A study of employment issues amongst BME workers in Perth and Kinross

Perth CAB and local ethnic minority advocacy group; Minority Ethnic Access Development Project (MEAD) set out to explore the main employment issues confronted by BME (Black or Ethnic Minority) workers within Perth and Kinross local authority. Our ultimate goal was to produce good practice guidelines for local employers on employing BME workers. It should be noted that whilst the term BME has traditionally been used to refer to minorities who have been long term residents of UK i.e. Chinese, Pakistani, etc. we expanded our definition to include newer migrants; most significantly those from A8 countries such as Poland.

Our primary method of data collection was an online survey, targeted primarily at BME citizens yet open to all who wished to participate. The survey comprised mainly of ‘tick-box’ type questions with comments boxes available for those who wished to share additional details. In addition to the survey, a series of micro case studies were compiled from the bureau’s records.

Demographics and employment characteristics

In terms of nationality, 52% of survey respondents identified themselves as Polish, 20% Scottish, 13% Asian, 12% British and 3% other European. 66% of respondents were female and the remaining 34% male. Length of residence in UK ranged from one year to lifelong.

At the time of survey completion 83% of respondents were in employment. As to hours and days worked each week, 93% of respondents stated that they worked more than 16 hours per week, half of this figure stating they exceeded 40 hours. 83% worked 5 or more days each week, the remaining 17% working either two, three or four days.

The response rate to the question concerning what industry respondents were employed in was poor. However amongst those responding hospitality and agriculture were the most prominent, particularly amongst Polish residents. ‘Salaries’ were the most widely reported method of payment, which was followed by ‘hourly wages’. The majority stated that they were paid ‘monthly’ whilst a minority stated they were paid ‘weekly’.
Positive and negative employment experiences

When questioned on their experiences of employment, responses painted a largely mixed picture in terms of positive and negative. 68% acknowledged positive employment experiences; ‘supportive colleagues’ being by far the most popular. This was followed albeit at some distance by ‘adequate training’ and ‘help available if needed’. Encouraging as these findings were, they were mirrored by and respondents reporting negative experiences. ‘Discrimination’, ‘verbal abuse’, ‘lack of support with language barriers’ and ‘Bullying’ were the most common.

In addition to the quantitative findings, comments and case studies revealed further details of the ways BME workers could be mistreated at work. These included (amongst others) being forbidden to speak in their native language at work, having employment terminated at a moment’s notice, working hours being increased without prior notice and workplace injuries not being properly recorded.

Underemployment, Wage sustainability and Welfare Benefits

Almost 70% of informants regarded themselves as ‘underemployed’ and working below their qualification. Half of the Polish respondents identified themselves as being within this category.

The majority of responses (62%) were evenly split between those who were able to ‘live comfortably of their wages and afford everything and they need’ and those who do the same but ‘struggle slightly to afford what they need’. The remainder were split unevenly amongst those who ‘could live of wages but not afford everything they needed’ (23%) and those who were ‘unable to live of their wages and needed extra support to pay for what they needed’ (15%). As to what types of external assistance BME workers used, our data revealed that borrowing money from family/friends was the most widely used.

Although the vast majority of respondents were employed during participation we wanted to explore the experiences unemployed BMEs had of ‘signing on’ and claiming benefits. Only half of those identified as ‘unemployed’ stated that they were formally registered at Jobcentre Plus. Reasons given for not ‘signing on’ included: not seeking employment, unable to get advice, language difficulties, uncertainty about entitlement, not knowing how to register.

The situation was similar for benefit claiming. The majority of respondents were not claiming any benefits at the time of participation. For those who were the most widely claimed benefits included Tax Credits, Child Benefit, Housing Benefit and Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). Others had claimed but had either been refused, sanctioned or were waiting for a decision from the DWP. For those who had not claimed any benefits, the majority had not done so as they did not think they were entitled. One case study reflected this issue; a recently dismissed client had not applied for JSA as they did not think they were entitled. It turns out they were entitled given the duration of their stay in UK. Others reasons included being unable to get advice on claiming and not knowing how to apply. A testimony from a BME support worker employed within Perth and Kinross added further insights by stating that some do not claim as they do not want the ‘responsibility’ of engaging with the claiming process. Alongside these reasons were those who had not claimed as they did not need any benefits.

This research commenced in January 2014 and was carried out by the Social Policy Team at Perth Citizens Advice Bureau and the staff at local BME advocacy Group Minority Ethnic Access Development Project (MEAD). Support with survey distribution was provided by staff at Perth CAB and partner organisations.