



Principles for Equality of Opportunity and Good Relations in Local Government Reform

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Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



'Everything has a consequence. All policy decisions by Government, by public authorities, by large private companies, whether international or national; all decisions by communities, by small companies, by individuals – all our actions have consequences that affect others, whether we wish it so or not.

This is a call to those with responsibility to remember the reality of inequality, to have it in mind in the decisions they take and to adjust or modify those decisions so that they can reduce its consequences in the lives of people'

(Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner. October 2007)



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The context

The Equality Commission has the vision of Northern Ireland as a shared, integrated and inclusive place, a society where difference is respected and valued, based on equality and fairness for the entire community.

Through ongoing local government reform, particularly the Review of Public Administration (RPA), there is not only a once in a generation chance, but also the imperative, to fully embed equality of opportunity and good relations in public services.

While the changing political, economic and social environment played a part in the introduction of a reform agenda for public services in Northern Ireland, a major driver was Government's priority of efficiency and effectiveness in public service delivery itself.

Reorganisation, though, will not of itself ensure that the deep seated change occurs which will influence fully the achievement of an inclusive, open, healthy, just and equal society in which everyone can contribute. Commitment and action are needed to achieve this.

There are lessons to be learnt from past experience in public service provision as well as new and testing ways of working to achieve this. The unique mechanism of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, 1998 (s 75) will assist in making the fundamental cultural and practical changes which will deliver public services with equality of opportunity and good relations at their heart.

The principles

In maximising the opportunities presented by public service reform there are a number of important principles which should be embraced



by organisations at each stage – in creating the new structures, in achieving the change and in delivering future services. Essential among them are

- leadership
- communication
- accountability and information
- collaboration
- inclusion

These principles also apply in the period of transition, which presents opportunities and challenges in itself.

Leadership

Leadership is critical to drive positive cultural and institutional change in local government towards the development and delivery of best quality services in a way which promotes equality and good relations. Elected representatives and senior staff should be clear in their vision and be champions of equality of opportunity and good relations in their work.

This is necessary for the creation of new institutions and new services which have regard to the needs of everyone. Leadership can go beyond simply seeking consensus and agreement to recognising disagreement and finding new pathways through.

Clear leadership which identifies the direction and sets the tone is critical to the successful implementation of the good relations duty. Leaders of public authorities need to demonstrate publicly in an unequivocal manner that promoting good relations is both central to and a measure of their success. The duty is not just directed at removing or avoiding occasions of difficulty between various groups but, rather, is intended actively to encourage the expression of good relations and their promotion in all aspects of an authority's work. The inclusion of the duty in the legislation that sets out the constitutional framework for Northern Ireland is not a mere token or a platitude. It is intended to be transformative; it is about changing attitudes as well as behaviour.

Foreword, Guide to Good Relations, ECNI



In practice

- In local government, equality of opportunity and good relations should be enshrined in the Code of Conduct for Councillors in order that the obligations in s 75 are reflected in how the council does its work. Using such a code as a standard will mean that the work of councillors and officers will achieve the maximum benefit in the services delivered. Good governance is the context for both respect and best practice
- Effective leadership will result in clear expectations set by Chairs, Board Members and Chief Officers, with known organisational behaviour, underlining the commitment to equality and good relations. Standards of behaviour will be clear
- Equality of opportunity and good relations will be apparent in corporate planning objectives, targets and performance measures, alongside commitment to resources
- Those responsible for policy decisions, including Chairs, Board Members, Councillors and Chief Officers are trained and have a full understanding of the anti-discrimination legislation, equality of opportunity and good relations
- Individuals throughout an organisation will be clear in their roles, and implementation and delivery measures built into performance management
- Those driving civic leadership will recognise the responsibility to bring people to challenge the accepted, to persuade others to change if necessary, to be supportive and to change by example. It is a central question of fairness, equity and justice in our society
- Leaders will take action to assess where under-representation occurs, for example of women, within their sphere of influence, and take measures to address this

The exercise of leadership will ensure that equality of opportunity and good relations are integral to core business in an organisation.



Communication

Public service delivery must meet the needs of everyone. Those responsible for its governance and its administration must capture and respond to peoples' aspirations and expectations.

This is important in building confidence and cooperation across and between communities and requires that the imperatives which drive equality of opportunity and good relations are understood and promoted. It is in this way that misunderstanding, concerns and fears can be identified and dealt with and that everyone can embrace equality of opportunity and good relations.

It will require communication of the highest standard, to listen, interpret and articulate clear resulting objectives. The proposed power of wellbeing will allow new, innovative and creative ways of meeting objectives which marry with existing high quality service provision and experience. Local authorities will learn from employees with professional expertise and personal experience, by seeking out people excluded by inaccessible service and by hearing from people for whom public service delivery works. The framework of an equality scheme and consultation requirements are central to this.

In practice

- There is consistency of message within and from an organisation
- There is good communication within an organisation both horizontally and vertically, particularly during strategic planning and the planning of services
- Consultation is engaging, inclusive and part of a learning process for the organisation in the best delivery of services
- Progress and ongoing commitment are clear in messages conveyed
- Forums are established where difficult issues can be raised, discussed and resolved

Building horizontal and vertical relationships results in good planning and decision making and ownership of the objectives.



Accountability and information

Public service delivery fit for purpose requires an understanding of all of the dimensions and multiple dimensions of people's lives and the situations in which they find themselves. This demands difficult decisions.

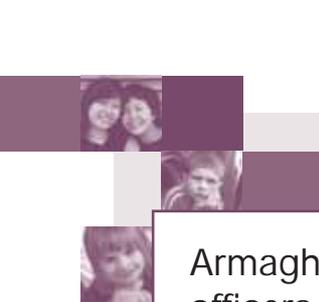
Good relations and equality of opportunity are inextricably linked in responding to people's needs. They are not competing ideals, even where positive action measures are required. Nor is there a hierarchy of equalities. The full extent of identity must be taken into account.

Systematic dialogue and assessment of impact are the tools for achieving completeness. They create understanding and assist in responding to complex demands. Whatever the divisions in society there is agreement that good local government, as well as education and health and social care, should be afforded to all.

In practice

- The process of equality impact assessment and consultation contribute to an ever increasing knowledge and understanding of the complex needs of an organisation's customers/clients/residents or services users. This information is continually used and built upon
- The organisation provides clear reasoning for its decision making, and makes the evidence available consistently
- The knowledge, understanding and response to complex needs are made available for better collaborative working arrangements, such as for community planning
- The demonstration of responding to complex needs and difficult issues results in a greater confidence, trust and acceptance of diversity amongst service users

Once impact assessment mechanisms are in place, used and developed they give information which allows the difficult decisions to be made. Assessing, understanding and articulating impact allows good decision making and consideration of both perceived and actual impacts.



Armagh City and District Council established a working group, involving officers from a cross section of Council Departments (including the Community Relations Officers), to decide on a research protocol for the development of a Good Relations Strategy.

The methodology used included desk top research, questionnaire and focus groups. The questionnaire was designed to include six areas namely: community involvement, religion, political opinion, race, disability and sexual orientation.

The personal data section requested details along the Section 75 categories. Two thousand questionnaires were sent on a random basis throughout the City and District with over 400 responses, and the results analysed by the Diversity & Equality Manager. From these findings, focus groups were facilitated by a firm of independent consultants. These involved public meetings and targeted consultations with 'hard to reach groups'. Focus groups were also held with Councillors and staff. The combined research has illustrated the wide 'diversity' within the City and District as well as highlighting the many positive and negative aspects of Good Relations throughout the area.



Collaboration

Equality of opportunity and good relations will be mainstreamed only when policy making is transparent and informed.

Demonstrating fairness and transparency allows people to accept change and matters even if they do not like them.

Working within the s 75 framework assists this through developing audit, action plans, impact assessment, evaluation, reporting and review. This allows for accessible accountability.

In practice

- The value of a collaborative approach to working with other organisations is recognised, valued and commitments made to pursue this way of working
- A needs based approach to service delivery planning ensures collaboration with those from other organisations, NGOs and end users to identify the best options
- Economies of scale are identified and service delivery or planning structures are changed to capitalise on them; community planning will present opportunities for change on this basis

This will help develop shared services and consistency and new understanding of the nature of partnerships and mainstreaming will develop.

The corporate plans of the Staff Commission for the Education and Library Boards and the five Education and Library Boards declare that the organisation fully supports the principles of fairness, equality, accessibility, inclusivity and promotion of choice and have as a key corporate objective or core value the promotion of equality, rights and social inclusion.

Each states that objectives and targets relating to the statutory duties have been mainstreamed into the organisation's corporate and business plans and that equality objectives have been built into performance targets.



Inclusion

Underpinning all of the principles is the principle of inclusion. The future of public service delivery will require partnership, sharing and the development of people's ability to be involved in decision making.

Future planning and delivery of services must involve everyone and be informed by people who understand inequalities because of how they experience them.

This will be achieved through training, developing capacity, raising awareness and being aware. The quality of consultation must be enhanced to ensure that meaningful engagement. Discussion and debate across civil society can ameliorate the negative effects of political opinion which inevitably polarises on certain issues.

In practice

- Using the s 75 framework for screening and assessing impact, opportunities will be sought for the improvement of services from those who have experience of services or useful information to contribute
- An organisation will increase its knowledge of the constituency it serves and the needs of groups or individuals, and of the different needs of those in urban or rural environments
- Effective partnership working facilitates informed decision making and effective service delivery
- There is greater visibility of and participation by under-represented groups in public life, whether disabled people, women, young people or those from ethnic minority backgrounds. The organisation has taken action to assess where under-representation occurs and has taken measures to address this

Such an exchange can also build trust and ease in diversity. It also acknowledges the economic and moral arguments against parallel services.



In transition

Organisational change occurs over time, both in the planning and the implementation of new structures and procedures. The RPA is a long term change programme. The principles contained within this briefing apply during the transition time. There are specific issues that need to be addressed during transition

- The decisions taken both at sectoral and geographic level that will determine the organisational structures, functions or services delivered should be screened and undergo equality impact assessment as required
- The impact of locational decisions, such as the site for a newly established organisation, need to be considered in the broadest context. Screening and EQIA as required needs to be undertaken at the highest strategic level
- The impact of change on staff needs to be considered on an ongoing basis, to ensure that equality of opportunity, good relations and fairness are maintained

Conclusion

With good, permissive governance and careful inclusive planning clear and relevant objectives will be set. If consultation, performance management and evaluation are rigorous all aspects of public services – procurement, workforce, effective partnerships – will have equality and good relations at the heart.

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Further information and advice

For further information and advice on embedding equality of opportunity and good relations in public services or if you would like to find out more about the Equality Commission and its work, contact us:



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