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# VLA Equality Scheme 2007/10

An Executive Agency of the  
Department for Environment,  
Food and Rural Affairs

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## **FOREWORD**

### **Foreword**

The preparation of an Equality Scheme is an important part of the Government's drive to create a fairer society, with the public sector leading by example. Like other public sector bodies, the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) is not only contributing to that drive but has prepared a specific Equality Scheme. We are fully committed to equality of opportunity, as an employer and in the way we conduct our business.

Through the VLA Equality Scheme we will ensure the VLA operates in a culture based on transparency, consultation, inclusiveness and policies that promote equality of opportunity. We intend to demonstrate that this culture permeates the work of the VLA both now and in the future.

**Prof Steve Edwards**  
Chief Executive

## Background and Introduction

1. The Government has introduced legislation in recent years to raise awareness of the need to:
  - eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment,
  - promote equal opportunities for all, and
  - promote good relations between people of different racial groups.
2. The Employment Equality (Sex Discrimination) Regulations 2005 and the Disability Discrimination Act require public authorities to:
  - eliminate harassment because of gender or disability,
  - take steps to take account of a person's disabilities, even where that involves treating them more favourably than others, and
  - encourage participation in public life by people with a disability.
3. The Gender Equality Duty requires authorities to undertake an Equal Pay Review and address any issues raised.
4. In order to actively demonstrate its commitment to this, public bodies were required to produce equality schemes covering initially race in May 2002, followed by disability in December 2006 and gender in April 2007. The VLA had published its Race and Disability Schemes as required by legislation but has now brought these different Schemes together under a joint VLA Equality Scheme.
5. Further legislation may be introduced in the future to cover age, religious beliefs and sexual orientation and should these and any other legislation covering equality and diversity come into force the VLA Equality Scheme will incorporate these additions.

## Key Aims

6. The VLA operates within a set of guidelines or key aims which complement the Equality Scheme. These aims are:
  - We provide our customers with the highest quality scientific data and advice to support evidence-based policymaking while providing best value for money.
  - We work collaboratively to deliver leading edge veterinary research, surveillance, consultancy and laboratory testing services through a series of integrated science programmes.
  - We maintain an emergency response capability for animal health and public health threats.

- We develop colleagues to their full potential and recognise their individual and collective contribution.
- We work by a set of principles and values that underpin our behaviour:
  - Be open to constructive criticism and external challenge.
  - Develop leadership to promote shared vision and values.
  - Demonstrate rigour and responsibility in relation to our science.
  - Share knowledge and communicate openly at all levels.
  - Strive for excellence whilst confronting poor performance.
  - Treat everyone fairly and recognise their views and contributions.
  - Treat everyone with dignity and respect.
  - Work together to turn problems into solutions.

## **The Duty to Promote Equality**

### **General Duty**

7. Current legislation requires the VLA to meet a “*general*” duty or standard and have due regard to the following when carrying out its activities.
8. The general duty is to:-
  - promote equality of opportunity between people,
  - eliminate discrimination that is unlawful under legislation relating to race, gender or disability,
  - eliminate harassment of people that is related to their disability, race or gender,
  - promote positive attitudes towards disabled people,
  - encourage participation by all people in public life, and
  - take steps to meet people’s needs, even if this requires more favourable treatment.

### **Specific Duty**

9. The legislation places a ‘*specific*’ duty upon government departments to have a Scheme or Schemes, which set out how it will promote equality.

10. It also requires Departments and Agencies to review a range of employment practices, from recruitment to retirement to ensure that the Scheme is working.

## **What is an equality scheme?**

11. An Equality Scheme is a strategy which includes actions summarising how VLA will build equality of opportunity into its corporate aims, and how it will monitor and evaluate its performance so that it can continually improve.
12. The Scheme aims to demonstrate how VLA already builds equality into its policies and employment practices, rather than making adjustments at a later stage. It also sets out steps to further develop these policies and practices.
13. The VLA will report progress on an annual basis and ensure the approach to equality and diversity is maintained and continually improved.
14. The Scheme is designed to:
  - encourage a strategic approach by:
    - setting out a timetabled Action Plan,
    - setting out what we will do to evaluate the impact of the Scheme,
    - linking to other business processes so that the Scheme can properly reflect priorities and pressures facing VLA,
  - improve transparency and accountability by:
    - including all current and planned measures to promote equality,
    - showing our plans to staff and the public,
    - explaining how we deal with any complaints,
  - reach all parts of VLA by:
    - telling all members of staff what they need to do to promote equality,
    - including appropriate material within training programmes, and
    - linking with other initiatives which might have an impact on the promotion of equality of opportunity within the VLA.

## **The aims of VLA's Equality Scheme**

15. By putting the Equality Scheme into practice, we aim to realise the following outcomes over the next three years:

- increased satisfaction with the delivery of our activities across all groups,
- the removal of any unintended unfavourable impact on staff of our policies and practices, and
- maintain employee awareness of equality issues.

## **The Benefits of the Scheme**

16. The promotion of equality **in relation to policy and service** delivery will help to:
  - attract competent and capable staff,
  - make VLA more representative of the diverse population,
  - develop good practice, and
  - avoid claims of unlawful disability, race or gender discrimination.
17. The promotion of equality **in employment** will help to:
  - retain staff,
  - improve the way all staff are managed and,
  - improve staff morale and productivity.

## **How VLA developed the Equality Scheme**

18. At the centre of the Equality Duty is the requirement to involve people who may have an interest in the way activities are carried out, in producing parts of the Scheme particularly relevant to them. For example, for aspects of the sections relating to disability, all 94 staff (7.2% of staff) who had declared a disability were sent a questionnaire and they were asked to comment on all of VLA's activities and if they had any suggestions on how VLA could improve as a disability employer. Around half of those written to responded 43 (45%), 3 indicated they did not wish to participate, 20 completed the form without additional comments and the remaining 20 commented on the activities at VLA.
19. All staff who returned a completed questionnaire were sent letters advising them of the progress that had been made and how their comments had been incorporated into the Scheme where appropriate. However it was apparent from the comments that staff did not identify any major problems either to the VLA policies or the VLA as a whole and the suggestions made were mainly in areas where amendments could be made. One area in which VLA could not make progress was in the request for spellcheck on

the Self Service Oracle HR system as unfortunately Oracle are unable to provide this.

20. We also considered the results of the VLA 'Have Your Say' staff survey, exit questionnaires and complaints to see if any trends were emerging which required further investigation to inform the areas covering race, gender, age and sexual orientation as well as disability.
21. The Trade Union Side were also consulted about the Equality Scheme.

### **Review of the scheme**

22. The Scheme will be reviewed annually and a progress report published on the VLA websites. Comments from the TUS and any individuals will be taken into account when reviews and actions are developed.

### **Policies**

23. The policies to which the *General Duty* may apply are:-

#### **VLA policy**

24. The Veterinary Laboratories Agency is an equal opportunities employer. Its policy is to provide equality of opportunity for employment, career development and promotion to all that are eligible, on the basis of ability, qualifications and fitness for the work. Applications are welcome from all sections of the community, irrespective of race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, disability or age. Unfair discrimination and harassment and bullying are unacceptable behaviour and could lead to disciplinary measures.
25. For external recruitment of staff an equal opportunities statement is included in all VLA website advertisements and Vacancy Information sheets sent to candidates on request of an application form.
26. External press advertisements carry the following statement, "*Applications are welcome from all sections of the community irrespective of race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, disability or age*".
27. The VLA Staff Handbook, Chapter 13 Equality and Diversity, published on the VLA intranet, covers the range of legislation mentioned under the Scheme. This Chapter covers the various acts which make it unlawful to discriminate in all aspects of employment including recruitment, promotion, learning and development and dismissal.

#### **Internal**

28. The VLA maintains a Staff Handbook which includes all the policies operating at the VLA. The VLA Staff Handbook is updated at least annually or sooner if there is a change to the policy. It is divided into 19 Chapters for

ease of reference. The following policies are detailed in the VLA Staff Handbook available to all staff on the VLA intranet:

- Conduct, Recruitment, Probation, Attendance, Pay, Appointments & Working Patterns, Appraisal, Inefficiency, Learning & Development, Promotion, Stand In Allowance, Misconduct, Equality & Diversity, Health & Welfare, Leaving the VLA, Redeployment & Redundancy, Innovation & Invention, Complaints, Family Support.
29. Policy Documents define VLA's intentions/objectives for various aspects of VLA's business. These documents are mandatory and apply to all areas of the VLA. The Strategy Management Group (Directors) hold controlled signed hard copies of all Policy Documents. Other Procedure Documents, such as Agency Procedures and Guidance Documents explain how the policies are put into practice.
  30. There is an Equality and Diversity section on the VLA intranet which provides further guidance for staff.
  31. The VLA has access to the Defra Networks which are mentioned under their respective diversity areas below and staff are allowed time off to attend the meetings.

### **External Contracts**

32. VLA awards contracts for work performed on behalf of the Agency. These vary in range from the on site Nursery/Playscheme provider to services such as research. In awarding contracts, VLA has due regard to ensure that the suppliers act in accordance with the VLA's equal opportunities policy. All contracts contain an 'equal opportunity clause'.

### **Trade Union Side**

33. The VLA takes into account the views of staff and works with the Trade Union Side (TUS) to implement existing policies and develop new ones.
34. The relationship with the TUS has evolved over many years. There is a dedicated part-time Chair of the TUS in recognition of the amount of liaison between VLA management and the TUS and to maintain and improve the good working relationship already established.
35. Formal Whitley Committee meetings between Management and TUS, are held twice yearly and there are also half yearly meetings covering equality and diversity issues. Other meetings with the Trade Unions are held on a variety of issues including Pay negotiations.

### **Equality Impact Assessments**

36. Equality Impact Assessments will be carried out on VLA policies to ensure staff are not disadvantaged by them and any adverse effects are either eliminated or reduced where possible.

## Current VLA practices

### Facilities

37. In order to meet disability legislation requirements coming into force in October 2004 the VLA undertook investigations into all its premises to ensure that they were adapted where it was possible to do so without damaging the buildings' structures. The VLA facilities meet those Disability requirements and also meet requirements under the Tommy Campaign for the care of pregnant staff (also referred to under Childcare).
38. The Mills Building, opened in November 2005, is one of VLA's most innovative buildings. It achieved a BREEAM Excellent Rating, the highest ever bespoke assessment. BREEAM stands for Building Research Establishment's Environmental Assessment Method, a method used to assess the environmental performance of both new and existing buildings. It is regarded by the UK's construction and property sectors as the measure of best practice in environmental design and management.
39. The Mills Building was tested on a number of aspects including design, building material and running efficiency.
40. Other redevelopments currently underway are designed to meet stringent best practice standards wherever possible but conform to legislative requirements.

### Biodiversity

41. Biodiversity covers the wide variety of plants and animals living in their natural environments from micro-organisms to human beings. Biodiversity is important for our sense of wellbeing and contributes to our recreation, tourism and education. It provides water, air, food, regulates our climate and helps us to monitor the state of the wider environment.
42. There are clauses in our grounds and building contracts to minimise the impact on biodiversity. Examples include reducing the use of pesticides and less mowing of grass areas not used by staff.
43. There are artificial nests around VLA Weybridge for house martins.
44. The pond at VLA Starcross attracts many species of damselflies and dragonflies.
45. In 2004, Surrey Wildlife Trust selected Hall's Farm at VLA Weybridge as a Nature Conservation Importance Project (SNCI) due to its alder woodland and wet grassland.
46. The Nursery and Playscheme children have a wildlife area where they can look for insects and wildlife in logs. They have a bird box with a camera installed to study the development of the eggs and have a garden where they grow flowers and vegetables.

## **Communications**

47. The VLA uses a range of communication tools to ensure all staff have access to information and can communicate across the VLA and externally.

## **Websites**

48. The staff with responsibility for maintaining the VLA websites have been trained to ensure that the websites are presented in such a way that staff and the public can view them with ease.

## **Team Briefing**

49. Team briefing is VLA's face-to-face method of communication which ensures colleagues are kept informed about issues which effect them and their jobs. The briefs are a mixture of corporate and local issues and are held monthly except August and December.
50. The Core Brief is compiled by the Chief Executive while the Directors and Heads of Departments are responsible for their local briefs. Each brief is structured around:
- Progress
  - Policy
  - People
  - Points
51. The team brief allows questions to be fed back up the line.

## **OutLook**

52. OutLook is the internal quarterly newsletter for staff providing an informal look at what has been happening at VLA. Staff are encouraged to send in contributions or ideas for future editions and topics include articles such as study visits or conferences - particularly overseas, scientific research projects, new initiatives or services which have been introduced, and prize awards. Articles have been included on Equality and Diversity issues.

## **Weekly Bulletin**

53. The Weekly Bulletin is an internal publication keeping staff informed of relevant issues concerning the VLA. It is a Noticeboard for items such as learning and development opportunities, vacancies arising and reminders about policies and practices operating at the VLA. It is available to all staff both in hard copy and on the intranet.

**Ask Pete**

54. There is a mailbox facility on the intranet for staff to email questions to the VLA Chief Executive on any subject related to the workplace. A wide range of queries are raised and the Chief Executive responds to these.

**Ask Personnel**

55. There is also a mailbox facility on the VLA intranet for staff to ask Personnel any questions regarding pay, terms and conditions or the VLA Staff Handbook. This is in addition to using other standard forms of communication.

**Open Sessions**

56. Directorate hold open sessions across VLA when they visit Departments/Units within their areas of responsibility to speak with staff, discuss any issues and provide an opportunity for staff to put questions to them. Each Director is expected to undertake 3/4 sessions per year.

**Recruitment**

57. The VLA operates a policy of fair and open recruitment and appointment on merit for all nationalities eligible for employment within the Civil Service. The policy operates in accordance with the Civil Service Commissioners Recruitment Code and is subject to internal checks and external audit. Disabled job applicants are offered a guaranteed job interview if they meet the basic criteria. For those applying for Pay Band F and G (Administrator) posts without the required qualifications, a selection test is available.
58. All recruitment and trawl advertisements display an Equality and Diversity statement to increase and maintain awareness of the policy in operation.
59. VLA uses outreach, targeted recruitment and advertising and other methods to encourage applications from men, women, ethnic minorities and disabled individuals so that staff are representative of the economically active population in the area/nationally. This can involve advertising in ethnic publications and in having stands and leaflets for Recruitment Fairs emphasising VLA's equality of opportunity and the work/life balance flexibilities available in VLA.

**Pay**

60. A formal Equal Pay Review is undertaken every three years to ensure that no discrimination occurs between genders or group or area disadvantaged and if any problem areas are identified strategies are developed to tackle the problem.

## Appraisal

61. Under the Staff Reporting and Appraisal system all staff should have a diversity objective and are reminded of this through internal Notices issued when objectives are being set. Objective setting, including examples of how to set diversity objectives, are given in the VLA Staff Handbook, Chapter 7, Appraisal. These help staff set meaningful objectives they can relate to and work towards. In-year reviews are held during the year to discuss progress against the objectives and any problems encountered can be discussed and resolved at an early stage.

## Learning and Development

62. Staff in specialist posts such as Personnel, Harassment Officers, Agency Equal Opportunities Officer and Welfare Officer undertake the two day Equality and Diversity for Specialists course. Refresher courses are also held at regular intervals.
63. It is a mandatory requirement that all staff at the management levels attend Equality and Diversity training and mandatory for new entrant staff at the non-management levels to attend Diversity Awareness training. Diversity Awareness training is available for existing staff at the non-management levels and they are encouraged to attend. This means that all VLA staff have access to Diversity training.
64. A range of learning and development opportunities are available to staff from short one day courses to longer term formal qualifications such as degrees and postgraduate qualifications. Staff are given approval to undertake the learning if it is in line with the business need.
65. For staff attending short courses we try to accommodate their individual requirements as far as possible whether they are for example dietary, signer, equipment needs or flexibility of hours.
66. All advertisements for courses carry an Equality and Diversity statement to maintain awareness of VLA policy. The Equality and Diversity statement reads:
- *“Requests for training are welcome from staff irrespective of race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, disability or age”.*

## Investors in People

67. The VLA was originally awarded the Investors in People (IiP) standard in December 1999 and was reassessed in March 2001, October 2002, February 2004 and October 2005, the last assessment being against the revised, more stringent IiP standard. In the October 2005 report the Assessor noted that good practices included:

- the continued commitment to the development of all staff, not only for present learning and development needs but future needs, especially in sciences (indicator 2),
  - diversity and equality of opportunity have a high agenda across the Agency which links to some of their Key Aims (indicator 3), and
  - the improvement by managers of recognising people's contribution and communicating this effectively to them (indicator 6).
68. A further assessment in October 2006 included the following comments from the Recognition Panel which considers the Assessor's Report and makes the final decision to grant the award:
- the VLA has developed an excellent supportive and consultative culture within the organisation which has been greatly strengthened by the communication process through the Core and Team briefings as well as through initiatives such as "Ask Steve", and
  - the VLA Balanced Scorecard, which cascades objectives down throughout the organisation to the local scorecards, is an excellent idea and appears to be working very well. It is well recognised that by giving the staff the opportunity to be involved in discussing and agreeing how objectives can be achieved helps them to feel involved, valued and appreciated as well as gaining commitment and ownership of those objectives.

## Resignations

69. All staff should feel valued and the VLA aims to ensure that no group of staff feels undervalued so they resign in greater numbers than their representation in their Pay Band. To this end resignation data is analysed to ensure staff have not felt less well treated because of race, gender, disability, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation or religious beliefs. Where any negative comments are made on exit questionnaires further investigation is undertaken by Personnel and action taken as necessary. To date no resignations have been as a result of a race or disability issue.

## Race

70. The VLA Race Equality Scheme was published in May 2002 on the internal and external websites. The VLA Race Equality Scheme has now been incorporated into the joint Equality Scheme which is available on both websites.
71. All applicants for VLA posts are requested to complete an ethnic questionnaire when applying. Applicants who do not return a questionnaire are reminded they have not done so and most applicants then declare their ethnicity. However if a new entrant has not declared their ethnicity they are encouraged to do so unless they state that they are not willing to declare it.

72. As the VLA is part of the Civil Service it is subject to regulations on the nationality of the people it may employ although there are still a wide range of nationalities and cultures represented within the workforce. Aspirational targets have been set for those VLA locations where the ratio of ethnic minority staff at VLA does not reflect the local employment community. It would appear that the rural locations for some of the facilities are an added difficulty in recruitment of ethnic groups so we will continue to use appropriate ethnic publications as necessary to work to improve the representation of ethnic groups. At 1 April 2007 the percentage of declared ethnic staff was 4.4%.
73. An exercise was undertaken later in 2007 to encourage staff to record their ethnicity. Staff who had 'unknown' as their ethnicity were invited to respond. As a result of this around 98% of staff have now returned a completed questionnaire/declared their ethnicity online or indicated they did not wish to declare their ethnicity.
74. At 1 April 2008 the percentage of declared ethnic staff was 5.8%.
75. It is worth remembering that the VLA deals with a wide range of organisations both nationally and internationally. Staff work with many different countries and cultures by going out to work in those countries as well as welcoming international visitors to the VLA. This means that their awareness of cultural differences is enhanced by their work experiences.
76. These work opportunities have benefited both sides and will continue to be available to staff through attendance at national and international conferences, meetings, seminars and workshops.
77. The VLA also hosts several international conferences attracting a wide range of delegates and nationalities which are accommodated.
78. Because of the technical and scientific nature of many of the posts at VLA all staff are required to have a working knowledge of the English language in order to carry out the duties appropriately. This is particularly important when using scientific or veterinary terms and is essential to undertake much of the work correctly. Language problems could lead to a breach of Health and Safety regulations with a significant impact. This requirement does have a bearing on recruitment but in this instance is necessary. However there have been occasions when staff have received additional support to improve their oral or written skills in English if it was not their first language.
79. A Code of Practice governing the use of ethnic monitoring data, agreed with the TUS, outlines the basis on which monitoring of ethnicity data is undertaken.
80. An advertisement displaying VLA policy on equality and diversity is placed annually in 'Urban UK'.
81. A short time after the launch of the original VLA Race Equality Scheme a representative of the Race and Equality advisory Service (REAS), ACAS, had a meeting with the VLA to discuss all aspects of equal opportunities.

and how it was addressed within VLA. REAS formally acknowledged the policies and procedures in place to address diversity and in particular the training available and made no recommendations for improvement.

82. The VLA undertakes monitoring of any complaints it receives whether they are informal issues or formal ones involving the complaints procedures. To date no complaint has involved a racial issue.
83. The 2004 Staff Survey supported this as there was a 100% response to the question asking if staff had experienced racial harassment and no staff had experienced it.
84. VLA staff can take part in the Defra Ethnic Minority Network.

## **Disability**

85. All staff with a declared disability were invited to comment to inform the Scheme.
86. The VLA operates a range of disability policies (see paragraphs 18 and 19).
87. There are presently a significant percentage of staff who have declared disabilities under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995. In 2006/07 7.2% of staff had declared disabilities.
88. The 2004 Staff Survey showed that 75% of disabled staff indicated that the VLA respected the needs of disabled staff which is an increase from the 2002 survey.
89. The legal requirements contained in the provisions of the DDA 1995, which became effective from 1 October 2004 covering facilities and services were incorporated into planned building works. This is covered in more detail under 'Facilities' (paragraph 34).
90. All staff are requested to complete a Disability Questionnaire on joining the VLA to ensure that if any additional assistance, support, adjustment or equipment is required, this can be arranged at an early stage. For those who declare they have a recognised condition follow up action can be taken so that managers are aware of the situation and any necessary equipment purchased. Any reasonable adjustments can then be made to provide the right working environment for the individual. The follow up action to notify the manager is only taken with the agreement of the individual as confidentiality is respected. Staff can record and if necessary change their Disability status by using the Self Service HR system.
91. The VLA works with staff with health problems and declared disabilities to ensure that the workplace provision is appropriate to the individual to allow them to do their job effectively. Significant efforts are made to try to ensure that staff can work as long as their health permits and that withdrawal from the workplace is not through inadequate facilities or support.

92. The VLA consults with the individual, the Occupational Health Advisor (OHA), Occupational Health Physician (OP) and the Disability Service/Job Centre Plus to ensure the required outcome is achieved for the individual. Liaison is also undertaken with organisations such as Access to Work and the Shaw Trust where appropriate. These organisations provide support and guidance and in some cases financial assistance to VLA to help disabled staff to continue to work within their capabilities. The VLA has an OHA who holds clinics at Weybridge four days a week and another OHA who visits the Regional Laboratories on a regular basis. The OP undertakes clinics at Weybridge twice a month.
93. Any cases of newly declared disability can be referred to the OHA/OP for advice on any reasonable adjustments that may need to be made. Reasonable adjustments can include: a change in working patterns, provision of specialist equipment or training or transfer to a different post. In some instances this ongoing support can last a significant number of years whereas in other cases the support required is of a shorter duration.
94. Workplace assessments are undertaken with any member of staff and their manager who make a request. The assessment covers the working environment of the individual and recommendations are made to improve the working environment or methods of working where appropriate.
95. Staff undergo health clearance when moving to new posts. This ensures that each time they move any issues identified can be dealt with at the early stages.
96. Staff can also apply for disability leave which is a form of special leave with pay for staff requiring time off for rehabilitation, assessment or to receive treatment. The leave is available for staff who have declared a disability.
97. Guidance can also be found on the intranet Health page covering Stress at Work, Alcohol and Drug Misuse, Mental Health and Staff with Disabilities.
98. An advertisement displaying VLA policy on equality and diversity is placed in the publication 'Disability Today'.
99. In recognition for the work that is done for staff with disabilities the VLA can display the 'Two Ticks' disability symbol.
100. The VLA undertakes monitoring of any complaints it receives whether they are informal issues or formal ones involving the complaints procedures. To date no complaint has involved a disability issue.
101. VLA staff can take part in the Defra Disability Network.

## **Gender**

102. The VLA operates a policy of equality of opportunity regardless of gender and demonstrates this in its policies and practices. Staff of either gender can apply for leave to care for children should an emergency arise. Staff

can apply to adjust their working pattern to suit their domestic circumstances and each case is considered individually dependent on the work of the Department.

103. Promotion is awarded on merit to the best person for the job and salary increases are performance based with the percentage increase fixed within the Pay Bands.
104. As at 1 April 2008 there were 522 male (41.1%) and 745 (58.9%) female staff in VLA. Of those 22 males work part time and 210 females work part time. Of those promoted during 2007/08 50.8% were male and 49.2% were female. There are 5 staff aged 66 and over who have chosen to continue working after their retirement.
105. The ratio of women to men in the VLA shows a higher percentage of women in the lower Pay Bands and is about even at the middle management level. The highest Pay Bands reflect a higher ratio of men to women. The VLA is continuing to encourage women into the higher Pay Bands and monitor progress. Improvement has been steady between 2001 and 2005.
106. New legislation came into force in April 2007, which prohibits discrimination and harassment on the grounds of gender. Staff are reminded by an internal Notice that it is unacceptable and will be treated as any other form of harassment.
107. There are two Harassment Contact Officers, one male and one female, so that staff can feel comfortable about approaching either officer with any problem.
108. Of those staff that have discussed issues with the VLA Welfare Officer, around one third are male and two thirds are female which broadly reflects the ratio of male/female staff at the VLA.
109. The VLA undertakes monitoring of any complaints it receives whether they are informal issues or formal ones involving the complaints procedures. To date no complaint has involved a gender issue.

## **Age**

110. Staff may retire at 60 but can continue working until they wish to retire.
111. A significant number of staff have been recruited where their current position was not their first career such as those who were retired from their previous position. Several of those have gained promotion and continued to develop their skills whilst employed at VLA.
112. Terms and conditions of employment for young workers under the age of 18 are governed by the Young Workers Directive. They do not undertake overtime and special risk assessments are carried out to protect their wellbeing.

## Religious Beliefs

113. VLA policy prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religious beliefs. Differing religious and cultural beliefs of different groups can also impact on equality of opportunity.
114. Harassment or bullying of an individual on the grounds of their religion or belief are not acceptable and action will be taken in line with VLA policy.
115. Annual Internal Notices remind staff of the information covering different religious festivals and all managers are encouraged to sympathetically view requests for leave for such occasions.
116. The VLA Prayer Room is available to Weybridge staff and those visiting the site. It is available to staff regardless of faith, for prayer, meditation and private reflection.

## Sexual Orientation

117. VLA policy prohibits discrimination and harassment on the grounds of sexual orientation. Annual internal Notices remind staff that it is unacceptable and is treated as any other form of discrimination and harassment.
118. Harassment or bullying of an individual on the grounds of their sexual orientation is not acceptable and action will be taken in line with VLA policy.
119. Staff can take part in the Defra Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender Network group.

## Welfare

120. A VLA Welfare Officer was appointed in April 2007 to continue to provide welfare support for staff with problems which would benefit from an independent consultation. Prior to that VLA staff had been covered by the Defra Employee Assistance Programme. The Welfare Officer is available to provide confidential support and advice on problems at work.
121. The Welfare Officer provides assistance to groups, if invited and with the agreement of the individual concerned, to help them appreciate the problems an individual might be facing as a result of their declared disability, whether physical, mental or emotional.
122. Counselling can be given if requested to try to resolve issues before the problem escalates.
123. Stress Awareness courses are also delivered by the Welfare Officer and are available to all staff.

## **Work/Life balance**

124. The VLA policy concerning the culture of working long hours is regularly reviewed and publicised. We remind staff annually by internal Notices of the need to maintain a proper work/life balance and for the need to ensure annual leave is taken.
125. The VLA complies with the Working Time Regulations 1998 (amended 2003), including the Working Time Regulations for Young Workers, with regard to issues such as working arrangements or leave. In this context the VLA Directors have made it clear that they do not expect any VLA staff to work more than 48 hours a week over a 17 week period. Staff are also reminded of the Working Time Regulations in an annual internal Notice.
126. Requests to work flexibly are viewed sympathetically and efforts are made to accommodate staff where it is possible to do so.

## **Part Time**

127. The VLA employs a significant number of staff working less than full time hours and operating a variety of working patterns such as part days or set days each week. At 1 April 2008 74 males (5.84%) and 210 females (16.5%) were working shorter hours.

## **Term Time**

128. The opportunity to work during term time is available if it fits with the work of the Department/Unit. Whilst this can be more difficult to operate because of workflow, every effort is made to accommodate any request where possible.

## **Homeworking**

129. Some staff use the homeworking facility either full time or as part of their contracted hours. Any request to operate homeworking is given serious consideration but must fit with the needs of the Department/Unit concerned.

## **Condensed Hours**

130. Condensed hours involve a person working their contracted hours over a shorter period of time often to fit in with domestic circumstances. A number of staff currently use this working pattern and each request is considered depending on the needs of the Department/Unit concerned.

## **Flexible Working Hours Scheme (FWH)**

131. Staff have benefited from the Scheme for many years. They are able to carry over 3 days credit or 2 days debit in a 4 week period. The Scheme, which is given as a privilege to staff, allows full time staff to have a flexible starting time between 7.30am and 10.00am and a finishing time between 4.00pm and 6.30pm to help them arrange working hours around domestic commitments. The Scheme operates across VLA. Some areas operate a modified system for operational reasons.

## **Right to Work Flexibly Regulations**

132. Mothers and fathers, including adoptive, guardian or foster parents of young children under 6 or disabled children under 18 years have the right to request a flexible working arrangement if they meet the required criteria. It does not provide an automatic right to work flexibly but aims to facilitate discussion between the parents and employers and encourage them to find a solution suitable to both parties.

## **Annual Leave and Public Holidays**

133. Staff now enjoy 6 weeks annual leave on commencement of employment at VLA (the statutory minimum is 24 days). In addition to annual leave staff receive public and privilege holiday entitlements of 10½ days.

## **Maternity Leave**

134. Staff who fulfil the criteria are eligible for 26 weeks paid maternity leave for the period of continuous absence before and after confinement, 13 weeks statutory paid leave and a further 13 weeks unpaid maternity leave. Staff who do not fulfil the qualifying criteria may still be eligible for statutory maternity pay and/or unpaid maternity leave.

## **Maternity Support (Paternity) Leave**

135. Maternity Support leave is paid or unpaid time off to allow partners to support the prime carer and spend time with a new child following birth or adoption. Staff can have up to 15 standard working days paid Maternity Support leave.

## **Adoption Leave**

136. Adoption leave is time off to allow parents to prepare for the child's arrival and to spend time with the child once placed in the adoptive parents' full time care. The new rights to adoption leave and pay entitle eligible staff to take paid leave when a child is newly placed for adoption.

## **Parental Leave**

137. Under the Employment Regulations Act 1999, amended January 2002, staff may be eligible for unpaid Parental Leave to spend more time with children and strike a better balance between work and family commitments. Up to 13 weeks maximum for each child is permitted until the child's fifth birthday and up to 18 weeks maximum until the age of 18 if the child is disabled. A maximum of 4 weeks per year is permitted.

## **Career Break Scheme**

138. The Career Break Scheme allows staff time off for up to 5 years to care for dependent children or relatives. When staff indicate they would like to return to work every effort is made to offer a position at the same level as

they occupied prior to their career break although a post cannot be guaranteed.

### **Special Leave**

139. Special leave with pay may be available for emergency domestic situations such as bereavement or emergency caring for sick relatives or children. Special leave without pay may be available for circumstances such as caring for children in school holidays, taking extended periods of travel or working full time towards qualifications.

### **Guidance for Carers**

140. In order to clarify what support and assistance is available for those caring for dependents the Guidance is published on the internal website.

### **Lifestyle Screening**

141. Staff can be offered the opportunity to undertake lifestyle screening every four years as part of a general health and wellbeing programme.

### **VDU Screening**

142. Staff whose duties involved significant use of a VDU have an eyesight test on entry and every three years thereafter unless their duties change and VDU use decreases.

### **Prince's Trust**

143. Staff can participate in the Princes Trust Scheme and applications to participate are viewed sympathetically.

### **Volunteering**

144. Staff can apply for one day's special leave in a year to participate in an unpaid voluntary activity undertaken for a non-profit making organisation serving the public.

### **Childcare**

#### **Facilities**

145. An on-site 26 place Nursery is available to staff at VLA Weybridge. For those unable to use the Nursery because no places are available or because of geographical location a Nursery Allowance is offered. There is also a holiday Playscheme at VLA Weybridge for school age children up to age 12 operated in the February and October half-terms, Easter and Summer school holidays.

146. The Nursery is open for 50 weeks of the year and the Playscheme is available for 9 weeks of the year. The facilities are regularly reviewed to

ensure value for money and there continues to be sufficient demand to support their continuation.

147. A Salary Sacrifice (Childcare) Scheme was launched in February 2007 to help parents manage their childcare costs. The Scheme is available to all staff with children up to the age of 15.

### **Additional Childcare Costs**

148. For staff attending training courses or whose normal working patterns are broken because of temporary changes at work the additional childcare costs incurred may be reimbursed.

### **Tommy Award**

149. The Tommy Campaign is a unique initiative launched by St. Thomas' Hospital in 1999 to improve conditions for pregnant women in the workplace by creating a more positive culture and a better understanding of the issues involved.
150. The VLA was recognised for the Tommy Award in 2004. The award is a significant achievement as it formally recognises the work that is done in VLA to care for pregnant staff.

### **Harassment and Bullying**

151. Harassment and bullying are not acceptable and are contrary to VLA and Civil Service policy. All staff have the right to be treated with dignity and respect and work in an environment free from harassment and bullying. Staff who feel they have been harassed or bullied are encouraged to raise the matter with their line manager, the Harassment Officers, the Agency Equal Opportunities Officer, the Welfare Officer, Diversity Champion, the Trade Union Side representative or Personnel.
152. Staff continue to be reminded of the serious view which is taken of these issues. However it is also important that staff are aware of the difference between harassment/bullying and firm management. Managers are expected to manage to ensure the work is carried out and firm management may at times be required to achieve this.
153. The VLA supports the 'Ban Bullying at Work Day' and reminds staff annually with an internal Notice of the VLA policy on harassment and bullying.

### **Monitoring**

154. VLA is committed to promoting equality in all aspects of employment. We aim to have a diverse and representative workforce who are valued and enabled to meet their full potential. To ensure this is being achieved, monitoring of a number of key employment areas is undertaken.

155. If it is found that policies could impact unfavourably on people the policies will be reviewed and revised wherever possible. Where such a revision is not possible we will take all necessary steps to reduce the impact of the policy.
156. The monitoring will help VLA establish whether the policies, operation and organisational culture are discriminating against any groups. Monitoring will include staff surveys and the analysis of complaints received.
157. The VLA provides data such as gender splits when requested under EU Framework proposals and this data has compared favourably with other similar organisations.
158. The VLA already has information on the employment community it serves at its different locations. We continue to monitor our workforce at each location to ensure it represents each community wherever possible.
159. Monitoring also indicates the number of staff employed over the age of 60 or the individual's own retirement if earlier and the gender split shows no discrimination. This will continue to be monitored annually as part of the monitoring process.

## **Risk Assessments**

160. Risk assessments are carried out where an individual or group of workers might undertake work which could pose a risk to them whether that risk is minor or more significant.
161. The risk assessment looks at the potential problem and establishes the level of risk involved and could suggest solutions to reduce the risk. Risk assessments can be carried out for a variety of reasons such as:
  - a young person working in a certain area or over a period of time,
  - a women becoming pregnant would undergo a risk assessment to ensure her responsibilities and working environment did not affect her health, or
  - a disabled person where further adjustment might be needed to carry out their duties effectively.

## **Quality**

162. The VLA policy is to maintain a high standard of quality in all aspects of its operation and to continually satisfy our customers in respect of all the services and products offered. The various accreditations are subject to regular review to ensure the VLA maintains the standards for continued certification. This means that staff are only signed off as competent to undertake their duties if they meet the terms of the relevant quality standard and are supervised until competent to work on their own.

## External

### UKAS

163. The United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) is the only national accreditation body recognised by government to assess, against internationally agreed standards, organisations that provide certification, testing, inspection and calibration services.
164. Accreditation by UKAS demonstrates the competence, impartiality and performance capability of these evaluators. UKAS is a non-profit-company, limited by guarantee, and operates under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government through the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.
165. It is concerned with traceability and repeatability. The standard is internationally recognised and is monitored by annual visits by UKAS.

### ISO 17025

166. The laboratory facilities are UKAS accredited to BS EN ISO 17025:2005 (Lab Nos. 0941 and 1769) for an extensive range of tests supported by proficiency testing accredited to ISO/IEC Guide 43-1 1997 (Lab No. 0004).

### ISO 9000:2001

167. VLA is certificated to BS EN ISO 9001:2000 for 'the provision of a range of specialist veterinary scientific services and products to the Government and other interested parties worldwide (Certificate No. LRQ 4001392).
168. Additionally the VLA holds Good Laboratory Practice and Good Manufacturing Practice approval and complies with the Joint Code of Practice for Research projects, Joint Code of Practice for Veterinary Activities (including Surveillance) and Good Clinical Veterinary Practice quality standards.

### ISO 14001

169. ISO14001 is an international standard for sustainable development. The government is committed to the Sustainable Development in Government (SDIG) campaign which Defra leads. Defra are therefore very keen that all parts of the organisation, including Executive Agencies must achieve ISO14001 certification. VLA Weybridge was the first of Defra's Science Agencies to gain ISO14001 and gained corporate ISO14001 certification in February 2007.
170. All VLA sites are certificated to BS EN ISO 14001:2004 for its environmental management systems.

## Science Audit

171. Every five years VLA is subject to an independent science audit and the most recent audit took place in September 2007. A full report has been received and the VLA are responding to its findings. An externally facing website was set up for the auditors containing a wide range of background information.
172. The Audit Team consisted of 22 experts, from academia, government laboratories, international organisations and industry, both from the UK and overseas.
173. Professor Quintin Mckellar, Principal of the Royal Veterinary College, Chaired the audit assisted in leading the Audit Team by the Co-Chair Professor Sheila Crispin, President of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS).
174. The Audit Team consisted of four Science Teams, each looking at a different scientific area within VLA and assessing both surveillance and monitoring as well as research activities. Each team was led by a Vice-Chair comprising of four additional members.

## Internal

175. The VLA also conducts a wide range of audits as part of its overall quality programme and these audits link to the wider quality standards that the VLA works to maintain with the external quality standards mentioned above.

## Plaudits

176. Departments are required to maintain a record of plaudits they have received from customers both internal and external so that performance can be assessed. These plaudits are recorded at departmental management meetings and can be an indication of the performance of the department.

## Staff Surveys

177. The VLA Directors are committed to providing colleagues with the opportunities for them to 'Have Your Say' on things that are important to them within the work place. One way of achieving this is through regular staff opinion surveys. After each survey an action plan is drawn up to address the main issues and to monitor ongoing achievement.
178. To ensure total independence and confidentiality we use an external company, ORC International, to run the surveys. They also carry out surveys for Defra and a wide range of other public and private sector companies.
179. In 2002 and 2004 we surveyed all staff with an extensive questionnaire. One of the key strengths from the 2004 survey was the perception of the VLA as an equal opportunities employer.

180. During 2005/06 we carried out quarterly wave surveys using a much shorter questionnaire. A brief summary report was produced after each wave and a full report produced at the end of the four waves. Over the four waves a total of 1553 questionnaires were sent out and 856 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 55%. It was noted that the return of questionnaires from the wave surveys was lower than for the full survey. The questionnaire was available both electronically and in hard copy.
181. As indicated throughout the Scheme the surveys have not raised any areas for concern that need further actions in the Scheme.
182. The findings between the survey reports have been compared and were also benchmarked against others, mainly other government departments. The findings, which are available on the internal website, are being monitored and work continues on the areas still requiring improvement. A further survey will be conducted in 2008/09.

## **Consultation**

183. All staff and the Trade Union Side will have the opportunity to comment on the Scheme and proposed actions arising from it. Staff who have declared a disability will be invited to comment on particular issues relevant to them as well as commenting on more general issues.

## **Publications**

184. The Scheme sets out our arrangements for publishing the results of our assessments, consultations and monitoring. Publication of the results will be on the VLA external and internal websites and copies are available in some other formats if requested.
185. We publish recruitment information including disability and ethnicity data on the VLA website.

## **Access to information**

186. VLA endeavours to meet the needs of all its customers and continually looks to improve the availability and access to information.
187. The VLA works to make sure people have access to the information we provide, subject to the limitations of the Freedom of Information Act. VLA will aim to provide a request for information in a format appropriate to the individual's needs wherever possible.
188. Staff working with the websites have received training to enable them to better understand and implement improved use of websites so that individuals can access and read documents more easily.
189. VLA has access to the various Defra Equality Networks which are platforms for discussion issues. Personnel promote this facility by way of an Annual Notice to staff and on the VLA intranet.

## Reviews

190. In addition to publishing the Scheme the VLA will review it at least at three-yearly intervals and publish an annual progress report incorporating the results of any monitoring.

## Sources of advice

191. The Agency Equal Opportunities Officer, Harassment Officers (the VLA has two Officers – one male and one female), Diversity Champion, VLA Welfare Officer, Trade Union Side representative and Personnel provide advice for anyone who feels they have been discriminated against, harassed or bullied. Contact details are available to staff on the internal website.

## Complaints

192. VLA is committed to ensuring that everyone is treated fairly and with respect. Anyone presenting a complaint can be assured it will be taken seriously and dealt with fairly, thoroughly, sensitively and promptly based on the facts of the case. To date no complaints of a racial or disability nature have been raised.

### Internal Complaints

193. The VLA Staff Handbook, Chapter 18 – Complaints, sets out the arrangements for staff wishing to make an official complaint.

### External Complaints

194. VLA values feedback on its services. Customer complaints are dealt with as set out in the VLA Agency Procedures. Initially complaints are handled by the individual Department. If it cannot be resolved it will be referred for further action in line with the VLA Complaints Procedures.

### Rights Commission

195. In addition to the above, complaints can be made to the Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

## Enquiries about VLA's Equality Scheme

196. If you have an enquiry about any aspect of this scheme, please contact:

Personnel  
Veterinary Laboratories Agency  
Woodham Lane  
New Haw  
Addlestone  
KT15 3NB  
Tel: 01932 357735 (direct dial)

## Actions

### Race

Reduce the number of staff not declaring their ethnicity.

*Ongoing*

Ensure all complaints investigated follow the laid down procedures.

*Ongoing*

### Disability

Raise and maintain disability awareness of all staff (Defra Disability Equality Scheme Objective).

*March 2010*

Ensure equality in recruitment, promotion and retention of disabled and deaf staff (Defra Disability Equality Scheme objective).

*Ongoing*

Raise awareness and provide support to staff with mental health/stress issues (Defra Disability Equality Scheme objective).

*March 2010*

Reduce the number of staff not declaring their disability status.

*March 2009*

Regularly review documents and consult with the Trade Union Side and any other interested parties, such as staff with a disability, as appropriate.

*Ongoing*

Offer a guaranteed interview to disabled applicants if they meet the basic criteria of the post. For those applying for non-management level administrative posts without the required qualifications, continue to offer a selection test as an alternative.

*Ongoing*

Shared Services Division (SSD), Defra, has overall responsibility for the repair and maintenance of VLA buildings and facilities. However VLA has a responsibility to support Defra by working with them and making them aware of any problems arising which could affect the health and safety of staff. VLA will continue to raise issues with SSD to reduce the risk to all staff from their working environment and ensure disabled staff are not disadvantaged.

*Ongoing*

### Gender

Maintain the VLA Equal Pay Audits so that potential problem areas are highlighted and action can be taken.

*Ongoing*

Monitor complaints and take action to investigate any disparities in complaints.

*Ongoing*

Continue to provide data on gender splits when requested by the EU to support project bids as the gender data can influence bid outcomes. Unfavourable male/female ratios could have a negative impact on the project decisions.

*Ongoing*

### Other

Continue to provide and review mandatory equality and diversity training for all managers, provide mandatory training for all new entrant staff at non-management levels and provide refresher training for all specialist staff such as Personnel, Welfare and Harassment Officers.

*Ongoing*  
Maintain a VLA Diversity Champion to encourage and promote equality and diversity in the workplace and champion its aims.

*Ongoing*  
Ensure that all interviewers attend an Interviewing Skills course and an Equality and Diversity course before undertaking recruitment or promotion.

*Ongoing*  
Follow the procedures laid down by the Civil Service Commissioner's Recruitment Code and apply the principles of 'open and fair' competition and appointment on merit.

*Ongoing*  
Remind staff annually of the various benefits available to them through internal Notices.

*Ongoing*

### **Monitoring**

Undertake monitoring in the following areas:

- recruitment stages
- trawl stages
- promotion
- Stand in Allowance
- learning and development
- exit questionnaires
- complaints

*Ongoing*

ANNEX A

ACTIONS RELATING TO HEALTHCARE

