

ENCOURAGING AND UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY



Situated in the heart of West Yorkshire, Kirklees is the seventh largest metropolitan district in the United Kingdom. The availability of work in the 1950s and 1960s attracted many immigrant workers and today 14% of the population is from an ethnic background and this is well above the UK average of 9%. However, wage levels are below the national average as the industry mix still retains 25% of jobs in manufacturing and a significant minority of the workforce has low educational attainment and basic skills.

"The Common Ground Development Partnership was especially interested in working with employers to break down stereotypes and preconceptions and to promote processes and structures to support diversity in the workplace," says Jennifer Reeves, the HR and Diversity Advisor of Business Link West Yorkshire, one of the strategic partners in project. Jennifer also believes that "it took a lot of hard work but Common Ground has really succeeded in harnessing the hidden potential of our people in Kirklees."

PROMOTING DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO DIVERSITY

This EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) has established 'Common Ground' with employers and is testing an array of innovations to promote the principle that diversity pays and that by identifying and building on the latent skills of the population, it is possible to move towards a more productive local economy and a more inclusive society.



One of the DP's 12 innovations – the Equaliser project connecting with "hard to reach" young people

Despite managing the Diverse Reflections Transnational Partnership and making a major contribution to EQUAL's European Thematic Group on Employability, Common Ground's most significant impact has been made at local level. Nearly 900 individuals and over 100 businesses have benefited from the wide range of support available through the DP and over 60 people gained employment, while 85 jobs were safeguarded. In effect, Common Ground has been a vast laboratory in which as many as 12 different, but coordinated, approaches to labour market integration have been tried and tested.

The DP was created after a process of widespread consultation that resulted in 21 organisations signing up to become members. Some of these are the 'researchers' and are mainly voluntary organisations and community groups that have been working very hard to come up with new solutions to the problems encountered by certain groups in the labour market. Other members are the potential users of these solutions such as Jobcentre Plus which is the UK's public employment service, the Learning and Skills Council which funds the local delivery of vocational training and a few more, such as the local Chamber of Commerce, help Common Ground to interpret the solutions in a way in which they are understandable and useful to employers.

With so many approaches and so many partners, it was important that the DP remained strategic in its delivery and two overarching frameworks have been established to help drive the activities forward. Firstly, a Mentoring Network ensures that the coaching and support that is offered to all target groups is provided to a similar standard and that lessons learned from techniques used with one particular target group are disseminated for use with others and then built into future approaches and procedures. This Network is led by the Kirklees Local Education Authority and includes six of the DP's pilot projects that have a mentoring dimension to their

activities. Being involved in these pilots, either as a mentor or a mentee, can be a valuable and challenging experience.

Mehnaz Dad has been working with the Kirklees Mentoring Network for six months and she has been trained to provide support, guidance and assistance to mentees in their search for further training or employment. She feels that *“The training I have received has made a big impact on my life. Mentoring has given me the confidence to approach people and use my listening skills to help them. It has also helped me to progress further in my career, into another field of employment, with the Community Mental Health Team.”*

The second Common Ground framework has been built on an earlier employers' network and this framework has led to the creation of the Equality at Work Award. The target group is smaller businesses, as many of these employers are confused by the complexity of equality-related employment legislation, and lack any dedicated HR or equality specialists. In this Award, Diversity has moved beyond race, disability and gender to encompass a wider set of factors, including age, sexual orientation, religion and work-life balance. Equality at Work challenges the views of some employers that equality-related measures are “an irksome burden that blocks progress and development”.

A new Equality at Work Standard has been established that sets rigorous and demonstrable requirements in terms of equality-related policies and procedures. There is a strong emphasis on human resources good practice, closely linked to equality legislation in the context of improved business performance. Delivery of support to the SMEs includes one-to-one, on site consultancy, and also workshops and materials that offer practical solutions to immediate problems. Each company application is independently assessed, before a report is submitted for final judgement by a panel of employers who have already received the award.

Andy Aldridge is the Managing Director of one of the first of 30 small businesses that have received the Equality at Work Award. He believes that *“The biggest business benefit has been the improved image of our organisation. We are now much more reflective of our local society and potential customer base. As a result, it has helped us develop new markets and business opportunities and enabled us to recruit from groups who may not previously have joined our company.”*

The Partnership has also produced a variety of user friendly products and toolkits for employers including a Disability Discrimination Toolkit, a Work-Life Balance Toolkit, a Mentor Training Pack and an Employment Good Practice Guide specifically designed for voluntary sector employers.

TRANSNATIONALITY IN ACTION

SORTING OUT WHAT TO DO AND WHO DOES WHAT



Danish Mayors on the study visit receiving an initial briefing in Kirklees Town Hall

Common Ground provides the secretariat of the [Diverse Reflections Transnational Partnership](#) which involves [The Network](#) from Denmark, [AMiKU](#) (Arbeit für Migranten-Neue Wege in den Arbeitsmarkt im Kreis Unna) from Germany and [Different People](#) from the Netherlands. While these EQUAL DPs are all pursuing slightly different tacks, the rationale for them coming together was that they shared the view that to reduce inequalities and combat discrimination, “there was a desperate need to work on removing the barriers to inclusion on the demand side” and so the main focus of their activities has been on influencing employers. The transnational partnership was launched in Amsterdam, in June 2002, but the first real occasion when it got down to serious work was in Skagen, Denmark during November of the same year. This event proved to be crucial in deciding on how the partnership would operate over the rest of its lifetime. Four working

groups met for the first time on major aspects of both the outcomes and processes of the partnership, each under the leadership of one of the individual partners.

ENHANCING COMMUNICATION

This first meeting in Demark also set the tone for future meetings and events of the Transnational Partnership. All of the partners had agreed that while ICT communication mechanisms would be used to the optimum, good personal relationships were the key to the success of the overall programme. Thus when the partners meet for business, additional time is allocated to give the participants a chance to get to know each other better and to discuss ideas informally. As an aid to ensuring clear and open communication, a glossary of everyday terms in each Member State was also developed and translated into other languages as required. In terms of ICT, a communications platform on the Diverse Reflections' web site was used extensively to share documents, plan meetings and hold discussions on various themes and topics.

MAXIMISING THE IMPACT OF THE EXCHANGES OF EXPERIENCE

Apart from those working meetings for DP coordinators and project staff, every attempt has been made to include a broad cross-section of other interests in transnational events. Naturally, the national conferences involved all of the local and transnational partners but they were also given a political dimension and have included local, regional and national key players and multipliers. They have been large meetings of over a hundred people designed to maximise the potential impact and to raise the profile of the project, the issues it is addressed and its results. Similarly, selected politicians and key actors have joined local partners during study visits to other countries. These opportunities have been very welcome, as the coordinator of the Danish DP, Michael Vinther Nielsen, explained after a visit to Yorkshire, *"We have gained new knowledge and energy for our project and the Mayors in our party have been very interested in, and impressed by, your local Racial Equality Council."* The people of Kirklees have also had a series of positive international experiences. James Wood from the Changeworks Consultancy Limited, which helps ethnic minority women to achieve their training and employment goals was involved in a very valuable exchange of experiences. He felt that *"We received a lot of positive interest in our 'Soft Outcomes Measurement Kit' particularly as AMIKU had examined another measurement system that they felt was too complicated and expensive. But the trip was mutually beneficial as we were very impressed with their Multi-Cultural Forum where a single organisation provides a wide range of services to assist ethnic minority groups."*

INCREASING THE LEVEL OF COOPERATION

Whilst all of the activities mentioned above have been extremely valuable, the most impressive aspect of Diverse Reflections has not been exchange but joint action. Together these transnational partners have organised a common Mainstreaming and Lobbying conference. This event entitled "A Strong Europe – United and Diverse" took place in Brussels in April 2004 with an invited audience of key policy makers, MEPs and the European Commission's Desk Officers



Heather Waddington welcomes visitors to the Common Ground stand during the partners' joint mainstreaming and lobbying conference in Brussels

for all of the partners' Member States. A video was produced for this conference on perceptions and issues around labour market access which contrasted the views of participants and employers who had been involved with all of the partner projects. A book called 'Diverse Reflections' has also been written that contains a series of moving accounts of how 16 people from the various partner countries have overcome the difficulties that they have encountered in being accepted in their community, in their workplace or in their new country. It illustrates how subtle changes in employment policy can bring about significant benefits, not only for individual employees, but also for businesses, the wider community and government.

REALISING THE LOCAL BENEFITS OF TRANSNATIONAL ACTION

The external evaluation of the Common Ground DP has highlighted a number of ways in which its local partners have gained added value from transnational action, an experience that was completely new to many of these organisations. The most significant points are:

- The transnational experience was enjoyable and it both renewed enthusiasm and cemented partnerships for the work back home;
- More than 60% of partners were able to identify specific ideas or innovations from the transnational partners which were of interest to them;
- More than 50% of partners have made new contacts through transnational work;
- Most partners were able to identify an action of one of the transnational partners that they would like to implement in Kirklees.

The evaluation also stressed that "Another important way that transnational work has added value is in its ability to motivate and mobilise. It raised participants' awareness that 'diversity' is not an academic subject but an area which needs to be acted upon because we need to change discriminating behaviour towards disadvantaged groups and it demonstrated that Diversity Management is a European issue not just a British and American issue."

A new EQUAL project is now coming on stream called 'Common Ground - Breaking New Ground. Despite all of her work in managing the first EQUAL DP and providing the secretariat of its transnational partnership, Heather Waddington still believes in the importance of transnationality. She is clear that *"transnational activities will bring novel ideas and innovative approaches to help us break new ground in Kirklees. We are excited about working with this next set of European partners and hope that our cooperation will be as productive and enjoyable as it has been in Diverse Reflections."*

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Link to [EQUAL database description](#)

A short version of this "Success story" and other "Success stories" are available on the [EQUAL website](#)