

## **Women into construction**

*Phil Brennan looks at what councils can do to encourage a more diverse range of people in the building and maintenance workforce*

The traditional comedy image of the worker in the construction industry is of a white middle-aged man whose trousers are in dire need of a sturdy belt.

And yet, encouraging more women, people from minority ethnic groups and older and younger people to become plumbers, joiners, roofers and take up other such trades is just what is needed in an industry beset with chronic skills shortages. This is underlined by a recent Construction Products Association Survey, which found that one in three construction jobs are being delayed due to skills shortages.

Local authorities are well placed to promote greater diversity both within their own workforce and in construction projects as a whole through their building and maintenance departments, capital works projects and their responsibility for procurement, equalities, skills and economic development. Enhancing diversity among the construction workforce can be a way of maximising the benefits of regeneration projects and providing jobs for people in deprived areas. Some older and female residents also say they feel safer having women workers in their homes and trades-people from BME groups can bring useful languages and cultural understanding when jobs are being carried out for BME residents.

But research by the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) reveals that just 1.3% of frontline operatives in the council building and maintenance departments that took part are female, 0.95% are from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups and 15.9% are aged under 25. A total of 60% of participants reported difficulties in recruiting frontline operatives however.

These figures back up national statistics from ConstructionSkills, the skills body for the industry, which show that females make up only 1% of those employed in building trades in the UK and people from BME groups make up only 3%. Councils are by no means alone in attempting to tackle this, as central government and the industry itself are well aware of the need for greater diversity and can offer information and other resources to be tapped into.

APSE, which works with 300 local authorities who deliver front-line services including housing and building maintenance across the UK, is looking at what can be done to promote greater diversity in traditionally male-dominated trades in partnership with the Construction Youth Trust. This includes bringing together a group of local authorities wishing to tackle this issue and providing small grants for mentoring and support for authorities that are taking on female workers in building trades.

The Trust aims to remove barriers that are stopping young people and people from

disadvantaged groups taking up careers in construction and develop skills at community level. It is also working in alliance with ConstructionSkills to increase the diversity of the workforce. Project manager, Christine Townley, emphasises the 'pivotal role' local authorities can play in encouraging greater diversity in construction.

In her view, the biggest barrier is 'perception' and councils need to be proactive and ensure advertisements reflect that opportunities are open to people from all backgrounds and to go into schools to get messages about apprenticeships across to girls as well as boys. They can also run pilot schemes to take women out on site to learn about the range of jobs available.

She says councils need to 'work with contractors to get messages across' and contracts can be tendered in a way that sets targets for greater diversity in the workforce.

She adds: 'While local authorities have made great strides to recruit more women into the construction industry, they still needed a seismic shift in attitude to ensure more young females come into construction through the local authority apprenticeship route.' These schemes are vital because private sector building apprenticeships have declined due to the fragmentation of the industry caused by sub-contracting.

APSE's is encouraging councils to enter its Apprentice of the Year Awards, which include two female housing and building apprentice category.

It is also collecting examples of good practice among councils who are trying to diversify the building workforce.

One such example is Swansea Council's building services division, which is promoting greater diversity among its staff through its Construction Connection Programme. The main element of the programme is a Saturday Morning Trade School which is a 'pre-apprenticeship' scheme that offers a basic introduction to building trades and links directly into the department's apprenticeship programme. This targets 16 to 17 year old girls and both girls and boys from BME groups.

The scheme identified a number of obstacles to recruiting from a more diverse pool of staff. These included the fact that the education system focuses on academic rather than vocational skills, lack of knowledge of jobs in the industry and lack of funding. Such barriers have been overcome by gaining organisational buy-in from schools, employment and training organisations and other partners, through corporate and sponsorship funding and grants and, crucially, through raising the profile of the programme through media, internet and promotional leaflets.

Neath Port Talbot Council is also benefiting from appointing females as building management apprentices. One of the apprentices, seventeen year old Hannah Jenkins, suggests that councils can both enhance their own reputation and encourage more women to apply by enabling women who already work in the industry to talk to others and explain what they can achieve.

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For further information visit:

[www.apse.org.uk](http://www.apse.org.uk)

[www.citb-constructionskills.co.uk](http://www.citb-constructionskills.co.uk)

[www.constructionyouth.org.uk](http://www.constructionyouth.org.uk)

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