



Celebrating our differences with pride

Howard Freeman came to London in 1986 – six months after qualifying as a solicitor in Leeds. Here he reflects on the social mix of Freemans and how he established the practice...

Three years after arriving in London I joined a medium sized firm in Holborn and worked my way up to become a partner.

I was successful concentrating on property and business related matters after previously being trained as a litigator. When the time to change arrived in early 1995 I was keen to spread my wings and have my own practice working across a wide range of specialist areas.

I also knew I wanted immigration to be a big part of my practice having always had an interest in that area. So I suppose it was inevitable that we would need to recruit Black, Asian and Minority ethnic (BAME) staff – even if that wasn't a conscious decision at the time.

Oxford Street

Someone told me about two rooms just off Oxford Street that were on the market. They were in a dreadful state. But I liked the area so much that I didn't hesitate. I took the rooms, got them sorted out in six weeks and then opened for business. There were just three of us at the practice to begin with, and two more joined shortly afterwards.

Model for Freemans

Right from the start it was clear to me that the ethnic minority population in London and the south east was growing quickly. The recession had just ended and Britain was thought to be

a good place to come for education and work. So it was only natural that we should employ both support staff and fee earners from ethnic minority groups.

Being Jewish and therefore from an ethnic minority myself, I do not find this idea strange, but normal.

I am not interested in the colour of a person's skin or their religion when I consider applications for specific posts. Black or white, Muslim, Hindu or Jewish, British or otherwise, it does not matter. What you must have is a desire to work hard, not have money as your sole goal and be socially compassionate.

We deal with everyone here from council tenants to multi-millionaires. So if you do not have these principles as your guiding light, you will not fit in at Freemans.

Bigger premises

We've got much bigger premises now and I've never really stopped before to think about how many ethnic minority employees there are in the practice.

But I now know that out of a total staff of 36, including partners, there are 19 who are from an ethnic minority – yes, a melting pot but not a cause of difference or tension within the practice. Rather something to celebrate with pride.

Engaging with BAME firms on funding reforms

Events have been held in Manchester and London to discuss the impact of funding reforms on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) lawyers.

The diversity impact events were open to all providers – just like the main Best Value Tendering (BVT) consultation events. But they were specifically focused on identifying equality impact assessments.

They were the latest in a series to be organised by the LSC in partnership with the Law Society and the Black Solicitors' Network.

The events allowed BAME lawyers to discuss any issues flowing from the proposed tender process for criminal contracts.

A key issue for BAME lawyers is making sure that firms of all sizes will be able to compete effectively under BVT in any tendering rounds.

This is important for BAME lawyers because they have been shown to be over-represented among small legal aid providers in big cities like London, Birmingham, Leicester and Bradford.

Concerned

LSC head of diversity Fay Scott said: 'These events have been an important part of the consultation process. As well as BSN we've worked with the Society of Asian Lawyers, in consultation with the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Law Society.'

'We understand BAME providers concerns that the tendering system may have a disproportionate impact on their firms.'

'We have tried to address this by carrying out impact assessments at every stage of the reform process. Also, by designing a tendering system that allows firms of varying sizes to compete in the new market environment.'

Helped

'While we appreciate the concerns of firms with BAME owners or partners, they can be reassured that they will not be disadvantaged in any way by BVT. The views of BAME providers and clients have helped develop a full equality impact assessment.'

See page 18 for details of the BVT consultation.