

# Organisational Audits

## Introduction

Research has shown that sectarian division plays a part in how people relate to each other and to the services that are provided or needed.

The communal divisions are seen to affect decisions people make about where they access services. Segregation and the labelling of areas can make people feel 'comfortable' or 'safe' in one area and 'uncomfortable' or 'unsafe' in another. These feelings or perceptions can be coloured by the prevailing political climate, what is happening in the neighbourhood, by the time of year or even whether it is day or night. The perceptions can also be different for people of different economic or social backgrounds, gender or age. This is reflected in their willingness to use the facilities and services provided. One result may be that people travel long distances to access services if those located close by are in territory which is perceived as potentially unsafe. Another result may be equality of opportunity implications for public access to the services.

There can also be cost implications for the organisation in the delivery of service. It may be that service is provided in a segregated fashion resulting in duplication and additional running costs, or that the service is not being used by a particular section of the community. In the latter case clients or customers, as well as the funding that comes with them, are being lost by the organisation. Even if the area is seen belonging to one particular tradition there can be issues of division within that tradition.

As part of marketing strategies or consumer research on the service provided organisations often carry out an 'Audit'. Through this a profile of the organisation can be obtained. From this an organisation can find out how it is seen by its customers/clients and by those potential customers/clients who do not make use of the services. In any such audit or research there is a strong case for the inclusion of how the sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland affect perceptions of the organisation and the services it provides. In addition to looking at the organisation, an important part of any analysis is a profile of the area served, its needs, current services, desires of local people and the degree of segregation.

Looking at these issues can be difficult. Sometimes we are inclined to avoid asking the necessary questions because we are not sure how to go about it without causing offence or hurt. We may be concerned that asking these questions sends out the message that the organisation has something to hide, that there is a problem. Yet, we can only be sure that segregation and sectarian division are not factors if the questions have been asked. Your organisation is not unique; like all others in Northern Ireland, it serves a divided society and it would be very strange if it was completely insulated from the effects of those divisions.

We may be concerned that asking questions about what are sensitive issues will damage existing relationships among staff and clients across those sectarian divides, or that intervention may make the poor level of relationships worse. It may be that some people are aware of these issues but do not know how to raise them with their colleagues. It can also be the case that the organisation has had to respond to a particular problem or incident but does not have any policies or procedures to assist and guide staff as to how they should react.

The experience that the Community Relations Council has developed from working with people from a variety of areas is that it is beneficial to look at these issues. If this is done sensitively the result is a better understanding of the organisation and of the local community, and any service provision is more soundly based. Policies and procedures will be also be developed to support staff and clients if incidents should occur.

The situation here is probably best described in the quote from Carlo Gebler's book *The Glass Curtain*;

"There's a glass curtain here. Many people can't see it, or won't. But it's here alright, separating the two communities, only you don't find out about it until you walk into it and break your nose." In this publication the Community Relations Council has drawn on the experience of organisations which have carried out audits with a community relations perspective. In some cases community relations or sectarianism has been the main or single focus of the audit. In most it has been a part of a wider examination of an area or of an organisation and how it is perceived. The questions asked and issues raised are there as examples and may or may not be relevant to your area or organisation.

In addition the Government's White Paper 'Partnership for Equality' and the 'Good Friday Agreement' make it dear that equality measures will be extended to cover 'goods and services' and that public bodies 'promote equality of opportunity and that this could be extended to 'the promotion of good relations between people form different religious and political opinions, and people of different racial groups.

Those of us from outside can only advise. You are the experts. You alone will have to take the responsibility for your audit and be able to act on its conclusions.