EDI Audit: Recommendations and Next Steps

Foreword from Belinda Bell, Chair of Trustees

On behalf of the Board of Mermaids, I would like to thank all our staff who contributed to the Social Justice Collective's equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) review of our charity – your honesty and bravery throughout have revealed an unacceptable situation which we are determined to address without delay, and have already begun to work on.

The Board has accepted all of the report's recommendations, and we are pleased that the Senior Leadership Team have outlined the next steps which they are taking to ensure that becoming an organisation which embraces equity, diversity, inclusion and anti-oppressive practice is a strategic priority for Mermaids this year and in the years to come.

I want to apologise unreservedly to anyone who has experienced oppression in any form. Every member of this Board considers equity, diversity and inclusion to be of the utmost importance, and we believe the individual cases that have informed this report are deeply concerning. Every person at Mermaids should feel supported, heard and valued in the workplace, and we take responsibility for the institutional weaknesses that failed you.

The review has shone a light on representation and discrimination within the organisation. We know we cannot effectively fulfil our mission to support transgender, non-binary and gender diverse children, young people and their families if we fail to support and actively listen to our marginalised staff. No one at Mermaids should ever feel abandoned or confronted by the stereotypes that we as a charity work so hard to dismantle. Our charity should not tolerate discriminatory or harassing behaviour whatsoever, and we commit to investing in the skills, processes and guidance required to ensure we uphold the highest standards in this regard.

Our internal processes also require urgent review. We need structures that acknowledge and confront the issues raised by staff, that prioritise staff wellbeing, and that ensure decision-makers are held accountable. Our managers should understand the structures and behaviours that perpetuate systemic oppression and our staff should feel their personal progression is valued. The delivery of training and EDI-specific support that has so far been lacking will be critical going forward.

We have provided a range of mechanisms for people to ask questions, provide feedback or raise concerns about the report. More generally, the trustees would like to enable staff members the ability to raise concerns associated with the report and the EDI process in a safe and confidential manner. For that purpose, should staff feel unable to raise an issue via the usual grievance process, they can make contact directly with either the CEO or the Chair of the HR and Remuneration Committee, Hardeep Aiden.

As part of our next steps, we are seeking to improve our whistleblowing policy, including working with external experts which will provide further support should management,

leadership or the trustees know about and fail to act on discrimination or systemic oppression in the future.

Belinda Bell, Chair of Trustees

Introduction

Mermaids engaged external consultants in Spring 2022 to undertake an equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) review of the organisation. The consultants spent time with the staff and leadership team in focus groups and gathered documents and data to understand the culture around EDI at Mermaids with a focus on the following themes:

- Belonging and values: whether Mermaids is a place where marginalised people love to work, feel supported, heard, and valued.
- Representation and power: the extent to which there is equal representation throughout the organisation and workplace.
- Awareness and learning: whether staff, senior leadership and the board fully understand equity, diversity and inclusion and whether they commit to educate, upskill, and challenge themselves and each other.
- Progression: whether marginalised staff can thrive and have their skills appreciated and nurtured.
- Processes: whether best practice processes and policies are in place which benefit all staff. Whether processes proactively guarantee fair and understanding support and make it easy to understand how to address instances of oppression or discrimination.

The aim of the review was to understand current challenges and priority actions with regards to Mermaids becoming an equitable organisation with a clear vision for social justice. The review has resulted in a range of recommendations based on participants' feedback.

The consultants produced findings and the following recommendations that the Board of Trustees have accepted in full. They have instructed the Senior Leadership Team to work with Mermaids' external consultants to action these. The immediate next steps are set out in this document, and we look forward to sharing our progress, internally and externally.

These form the core of one of our Strategic Objectives for 2023-24 and beyond, enabling Leadership and the Board to make rapid, meaningful progress towards being an organisation which embraces equity, diversity and inclusion and tackles oppression robustly wherever it occurs.

Recommendations

Culture, belonging and values

1. Collectively articulate who Mermaids seeks to serve in terms of communities in a shared vision and strategy for EDI that is rooted in anti-oppressive practice.

2. Operationalise the EDI vision and strategy with tangible goals that are embedded in Mermaids' business plan.

3. Develop a more robust EDI policy and statement, with clear behaviour frameworks for staff. Behaviour frameworks should detail how staff are expected to create an inclusive environment, and how oppressive incidents will be tackled when people do not meet these expectations.

4. Use staff demographic data to identify and address underrepresentation, particular around disabled, PoC and trans representation. Develop regular EDI feedback mechanisms (e.g., annual staff survey) to better understand, monitor, and evaluate the experiences of staff from marginalised backgrounds and the inclusivity of the culture at Mermaids.

5. Introduce regular opportunities for staff to engage in challenging conversations around trans and racial equity. Alongside this, in collaboration with staff, ensure safe spaces for all staff to talk about marginalised experiences are fully supported and lent autonomy and routes to hold leadership accountable.

6. Invest specifically in the development of leadership and management skills, processes, and guidance to create inclusive cultures from the point of induction so that staff of colour, disabled and trans and non-binary staff feel valued and a true sense of belonging.

7. Review and publish clear zero tolerance policies and processes around racist, transphobic and ableist incidents, including supporting examples and reporting routes.

Representation and Power

1. During the EDI visioning process, explore and articulate a shared organisational view as to why representation of the communities Mermaids seeks to serve is integral to Mermaids' organisational purpose.

2. Clearly define and discuss Mermaids' purpose and mission to ensure that it represents, advocates, and amplifies the voices of trans young people.

3. Prioritise diversification and representation on the Board and at senior levels to reflect the intersectional identities of the communities Mermaids seeks to support, to ensure that culture change can be led from the top and lived experience is shaping Mermaids' decisions and services.

4. Develop clear mechanisms for all staff, and particularly junior / frontline staff, to engage with the Board, leadership team and decision-making processes, including ways to feed back when those mechanisms have not worked effectively.

5. Set behavioural objectives for senior leaders to role model inclusivity and ensure that these are reviewed through appraisal and 360 processes.

6. Identify clear leads and accountable owners for race and trans equity actions. Ensure that senior leads for anti-racism work undertake learning and development in racial justice, power and privilege and white fragility.

7. Acknowledge, thank, and allocate appropriate time and reward to staff of colour / non-senior staff who are supporting the development of Mermaids' EDI work.

Processes

1. Develop a clear, transparent, and robust process for handling all forms and levels of oppressive incidents and behaviours. This mechanism should support and centre the person who has experienced harm, thank those who report incidents and create learning for the wider organisation.

2. Review HR policies through an EDI lens and supporting guidance for line managers. Communicate policies clearly through the staff handbook and induction process. Review and update HR policies regularly in consultation with staff, actively encouraging staff to raise inequities as part of feedback processes.

3. Update grievances / complaints / disciplinary policies setting out clear. consequences for oppressive, discriminatory, or harassing behaviours – internally and externally.

4. Monitor and report on incidents and the action taken to identify patterns and from that develop strategic solutions to issues identified.

5. Review staff recruitment processes from start to finish, looking at job design, advertisement routes and selection processes to analyse and amend points at which marginalised participants may be excluded (e.g., requirement for a degree, or bias in panels). Prioritise removing barriers and encouraging applications in current areas of underrepresentation within the communities Mermaids' serves.

6. Develop inclusive recruitment training and guidance to support this, including on how to recruit for potential not 'traditional' experience.

Awareness and learning

1. Proactively identify and develop meaningful partnerships with PoC community led and trans-led organisations in the UK and internationally.

2. Proactively foster a culture of learning and practice and ensure the Board, leadership and all staff undergo a rolling learning programme covering; trans and non-binary identities, white fragility, racial equity, power and privilege, microaggressions, intersectional identities, having challenging conversations and EDI action planning / commitment setting.

3. Establish the EDI resource, expertise and lived experience that Mermaids needs and avoid leaning on staff networks and marginalised staff to educate and offer lived expertise.

4. Equip all staff with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to understand and apply an intersectional approach in the design and delivery of work, services, and projects (e.g., create and use a simple equity and inclusion impact assessment tool for Mermaids).

5. Create regular, intentional spaces for brave conversations and self-reflective praxis and what it means in practice in terms of individual behaviours and for Mermaids' service delivery.

6. Explore opportunities for reverse mentoring for staff, leadership, and the Board, ensuring that staff with lived experience are valued and adequately compensated for sharing skills and experience.

Progression

1. Review and update policies and processes through an EDI lens, using the shared vision, and centring what an equitable, inclusive workplace for marginalised staff would look and feel like.

2. Review pay, progression and development routes through an EDI lens i.e., proactively explore and address the specific barriers marginalised staff may face in accessing equitable pay and progression and offer transparency around progression criteria, routes and opportunities.

3. Consider options for objective, external support from someone with HR and anti-oppression expertise when required (particularly around race, disability and trans identities).

4. Collect specific feedback (via staff survey) and monitor the retention and progression of all staff to identify where marginalised staff may face barriers.

5. Work with marginalised staff to identify opportunities for development and progression e.g., to practice skills or access to formal/informal networks, mentoring or coaching.

6. Ensure that exit interviews adequately feature equity, diversity and inclusion to establish any barriers to marginalised staff' sense of belonging and ability to thrive and develop at Mermaids.

Next Steps

Some steps were taken during the audit process, and have continued since, to deliver immediate improvements in the environment in which our staff work, including improvements in internal communications and improved visibility and accessibility of the Board of Trustees, although we still have work to do in these areas.

The Senior Leadership Team, as commissioned by the Board of Trustees are taking the following steps in the immediate future, as part of a wider strategic journey:

1. Establishing a strategic objective relating to EDI for 2023-24 which includes:
   a. Developing and delivering against a clear action plan
   b. Reviewing and embedding inclusive values and behaviours
   c. Answering the question as to whether the charity has an ambition to be trans and/or community led
2. Working with external consultants to agree a clear vision for EDI at Mermaids in the coming weeks, based on the draft vision co-created by staff during the audit process.
3. Working with the operational team, staff and external consultants throughout February 2023 to translate the vision and recommendations into a clear action plan and objectives for teams throughout the organisation.
   a. This will include creating a structure for feedback, and accountability for staff at all levels, trustees and appropriate stakeholders.
4. Sharing this action plan, and our progress, internally and with external stakeholders throughout 2023-24 and beyond.