Note of Informal Session with Businesses 29 October 2015

On 29 October, the Committee met with business leads in the areas of technology, retail, marketing, customer service and banking with a range of management and support functions. Those present discussed areas relating to the Committee’s inquiry into race, ethnicity and employment.

Data on ethnicity

Those present were asked whether they collect data on the ethnicity of their staff.

All of the businesses present gathered data on staff ethnicity, usually at the recruitment stage and/or through staff surveys. Demographical information was also held in staff databases.

Whilst some organisations present considered there to be few issues surrounding the collection of data, others made reference to a “disclosure gap” explaining that around 30% of staff choose not to disclose their ethnicity.

A suggestion was made that candidates for roles may be reluctant to disclose their ethnicity for fear that it would count against them in the recruitment process.

Concern was expressed that low disclosure rates would prevent issues, such as a lack of diversity at leadership level, from being tackled. It was suggested that businesses could use work of other organisations as a benchmark to measure their own success in the collection of data on ethnicity.

Some organisations used the census to compare the ethnicity of their workforce against the UK and Ireland demographic.

In some cases, data was used to inform policy and help businesses to retain employees.

Diversity in the workforce

The organisations were asked about the importance of promoting diversity in the workplace.

The organisations present had various inclusion and diversity policies and guidance in place. In many cases, networks and diversity steering groups were set up to help create an inclusive workplace. The need for buy-in and participation in such policies at a senior management level was emphasised.

The commercial value of having a diverse workforce was discussed. It was felt that workforces should reflect the diverse customer bases of the organisations they work for. It was considered that customers would be more trusting of an inclusive organisation and that, in order to employ the best global talent, a diverse workforce was required.
Recruitment, retention and promotion

The Committee asked those present about their recruitment methods in addition to any policies relating to retention and promotion

Various recruitment methods were discussed. Some of the organisations used volume recruitment in which applications were filled in online and telephone interviews were conducted. It was considered that this method helped to promote inclusiveness at the recruitment stage.

There was some discussion on the use of recruitment adverts. Some organisations had carried out work on the language used in such adverts to ensure they were inclusive.

The group was asked whether they would consider anonymising CVs in order to lessen the potential for bias at the recruitment stage. Some of the organisations were moving towards the use of this method. Another organisation explained that as they used Linkedin, anonymity would be difficult to achieve.

It was pointed out that a large amount of recruitment is internal, making it impossible to achieve anonymity.

It was suggested by some that, when anonymity was possible, it could lead to other potential problems such as difficulties in collecting data on ethnic minority employees.

The Committee heard that interview panels were given equality guidance and in some cases unconscious bias training was provided. But in addition, the importance of having recruiters who were diverse in their thinking was emphasised.

The organisations considered that different issues affect different ethnic groups in different employment contexts. Solutions therefore differ depending on the group in question.

Some of the organisations talked about work being carried out to accommodate different people’s circumstances e.g. weekend shifts, job shares and home working.

The Committee heard how staff surveys were used to monitor the views of the workforce. One organisation asks its staff whether they want to stay with company and whether or not they would leave if they were offered a different job. This was considered a good way of addressing any problems and encouraging retention.

There was acknowledgement that people from an ethnic minority could often be well represented in entry-level roles, but underrepresented in more senior roles. An increase in BME people in senior management positions as role models could encourage progression and build confidence. It was suggested that there is a need to look at performance and potential and assess whether there is bias in the system.
Overcoming barriers

Those present were asked about any barriers they face in recruiting and retaining staff and in ensuring opportunities for promotion are available to people from ethnic minorities and how such barriers can be overcome.

There was some discussion about how people view different roles and industries and how such perceptions can deter people from seeking a career with certain companies e.g. people may be unaware of the variety of roles and senior posts available in the retail sector, or software engineering or careers in science.

It was suggested that work should be done to educate people about different careers and to promote certain industries as viable career routes. Businesses could establish links with schools in order to raise awareness amongst pupils and parents.

Some of the organisations present talked about the work they were doing to inspire young people through the use of apprenticeships, graduate schemes etc.

Staff surveys were used by many organisations to provide employees with an opportunity to highlight any issues they are having. In some cases, specific questions on diversity were included in surveys in order to encourage employees to highlight any related problems.

The links between ethnicity, social mobility and access to opportunity were discussed. It was suggested that this could be counteracted by ensuring that recruitment campaigns are aimed at attracting a diverse workforce.

The suggestion was made that the Scottish Government could use its position to ‘market and sell the story.’ The use of a long term campaign could help make a diverse workforce ‘the norm.’

It was also suggested that mentoring between different businesses could be used to encourage and share best practice. This could include reciprocal mentoring between larger and smaller businesses. It was considered that good employment practice was equally able to be applied to both larger and smaller businesses.

Equality Act

The organisations were asked about provisions in the Equality Act 2010 that are relevant to private sector employers.

It was agreed that compliance with the Equality Act is a baseline/minimum for what should be achieved. It was considered good practice for businesses to go further than complying with the Act. It was felt by some that legislation is not the way to address the issues discussed.