

Exploring Equality and Social Inclusion



Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

This fact sheet highlights the issues of Equality and Social Inclusion to be considered when developing a Service Centre Hub. It is important for anyone working in the community development sector to be aware of such issues in relation to practice as well as the wider policy implications as a whole. The issues outlined in this fact sheet are further developed within the content and activities of the whole series of fact sheets.

Discrimination

Society does not treat all people equally and many groups of people in our society experience discrimination. Discrimination can take many forms. At an individual level, it can involve put downs, being subjected to stereotyping, harassment and sometimes violence. On an institutional level, it may also involve being denied access to resources and opportunities through inappropriate policies. Discrimination can occur directly as a result of someone else's actions and intentions. It can also be the result of an indirect action or comment or lack of understanding.

Equality and the Law

Addressing discrimination and disadvantage and promoting understanding of equality are central to community development practice, practice which should inform any work towards developing a Service Centre Hub. Here we briefly outline relevant legislation around Equality. Further information can be obtained from the Equality Commission.

Northern Ireland is now subject to equality legislation under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This legislation provides a useful reference point for workers.

The legislation is intended to promote equality by:

- increasing participation and inclusion, particularly by those who have traditionally experienced discrimination
- changing the culture of decision making
- placing a more proactive approach on the promotion of equality at the heart of policy

Section 75 imposes a statutory duty on public authorities in Northern Ireland to examine all their new and existing policies in the context of addressing equality. The legislation lists nine categories under which people may experience discrimination. When focusing on issues around equality within community development work, it is useful to consider the experiences of people from these different categories.

Category

Religious belief
Political opinion
Racial group
Gender
Marital status
Age grouping
Persons with a disability
Persons with dependents
Sexual orientation

Social Inclusion

Social Inclusion has become a commonly used term in today's society and is often used in different ways. For some, Social Inclusion is about addressing poverty. Others use the term to describe social cohesion around the rights and responsibilities of both governments and citizens. Social Inclusion is about improving the quality of all services, maximising participation and responsibility, ensuring continued opportunity and equality for all – elements which should be at the core of thinking around developing a Service Centre Hub.

Why is it important to build Equality and Social Inclusion?

Challenging discrimination and promoting the empowerment of those who experience social exclusion is central to good community development practice. There are many ways of doing this and actions can range from simply providing support to those experiencing discrimination through to actions that directly challenge the root causes and seek to bring about change.

Community groups that are seeking to improve the quality of life in their communities through the development of a Service Centre Hub should strive to promote equality, inclusion and participation. The other fact sheets offer practical ideas and activities to support this.

It is important to note that in some cases it may be necessary to target measures and actions specifically at the target group experiencing discrimination and disadvantage. For example, if a community group is seeking to encourage more young people to get involved, the group needs to look at how attractive/interesting their meetings are for young people, when and where they are held, how much support there is for young people's active participation in the meetings and how much the group values the views and ideas the young people have.

Promoting Equality and Inclusion involves

- Encouraging respect for other people of different gender/ages/religions/cultures/traditions
- Providing accessible and flexible facilities and services for people of all abilities
- Promoting positive images in publicity and targeting publicity to reach those who are excluded

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- Talking and listening to the community regularly and acting on the outcome of these discussions

Equality and Inclusion Checklist

It is useful to draw up a checklist with which to assess activities in terms of equality and inclusion. It will also be beneficial to refer to specific agencies that work with some of the main target groups, for example, the Equality Commission, the NI Council for Ethnic Minorities, YouthAction, Disability Action and Age Concern, to ensure that all the necessary issues have been covered.

A checklist of questions is helpful for reflecting on working practices and identifying what actions need to be taken to promote equality and inclusion. The checklist below can be used with a community group to explore how they work together and their activities within the wider community.

Key Questions

- How diverse is the group? Do members come from different backgrounds, traditions? Do they have different interests and experiences?
- Are some members of the group treated more favourably or less favourably than others?
- How open and honest are group members with each other?
- Does the timing of events/activities prevent certain people from participating?
- Are venues shared and acceptable to people from different backgrounds and traditions?
- Do buildings used meet the needs of people with disabilities? For example, wheelchair access, lifts, loop systems etc.
- Are meetings designed to be participative and encourage involvement?
- What language is used? Can people understand the terms used, is there likely to be too much jargon?
- Have caring issues been thought of?
- Can people get to the meetings? Is transport required?
- How will the group identify what services it may deliver? Who will be consulted and how will the voices of those who are most marginalised in the community be heard?
- How will the group ensure that the services identified will be accessible to people from different backgrounds and traditions with different needs? For example, with regard to when services are available and where?
- How will the group check out with people with regard to their experiences of the services delivered, any feedback they might have, particularly again hearing the voices of those with least power. Of equal importance is checking out the views of those not using the services.
- Working with children and young people and vetting requirements – finding the balance between child protection and not automatically denying those who might have a criminal conviction the possibility of volunteering and contributing something to community life.

- Engaging with central and local government departments – how will the group ensure that it is confident and clear in the negotiations with government and ensure that its voice is heard as an equal.

Taking time to consider these questions will help groups to improve the quality of community development practice in relation to equality and social inclusion. Working through the other fact sheets will also help to embed equality and social inclusion within specific aspects of community groups' work.