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LEGAL CORE

LEGAL CORE THINK TANK 2026 REPORT

Futureproofing inclusion: ensuring Minority
Ethnic talent thrives in uncertain times





Setting the scene

The third annual Legal CORE Think Tank took place on 3 February 2026, and this report aims to capture the energy, insights and practical takeaways from the event.

Legal CORE (the Legal Collaboration on Race and Ethnicity) brings together law firms committed to advancing race and ethnicity inclusion across the legal profession. The Think Tank was conceived and created by Legal CORE members as a gathering of people who want to learn from each other and make real progress.

Hosted this year in Norton Rose Fulbright's Design Lab in London, 65 attendees joined representing more than 31 law firms and organisations. This breadth of participation reflected the collective commitment within the sector to tackle shared challenges together.

Welcome: The purpose behind the day

The current Co-Chairs of Legal CORE, Nina Goswami of Clifford Chance and Louise Zekaria of Macfarlanes, opened proceedings and explained the agenda for the day.

"One of the things I value most about Legal CORE is the honesty and openness firms bring to this space - recognising that no one has all the answers, but collectively we have a huge amount of insight." Louise

Nina also took a moment to celebrate recent recognition. Legal CORE won Outstanding Collaboration at the British Legal Awards, in partnership with race equity experts Rare Technology. This is a practical and sector-wide initiative, with Legal CORE firms funding the Hemisphere Education programme, a pioneering racial literacy programme that helps schools address disparities in outcomes and experiences for pupils of Black and minority ethnic heritage. As Nina noted, it was "a brilliant reflection of the collective effort from everyone in this room."



Nina
Goswami



Louise
Zekaria

The big question



"In uncertain times, how do we ensure our minority ethnic talent can thrive across the legal profession?"

The word choice mattered. As Louise explained: "We chose the word thrive intentionally, because this is about more than retention. It's about progression, opportunity, sponsorship, equitable work allocation, belonging, confidence and long-term career sustainability."

How the day unfolded

The event was facilitated by extense, a consultancy specialising in racial equity in professional services.

extense is the author of "The 1% Study", a research report which investigated the key factors which assisted Black solicitors to reach partnership within major UK law firms. The extense team guided delegates through the day's activities with a blend of data, behavioural science and sector insight.



The carousel speakers

Three carousel speakers shared case studies on their firm's approaches to inclusion:

Speaker	Firm	Focus area
Joanna Harris & Christine John	Norton Rose Fulbright LLP	Accountability and use of technology
Freya Lipkin-Connor	Stephenson Harwood LLP	Business Services focus and qualitative data discovery
Charlotte Yirrell	Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer LLP	Targeted, equitable support



Case Study 1:

Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer's Black Talent Programme

Charlotte Yirrell, Senior Diversity & Inclusion Manager, UK & EMEA at Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer, spoke about a three-year programme specifically supporting Black trainees and associates in the UK.



Why create this programme?

The programme was created to address disproportionate representation and progression outcomes for Black talent within the firm in the UK. HSF Kramer recognised that one-off interventions were not enough; a structured, multi-year approach was needed to meaningfully shift outcomes and improve the system around Black trainees and associates.

The firm worked with the Black Employee Network (BEN) to ensure the programme responded to feedback and the lived experiences of Black colleagues. That partnership shaped both the focus and the format, so the support is grounded in what participants said they needed and is designed to drive lasting cultural and process change—not just individual development.

Crucially, this wasn't about "ticking boxes". As Charlotte emphasised, the programme is *"an investment in our future leaders and in the culture they work in."*

How it works

The programme was developed collaboratively by the BEN, the firm's UK D&I team and the Learning team, working with extense. It is shaped around the advice emerging from The 1% Study, with a multi-year design intended to build momentum and compound learning over time.

Delegates have access to coaching, peer connection and networking opportunities, alongside structured development sessions. The programme's distinctive feature is its dual-track approach: one track focuses on the participants' development, and the other focuses on the leaders and systems that shape their day-to-day experience.

Both tracks matter: developing individuals without changing leadership behaviours and workplace systems will not deliver sustained change.



The firm's UK Executive supported the programme and partners were heavily involved, attending all-partner workshops and dedicated sessions on sponsorship and supervision. This shared ownership gave the programme real traction.

What is measured

Charlotte's team tracks multiple indicators: engagement signals (attendance, coaching uptake, feedback), leadership involvement, pipeline visibility in practice-level conversations, cultural indicators from BEN feedback and listening sessions, and longer-term metrics around retention and progression as the programme matures.



Case Study 2: Norton Rose Fulbright LLP's Data-driven Accountability



Joanna Harris (Head of Responsible Business and Wellbeing, EMEAPAC) and Christine John (Head of Social Impact & Sustainability Manager, EMEAPAC) presented their firm's refreshed approach to a race and ethnicity strategy.



**NORTON ROSE
FULBRIGHT**

Learning from five years of progress

Like many firms, Norton Rose Fulbright LLP launched a race and ethnicity strategy in 2020 with clear targets. Over five years, they saw genuine progress. But as Christine explained, *"progress hasn't always been linear, nor consistent at every level."*

The new strategy is much more data-driven and insight-led, strengthening accountability and using technology in ways that simply weren't possible in 2020. Crucially, it was shaped by colleagues' lived experiences, captured through listening exercises across the firm, including with partners.

The firm has also expanded its targets to include solicitor apprentices, paralegals, business graduates and trainees - influencing the pipeline earlier and more effectively.

"As we reset our targets, we were being intentional about the areas where change is most needed, especially senior representation and key business services teams where our data shows we need to focus. The refreshed targets are stretching and transparent and designed to hold us collectively accountable."

And importantly, Christine emphasised, *"This is not a numbers exercise. It's about ensuring our firm, especially at senior levels, reflects the society we serve and enables meaningful, sustained cultural change."*

DEI action plans for every team

Joanna explained how the firm now has action plans for every team across the region. These were designed to embed inclusion and accountability at team level.

Each plan draws on real data:



Data category	What it includes
Performance data	Appraisal ratings, promotions
Financial data	Billing information, bonus allocation
Role information	Role type, performance metrics
Demographics	All mapped against gender data (ethnicity coming in Phase 2)

Team leaders work alongside their HR Business Partner to shape actions that reflect their specific data. They have also created a dashboard that overlays all this data. As Joanna explained:

"Our action plans and dashboard are designed to work hand-in-hand. One sets the direction and accountability, and the other gives leaders the real-time insight needed to take meaningful action."

Team leaders meet twice yearly with the firm's Managing Partner to report their progress on the plans.

This integrated approach -strategic target-setting combined with operational tools for day-to-day monitoring - offers a practical model for any firm wanting to move beyond aspiration to measurable accountability.



Case Study 3:

Stephenson Harwood's Business Services Listening Exercise



Freya Lipkin-Connor, D&I and Social Impact Manager at Stephenson Harwood, shared something particularly instructive: how to understand what's happening behind the numbers when the data alone isn't telling the full story.



**STEPHENSON
HARWOOD**

Spotting the amber flag

In 2021, Stephenson Harwood introduced its ethnicity action plan with targets for the partnership, trainees, and proportional retention for ethnic minority associates and business services colleagues. By 2025, those initial targets had concluded, and the firm was reviewing progress.

The data showed that a higher proportion of ethnic minority business services colleagues were leaving. But the numbers were small. Rather than moving on, the firm treated it as an "amber flag" and kept monitoring.

The team wanted to understand what was going on behind the numbers. The aim was to create space for colleagues to share their lived experiences openly.

Building internal support

Freya and her team began by speaking with Heads of Business Services (HOBS), sharing the initial data and exploring possible explanations together. This collaborative approach helped shape the options.

Working with extense, they designed an approach open to all colleagues, with separate control groups to understand the specific experiences of ethnic minority colleagues sensitively.

They met each HOBS individually, attended team meetings and spoke to people individually, to encourage participation from all levels, teams and backgrounds.

Creating safety for honest feedback

Several elements proved essential:

Safety and trust Colleagues needed confidence that their feedback would be anonymised and used constructively.

Clear communication Invitations were framed around inclusion. Participants were then grouped appropriately to ensure the right conversations happened with the right people.



Separate space for HR After inviting HR colleagues to participate, some approached to say they felt hesitant about joining as they were the HR representatives for those colleagues. The solution? A separate 1:1 session with extense so they could share their views openly.

What changed

Working in partnership with HOBS and extense, the firm co-created an action plan with concrete outcomes including:

- Launching a business services mentoring programme
- Increasing and promoting inclusive socials
- Rolling out inclusive line manager training

What's particularly noteworthy is how HOBS engaged. They became mentors themselves, championed the training, and encouraged involvement across their teams.



The three pillars:

Core discussion themes



The heart of the Think Tank lay in structured discussions around three core questions, each addressing a different aspect of minority ethnic talent retention and progression.

Pillar one: Accountability for impact

The question: *"How can we design systems, policies and processes, in the current geopolitical climate, that support accountability mechanisms, impact measurement and progress tracking for the career progression of minority ethnic talent?"*

Delegates generated ideas, then stress-tested them for feasibility.

The key emerging theme was **Work Allocation as a KPI for Supervisors:**

- Equitable work allocation is fundamental to career progression. Without the right work, people can't build the right experience, and it is harder to progress.
- Clear processes, time, and partner buy-in are all needed. Traditional firm structures don't always support KPIs.
- What would success look like? More equitable work allocation outcomes, higher engagement scores, parity in career progression, improved retention, all tracked over a three-year period.

Pillar two: Supervisor and line manager optimisation

The question: *"At the supervisor level, team and practice group level, and departmental level, how can we embed proactive allyship into everyday behaviours that support firm culture, to embed minority ethnic talent within teams and support the development of belonging?"*

A Seat at the Board Table A rotating seat on the board for minority ethnic talent. Would voices genuinely be heard? What decisions could representatives meaningfully contribute to? How should selection work?

Some delegates noted that certain firms already have standing agenda points co-delivered with HR Directors.

Acting on Lived Experiences Collecting genuine feedback from minority ethnic colleagues was seen as essential - but feasibility challenges were significant. How do you get honest feedback? How do you manage discussion fatigue? How do you ensure psychological safety? The answer: constant transparency and communication, demonstrating real action through "you said, we did" approaches.



Pillar three: Career-advancing work allocation

The question: "How can resources, community and technology be utilised to improve equality of opportunity and parity of progression for minority ethnic talent?"

Monitoring Work Allocation Does your firm have resource managers or a resource management platform? What role do resource managers play in developing skills matrices? How visible is incoming work and stretch opportunities?

AI was identified as a potential tool to support this work.

Transparent Performance Frameworks Frameworks for appraisals, promotions and recruitment that are transparent and equitable emerged as a key enabler.

A particular challenge: bias from managers e.g. perceiving someone as "too quiet" or "too introverted" when cultural aspects may be at play.





Practical takeaways



Drawing together the day's discussions, here are practical recommendations to consider.

Leadership and accountability

1. **Devolve leadership accountability** through quarterly check-ins with local leadership boards and Practice Group Head ownership of progress tracking.
2. **Develop diversity action plans at practice area level** – moving from firm-wide initiatives to practice group and team-level action plans.
3. **Empower HR Business Partners with data** – quantitative and qualitative, to inform conversations about attrition and progression.

Work allocation and career development

1. **Technology and data** – the potential for technology to support fair allocation of work is significant. In addition to incorporating a D&I lens to work allocation data, AI could monitor patterns and identify disparities.
2. **Conduct "opportunity audits"** at regular review points – who received stretch opportunities and why.
3. **Establish consistency of approach** through clear guidelines on work allocation.

Data and measurement

1. **Ensure robust data sets** to present the case for change.
2. **Implement consistent monitoring throughout the year**, considering nuances between teams.
3. **Conduct NQ interviews post-training contract**—building a picture over time, not just snapshots.



The verdict: What delegates said



Did this year's Think Tank deliver? The feedback suggests it did.

Would you recommend this session to a colleague?	9.3 (out of 10)
Was the content informative and relevant?	9.1 (out of 10)
Will this session help you to better support race and ethnicity inclusion/retention at your firm?	8.7 (out of 10)

In their own words

Here's what delegates said about their key takeaways:

"The value and importance of collaboration."

"Very helpful to hear the presentations from other firms. Takeaways: spend more time considering business services, the importance of consultation, and stay interviews and surveys."

"As a fee-earner, I wasn't aware of the extent of work HR and other business services do to help with the retention and recruitment of minority ethnics within law firms."

"Critical importance of data—robust systems, identifying essential data points, and how to use it."

"Lots of firms are at different stages but there is a real benefit in collaborating and sharing ideas with each other. As a junior fee-earner, this session has been useful."

"Data, data, data."

"The tailored departmental action plans, work allocation teams/resource and stay interviews."



Looking ahead: What happens next



Delegates left the event with renewed energy and practical ideas to take back to their firms.

As Nina and Louise emphasised in the closing session, this Think Tank was one moment in a longer journey. The real impact will come from actions taken in the weeks and months ahead. For those who couldn't attend, this report aims to provide something useful to work with. The challenges the sector faces are shared. The solutions are there to be found. And as one delegate put it perfectly:

"We're all trying to do the same thing, just doing it in different ways - that's why these sessions are so good, to learn from each other and understand the 'how'."

The invitation stands: take these ideas back, adapt what makes sense for your context. No one has all the answers, but collectively there is a huge amount of insight to draw on.

"What struck me during this year's Think Tank was the balance in the room - a clear understanding of how far we still need to go, matched with a shared determination to keep shifting the dial. There was a real unity of belief that progress comes through consistent, everyday actions - fairer opportunities, better conversations, genuine curiosity - underpinned by the systemic change we're all working towards." Nina Goswami, Clifford Chance



A collective approach to tackling shared challenges, including the retention and progression of minority ethnic talent, is necessary for sector-wide change. Bringing together a hive mind of changemakers to share insights and cross-pollinate ideas is helping to accelerate continuous improvement across the profession.



Julian Richard, Managing Director, extense





Visual summary of Think Tank solutions



The live scribe captured the energy and themes of the day in a visual illustration by Raquel Durán that encapsulated the key messages emerging from our discussions.



Thank you to the team at Norton Rose Fulbright LLP for hosting this event so expertly, to the Legal CORE steering committee members for their time and commitment and to every law firm that is a member of Legal CORE – thank you for collaborating together.



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