

BUILDING ON DIVERSITY - HARNESSING THE HIDDEN POTENTIAL OF DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

This Development Partnership in England is trying to establish the "Common Ground" in working with local employers in the Metropolitan District of Kirklees in Yorkshire to "harness the hidden potential of its residents". Hence the title of this project, which is questioning existing organisational cultures and recruitment and HR procedures by providing evidence of the skills, capabilities and capacities of the many diverse groupings that live in the district.

MAJOR AIMS AND APPROACH OF THE DP

At the moment, Common Ground is a huge laboratory in which as many as twelve different approaches are being tested. The DP has been created from a process of widespread consultation that resulted in over 25 organisations signing up to become members. Some of these are the 'researchers' and are mainly voluntary organisations and community groups that are currently working very hard to come up with new solutions to the problems encountered by certain groups on the labour market. Other members are the potential users of these solutions such as Job Centre Plus and the local Learning and Skills Council and a few more, such as the local Chamber of Commerce, who will help Common Ground interpret the solutions in a way in which they are understandable and useful to employers.

Unemployment rates in a number of districts in Kirklees are much higher than the national average and people from ethnic minority background suffer disproportionately. Also, employers still have preconceptions about the employability of certain "diverse" groupings. So, the DP is experimenting with various methods and approaches to the inclusion of a number of different groupings such as the long-term unemployed, young unemployed, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, returners to the labour market, those lacking basic skill qualifications and older workers. Examples of these methods include job rotation, supporting employers to design and implement "employee-centered" and "family-friendly" working, developing new training and mentoring packages and ensuring that employers have good HR practices in place.

INNOVATIVE ACTIVITIES AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

In order to remain strategic in its delivery, Common Ground has established three Thematic Partnership Groups on:

- Intermediaries and Employers;
- Mentoring;
- Measuring Soft Outcomes

These groups are involved in analysing relevant practices within all of the 12 pilot projects and will help Common Ground in the formulation of its outcomes.

Two overarching frameworks are also being created to help drive the DP's activities forward. Firstly, a Mentoring Network will ensure that the mentoring across all target groups will be provided to a similar standard and that lessons learnt from techniques used with one particular target group will be disseminated for use with others and then, built in to future approaches and procedures. This Network is led by the Kirklees Local Education Authority and will initially include the five or six DP pilot projects that have a mentoring dimension to their activities. Secondly, an Employer Equality Network will be formed to promote good practice in the field of employment and to embed a culture of equality and diversity within the workplace. The network will provide an opportunity for closer collaboration with local employers, especially SMEs, and a channel for

promoting and 'showcasing' the best practice from the pilot activities. It is also intended to produce materials, which will help improve employment and integration practices within firms and organisations and thus, assist those from excluded groups access local job opportunities.



Managing an EQUAL project is easy compared to this

In such a large partnership, it is important to keep people together and to maintain a common motivation and purpose and 'Away Days' are now annual features in the DP's work programme that involve representatives of all of the partner organisations. They are held in venues outside Kirklees so that people can escape from their usual situations and focus on the topics in hand. There is a sense of fun during these days, as icebreakers and other games are used to make sure that people to get to know

and work with each other, as quickly as possible. However, it is not all fun, as these days are used to plan the activities of the DP over the following twelve months. One beneficiary at the first Away Day put it like this "*on reflection EQUAL has major differences to the empty promises of the past (how refreshing) ... my concerns and misgivings are what EQUAL is about, essentially what appear to be risks around innovation and change and moving to systems which reflect and support what is really going on.*" The Away Days also demonstrate the fact that empowerment is a reality in this DP, as those individuals that are targeted for support are directly involved in the design, development and evaluation of all of its activities.

Common Ground is nearly at the stage of parcelling up the results of its experimental activities and translating them into meaningful outcomes. It will be helped in these tasks by the three thematic groups and the two networks described above. They will play an important role in ensuring that the information, materials and products from Common Ground reach and impact on employers and intermediary organisations during the course of the DP's EQUAL Action 3 dissemination phase

TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

Common Ground is a member of the [Diverse Reflections Transnational Partnership](#) together with DPs from Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands. The rationale for these projects coming together was that they shared the view that to tackle inequalities and combat discrimination, "*there was a desperate need to work on removing the barriers to inclusion on the demand side*" and their attempts to influence employers will focus on

- Barriers inherent in the organisational culture;
- Employers' lack of knowledge and vision with regard to diversity management - promoting the "Business Case for diversity and equality"
- Negative stereotyping, prejudices and image forming both within and outside of organisations.

INVOLVEMENT IN ETG1

Heather Waddington, the Manager of Common Ground, participated in the [Initial Workshop](#) of the EQUAL European Thematic Group on Employability, in Birmingham. She felt that "*this 'Building on Diversity' Workshop came along at a very opportune time for us. The more that we can learn about how DPs throughout Europe are influencing and involving employers, the more effective the next stage of our own dissemination and awareness raising activities will be!*" After attending the Workshop, Heather was pleasantly surprised at the delivery of the programme and outcomes of the three days. "*The event was very interesting and at last in this round of Community Initiatives, we see something real happening in terms of the possibility of mainstreaming and disseminating results from the DPs across Europe and into future European Policy,*" and she continued by confirming that "*the Common Ground Partnership intends to share our knowledge*

and best practice with the Working Groups established in Birmingham, especially the one that is considering how best to involve employers".

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Link to [EQUAL database description](#)