



# Boosting Opportunity and Realising Potential Report of the Workplace Equity Commission September 2024

In partnership with

**youth  
futures**  
FOUNDATION



British  
Chambers of  
Commerce

Workplace  
Equity  
Commission

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# FOREWORDS



**Sarah Howard**  
**MBE**

Chair of BCC  
and Co-Chair  
of the  
Workplace  
Equity  
Commission

## **Access to a skilled, engaged and productive workforce remains a top priority for business.**

Recruitment and retention difficulties are holding back firms of all sizes and sectors across the UK. They are also acting as a drag anchor on the economy. At the same time, the skills, experience and potential of many working age people are going untapped. People are struggling to overcome barriers to accessing work and career progression. It's vital that we address this disconnect. Our goals should be supporting everyone who wants to work to achieve their full potential and enabling employers to embrace talent pools from every part of society.

By changing approaches to recruitment, development and workplace culture, employers can help more people access employment opportunities and contribute to the success of the business.

During the past year, the Workplace Equity Commission has sought to understand the challenges and opportunities for SME employers in creating equitable workplaces. SMEs, in general, are less likely to have introduced or progressed strategies and interventions to break down barriers in the workplace. We have looked for best practice that can be scaled-up across business communities and where additional support and guidance could help to overcome challenges.

Fairer, more inclusive and diverse workplaces benefit individuals, businesses and local economies. Our report reflects on the need for managers and policymakers to create the right conditions to drive change at pace for all talent pools in our workforce.

Thank you to all the businesses, Chambers and organisations who have contributed. Special thanks to my fellow Commissioners from across business and civil society for your support and wise counsel.

We are grateful to our partner, Youth Futures Foundation, who have provided valuable insight on priorities for young people.

We are also thankful to the TUC for their input to the report, sharing the vital work that unions do in delivering equity for workers.

This report is just the start and there is much more for business and government to do. We need to shift the dial on workplace equity and remove barriers for all underrepresented groups in the workforce.





**Barry Fletcher**  
Chief Executive  
of Youth  
Futures  
Foundation

**As the What Works Centre for youth employment, with a specific focus on marginalised young people, we understand the importance of giving the next generation the education, skills and opportunities they need to realise their full potential in the workforce.**

The UK has significant labour market challenges and employers tell us they lack the talent and skills they need, with the latest ONS data showing vacancy levels remain high at 884,000. Yet simultaneously, 872,000 16-24-year-olds are not in education, employment or training (NEET), equivalent to 1 in 8 – the highest rate in eight years.<sup>i</sup>

Without decisive action to address this challenge and turn it into opportunity, we are not only letting down a generation of young people, but employers will continue missing out on a talent pool that can deliver future prosperity. If we were ambitious and sought to match the NEET rate of the Netherlands, where only one in 20 young people are not in employment or education, we could add £69 billion to the UK economy over the long term.<sup>ii</sup>

To deliver this, we need a gear change from employers and government. With SMEs making up 99% of UK businesses, they are an essential part of the solution, which is why Youth Futures Foundation is delighted to have joined together with the British Chambers of Commerce on the Workplace Equity Commission.

Employers tell us they recognise the importance of building diverse teams and see young people as essential in this but turning intention into reality means doing things differently. Reaching and nurturing diverse talent pools requires new strategies and rethinking recruitment and retention practices for SMEs as well as a supportive and enabling policy environment. There is much to do and learn. The data and evidence will be essential to help small businesses to know how to do this practically and effectively. Only through addressing these challenges can we build the workforce of the future.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**As firms face persistent challenges with skills shortages, and the UK economy continues to be plagued by weak productivity and unprecedented rates of economic inactivity, the need for businesses to attract, develop and retain the broadest range of talent is clear. The cost of worklessness in the UK is unsustainable and too much talent is going untapped because individuals find themselves excluded from the labour market.**

The benefits of workplace equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) for both business and government are well known. Companies leading their geography and industry for EDI perform better than their market average across a number of metrics. Not only are they more able to engage and retain staff, but evidence shows they are 36% more likely to outperform on profitability and able to achieve a 20% higher rate of innovation<sup>iii</sup>. The new government is going for growth. More people in employment means increased tax revenues and reduced benefits costs. Take disabilities as an example, if the Disability Employment Gap was halved in the UK, this would unlock an estimated £17bn benefit to HM Treasury.<sup>iv</sup>

While large companies have the resources and capabilities to make EDI a priority, and should do more to share their learnings, SMEs — which account for 61% of UK employment — continue to face a series of challenges to improve access and opportunity. BCC research revealed that less than half of SMEs have yet introduced any specific policies or programmes for under-represented groups in the workplace.



Not only are they held back by a lack of information, resources and the complexity of equalities legislation, the fear of the financial and reputational risk of doing or saying the wrong thing is leading to paralysis - a fear that has been heightened by increased politicisation of EDI. This is having unintended consequences and it's time to turn down the temperature of the debate.

Removing barriers to access will need to be at the heart of the new government's economic agenda. But this can't be about heavy-handed regulation, high-cost initiatives, or gimmicks. Firms, particularly SMEs, need practical ways to support the principles of fairness and equity in the workplace.

The government needs to provide a framework that incentivises and gives confidence to firms to move forward at pace, and help employers tackle these challenges head on. To improve individual's prospects, boost business success and drive economic growth, we have set out in our report a five-point plan on how the government and employers can take action.

The plan covers:

1. Setting out an ambitious and enabling framework for the public and private sector
2. Supporting diverse leadership and management
3. Improving access to opportunity
4. Helping people to stay and progress in work
5. Supporting minoritised communities and addressing cross-cutting factors.

## Context

The government has set out an ambitious plan for increasing the employment rate to 80%, alongside a series of measures designed to help the economically inactive into stable jobs. This plan to ‘get Britain working again’ is essential to drive forward the government’s key mission — generating economic growth.

The government, like business, knows that the best resource this country has is its people. They are the lifeblood of any successful enterprise, and getting all those who are able into good, well-paid employment will be the foundation of our future prosperity. However, now, more than ever, businesses are facing acute skills shortages and a population that is increasingly likely to face health issues that cause them to drop out of work.

The government’s Plan to Make Work Pay is an ambitious project to reform employment rights for generations to come, updating legislation and embedding best practice across the wider workplace. Its upcoming Employment Rights Bill and Draft Equality (Race and Disability) Bill will be the centrepieces of this programme. Measures like the right to request flexible working, addressing pay gaps, and tackling maternity discrimination will help generate a positive environment for all workers, not just marginalised groups.

Equity in the workplace is at the core of this ambition. It is about enabling simple, practical steps to facilitate access to work for as many people as possible, and it is about doing that in a light-touch way that helps to guide business towards the right outcomes. As the government develops its plans it needs business alongside it on that positive journey, working together towards a common goal of a happier, healthier, and more inclusive workforce. Therefore, it is essential that all reforms are proportionate and developed in partnership with business.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FIVE-POINT PLAN FOR WORKPLACE EQUITY

**The Commission has developed a five point plan for workplace equity. We aim to set out simple, practical steps that can be taken by government and SMEs to advance the shared aim of equity in the workplace. This plan follows from our research and evidence-gathering, detailed in the subsequent chapters, and is designed to provide a framework for success across every part of our society.**

### 1. SET OUT AN AMBITIOUS AND ENABLING FRAMEWORK FOR THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR

#### Government

##### A. Set High Expectations

Update and streamline equalities legislation, strengthen and underpin the role of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and increase understanding among employers and their workforce. Extend pay gap reporting for large firms to include ethnicity and disability, supported by robust guidance for employers and the workforce, and with a requirement to cascade best practice through supply chains to support SMEs. Review the effectiveness of pay gap action plans. Deliver the proposed Equality (Race and Disability) Bill in full, to extend equal pay rights to Black, Asian, and minority ethnic and disabled workers, treating equal pay claims based on ethnicity and disability on a par with existing protections for women. Ensure employment best practice is adopted throughout government and the public sector.

## **B. Review Recommendations**

Consider the recommendations of the 2024 Lilac Review on support for disabled entrepreneurs and the Buckland and Autistica Review on autism employment.<sup>vi</sup>

## **C. Encourage Local Initiatives and Solutions**

Devolve skills budgets to enable funding to be better targeted to local priorities. Create a framework for the sharing of best practice between the UK nations and devolved English regions, and encourage innovative solutions that meet local needs.

## **D. Robust Consultation**

Consult and engage with businesses and those with lived experience, both in and out of work, on all proposed changes to employment and equalities legislation. This is important to maximise the benefits and minimise the risk of unintended consequences. It will be particularly important as the government's Plan to Make Work Pay is implemented over the coming months and years. We must achieve the right balance of rights for employers and individuals and ensure that no person is left behind.

## **E. Joined Up Policy**

Ensure joined up policy and activity across government. The role of the Equalities Minister should include a requirement to promote and support workplace equity in business. It should have clear links to the Department for Business and Trade.

## **F. Simplify and Streamline**

Normalise and simplify the language of equality policy and create a positive atmosphere for conversation and progress. Provide clear guidance. Ensure ACAS has the resources to quickly respond to and support SMEs.

## **G. Tried and Tested Resources**

Use the What Works Network<sup>vii</sup>, and other trusted resources, to boost capacity among SMEs. Signpost to relevant and curated information, best practice and toolkits. Help them introduce proportionate and low-cost changes that are proven to work and have a positive impact on individuals and the bottom line.

## **H. Procurement and Supply Chain**

Use public procurement policy to encourage large firms to share best practice on equity with SMEs through supply chains. Incentivise (not penalise) SMEs through the procurement process by ensuring any requirements are proportionate for the size of business.

## **I. Champion Business Champions**

Publicly recognise business champions of workplace equity. Offer match funding to those employers who want to try innovative ways of supporting diverse groups into the workplace. Encourage large firms to maintain momentum in the face of pressure from international stakeholders.

## **J. Embed Equity in Education and Training**

Build workplace equity awareness into the curriculum and all publicly funded post-16 education and training at all skill levels, including management training, apprenticeship standards and technical and vocational qualifications.

## **K. Accessible Buildings**

Help SMEs who feel constrained in rented business premises to remove physical barriers that hold back progress on workplace equity.

## **L. Improve Careers Information, Advice and Guidance**

Invest more in careers information, advice and guidance for all age groups. Raise awareness of employment opportunities in sectors where there are pay gaps for underrepresented groups. Incentivise employers to engage with careers programmes, including in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) environment.



## 2. DIVERSE LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

### Employers

#### A. Lead the Change

Establish and promote the business case for change and invest for the long term. Build workplace equity into business strategy and put in place a plan to diversify at the decision-making level. Monitor diversity statistics in your leadership team and report internally (and publicly where appropriate), putting in place action plans to address any gaps. Take low cost, deliberate steps to create a workplace culture where everyone can achieve their full potential and individuals get the support they need to thrive in the business. Maintain the commitment and engagement of senior managers and ensure that all teams throughout the business are bought in. Make clear that equity isn't just an HR issue, but a responsibility for all leaders and employees from the moment they become an employee and throughout their career.

#### B. Trained and Diverse Managers

Train managers to ensure they have the skills, knowledge and confidence to create, engage and effectively manage diverse and hybrid teams. Empower them to identify and introduce the changes needed to give individuals and groups the support they need, tackle discriminatory behaviour and build an inclusive workplace culture. Consciously remove any barriers to progression to ensure you are not overlooking management talent.



### **C. Measure and Monitor**

Adopt workplace practices that boost opportunity for people and deliver a return on investment. Routinely gather data on your workforce and benchmark to assess the impact of interventions and working practices and enable managers to identify and address any issues.

### **D. Seek Peer Support**

Information, toolkits and peer support is available to help employers take the first proactive steps and drive continuous improvement. Engage with Chambers and other business networks to access information, guidance, training and best practice. Use these networks to discuss and address challenges in relation to workplace equity.



### 3. IMPROVE ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

#### Employers

##### **A. Modernise Recruitment Strategies**

Ensure recruitment practices do not inadvertently deter talented individuals from applying for job vacancies or prevent them from performing at their best at interviews. Adopt best practice on interview techniques to attract a diverse range of candidates, widen access for under-represented groups and connect the business to new talent pools. Consider redesign of jobs, flexible working patterns and ways to eliminate bias.

##### **B. Proactively Seek Out Diverse Talent**

Work with Job Centres, local and national charities, specialist recruitment businesses and other sources of advice and support across communities. Use social media and other avenues where appropriate. Promote your training and employment opportunities to candidates who might otherwise not see themselves fitting into your business or sector.

##### **C. Make a Statement**

Publicly demonstrate commitment to workplace equity, for example by becoming a Disability Confident employer and displaying the 'Happy To Talk Flexible Working' in your job advertisements.

## Government

### D. Skills England

Through the work of Skills England<sup>viii</sup>, build principles of fairness and equity into the new national framework for skills, education and employment.

### E. Digital Exclusion

To help SMEs reach diverse talent pools, develop a targeted programme to enhance access to job advertisements and applications for individuals experiencing digital poverty or with digital access needs. Explore social tariffs for lower income areas, to enable more people to access broadband services, improve access to technology, and enable access to flexible working.



## 4. HELP PEOPLE STAY AND PROGRESS IN WORK

### Government

#### **A. Promote Workplace Health**

Remove the tax on private medical insurance and health cash schemes. This will help SMEs maintain good health for everyone in the workplace and support people with ill health to access jobs.

#### **B. Funding for Adaptations**

Boost resources and capacity for the Access to Work scheme to support individuals and SME employers. This will help ensure people get the support they need more quickly for adjustments that help them to access, remain and progress in work.

#### **C. Access To Childcare**

Undertake a root and branch review of childcare provision to reduce barriers to childcare for working families in all parts of the UK. Ensure parents can access, remain and progress in employment. Ensure the policy to extend early years childcare provision is properly funded. Address issues in the sector, including staff pay and recruitment, training, progression and retention. Expand subsidised wraparound childcare support. Raise awareness of childcare support available on Universal Credit to help people make informed choices related to their careers. Consider the introduction of a new payment system to replace the upfront payment process and reduce the immediate outlay costs for working parents on universal credit. Launch a review of paternity leave so more men can pick up childcare duties without a financial penalty.

## Employers

### **D. Flexible Workplaces**

Provide the broadest range of flexible working solutions, wherever possible, to help employees balance work and learning with health, caring responsibilities and other commitments.

### **E. Retaining Skills**

To retain skills, understand what is driving the behaviour of underrepresented groups in your workplace. Assess and gather data on the drivers of employee turnover, including employee benefits, development opportunities and progression.



## 5. THE FUTURE WORKFORCE

### Government

#### A. Preparing People For The World Of Work

Ensure access to high quality careers information, advice and guidance for young people in education and adults looking to enter, remain and progress in work.

Use the curriculum review to ensure careers IAG is a mainstream priority for every school, college and university, embedded in school life. Provide practical support for SMEs to help them engage with schools and provide work experience opportunities.

Integrate adult employment support and careers IAG through job centres and place-based initiatives.

#### B. Progression Pathways

Ensure education providers are required and supported to promote technical and vocational routes on a par with traditional academic routes to employment.

The remit of Skills England should include a requirement to ensure there are progression pathways, supported by evidence, from level 2 to level 5 and above and including apprenticeships. These pathways must be available to people in local communities in all parts of the country. This will help learners of underrepresented groups to gain the skills they need to progress in work, whatever their life experience and circumstances.

## **C. Adoption of New Technologies**

Technology has the potential to dismantle workplace barriers and create better opportunities for all employees. Appoint an AI Champion to help businesses understand how they can adopt new technologies such as artificial intelligence to create better outcomes, including for workplace equity. As the growth of digital technologies and AI continues to transform the workplace, support all individuals and employees to continuously upskill or retrain to adapt to these changes and thrive in work.

## **D. Business Support**

Provide practical support for SME employers to redesign jobs to support individuals. This will enable more people to utilise their skills and experience, access and remain in work, and achieve their potential.

## **Employers**

### **E. Provide Experience and Opportunities**

Engage early with schools and education providers to raise young people's awareness of, and aspiration for, careers in your business and sector.

Support new and diverse talent of all ages to join your business. Provide structured work experience and extended industry placements. Offer paid and supported internships, apprenticeships and other 'earn while you learn' opportunities. Use training and job redesign to support people in underrepresented groups to access your employment opportunities, keep developing their careers, and fulfil their potential.

# INTRODUCTION



**Gill Hunter**

Square One  
Law and Co-  
Chair of the  
Workplace  
Equity  
Commission

**Many of us are aware of the challenges that we, our family members and friends may have experienced on the journey through education and work. Of course, in life, not everyone starts from the same place, nor has the same access to opportunity, networks and ongoing good health, for example. But everyone deserves the chance to achieve their full potential in the workplace and it is a business imperative that we help to identify and remove any barriers to their full participation.**

There are times in our working lives when additional support, flexibility and understanding is needed to help us achieve our ambitions, overcome setbacks, or balance work with other commitments and circumstances. In my experience, creating an equitable workplace does not require a plethora of expensive initiatives, gimmicks, or large-scale interventions. Many SMEs have seen positive impacts by taking small, low-cost, practical steps that make a big difference to individuals and the wider workforce. What is essential, however, is an equitable workplace culture, where people feel they are included and belong, and where there is ongoing commitment by senior managers to maintaining a level playing field for everyone. In my own business, this approach has improved recruitment, retention and staff engagement, as well as delivering tangible increases in turnover and profit.

In this report, we examine the benefits of looking beyond workplace equality. Rather than ensuring everyone has the same opportunity, we focus on an equitable workplace where people get the individual support they need to play their part in the success of the business.



# THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR EQUITY IN THE WORKPLACE



**Vicky Pryce**  
Chair of the  
BCC Economic  
Advisory  
Council

**Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the beating heart of our economy. The 5.5m SMEs across the UK account for 99.9% of private sector businesses and employ 16.7 million people.**

Recent years have been particularly tough for these firms. The pandemic, global conflicts and challenging economic conditions here at home, have created a difficult business environment. But there's a renewed sense of optimism, with recent surveys by the British Chambers of Commerce showing a rise in business confidence among SMEs over the last 12 months<sup>ix</sup>.

What SMEs do matters to the wider economy and society. But as they juggle so many daily issues, without the resources of big firms, what's the economic case for creating equitable workplaces?

For some ideas, we can turn to some of the organisations involved in our Equity Commission. Research by Youth Futures Foundation suggests tackling youth unemployment could add £69bn to the UK's GDP over the long term<sup>x</sup>. The Centre for Ageing Better calculate that closing the employment gap for older workers could generate £9bn a year for the UK economy<sup>xi</sup>. Scope say halving the disability employment gap would bring economic returns of £17bn to the UK annually.<sup>xii</sup>

When the economy grows – it's because SMEs are growing.

## ABOUT THE BCC WORKPLACE EQUITY COMMISSION

The Workplace Equity Commission was convened in September 2023 to consider the question ‘How do we help SMEs create more equitable workplaces’. The inquiry was set against the background of:

- A tight labour market where employers were struggling to fill job vacancies;
- The need to boost business productivity;
- Increasing numbers of working age people who were economically inactive; and
- Evidence of barriers for cohorts of people in getting access to jobs, in-work progression and representation in senior roles.

Our influential commissioners, listed in full at Annex 1, comprise UK and international Chamber of Commerce CEOs together with businesses and experts from across civil society.

Commissioners defined workplace equity as creating a level playing field for all individuals, recognising that we do not all start from the same place and that adjustments may be required to provide fair access to opportunity. SMEs were identified as a group who were, in general, more likely to have faced challenges in starting or progressing strategies and interventions to break down barriers and create more equitable workplaces.

To understand the perspective of employers and broader stakeholders, the Commissioners published a UK-wide Call for Evidence from October 2023 to June 2024. It sought to understand how to create a culture where leaders ensure workplace equity is at the heart of business and where they commit to the cultural change required. It asked what SMEs were doing to develop equitable workplaces, what support they needed and how Chambers, other organisations and government could help.

This report summarises the key themes, issues and opportunities raised in our discussions with Chambers, member businesses and a wide range of external organisations during the Commission's year-long UK-wide inquiry. A list of organisations and individuals who contributed can be found in Annex 2.

The report also sets out a five-point plan for employers and policy makers to shift the dial on workplace equity.



# ABOUT YOUTH FUTURES FOUNDATION

**Youth Futures Foundation is the What Works Centre for youth employment.**

It focuses on how the employment gap can be narrowed for young people facing the greatest challenges, by identifying what works and why and investing in evidence generation to improve public policy and practice.



**This report is based on extensive research with businesses of all sizes, sectors and regions across the UK. We also undertook research of working age individuals and consulted stakeholders and experts from across civil society.**

The BCC's Insights Unit led research in two main areas:

1. The BCC Workforce Survey of around 1,300 businesses in 2023 and 2024 examined the extent to which businesses were introducing specific initiatives to support underrepresented groups in the workplace.
2. Research of over 4,000 individuals was conducted ahead of International Women's Day 2023 and a follow up study with around 2,000 individuals in 2024 assessing their understanding of workplace equity and their perception and experience of accessing opportunities and progression.

A UK-wide call for evidence was opened from October 2023 to June 2024, inviting views from over 50,000 businesses and other place-based stakeholders. Around 100 employers were involved in focus groups and roundtables to explore their experience of workplace equity and the challenges and opportunities for the workplace.

In addition, over 60 pieces of evidence were submitted, either in writing or through interviews, from 40 businesses or interested stakeholders.

**More detail on the research findings is at Annex 3**



# CHAPTER 1

## THE BUSINESS IMPERATIVE AND APPETITE FOR CHANGE

Workplace equity ensures businesses have access to the best talent and that everyone in the workforce can achieve their potential. This is fundamental to businesses thriving and the economy growing.

However, research into the lived experience of individuals suggests that SME employers are overlooking and failing to retain the diverse talent and potential that's already in their workforce, as well as the skills and experience of job seekers in broader talent pools.

This comes at a time when unemployment is rising, economic inactivity in the UK has hit historic levels at 22%, and UK businesses are struggling with persistent skills shortages.

The government understands the need for change. 'Breaking down the barriers to opportunity' is one of its five central missions, but without doing more to help SMEs access talent both inside and outside the existing workforce, it will fail in that goal. The Making Work Pay proposals present an opportunity to deliver this in a balanced way, in partnership with businesses.

In March 2023, BCC surveyed 4,102 working age individuals on the impact of childcare and caring responsibilities on their career development, pay rises or promotions.<sup>xiii</sup> Two-thirds (63%) of women felt they had missed out because of childcare responsibilities, compared with 33% of male respondents. Similarly, over half (52%) of male and female respondents alike felt they had missed out because of their general non-paid caring responsibilities.

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“Business needs to measure risk and the lack of diversity should be on the risk register in relation to the bottom line”

**The Open University**

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Around three-quarters of women (74%) felt there was insufficient support in the workplace for women experiencing menopause symptoms. Of those who had experienced menopause, a third (33%) felt that it had impacted on their career progression, pay rises and promotion.

When asked what employers could do to help them, people wanted the ability to work flexibly and to take time off for urgent caring needs without this impacting on career progression. Respondents felt employers needed to be more understanding of this.

In March 2024, BCC undertook a further survey of 2041 working age adults to understand their perception of fairness in the workplace.<sup>xiv</sup> A quarter (25%) of people disagreed that all colleagues had access to the same opportunities, resources and treatment, while 28% felt they had unfairly missed out on a workplace opportunity within their organisation for which they were suitably qualified. Around a third (31%) felt that their abilities were not being utilised to their full potential by their current employer.

It is also important to understand how these issues may impact the future of talent. The 2021 census<sup>xv</sup> shows that a quarter of England's future workforce will soon come from an ethnic minority background. However, we know that too many ethnically minoritised people are facing significant barriers to employment<sup>xi</sup>.

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“When you employ over 100 people you start to create a community in the workplace, and communities should be diverse – employers have a responsibility to make them so”

**SME  
Manufacturing  
Firm - North  
East England**

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Many good employers of all sizes are leading the way in addressing these issues, demonstrating best practice and boosting business performance as a result. Government and business need to do more to identify and scale up this best practice and help SMEs act on workplace equity. This will require practical support and guidance on evidence-based interventions that both improve opportunities for individuals and demonstrate a tangible return on business investment.

## ACCESS TO SKILLS

Skills shortages are a key driver for change with 74% of businesses<sup>xvi</sup> struggling to attract the skilled people they need, while across the economy there are high levels of job vacancies. At the same time, there are 2.8m people who are economically inactive<sup>xvii</sup> and whose skills and potential are not accessible to businesses who need them. Many people in these circumstances would like to work and could be helped to do so with support from the government and employers.

The government could stimulate and support more innovation in filling jobs. Providing practical support to help firms redesign jobs would help people access or stay in work. By supporting people in marginalised groups to develop the skills that the economy needs, for example in high demand areas such as cyber security, data analytics and AI, it would also be supporting businesses to address skills shortages. The government could offer recognition and match funding to employers, such as tech firms, who are willing to try new ways of supporting underrepresented groups into the workplace to address skills shortages.

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“Making workforces more diverse is an economic opportunity. For example, halving the Disability Employment Gap would result in £17bn of benefit to the Treasury alone in reduced benefits payments and increased tax revenues. There are a million disabled people who want to work, are able to work, and are currently not in work.”

## Scope

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## **CULTURE AND APPETITE**

Evidence gained through our interviews, roundtables and written submissions highlights how SMEs want to provide good jobs and opportunities for local people. They are motivated to better reflect the communities in which they are based and the customers they serve. Employers understand the benefits of identifying and eliminating barriers to job access and career advancement. They are agile, open to change and can generally introduce new practices more quickly than larger firms. However, many have yet to introduce policies and strategies to achieve this outcome.

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“Equity came into focus for us through the sheer force of growing rapidly as a business: even if we didn’t always purposefully hire with intent to diversify our teams, new people joining the business diversified our work force. It is because of our colleagues’ advocacy that we realised it was a business need for us to proactively focus on this. It is now a business priority.”

### **SME- North East England**

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“The benefits of being a micro-business means we can genuinely work out what is important to each individual. Being a very small business is a massive superpower to us in this area – we have such an ability to react and be flexible.”

We recognise that if we’re going to keep and retain staff, who we’re going to spend time and money investing in, then we need to make sure we’re an organisation that reflects what their lives are like.”

### **SME - West Midlands**

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## THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

AI technology will be increasingly important in the coming years. It has the potential to increase productivity and improve workplace equity. However, SMEs are still hesitant to fully embrace new technology. Research by the BCC of over 1,000 firms shows that only 25% of businesses are currently using AI, while 43% of firms said they have no plans to use AI technology.

Used correctly, AI could help boost equity in a number of ways. For SMEs struggling with resources, it could improve both fairer recruitment and data collection. AI can also curate bespoke development support for individual staff so they can progress. However the financial cost for SMEs of adopting AI technology is significant. There are also legitimate concerns about the lack of transparency and accountability when AI is more heavily relied upon. SMEs need support to navigate the opportunities AI can bring to improve workplace equity.

Businesses also need access to reliable technology infrastructure, namely fast broadband and mobile connectivity. For millions of people, logging in remotely for at least some part of the working week is now routine. Flexible working helps employers unlock new and diverse talent pools and boost workplace equity.

The UK government should explore social tariffs for lower income areas, to enable more people to access broadband services. That should include small businesses. Improving access to technology can make a huge difference to improving social mobility.

## CHAPTER 2

# LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

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“For leaders to commit to the cultural change required to promote workplace equity, they must fully comprehend its significance, actively prioritise it, and possess the necessary insights to facilitate positive change.”

### Centre for Ageing Better

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Employers and broader stakeholders agreed that businesses need a diverse team. However, unless firms have fostered an equitable culture, and secured commitment from the senior leadership, they are not going to make progress. Many leaders recognised that workplace equity is not just the right thing to do but that it also leads to better business outcomes and economic success. There was also recognition that they need to drive this cultural change and ensure there is buy-in across the workforce.

The single biggest hurdle to achieving equity in the workplace for many SMEs is that they find the subject to be daunting and have thus become risk averse. Many are intimidated by the word ‘equity’ alone. They do not have the resource for a dedicated subject matter expert who can demystify it for them. They may be reluctant to employ individuals because they are not sure what considerations they have to make and because they are under the impression that it would be costly to do so”

### Employment Law Firm, South Yorkshire

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Describing the progress they had made, SMEs explained how the responsibility for achieving workplace equity rests with everyone within the organisation, whatever their role or level of responsibility. They said culture change can only be achieved when everyone is aware of their role and plays an active part in championing equity. A top-down, hierarchical approach does not work because it is not ‘owned’ by everyone.

Commissioners heard how some SMEs had brought in charities and groups to do audits of the business, rather than EDI consultants, to assess progress on workplace equity.

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“The bad news is there are no shortcuts, but the good news is that if you genuinely embrace workplace equity and properly value diversity and challenge, it becomes the culture of the organisation and self-perpetuating. Fundamentally, it is about creating a workplace where everyone can be heard, difference is valued, listening, negotiation and generosity replace rules, hierarchy and micromanagement. It’s important to accept that change is constant, and flexibility has to be demonstrated by all.”

### **Service Sector SME - Cornwall**

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Some SMEs told us that initiatives with potential had failed due to a lack of ongoing and visible leadership from senior managers. Similarly, motivation had waned when initiatives became subject to internal criticism. In some smaller businesses, managers were disappointed that their positive and well-intended initiatives had been abused by some staff, which had led to the need for additional resources for ongoing monitoring and management.

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“We set up an internal group called FED (fairness, equality and diversity) to bring employees together once a month and have candid conversations about people’s welfare - always asking ‘what more does the company need to do?’ But it started to fall apart without the CEO attending every meeting and driving it forward.”

### **SME Manufacturing Sector - North East England**

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#### **ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Diverse leadership is important, not only in realising individual potential but also in helping to shape an equitable culture. Commissioners heard of various initiatives to support people in under-represented groups to start and grow a business. For example, the independent Lilac Review is aiming to tackle the inequality faced by disabled-led businesses to boost entrepreneurial opportunity across the UK, by identifying the barriers and developing an action plan to remove them.<sup>xviii</sup>

## DATA

The importance of accurate workforce data, sector benchmarking, and local economic demographics were highlighted as crucial to better understanding and managing workplace equity. Commissioners heard that, for some businesses, a positive change in the culture had increased the number of people disclosing disabilities, gender and sexual orientation. This data had enabled SMEs to introduce relevant and targeted programmes that were impactful and beneficial. However, BCC research revealed that less than half of SMEs have yet introduced any specific policies or programmes for under-represented groups in the workplace.

For many SMEs, a lack of confidence, time and resources has deterred them from engaging the workforce and collecting relevant data. Managers are unsure how and when to monitor diversity. Templates and frameworks may help as well as access to the demographics for their local area and customer base.

Managers also felt they needed more help in changing business culture, rather than focusing solely on diversity statistics.

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“It’s vital that companies recognise where they currently sit in terms of diversity in the workplace. For example, organisations need to be aware of their stats surrounding diversity before being able to create and implement improvement plans.”

**Information and Communications (ICT) SME - West Midlands**

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“We recognise that it’s important to track people’s experiences and to make decisions based on data, so we use surveys, recognition platforms and anonymous feedback/reporting channels to encourage our staff to share their experiences with sincerity. We also have open channels of communication for raising ideas on what we can improve, and we support and enable staff self-organisation. “

### **Service Sector SME – North East England**

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“We strongly believe that what gets measured gets done and that there should be mandatory reporting on disability pay gap. We think organisations can take a lead in this space through voluntary reporting in the meantime”

### **Scope**

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## **MANAGEMENT TRAINING**

Workplace equity relies on well-trained and confident managers, business processes, governance and recruitment practices.

In its evidence to the Commission, the CMI highlighted the importance of recruiting and developing a diverse management team and supporting individual managers to gain the skills and confidence they need. Similarly, the CIPD also pointed to useful resources to develop and manage diverse teams on their People Skills Hub.<sup>xxi</sup>



## CHALLENGES

Firms highlighted various challenges to adopting a more targeted approach to recruitment, training and progression for diverse talent groups. These included:

- Too much information, knowing what is right for the business and how to start
- A lack of time, budget and HR resource
- Understanding the terminology and fear of saying or doing the wrong thing leading to conflict, challenge and reputational and financial risk
- Gaining the trust and confidence of staff in order to collect accurate data, and overcoming individuals' reluctance to self-identify with a protected characteristic

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“It is important to value open debate and transparency. The whole issue of equity and diversity is a challenging space to get it right.”

**Technology  
Business -  
Edinburgh**

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## COMPLEXITY AND BALANCE

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“There’s a tendency when it comes to equalities to look at every different protected characteristic in a different box, with a different set of recommendations, a different initiative and different reporting. This makes it complex for SMEs to manage, particularly if they have no in-house HR resource to lead on the activity, and when often an employer is doing this off the side of the desk with many other things to manage. SMEs need support to bring this together in a simple way and to demonstrate that many of the best practice interventions are cross cutting.”

**Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce**

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Commissioners heard that many SMEs lack internal HR resources. Often, they seek advice on how to achieve the right balance between meeting the demands of the business and introducing an inclusive culture, flexibilities, adjustments, and support for diverse groups and individuals.

Firms raised concerns about the potential impact and unintended consequences of proposed legislation to widen and strengthen employment rights, such as the ability for workers to access all employment rights from their first day in work. There needs to be a proportionate approach, together with support for SMEs. There is a risk that employers could be deterred from the equity focus, resulting in fewer accessible employment opportunities being created in the UK.

SMEs lack the time and resources to go through long and complicated guidance and are looking for shorter, more targeted sources of information and advice from a central trusted source or their professional body. Firms also value opportunities for peer-to-peer learning with organisations of similar size or those within their sector. Many witnesses identified Chambers as safe spaces where firms could discuss sensitive issues and learn best practice from other firms.

## LANGUAGE MATTERS

In changing workplace culture, it is essential that SMEs are reassured around the language of equity, so that they feel confident enough to use inclusive terms without fearing that an honest mistake will lead to a hostile response. Equitable environments must also be forgiving ones, if they are to produce positive workplace cultures.

In our interviews with employers, language and terminology was raised as an important issue. For example, while firms felt they understood the terms equality, diversity and inclusion, the term ‘equity’ created confusion for some SMEs who perceived it to be relating to financial matters. The term was also poorly understood by the workforce.

BCC conducted research to test attitudes among the general population towards some of the terminology being used and their experiences with workplace equity.<sup>xxii</sup> When asked the extent to which respondents felt they understood the term ‘Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)’, 73% overall said they fully understood the term and 20% said they partially understood the term. The term ‘Workplace Equity’, however, was less understood in general. Half (50%) of respondents said they fully understood the term, 23% partially understood and a much higher proportion (11% and 17% respectively) were either aware of the term but didn’t understand what it meant or were not aware of the term.

Employers most commonly used the terms ‘common sense’, kindness’, fairness’ and ‘understanding’ when describing their approach to workplace equity. However, many also expressed concern about their lack of understanding of the ‘official’ language relating to EDI. These concerns had been exacerbated by the escalation of negative reporting on equality issues in the media, and increased politicisation of the issues.

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“The conversation around equity can often feel needlessly antagonistic when instead it should be about celebrating business as a force for good. Businesses are worrying too much about identifying the safest language to use. Instead of getting hung up on the minutiae of policy and legislation, employers should feel comfortable asking questions.

Organisations should be value-led rather than policy-led and we should judge success (when it comes to equity) less by inputs and more by outcomes. For example, does the business have a high staff turnover, a good net-promoter score and a happy workforce? These insights are more useful in gauging how well an employer is meeting the needs of its people.”

**Doncaster Chamber**

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There was a general sense in the discussions that a simplification of language was needed. When looking to develop fairer, more equitable workplaces, many employers say they lack the confidence to engage in open and constructive conversations with individuals and groups.

Views on the use of specific language and models varied among commissioners and advisers. The TUC for example, stressed the importance of using the social model of disability<sup>xli</sup>, which is a way of viewing the world, developed by disabled people. However, it was noted that not everyone uses the social model and that people may talk about their impairment in other ways. This highlights the complexity of the issue for employers.

Employers will always want to get the language right and are happy to be guided in this by individuals in the workplace. Training for managers is very important. Nevertheless, the genuine fear of inadvertently getting things wrong – and the consequences to the business in doing so – remains a significant concern to employers.

Some employers expressed concern to us about the risk of being challenged for providing more support to one group or individual over another. Some highlighted the risk of financial and reputational damage if a well-intentioned comment or action were to create offence and lead to a claim at an Employment Tribunal. For firms who are unable to draw upon the advice and support of internal HR resources, these are serious concerns that can present a barrier to gaining and retaining leadership support and resources.

This could dampen employers' appetite, lead to paralysis and prevent or pause any progress on workplace equity.

Commissioners found there was not enough support for SMEs to address and overcome these concerns. Government has a leadership and brokerage role to play to work with business on the levers that can help move us forward.

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“SMEs need help in taking away the fear of getting it wrong. I'm not sure how. In HR we all fear a discrimination claim because of the potential unlimited awards associated with them. We have held back from certain initiatives for fear that a rogue manager (despite their training) may land us in a claim situation.”

### **SME - Lancashire**

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## CHAPTER 3

# IMPROVING ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

### RECRUITMENT

In the responses to the Commission's Call For Evidence, there was widespread agreement that equitable and fair recruitment practices are critical to changing the demographics of workplaces. SMEs understand the need to modernise their staff recruitment and development practices to fill job vacancies. Many employers said they recognise the business sense of investing in recruitment and development of people from more diverse talent pools, in order to better reflect the diversity of their local community, supplier and customer base.

There was also recognition that individuals of all ages and backgrounds can face significant challenges to accessing, remaining and progressing in work.

For example, ageism in recruitment is experienced by both older and younger workers. A survey conducted by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) in 2022<sup>xxiii</sup> found that more than 1 in 3 workers aged 50-69 felt disadvantaged applying for jobs because of their age. Workers in this age group report being directly told 'you're a little too experienced' or even '[we're] looking for someone younger'.

Similarly, a report by Youth Futures Foundation found that 48% of young people have experienced prejudice or discrimination when seeking to enter the workplace.<sup>xxiv</sup> Compared to other forms of discrimination, ethnic discrimination was seen as the biggest barrier for young people joining the workforce. With almost over a quarter of the UK's population below aged 25 now from an ethnic minority background, discrimination will impact on Britain's current and future workforce.

At the same time, there are also changes happening in older age groups. The number of people aged 60 and over from a minoritised ethnic background increased by 80% between the 2011 and 2021 census<sup>xxv</sup>. Today, around 1 in 5 of the whole population of England and Wales is from a minoritised ethnic background. Measures to improve age inclusivity, racial justice and achieve broader equity in the workplace are, therefore, mutually supportive.

Firms cited other factors such as employee disability, ill health, menopause, childcare and caring responsibilities, as issues that they often need to consider at the recruitment stage and which may require greater flexibility in job design, working hours and patterns, or adjustments to the working environment. Modernising recruitment and working practices to accommodate these needs was recognised as being beneficial for a wide range of groups and individuals in the workplace.

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) told us “We would also like to see the government introduce a Help to Hire scheme to support SMEs to address biases in hiring and progression, and to empower them to harness the potential of under-represented groups.”

The CMI 2020 report ‘Management Transformed’<sup>xxvi</sup> focuses on inclusive workplaces. The organisation also offers a range of diversity and inclusion resources for its members. Meanwhile the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) also offer free resources<sup>xxvii</sup>.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) has a range of guidance and advice<sup>xxviii</sup> on ‘workplace equality’ freely available online.



Employers in engineering, manufacturing and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sectors highlighted the difficulties they had in recruiting and promoting women into senior roles. They felt that the education and careers system could do more to encourage women, minoritised ethnic people and people from disadvantaged backgrounds to aspire to work in a broader range of industries and professions. There was recognition that the employer has a key role to play in engaging with schools and colleges to raise awareness of careers, and to offer work experience to those who may not have thought such opportunities would be open to them.

The Careers & Enterprise Company, and many Chambers of Commerce, provide practical support for local businesses to engage with young people and education leaders.

Many firms we heard from had introduced well planned and structured changes to recruitment to improve equity. We heard examples of low-cost interventions by SMEs that had brought about positive change, including ‘blind’ recruitment which removes personal details during the sifting stage and by moving away from a strict focus on academic requirements. Some firms were supporting neurodiverse candidates to overcome difficulties at interview by making the questions available to them in advance, introducing video interviews, walking interviews, and other measures to ensure people could perform at their best at the recruitment stage. Others had introduced ‘diverse interview and hiring communities’ rather than relying on a single hiring manager and using software to anonymise candidate information at shortlisting to help eliminate early-stage bias.

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“We have a strong belief that change happens through recruitment and by creating a diverse workforce that breathes the values you are living by, strengthened by those with real, lived experience.”

**Member of  
North East  
Chamber of  
Commerce**

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SMEs told us these were quick wins that most employers could introduce.

Other examples considered as best practice and cited by SME's included:

- Being flexible on the timing or format of interviews, or conducting online interviews, to support working parents, carers and candidates facing disability or mobility barriers.
- Explicitly stating where roles are flexible to encourage applications from those who require it.
- Removing information that identifies a candidate's age.
- Using the 'Disability Confident' and 'Happy to Work Flexibly' logos and strapline on recruitment adverts and utilising resources in the Social Mobility Index.
- Using application questions, without the need for CVs and covering letters.
- Removing the requirement for formal qualifications - unless this is essential for the role - and looking instead for an individual's attitude and how their potential can be developed through training and mentoring.
- Job descriptions that only list what is needed for the role.
- Seeking help on job design - with elements added or removed to best use the skills and experience of the candidate.

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“People are wrongly judged on their CVs, academic abilities and qualifications. Instead, we need to look at experience and skills.”

**Training  
Provider,  
Cambridgeshire**

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SMEs predominantly use their website and traditional advertising platforms for job advertisements, preferring to recruit from their local community. Many rely on recruitment agencies to hire staff and the service provider's ability to source and introduce diverse candidates. There was some evidence of firms engaging specialist recruitment agencies, charities or other organisations to target diverse talent pools in their local community, including ex-offenders and armed forces personnel and their families. However, this was not common practice, and it represents a missed opportunity that place-based business networks, such as Chambers of commerce, can help to address. For example, the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce is very proactive in promoting good leadership and people management in smaller businesses and in sharing good practice on attracting, retaining and developing diverse talent through its Growth Through People Campaign.<sup>xxix</sup>

During a business roundtable discussion held by Cambridgeshire Chamber of Commerce, participants identified the need to connect engaged but overlooked candidates with businesses who need their skills. They noted that traditional methods of recruitment are not always suitable for improving diversity.

The Commission heard concerns from employers who believe their industries are less attractive to a diverse workforce. Firms in the hospitality sector, for example, said jobs that require shift work and anti-social hours can often be difficult for people with families or caring responsibilities. Many firms had introduced greater flexibilities in working patterns to help attract and retain people.



Travel expenses were also cited as a barrier to employment for people and it was suggested that more investment in affordable public transport was needed, together with discounted fares.

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“Employers need to send a strong message to agencies that they want a more diverse workforce and won’t accept shortlists for roles that do not evidence this. Agencies need to try different approaches to reach these marginalised groups and adopt approaches to remove unconscious bias. Sharing good practice and learnings will also help. We have been advocating that the government backs a portal with content from government, businesses who are already leading on this, charities and other trusted sources.”

## Scope

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Recruiting young people was cited by many SMEs as an example of how to diversify their workforce. Some referred to their engagement with primary and secondary school students to showcase the career opportunities available in their business and sector.

There were examples of manufacturing, tech based and professional firms that had sought to engage with specific cohorts of female students, students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds and young people in schools located in areas of deprivation. However, some firms felt frustrated by the barriers they experienced and suggested that more could be done by schools to positively engage with employers and to promote technical and vocational routes to employment on a par with traditional academic routes. Some suggested there was a need to increase diversity in the workforce of many educational institutions.

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“Pipeline building is crucial – letting the young people of today know what the workplace looks like – then we’ll have workforces that are more equitable. Kids will start to recognise they can follow certain careers.”

### **Communications SME – North East England**

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It was noted that only 35% of 18-year-olds in the UK entered university in 2023<sup>xxx</sup> and that therefore employers, colleges and independent training providers needed to work together to support the remaining 65% of young people to access technical and vocational routes to employment. This included providing high quality, structured work experience and extended industry placements.

Employers, in their evidence, highlighted the need for improved collaboration between educational institutions and industries. The aim was to identify medium to long term skill needs in local economies and how these can be linked to careers IAG.

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“I work closely with my local secondary school as an Enterprise Advisor, attending career days, open evenings and offering short periods of work experience. By working directly with students, the business gets access to new talent as we give young people a better sense of the career options in the electrical industry and how school helps them into work. Some of the students will go on to apply for our short work experience or apprenticeship positions in the future.”

“Providing periods of short work experience saves our business time, energy and costs in the long-term. We get first-hand experience of who has the right work ethic and in-work communication skills to fit in with our team, and the young people get a real taste of working in an electrical role.”

### **Electrical contractor SME, East Sussex**

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A BCC evaluation of Chamber-led Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)<sup>xxxi</sup> showed that over 65,000 employers had engaged with these new partnerships in the first year. LSIPs help ensure local careers IAG and training provision for people of all ages is aligned with employment opportunities and skills needs.

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“The opportunities are immense, but there is a tendency to link innovation with academic high-fliers and see the universities as the source of innovators, entrepreneurs and talent (although conversely the tech industries do seem to favour self-taught talent). Given over half of the learners are not on a path to university education, this section of the young digital innate need to be given greater scope to achieve and in doing so expand the pool of prospective employees.”

### **Digital SME - West Midlands**

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Some SME employers had invested in apprenticeships as a route to providing jobs with training opportunities for young people in under-represented groups. Some used apprenticeships to help older workers and those returning from a career break to retrain ‘on the job’.

However, BCC’s Workforce Survey 2024<sup>xxxii</sup> revealed that, over the next 12 months, only 20% of employers planned to use apprenticeships at levels 2 and 3 and 13% at levels 4 and above. For those not planning to offer apprenticeships, around a quarter of firms said there was a lack of candidates or that they did not have the capacity to support apprentices in the business. This suggests that while apprenticeships can help to increase access to work and progression for diverse groups, more support is needed to enable SMEs to fully utilise the opportunity. The Youth Futures Toolkit Unwrapped series is a useful resource to help employers transform the lives of young people through in-work training.<sup>xlii</sup>



Increasing SME understanding of apprenticeships, minimising bureaucracy in the system and providing financial support to cover the additional costs of employing a young apprentice, would help remove barriers for some firms. As such, we welcome the announcement in the King's Speech that the Apprenticeship Levy will be turned into a wider Growth and Skills Levy, with a broader range of courses eligible for funding. This will help SMEs design a wider range of programmes to suit the needs of individuals and the business.

**Youth Futures  
Foundation Youth  
Employment Toolkit<sup>xxxiii</sup>  
launched in 2023 suggests that,  
on average, for every 10 young  
people who can take part in an  
apprenticeship as a targeted youth  
employment intervention, one will  
get a job who wouldn't have done  
so without the intervention.**

## DEVOLUTION

With more decision making now devolved across the UK, clear examples of good practice have emerged in the context of workplace equity. In Wales, for example, the Future Generations Act places a legal duty on public bodies to assess the impact of their decisions on people, environment, culture and communities. The Act outlines goals, including ‘a more equal Wales’, meaning ‘a society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstance (including their socio-economic circumstances)’.

While the Welsh legislation does not apply to the private sector many companies have used it as a framework for improving workplace equity. A ‘Future Proofing Toolkit’<sup>xxxiv</sup> is available for firms in Wales, operated by Business Wales, that offers seven well-being goals as ‘useful principles for creating stronger, robust businesses’. The Welsh case is a clear example of government creating a framework which inspires businesses to make a difference.

Across England, many combined authorities and metro mayors have introduced Good Employment Charters or Pledges. They are voluntary membership and assessment schemes to help employers raise standards, above the required legislation. Notable examples include the Good Employment Charters in Manchester and the West of England, and the London Mayor’s Good Work Standard. In London, over 150 organisations are part of the scheme meaning 260,000 people now work for a Good Standard employer.

The Commission heard evidence from the team behind the North East Combined Authority Good Work Pledge which includes a focus on ‘developing a balanced workforce’. 150 accredited organisations have signed up to the scheme, demonstrating their commitment to promoting workplace equality and diversity.

Improving social mobility is often well tackled by local projects. Backed by the Business West Chamber, the OurCity2030 project in Bristol has a bold vision to support at least one person from each inner-city household to achieve a median salary (£30,353) by 2030 by providing pathways into different employment sectors.

In its pilot phase, nearly 230 young people have been supported. It now aims to support 600 young people every year, with an end goal of supporting 2,030 people into median income employment over the next six years.

It is clear that locally based projects have huge potential to support and develop equitable workplaces. It is important that devolved administrations and regional authorities utilise and share best practice, while having the flexibility to respond to specific needs in the areas.

In England, proposals to simplify and devolve adult education budgets to mayoral combined authorities are, therefore, welcomed. This will empower local leaders to drive economic opportunity and work in partnership with businesses and colleges to deliver employment opportunities.

# CHAPTER 4

## RETAINING AND PROGRESSING TALENT

### RETENTION

SMEs feel they know their employees well, developing and maintaining good working relationships. Therefore, they are willing to provide flexibility and support, wherever possible, when an individual's health needs or circumstances change, to help them stay in work. There was recognition that employees who feel valued and given access to opportunity are likely to be more engaged, productive, supportive and loyal to their employer. Employers that offered such support said they had experienced reduced absenteeism and staff turnover as a result.

Anecdotal evidence from medium sized firms pointed to successful interventions that support progression for under-represented groups. This includes coaching and mentoring, as well as steps to ensure gender and ethnicity balance at senior levels. These firms had also taken steps to gather and monitor data in these areas to take an evidence led approach.

Private health insurance, health cash plans and wellbeing initiatives are used by employers to ensure the workforce has access to high quality preventative and responsive health support. Employers said this helped them support people who experienced illness or disability to remain in work, or return to work faster, and to prevent people from falling into long term absence. All of which results in the loss of skills and experience from the business.

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“Recruitment is competitive, and retention of team members is critical. I needed to create a team that was inclusive and celebrated - and where individuals were supported.”

**Service Sector  
Business - North  
East England**

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## CHILDCARE

Businesses are aware that skilled people are being forced to leave the workforce because of the cost and availability of care or childcare. While some firms had introduced on-site childcare to support parents, this was felt to be less feasible for smaller firms.

The responsibility for childcare, caring responsibilities and other family issues tends to fall disproportionately onto women across all the protected characteristics as currently very few working men take up the option of parental leave. This can present a major barrier to women accessing work and then remaining and progressing. This is central to addressing workplace equity.

While the new, enhanced entitlement to free childcare placements is welcome, it still does not go far enough and, in many cases, is not accessible to all families who need it. More capacity is needed in the childcare sector, requiring a focus on recruitment and retention, training, pay and benefits and progression opportunities.

# 10%

of firms responding to the BCC Workforce Survey 2023 said skilled people had left the business because of childcare or caring commitments.

# 2/3

of women feel they have missed out on career progression due to childcare responsibilities, according to a BCC survey of more than 4,100 respondents.

The Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry has worked with a large employer to develop a group-solution for SMEs which would enable them to offer affordable childcare solutions in or near their business premises.

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“We offer part-time and work-from-home options for those with childcare commitments and long-term medical issues. We do not have any people working from home full time as it does not work for our collaborative projects and building our workplace culture.”

**SME - Liverpool City Region**

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## **FUNDING FOR WORKPLACE ADAPTATIONS**

Some firms have sought help from the DWP ‘Access To Work’ team, both at the recruitment stage and when employees have developed an illness or disability. Employers valued the input from this team but felt that support available was slow and limited and that the service should be better resourced to help employers and individuals more quickly.

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“The Access to Work programme needs to be improved. We have contact with the Access to Work team at our local Job Centre Plus, but it’s really difficult to schedule time with them. They are overworked and understaffed.”

**Member of Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce**

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## PHYSICAL SPACES

Some firms that rent a commercial workspace feel constrained in making their buildings fully accessible to all employees. They suggested landlords should be required, and have access to financial support, to make the necessary improvements that SME tenants need to support their diverse workforce.

## IN-WORK PROGRESSION

SMEs are generally less confident about introducing initiatives to proactively identify and remove barriers to in-work progression for employees from under-represented groups, which means they can miss out on valuable skills, talent and potential. Around two thirds of firms surveyed by BCC and the Open University did not have a recruitment, retention or training initiative specifically for underrepresented groups.<sup>xxxv</sup>

## TRAINING

In our interviews, most employers regarded training and upskilling staff as the main route to in-work progression. However, there is evidence that too few managers are proactively planning to address their skills needs and less than a fifth of firms have implemented a written training plan. Moreover, employer investment in training has declined over the past ten years.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Without better planning and more investment in skills, SMEs are unlikely to shift the dial on workplace equity.

## WORKPLACE HEALTH

Employers expressed concern about people being forced to leave the workforce because of ill-health and the impact this has on the retention of skills. There was also concern about the increasing numbers of people who are economically inactive because of health issues, which reduces employers' access to talent. Supporting employers to provide workplace solutions would not only help people to remain in work but would also help the government in its aim to achieve an 80% employment rate.

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“Government should provide financial incentives/support for investing in equity. It is incredibly expensive to invest equitably in the workplace, for example policy that allows leave and medical support for people, including mental health support. This is particularly difficult for SMEs to find financially viable methods so providing financial incentives/support would help them accelerate the work.”

### **SME software business, North East England**

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The BCC's People and Work Report recognised the important role that business must play in enabling their employees to live healthy working lives by offering workplace health support services. However, BCC's 2022 Workforce Survey found that only around a third of employers surveyed offered occupational health support to their people. A similar proportion, 30%, said they don't offer any well-being programmes at all.



To help businesses support people experiencing ill health to access employment, stay in work, and return to work more quickly, we recommend targeting tax incentives at both employers and employees to lower the cost of workplace health and wellbeing solutions. This should be in addition to broader initiatives and incentives to boost access to quality occupational health capacity in the market.



## CHAPTER 5

# MINORITISED COMMUNITIES AND INTERSECTIONAL FACTORS

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“I think that young minoritised people don’t feel comfortable raising issues at work because they are worried that it will affect their position in the company, how their boss sees them and their ability to progress. Employers need to create spaces that feel safe so that young people feel that what they are saying will be heard and taken seriously.”

**Olivia, Future Voices Group Ambassador,  
Youth Futures**

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Employers reported that many of the most impactful workplace equity interventions are those that focus on the needs of individuals, recognising that people may experience more than one set of challenges and disadvantages arising from any number of protected characteristics and personal circumstances. Businesses also recognise that an individual’s needs are likely to evolve over time as they journey through working life and that maintaining a flexible and supportive approach is essential.

Supporting young people joining the workforce, and in their ongoing career development, was an issue highlighted by employers and other stakeholders as being of particular importance, as highlighted earlier in our report in relation to recruitment practices. The need to ensure fairness of access for minoritised and underrepresented groups to all work experience opportunities was acknowledged, including engagement in targeted initiatives to attract them into high earning sectors.

For example, in its evidence, the Association for Graduate Careers Advisory Services advocated stronger partnerships between higher education and employers to create tailored, inclusive opportunities for training and recruitment of neurodiverse graduates. It said the perception of SMEs as being non-diverse may limit the pool of candidates who feel that working for an SME is a viable option for them.

Similarly, the TUC in its evidence highlighted the continued barriers faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. In its 2023 report, the organisation said there needed to be renewed urgency to tackle LGBTQ+ discrimination and inequality in the workplace.<sup>xxxvii</sup> It sets out recommendations for employers, including the need to ensure that workplace policies translate into an inclusive culture.

Supporting employers to work with education institutions, Job Centres, Career Hubs, Youth Hubs, charities and local support organisations would also be helpful. It could provide opportunities for people not in education, employment or training to develop the skills and experience they need to enter the workplace and thrive in good, secure work.

The 10,000 Interns Foundation<sup>xxxviii</sup> has created 7,000 paid internships in 4 years, with 700 organisations, in over 35 different sectors all across the UK, and have also trained a further 45K plus applicants.

Other interventions that benefit young people can also support broader talent pools in the workforce, such as:

- Recognition of the impact on individuals of caring responsibilities, experience, confidence and mental health, and there being employer willingness to provide additional adjustments, patience, training, help and support in the workplace.
- Training line managers to ensure they have the skills and confidence to engage an intergenerational workforce, foster a culture of inclusion, and identify and eliminate unconscious bias, harassment and discrimination.
- Supporting in-work progression and career development through ongoing training and experience, coaching and mentoring, and support to develop networks and social capital.

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“I never thought I would get out of the place that I came from, even after university, now I have a full-time role at a financial services firm, if I hadn’t secured a paid internship through the 10,000 Black Interns programme this never would’ve happened. I tried to apply directly but I didn’t even hear back from anyone!”

**10,000 Interns Foundation member**

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## DISCRIMINATION

Prejudice and discrimination can impact on people of all ages in the workforce and the Commission heard evidence that young people and older workers, in particular, had experienced barriers to entering, progressing and thriving at work. It was felt that, to address the issue, employers needed to take a zero-tolerance approach to tackling non-inclusive behaviour and that the government should look at legislation to close pay gaps for all underrepresented groups.

Compared to other forms of discrimination, ethnic discrimination is seen by young people as the biggest barrier to entering the workforce.<sup>xxxix</sup> The latest Census data shows almost a quarter of the UK's population below the age of 25 are now from an ethnic minority background and, therefore, discrimination of this group will have a detrimental impact on the current and future workforce and the UK economy.

Young people also report significant challenges around how businesses tackle discrimination within the workplace, with over two-thirds (69%) of young people who experience discrimination saying they haven't reported it as they felt it would make no difference, according to a study, carried out by Youth Futures Foundation<sup>xliii</sup>.

The effects of discrimination and disadvantage are compounded over the course of a career, and inequalities widen with age. Therefore, it is crucial that employers take proactive steps to support all talent pools throughout the life course.

The UK has an ageing population, and a rising state pension age. More people are facing an imperative to work for longer, and this will only intensify in the coming decades – particularly for the lowest earners. As we get older, we are more likely to face certain practical challenges. The Centre for Ageing Better highlights the impact of ill health and caring responsibilities in contributing to the problem of accessing and thriving in work. This adds weight to the case for improving workplace flexibility and health and providing health and wellbeing interventions. Alongside these practical issues, ageism and discriminatory attitudes can present a further barrier to individuals accessing, staying and progressing in the labour market or getting back into secure work that fully utilises their skills and experience after falling out of work. BCC research (Annex 3) identified employer concerns about an ageing workforce and employers’ ability to retain or replace the skills, knowledge and experience should people choose to retire or be forced to leave through ill health or other factors. So, it is in both employers’ and individuals’ interests that we make sure nobody is shut out of work due to their age.

In discussing these issues, and other barriers that impact on opportunities for people in relation to the workplace, employers and expert advisers highlighted to Commissioners the need for government and business to work together to remove barriers and provide additional support. This includes affordable access to high quality occupational health and preventative medical support, adopting the broadest range of flexible working options and measures to remove discrimination in recruitment, training and progression.

## RESOURCES FOR EMPLOYERS

Youth Futures Foundation

<https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/our-tools/>

The Disability Confident employer scheme encourages employers to think differently about disability and take action to improve how they recruit, retain and develop disabled people.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/disability-confident-campaign>

The Age-friendly Employer Pledge is a free national programme for employers who want to improve the recruitment, retention and development of workers in their 50s and 60s.

<https://ageing-better.org.uk/age-friendly-businesses>

The Charity Stonewall provides resources for employers to unlock the potential of LGBTQ+ talent.

[www.Stonewall.org.uk/inclusiveworkplaces](http://www.Stonewall.org.uk/inclusiveworkplaces)

# CONCLUSION

**The Commission has considered workplace equity from the perspective of small and medium sized businesses and how they can be supported to remove barriers in the workplace for individuals in under-represented groups.**

Good practice is evident in many SMEs across the country, with low cost, high impact initiatives that are opening-up employment and progression opportunities for broader talent pools, helping individuals achieve their full potential in work and boosting business outcomes.

Scaling-up this activity across all sectors and regions is key to creating fairer workplaces, that not only boost opportunities for people, but also help businesses attract, retain and fully utilise the skills they need to drive better performance and growth.

The government has a key role to play in creating a positive environment, articulating the ambition and setting out a legislative framework to drive change at pace.

At the same time, there needs to be more support for employers, ensuring they have tools and confidence to try new ways of working, without fear of doing or saying the wrong thing. This requires everyone in the workplace to play their part in the change process and to be willing to adopt a continuous learning, forgiving and flexible approach.

Workplace equity makes good business sense, and our research revealed a strong appetite for businesses to understand more and start or progress on their journey.



## ANNEX 1

# COMMISSIONERS



**Sarah  
Howard**  
**MBE**  
(Co-Chair)

Sarah is the Chair of the British Chambers of Commerce and a Past President of Suffolk Chamber of Commerce. With a background in management consultancy, Sarah has worked for high profile organisations including JP Morgan and KPMG. She holds several chair roles within SMEs and chairs a large not-for-profit Leisure Trust. She is a Governor at West Suffolk College and a Member of Suffolk Academies Trust and chairs the Newmarket Charitable Foundation. She also sits on the several advisory boards focusing on skills, equity and neurodiversity and has just been appointed to the Together Coalition Steering Group .

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**Gill Hunter**  
(Co-Chair)

As an owner and the managing partner of commercial law firm, Square One Law, Gill leads a team of highly talented people committed to giving their clients the best service possible. She strongly believes that a diverse and inclusive work environment not only fosters innovation and creativity, but also drives employee satisfaction and productivity and as a result delivers great client service. In 2022, she stepped up as the vice chair of the board of trustees for Disability North and she's extremely active in supporting other communities throughout her networks.

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**Jane  
Gratton**  
(Secretary)

Jane is BCC's Deputy Director of Public Policy, leading on employment and skills, and bringing employers and policy makers together on labour market issues. Jane joined the BCC in 2017 from the Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce where she was Deputy Chief Executive. During her career Jane has led the delivery of business support programmes – including training, exporting, start up and scale-up- helping thousands of firms of all sizes and sectors.

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**Farida  
Abbas**

Farida Abbas is the CEO of the British Chamber of Commerce in Kenya. She provides leadership and strategic vision to the Chamber by identifying, evaluating, and developing trade and investment opportunities between Kenya and the United Kingdom. Farida comes from a background in sustainable business development and thrives on growing SME capacity building. Farida draws on work from her experience with the FTSE 100 companies in Kenya, including Diageo, AstraZeneca & GlaxoSmithKline.

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**Rebecca  
Achieng  
Ajulu-  
Bushell**

Rebecca is an ex-elite athlete who swam for both Great Britain and Kenya over a 10-year career. She is a former British Champion, world number one, and the first Black woman to ever swim for Great Britain. Honoured in Forbes 30 Under 30 Class of 2023 in the Social Impact category, Rebecca is also the CEO of the 10,000 Interns Foundation, a non-profit that champions underrepresented talent by creating paid internship opportunities, over 5,000 in just three years with over 700 companies all across the UK. Prior to this, she founded and ran NKG, a creative strategy and media agency focused on social change projects.

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**Iain  
Anderson**

Iain is a founding shareholder and Executive Chairman of H/Advisors Cicero. He has over 30 years' experience as a political adviser, business journalist and CEO and Board level counsel for some of the world's leading business and not for profit organisations. Iain believes passionately in workplace opportunity and is the former Chair of Stonewall – the global LGBTQ+ charity. He was appointed as the UK's first ever LGBTQ+ Business Champion by the UK government in 2021.

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**Emily  
Andrews**

Dr Emily Andrews is Deputy Director for Work at the Centre for Ageing Better – a charity pioneering ways to make ageing better for everyone. She leads the team who are working to create fair access to work for people in their 50s and 60s. She was previously Associate Director at the Institute for government, where she led work on public sector performance and productivity, and digital government.

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**Henrietta  
Brealey**

Henrietta is CEO of the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce. She also the executive lead for Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging on the GBCC board. She was appointed in 2021 at age 30, making her the youngest CEO in the organisation's 210 year history. Prior to this, Henrietta was Director of Policy & Strategic Relationships leading the GBCC's research, policy, stakeholder engagement and campaigns activity as well as management of the GBCC's top tier of membership: Patronage. In 2019 she was named as one of Birmingham Live's Brum 30 Under 30. She is a Governor and honorary fellow (2021) of University College Birmingham.

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**Paul  
Butterworth**

Paul is passionate about creating a better and fairer business landscape for all in Wales and thrives on promoting & connecting Welsh businesses. As CEO for Chambers Wales South East, South West and Mid, it is his mission to help and support Welsh businesses, promote and connect trade nationally and Internationally through our global network and be the voice with policy makers that lobbies for better skills, infrastructure improvements, jobs and economic growth in Wales. Before joining the Chamber Paul worked for 20 years in the events industry organising some of the biggest high-profile occasions.

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**Mark  
Hodgkinson**

Mark joined Scope as Chief Executive in January 2019. He spent his early career working for Sir Richard Branson, running Virgin Money. He has led businesses through major changes in many different sectors including restaurants, housing, retail, care homes, leisure, entertainment and financial services. He also spent a year working for the government to find ways to accelerate home-building in the country, leading Homes England. He co-chairs the Disability Charities Consortium (DCC) which is a coalition of many of the main disability charities in the UK.

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**Jude Kelly**

Jude Kelly is Founder and CEO of The WOW Foundation which runs WOW - Women of the World Festivals to celebrate the achievements of women and girls and confront gender injustice across the globe. Starting in London in 2010 the Festival now takes place in 30 locations across six continents. In 2018 Jude established The WOW Foundation, an independent charity dedicated to building the WOW movement as a force for positive change. Jude Kelly was the Artistic Director of Southbank Centre in London for 12 years from 2006 to 2018, where she established the WOW Festival. In February 2013 she was named as one of the 100 most powerful women in the UK by BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour.

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**Catherine  
Le Yaouanc**

Catherine has been the General Manager of the Franco-British Chamber since 1993. To mark her 20 years with the Chamber in 2013, her European peers awarded her "The Howard Rosen Special Award for Excellence". She is also a board member for the "Fondation Franco-Britannique de la Colony de Sillery".

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**Karl Lokko**

As a campaigner, Karl has spent the past decade of his life advocating for a fairer and more inclusive business ecosystem. Karl offers consultancy and advisory to high profile individuals, decision makers and corporates. His philanthropic efforts have helped raise millions for charities in the UK. A gifted orator, Karl is regularly invited to speak at corporate, public and charity events including TEDx Talks. He is also the co-founder and chairman on Black Seed, Europe's first Black fund for Black founders by Black founders.

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**Nadia  
Minors**

Nadia has over 15 years of experience within the financial and professional services. Currently, Nadia is Vice President, Compliance at Vocalink, a Mastercard company. She previously worked at HSBC in various risk and compliance leadership roles. A champion of social mobility, diversity, equity and inclusion, Nadia firmly believes that every employee deserves equal opportunities to flourish in their workplace. Nadia serves as a Board Member and Non-Executive Director of Progress Together, the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Women in Business Advisory Board and York St John University London Advisory Board. Nadia is also a mentor and public speaker.

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**Caroline  
Stevens**

Caroline Stevens is the Director of Herts Inclusive Theatre (HIT), an organisation which uses the arts as a tool for development and well-being, providing fully accessible arts activities, events, and performances across Hertfordshire. In 2022, HIT won the BCC Equality Trailblazer Award. Prior to her work with HIT, Caroline worked for several community theatre and dance companies. Caroline spent a lot of her training working with marginalised communities and specialised in working with children with autism and life-debilitating illnesses.

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**Layla Young**

Layla joined Genuit Group in November 2021, and is currently the HR Director for the Sustainable Building Solutions Business Unit. The business is growing and evolving in all areas, and their focus on providing a sustainable working environment that is diverse and inclusive is more important now than ever. With a career in generalist Human Resources spanning over 20 years, Layla's early career saw a brief period in the computer technology industry and waste management, before transitioning into manufacturing.

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## ANNEX 2

# LIST OF STAKEHOLDERS RESPONDING TO THE CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Aviva

British Chambers of Commerce  
Employment & Skills Policy  
Group

British Chambers of Commerce  
Employment Expert Panel

Business West

Cambridgeshire Chambers of  
Commerce

Catherine Hale, Disability and  
Work Research Consultant, Kings  
College

Centre for Ageing Better

Chambers Wales, South East,  
South West & Mid

Chartered Management Institute

Clear Company

Composites UK

Digital Innovators WM

Diana Crouch, Special Advisor  
to the APPG for BAME Business  
Owners

Doncaster Chamber

East Lancashire Chamber of  
Commerce

East Midlands Housing

East Village PR

Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce

Equality and Human Rights  
Commission

Fawcett Society

Glass Ceiling Change  
Management

Global Butterflies

Greater Birmingham Chambers of  
Commerce

Inclusioneering

Institute for Employment Studies

Liverpool Chamber of Commerce

London Chamber of Commerce  
and Industry

Mercy Muroki – Former Policy  
advisor in the government’s  
Equalities Hub

Neurodiversity in Business

Newcastle Building Society

North East Chamber of  
Commerce

North of Tyne Combined  
Authority

Open Cast Software

Open University

Pi-Kem

Prima Cheese

PWC

Real Ideas

RSM

Rt Hon Anneliese Dodds MP –  
Minister for Women and Equalities



## Scope

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Small Business Britain

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Somerset Chamber of Commerce

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Staci UK

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Talentheads

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TUC

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We are the Curious

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Working Families

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## ANNEX 3

# RESEARCH FINDINGS



### Workforce Survey

The BCC Insights Unit's 2024 Workforce Survey was an online survey of 1,350 organisations across the UK, conducted between April and May 2024. Respondents were drawn from all sectors and geographies of the UK and 90% were small and medium-sized (fewer than 250 employees).

The Workforce Survey shows a majority of organisations are offering various employee flexibilities and benefits that support workplace equity. The most common benefits include flexible and/or hybrid working (55%), occupational health and wellbeing services (38%) and just under one third (31%) of organisations are offering structured learning opportunities.

The survey data reveals that a significant portion of organisations (63%) do not have specific recruitment, retention, or training initiatives for the targeted groups listed, with a further 10% unsure about whether any are offered. Among those with targeted programmes, workers under 25 years old (13%), over 50 years old (12%), and disabled people (9%) are the most frequently supported groups. Other notable focuses include workers with childcare responsibilities (11%) and neurodiverse individuals (8%). However, initiatives for care leavers (3%), ex-offenders (3%), and refugees (2%) are notably sparse.

The vast majority of firms intend to use some form of training for employees. 39% intend to use coaching or mentoring, 37% short courses with certification and 31% uncertified short courses. 20% intend to use apprenticeships at Levels 2-3 and 13% at Level 4 upward.

## Research of individuals ahead of International Womens Day

In March 2023, the BCC Insights Unit surveyed 4,102 working age individuals on the impact of childcare and caring responsibilities on their career development, pay rises or promotions. Two thirds (63%) of women felt they had missed out because of childcare responsibilities, compared with 33% of male respondents. Similarly, over half (52%) of male and female respondents alike felt they had missed out because of their general non-paid caring responsibilities.

Around three quarters of women (74%) felt there was insufficient support in the workplace for women experiencing menopause symptoms. Of those who had experienced menopause, a third (33%) felt that it had impacted on their career progression, pay rises and promotion.

Of those who had not yet experienced menopause, just under two fifths (38%) anticipated that it would have a negative impact on career progression.

When asked what employers could do to help them, responses most commonly referenced:

- the ability to work flexibly without this impacting on career progression;
- and flexibility to take time off for urgent caring needs and for employers to be more understanding in these circumstances.

The research findings showed that the dial for women's equality and equity in the workplace was not moving fast enough. It also raised questions about the extent to which parents, carers and other groups in the workforce were also being held back from accessing opportunities and from reaching their full potential.

Therefore, in March 2024, BCC undertook a further survey of 2041 working age adults to understand their perception of fairness in the workplace. A quarter (25%) of people disagreed that all colleagues had access to the same opportunities, resources and treatment. 28% felt they had unfairly missed out on a workplace opportunity within their organisation for which they were suitably qualified. Around a third (31%) felt that their abilities were not being utilised to their full potential by their current employer. The majority of respondents felt they understood the terminology Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (93%) and Workplace Equity (73%).



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# NOTES





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