

WHITE PAPER



ELEVATING EQUALITY DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

INSIGHTS INTO BELONGING IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT



Learn how to communicate your EDI efforts

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INTRODUCTION

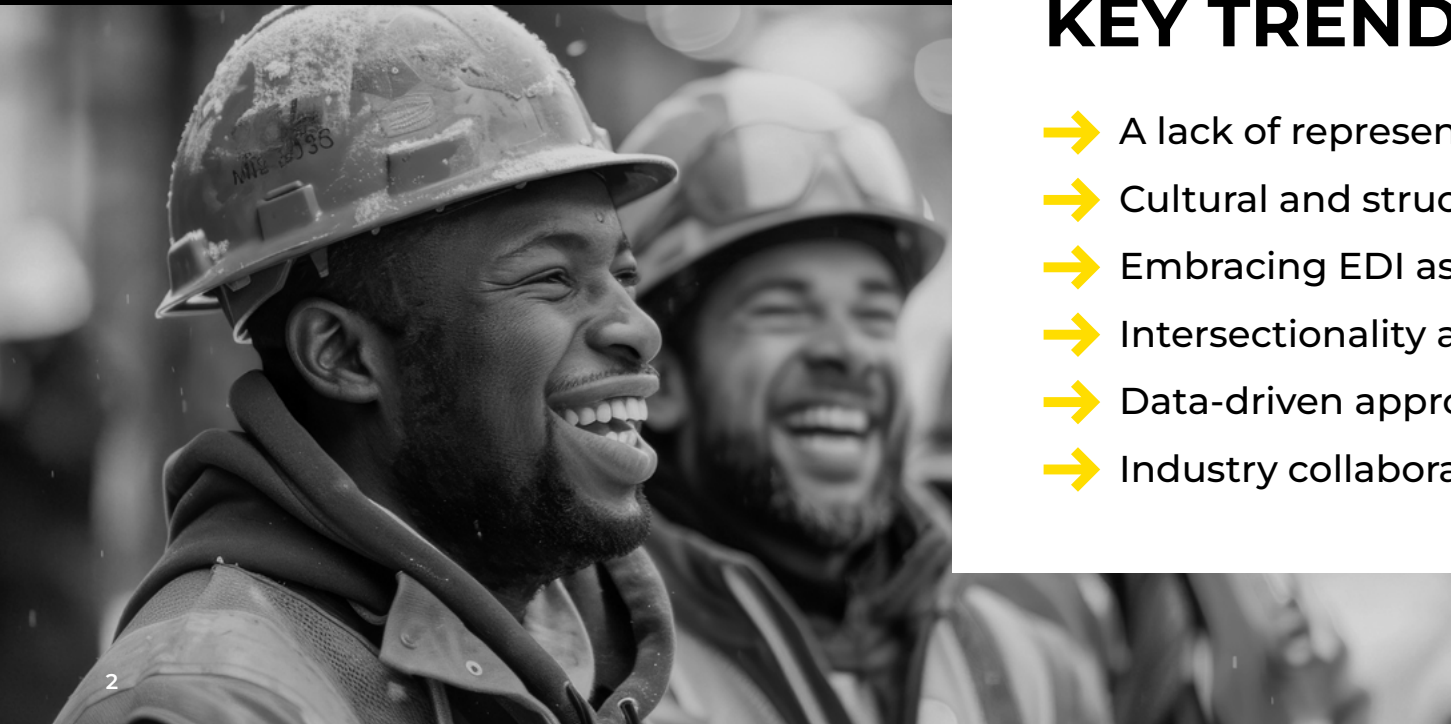
Everyone's talking about Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in construction. But with outdated norms and the ongoing skills shortage squeezing the sector, are companies struggling to make lasting change?

Drawing on insights from sector specialists, this whitepaper delves into the current landscape of EDI in construction, exploring the barriers to inclusion, the importance of systemic shifts in workplace culture, and the inevitable move away from tokenistic gestures to achieve true inclusivity. To conclude, we offer practical tips on how best to communicate your EDI efforts in a meaningful way. Our findings emphasise the delicate balance between driving real cultural change and meeting competitive business demands as organisations strive to foster a genuinely inclusive construction industry.



KEY TRENDS

- A lack of representation
- Cultural and structural barriers
- Embracing EDI as a solution to the skills shortage
- Intersectionality and broader inclusion
- Data-driven approaches to accountability
- Industry collaboration and shared learning



INDUSTRY ANALYSIS

HIGHLIGHTS

REPRESENTATION MATTERS

According to the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB), only 2% of on-site employees in UK construction are female. Craig Carney, head of people at Seddon, describes the pandemic as a setback, with many women leaving the industry. “The biggest challenge is getting more women into senior roles, especially in pre-construction, design, commercial, and construction delivery positions,” he notes. While Seddon has recruited more female apprentices in both trades and commercial roles, Carney acknowledges that “closing the gender pay gap remains a challenge.”

Vicky Brook, Chair of the Women's Leadership Group and Founder & Business Lead at P3CL, highlights the importance of representation, emphasising that “as the number of women breaking through into the sector increases and more women succeed in leadership roles, it will be a pivotal moment.” Brook believes in the power of “what you see, you can become,” and that representation creates self-belief for some and acceptance for others.

Equality diversity and inclusion consultant & race specialist, Elizabeth Cameron, stresses that “fostering inclusive leadership and creating robust support networks for underrepresented groups is essential to reduce isolation”. “Often the change that’s required is immediately seen in stark visual lack of representation, this is further backed by the aggregation of HR data systems.”

Awareness of neurodiversity is also growing, with companies recognising the need to support workers with ADHD, dyslexia, and autism. Carney notes that digital transformation, though challenging, has also provided new opportunities, with tailored support helping neurodiverse employees thrive.

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NAVIGATING A TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Navigating construction’s longstanding traditional culture poses significant challenges when it comes to perceptions of EDI initiatives. The sector’s deeply ingrained cultural norms often result in resistance to change, as leadership and the broader workforce may be reluctant to fully commit. This can cause further rifts within the workforce and initiatives can end up causing added isolation if not implemented correctly. Craig Carney states: “Cultural resistance and unconscious bias are significant barriers that can hinder the progress of EDI efforts in the industry.”

Leadership is crucial to overcoming these barriers. Consistent, top-level commitment to EDI is needed, but many organisations still view these efforts as a “nice-to-have” rather than a core business necessity. Marsha Ramroop, author of Building Inclusion, A Practical Guide to EDI in Architecture & Built Environment, points out that “those who lead the profession from the white, able-bodied, heteronormative male demographic rarely think inclusion work is about them, but it’s inclusion for all, or it’s not inclusion at all.”

SKILLS SHORTAGE

Construction continues to face a growing demand for talent, with an estimated need for 270,000 new employees by 2025 according to CITB figures. Yet, addressing the skills gap requires more than just recruiting - it involves creating a more inclusive workforce. According to Mark Harrison, CIOB's head of EDI transformation: "The biggest motivator [for EDI initiatives] we are currently seeing is the people shortage and skills gaps across a range of employment sectors. When you consider only 2% of on-site employees are women in the UK, and the significant under-representation of Black and Asian people, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups, there is an obvious solution to narrowing the people shortage and skills gaps."

Elizabeth Cameron points out that the motivator for EDI is not yet felt industry-wide: "Larger firms, driven by client expectations, public sector requirements, and a business case for addressing skills shortages, are leading the way. However, smaller firms and traditional site-based roles may be slower to advance, either due to cultural resistance or resource constraints."

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INTERSECTIONALITY AND BROADER INCLUSION

We are beginning to see the introduction of intersectional approaches to EDI within some forward-thinking organisations as they move beyond tokenistic initiatives.

Some organisations are starting to see the benefit of bringing everyone along on the EDI journey. Lisa Coleman - employee experience director at Baily Garner, believes that the future of effective people management relies on promoting and delivering EDI to all employees. "It's about creating working environments and cultures where every individual can feel safe, have a sense of belonging and feel empowered to achieve their full potential. We put EDI at the centre of everything we do and everyone is encouraged to bring their true selves to work."

Instead of focusing solely on individual diversity months, a number businesses are developing systemic strategies to address broader cultural, social, and operational dynamics. As Marsha Ramroop explains: "The misconceptions are usually that EDI work is to do with race, gender, sexuality and disability, it shouldn't be the sole focus or purpose of the work to learn more about these identities. The main point of EDI work should be to remove systemic issues to allow for equity, and no diversity initiative does that. Progress is made through inclusive behaviours and inclusion strategies informing policies, procedures and practices. These need to be created, implemented and enforced across how we attract a variety of people to the sector, how we treat, progress and retain them, how we create our places, products and services, and how we engage our stakeholders, users, customers, clients and communities."

Elizabeth Cameron further underscores the need to move away from tokenistic gestures towards a holistic approach to achieve systemic change, advocating for "creating inclusive cultures, improving support structures, management skills, cultural capabilities and offering greater work pattern flexibility, especially for those who are economically or socially vulnerable."

DATA-DRIVEN EDI

Companies are moving away from box-ticking to a metrics-focused approach. Craig Carney explains, “There is a growing focus on data to drive EDI strategies.” With its new system, Seddon has been able to measure the impact of recruitment events in the Midlands, where the contractor has seen “high proportions of ethnic minorities applying.” This data-driven strategy helps “identify gaps” and assess the effectiveness of EDI initiatives, enabling more informed and impactful decision-making.

Ellie Jenkins – partner of the B Corp ESG consultancy firm, Akerlof, highlights the importance of measurement to track progress and instil consistency: “Set out a roadmap and hold yourself accountable – it will mean that EDI stays at the top of the agenda even when deadlines are rolling in.” Jenkins also notes the importance of understanding internal culture and barriers through data in refining recruitment and retention strategies, making EDI efforts more targeted and effective.

Jenkins believes that organisations must set ambitious yet achievable goals, highlighting the importance of “celebrating small wins.” Progress must be measurable to maintain momentum. Without a roadmap to measure progress, EDI risks becoming superficial.



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BARRIERS TO EDI

CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL RESISTANCE

Cultural and structural resistance present a longstanding challenge to EDI in the industry, particularly given the deeply ingrained male-dominated culture in senior roles. Elizabeth Cameron emphasises that overcoming these barriers requires “systemic change through leadership commitment,” noting that sustainable progress demands strong top-level support and consistency over time.

Marsha Ramroop points out a critical issue: “If there are no experts advising leadership, then the solutions leaders are focusing on may look good, but rarely create systemic, and therefore, useful change.” Ramroop highlights that many leaders in decision-making positions across the industry may not fully understand what effective EDI requires, which can limit the impact of their initiatives.

Ellie Jenkins has experienced the challenges that limited in-house expertise can bring but has been able to turn this into a positive: “As a small organisation, we don’t have a central team of experts to call upon. We have had to learn at a pace which is right for us and have called upon outside experts to help us build our knowledge and confidence. This is great in the long term, as we are building our capability, but it can be slow and painful at times.”

Vicky Brook also discusses internalised barriers that women in construction face, pointing out that self-doubt, or “imposter syndrome,” can arise from unconscious bias, unfavourable experiences with managers, or poorly delivered appraisals. This often leads to a sense “that the business doesn’t support, respect or value its female talent” or that “there aren’t the same opportunities for women.” Brook notes that these challenges can cause women to “doubt their capabilities, not feel confident enough about themselves or their value,” ultimately affecting their visibility and advancement within the organisation.

WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

Historically set up only to accommodate white, able-bodied men, the nature of the construction environment, particularly for on-site roles, means there is a transitional process to accommodating a more diverse set of people with different needs. Craig Carney states: “There’s recognition that the industry must evolve to accommodate a more diverse workforce if it wants to attract and retain talent, and this goes for the environments in which we work.”

But recognition is only a starting point. Even today, many construction sites don’t even provide female toilets, with many doubling up as store cupboards, and others permanently locked or unavailable. We are seeing pushback from the industry through campaigns like ‘Release the bogs’ aimed at addressing exactly this, but efforts must speed up if the industry is to see meaningful change.

AN INVISIBLE WORKFORCE

The transient nature of on-site work poses unique challenges to fostering inclusivity within construction teams. Craig Carney explains: “Fostering inclusive strategies can be challenging, primarily due to the nature of on-site employment, the structure of how teams work, and the diverse needs of the workforce.” Key obstacles include limited access to resources, cultural barriers, and geographical mobility.

Seddon is responding to these challenges with a commitment to sustained inclusivity efforts. “We are focusing on investment in relationships to ensure that inclusivity strategies reach our transient workforce,” Carney notes, highlighting Seddon’s dedication to reaching all employees.

APPETITE FOR EDI

COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

Ellie Jenkins highlights the strong support for EDI at Akerlof, where it's embedded in the company culture. "We're lucky to have support from the partners at Akerlof, which has meant we have been able to bring the whole team on the journey," Jenkins explains. She sees value in collaborating with clients who prioritise EDI, describing them as companies that "believe EDI is an important issue and are trying to push to do better."

The industry is also seeing external pushes for EDI from clients, who are factoring it into project requirements. Lisa Coleman notes that at Baily Garner "clients demonstrate the importance of EDI within the questions asked at bid stage and the requirements they place on ESG commitments for their projects."

POSITIVE SHIFTS AND ONGOING CHALLENGES

On a broader scale, the CIOB's Diversity & Inclusion Charter received enthusiastic uptake across the sector. Mark Harrison reports that "280 companies have now signed up to its commitments," spanning SMEs and Tier 1 construction companies. He points to "positive shifts in the demographics—particularly a more balanced gender representation." However, he acknowledges that "progress is far too slow," emphasising the need for consistency across the industry.

Vicky Brook underscores the positive reception to her initiatives within construction and further afield: "When I launched the Women's Leadership Group in November 2023 I aimed to be action-focused and strategic-led with six objectives. Our initiatives have been well received and what is interesting is that although I set up the group to aid change in construction, the extent of out-of-sector support, contribution and interest is significant which is also very telling!"

A NEED FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

While some are seeing progress, Marsha Ramroop warns of lingering superficiality: "All too often, EDI has a tokenistic and superficial level of regard for people in construction, unless they are from an underrepresented group," noting that the burden of change often falls disproportionately on marginalised groups.

The landscape is shifting, but uneven; while some groups advance EDI initiatives with robust strategies and client support, it is clear that others still aren't doing enough. There is a vital need to alleviate the pressure often placed on marginalised groups, who are left to be the driving force for change, and this must start from the top.

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APPROACHES TO EDI

CREATING COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Ellie Jenkins emphasises the importance of collaboration as an strategy for EDI, advising organisations to “get a small group of people together who are passionate about EDI, including someone who is able to influence the board or decision makers.” Regular meetings should be scheduled to maintain momentum, with an agenda item dedicated to EDI discussions. Jenkins believes that bringing in external support can help push organisations outside their comfort zones, allowing for “uncomfortable conversations” that foster growth and learning.

JENKINS BELIEVES THAT BRINGING IN EXTERNAL SUPPORT CAN HELP PUSH ORGANISATIONS OUTSIDE THEIR COMFORT ZONES

EMBEDDING EDI INTO COMPANY CULTURE

Lisa Coleman highlights the need for continuous action through employee behaviour to cultivate an inclusive workplace. She explains that Baily Garner’s culture is reflected in its business plan and values, which serve as a “golden thread” throughout its communications and policies. This is reinforced through ongoing assessments of employee well-being and competency, ensuring that EDI is woven into the fabric of the organisation.

SETTING OUT THE BUSINESS CASE

Mark Harrison points out the importance of getting buy-in by promoting EDI as a tool that benefits everyone: “There is now plenty of research that demonstrates that more diverse and representative companies are more creative; have better staff and client satisfaction and are more profitable.” He continues: “Inclusive practices benefit everyone, including middle-aged white men. For instance, we are seeing a range of much needed initiatives in the industry aimed at supporting people with mental health issues. In addition, a more positive approach to flexible working helps all employees manage their work-life balance, regardless of gender. There are also new initiatives specifically aimed at men, such as the provision of waste bins in male toilet facilities for those who suffer from incontinence due to prostate cancer treatment. Promoting EDI is about ensuring respect for all in the workplace and is, in fact, an agenda that benefits everyone.”



ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

Marsha Ramroop emphasises the need to elevate EDI to the same level of importance as other well-established strategies, such as health and safety. She asserts that “adoption of inclusion strategies should be placed as a similar level culture shift to health and safety.” She explains that part of this may involve implementing legislative measures, sanctions, and financial incentives that clearly communicate the benefits of change.

To dismantle existing barriers, organisations must address the essential components that facilitate successful EDI integration. Marsha argues that the absence of “support, time, resource, expertise, agency and money to deliver on effective EDI all need to be addressed for the barriers to be removed.”

A JOURNEY OF CHANGE

Recognising that EDI is an ongoing transition with constant room for improvement is crucial to achieving consistency. Lisa Coleman has taken this approach at Baily Gartner stating: “EDI is increasingly important to our workforce in an ever changing and diversifying world of work. At Baily Garner, we feel that managing diversity and developing a culture of inclusion is a continuous process of improvement, not a one-off initiative.”

Craig Carney stresses that EDI should never be a “tick box exercise,” but rather an continuous journey that involves everyone in the organisation. “It’s about understanding where the challenges in the business and the wider industry are and asking ‘what can we do differently? What can we do to not only improve on those statistics but to take people on a journey?’ We have 585 employees at Seddon, that’s our army to change EDI. Make everybody responsible for it.”

LEADERSHIP ENGAGEMENT

Elizabeth Cameron has led several initiatives to enhance EDI within organisations. These have included developing KPIs to sit within EDI strategies that closely align with organisational objectives, goals and vision and ensuring greater representation of women, LGBTQ+ and ethnic minorities in positive roles shown in visual, recorded materials and intranet articles. Elizabeth has advocated for improved female-friendly toilets and Muslim women washing aids. She has implemented recruitment strategies such as blind CVs, providing reasonable adjustments and encouraging applications from all underrepresented groups including care experienced to eliminate bias. She has also promoted the allyship of male managers in EDI initiatives such as menopause emphasising their role in fostering inclusivity.

Vicky Brook also highlights the importance of including male leaders in discussions about EDI: “I deliberately target male leaders to get involved as we need them in the conversation.” She further emphasises that collaboration with local and central government is crucial for advocating legislative changes that support diversity initiatives. “Getting in front of MPs is key and I had started some work on this before the recent government change; now there is a new set of MPs to tackle. I will be looking to host a meeting with local and central government where some of Women’s Leadership Group community will join me to ensure that we get a voice and hopefully drive some change in respect of legislator consideration and maybe even some tax benefit to employers who put diversity high on their agendas.”

COMMUNICATING YOUR EDI EFFORTS

Effectively communicating an organisation's EDI efforts can be challenging, especially as so many of us are aware of the risks of 'virtue signalling' - a term used to describe individuals or businesses making empty gestures that signal support for EDI without real commitment or impact. Here, Rebecca Adams - Account director and EDI lead at Rumpus, shares her PR tips to help you meaningfully communicate your EDI work.



COLLABORATE WITH YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

It is more than likely that your stakeholders have played a significant role in establishing and achieving EDI goals. Whether they're clients, suppliers, or community organisations, their insights and experiences can help you paint a more comprehensive picture of your EDI journey so far. Adding extra voices to a news piece, blog, case study or social post enhances your message. If you have delivered effective EDI then your stakeholders should be the ideal advocates for your initiatives, adding authenticity and extending the reach of your story.

USE METRICS TO BACK UP YOUR STORIES

Data-driven EDI stories carry weight. Use metrics to showcase progress, such as changes in recruitment diversity, promotions for underrepresented groups, or participation in EDI training. For example, citing a specific percentage increases in women hired or improvements in workforce diversity over time provides tangible proof of your commitment and impact. Additionally, measuring employee sentiment can provide insights into the inclusiveness of your workplace culture. If the sentiment isn't where you want it to be then you might not be ready to shout about it.

PLATFORM YOUR DIVERSE TEAM

Your workforce should be reflective of the wider population, and your stories should do the same. We know that diverse representation is powerful, so try to show this by profiling employees from all backgrounds in various roles. Avoid tokenism by focusing on authentic, meaningful stories that platform real people and real contributions, reflecting the full spectrum of diversity in your company. This should be your approach beyond just EDI-related content; for any topic, ask yourself if there's an opportunity to feature a more diverse speaker.

ASK YOURSELF 'WHY?'

This is key for all communications, but is especially important when it comes to your EDI messages. Before sharing, ask yourself why it matters. Have you made a major difference to the lives of your employees or wider stakeholders? Or do you just want to make some noise without any substance? EDI stories can go a long way in helping to inform, educate and inspire other businesses in your sector; however, if your story doesn't involve a positive impact then it's probably going to do the reverse of your desired outcome. Asking 'why' ensures your communications are grounded in genuine impact rather than superficial promotion, allowing you to avoid virtue signalling.

REMEMBER, IT'S A JOURNEY

While you may be eager to celebrate a significant achievement, remember that any communication should be grounded in the knowledge that EDI is an ongoing process, not a one-off achievement. Even the most ethical businesses have more work to do in this area, so make sure you share both successes and challenges to demonstrate your company's commitment to continuous learning and growth. This transparency not only adds credibility to your message but also demonstrates a commitment to making long-term change.

EDI STORIES CAN GO A LONG WAY IN HELPING TO INFORM, EDUCATE AND INSPIRE OTHER BUSINESSES IN YOUR SECTOR



CONTRIBUTORS

We would like to thank each of the contributors to this paper for sharing their expertise and experience.

Read more about our contributors involved below.



REBECCA ADAMS

Account director & EDI lead at Rumpus

Rebecca has over four years' experience in successfully delivering EDI programmes to multiple organisations. Creator of Rumpus's own B LONG™ EDI programme, Rebecca has been the driving force of developing this as a meaningful service to deliver to external businesses. In 2024, Rebecca was awarded her Level 6 CMI qualification in Leading Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, providing her with Foundation Chartered Manager (fCMgr) status.



VICKY BROOK

Chair of the Women's Leadership Group, Founder & business lead at P3CL, and a chartered fellow of the CIPD

With a background in executive roles across male-dominated sectors like MMC, HR, and banking, Vicky broke into the boardroom before age 30 while raising two daughters. Her mission is to challenge biases in construction boardrooms, fostering female leadership and creating pathways to the C-suite. She leads by example, drawing from her experience as a CEO and European board leader. For over five years, Vicky has served as a non-executive director for a leading MMC provider.



ELIZABETH CAMERON

Equality, diversity, and inclusion consultant & race specialist

Elizabeth Cameron is an EDI Consultant, Trustee, mentor, and speaker with over 25 years of experience championing intersectional issues across race, gender, class, LGBTQ+, and disability rights, particularly within minority communities. Elizabeth has supported those affected by domestic and sexual violence and as a qualified practitioner (CMI, CCWE) delivers bespoke ED&I training across sectors. Former Chair of the GMCA Race Equality Panel, Elizabeth has collaborated on policy with GM Mayor Andy Burnham and serves on multiple boards, including as Regional Diversity & Inclusion lead for the Chartered Management Institute's West Midlands and North west Board (CMIWMNW). Her recent projects span organisations like Greater Manchester Police, Show Racism the Red Card, 50 50 Parliament, House of Lords and NHS.



CRAIG CARNEY

Head of people at Seddon

Craig began his career in People Management in 2007. He has worked closely with clients to manage complex employment relationship cases and provided a customer-focused HR service. In 2014, Craig joined Seddon as the Head of People, reporting to the board of directors. Leading a team across multiple regions of the UK, Craig has been responsible for shaping and supporting the HR and L&D strategy to build an engaged organisation with a culture of high performance and talent management.



LISA COLEMAN

Employee experience director at Baily Garner

Lisa is employee experience director at B Corp construction consultancy Baily Garner. Responsible for all things 'people,' Lisa joined Baily Garner as its first standalone HR Manager in 2013 and became a director in 2021. The team has expanded considerably to support the growing business, overseeing HR, L&D, facilities, front of house, and employee well-being. Lisa is keen to develop Baily Garner as an outstanding workplace where everyone feels comfortable bringing their true selves, with a particular focus on women in leadership and mental health.



ELLIE JENKINS

Partner at Akerlof

Ellie has extensive experience supporting public and private sector clients in aligning long-term strategic priorities with pragmatic solutions to enhance social, economic, and environmental value. Having steered the course of social impact initiatives for a prominent Tier One contractor over the course of a decade, Ellie has a deep understanding of social value, community engagement, and stakeholder management. As the former director of engagement and communications at the Construction Innovation Hub, Ellie contributed to key sector policies, including the Construction Playbook. She also led the development of the Value Toolkit, which facilitates improved outcomes for infrastructure investments. Currently, she collaborates with the Infrastructure Projects Authority and the Cabinet Office to embed value-led investment practices.



MARK HARRISON

Head of EDI transformation at CIOB

Mark Harrison joined CIOB as its first Head of EDI transformation in January 2021. Since that time, Mark has launched the CIOB D&I Charter for built environment employers, which has garnered over 280 signatories; established the CIOB's international EDI Conference; and created its first annual EDI Awards. Mark was also a key initiator of the ground-breaking partnership with other built environment membership institutes (ICE, RIBA, RICS, RTPI, LI) to promote EDI in the sector. He has 16 years of experience in lead EDI roles across the built environment, charity, and higher education sectors.



MARSHA RAMROOP

Author & founder director of
Unheard Voice Consultancy Ltd

Marsha Ramroop is an award-winning EDI strategist, vice chair of the Institute of Equality and Diversity Professionals, and founder of Unheard Voice Consultancy Ltd. She also serves as Executive Director of EDI for Building People CIC, advancing opportunities for underrepresented groups in the built environment. Marsha's book, *Building Inclusion: A Practical Guide to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Architecture and the Built Environment*, provides essential guidance on implementing effective EDI strategies. Drawing on global case studies and testimonials, it addresses challenges like talent retention, inclusive design, and public sector engagement with an intersectional approach, fostering genuine inclusion across the profession.

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