



Accommodating Change

Responses to Community Relations Issues in the Workplace

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Preface

In October 1994, the Community Relations Council organised a very successful conference – Accommodating Change – which was attended by around 100 senior personnel from the public and private sectors. The conference discussed how organisations in both the public and private sectors are affected by community relations issues and provided an opportunity to find out about the help, support and advice that is available to assist with the task of addressing these problems in the workplace.

Participants at the conference had the opportunity to hear from a number of those who had to address community relations issues in their organisations. These included: Martin Caher from the Training and Employment Agency and John MacVicar of the NI Association of Community Training Organisations who made a linked presentation; Pat Dougan, Chief Executive of Mackie International Group pic; Paul Brown, Equal Opportunities Manager of the Queen's University of Belfast; Harry MacConnell, Equality and Corporate Affairs Manager of NIE pic; and Eamonn McElroy, Group Managing Director of First Trust Bank. Dr Clem McCartney followed these presentations with an overview of the issues around and approaches to community relations in different contexts.

The conference also featured an open forum involving agencies with community relations expertise and experience to offer. These were: the Fair Employment Commission; the WEA Interface project; Counteract (NIC/ICTU); the Community Relations Council itself; and the Industrial Society.

One year on from Accommodating Change, it was felt that revisiting the themes discussed by the participants at the conference would be both useful and interesting. Most of those making presentations¹ at the conference were approached and asked to contribute their experience of addressing community relations issues both in the context of the conference and in the light of the past year since. The results are set out below with the original introductory remarks made by Sir George Quigley and the reflections of Mary Clark-Glass.

Thanks to all firstly for their contribution to the original conference and then for agreeing to discuss their views again. Thanks also to Damian Smyth for undertaking the interviews and presenting them in a common and accessible way.

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¹ Eamonn McElroy has moved on from First Trust and could not be contacted. Martin Caher also moved on and his successor, Billy Gamble, kindly outlined the T&EA role.

Introduction:

Sir George Quigley, Chairman, Ulster Bank Ltd.

My introductory remarks will be brief but perhaps I might identify a few themes by way of backcloth.

It has been said that the only abiding constant in today's world is change. We are certainly experiencing that phenomenon in Northern Ireland, but part of our problem may stem from our reluctance to acknowledge it. Although dominated by the past - or perhaps because of that - we find it difficult to come to terms with history and society in motion. Traditions are assailed - and arouse passionate defence. Loyalties, habits and prejudices clash with new needs.

In a society where divisions over core values have such deep roots, the difficulties are compounded. It has taken us too long to recognise that, in these circumstances, diversity must be actively managed and that the appropriate management skills have to be learnt.

We have also found that there are no turnkey solutions for our society at large or for the micro-organisms which make it up, just as there are no 'off the peg' answers to business problems. The rise and fall of a succession of fashionable management theories is ample proof of that. What is shown to work in business education, however, is the case-study method. This Conference gave us access to a series of case studies. Equipped with the insights of others in their particular situations, we enhance our repertoire of responses to our own individual problem and are the better able to customise our own solutions.

Individual organisations are always at risk of destabilisation from external shocks – from the exogenous variables, as it were. There is some evidence that companies and other organisations with strong cultural values based on the successful management of diversity score high on ability to withstand such shocks.

Organisations are not helped by the inability – so far - of the representative political players in our society to find means of contributing to the management of diversity. This places an undue burden of management on individual organisations, and on those on whom they rely for advice. There needs to be concurrent and complementary top-down and bottom up action which gradually becomes mutually reinforcing. Thank goodness - on experience to date - that Northern Ireland plc has laid off its wager on the big bang macro solutions with smaller side bets on the less ambitious micro initiatives. I suspect that, in the perspective of history, the great mass of companies, organisations and groups of all kinds in both the public and the private sectors, whilst they may not be perfect, will be perceived to have managed diversity remarkably well in impossibly difficult circumstances and to have learnt fast.

I would expect all our case studies to show people spurred on by a very clear perception of the prize to be won from the successful accommodation of change - and not least the change inherent in the management of diversity. I recall reading several years ago some research results from the business world which showed that, whilst it takes very diverse teams longer to get their act together, they ultimately prove more innovative and effective than more homogeneous teams. If so, Northern Ireland plc cannot brook any delay in earning the prize.

Experience of Change:

Harry McConnell, Equality & Corporate Affairs, Northern Ireland Electricity

Q Would you like to say something about the community relations policy at Northern Ireland Electricity?

A I would concentrate more on the equality perspective, which is slightly different. As an organisation which provides a service to the entire community and has over 600,000 customers throughout Northern Ireland, we are very conscious of the need to provide a service on a fair basis. One of our stated goals is that we have a workforce representative of the community we serve.

Q What moved NIE to take on such a commitment?

A There are three or four business reasons why equality of opportunity and maintaining good relations with the community are very important. The first one, simply, is social responsibility we want to deliver an equality programme because it is right to do so. People should get somewhere in the community on merit rather than background. There is also a commercial self-interest argument for operating an equality policy. If a significant number of one community is not applying for jobs in your workplace or are not prepared to work at certain sites, then you are not drawing on the widest pool of possible employees and you are losing out on good people.

The third point is that there is real merit in diversity. Bringing together Catholics and Protestants, or men and women, means bringing together people with slightly different strengths. In a group this stimulates better team spirit and a better product.

The fourth argument is if you have a workforce representative of the community it serves, it is likely that special needs in the community will be understood in the workforce. If you have a workforce representative of people with disabilities, you will be more aware of the special needs of customers with disabilities. If you have a workforce representative of women, there will be greater awareness of the special childcare obligations society tends to impose on women. That is maybe less obvious than the Catholic/Protestant thing.

Q What material benefits are derived from such a policy direction?

A The bottom line is if there is a community significantly under-represented in your workforce, that community may decide not to buy from you. Other bottom line factors are, of course, the MacBride Principles, which means American investment. If you are recognised as an employer who is not providing fair treatment for the two sides, that may affect your ability to get financial investment for the future.

Q What measures has NIE taken specifically to counter religious imbalance in the workforce?

A NIE set up, in the late 70s, an equal opportunity policy with clear emphasis on the merit principle in all appointments. In the early 90s, following the Fair Employment Act of 1989, we implemented a new policy with two objectives: to provide equality of opportunity and to work towards fair participation of both communities in our workforce. We have determined to take affirmative action where there is a lack of fair participation and we are doing that on a variety of sites. We are putting statements at the bottom of ads encouraging applications from Catholics. NIE's profile is well-known, in that we have a small number of Catholics in the workforce, significantly smaller than you would expect. Seventy-five per cent Protestant, twenty-five per cent Catholic. Women are also significantly under-represented. We are perceived as a male, engineering working environment.

We have also organised targeted training in border areas in Northern Ireland in electrical skills that is allowed as a form of affirmative action under the 1989 Act. Catholics are under-represented in the workforce and we are downsizing significantly at the minute. We are not creating many real employment opportunities, but we can allow people to avail of our training facilities. We train young people be they Protestant or Catholic, but by choosing border areas

there are more Catholics than Protestants. After four years, they have a head start in the employment market. We are one of the few employers to have done that in Northern Ireland.

Q *Would you care to expand on what is meant by "fair participation"?*

A There are two Fair Employment acts. The 1976 deals with equal opportunities, the 1989 with equal opportunities but adding the concept of "fair participation". Under both acts, equal opportunities means each individual has the right not be discriminated against on the grounds of their religious belief or political opinion. A person has the right not to be discriminated against because of their perceived religion, whether Catholic, Protestant, Jew or Muslim. It is the same with gender.

Equal opportunities deals with individuals; fair participation in the 1989 act deals with communities and only the Protestant and Catholic communities. If Catholics or Protestants are under-represented in your workforce relative to what you would expect, you must take affirmative action to redress that.

In NIE, our policies have worked well. Progress and change is slow because we're reducing numbers but we were 18% Catholic in 1988 when monitoring the workforce was around 6,000 and it is now around 2,500, so the opportunities for change have been limited. The more encouraging statistics are in the last six years: of the people we've appointed 40% have been Catholic and 60% Protestant, which is roughly what I would expect. If you look at our younger age profile, the workforce under 25 is about 42% Catholic so this suggests that current recruitment and selection seem to be operating fairly.

I think you have to be doing a lot of public work in the community, especially the community that is under-represented in the workforce. We have managed in the 90s to increase the Catholic applicant rate to 48%, so really I have been talking about 50-50 in the last few years which at school-leaving age is what you'd expect.

We and a lot of other big employers have proved that you can achieve change. It is not just NIE. If you look at the FEC figures, the changes are there and it will obviously require time to change the composition of firms. This is where you get into the interesting arguments with MacBride over what the pace of change should be; but I think employers will stick very tightly to the fact that they must provide equality of opportunity. You can take affirmative action to speed up the process by which you get a better representation of the two communities. Any affirmative action therefore must only be taken up to the point of selection. You can encourage application from the under-represented group, improve your contact with schools from the under-represented group and all those things, but, at the point of selection, if you have two good people, one's a Catholic and one's a Protestant, and you're under-represented in Catholics, even if they're very close you don't appoint a Catholic because he's a Catholic. You must find one who's better in ability than the other.

Q *How has the company dealt with the main issues of cultural diversity in the workplace?*

A Well, from 1988, like a lot of employers, we started taking the issue of offensive flags and emblems very seriously. Like a lot of big factory-based employers in Northern Ireland, we had a number of sites where bunting was flown at the relevant times of the year. We introduced a new policy and made it very clear that any breaches of the policy would involve discipline and people could ultimately be sacked. That was a very difficult phase we had managers receiving bullets in the post, we had to relocate managers, we had a lot of threats made to the firm. But we took down all the bunting.

It was quite a culture change and it was achieved by working closely with the unions and having senior managers deal with the problems it wasn't left to the equality person to take the flags down. The compromise was to have the Union flag flying all the year round at headquarters which is the same arrangement they have at Shorts.

Q *What sanctions can the company impose in the event of the community relations breakdown in the workforce?*

A The company takes a very high profile on sectarian harassment. Anyone suffering from harassment of any kind has a direct route to senior management for complaints. We are issuing credit card-sized cards to all staff with telephone numbers on them so staff can ring people if they are harassed. We have also trained 40 harassment advisers at different locations and different grades to provide advice as a first port of call. We have also trained 50 managers in how to investigate complaints and all supervisors have received training on what might constitute harassment and all staff have been informed of their rights in writing.

Q How do these measures fit in with what you know of “mutual understanding”?

A I have written articles in our in-house magazine because I think people may not understand what constitutes harassment. Some people feel that banter is a great Ulster way of dealing with the problem. This view came up at the conference. But the obligations on employers are tighter than people dealing with community relations have to deal with. We have an obligation to show and ensure that there is nothing offensive to any group in the workplace. That means we will have to go through a period of withdrawing anything that is associated with either tradition before, 20 or 30 years down the line, we can all come to appreciate the cultural richness of all the traditions.

Anyone can have any political views they want and I would have to say that anyone with bigoted, sectarian views has those views protected under the Fair Employment Act. But as employers, we must show that they do not bring those views into the workplace. As an employer, I protect your right not to have extreme views taken into account in any employment decision made in relation to you. What I do not protect is a perceived right you may have to make comments on those views you have which may be offensive to other people in the workplace.

The Community Relations Council is obviously trying to kill the tension and make sure that people are prepared to respect each other’s traditions and compromise more, and so on. But as an employer, I don’t want to get into the trying to change your attitude mode because I would argue that, under the Fair Employment Act, it is about protecting your right to have extreme views if you choose. But you can’t bring those into the workplace.

Q Do you think employers are forced to carry the burdens of the wider society?

A Our job is to make sure that signs and symbols are not present in the workplace. That is a demanding obligation to put on employers. When there is a Greysteel or a Shankill Road, it is very difficult for an employer to ensure that there is no tension in the workplace on the following Monday. It is very likely some Catholics will be “cool” about Protestants if there is a Greysteel and vice versa on the Monday morning if there has been a Shankill Road. That is inevitable. The point is your attitudes may be a bit more negative on Monday, but you can’t show it and you can’t treat people differently because of it.

The people we bring into our business have been brought up in different systems of schooling, they live in different areas from their Catholic or Protestant colleagues, they have probably never socialised in sport because they play different games. Employment is one of the first places where they are forced to mix. It is inevitable, then, that employers get some of the problems that result from totally segregated societal patterns, for we are one of the first forums where people are brought together if they haven’t gone to university.

Q What are the prerequisites for changes such as those you outline at NIE?

A To secure change you have to have total senior level commitment. The top man or woman has to be behind the policy totally. They have to make it clear that they will “pull the plug” or sack people if they don’t toe the line. You also have to do a major communications exercise and the only meaningful way of doing that is to get the support of the trade unions. Trade unions and management must work together to ensure that as much is done as is reasonably possible to ensure a new neutral working environment.

There also needs to be training of the key people who are advisers or responsible for investigating complaints of harassment. A lot of that training has to focus on awareness-raising. Protestants are not particularly aware that poppies might be offensive if worn outside the normal period and Catholics are not aware that speaking the Irish language may be offensive in the presence of Protestants. There is such segregation in society that there is a low level of awareness of what constitutes offence. The law is very clear on this for employers. The offence is based on the impact on the individual. A Catholic might have tolerated a King Billy poster or a Protestant a tricolour, but they don't have to; and they have a very strong case if they want to make it.

Q How did you manage to involve the unions in your programmes?

A We devised the harassment training in-house, but we did it in conjunction with Billy Robinson of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Its Northern Ireland Committee has set up an anti-sectarian, anti-harassment unit called Counteract and it has developed quite a lot of good training through using case studies of the whole area. The training combined sectarian and sexual harassment, so we dealt with it in broader terms. The Equal Opportunities Commission helped us out on the sexual harassment side and Mr Robinson provided the training on the sectarian side.

We call them Harassment Advisers. NIE is big enough to have a nurse and a doctor and they are trained counsellors. They will argue that there is a difference between a counsellor and an adviser: to be a proper counsellor, to deal with people who are suffering from stress as a result of harassment, you need specific listening skills. Our advisers are given basic counselling skills, but if they have serious traumatic experiences to deal with they are referred to our medical and welfare people.

Q How would you assess the value of the Accommodating Change conference?

A I found the conference interesting. The audience seemed to be made up of chief executives of the public sector. I got a very positive response at the end. People came up to me afterwards and said what we were doing as an employer was very interesting, which was useful. I spoke about practical measures, rather than how you might accommodate difference within the traditions in Northern Ireland. I came away with a better idea of what the Community Relations Council does and what its role is. I would know the Fair Employment Commission well as an employer, and the Equal Opportunities Commission, but the CRC I didn't know much about.

Pat Dougan, Chief Executive, Mackie International Group plc.

Q Could you give an idea of Mackie 's perspective on community relations?

A In here we have absolutely no problem. I have been involved in Mackie for the last three and a half years and I can only speak with personal experience during that time. As far as I can see on the surface, there is no problem. The shop floor personnel have an excellent relationship with each other. This is the view from both sides. Most people agree that historically there were problems in the past. People have been shot in the factory - three inside Mackie over the period of the Troubles – so they know that difficulties did exist.

Q Do you have any examples of a community relations breakdown?

A None at all. You could go through every inch of the buildings, throughout the factory, and you wouldn't find a flag or emblem. That's gone completely and we've been through three Twelfths of July and there were never any displays. The Fair Employment have been involved with us and have congratulated us on our actions.

Q Is that as a result of legislation?

A No. This question came up at our Board meeting recently while discussing Fair Employment business. We use the fair employment regulations as a measurement. We often seek advice from the Agency.

Q Do you have any sense that society is dumping its ills on business to sort out?

A They have a clear brief. I had a problem with one of their requirements to put on ads that "we welcome applications from the Catholic community". They threatened me with legislation. We do receive applications from a broad spectrum. There is a problem convincing the Catholic community that there are opportunities in Mackie; but I don't see how writing "We welcome..." at the bottom is of use, because even the Catholic community will see that as obligatory.

Q So you would hold that only 'real' change has an effect?

A Real change has had more effect in convincing Catholic community to apply for jobs. If they don't apply, it is very difficult to recruit. But if they do apply then we have a chance to look at the equality of jobs and the equality of rights. Our sponsoring of the Antrim hurling team actually did more in the west Belfast community than anything else. People saw that Mackie had changed. There were protests from some of the hard-line clubs in west Belfast that Mackie was allowed to sponsor the hurling team. But, alongside that, we were being threatened by the UVF as being part of the pan-nationalist movement. It was quite interesting hearing the Lower Falls clubs rejecting it.

Q Do you feel that better community relations is the responsibility of business?

A Absolutely. Our Mission Statement devotes a clause to this: "Good Neighbour" To make a positive contribution to the communities in which we reside.

Q And you feel that is the case over and above the requirements of the law?

A Yes. Government is irrelevant in that case. At Mackie we do what we see is right. There is a very clear moral responsibility to put things right.

Q Are there commercial or other advantages for Mackie?

A They are the same advantages as Northern Ireland gets generally. In so far as the policy of "the establishment" here was to refuse opportunity to the Catholic community, they denied

themselves access to the asset of very highly qualified people. Now the reverse of that is equally true. By creating opportunities for all enables us to draw on the total human resources. This enables us to have the best qualified persons for each position.

Q Has Mackie been influenced by the measures taken by other companies?

A I am not aware of what others do. We have our own tasks. We are not particularly interested in the activities of others.

Q How do you see your view of these matters working with that of the Community Relations Council?

A As far as I know, we have not had much contact with the CRC. They may have been dealing with our Human Relations person. Anyone who wishes to visit us and seek our advice is most welcome. We have made it an open house to all people. I am to be at St Louise's today talking to the children and we have a team of shop-stewards visiting schools telling them about the opportunities Mackie offers young people.

Last year we organised a lunch and afternoon entertainment for a large number of the aged of the local community. We were assisted in this by a wide range of community leaders. It turned out that many of these old people from both religious sections had lived amongst each other prior to the troubles and knew each other well. We had an excellent day's entertainment.

The old people had a welcome from the then Lord Mayor, Hugh Smith. By coincidence he met his forewoman from the Linfield Canning Company where they both worked many years before.

Q What benefits, if any, did you or Mackie derive from the conference?

A I'm not sure we got any, or expected any. We expected to make a contribution. We have to go and tell people how it is in Mackie. I feel we are doing our job. We have taken employment here from 9% Catholic when I arrived to 28%. This seems to be a small contribution but it is worthwhile work. If you are not increasing employment, it is virtually impossible other than to fire people, and that's not the point behind it.

Paul Browne, Equal Opportunities Unit, The Queen's University of Belfast

Q *Would you like to say something about the community relations policy at the Queen's University of Belfast?*

A The University is a large employer there are 3,000 staff full-time with a fair number of part-time staff. There is also a community of around 10,000 students, coming and going in this area. Equal opportunities and community relations are very important to the employees we have here. We have had problems at the University; there are tensions at the University. We have had people murdered in the University; there was a lecturer shot dead in University Square and there have been students killed. The institution reflects society.

In recognition of that, the University has put in place equal opportunities policies and procedures and established an Equal Opportunities Unit. Six people work in the Equal Opportunities Unit it is a major attempt to address these problems. We have developed anti-harassment policies and put in place "harassment advisers". The Equal Opportunities Unit has, during its brief life, produced various reports, originated various procedures and policies and worked closely with other members of staff within the personnel function to provide an equal opportunities input into training and the development of policies and procedures generally.

The provision of harassment advisers used only to relate to sexual harassment, but now we have them for sectarian harassment. Sectarian harassment is perceived as a disciplinary offence and may result in a dismissal from the University. These are real issues for the University, in spite of the fact that you'd think that in an academic, liberal institution, these things wouldn't happen at all. But they do happen. We have something like 730 academic staff, but the rest are support staff, ancillary staff, administrative staff, technical staff and so forth. That puts it in context. The University is alive to these issues.

Q *Have the cease-fires had any noticeable effect on this context within which the University operates?*

A The effect of the cease-fires is an intangible. I can't perceive any tangible change other than people's mood and the atmosphere. People feel more comfortable, I suppose. There is less tension to that extent, but that just reflects the lessening tension in society.

Q **How does the University cope with ideas of "mutual understanding"?**

A The National Anthem debate surrounding graduation and the RUC band playing afterwards at the garden party is directly linked to this whole area and the University has gone through a very lengthy and tortuous process looking at these issues. A report went to Senate which advocated the stopping of the National Anthem being played at graduation routinely, and that the RUC band should be only one of a number of bands that would be invited to come here to the University and provide the music. That whole issue is very emotional and has generated a lot of debate in the newspapers. The Newsletter has said that it was the single item upon which they had received the most correspondence ... so they kept it going for quite some period of time.

Q **Did that issue fall under flags and emblems legislation?**

A We see flags and emblems in the workplace as sectarian harassment and we don't allow it. We don't allow any of our workshops to have an emblem up or a flag. If it is reported to me or to a manager we would go and remove it or get it removed.

In conjunction with that, we've been working closely with the Counteract organisation Billy Robinson was one of the speakers at the conference. We've organised and run three training sessions for management and supervisory staff and trade unionists here at the University. We have worked towards eliminating that problem. We have had to identify sectarianism, discover what exactly it is, and what we are going to do about it. We have also been advising people of the law. And I think we have been fairly upfront about it.

We have also signed up to a joint Declaration of Protection against Sectarianism. Sixty copies have been distributed throughout the University and are on University notice boards. It is a joint declaration between the management of the University and the trade unions that they will not tolerate sectarianism. It replicates the CBI/ICTU initiative and a large number of employers in Northern Ireland have done likewise. It took time to catch up with that one. The Vice-Chancellor signed it and we got good coverage in the print and broadcast media. We take the subject seriously.

Q *Does the University have a policy of encouraging greater understanding between the communities in its environment, as well as of discouraging tension?*

A Toleration, you mean. Each member of staff has to do a one-day equal opportunities workshop. It is compulsory. But it takes quite some time processing 3,000 staff at the rate of about 50 a session. We're projecting through to 1996 on this. We use that workshop as a means of allowing people to identify the issues concerning equal opportunities and how they impact upon the working environment, what's expected of them in terms of behaviour and so forth.

It is only a taster, only an awareness workshop. People are not going to come in the morning with a certain set of values and leave enlightened with a different set of values at the end of the day. It is an attempt to point them in the right direction and to make them aware of the University's policy and stance in these areas.

Q *Is there a sense of the University as a clearing-house for the ills of the wider society?*

A I don't know if we could claim that work done inside the University has an impact on what's going on outside, other than people having to travel from their communities into work here and go back again. If we are providing a forum where they are exposed to this whole concept of equal opportunities, or are made aware of the legislation, so be it. That's the information they have got from us.

As far as the image of the University goes, the measures we have introduced work to break down perceptions. The University may be perceived as a unionist bastion of society, but Catholic students or nationalist students are not put off coming to Queen's. They are here in large numbers. Up until quite recently, unionist students were the majority on the Students' Representative Committee and had been all the time. Nevertheless, the Students' Union has been perceived as a republican den and all sorts of derogatory remarks or statements have been made about it. But it has only recently become 50/50. Its committees and sub-committees are all broadly representative of the community. The Fair Employment report into Queen's in 1987 showed imbalances in the workforce and the University has sought to redress those imbalances.

The University commissioned an independent report into equality of opportunity and fair participation in the institution and it resulted in 96 recommendations, which were enthusiastically accepted by the Senate and the University authorities. The recommendations were far reaching and required a systematic approach. The University reviewed its operations in terms of human resources and, to date, 76 of the 96 have been implemented. One particular initiative is the requirement that every member of staff from porter to professor attend the one-day equal opportunities workshop. More than 1,600 members of staff have already been through these workshops.

Q *Is there a sense that undue attention has been paid to visible places like training and work and education, when sources of sectarianism might be said to come from elsewhere?*

A But employers have to take action. That is the law the Fair Employment Act. Harassment is direct discrimination and if the employer doesn't take action he may find himself at a tribunal defending his lack of action. The tribunal is quite clear. It is not sufficient for an employer to say Cut it out. They have to be pro-active. They actually have to go out and educate their

workforce and say what is and is not acceptable. At the end of the day, employers have to take into account the law of the land and the Fair Employment Act is there to be observed.

The concern about a neutral working environment at Queen's led to establishment of the Shanks Working Group. This was the committee charged with the task of addressing the issues of the National Anthem and the presence of the RUC band at the garden party, as well as the existence of Irish-language signs in the Students' Union. The membership of the working party was, unusually for the University, drawn from a very wide spectrum from within the institution and representations were made to it from a range of interested parties. In addition, advice was taken from a number of others who had faced similar problems.

Q How would you assess the value of the conference?

A Any of these conferences do have value. It gives you an opportunity to go along and hear what other people are doing and share ideas and meet with people. To that extent it is valuable. If you can get one good idea out of any of these conferences and bring it back and put it into operation, that's fair enough. Also, it is comforting at times to realise that other people are having the same difficulties that you are having and maybe they have got the key to unlocking some problem you can't appear to solve. It does promote a good message so they are laudable attempts, as long as they don't get hijacked along certain agendas. The sharing of ideas is always beneficial.

Billy Gamble, Equality Unit, Training & Employment Agency

Q Would you describe the measures the T&EA has taken to deal with community relations issues?

A About 6 months ago, the Agency set up an Equality Unit. Its task is to ensure that there is equality of opportunity and fair treatment in terms of the programmes and services the Agency offers. There are two basic dimensions to that: one is the commitment to Targeting Social Need and the other is the Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment (PAFT) initiative. TSN is much more than a social programme; it is a programme dealing with equity and, in particular, the differentials that exist in the community. What we are doing through the TSN and PAFT initiatives is looking at the range of programmes we offer and how they impact on various groups, particularly the unemployed.

On the overarching strategy, which is the policy of fair treatment, the Agency had contributed to the first annual PAFT report for the 1994 calendar year. We looked at four particular areas of policy to see to what extent differentials impacted on the various categories.

Q What categories were those?

A The programmes or policy areas that were looked at in the 1994 report included Job Skills, the Adult Guidance Service, Enterprise Ulster and ACE. These were reviewed in terms of their differential impact on people of different gender, religious or political belief, disability, ethnic city, marital status and age. The findings of that appraisal was included in the departmental annual report which was published in July 1995.

On the day-to-day aspects, the Unit would work right across all the business divisions of the Agency and explain the basis of our work, across these in terms of bench-marking what the Agency is doing and what it needs to do so that it can address both equality and equity issues.

Q How is such liaison effected?

A Through a whole range of ways- through seminars, through just working alongside the various divisions and helping to develop enhanced arrangements, building on the publication Equality of Opportunity which was published over a year ago and monitoring results. Basically, what we are doing is moving beyond that to look at enhanced monitoring arrangements which go beyond disability, gender and community background.

The Agency is committed to equality of opportunity and fair treatment for all.

Q Is the Agency familiar with the priorities of the Community Relations Council?

A For the last three years I have been working in inner city Belfast and I'm aware of the role of the CRC in terms of what it does in the community. What the Equality Unit has done since it was set up is to get out more into the community. In the area of gender, for instance, we're engaged in the community with women's groups to see what are the barriers to women moving through training into employment.

It is a pro-active approach. We have not only been looking at our programmes, but discussing with people the issues that they feel are important in terms of access and outcome in relation to equal opportunity.

In anti-sectarianism, I have been working quite closely with ICTU Northern Ireland Committee's Counteract project and I've sat in on a number of seminars that they've run with training organisations to identify the prejudices individuals have and how they should conduct themselves in training or in the workplace.

I have kept fairly close to the work of Counteract and what they are developing. Within the Agency, I know that personnel staff are looking at issues of sexual harassment and sectarian

harassment as well as the whole issue of equal opportunities. Staff can be made aware of the issues as they impact on the Agency. Those are being taken forward at different levels. I am also working with Counteract on a video dealing with anti-sectarianism and they're hoping to put together a sponsored package. We have part-funded the video. I hope that answers how the issues of the CRC impact on the Agency.

Q Do you have tangible evidence of progress?

A I take the view that whether we are dealing with sexual or sectarian harassment, or wider equality and equity issues, then it has to be dealt with as a business issue. It is important to an organisation that it conducts itself properly and anything that smacks of sectarianism, inequality or sexual harassment is fundamentally at odds with good business.

Q What were the conditions that made the setting up of the Unit necessary?

A To give focus to the work we were doing on equality of opportunity and fair treatment. It is to drive forward two initiatives, on equality of opportunity and fair treatment. It is up to individual divisions – the operational divisions – to take forward the issues that are pertinent to them in terms of both initiatives. Our role is facilitative and a service role by making people aware of the issues as they impact across the divisions and working with them to seek to address the issues where they arise. If there are certain imbalances, whether it is inequality, disability, gender or community background, then we have to look to see why those imbalances exist and whether or not there is a justifiable case for doing something about it.

Q Was the Unit established, perhaps, as a result of legislation?

A No. It was in response to the issues that we faced. There are differentials in the community and the most talked about one is the community differential where Catholic males are twice as likely to be unemployed. In terms of TSN, we're looking at those differentials and to what extent the Agency's programmes are impacting. Where there is scope for us to do more, more will be done.

Q What are the advantages, if any, to the Agency of that policy?

A There is a moral issue in terms of having a just and sensible policy which is fair and seen to be fair within the community. But, equally, there is a business argument for people addressing the issue of diversity. Diversity in the workforce, in the widest sense, is important for any organisation because people with their backgrounds – whether they are cultural or whatever – can contribute to the well-being of that organisation. So there is both an economic or business sense and also a moral or justice sense in addressing those issues.

Now if you're asking me if there is a cost to be borne in terms of competitiveness, there may well be. But it is a matter of determining whether there is such a cost and deciding thereupon whether it is appropriate to move forward and bear it in full or in part. Clearly there is a commitment within the Agency to move forward on the TSN and PAFT initiatives and it is a matter of assessing whether or not there are costs to be met in advancing both.

Q Have you been aware of a change of emphasis in your area since the cease-fires?

A From what I can gauge at street level, there is a feeling of tremendous opportunity as a result of the cease-fires and that the opportunity is there to make a real impact and improve the economy. It is for all of us to get engaged, in both the community and public sectors. There will still be a divided community for quite some time, but I think we do have the opportunity to try and make inroads and to try and close that differential as much as we can. There is a fair degree of optimism that progress can be made.

The main difficulty is that you have to have a growing economy before you can make real impact in terms of employment differential. But if there is a degree of buoyancy in the economy and if we get the investment then that will provide a tremendous boost to the economy. If we can create more opportunities, then I would hope that the people living in the

most disadvantaged areas, which coincide with the areas of highest unemployment, will benefit.

John MacVicar, NI Association of Community-based Training Organisations

Q Can you explain what NIACTO is and what it stands for?

A NIACTO is the Northern Ireland Association of Community-Based Training Organisations, so it is an umbrella organisation for community-training groups right across Northern Ireland. There are about 36 organisations altogether. It was born 15 to 16 years ago – in a previous life it was called MACW, for the organisations were then called community workshops. It was set up to offer an opportunity for the organisations, collectively to lobby relevant government agencies, primarily the Department of Manpower Services, the Department of Economic Development (the Training and Employment Agency as it is now), but it was also meant to give people an opportunity to network and to bounce good ideas and bad ideas off each other and that is how it evolved.

Q What role did your organisation play in the conference?

A Ken Logue approached me about doing a joint presentation with the Training and Employment Agency to talk about community relations and issues around sectarianism. We didn't and probably still don't have a policy on this we couldn't say here are the guidelines we looked at and worked through.

The conference began to make me think about the issues around community relations and sectarianism. We then approached Counteract who had also done a presentation and we also approached the Community Relations Council. The end result was we organised two one-and-a-half day workshops with Counteract as facilitators, looking at areas specifically about sectarianism in the workplace and how to cope with it. I felt that within our training organisations we were developing young people's qualifications but we were ignoring a lot of things including personal and social development. We were also ignoring the area of sectarianism and how to cope with it. We were developing young people in automotive skills but we weren't tackling the relations of Protestant to Catholic and vice versa.

That was the first step and it was relatively successful. Those who attended it found it interesting. Stimulating and thought-provoking in terms of their own organisations. Of the 35 or 36 organisations involved in training across Northern Ireland, probably about 10 would be in a position to provide mixed training; the majority would be in either Protestant or Catholic areas.

Q What form did the workshops take?

A The first event was primarily to give the managers within the organisations an idea of some of the issues around. The second was to involve some of the trainers, those who would actually have day-to-day influence over the young people. There was a two-pronged attack. Yes, we extend the sessions into each of the organisations; yes, we begin to think about 'peer education'. As far as young people are concerned, anyone over 20 is old. The best vehicle to put a message across is their peers. These are the two points that came out of the two workshops we have run. It is a case of putting the ball back into the T & EA's court and with the CRC. But it was the conference which triggered us into doing something, and for us it i< back to the drawing board to see where it all fits in.

The difficulty is that throughout Northern Ireland there has been a shift towards vocational training and away from personal and social development. The training organisations I deal with would recruit from the 'low-achievers', the 'drop-outs', what education would regard as the 'no-hopers'. A lot of them come with a lot of personal baggage problems of numeracy and literacy and as well as that many of them don't know what a Catholic is, or a Protestant.

Q How do you train young people on sectarianism?

A Much of it is down to common sense. But it is not a priority, I feel, given the vocational emphasis. To be blunt, most organisations depend for survival on young people getting qualifications as quickly as they possibly can. Those are the hoops the government puts up and

people have to jump through them. So unless it is within the context of that type of training, people tend to ignore it. Also, there are neither the financial nor human resources to make it a priority.

Q *Have you had much dealings with the Community Relations Council?*

A There is an attitude that the Community Relations Council is a 'fur coat' brigade, the do-gooders. People resent being manipulated for whatever motive. There needs to be a rethink of strategy within the CRC. We are working with young people in the training organisations. That is an advantage. It should be taken a stage further backwards into the education system to provide people with the opportunity to have a better understanding of each other's communities.

Q *Do you feel that training organisations are expected to deal with the problems of wider society?*

A That is correct. The taking up of the emphasis on vocational qualifications and the dropping of personal and social development, numeracy, literacy, teenage pregnancies, drug abuse, solvent abuse, sectarianism, it is a bit like saying 'We are a training organisation but we want you to come in and hang all the real problems you have with solvent abuse and reading on the coat hook. Bring the training part of you in and pick up those other things on the way out.' It doesn't work! It is as if government or whatever has said 'You're a failure. Go away. We're more concerned with saying that Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom has the best O and A level results and more people per head of the population go to university'. It is a case of containing an under-class, and sometimes humouring them.

This is a personal opinion; but the saying is 'When the po cracks, there'll be a terrible stink'. The primary objective for any organisation in training is the K sign over the head of every young person who enters the door. How much are they worth to the organisation, both in terms of generated funding and in terms of output-related funding. The organisation and the young person gets a bonus for qualification. There are no pounds and pence for social issues, so you've got to drop it if you want to survive.

At least there are organisations like Opportunity Youth who have taken on the responsibility for those issues, but the other organisations basically just have to soldier through and, at the end of the day, just ignore those issues. Of course, no training organisation should have to deal with literacy, numeracy and so on: those should be dealt with by the education system. All too often government and government departments are looking for quick-fix solutions to long-term problems, and that's like the area of sectarianism and community relations.

Q *What effect, if any, can you attribute to the cease-fires?*

A Since the cease-fires, things have obviously got better, but there is a lot of hurt and mistrust out there that needs to be dealt with and it is not going to happen overnight. Let's give the people the opportunity. The Opportunity Youth Programme I am involved in sent me to the States for nine weeks. We approached the International Fund for Ireland about doing a Wider Horizons Programme

We took 23 young people away, 18 from Belfast and 5 from Dun Laoghaire. We prepared a programme well in advance – ice-breakers and residentials -and involved Co-operation North in it. We challenged young people on their attitudes - in some cases, this was the first Catholic or Protestant they had met. The end result of that is there are relationships and friendships that have developed.

I think the cease-fires had a lot to do with that. I am talking about a young lad from north Belfast who would be your typical right-wing loyalist, Rangers supporter, Linfield supporter; but the relationships he has developed with a girl from Whiterock and a guy from Unity Flats are remarkable. And there was another young lad in the training organisation he was with who went on the trip and they came back and there was a bit of banter about all these Taigs, but he actually defended the other one and said 'No, we're good friends'.

There is hope out there; it just takes a bit of time and a bit of patience and to use whatever opportunities there are. All right, there were only 23 of them; it is a small step, but it is in the right direction.

A Personal Reflection

Mary Clark-Glass CBE

Q How do you feel about the problem of sectarianism as something to be dealt with in the workplace?

A Where else are you going to deal with it? Though we do have high unemployment in Northern Ireland, there are still more people in work than not. Since the legislation is strongest in relation to sex discrimination and fair employment issues, it is in employment that the sectarianism issue arises most strongly, because whether we like it or not we live in a society that is based on economic wealth and work. You are judged by what you do rather than who you are. You must also address it through the churches, youth organisations and so forth. But if you can't address it in the workplace, where can you address it?

Q Have you experience of the Community Relations Council and its agenda in this regard?

A Not really. In the Equal Opportunities Commission, which I headed up for about eight years, we had more females than males in our workforce in senior positions, which is very unusual. As far as Catholic and Protestant were concerned, we were a mirror of the outside. People joked about their religion. I remember I said to one of the receptionists "Oh, tell a fib or something, say I'm not here"-about the rather odd character who was trying to see me. She said "God, it's all right for them heathens, but I'd be committing a sin." And somebody said "It's okay, you can get it wiped off on Sunday, but I can't because I'm a Presbyterian."

They were howling with laughter and joking amongst themselves. So I felt that, because our whole ethos was about equality and fairness, people felt comfortable enough to make fun of their religion and also-which is much more delicate in Northern Ireland-to make fun of somebody else's. When I first came here in the 1970s, I lived for a while at RAF Aldergrove. There was prejudice, but it wasn't sectarian: it was "them and us". "Bogwogs" and "Paddies" were some of the phraseology, not so much among the airforce but among some of the army officers. I was horrified at it, but it was a different thing - more cultural. And, at that time, the level of killings was quite high. They saw everybody who wasn't in the services as the enemy.

And at the College of Business Studies, where I taught, the first year for some of the students was quite difficult because they had come from separate religious backgrounds. Most of them had come from wholly Protestant or Catholic schools and there was quite a bit of adjustment with the 18-year-olds to shake down. It was interesting. After about two terms, you would notice that they would go off drinking together at lunchtime.

Q What about the use of incentives for businesses to integrate workforces?

A They used them for the Fair Employment issue – f5,000 worth to employers. Sometimes bribery works, for that is what it is. You had some people, like some of the councils, who would not take the money. They went on about "green money" and "American blood money", but they have all taken it now. I think you have to be quite cold about it. But bribery isn't enough. You have to have encouragement and also penalties. I'm a great believer in using the law to really hit people in the wallet. That's why the lifting of the f30,000 compensation ceiling is a good thing. You do have the problem that people "have a go" if they don't get a job or don't get promotion, just to see if they'll get some money out of it. I know that small employers go on about that. So let them.

My experience is not the norm in that everywhere I have worked in Northern Ireland has been fairly mixed. I was in the in the BBC for many years. I have experienced sectarianism. I mean, Paisley has had a go at me several times. Terry Carlin and I came in for sort of threatening language, about a year after the Ulster Workers' Strike (I lived in Hillsborough, in the Square). Paisley was there with a lot of Orangemen, on a dray, right outside my house. I couldn't even get the car in. I had to leave it down in the forest and walk up and he saw me, walking, trying to get through to the front door. He had been going on about people called Terence and Mary who take their orders from Dublin because we had been at an official

government dinner. People weren't supposed to be mixing with government ministers in the 1980s, after the Anglo-Irish Agreement, remember that.

When we first moved to Hillsborough, there was a very great attempt by some local people to find out what religion I was, but that was in the community not the workplace. My younger boy, who was 18, said "Mum, we'll have to do something, the village thinks this is a mixed marriage". And I said "Well, that's very unfair to poor Basil. They must know he is a Methodist". "And he said It's not Basil, it's you!" And it was only when I got interviewed for the local paper because I got a CBE or something, and was asked what my greatest influence was and I said it was the Non-Conformist Welsh chapel and my grandmother that was the strongest influence. There was a change then. Until they found out my mother was a Catholic.

I think of friends who have businesses around our area, some very wealthy guys and they do not like community relations and the fair employment legislation or its impact on their firms. They do not like asking people, you know, for the monitor, and I know there are one or two of them who quite determinedly would not employ Catholics. Sad.

Q What about the idea of "cherishing symbols" and its relationship with the legislation which outlaws such items in the workplace?

A There was the whole thing where people would put flags for VE day. I have taken down flags that they'd tied to our downpipes before now in the Square and they don't put them up any more. I'd say they were trespassing on our property or that it had just been painted. But I'd put out European flags or the flags of the Twelfth. I have them in the window. I have the Irish tricolour there. So it would be quite nice if people could have their tricolours and have their Union Jacks in an ideal world, so that equal value was given to them, but I don't think we have got to that stage yet.

People still need some protection, because they are not really put there as a cherished symbol but more as a supremacy or threat symbol. Really, I dislike it when they do the mini-Twelfth through the village. They make a point of always stopping outside our door and playing the Lambeg drum. They do the same to one local pub and they do the same to a particular local shop because they were the only two that stayed open during the Day of Action after the Hillsborough Agreement. Obviously, I also went to work and I also went, when I came home, into the pub and into the shop. It was a case of solidarity. Just underneath the surface there is a trend of violence and threat which, for me, is not comfortable. Also, I was down in Crossmaglen recently and I found it quite threatening with the RUC Out and RUC bastards and all those "sectarian force" signs absolutely everywhere.

Q What do you think would be the best way of undermining such aggression?

A I think if you take the flags down it becomes confrontational. If you legislate, it is also rather confrontational. But you can legislate within the workforce and I think you have to at this stage. It would be nice if we got to a point where somebody could have a picture of the Queen up and somebody else could have a picture of the Pope or Mary Robinson. But I don't feel we've got to that stage yet.

Q Generally speaking, do you think that conferences involving community relations people and business people is of use?

A Yes, I think so. You could do work within a workforce, specific to that workforce, rather like one local firm did with their shop stewards. I lectured on that course with Bob Cooper. They were struggling in realising that they had to tackle the religious discrimination issue. I have a feeling they were all Prods, and they were all men, and they realised that there was a threat of disinvestment and everything else unless something was addressed. But they still felt comfortable enough to be sexist. One said "Oh, I wouldn't like to employ a woman because she would have periods". I said "Are you saying that men are equable all the time?" I can remember I shocked them horribly because they went back to their managing director who was on the Equal Opportunities Commission. One of them said to me "is there anything then that you think a man can do better than a woman?" and I said "Ya, piss down wind". I don't

think they thought it was very ladylike! So sometimes confronting within the workforce can be done through small seminars.

I know Mari Fitzduff quite well, but I have never directly used the Community Relations Council. I would be friendly, but I'm not a normal representative of employers in a way, because I am in that business myself.

Q How would you assess the conference as a whole?

A It was very useful to have people be able to open up about sectarianism in the workforce. There was still a bit of denial with some of the employers and also a feeling of unwillingness to label people because they felt that was being sectarian. Some understood that a beginning was needed, that you have to go through that stage before you can come out with a truly equal society. There was a little bit of smugness from one or two employers and I think that could have been attacked slightly because of all the discussion that was going on.

It was a very worthwhile exercise. One of the important things was that people felt confident enough to be fairly honest and frank because they weren't going to be reported because there weren't any journalists there.

Support and Advice

Interface, Colin Neilands

Workshops and Courses

Interface, the WEA's Anti-sectarian Education Project, offers a range of "off the peg" and tailor-made workshops and courses covering a variety of approaches to community relations work. The work of the project has spread to all parts of Northern Ireland and mutually supportive relationships have been built with many of the local district councils' community relations programmes. The standard workshops and courses are outlined in more detail in a catalogue which is available from the WEA.

Working with Agencies

The project is especially interested in working with agencies to assist in the development and delivery of awareness and policy/practice training programmes in the area of equal opportunities, particularly focusing on anti-sectarianism. It is one of the encouraging developments of the past year that a small number of agencies have begun to actively explore these issues which previously would have been perceived as too sensitive/dangerous to approach.

Course Packs

In the past year Interface has also produced the first of a planned series of course packs. The Us and Them pack contains materials for a 10-unit course which aims to assist individuals and groups to explore the complexities, origins, myths and conflicts which may surround their sense of identity living in N.I.; topics covered include - symbols, cultural traditions, roots, religious labels, borders and nationalities. Work is currently underway on the second pack, provisionally entitled Paths Through the Past which is a general introduction to the study of Irish history (this course has already proved enormously successful around the country). Future packs will include materials for the exploration of politics (past, present and future) and to encourage the sharing of our stories of living through the past 25/26 years.

Question Time

Just prior to the cease-fires Interface held its first Question Time event, an evening of discussion simulated by a panel of leading figures in the fields of politics, academia, the churches, the voluntary sector, education and trade unions. Buoyed by the cease-fires and the publication of the Framework document the autumn and spring saw 15 more of these lively discussion evenings in 12 towns across the six counties. Topics discussed included not only constitutional politics but also many concerns on social and economic issues. The project plans to continue its work in the promotion of public political discussion through this and other formats.

The Future

Interface hopes to secure funding to expand its current work and to build greater resources for the continuation of community relations training and education both within and beyond the lifespan of the project.

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Counteract, Billy Robinson

Development

Since the C.R.C. Conference Counteract has continued to develop its training programme with trade unionists, employers and community groups. Counteract has developed two new initiatives this year the first was the establishment of a new unit of work an “anti-intimidation support unit”.

Anti-intimidation Support Unit

The aims of the new unit are:

- ◆ to develop models of anti-intimidation practices to be used by local communities
- ◆ assisting local groups to develop such initiatives
- ◆ assisting the development of overall strategies and programmes of prevention
- ◆ supporting training initiatives in co-operation with relevant agencies

The establishment of the new unit entailed the recruitment of two additional staff for a three year period. Funding for the project has been received from the European Physical and Social Programme (PSEP) (1994-1999)

The Inside Story

Our second project was the production of an inter-active training video on sectarianism in the workplace. This was produced as a training aid for presenters providing seminars on anti-sectarianism. It is envisaged that the package will be used by trade unions, employers, educationalists and community groups. With the video is a comprehensive training-aid for those taking up the use of the video to assist the presenter conducting the seminars, work groups etc. In addition as part of the package organisations who take up the use of the video will be invited to attend a seminar provided by Counteract on the best method of using the training guide. We also offer continuing support/advice and updating information.

Video Format

The format of the video takes the shape of two dramas depicting sectarian activities in the workplace with reprise taken by local actor Adrian Dunbar highlighting the issues which need to be addressed. The First drama involves a young Catholic woman on her first job who experiences obvious threats and hostilities from her Protestant co-workers. The second involves a Protestant man who experiences a more subtle form of harassment from his predominantly Catholic workmates of 15 years.

The video itself can stand on its own in that running time is 35 minutes and it could for example be used within team briefs, quality circles etc.

Funding

Funding for the production of the video was received from The Queen’s University of Belfast, The University of Ulster, the European Commission, Employers - N.I.E, Shorts pic, Harland & Wolff, Citybus, the Training and Employment Agency, the Fair Employment Commission and the Community Relations Council.

The Future

In the coming year Counteract have a number of other projects we are hoping to develop. One of which is in relation to young people within Youth Training Programmes.

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Keith Brown, Director of Advice and Information, Fair Employment Commission

Advice and Information

The Advice and Information Department of the Fair Employment Commission provides advice, guidance and training on matters relating to fair employment legislation and the Code of Practice, to a wide range of individuals and groups. These include the general public, private and public sector concerns, government agencies, trade unions and employer associations, educational and training establishments and voluntary organisations.

Partnership

In addition to receiving assistance on particular issues many organisations are now seeing the benefit of working in partnership with the Commission to develop and implement their equal opportunity training strategy.

Equality of Opportunity

Employers in particular are responsible for providing equality of opportunity for all employees and training can form a vital part of any well-planned strategy which aims to establish and maintain an environment where equality of opportunity and fair employment are effectively practised

Equality awareness training

Equality awareness training enables organisations to translate their commitment to equality of opportunity into effective and visible practice by placing their affirmative action in context, explaining any associated concerns or misconceptions and examining the benefits of equality of opportunity and fair participation.

Preventing sectarian harassment

In addition to requests for training in relation to best practice in recruitment and selection, the Commission has undertaken an increasing amount of work this year in the area of preventing and dealing with sectarian harassment in the workplace.

Sectarian harassment is a serious workplace problem in Northern Ireland. Recognising this, the Commission has made widely available copies of a model policy and procedure to deal with sectarian harassment and guidelines on the effective implementation of the model policy and procedure are currently being finalised.

Training to prevent and deal with sectarian harassment has been provided by staff from the Commission for public and private sector concerns, voluntary organisations and trade unions and the demand for focused workshops on this issue is growing. Training is an essential part of a process to create and maintain an environment where sectarian harassment is unacceptable. It also provides an ideal opportunity for management to restate and reinforce the organisations commitment to eliminate sectarian harassment.

Planned Approach

Engaging in a planned structured approach to preventing sectarian harassment and delivering equality of opportunity and fair participation, can give a clear message to current and prospective employees of the organisations commitment to progress particularly if it includes contributions from recognised trade unions and is openly backed by key staff.

Advisory and Training Services

Staff from the Commission are available to provide free and confidential advisory and training services relating to any issue arising from the fair employment legislation and Code of Practice.

Contact:

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A Community Relations Checklist

Will Glendinning
Community Relations Council,

This checklist has been drawn up to assist organisations in considering if they are operating as welcoming or inclusive to those from a variety of traditions, cultures, religions, or political backgrounds or whether there are some barriers apparent to people outside the group but not obvious to those involved. The list is not exclusive and should not be taken as absolute but rather as a guide to aid discussion in an organisation.

All the guidelines may not be relevant to your group or project. The guide does not try to give any specific answers or proposals as these will vary from project to project and area to area. The critical issue is that there is discussion and consequent decisions in the project or organisation.

The Community Relations Council is of course willing to give advice and support or suggest where such advice and support can be found to help you with those discussions and decisions.

1. Does the make up of the group at all levels i.e. users, membership, committee, staff, officers, patrons reflect the breakdown of the local population with regard to political, religious or cultural differences? If not, what action can be taken to try to redress any imbalance? In this you are not looking for exact quotas or numbers but for trends.
2. Does the group use venues for its meetings which are seen as welcoming and accessible to those of all traditions and backgrounds. Is the venue seen as “open” and “safe”?
3. While the venue itself may be seen as “neutral” does travel to it mean that people have to travel through “foreign” or what they might see as “hostile” territory?
4. In sending out information about the group’s activities does it ensure that the information is provided through what may be different networks which may operate in differing communities?
5. Has the group developed ways in which issues of potential sectarian difference can be raised and discussed in the group without rancour and can then hopefully be resolved? The lack of being able to do this is most often shown by silence or avoidance.
6. Is the name of the group seen as being associated with only one tradition or with a variety of traditions?
7. Does the group or the venues it uses have symbols which can be seen as being identified with only one tradition?
8. Do the users of the group’s facilities or premises carry with them a perceived connection or support of one community and not another?
9. Does the group make any positive statement about principles of being open, cross-community, anti-sectarian?
10. Has the group developed guidelines for staff, users, members etc. about potential issues of sectarian, political or other forms of harassment and are these clearly available and shown to people? Are there training and induction procedures on the reasons for the guidelines and their use?

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