

## **BUILDING ON DIVERSITY - SUPPORTING A COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL STRATEGY TO COMBAT DISCRIMINATION**

**Promoting cooperation and a partnership approach to diversity issues in the workplace is the ambitious objective of Diversity Matters, a Development Partnership (DP) based in Belfast but with activities and a membership that stretch across the whole of Northern Ireland. It also hopes to engage the commitment of politicians and senior civil servants in achieving its objective.**

### **AIMS AND BACKGROUND OF THE DP**

Northern Ireland now has Equality legislation, which in terms of its provisions, is probably unrivalled in Europe. This is one positive legacy of the relatively recent community conflict and a history of discrimination on political or religious grounds. However, the translation of this legislation into practice often requires changes to be made in the organisational culture of firms and agencies and the [Diversity Matters](#) DP aims to assist in this respect.

The composition of Diversity Matters is a reflection of the philosophy behind the project. The DP believes that it is not possible to fight one form of discrimination without fighting all forms of discrimination. *"In order to fight racism, the Development Partnership must also fight religious bigotry, sexism, homophobia, ageism and disablism"* says Fiona McMahon, the DP Coordinator, *"and this is why Diversity Matters comprises representatives of the groupings that are affected by these types of discrimination together with 'official' bodies and employers who can take measures to address and correct the problems."* For example, in terms of diversity, the partnership includes organisations ranging from the 'Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly' to the 'Coalition on Sexual Orientation' that is a voluntary organisation without any paid staff.

The DP is led by [Disability Action](#), which is a representative body for disability organisations in Northern Ireland and the partnership was originally constructed to be of a realistic size in terms of the time and effort that would have to be devoted to its management. However, the project has also engaged the support of an additional five reference point organisations, i.e. groupings of people who have either experienced discrimination or have been involved in capacity building exercises at local level. These reference point organisations provide views on the DP's activities and progress from their different perspectives, and assist in the creation of training packages and the mainstreaming of the DP's outcomes.

### **ACTIVITIES AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

Now, Diversity Matters has started work on the development of its two main products. The first is a training package entitled 'Take the Challenge - Make the Change' designed for individuals who are marginalised in accessing employment and/or those that experience discrimination in the workplace. The model that is currently being piloted involves four modules spread over a total period of 20 hours on:

- Exploring personal identity;
- Common issues, uncommon experience;
- Equality, human rights and citizenship;
- Making the change

The last module is intended to equip participants with the ability to develop an action plan to promote diversity and with the personal skills to help influence change. It also provides all the participants with a chance to practise in presenting the case for change. Different group tasks and exercises are used in this module and there is also a session that enables the participants to become more aware of their personal strengths and skills.

The piloting began in Belfast and will be completed in the North West of Northern Ireland in September. During November 'training of trainer' courses for potential tutors will be held so that by the end of the year, the DP will be able to roll out a complete training package. It is intended that this package could be used by any individual or organisation interested in diversity, including those groups that experience, or work to combat, marginalisation or discrimination.

The second product will be a 'Diversity Management Package' for employers but work on this tool will not begin until 2004. The most important aspect of the two training packages is the direct involvement of the potential users in their development and, in the case of the employers' package, it will be designed to have a relevance to any particular sector or occupation.

The DP also plans to set up a 'Forum on Diversity' with politicians from all parties within the Northern Ireland Assembly and senior civil servants, to enhance understanding and encourage the development of innovative economic and employment policies related to diversity. The DP has made contact with the equality spokespersons of most of the political parties in NI and has attended and /or provided information at all of the annual party conferences and these regular political contacts will be maintained until the forum is established.

In terms of the future, all the community and voluntary sector groups within the Northern Irish partnership and its reference point organisations have made a commitment to use the 'Take the Challenge - Make the Change' package in their work. A lead will also be taken by other members of the DP such as the Equality Commission, the (Employers') Equality Forum and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in the implementation of the 'Diversity Management Package' for employers. The DP intends to market the two training packages and to establish a support system for users. Diversity Matters is very aware of the issue of transferability and expects to adapt and change the training programmes to fit the individual needs of the organisations wishing to implement them. This will require a partnership between the DP and the potential users that will maintain the principles and aims of the training programmes, as well as the practicalities of time and commitment.

## **TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION**

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Diversity Matters is a member of the [SEEN](#) (Strength in Equality European Network) Transnational Partnership (TP), which led by a Swedish DP and also has three Italian DPs and an Irish DP, as partners. The elements of the TP, which are of greatest interest to Diversity Matters are:

- The concept of protocols for the assessment of an individual's employability;
- Integration strategies for African immigrants

## **INVOLVEMENT IN ETG1**

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Two representatives from the DP attended the [Initial Workshop](#) of the EQUAL European Thematic Group on Employability, in Birmingham - Fiona McMahon and Martin Howell, the Director of for Corporate Social Responsibility of the 'Business in the Community' organisation in Northern Ireland. Both of them were particularly interested in "*the use of language within EQUAL, especially in the way in which agencies and organisations within DPs communicate with, and relate to, their beneficiaries and client groups.*" They felt that "*sometimes the language used can be unnecessarily complicated and on other occasion the tone can be unintentionally patronising.*" So, they were particularly pleased that the 'Strategies for Networking' Working Group that was proposed at Birmingham agreed that its remit should include 'a study of communication within local and regional networks and relevant National Thematic networks and the diverse variety of target groups'.

Fiona and Martin were also impressed with "*the use of Open Space as a technique to stimulate discussion and increase participation,*" and indicated this when just five days after the Workshop, they presented their report to other members of the DP. This meeting then decided that Diversity Matters should contribute to, and participate in, the Working Group on the 'Involvement of Employers' that had been established, at Birmingham.

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Link to [EQUAL database description](#)