

Employing Migrant Workers In Northern Ireland

The Equality Commission event 'Focusing on Migrant Workers' took place at the end of September 2004 in the Seagoe Hotel in Craigavon. The event was targeted primarily at private sector employers in Northern Ireland who are either currently employing migrant workers or are considering employing them in the future. The seminar aimed to examine and share experiences and best practice initiatives on the employment of migrant workers and to identify ways in which the Commission could assist employers in ensuring equality of opportunity in employment.

The Commission was very pleased with the high level of interest from employers with almost 100 participants attending this event. This report includes a summary of each of the speeches as well as an outline of our future plans in this important area of employment equality.

The Way Forward


The following is a summary of the discussion that took place during the event and the feedback afterwards.

Participants felt that the event was worthwhile in terms of sharing best practice and wanted the Commission to ensure that employers are provided with further opportunities to do this. This suggestion was made in relation to migrant workers in particular and to best equality practices more generally.

There were also many areas where employers would value further information and support. These included:

- Information on education facilities for those speaking English as a second language, and translation services;
- Obtaining national insurance numbers for migrant workers;
- Health and safety in the workplace;
- Ensuring compliance with immigration requirements and references;
- Access to other services including housing, childcare, health care and banking.





The Commission agrees with all of the speakers and participants at the event that a 'joined up' strategy addressing both the needs of migrant workers and employers is required. To move the process forward we are planning to hold a further event in the Spring of 2005.

This event will give employers an opportunity to network with organisations responsible for issues such as national insurance, healthcare in the community, provision of education, housing, banking, and community groups working with migrant workers. The Commission plans to meet with a range of these organisations over the next few months to discuss how to meet the needs of migrant workers in a co-ordinated way. The event will also give a further opportunity to share best practice in employing migrant workers. We will be writing to employers with details of this event early in the New Year.

The Commission facilitates a number of employer equality networks in various locations throughout Northern Ireland. These networks provide employers with the opportunity to share best practice initiatives and to liaise directly with Commission staff regarding their equality needs. If you would like to become part of such a network please let us know.

We have also recently been promoting employment equality plans covering the spectrum of equality categories and are very pleased at the positive interest and outcomes from employers to date. These equality plans may be adapted to focus on race equality. If you would like to discuss the development of employment equality plans or if you need advice relating to the development of specific equality policies, practices and procedures please contact us.

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Setting the Context – equality and the economy

Dame Joan Harbison, Chief Commissioner

Dame Joan set the context for the event by focusing on the need for everyone in Northern Ireland to welcome and support migrant workers choosing to come to work here. She noted that the significant presence of migrant workers is relatively new in the Northern Ireland economy and that some key sectors are now largely dependent on them. Migrant workers must be given the opportunity to use their huge variety of skills and to make their contribution to this society. There is potential for the enrichment of our culture in Northern Ireland and the reward of a truly diverse society.

Joan advised that while the focus for this year's Anti-Racist Workplace Week in November was on migrant workers the Commission recognises that organisations also require longer term strategies and support to meet the quickly changing challenges, and indeed opportunities. There is no one agency, organisation or partnership that can give all of what is needed to provide full opportunities to migrant workers and it is by working together on practical strategies that we can develop best practice in this important area. Continued work by, and support for, employers, trade unions and NGOs to promote intercultural workplace strategies and to provide practical supports to ensure good practice in recruitment and employment will facilitate this change. The Commission wants to ensure that it plays its full role in supporting employers to meet the challenges of achieving the rewards of intercultural workplaces. In this regard Joan recorded the Commission's appreciation to the speakers at the event for sharing their experiences and perspectives regarding the employment of migrant workers.

Joan asked participants to consider whether there are things that they could be doing in their organisations to better promote inter-cultural diversity in the workplace. She highlighted examples such as reviewing equal opportunities and harassment policies, amending recruitment and selection procedures, reviewing qualification equivalencies and adopting positive action measures to attract and retain black and minority ethnic applicants.

Joan emphasised the importance of providing good information to migrant workers. Such information may be about issues such as work permit conditions, benefit eligibility, and sources of advice on specific problems like housing and the availability of childcare and education services. In particular Joan pointed to the importance of information on employment rights and paid tribute to the work of the trade unions and the community sector in responding to these needs.



*Dame
Joan
Harbison*





*Frank
Hewitt*

Frank Hewitt, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce

Before taking up his post as Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, Frank Hewitt spent a large part of his career working in the field of economic development, attracting inward investment into Northern Ireland.

In his presentation Frank gave participants an overview of the Northern Ireland economy over the last three decades and pointed out that if we are to continue to benefit from the economic growth of the past decade, we will need to absorb and utilise the skills of committed migrant workers.

Migrant workers are now playing an increasing role in some sectors of the economy. For example, many manufacturers are now facing labour shortages with some evidence that local workers are unwilling to undertake what many regard as unpalatable work, particularly in the food processing sector. In other sectors, such as health, there are clearly identified skill shortages. This sector is now highly dependent on health care professionals from a variety of countries such as the Philippines. Northern Ireland is competing for labour with other economies which are also experiencing labour shortages and skill deficits.

Frank reflected on the international perspective of migrant workers and the need for Northern Ireland to learn from other countries. He suggested the need for a strategy to identify and track the development of migrant workers to ensure that their needs are understood and met. Northern Ireland would benefit from the development of formal links with the countries from which the migrant workers are coming and both Northern Ireland business and the migrant workers would benefit from better language skills.

Managing a non-national workforce - Employer's perspectives

Brian Cains Human Resources Director Moy Park Ltd

Moy Park Ltd is Northern Ireland's largest food processing company, with a turnover of £670 million. The company employs almost 8000 employees, 2900 based at the company's Northern Ireland locations in Craigavon, Dungannon and Moira. In Northern Ireland almost 30% of Moy Park's employees are non-nationals. The figure is slightly higher at the company's other UK locations.

Brian Cains, the Human Resources Director, gave an overview of the business needs of Moy Park Ltd. In recent years the company has found it increasingly difficult to recruit enough labour from the local market. The demand for labour has been met largely by the recruitment of Portuguese nationals.

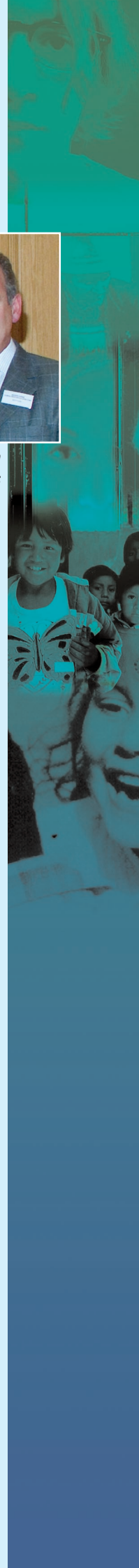
Brian recognised that the company is learning from its own experiences in employing non-national labour and welcomed the opportunity to share these experiences with other employers. He pointed out that the company's experience in employing non-national labour has been positive. The company has found its non-national employees to be highly motivated and productive. Absence rates have decreased and there has been an improvement in labour turnover rates. However some issues need attention. For example where non-nationals have limited knowledge of English, verbal and written communication can be difficult. The company addresses communication difficulties in a number of ways, for example by putting teams together to include workers who can translate or interpret. The company has also recently employed a Portuguese Human Resources Manager and benefits from her knowledge of language and cultural differences.

Moy Park Ltd also co-operates with local groups to ensure that any potential tensions between its workforce and the local community are identified at an early stage. The company's strategy on the employment of non-national employees is based on ongoing training and the measurement and audit of the effectiveness of its employment policies, practices and procedures. Recently the company invested substantial resources in a diversity training programme for all employees. The company recognises that there will be a need for ongoing training and development.

Brian suggested that the time is now right for some 'joined up' thinking about the employment of non-national workers with all key stakeholders involved.



Brian Cains





Lynda
Gordon

Lynda Gordon Head of Equality Assurance Unit Craigavon and Banbridge Community H&SS Trust

Lynda Gordon has many years experience working in the health sector and is currently Head of the Equality Assurance Unit in Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health and Social Service Trust.

Lynda informed participants that within the Southern Health and Social Services employers there are just over 11,000 employees of whom approximately 1.1% are from the Black and Minority Ethnic community. The Equality Assurance Unit has been monitoring the racial background of staff since 2000 and has employees from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. While in the past the majority of overseas workers were employed mainly in the medical profession in recent years there are increasing numbers in the ancillary and general job groups.

In 2002 the Trust, faced with recruitment difficulties, recruited nurses from the Philippines, initially on two year contracts. These contracts are now being renewed for a further two years. The Philippines was chosen due to the quality of nurse training, English language competency and the fact that the nursing qualifications are recognised by the UK nursing standards body.

Lynda explained some of the initiatives put into place by the Trust to ensure that these staff were welcomed into their employment. On arrival the nurses were met and transported to the newly refurbished hospital accommodation and provided with welcome packs and telephone cards to phone home.

The Trust has put in place a comprehensive orienteering programme to help the nurses to settle in. This included presentations on local culture, setting up bank accounts and obtaining National Insurance numbers. The nurses were also taken around local places of interest, including places of worship. A three week induction programme covering mandatory training and other relevant courses was also introduced. Each overseas nurse was allocated a mentor and a designated person was identified to deal with any issues arising, both personal and work related. A 24 hour support line was also established. The Trust has thus been able to deal with problems as they have arisen.

More recently the Trust has recruited some Polish workers in the ancillary and general job groups. These workers have received a similar induction programme to the Filipino nurses and are now taking English language courses.

Lynda pointed out that employers considering recruiting overseas workers should have structured recruitment practices in place and be prepared to invest in a comprehensive induction and follow up programme.

The Trade Union Perspective

Mel Corry Lecturer in Trade Union Studies at the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education

Mel Corry is a lecturer in Trade Union Studies at the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education. He is currently on secondment to the Transport and General Workers Union and is a regional official in Mid-Ulster.

Mel spoke of the trade union's commitment to equality and how this was the foundation for the union's work with the migrant workers. He spoke about the need for all of us to address our own personal prejudices and stereotypes associated with migrant workers. Mel went on to talk about the importance that training plays in relation to promoting equality of opportunity in the workplace and valuing the diversity that the migrant workers bring to places of employment and society in general in Northern Ireland.

Mel pointed out that both trade unions and employers have a role to play in promoting equality in the workplace, for example agreeing policies to deal with issues such as harassment and regularly reviewing these policies to ensure that they promote racial equality.

Mel gave participants some examples of work in which the union is involved with local migrant workers. For example, a trade union liaison officer has been appointed to work closely with the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) to advise migrant workers on a wide range of issues such as access to health and education services, childcare, housing and employment rights. This advice service has proven to be in great demand and have necessitated extending the opening hours of the local advice office.

From the trade union's perspective it is clear that both unions and management will need to adapt to changing circumstances to meet the needs of migrant workers.



Mel Corry



The Community Perspective



Tayra
McKee

Tayra McKee Community Development Worker South Tyrone Empowerment Programme

Tayra McKee is a Community Development Worker in the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) based in Dungannon. STEP is a rural community development organisation.

It is responsible for facilitating a range of community based projects aimed at empowering marginalised communities and addressing social exclusion issues. Projects include the Migrant Workers Support Centre which is based at the STEP offices in Dungannon.

Tayra gave an insight into the diversity of migrant workers in the Dungannon area and talked about the many issues they faced.

In recent years there has been a significant change in the demographic profile of the Dungannon area with more than 10% of the population made up of non-nationals. Many non nationals are employed by employment agencies who in some cases also supply accommodation. This makes it difficult for them to find alternative work as once they leave the employment agency they lose their accommodation. House prices in the Dungannon area have increased in the last year and it is increasingly difficult to find affordable housing. For those with young families it is also difficult to find suitable childcare, and it is therefore difficult for both parents to choose to work outside the home.

For those who are not proficient in the use of English there are additional difficulties, for example in translating documents and accessing local services. Tayra did helpfully remind the audience that one in four adults in Northern Ireland cannot read and write properly. The STEP organisation helps migrant workers by providing interpreters for job interviews and provides language tuition, through online learning and through tutor led classes. One local employer provides migrant employees with some paid time off to attend language classes.

Tayra recommended that unions become further involved in organising migrant workers and that employers lobby government to address difficulties that migrant workers face in opening bank accounts, obtaining National Insurance numbers, tax credits and housing. Tayra also recommended that employers should provide comprehensive induction programmes for migrant workers, not only in relation to their employment but into the life of the whole local area.