

# Deconstructing Barriers

## Summary report and recommendations

A research report into discrimination in age, race and disability in the North West construction sector



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

In 2006, ConstructionSkills in the North West were successful in gaining European Social Fund (ESF Objective 3) funding to contribute and support a research project that focused on identifying the nature and effect of institutional discrimination in the construction sector with specific reference to race, disability and age. The project has enabled ConstructionSkills to respond to the North West Regional Development Plan by researching the barriers to employment within the construction industry for people with a disability, ethnic minorities and those affected by age discrimination. The project aimed to examine barriers that produce a low entry rate to construction apprenticeships and employment by candidates from the identified under represented groups. The research data produced as a result of the project was to enable the follow-up of recommendations for key stakeholders within the industry, as well as helping people enter and remain within the industry as an identified regional group (within ESF Objective 3 prospectus), in addition to raising awareness about discrimination to enable it to be addressed and tackled at all levels within the workplace.

Following a procurement process to identify a suitable research consultancy to undertake the methodology of the project, York Consulting Limited (YCL) was commissioned by ConstructionSkills to undertake this activity.

Research activity undertaken by YCL commenced in June 2006.

This report aims to explore the nature and context of institutional discrimination, and through its findings address any areas where discrimination, or potential discrimination, may exist. The diversity and equality agenda and its subsequent anti-discrimination legislation within training and the workplace is well documented and evident. However, often when a sector is dominated by people from a particular gender, ethnicity or ability, non-traditional applicants can face a variety of barriers and challenges in order to enter or apply. This can be viewed to be a problem in occupational sectors where skill or labour shortages exist. The image of the construction industry is often stereotyped and any barriers that exist are likely to be reinforced by people in a variety of positions, including employers, training and careers professionals and in some cases family and friends. In addition, workplace culture, practices and procedures can also strengthen those barriers, whether conscious or unconscious. In the context of this report, institutional discrimination is regarded as the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their race, age or disability (such discrimination can affect other groups, for example in terms of gender, but these are

---

not within the scope of this report). Institutional discrimination can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and stereotyping which disadvantage certain groups of people.

The project's methodology aimed to provide a rounded view of institutional discrimination in the sector, drawing on the views and experiences of employers, employees, trainees and other stakeholders. The main elements of the project's fieldwork were as follows:

- Consultations with 45 employers, diversity bodies and other construction stakeholders;
- A telephone survey of 300 employers across the North West;
- Five focus groups with construction trainees, employees and employers in the region;
- A stakeholder workshop; and
- A review of equality legislation and its implications for employment.

### Findings

Disabled people, older people and those from BME communities are already disadvantaged when it comes to employment, and this is exacerbated in construction. Disabled and older people are less likely to be employed in the North West construction sector than in the regional workforce as a whole. The proportion of people from BME communities employed in the sector is about the same as that for the entire regional workforce.

**Employers** do not perceive any short-term problems with recruitment that might lead them to consider recruiting from a more diverse pool of recruits. Furthermore, recruitment in the construction sector is heavily dependent on word of mouth, which can contribute to reinforcing the current workforce stereotypes.

Substantial differences can be seen between large and small firms. Small firms are less likely to adopt flexible working practices, have equal opportunities policies, engage in diversity training or feel affected by anti-discrimination legislation. This poses a considerable challenge to a sector that is dominated by small and micro-businesses.

The experience of larger firms suggests that that the cumulative impact of legislation, diversity and equality awareness, and greater working with the public sector, can have a positive impact on the employment of a more diverse workforce.

**Employees and trainees** highlighted a number of key issues:

- A lack of awareness about the sector's career opportunities in certain communities and more generally at school level;
- Employer reluctance to 'take a risk' by employing or providing a placement to someone who does not fit the traditional construction worker stereotype;
- The need for people from minority groups to build up a high level of tolerance and mental toughness to cope with feelings of isolation;
- A lack of awareness about the legal rights to be protected from discrimination, and a reluctance to exercise these rights in practice.

The difference between employer and employee views was noticeable. Employers tended to regard the solution to discrimination as lying with individuals from minority communities themselves, while employees stressed the role of employers in improving diversity. The attitudes, behaviour and culture of a firm are integral to the way in which it responds to issues like diversity. The focus for action therefore needs to be on changing business and employer attitudes towards 'non-traditional' construction workers, rather than expecting these individuals simply to 'fit in' with the existing culture, especially if that culture is hostile or unwelcoming.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of the Deconstructing Barriers research project can provide some important messages for policy-makers, employers and stakeholders about the reality of diversity in construction and the exploration of institutional discrimination. The fact that this research was conducted in the North West should not exclude its findings being drawn on nationally, or by other regions. In addition, it is acknowledged that the journey to a fully diverse and inclusive workforce is long-term and requires commitment, drive and full partnership working and collaboration for it to be meaningful and deliver measurable results. A number of partnerships within the NW sector currently exist, but more work and commitment is needed for a fully joined up response to the legal, moral and business framework that currently exists.

It is clear that there are a number of issues and barriers that, on first examination, have been described as 'traditional ways of working' and have remained unchallenged. However, the UK construction industry employs more than two million people nationwide and has been growing steadily for the last 12 years. Forecasts have indicated that the industry will need to recruit and train some 88,000 entrants a year for the next five years in order to meet the growing demand. Add to this the sometimes negative perceptions that people have of construction as a career choice,

and a significant challenge exists for the sector. Moreover, it is certain that current recruitment activities and practices in employment and training will not be able to meet the skill needs of the industry. The extent to which young, white, non-disabled men will represent the bulk of the working age population is receding.

1. Through previous research and skills data, the industry has indicated that it needs, and wants, a workforce that better reflects the communities it works in, and that it wants individuals to regard a career in construction as desirable and open to them. Construction companies have said that they want, and recognise the need to encourage, a more diverse workforce and for funding and training to be available to recruits who have previously made a choice not to enter into the industry, or who have been discriminated against by the industry.
2. This report has identified a number of institutional barriers that need to be overcome if the skills needs of the sector, its apparent willingness to change, and the needs of specific groups in society are to combine in order to create a more diverse workforce.
3. The barriers that face individuals in terms of age, disability and race certainly have their differences, and each has its own set of crosscutting themes (such as socio-economic status, gender, religion, faith, culture and heritage). This means that there is a considerable amount of experience to draw on about reality of employment and training in the sector, and identifying what needs to be addressed. also It is also clear however that many of these barriers have common roots in institutional discrimination, unwitting prejudice and stereotyping that are reinforced by processes and behaviours.

## Recommendations

### *Encouraging interest*

The business case for broadening the appeal of the construction sector and encouraging more applications across the board is clear, but it needs to be better understood by firms. ConstructionSkills has undertaken a variety of employer driven diversity activity, for example the recent Opening Doors to Diversity in Construction handbook, produced and supported by the NWDA, ConstructionSkills and the Construction SSPA.

**Recommendation One:** There is a need for greater promotion of the business benefits of diversity within the construction sector. These include broadening the skills base, promoting a positive public image of the sector, and meeting the needs and requirements of an increasingly diverse customer base.

Increasing diversity is a potentially important way of exploiting the demographic

---

changes within the regional population. The Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) for Construction provides the industry with a unique opportunity to address its skill needs. Industry, Government and the Education Sector are all partners in a single, over arching strategy to ensure that the right people, with the right skills, are in place at the right time to meet future and current construction demand. The Construction Skills Network, which consists of 12 regional Construction Skills Observatory Groups and a national Observatory Group, was formed to deliver authoritative data and workforce predictions to aid skills planning. In the North West, the Construction Skills Observatory draws on the knowledge and expertise from Government, training providers, construction employers, regional organisations and customers so that future skill needs and investment can be planned. Diversity is a key priority within the SSA and the demographics of the region and potential pool of skills and labour through non-traditional applicants could be further developed and exploited to the benefit of the industry.

**Recommendation Two:** The Construction Skills Network, North West Construction Skills Observatory and SSPA members should help firms to understand more clearly the demographic shifts that will impact on labour supply in the future, and the case for encouraging the development of a more diverse workforce.

There is widespread recognition that influencing the next generation of construction workers is vital. Schools are unlikely to promote the benefits of working in the sector sufficiently by themselves. Some awareness raising already takes place in schools, but this has historically focused upon young women and ethnic minorities. For a fully inclusive and diverse workforce, more activity and strategic planning needs to include disability and age issues.

**Recommendation Three:** Continued partnership working with Connexions and other organisations within the Information and Advice Group (IAG) network to promote careers in construction to BME communities and young people with a disability needs to take place. Awareness raising activity should not be restricted to under represented groups based upon gender and ethnic background in isolation. More work could be done to engage with younger people in disabled communities to ensure that they can make an informed choice in their own career destinies, with the right support and career guidance.

The research for this report indicates that there are a number of common perceptions and misconceptions of the construction sector that could be addressed through its marketing and promotional support material, including the use of positive images of disability in construction.

---

**Recommendation Four:** Literature to promote the construction sector should ensure that the sector's image is better-presented as a career option for disabled people, BME communities, and a range of age groups. This could be done by presenting positive images of each of the under represented groups in a variety of occupations to persuade the reader that work within the sector for non-traditional entrants is possible and achievable.

More generally, there is a case for a greater number of targeted activities to engage specific communities and groups. The Sustainable Training for Sustainable Communities programme by the Housing Forum and Constructing Excellence (CE) and partnered by ConstructionSkills has identified good practice since its inception in 2003. Client-led projects within the programme have demonstrated that it is crucial to have partnering with local specialist agencies to recruit under represented groups into the industry. Their experience and expertise gave support and direction to both clients and potential entrants from under represented groups into the industry.

**Recommendation Five:** Client-led projects should encourage the sector to promote itself more widely within specific communities and groups through recruitment drives and engagement activities sub-regionally.

#### ***Accessing training***

Funding can be a major barrier to accessing training for disadvantaged groups. Older trainees lose out substantially because of the focus on the 16-19 agenda, while reduced financial support for language classes and evening courses impacts on disabled people and ethnic minorities, among others. Many funding decisions lay beyond the remit of regional partners and individual learning delivery bodies. However, there is capacity for the sector to lobby decision-makers in order to encourage wider participation in construction training.

**Recommendation Six:** ConstructionSkills should seek to influence the financing of construction training in order to ensure that older people, people with a disability, and people from BME communities are able to access training opportunities within the sector

Colleges in the region that run construction courses acknowledge that there is more that they could be doing to promote a more diverse intake, but the impetus is limited by the current high levels of applications for courses. However, there are some specific examples of Colleges working in partnership with ConstructionSkills providing access to training courses in specific occupations for under represented groups through a variety of positive action measures e.g. Bolton College and MANCAT, Manchester.

**Recommendation Seven:** Construction education and training bodies should be encouraged to share best practice about improving the diversity of their intake, and work in partnership with others to enable a more diverse applicant base.

Information on the career destinations of trainees appears to be limited. It is important to understand the extent to which individuals from key groups leave the industry, and why. High leaving rates may be linked to the problems some groups appear to have with securing apprenticeship placements as part of their training.

**Recommendation Eight:** ConstructionSkills, the LSC and education and training providers could consider how to improve the monitoring of retention rates within the sector, the career destinations of trainees, and success in securing work placements. This information needs to be available in terms of age, ethnicity and disability.

#### ***Recruiting differently***

Current recruitment methods such as informal chats, traditional networking opportunities through the usual channels of family, friends and acquaintances and unstructured advertising can contribute to, and support the appointment of, 'likes'. They offer few opportunities to non-traditional applicants who may wish to enter the industry.

**Recommendation Nine:** Employers and stakeholders can help to tackle recruitment barriers by widening the net beyond traditional sources of labour supply. Greater effort and action to reach the communities identified in this report to engage them through a variety of methods could be undertaken.

**Recommendation Ten:** The construction sector needs to become better at monitoring the age, ethnic and disability status of its employees. A baseline of these factors would allow the sector to monitor its progress towards delivering a more diverse workforce. Sector organisations could obtain this information through employer engagement activity that may already take place. (For example, CITB-ConstructionSkills Levy/Grant administration activity).

**Recommendation Eleven:** Employers need to examine their selection criteria and recruitment processes to identify current procedures or practices which may hinder the progress of potential entrants on the basis of their age, ethnicity or disability.

#### ***Employing confidently***

Responses to diversity training in the workforce vary, but on balance they appear to be received positively. The capacity for smaller companies to undertake this training by themselves is very limited, and they will need additional support. The targeting of

such training is also important. It is front-line managers and site foremen who most need such training. They are in the best position to monitor and moderate behaviour in the workplace, and are often instrumental in on-the-spot recruitment decisions.

**Recommendation Twelve:** Support agencies, in conjunction with federations, unions and the SSPA could work together to produce comprehensive education and training resources in age, race and disability. This would assist employers in understanding the meaning of discrimination, diversity and legal frameworks, and encourage action towards change in these areas.

Certain recurrent issues were identified throughout the research, including an apparent widespread fear among employers of all things deemed 'politically correct'. Some employers appeared reluctant to recruit outside of their traditional base, whether through fear of resentment among current workers; avoiding perceived legal or cost implications; or thinking that in doing so they are 'protecting' people from harassment and bullying. This is evidenced, for example, by employers who tended to be reactive in disability issues. Firms need to be more proactive in dealing with disability, and provide a working environment that encourages disclosure and accommodation of disabilities. There is evidence of some work in this area, for example Constructing Excellence Respect for People Toolkit, which includes a module on equality and diversity. This module helps companies identify issues that need to be addressed in equality and diversity in the workplace, and provides links to agencies and information that can help in responding to the challenge of managing equality and diversity in construction and the built environment.

There is also evidence of sub-regional projects that provide resources for teachers, learning providers and employers in construction that challenge outdated concepts of gender and ethnicity stereotyping in construction occupations. However, more activity needs to be focused upon disability and age, the barriers experienced by these groups and how the industry and employers could respond to them. Furthermore, equality specific resources need to be readily accessible for employers, particularly small to medium-sized enterprises, and be widely disseminated to ensure awareness.

**Recommendation Thirteen:** Employers need to become more proactive and confident when it comes to addressing diversity. Support agencies need to find a way in which to provide information to the employers and engage them on diversity issues in an atmosphere that encourages their cooperation and ties in with construction procurement agendas as a way forward.

Employers need to be able to source up-to-date and non-technical information regarding diversity in the workplace. There is also a specific lack of awareness about

---

the new age discrimination legislation. Whilst evidence suggests that awareness of the new public sector duty on disability discrimination is also likely to be low.

**Recommendation Fourteen:** There is an urgent need for Government agencies and employer representative bodies to raise awareness among construction firms about the new age discrimination legislation and the public sector duty on disability, especially among smaller companies. Companies need to be engaged through a partnership approach.

### ***Ensuring retention***

Employers have an important role to play in tackling discrimination and ensuring that employees and their peers from under represented groups have an opportunity to realise their full potential, once they are in the workplace. This responsibility is wider than management teams.

**Recommendation Fifteen:** All employees in construction companies need to be made aware of equality and diversity issues and responsibilities at induction stage. This induction could tie in and support new or existing policies and procedures in Equal Opportunities and diversity within the workplace.

The research findings suggest that some employees from under represented groups gained benefit from support networks within the workplace and on site. Support practices, such as coaching and mentoring also appear to help in the crucial early days of employment. There is also evidence that some construction companies in the North West already adopt support programmes that support minority workers. For example, Bramall Construction have found success in ensuring the retention of women in the early stages of employment through pairing, buddying and mentoring practices on site. This approach could also work in terms of older workers and workers who may have a disability.

**Recommendation Sixteen:** Employers should consider how to adopt and encourage the use of mentoring programmes, buddying systems and pairing work placements to help minority applicants in the first stages of recruitment and within new roles.

### **Satisfying customers**

Some public sector clients have demonstrated the ability to exert real influence on recruitment in construction. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) linked to large scale contracts are encouraging recruitment from under represented groups in local areas, although there is little evidence that this good practice is filtering through to private sector contracts. However, KPIs and other targets need to be used carefully if they are to encourage good practice.

---

**Recommendation Seventeen:** The diversity agenda needs to be an integral part of all public sector-led construction projects and initiatives. There is greater scope for such exercises to be adopted by the region's public sector clients. The experience of some sector bodies suggests that parts of the public sector require education on how to incorporate contractual clauses in equality and diversity with success.

### **Readiness and enthusiasm for change**

The regional construction sector now needs to address the barriers and issues identified in this report. Partners have already demonstrated their readiness and enthusiasm to action and change through the Regional Economic Strategy (RES), the Regional Equality and Diversity Strategy and within the Regional Statement of Skills Priorities. However, there is scope for more practical action to be delivered by these commitments.

As the promotion of equality and diversity is regarded as a crosscutting theme in strategies, this should enable an integrated approach to addressing the barriers identified.

**Recommendation Eighteen:** Equality and diversity strategies need practical action at sub-regional level, for the industry to make the changes necessary. Clients and contractors all have a role to play to ensure that discrimination, obvious and hidden, is tackled with commitment and energy. This should take place as part of an integrated strategy within the sector, and driven by the main players into the supply chain. Promotion of activities generated by regional strategies should be widely disseminated to ensure that good practice can be adopted at a local level by clients, employers and support agencies.

The recommendations within the report identify a number of ways in which the sector can identify and drive changes forward, both within the Sector Skills Agreement and within each of the organisations own strategies for addressing and developing equality and diversity.

In developing these recommendations, we have engaged the members of the Construction Sector Skills and Productivity Alliance (SSPA). The SSPA was established in 2003 and is designed to ensure that the varying priorities of the construction sector's regional partners are aligned. The North West Sector Skills and Productivity Alliance (SSPA) for Construction is driven by the North West Development Agency (NWDA), and brings together a wide range of strategic partners that include ConstructionSkills, SummitSkills, Asset Skills, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Centre for Construction Innovation (CCI), North West Regional Intelligence Unit, Jobcentre Plus, Business Link and the North West Universities

Association.

Drawing on this broad base of local knowledge and expertise, the SSPA has provided the focal point for the development of the regional Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) for Construction.

The Construction SSA in the NW addresses the key skills challenges revealed through in-depth research and industry consultation. The SSA is designed to deliver the right type of training, in the right format for employers and their employees to improve the industry's performance and productivity.

This is achieved in collaboration with construction employers, training providers and Government partners. At the heart of the SSA is an increased employer commitment to training and skills, and priority measures in diversity and equality feature within the plan for the region. The SSPA members have each been engaged regarding the findings of this report and discussion regarding the way forward has taken place.

The engagement of the SSPA was important for three reasons:

- Firstly, to ensure that the direction of the report's recommendations aligned to the SSPA's future priorities;
- Secondly, to explore further the recommendations and flesh out some ideas for action (such as the involvement of CCI and Business Link, in helping small firms cope better with equality and diversity issues); and
- Thirdly, to build commitment and enthusiasm for the research's findings that can be carried forward with sector employers in the future.

This final reason for SSPA engagement – building a commitment for future action – is perhaps the most important. Employers have a vital role to play in addressing the barriers identified in this report, as well as industry federations, unions and public sector bodies. However, the engagement of the SSPA provides a regional strategic forum to oversee the delivery of change.

**Recommendation Nineteen:** All members within the SSPA should ensure that all issues regarding ethnicity, disability and age are included into their relevant diversity strategies and promoted actively through their activities.

Finally, ConstructionSkills and other partners, particularly those within the built environment, should look to identify projects and activities that might be suitable for a wider audience beyond construction. This could leverage greater resources and engage other stakeholders at regional or national level, while still satisfying the needs of the North West construction sector.

## ANNEX A – STEERING GROUP MEMBERS

Sharon Brown	ConstructionSkills
Debbie Hatton	ConstructionSkills
Lee Bryer	ConstructionSkills
Jill Coyne, Sue Harrison	ACAS
Duncan Aspin	Birse Civils
Bill Sargeant	Bramall Construction
Fiona McGregor	North West Universities Association
Ken Humphreys	Cruden Group
Linda Harper	Diversity Action
Dr Andrew Platten	Elevate East Lancashire
Val Michej	5050Vision
Professor Marcus Ormerod	SURFACE, University of Salford
Vicki Austin	NWDA

## ANNEX B – LIST OF ORGANISATIONS CONSULTED

5050 Vision	Durkan Construction
ACAS	Elevate
Accrington & Rossendale College	Equal Opportunities Commission
Age Concern/PRIME	FaithRegen
Birse Civils	Federation of Master Builders
Blackpool College	Golden Gates Housing, Warrington
Bolton at home	Greenspace
Bolton College/ACE	Junction 21
Bramall/Keepmoat	Learning and Skills Council
Breakthrough UK	MANCAT
British Gas	New East Manchester
Centre for Diversity	North West Development Agency
ConstructionSkills	Rochdale Housing Initiative
CIC-ConstructionSkills	Salford University (SURFACE)
Constructing Excellence/Centre for Construction Innovation	Skills Solutions, Manchester
Commission for Racial Equality	UCATT
Cruden Construction	Wai Yin
Diversity Action	Wates
Disability Rights Commission	Youthbuild

## ANNEX C – LIST OF USEFUL ORGANISATIONS AND LINKS

<b>National bodies</b>	
Disability Rights Commission	<a href="http://www.drc-gb.org/">http://www.drc-gb.org/</a>
Equal Opportunities Commission	<a href="http://www.eoc.org.uk/">http://www.eoc.org.uk/</a>
Commission for Racial Equality	<a href="http://www.cre.gov.uk/">http://www.cre.gov.uk/</a>
Commission for Equality and Human Rights	<a href="http://www.cehr.org.uk/">http://www.cehr.org.uk/</a>
ConstructionSkills	<a href="http://www.constructionskills.net">http://www.constructionskills.net</a>
Constructing Excellence/Centre for Construction Innovation	<a href="http://www.constructingexcellence.org.uk/">http://www.constructingexcellence.org.uk/</a>
Federation of Master Builders	<a href="http://www.fmb.org.uk/">http://www.fmb.org.uk/</a>
CIC-ConstructionSkills	<a href="http://www.cic.org.uk/home/index.shtml">http://www.cic.org.uk/home/index.shtml</a>
Faith Regen Foundation	<a href="http://www.faithregenuk.org/frf.html">http://www.faithregenuk.org/frf.html</a>
Age Concern	<a href="http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/">http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/</a>
UCATT	<a href="http://www.ucatt.org.uk/">http://www.ucatt.org.uk/</a>
<b>Regional bodies</b>	
5050Vision – the Northwest Forum on Ageing	<a href="http://www.5050vision.com/">http://www.5050vision.com/</a>
Breakthrough UK – employment advocacy for disabled people	<a href="http://www.breakthrough-uk.com/">http://www.breakthrough-uk.com/</a>
Diversity Action	<a href="http://www.diversityaction.co.uk/">http://www.diversityaction.co.uk/</a>
<b>Legislation and regulations</b>	
The Disability Discrimination Act	<a href="http://www.direct.gov.uk/DisabledPeople/RightsAndObligations/YourRights/YourRightsArticles/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4001068&amp;chk=eazXEG">http://www.direct.gov.uk/DisabledPeople/RightsAndObligations/YourRights/YourRightsArticles/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4001068&amp;chk=eazXEG</a>
DTI – advice on discrimination for businesses	<a href="http://www.dti.gov.uk/employment/discrimination/index.html">http://www.dti.gov.uk/employment/discrimination/index.html</a>
Liberty – advice on anti-discrimination rights	<a href="http://www.yourrights.org.uk/your-rights/chapters/the-right-not-to-be-discriminated-against/index.shtml">http://www.yourrights.org.uk/your-rights/chapters/the-right-not-to-be-discriminated-against/index.shtml</a>



CITB-ConstructionSkills, CIC and CITB(NI) are working in partnership as the Sector Skills Council for Construction  
(CITB-ConstructionSkills Registered Charity Number 264289)  
Part of the Skills for Business network of 25 employer-led Sector Skills Councils  
CM0700

