

A positive highway

An initiative to increase the number of planners from ethnic minority backgrounds has made a promising start but needs time to reach its potential, reports **Rob Winkley**

UK mortgage lenders are quietly concerned at the moment over the state of the housing market. Although house prices continue to rise, the number of first-time buyers is at its lowest for years.

The cycle of people dying, their house being sold and someone moving one rung further up the ladder allows a first-time buyer to get a foothold at the bottom end of the market. But if no-one is prepared to get on the ladder at the bottom, the market eventually collapses.

It is a similar story in the planning world. For every chief planner who retires, a chain reaction begins and officers further down the pecking order are bumped up a grade. This is all fine and well when there is young blood eager to join the ranks as junior planners. But what happens when there are insufficient new faces?

You end up with a recruitment crisis. But that is only half of the problem. The planning profession is dominated by white, middle-class men. It is far from representative of the UK population.

Tomorrow's Planners is an initiative that



Tomorrow's Planners trainees: aiming to tackle under-representation of black and minority ethnic people in planning sector

offers one route to tackling the imbalance. The programme, now celebrating its first anniversary, is a partnership between the Planning Inspectorate and the Positive Action Training Highway (PATH), a London-based charity that helps black and minority ethnic (BME) people into careers where they are under-represented.

Given some of the statistics unearthed by University of Westminster planning academic Tim Edmundson, such a scheme is long overdue. "The planning profession has only a quarter of the minority ethnic staff needed to reflect the communities it serves," he points out.

According to Edmundson's research,

only 1.7 per cent of RTPI members belong to BME groups even though they represent 7.9 per cent of the UK population. In London, close to 30 per cent of the population comes from BME groups, yet they account for just 6.6 per cent of the capital's planners. Something is going badly wrong.

Edmundson also notes that surveys

Jo Gay, London Borough of Southwark

Jo Gay, 31, has a degree in environmental chemistry and assessment. She was working in sales when she realised that she was in the wrong career. Following two years working in Spain, she returned to London and discovered the planning opportunities on the Prospects website.

"I'd been looking for a job for a while and had seen some amazing schemes," says Gay. Her application to PATH was successful and she is now in her fifth month at the London Borough of Southwark, where she works in the development control team and is finding her colleagues a "mine of information".

Her territory includes tourist traps such as the London Dungeon, the Globe Theatre and the Imperial War Museum. The latest in a long line of major planning applications is London Bridge Tower, also known as the Shard of Glass. Although the tower has planning permission, Gay still expects to be involved in the more fine-grained planning discussions.

She is also finding out first-hand that a planner's workload never diminishes.



"I have a caseload of 20 to 25 cases at any one time," she reveals. "I've lost an informal hearing and been to a public inquiry already."

Together with her one-day-a-week course at South Bank University, the job has been a culture shock. Does she have any regrets about the career change? "No, I'm very settled and very happy," she maintains.

Mongezi Ndelela, RPS Group

As the only member of the Tomorrow's Planners intake to land a job in the private sector, 24-year-old Mongezi Ndelela can offer a unique perspective on life as an aspiring planner.

Ndelela graduated from Swansea University in 2002 with a geography degree. During the following year, working in human resources, he realised that the job "was not for him." He recalls: "I really enjoyed the geography and always wanted to take it further. I went for RPS because they work on such a broad range of jobs."

He has already been involved in a huge range of projects, even though he only started last September. Not even the rigours of getting his head around the complexities of sequential testing for retail applications or being asked to produce research assessments has dampened his spirits. "It's just a bonus for me that I'm not sat behind a desk for 35 hours a week," he says.

As if he isn't busy enough, Ndelela spends one day a week studying at the University of Westminster. "It keeps me busy and I constantly have deadlines to



look forward to," he points out. "In fact, I've got an essay to hand in on Monday."

Despite finding his one-day-a-week course "more suited to public sector planners", he says it is offering him a valuable insight into the machinations of local authorities. Like Gay, he found the Tomorrow's Planners advert by accident while surfing the internet. "I felt this was an opportunity of a lifetime," he adds.

to better services

reveal a low awareness of planning as a career among BME groups. That has to be one of the reasons why they are under-represented in the profession and in the RTPI, both at student and corporate member level. Beyond that, the causes of this low level of interest are obscure.

Edmundson speculates that the proliferation of other university courses may be drawing attention away from planning, although that phenomenon is not confined to minority groups. He also points out that because there is low BME representation in planning, BME applicants are less likely to have relatives already established in the profession.

"We have got together with the inspectorate and the ODPM because we need to ensure that BME groups have access to quality jobs," explains PATH managing director Paul Butler. "We know that they are getting the education but not the jobs. This initiative is helping."

Tomorrow's Planners offers the best opportunity yet for redressing the imbalance. Set up in January last year, the scheme takes on trainees on a three-year contract. The trainees are employed by PATH and then placed with host providers in either the private or public sector. They are also found places on RTPI-accredited part-time postgraduate planning courses.

PATH provides the administration, monitoring and mentoring, while the host pays a training allowance and management fee to the charity. The response last year was encouraging. The programme received

Ethnic group profiles

	UK population	RTPI members
Members of BME groups	7.9%	1.7%
Asian	4.4%	1.1%
Black African	0.8%	0.3%
Black Caribbean	1.0%	0.2%
	London population	London planners
Members of BME groups	28.9%	6.6%

Source: University of Westminster

610 requests for information and 116 applications. A total of 46 candidates made the shortlist. Last September, 19 students were placed.

The aim is to double the number of placements this September and to place 500 trainees over the ten years of the programme. "From a standing start a year ago, where we are today is fantastic," says chief planning inspector Katrine Sporle. "We do not have a balanced workforce, but we cannot remedy that in one fell swoop. This is a long-term project."

The inspectorate carries out an annual customer survey to ascertain what users think of it. "They told us we are all white, middle-aged men," says Sporle. "That's not the image that we want to project. We want the inspectorate to be representative of the communities that we serve."

The programme's chairman, former chief planning inspector Chris Shepley, acknowledges that potential trainees

'The planning profession has only a quarter of the minority ethnic staff needed to reflect the communities it serves'

must be prepared for some hard graft. "Most of the trainees have found that in the first term, integrating a new job, course and location is hard," he explains. "But once you get through the first term, then you should be able to get through the rest of the course."

The only potential stumbling block is money. "The resources that we need for this process are huge. If we had the resources and time, then I think we could easily get 30 or 40 placements," declares

Shepley. He also admits that finding employers to take the trainees on is not as straightforward as he would like.

"When you get to the right people in the local authority and have a conversation with them, they are usually very receptive," he points out. "At the moment, however, I am still fairly daunted by the fact that we have to keep this initiative going for another nine years at least."

Paul Butler, managing director of PATH National, is more forthright. "The ODPM has left us under-resourced," he complains. "We need £52,000 between now and October." Butler is making do with an ODPM grant of £28,500. "We will have to make up the shortfall by reducing our level of activities," he warns.

Butler's fund-raising programme over the next few months includes meetings with each of the regional development agencies to see whether he can source some funding to complement the ODPM investment. The London Development Agency has also put money into the initiative, he reveals.

Tomorrow's Planners kills two birds with one stone. It creates opportunities for BME groups to get a foothold in planning while at the same time easing the recruitment crisis in the profession. But it needs genuine support from potential employers as well as money if it is to make its fullest possible contribution.

■ PATH will be advertising for trainees in March. Further details are available from PATH (tel) 020 7001 2000.

Raymond Okot, London Borough of Hackney

"So far, so good" is Raymond Okot's verdict on life in the enforcement team at the London Borough of Hackney. He has an environmental technology degree from the University of Durham, where he graduated in 2000.

Despite the fact that a lot of his course focused on chemistry as an aid to environmental impact assessment, Okot remembers enjoying the town and country planning module. "I wanted to do something that was related to what I studied," he explains. "But everyone wanted experience. I didn't have any and somehow I needed to get some involvement."

He responded to an advert to join the PATH initiative and the rest is history. Although he has yet to come across any aggressive customers in his travels around Hackney, he admits: "Most people are not very happy to see me."

He will soon move on to development control as part of his ongoing training. The change may be as good as a rest for Okot, who came to London in 1990 after fleeing war-torn Uganda. "I have 64 enforcement files already, so at the



end of the day I am very tired," he confesses.

With his commitment to obtaining a Football Association coaching badge with Charlton Athletic and the arrival of a baby, he is finding his time at a premium. "It is the finances that are difficult, not the motivation," he maintains. "I set my alarm for five in the morning. I think I can handle anything."

Stephen Rogers, London Borough of Redbridge

You will not hear any complaints about the Tomorrow's Planners scheme from Stephen Rogers, head of development control at the London Borough of Redbridge, which has been facing difficulties in recruiting staff at the more junior grades for the past six months.

"We had the money and the commitment but no access to the labour market," Rogers recalls. "As a council with a high BME population percentage, I think it was important that we got on board with the scheme. We need an increase in BME staff representation but it is also an issue for the whole of the council, not just the planning department."

Redbridge has taken on two students in development control and Rogers says there is an opening for a third candidate. "We just need the right student to come along," he explains. "But we are delighted with their progress so far. The feedback that we get is that they are enjoying their work and finding it fulfilling."

Rogers explains that PATH students are treated like any other planning



graduate, the only difference being that they are out of the office on Mondays due to university commitments.

"Our experience is that graduates join us, do two, three or four years' work and then leave. That is part of the cycle of life that we all expect," he says. "It would be nice to think that in the time they are with us, they will put down some roots in the area and want to stay."