

Community Platform Input to Enhancing Public Services: the potential of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

Introduction:

Many thanks to Galway City LCDC for the invitation to attend and participate in this event and represent the Community Platform.

For this presentation I want to give you some background to the Community Platform who I am representing today, but also my role with the Equality and Rights Alliance which led many discussions on Civil Society's role in implementing the duty. I want to look at the potential of the Duty from a Civil Society perspective, the role of civil society locally and nationally and to finally identify a challenge for us all that may present an opportunity to work collectively.

Community Platform:

Founded in 1996, the Community Platform is an alliance of national networks and organisations in the community and voluntary sector working to address poverty, social exclusion and inequality. The Community Platform was set up to be a collective critical voice for equality, rights and anti-poverty interests at a national level.

The vision of the Community Platform is an Ireland that is inclusive, sustainable and equal. The mission of the Community Platform is to work together to develop and promote a shared analysis, policies and action based on our values.

Equality and Rights Alliance

Whilst the Platform has not collectively developed an analysis on the Public Sector Duty, many of our organisations have done some work on this and it is in my former role as coordinator of the Equality and Rights Alliance (ERA) where I want to share some thoughts on civil society's role in implementing the duty.

ERA published the first analysis of the Duty back in 2015 and then created a working group for members to develop a shared collective analysis on the potential for the duty. We later developed a guide for Civil Society Groups in relation to the duty and held a series of workshops with local organisations in 2016 and 2017, the first of which was with GCCN in December 2016. We later also produced the "Engage for Change" which was for Civil Society groups and was launched in 2018. Sadly, the Equality and Rights Alliance is no more and there presents a challenge for Civil Society at a national level.

Potential of the Duty from a Civil Society Perspective.

- Potential to drive cultural change and embed human rights and equality issues into all areas of work for Public Bodies.
- Equality and human rights will no longer be seen as an add-on to the work of a public body or the remit of a single individual or department.
- More effective policies and practices based on the lived experiences of people accessing services who may be marginalized.

- Beneficial not only to the people using public services, but for staff within and the potential to create more diverse workforces, at all levels of employment.
- Reduce discrimination and violations of human rights.
- Potential for public bodies to move towards a proactive approach to equality and discrimination and to move away from reaction to cases taken or advocacy from rights holders (or their representative groups).
- The transformative potential for public bodies to move away from a conflictual, attritional relationship with Civil Society groups and towards a cooperative, collaborative space. This would be based on a vision of co-creation as opposed to one of “Us Against Them”.

The role of Civil Society Locally

- Given how advanced the work of GCCN and the LCDC in Galway City, these suggestions are not reflective of what needs to happen in Galway, but more that this approach taken needs to be repeated in other areas, with resources in order for civil society to do so:
- Create awareness internally of the potential of the Duty: with staff, board, volunteers, members and people accessing community groups.
- Build links with other local groups to create a shared analysis of the potential of the duty and what Civil Society’s role might be locally, learning from best practice in Galway.
- Create a collective demand from local service providers to implement the duty.
- Offer expertise to Public bodies on equality and human rights issues and bring the lived experience to the fore.
- Promote how lived experience across the ten grounds of equality (including socioeconomic status) can be valued by Public bodies to build an inclusive approach to realizing the Duty.

The role of Civil Society Nationally

- Create ways to share approaches taken at a local level and build an analysis of best practice for Civil Society groups.
- Work at a policy level to resource community groups to be equipped to engage with the Duty to a level that Public Bodies are.
- Link with the Trade Union Movement to ensure the Duty is on their agenda.
- Lobby that the Duty is driven at a cabinet level and resourced accordingly by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER).

Challenges and Opportunities for Civil Society

- Defining a clear collective role for Civil Society in the development and implementation of the Duty. We need to ensure that the Public Sector Duty is not seen solely as the remit of Public Bodies. Civil Society needs to create a sense of ownership of their role
- Civil Society needs to be resourced to take approaches like that of GCCN to engage strategically in how to engage in implementing the Duty. Public bodies recognize that they face new challenges in the duty and need to be equipped to do so; similarly Civil Society groups need to be resourced to meet the challenges the Duty presents to build an inclusive society.

- Moving towards a collective analysis for Civil Society will be a challenge. Meaningful engagement will require new ways to work in creative collaborative ways as a sector, removing us from our siloes and typical approaches of policy development, advocacy and campaigning.
- To meet this challenge creates an opportunity for local community groups to really build solidarity using a Values-based approach which, as evidenced today, has the potential to bring people together and build shared approaches and actions.

A Values-based approach for Civil Society

In advance of Local and European Elections in 2019, Community Platform members recognized that we needed a new approach to project the type of society we wanted to see.

There was a recognition that since the cutbacks faced by the community sector in 2008, many of our organisations had moved from projecting a vision for the type of Ireland we wanted to see, and more to reacting to impacts of austerity and exclusion.

Our Values-based approach was a challenge as it moved us from a list of specific policy issues representing our members and focused instead on our deepest shared beliefs and ideas. Those shared ideas were the ones that gave meaning to the work we were all involved in locally, regionally and nationally. Developing this Values-based approach gave us a framework to create actions for last year's elections and also the General Elections in 2020 and beyond. As an approach it could be adopted by Civil Society groups locally to define their collective approach in supporting the implementation of the Duty, *if resourced*.

The Values we chose to discuss were **Community, Participation and Decency**, and we defined them as follows:

The Community Platform defines the value of **Community** as people looking out for each other and having a sense of belonging; communities that are welcoming, inclusive, and nurturing; and building communities that are socially, economically, culturally, and environmentally sustainable.

The value of community should motivate government and national representatives to resource, create, and empower communities where: people are connected to each other and have a sense of place and belonging; difference is valued and incorporated in an inclusive manner; and resilience is fostered alongside a capacity to respond to challenges of environmental sustainability, justice, and social inclusion.

The Community Platform defines the value of **Participation** as people speaking up and having a say, with their views being heard and valued; different voices and the perspectives of different groups in society having an influence to advance equality, social justice and sustainability; and active engagement in decision-making, rebalancing of power in this process, and investing resources to support this engagement.

The value of participation should motivate government and national representatives to engage those who are currently marginalised and excluded from such decision-making in the co-creation and co-monitoring of key policies, policy strategies, programmes, and public services.

The Community Platform defines the value of **Decency** as valuing people's shared humanity and human dignity, and having mutual respect; compassion and mutual support; everyone having a quality of life, with their needs met and a capacity to choose the life they wish to lead; and decent work, accommodation and services for everyone.

The value of decency should motivate government and national representatives to ensure every person has access to adequate income, standard of living, accommodation, health and well-being, education, and public services, such that they are afforded dignity, have real choices, and enjoy a capability to flourish.