

A CONCERTED ATTACK ON DISCRIMINATION

Northern Ireland now has equality legislation, which in terms of its provisions, is unrivalled in Europe. This is perhaps the only positive legacy of its community conflict and its history of discrimination on political or religious grounds. However, if the legislation is going to reduce discrimination and prejudice on office or factory floors, changes have to be made to the organisational cultures of firms and agencies.



“In order to fight any type of discrimination effectively, the strategy must be to fight all forms of discrimination” says Monica Wilson who is the Chair of [Diversity Matters](#) and also the Chief Executive Officer of Disability Action, a pioneering charity representing the interests of people with disabilities throughout Northern Ireland. At the outset, Monica stated very clearly that *“The DP will challenge any hierarchy in the acceptability of discrimination.”* This is why Diversity Matters includes groupings affected by the different forms of discrimination together with employers and official bodies, like the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister, the Equality Commission and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, which can take measures to address and correct the problems.

BUILDING THE CAPACITY FOR CHANGE



Monica Wilson (seated) and Fiona McMahon (far right) with other speakers and organisers at the 'Hate Crimes' Briefing Paper Launch

Diversity Matters aims to promote cooperation and a partnership approach to diversity issues in the workplace and while the DP is based in Belfast, its activities and membership stretch across the whole of Northern Ireland. A number of its activities have received considerable media coverage. For example, a briefing paper on Hate Crimes Legislation was launched the day that related legislation was enacted in Northern Ireland and the event was attended by several local politicians and covered by local newspapers, local radio and television stations and a national television channel.

Partners in Diversity Matters have a common belief that “Diversity is about individual and group relationships. It is not only the acknowledgement and appreciation of what is different in people but the value placed on this difference.” However, they face a real challenge in trying to spread this message because it is the ‘perceived differences’ between the two main ethno-religious communities, often labelled Catholic and Protestant or National and Unionist, which have caused so many of Northern Ireland’s problems. For example, they have resulted in several decades of sectarian violence and even recently, produced a marked shift in public opinion towards the more extreme political positions. It is sad, but perhaps not surprising that for many people the most important characteristic in defining other individuals is their allegiance to either of these two communities rather than their age, gender, disability, sexual orientation or even race. However, partners remain convinced that “there is now an increased understanding that Northern Ireland should no longer be consumed by ‘two community’ diversity and should recognise the many other ethnic and social groups diversities that now make up society,” and this understanding is exactly what the DP is working to achieve.

One of the first products that Diversity Matters has developed tackles discrimination and promotes diversity in the workplace. It is a modular training package entitled ‘Take the Challenge

– Make the Change’ or TCMC for short. TCMC is designed for those who are interested in, or responsible for, diversity in the workplace and aims to:

- Enable participants to explore their own identity and that of key groups in society;
- Explore the experiences of different groups and how society reacts to them;
- Examine the opportunities to promote diversity through legislation and personal and group initiatives.

In particular, the final modules help participants to develop their personal action plans to promote diversity within their own organisations. Participants also get the chance to argue for their plans and to present their cases for change to the rest of the course – a practical exercise that is invaluable when they have to convince colleagues or managers in their actual working situations. One woman explained *“I felt that the personal action plans to promote diversity were very useful elements of the course. These workshops made the issues discussed more real and this element allowed you to put into practice in your own life what you learnt in the course.”* The model was piloted in Belfast and then in the North West of Northern Ireland and the final version of the course has been delivered to organisations as diverse as government departments, voluntary organisations and political parties.

Whilst working with job-seekers or employees, the DP has also been addressing the needs of employers. It has organised two seminars - one contrasting the ‘Differences between Equal Opportunities and Diversity Management’ and the other on ‘Influencing Your Decision Maker’, as the feedback that the DP had received from HR staff was that no company or organisation can develop effective diversity strategies without support from the very top. In addition, a publication entitled ‘Profit from Difference: Good Practice in Diversity Management in Northern Ireland’ has been produced and the DP is in the process of creating an e-learning tool to spread the diversity messages further throughout the workforce. A local employer explained the relevance of all this activity to his company as *“it was always our intention to attract the best staff. To be able to do this you must make sure that the environment is as open as possible.”*



Participants in the first pilot of the TCMC Diversity Training Programme

To support all of its activities, the DP has developed a number of publications. In addition to those described in other parts of this text, the project has produced:

- ‘Who lives in a place like this?’ – the results of the 2001 census analysed by various groupings and communities of interest in Northern Ireland;
- ‘Hate Crimes’ – a briefing paper on crimes directed at people because of their religious affiliation, ethnic background, sexual orientation or disability and more importantly, on the new legislation that has been designed to prevent such crimes.

The original intention of Diversity Matters was to establish a Diversity Forum within the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Assembly was suspended in October 2002 creating the current political stalemate and an increased polarisation in political opinion. In this climate, Diversity Matters has approached its work in this policy area through individual meetings with political parties, attendance at party conferences and personal invitations to Diversity Matters events. This has resulted in 21 separate meetings with political representatives from all local political parties, information stalls at 11 political party conferences, and the attendance of Members of the European Parliament and Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly at several Diversity Matters’ events. Representatives of the DP have also chaired a ‘Gay Question Time’ event and organised a tailor-made diversity training course for Belfast City Councillors from one political party.

PROMOTING THE PARTNERSHIP

INVOLVING THE TARGET GROUPS

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. While the DP included bodies like Disability Action and the Coalition on Sexual Orientation, the partners soon recognised that they needed to become more aware of the views of other potential users. The solution that they found was to appoint five 'reference point' organisations. These are organisations that represent men, women, young people, the various religious faiths in Northern Ireland and a local community development initiative, which is in contrast to project's non-geographical communities of interest approach. The organisations provide expert information and advice and this has given the DP a wider representative base, without the official partnership becoming larger and more difficult to manage.

Another extension to the partnership's consultative activities included eight Focus Groups meetings and an Introductory Afternoon on the TCMC training. These events enabled over 100 people to give their views on the content of the training and how it should be run. Similarly, the DP's activities for employers were based on the outcomes of two Focus Groups involving 25 employer representatives.

STRUCTURING AN EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP



Employers and trade unionists join the Diversity Matters partners to launch the 'Profit from Difference' publication

The commitment and involvement of the partners are maintained through the seven working groups that provide them with the opportunity to concentrate on those main activities of the DP in which they are most interested and/or have the most expertise. This arrangement ensures that partners do not have to attend a large number of meetings, as they work in parallel on different elements of the project. A climate of trust has been created and gradually working groups have been given more responsibility for taking decisions on behalf of the whole partnership.

Other aspects of the DP's operations have been based on written agreements and, looking to the future, such an agreement has been signed covering the individual partner's rights and obligations in using and promoting the products of Diversity Matters and detailing those arrangements that will continue to monitor and maintain quality control in the use of these products.

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR MUTUAL LEARNING AND SUPPORT

Any issue that comes up which is either "controversial" or "political" is resolved by the partnership as a whole. For example, some people challenged the work that the partnership was doing on sexual orientation because it appeared to be in conflict with their religious beliefs. Similarly, early on there were some problems about the use of language and terminology and so the partnership produced "Mind Your Language?" This is a briefing paper that offers advice on the use of words relating to equality and different social groups and contains a Glossary of Terms. For example, 'Community of Interests', a term that is used quite often in the partnership, is defined as 'a group of people who see themselves belonging to a community with common interests e.g. carers, disabled people, older people, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) community.'

Apart from the issue of use of language, Diversity Matters has helped to promote a greater understanding within the DP of its partners and the issues that they are addressing. As the

partnership is very diverse in the organisations and the individuals that represent them, it has created many opportunities for mutual learning. Frank Fleming of the Equality Commission felt that *“it was an ‘eye opener’ to work with the different sectors and all partners learned from each other as the project progressed,”* whilst Patricia Bray from the North West Forum of People with Disabilities said that *“each of the participants came with a different interest and each went away with a much greater awareness of the areas covered especially the issues surrounding sexual orientation and ethnic minorities.”*

DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

The project’s concerted approach to discrimination was also useful in its dealings with politicians and the press and media. As Fiona McMahon, the Project Coordinator explained *“there are times when certain groups or issues have a higher political priority and therefore attract more media attention, for example the European Year of People with Disabilities. However, through our integrated approach, we were able to use the opportunities offered by that year not only to promote disability issues but issues related to all of our other communities of interest.”*

This coordinated approach has also helped public authorities to come to terms with their responsibilities under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Section 75 of the Act places a statutory duty on public authorities to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunities and to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group. The outcomes of Diversity Matters demonstrated to these authorities a coordinated, holistic method of tackling diversity because the DP’s partners had designed it as “a unique means of addressing section 75 issues around a joined-up approach to diversity.”

Diversity Matters has been an initial step in helping both not only public, but also private, employers to understand how they can translate legislative requirements into action. Now the need for more intensive research into good practice has been recognised by six of its nine partners and they will be involved in a second round EQUAL project called [Diversity Works](#) which will develop and pilot diversity management processes for NGOs, SMEs and public authorities.

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Link to [EQUAL database description](#)