

Inclusive initiative

Positive action is helping more people from ethnic minorities get the training that they need to enter the planning profession, says **David Blackman**

Britain's ethnic make-up has changed dramatically in the past 50 years and the planning profession has been slow to catch up. The proportion of the UK's population from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds is soon expected to top ten per cent.

Many big city authorities are set to follow the lead of Brent in west London, which recently became the first borough where white people are in a minority. Most gatherings of planning professionals show that planning continues to present a white face to this changing society. But now steps are being taken to bring more BME staff into the profession.

Research carried out by Tim Edmondson of Westminster University showed that two years ago just 1.7 per cent of planners were from BME groups, compared with 7.9 per cent of the population at large. Among students, the record is better but still not good enough. Edmondson reckoned that 4.9 per cent of student

planners were from an ethnic minority background.

The housing profession has been more successful in attracting BME recruits. Eight per cent of the Chartered Institute of Housing's membership is from a BME background, almost mirroring the make-up of the national population. In addition, the institute has just elected its first black president.

It is not just ethnic minority candidates who are missing out as a result of what former chief planning inspector Chris Shepley describes as planning's "shameful" failure to attract more BME entrants. Understaffed planning authorities are failing to tap an increasingly important source of recruits.

Planners have to understand the needs of the community. But practitioners have been finding themselves increasingly out of touch with whole groups of service users who are not represented among the officers they are dealing with. "It is not just about political correctness," insists Shepley. "The credibility of the planning system is at stake."

Tony Wilson of the PATH agency, which promotes efforts to boost recruitment in areas where BME groups are under-represented, says: "If you have a highly diverse workforce, it will understand the needs of more members of the population. One of

the problems that planners have is engaging with members of the ethnic minority population."

Together with the Planning Inspectorate and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, PATH is helping to run the Tomorrow's Planners initiative, which is designed to remedy the under-representation of BME planners. Those taking part in the initiative, who must have an honours degree, receive a salary and a bursary to cover the cost of a part-time postgraduate planning course.

So far 81 BME trainees have taken part over the three years that the project has been running. Just under half of trainees are women. The biggest proportion (22 per cent) is from an Indian background, followed by people of black British origin (19 per cent). One in seven are Chinese and nine per cent each are black Caribbean, Pakistani and eastern European.

Trainees can be found in planning offices as far apart as Newcastle and Brighton. Many boroughs in London and the West Midlands have participated in the scheme, although the record of authorities in northern England and the South West is not as good. The result, says Wilson, is that authorities like Birmingham and Sandwell "are now representing the communities that they are trying to serve".

Shepley, who chairs the Tomorrow's

Planners steering group, says that the authorities taking on trainees have been "very satisfied" with their recruits. Many from the first intake in September 2003 are now employed full time by the organisations in which they were placed. Just five individuals have dropped out of the scheme and all have found full-time jobs elsewhere in the planning system.

The initiative aims to help 500 people become fully-fledged planners over ten years, increasing the proportion to just over six per cent of all planning professionals. The only disappointment, apart from the number of authorities that dropped out from the scheme at a late stage earlier this year, has been the private sector's reluctance to participate.

So far only one planning consultancy, the RPS Group, is offering places as part of a company bursary scheme that is funding a dozen students this year in planning and related skills. "Unfortunately we are having a challenge convincing the private sector," says Wilson. But he puts this reluctance down to a more general failure among consultancies to invest in training.

Many more organisations must be prepared to offer traineeships if the targets set for the Tomorrow's Planners programme are to be met. Both councils and the planning system as a whole will benefit from the wider pool of talent it brings.

Zulfiqar Ali

Zulfiqar Ali first became interested in development during a school work experience stint at Sheffield City Council's planning department. After a degree in geography and urban studies at the University of Lancaster, he took a detour from planning to study for a one-year postgraduate law certificate.

But the 29-year-old returned to his first interest when he spotted an advert for the Tomorrow's Planners scheme and became part of the first intake in September 2003. He went to work for the Environment Agency while on a part-time postgraduate course at Leeds Metropolitan University. In July this year he secured a full-time employment contract with the agency.

Ali acknowledges that, traditionally, Asian families have wanted their children to enter the most highly-paid professions like medicine and the law. But he says the perception of planning as a career path is changing in the community. "It is becoming more acceptable in Asian families and the RTPI qualification is highly valued on the sub-continent."

While training, Ali has worked on the agency's forward planning work and vetting of day-to-day applications



to check that they meet the environmental standards the agency is charged with safeguarding. He has particularly enjoyed working in his birthplace. "I have enjoyed getting to know the area and interacting with developers. Planners have to know a bit about everything," he says.

Ali believes that greater diversity in the planning profession is starting to break down barriers between ethnic minority communities and the planning system. "It is quite refreshing when they see somebody from their own background," he notes.

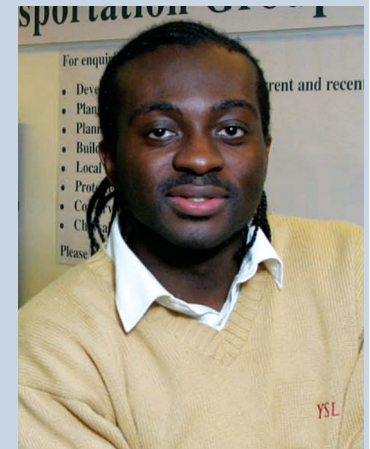
Lovelace Poku

Lovelace Poku was unsure what to do after graduating from the University of Lincoln with a degree in engineering. But having a degree with links to the built environment meant that the 27-year-old was able to qualify for a place on the Tomorrow's Planners initiative.

As part of the first intake under the scheme, Poku joined the London Borough of Hillingdon in September 2003 while taking a part-time degree at University College London's Bartlett School of Planning. Like other trainees, he has carried out a wide range of tasks over the past two years, working on both development control and forward planning.

At the moment Poku is helping to draft policies for Hillingdon's local development framework, including the council's open space strategy. "I have been able to reflect on the work that I have done in development control and the work I have done on the ground," he says.

Hillingdon's planning department is already quite a diverse employer. "A lot of people come from different backgrounds," Poku points out. One of the authority's development control managers, who is also black, has



been acting as a mentor to him, helping him to sort out any problems and pointing him towards further career options.

Working for a large metropolitan authority means that there is a wide variety of specialised paths, such as transport planning and urban design. Like many other Tomorrow's Planners trainees, Poku has secured a full-time contract with his employer. "Future job prospects are bright," he says. "There are lots of opportunities and you are able to transfer skills."