed the Mental Health Charter, a framework for working towards mentally healthy workplaces;

- We are a corporate founding member of Neurodiversity in Business, which is working towards building a neuro-inclusive society;

- We have joined Employers for Disability NI, which is our statutory commitment to promoting training, employment opportunities and accessibility for disabled people as employees and customers;

- We have developed a Disability Action Plan, our framework for providing accessibility to our staff and customers;

- We have committed to the Equality Commission's 'Every Customer Counts' and the 'Just a Minute' initiatives to ensure our services are accessible to disabled customers; and,

- We are a signatory to the Race at Work Charter, which is our commitment to proactively supporting the inclusion of ethnic communities in the workplace.

People and groups

- We have appointed an EDI Manager, reporting to our Chief Executive, and sponsored by an EDI Board Champion, to lead our work;

- We have established a range of staff-led groups – a number with Board member sponsors – to provide safe spaces to connect, share, raise awareness and help the Agency drive inclusive change: Carers' Network, Disability and Long Term Conditions Network, LGBT+ Allies Network, Neurodiversity Network, and Women's Network. We also have a Menopause Café;

- We have a Board Mental Health Champion;

- We participated in the Belfast and Foyle Pride events in 2022, with our own 'For Everyone' logo, to show solidarity with LGBT+ colleagues, family and friends and promote the Agency's services to the LGBT+ community;

- We have a strong partnership with our Trade Union Branch to ensure an effective employee voice in decision-making;

- We have an Employment Relations Group, which informs the activities the Agency should undertake and reviews progress;

- Our HR team plays a role in enabling the Agency to carry out its EDI agenda through advice, policy support, and providing information and training;

- Our line managers are expected to be engaged and committed to the EDI agenda in their day-to-day management of staff, and support their team members' participation in relevant initiatives; and,

- All staff are expected to take responsibility for being inclusive in their day-to-day interactions with colleagues and when delivering our services.

Partnerships

- We have a longstanding partnership with the Equality Commission with whom we deliver joint seminars/webinars on issues such as bullying and harassment in the workplace and publish guidance on cross-cutting issues such as 'Promoting Equality in Employment for Women Affected by the Menopause'. We also provide support to their work with the NI Human Rights Commission as the Dedicated Mechanism under Article 2 of the NI Protocol to ensure no diminution of rights following the UK's exit from the European Union;

- We collaborate with others, such as the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, to publish guidance on workplace issues, such as domestic violence; and,

- We work with voluntary and community groups, such as the African and Caribbean Support Network and the Rainbow Project, to use their insight into issues affecting their constituencies and deliver joint awareness-raising events on employment rights.

Management information and monitoring

- We have employee baseline data on equality categories, which enables us to understand trends and report progress;

- We carry out annual EDI surveys to measure staff's experiences relating to diversity, inclusion and belonging; and,

- We carry out quarterly pulse surveys to measure and monitor staff engagement.

Learning

- EDI is covered during induction;

- We have an intersectional approach to training, which has EDI at its core. We have undertaken Agency-wide unconscious bias training, sexual orientation and gender identity training, and over half of our staff have completed our Leadership Development programme, delivered through Queen's University, Belfast;

- We have adopted a diversity characteristic for focus in our annual training plan, and have organised Agency-wide equality training on that characteristic;

- We have held lunchtime learning presentations to align with awareness dates in the EDI calendar, such as Black History Month, International Women's Day, International Men's Day, and Pride;

- We have a programme on wellbeing, which is supported by our lunchtime learning talks, and includes annual health checks and massages at work;

- We have incorporated perspective-taking into our learning through staff sharing stories and cultural awareness, on aspects such as Disability, LGBT+ and Race and Ethnicity matters.

Employment Relations Services

All of our services are offered and delivered to our customers regardless of their identities, backgrounds, beliefs or diversity characteristics. We ensure these are fully accessible.

As part of our services, we provide guidance and thought-leadership on areas closely connected with EDI. We have developed practical guides on workplace issues such as menopause, hybrid working, childcare, domestic abuse, harassment and bullying, and Covid vaccination, and we offer webinars on topics such as hybrid working, parental bereavement leave and pay, and supporting mental health in the workplace.

Where We Are Now: EDI Maturity Model[2]

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Basic/ Compliance	**Awareness/ valuing diversity and inclusion**	**Intermediate/ Understanding and application**	**Integrated/ Mature**	**Sustainable/ Exemplary**
EDI is on the agenda for discussion but no concrete plans to define or achieve the outcomes beyond compliance with regulations and policies.	The business benefits to diversity and inclusion are recognised and acknowledged as important to success. The business case is communicated and EDI initiatives are developed at grassroots level to support the agenda. Plans are developed to increase diversity and inclusion.	Leaders recognise and accept the business benefits of diversity and inclusion. Managers throughout the organisation are integrating strategies to create an inclusive culture.	EDI is fully integrated into everyday activities. Managers are committed to creating an inclusive environment and leading from the front. The needs of staff and service users are reflected and EDI is supporting the success of the organisation's work.	EDI is "how things are done" and its architecture is part of the organisation and embedded in day to day activities. EDI drives innovation and strategic vision. The impact on the organisation is clear as EDI enables the organisation to be recognised as exemplary in its brand. Role models are visible at all levels of the organisation.

We will fully harness the business benefits of EDI by progressing along the above matrix. The Agency is currently at the 'Awareness' stage (Level 2) and are transitioning to 'Understanding and Application' (Level 3) in order to become a more diverse and inclusive organisation. While this EDI strategy is ambitious, it is also realistic and pragmatic. Therefore, we envisage that by 2025 we will be demonstrating elements of the 'Integrated/Maturity' (Level 4) stage.

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2   A maturity model is a tool to qualitatively measure the current effectiveness of a business or project. This maturity model is based on the Diversity and Maturity Model provided by Diversity Mark NI.

Our Objectives

We have set four ambitious objectives to help us become more diverse and inclusive by 2025, and we will use these to guide our efforts and hold ourselves to account. These objectives provide pillars, which guides the priorities and actions we plan to undertake. Everything that we do is captured within at least one of these pillars.

What we will achieve:

1)   Improved accessibility of all our employment relations services for our diverse range of service users.
2)   A diverse organisation with a talented, knowledgeable and skilled workforce that reflects the diversity of Northern Ireland society.
3)   An inclusive workplace culture that supports, respects and values contributions from all staff, and takes a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of discrimination and harassment.
4)   Recognition as an exemplary organisation as an employer and service provider, and a thought-leader on employment relations issues.

How we will realise our objectives

Evidence led

Our initiatives will be based on information such as diversity data, staff engagement survey results, EDI survey results and feedback, and equality and customer feedback data from our Employment Relations services. We will measure and review our progress. We will also take into account any research that is relevant to societal change. In addition, we will benchmark our organisation against others in order to ensure that our initiatives are relevant and that we are becoming exemplary in EDI.

Transparency

We will continue to report our progress in an open and transparent way. Where progress is slow or has not been achieved, we will be honest in communicating this and review how this can be addressed. We will embed EDI into our governance in order that there is an overview of our progress to our EDI commitments.

Inclusive leadership

EDI will be embedded across the organisation's structures and activities. Our leaders will be empowered through training on inclusive leadership and promotion of the behaviours and norms that are expected from all staff, and they will have responsibility for implementing the EDI agenda in their day to day management. Everyone will be expected to behave respectfully and foster an environment that does not tolerate discrimination, bullying or harassment. No shortfalls will be ignored.

Communication and engagement

We will all actively listen to each other with openness. Staff will be encouraged to take an active role in our EDI agenda when we consult through surveys, and we will engage with staff through consultation with the Employment Relations Group.

Objective 1:   Increased Accessibility of all our Employment Relations Services for our diverse range of service users

Why this is necessary

As an organisation that offers high quality, specialised employment relations services to the public, it is essential to take action on EDI to sustain our ability to meet the needs of a diverse society. In doing so, we will achieve our vision, improve workplace relations and support the economy, as well as meet statutory equality duties.

How we will achieve this

1) Conduct outreach, engage, consult and collaborate with a diverse range of stakeholders to inform the development of good practice guidance work and the barriers that diverse service users face in accessing our services;
2) Audit the preparation of good practice literature, workshops, articles, presentations and webinars to consider their impact on EDI;
3) Audit operational guidelines across our services to ensure accessibility for customers;
4) Align with our Communications Strategy to ensure our information and communications are fully accessible; and,
5) As a thought-leader, share our EDI Strategy and activities on our website and social media channels.

Desired outcomes by 2025

1) Improved awareness of the Agency's services;
2) Our services will be accessible and inclusive, particularly for disabled and neuro-divergent people, and those whose first language is not English; and,
3) Increased recognition in Customer Service Excellence Award.

Objective 2: A diverse organisation with a talented, knowledgeable and skilled workforce that reflects the diversity of Northern Ireland society

Why this is necessary

As an organisation providing employment relations services for everyone in Northern Ireland, it is vital that our workforce is diverse and engaged. An inclusive organisation brings a range of perspectives and ideas to our service delivery, policy-making and strategic objectives, which increases innovation and productivity. It also achieves stronger staff-customer relationships, which enhances staff morale and engagement.

How we will achieve this

1) Use a data-led approach to assess the diversity profile of the Agency;
2) Attract more diverse candidates for staff vacancies by applying EDI principles to the planning of recruitment and selection exercise and advertising channels;

3)   Review our recruitment processes on an ongoing basis to reduce the risk of bias and unintended barriers to inclusion;

4)   Use work placements and apprenticeships to introduce more diversity, nurture and develop future talent pipeline;

5)   Carry out outreach with organisations that support diverse communities to raise the Agency's profile;

6)   Coordinate a mentoring programme, including reverse mentoring, to focus on underrepresented groups, understand obstacles and grow talent;

7)   EDI related training into training programmes and inductions; and,

8)   Measure and track our recruitment metrics and aspire to improve upon these from a diversity perspective through positive action measures.

Desired outcomes by 2025

1)   A future-proofed organisation, which provides transfer of skills and experience between generations;

2)   A workforce that embraces diversity, and which has greater representation of marginalised groups at all levels;

3)   An organisation that people are proud to work for;

4)   Achievement of IiP Platinum.

Objective 3:   An inclusive workplace culture that supports, respects and values contributions from all staff, and takes a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of discrimination and harassment

Why this is necessary

There is a strong moral and business case that an inclusive organisation, which values diversity and dignity provides a respectful work environment and will enhance creativity, performance, employee engagement and satisfaction. These aspects lead to organisations which are more resilient, effective and attractive workplaces. We are striving to get the best out of all our people and provide equal support to them so that everyone feels included, supported and treated equitably. We will create a shift in our workplace culture to embed EDI practices in everything we do so that our staff are behaving inclusively by instinct, and we will relentlessly challenge ourselves to push our boundaries on this agenda. In line with our People Strategy, we will foster an inclusive culture in which wellbeing and mental health are promoted, and all colleagues feel empowered to flourish and achieve their potential.

How we will achieve this

1)   Use a data-driven approach to understand the culture of the organisation and experiences of staff in relation to belonging and inclusion;

2)   Actively demonstrate our commitment to EDI by changing mind-sets, living our values through inclusive behaviours and challenging any behaviours which undermine the right of staff to be diverse individuals or express their diverse characteristics in the workplace;

3) Encourage discussions and dialogue about EDI as part of Agency briefings and ERG meetings;

4) Support participation in current Employee Network Groups and identify any possible gaps for staff networks, whilst encouraging allyship for marginalised groups;

5) Celebrate EDI related initiatives and multicultural events, using the cultural calendar of awareness dates and diversity heritage months to promote engagement with staff;

6) Foster an environment that promotes perspective-taking, telling personal stories and championing of diversity and inclusion;

7) Establish a Diversity Council comprising champions and Staff Network leaders to communicate and promote EDI initiatives in their area and to work together on intersectional matters;

8) Ensure flexible working helps to promote a more diverse, and inclusive workplace culture;

9) Provide education to all staff on EDI matters. Mandatory training on a revolving diversity characteristic each year and refresher Dignity at Work training will be provided regularly;

10) Develop an inclusive leadership development programme to ensure that leaders and managers are aware of EDI issues and equipped to support diverse colleagues in the workplace;

11) Continue to review and update policies with an EDI lens and introduce new policies which increase inclusivity;

12) Create a vibrant EDI space on staff intranet, promoting the EDI agenda;

13) Benchmark with other organisations and participate in EDI networks of expertise to ensure best practice in EDI.

Desired outcomes by 2025

1) All leaders are competent in matters of diversity and inclusion;

2) Staff are behaving inclusively and are aware of and promoting a zero-tolerance, no-bystanders approach to bullying and harassment; and,

3) An organisation that staff are proud to work for.

Objective 4: Recogntion as an exemplary organisation as an employer and service provider, and a thought-leader on employment relations issues

Why this is necessary

We intend to optimise our position in the field of employment relations, by upholding our mission and values, and by working to improve employment relations, we will work towards positive change in the EDI space. Promoting EDI related issues in our work to increase good employment practice and then implementing such strategies and policies internally shows that we are intentional about EDI and leading by example.

Also, by engaging in outreach and partnerships and sharing best practice, we are influencing other organisations to make impactful change that adds to a culture of inclusion. We want all our stakeholders to be aware that EDI is central to everything we do and essential for our long-term success.

How we will achieve this

1)   Continue to provide guidance and information on EDI related issues which promote good employment relations;
2)   Demonstrate authenticity and lead by example by implementing good practice guidance into our internal processes and procedures;
3)   Engage in knowledge sharing with other organisations informally (via respective EDI managers) and formally (via staff conference);
4)   Contribute to Departmental/Executive strategies as a thought leader in EDI related matters;
5)   Demonstrate accountability by working on our frameworks as set out in Diversity Mark, CSE, Investors in People, and identify any other appropriate benchmarking mechanisms; and,
6)   Enter EDI awards competitions, such as CIPD, Business in the Community, and Women in Business, to assess progress against external benchmarks.

Desired outcomes by 2025

1)   Our services are customer-centric and EDI is embedded in the methods and content of our employment relations services;
2)   Our good practice guidance services are reflected by internal EDI-focused processes, practices and procedures;
3)   Towards Gold mark of progress in Diversity Mark NI[3] and external recognition by other best practice frameworks or charters;
4)   Recognition in EDI awards; and,
5)   An organisation staff are proud to work for.

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3   We envisage this will be awarded in early 2026.

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Head Office	**Regional Office**	**T:** 03300 522 220
James House	Floor 3	**F:** 028 9043 8737
2-4 Cromac Avenue	Richmond Chambers	**TDD:** 028 9023 8411
BELFAST	The Diamond	**E:** info:@lra.org.uk
BT7 2JA	DERRY/LONDONDERRY	**W:** lra.org.uk
	BT48 6HN	