



Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

NICVA'S RESPONSE TO PROMOTING GOOD RELATIONS – A GUIDE FOR PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

March 2007
CONS:729

1.0 BACKGROUND TO NICVA

- 1.1 NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. It provides over 1,000 members with information, advice, training and support services on a wide range of issues, together with representation for the sector as a whole.
- 1.2 NICVA works to achieve progressive social change, based on equality and equity, working through a community development approach, to empower local communities to pursue their own needs and agendas.

2.0 COMMENTS

- 2.1 NICVA welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. We have taken the opportunity already to respond to the Commission at a small seminar hosted with CRC, but will note our main points again here. We welcome the fact that detailed guidance is being produced on good relations for public authorities. Public authorities, as the major employers in Northern Ireland, as providers of services and as spenders of substantial resources are in a unique position to make a substantial contribution to good relations.
- 2.2 The obligations under Section 7 (2) have been largely neglected thus far by comparison with efforts put into Section 75 (1) and thus any development is timely and necessary. NICVA believes that A Shared Future is complementary to Section 75 parts (1) and (2). We welcome the Commission's recommendation to public bodies to think beyond compliance to build on good practice in other areas. There needs to be a proactive attitude to good relations within public bodies, and indeed further afield, if the vision in A Shared Future is to be realised.
- 2.3 NICVA shares concerns which were expressed at the feedback seminar held by ECNI and CRC that care must be taken not to dilute the focus on religious belief, political opinion and racial group. While promotion of good relations between other grounds is of course important and desirable, we must bear on mind what Northern Ireland's main problems have been and not allow focus on other grounds to draw attention away from tackling the very difficult issues of sectarianism and racism.
- 2.4 We note the duty placed on local Councils under the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to promote good relations between persons of different racial groups. With the potential new functions of local councils under the Review of Public Administration, including community planning, and the new Good Relations Challenge Programme under A Shared Future, NICVA believes that councils will have a key role to play in the future promotion of good relations. We agree that "councils should use these new powers and structures to maximise opportunities for embedding good relations into local services and governance

arrangements” and welcome the inclusion of a council as one of the good practice case studies within the guide.

- 2.5 In general, the case studies are very welcome as they provide concrete examples of what might otherwise seem a rather nebulous concept. The range of activities they highlight should provide ideas and encouragement to different kinds of public bodies about what they can usefully do that is practical and effective.
- 2.6 The recommendation that public bodies should develop a tailored Good Relations Strategy is desirable if they are to be taking the duty to promote good relations seriously. However, we are unclear as to the status of the Commission’s recommendations in this document. The Guide makes clear that it is not legally binding. Thus, when public authorities are told they “should detail their actions, planned and taken, and report on progress made in their annual progress reports on the implementation of Section 75” it is unclear whether this is optional or required.
- 2.7 While the definition of good relations in the document is fine, it would be more helpful if there was a standard definition of good relations that could be shared between CRC and ECNI and across the public sector. The document reference’s CRC’s suggested definition in its *Good Relations Framework*: “Good Relations challenges sectarianism and racism, promotes equality, develops respect for diversity and raises awareness of the interdependence of the people and institutions within NI.” It would seem to make sense that, if this definition is already in use, it could also be used by the Commission or that a common definition could be agreed by the two bodies. In this context we do not think it would be helpful for each public authority to “develop its own definition of good relations” as the document suggests – perhaps they should be encouraged to reflect more on what a clearly defined concept of good relations means for them in the discharge of their functions.
- 2.8 NICVA endorses the key principles set out in the Guidance and particularly welcomes the recognition in Collaboration and Coordination of “ensuring that the capacity of the voluntary and community sector to deliver community development ... is maintained and reinforced.
- 2.9 NICVA would recommend that some further consideration should be given to whether the Equality Impact Assessment tool is directly transferable to good relations. It may not be the best option simply to transfer the use of equality mechanisms to an area of work which is more focused on relationships between individuals and groups.
- 2.10 We welcome the highlighting of procurement as an area in which there are opportunities to promote both good relations and equality.

- 2.11 NICVA agrees that there should be both clarity and coherence when reporting on Section 75 (2) and on actions under the Triennial Action Plan for A Shared Future. There may scope for duplication or an impression that reporting on one may substitute for the other.