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Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow

Building a united community

Just over a year ago, we witnessed the launch of TBUC - the Executive's strategy "Together Building a United Community", which has the aim of "improving community relations and building a united and shared society" (pg 1). Its vision was based on "equality of opportunity [and] the desirability of good relations and reconciliation" (pg 2). This strategy was to provide a framework "for government action in tackling sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance, while seeking to address division, hate and separation" (ibid). The challenge was that "everyone has a role to play" in achieving this shared vision.



Now these were and are laudable aims and there is no doubt that we are all, in some way, accountable for addressing the ongoing divisions that have beset this society for decades.

One of the key areas highlighted in the strategy was how we, as a society emerging from conflict, will address the issue of good relations. Currently there is no legal definition of good relations, a fact which will surprise many of you. In some ways, this is understandable, as, unlike discriminatory practice and behaviours, it is not something which can be easily defined. We know what bad relations are but it is less simple to define good relations.

Part of this difficulty revolves around how we understand the concept. For example, do we understand good relations as an outcome of work done or do we see it as a methodology or an activity aimed at delivering an outcome. In brief, do we **do** good relations (promote activities) or do we aim towards a society which works on particular good relations values/principles? It is my view that it is both a method and an outcome.

Since publication of the TBUC strategy, we in the Equality Commission have consistently said that a definition of good relations is critical. It is needed to ensure clarity and consistency of purpose in shaping actions; and to provide guidance on measuring the effectiveness of actions to promote good relations.

The importance of this was apparent in the discussions at a recent stakeholder event addressing the issue of good relations, as was the view that any definition needed to extend the meaning beyond the “two traditions” model. While there was some support for the existing definition used in the Equality Act in Great Britain to “tackle prejudice and promote understanding”, some delegates considered that any definition needed to better reflect the Northern Ireland context and that it might perhaps be worth adding “and reconciliation” to “understanding”.

It is self evident that good relations is not something which operates outside real time and which is unaffected by circumstances. Given this fact, there are a number of interventions involved in delivering a society which is more at ease with difference, including awareness-raising, through challenge, support, encouragement and training, to modelling and rewarding good practice.

To model good relations is something which is incumbent on all of us. It is too easy to knock our political leaders and to have detached, sometimes ill informed discussions about how things haven’t moved on and express our frustration with the “peace process”.

All too often N Ireland makes the news for the wrong reasons; whether that is to do with race attacks, sectarian tensions or political impasses. If we get this strategy right, maybe, just maybe, we can begin to show another side to Northern Ireland. One where we become more comfortable with difference, more at ease with ourselves and all of us who have made this place their home.

The challenge is there... there is no room for bystanders.



Read the Chief Commissioner’s blog *“Here’s the thing...”*

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