

CHANGING MINDS

Good Practice Recommendations for Changing Attitudes to Black and Minority Ethnic Employment

This guidance is based on the experience of running four annual job fairs targeted at Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people by a partnership of Bield, Hanover and Trust housing Associations, the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (the Partners).

The partners collated experience and knowledge gained from events and combined this with available research/guidance to produce practical advice which is grounded in the reality of BME peoples' actual experiences and perceptions of job seeking across Scotland. The full report can be downloaded at www.EqualityScotland.com, www.cihscotland.org and www.sfha.co.uk

Employment data show that, despite changes in race relations legislation, race equality strategies and a multitude of paperwork on the issue, under-representation of BME people in the public and housing sectors remains an issue where little progress has been made.

The partners strongly believe that there is a need for a fresh approach and re-examination of what is needed to really change attitudes within organisations.

10 Good Practice Recommendations

1. Move the focus from paperwork and research to action and outcomes

'Analysis by the British Audit Commission has also suggested that organisations become too focused on process rather than outcome; bureaucracies can view the publishing of the equality scheme as the completion of the legal requirement rather than the starting point for effecting real change in everyday practice'¹.

The focus of equality work should be about changing outcomes for people not paperwork. Making informal contact with BME organisations will aid understanding and helps to identify what needs to change.

2. Use 'Mainstreaming' positively to ensure services are tailored to meet the needs of all communities

'Mainstreaming' too often results in lack of accountability and responsibility for equality issues, under-resources and a lack of knowledge of specific barriers. In order to work, mainstreaming requires commitment, senior management support, leadership, resources, clearly defined responsibilities and an informed staff.

3. Go beyond non-discrimination and challenge stereotypes and assumptions

To address under-representation properly Housing and Public Sector Employers need to go beyond being 'non discriminatory'. A broad commitment to 'treating everyone the same' can result in specific needs and concerns of minorities being ignored or overlooked, perpetuating inequality. Employers need to examine their internal processes and their organisation's cultural attitudes in order to identify assumptions and stereotypes which might lead to certain groups being excluded from employment, career advancement or the provision of appropriate services.

4. Introduce cultural awareness training for recruiters/managers

Cultural awareness means understanding that your own cultural references may be different to others and training for recruiters is vital to equip them to deal fairly and without assumptions with real-life interview situations. This should take a holistic approach, spanning verbal and non-verbal communication, particularly examining issues such as accents, body language, dress, religious affiliation and custom etc.

5. Make job advertisements jargon free and advertise widely

Make advertisements jargon-free in order not to intimidate some applicants and to avoid appealing only to those already familiar with the sector. Application packs that include guidance on issues such as the specification for the job or prerequisite experience should be analysed and be clear about the actual requirements. BME applicants may have valuable relevant experience or qualifications not formally recognised in the UK and may

¹ **Professor Mark Bell**, Putting equality into practice - What role for positive action? Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities - European Commission 2007

be deterred from applying if the application states a requirement for a degree but this is really shorthand for skills, experiences and knowledge that may be obtained without a degree.

Job advertising should include both traditional outlets and community publications and networks. Employers should provide an opportunity to informally discuss an advertised vacancy, giving applicants less familiar with processes and organisations a better opportunity to decide if they are qualified to apply.

6. Ensure interview shortlist process is fair and transparent

Ethnic origin monitoring data is routinely requested by organisations for good reasons. Employers should ensure that a shortlisting panel does not have access to this information. They should also inform applicants how monitoring data will be used. Concerns over potential prejudicial treatment of BME candidates can be addressed through 'blind' shortlisting where the recruitment panel does not see an applicant's personal details. Application packs need to inform candidates that this will happen as perceptions about the use of monitoring data may raise suspicions and deter BME candidates.

7. Set clear guidelines on how job interviews are to be conducted

Interviewers should create the appropriate atmosphere for the interview and an interview panel appropriate for the post. They need to make it clear that similar questions will be asked of all the candidates and to reassure candidates that if they do not understand a question, they can ask for it to be repeated more clearly without fear of being penalised.

8. Be attuned to language issues

Interviewers should be aware that:

- unfamiliar accents may not equate to lack of fluency in English
- unfamiliar accents can mean that the interviewer concentrates on deciphering the actual words spoken and may as a consequence lose some of the meaning and depth of responses

If interviewers are unsure whether they have understood a response because of an unfamiliar accent they should use follow up questions to ensure that they grasp the full depth and content of the interviewee's response.

9. Provide constructive post-interview feedback

If candidates are unsuccessful then employers should take time to provide informed and detailed feedback which will help them to improve their interview skills. Employers should not see this as an 'add on' but as an integral and important part of the recruitment process.

10. Instigate positive action in recruitment and training

Employers should consider positive action in its widest not narrowest sense, as a complementary activity to ensure that people from previously excluded ethnic minority groups can compete on equal terms with other applicants and also to address the accumulated effects of past discrimination. This can include specific jobs and placements but also more general information and training targeted at specific communities. It should also include practical advice and support on employment processes (especially for people

with qualifications and degrees earned abroad) and training, work placements and volunteer schemes to help potential employees gain access to and an understanding of mainstream organisations.

The Future Challenge

The scale of the challenges facing the housing and public housing sectors in Scotland (and indeed society more generally) in addressing inequality in the workplace and in the provision of services should not be underestimated.

This challenge has been recognised as a serious and pressing issue internationally. And more importantly, the contribution that positive action can play in addressing inequalities has been endorsed at a senior level.

In its report, 'Putting Equality into Practice – What role for Positive Action' published in March 2007, the European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities concluded:

'Equal opportunities are often assumed to exist, while the existence of discrimination is denied. In such a situation, positive action can play an important role as a tool to redress the lack of substantive equality in our societies².

In order to achieve real progress in Scotland there needs to be a more fundamental change in approach efforts must be action and results-oriented, rather than focusing on paperwork and/or research to the detriment of practical intervention.

Equality initiatives must have clear leadership, senior management commitment, responsibility and sufficient resources. Short-term 'one off' initiatives will inevitably be less effective than properly resourced and well-managed ongoing programmes, and indeed may damage efforts to build sustainable relationships with BME communities.

Legislative requirements have, to date, not been enough on their own to ensure sufficient progress. Under-representation of BME people remains a fact of life in too many organisations. It requires a commitment and willingness to address institutional barriers, assumptions and stereotypes to achieve change.

In practice, this also means that positive action initiatives must be supported by a commitment by senior management to communicate the reasons for and benefits of programmes to the organisation, its clients and stakeholders. Staff, governing bodies and communities must begin to understand that positive action is not about creating unfair advantage.

The Job Fairs Project uncovered some of the issues which need to be tackled and delivered positive results for those who took part. In a short time and with limited resources the project delivered positive results for those who took part. It was a first step that now needs housing and public sectors to commit to changing outcomes which will benefit both employers and BME job seekers.

² Putting Equality into Practice - What role for the positive action? (European Commission) Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, March 2007