

Guidelines for a
Community
Relations
Strategy
for Public Bodies



Community Relations Council

Introduction

The new Equality legislation imposes an obligation on public bodies to promote 'Good Relations' between people of different religious beliefs, political opinions and racial groupings. That proposal has been incorporated in the Northern Ireland Act, Section 75 (2).

Without prejudice to its obligations under subsection (1), a public authority shall, in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of differing religious beliefs, political opinions or racial groups.

The development and operation of this duty is to be carried out through the Equality Scheme that the public authority draws up. The Community Relations Council has developed guidelines for a 'Good Relations Policy' which public bodies can use to assist them in the development of their own equality scheme. The area of expertise of the Community Relations Council relates to this 'Good Relations' element of any equality scheme.

Good relations in any organisation can only be developed on the basis of equality and full equality will only come if there are good relations.

These guidelines have been developed through work which the Community Relations Council has carried out with public bodies in a variety of sectors including District Councils, Health and Social Services, Higher and Further Education, and others.

People in countries across the world are already familiar with equity issues in the context of disability, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and responsibility or non-responsibility for dependents. In Northern Ireland we have the additional issues of differing religious belief and political opinion. Wherever we work and live, handling division positively is an important factor in how we conduct our business.

Good organisations are built on effective teams of people working together to achieve a common organisational purpose and using their individual talents and experiences to contribute to a cohesive whole. The principle underpinning this work is that community relations, which includes equity, respect for diversity and interdependence is a critical part of the policies, procedures and ethos of organisations. It will impact on the organisation in its internal working and on its ability to attract staff/clients from as wide a background as possible. Work on this is not an end in itself but part of recognising and handling the effects and impacts of the society in which we operate.

Will Glendinning

Chief Executive
Community Relations Council

April 2000

Guidelines

The Community Relations Council proposes that a 'Good Relations Policy' which public authorities could use as part of an equality scheme should include the following:

1. A statement of commitment to promote good relations as required by the Act, and recognition that Good Relations will only be developed if there is equality as required under the legislation.

The Council believes that equality can only be properly established if there are also 'good relations', and that both requirements of the legislation are dependent on each other. The statement will need to be specific for each organisation but it should:

- ◆ include a commitment by the organisation to the three principles of Community Relations, i.e.
 - Equity:** equality of access to resources
 - Respecting Diversity:** recognition, understanding and tolerance of difference
 - Interdependence:** obligations and commitments to others, inter-connectedness
- ◆ establish the context of the policy, and show that the organisation wishes to reflect the diverse nature of society as portrayed through diverse cultures, classes, creeds, political opinions and ethnic origins (While these are the specific issues which are covered by legislation a policy can go beyond those limits and the Community Relations Council would support such an extension to cover other areas);
- ◆ be concerned with recognising our differences and making the most of everyone's potential, and not simply with eliminating discrimination, harassment and intimidation;
- ◆ state that there should be respect for diverse backgrounds of people not only in the organisation but with those whom it has, and may have, dealings either as staff, clients, suppliers or the general public;
- ◆ Include a commitment that diversity will be managed in a constructive and productive way so that everyone will be encouraged to meet their full potential, and that differences will be respected and valued;
- ◆ include a commitment that the issue is being taken seriously by the senior management of the organisation, and that this involves more than the drawing up of a list of taboo subjects which must never be discussed, but instead that it involves the

development of relationships of trust and respect in which even the delicate or divisive issues can be discussed;

- ◆ emphasise that the freedom to discuss sensitive issues in a non-threatening manner is vital if the organisation is to be able to meet the needs of a diverse society;
- ◆ state that the policy is important for the organisation in order to enable it to fulfil its mainstream function in this diverse society, and that therefore the policy must be linked to the functions of the organisation;
- ◆ make clear that the policy applies equally throughout the organisation and that all levels and grades will be part of training and monitoring of the policy.

2. The conduct of :

- ◆ an **internal audit** of the organisation to determine the state of relations in the organisation;
- ◆ an **external audit** to ascertain how the organisation is perceived in the community it serves by those from different religious beliefs, political opinions or racial groups; this audit may also relate to other parties in the organisation's supply chain.

3. A commitment to act on the outcome of the audit and to introduce policies and procedures to support areas where there are positive indicators, and redress areas where there are deficiencies.

4. The identification of people within the organisation who have the responsibility for the 'Good Relations' duty and the identification of resources for the task.

5. The creation of the freedom for staff to discuss community relations and cultural diversity as part of the development of the 'good relations' duty and in furtherance of the delivery of services in a divided society, without any prejudice to the development of the general equality agenda.

6. The development and implementation of training necessary for staff as required in the equality scheme.

7. The development of a system to review the implementation and working of the policy and practices on a regular basis in set time frames.

Further information

Useful Publications

Anti-sectarianism Means Business, Counteract
Consensus Building for Community Leaders/Activists,
Counteract
Counteract Trainers' Guide, Counteract
Doing Business in a Divided Society (1998) Community
Relations Council
*Getting Off the Fence - Challenging Sectarianism in Personal
Social Services* (1999) Central Council for Education and
Training in Social Work
Organisational Audits (1999) Community Relations Council
Sectarian Harassment in the Workplace, Counteract [Booklet
and video]
Service Delivery in a Divided Society (1999) Dunn, S &
Morgan, V. eds., Community Relations Council
Social Work and Social Change in Northern Ireland, (1999)
Campbell, J, Pinkerton et al., Central Council for Education and
Training in Social Work
Understanding Affirmative Action, Counteract
*A Worthwhile Venture? Practically Investing in Equity, Diversity
& Interdependence in Northern Ireland* (1997) Eyben, K,
Morrow, D, Wilson, D., Future Ways, University of Ulster
*Divided Society: Ethnic Minorities and Racism in Northern
Ireland* (1998) Hainsworth, P. ed., Pluto Press
Anti-sectarian Work - A Framework for Action (1994) Logue, K.
Community Relations Council

Useful Web Sites

Community Relations Council
www.community-relations.org.uk

Commission for Racial Equality
www.cre.gov.uk/about/cre_ni.html

Equality Commission
www.equalityni.org



For more information contact:
Community Relations Council
6 Murray Street,
Belfast BT1 6DN
Tel: 028 9022 7500
Fax: 028 9022 7551
info@community-relations.org.uk
<http://www.community-relations.org.uk>