

## **Good Relations and Probation: An Outline of a Developmental Initiative by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland**

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**Summary:** Work on equality and diversity is essential in societies emerging from conflict, however, it is insufficient to work on these areas alone. The need to secure an agreed law and order system and the experience of being equal and different citizens under that system are also fundamental and deeply intertwined requirements (Wright 1996). It is therefore imperative that criminal justice agencies see the goal of wider 'good relations' as central to their practice. In July 2002 the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) and the Future Ways Programme, University of Ulster entered into a joint developmental action research programme entitled 'An Equity, Diversity and Interdependence Approach to Good Relations'. This article charts the key steps taken by the PBNI/Future Ways partnership to establish a framework for action on good relations. Good relations practice requires staff to work to a mental model in which people are viewed as equal and different citizens rather than as members of opposed and partisan traditions. Such a demanding shift presents personal and professional challenges that must be supported by organisational leadership and commitment. This process initially required external support, however once the organisation as a whole committed to the good relations agenda then the PBNI's learning and training arm assumed responsibility for leading the programme.

**Keywords:** Good relations, citizenship, sectarianism, racism, organisational learning, organisational change.

### **Northern Ireland and the good relations agenda**

Northern Ireland is a politically contested society slowly, painfully and with great difficulty emerging from a conflict that was as much about the

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existence of the state as about whether the state was governed fairly and treated all its citizens equally. The absence of violence, however, does not equal peace: social relations remain shaped by years of hostility and fear; embedded separatist and competitive norms, expectations and beliefs permeate social structures and inter-group relations at all levels and in all environments. People and organisations have often survived in this context through silence and avoidance of issues such as religion or politics in the presence of the 'other' (Wilson and Morrow 1996). Cultural common sense involves learning to be polite. Organisations in the health and personal social services sector have been no different, with staff often 'operating above the divisions inherent in our society, rather than being part of them' (CCETSW 1999, p. v). This denial of wider realities, whilst understandable, fails to address the true situation facing staff and the people they serve.

As well as addressing religious and political sectarianism, the good relations theme is relevant to confronting racist behaviour in daily life. Northern Ireland is becoming a more diverse intercultural society and increasing numbers of racist incidents are coming to the attention of the courts. In the period 1 April 2005 to 28 February 2006, according to provisional figures from the Police Service of Northern Ireland, there were 835 racially motivated incidents over 658 offences and 206 homophobic motivated incidents over 140 offences.

As different people share the same space at work, the workplace has the potential to promote good relations. Unfortunately, people and organisations are often reluctant to move away from the uneasy equilibrium secured by promoting a neutral workplace culture. Nevertheless, promoting good relations between people from 'different religious beliefs, political opinions and racial groups' is a legally required duty of public bodies in Northern Ireland (Section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland (NI) Act 1998) and many have built on the opportunities presented by devolution, new political structures and the legislation to move beyond the silence and avoidance that characterised many workplace cultures.

### **The partnership**

The Future Ways Programme seeks 'to find practical and human ways that people can live, learn and work together equitably with their

differences in a society emerging from conflict' (see [www.ulster.ac.uk/futureways](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/futureways)). It is a charitably supported programme based in the School of Education, University of Ulster and offers learning and teaching resources, research on reconciliation and public policy, and community support. Future Ways has developed a framework for organisational learning and change based on securing equity, valuing difference and promoting interdependence. These values were incorporated as key principles underpinning the work of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council in 1997/8 and, after a period during which a significant number of voluntary, community and public bodies piloted these principles and incorporated them into their policies (Wilson 2005), they were stated as core policy principles within *A Shared Future – Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland* (OFMDFM 2005). The equity, diversity and interdependence approach provides a model for locating the dynamics of sectarianism and racism within a wider framework of exclusion and prejudice: age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender, physical abilities and having dependants or not (Section 75(1), NI Act 1998) as well as the differences of hierarchy, grade and power inherent within organisational cultures.

Future Ways sought to establish partnerships with organisations that are core to central themes in a society emerging from conflict such as education, housing and law and order and that also carried in their organisational history a wider vision of people and societies being able to learn, grow and change. Throughout the years of conflict the PBNI maintained the character of a learning organisation, in keeping with the view expressed by Lorenz that social workers are 'first and foremost learners themselves, learners with a conscience and with an unashamedly Utopian streak' (1994, p. 104). Many PBNI-supported community programmes, across all traditions, had an implicit community relations/reconciliation dimension and were considered standard setters. An example was the development for ex-offenders of community youthwork courses and access routes with the University of Ulster, which offered the possibility of qualifications and employment to those most impacted by the conflict, broke new ground and challenged existing attitudes in the wider society. As Northern Ireland emerged from conflict, the PBNI wished to be in a position to contribute to the development of a public service culture committed to good relations and community understanding, which in turn would contribute to building a cohesive and interdependent society in Northern Ireland and

to the exploration of the role of the public service in a wider European context.

In July 2002 the PBNI and Future Ways entered into a joint developmental action research programme entitled 'An Equity, Diversity and Interdependence Approach to Good Relations'. The equity, diversity and interdependence approach requires the process to be:

- **Inclusive:** All stakeholders need to be involved including administrative staff, board members, programme staff, trade unions and senior managers.
- **Relevant:** The process must make sense to people and connect to their work priorities, histories and experiences.
- **Accountable:** It is vital that executive leaders and other stakeholder groups participate in open communication and information sharing and are honest about progress made and challenges experienced.
- **Sustainable:** Building trust and new relationships is a long-term process that requires sustained commitment of resources and personnel.

### **Aim and objectives**

The programme's aim was to grow the PBNI's 'capacity to work through and learn from difficult issues around identities, prejudice and political divisions'. To achieve this aim, four objectives were set:

1. To develop the understanding of the organisation regarding the challenges and possibilities of operating in a politically contested society.
2. To support the organisation to define and identify key issues that are impacting on its capacity to deliver quality services.
3. To pilot and implement new ways of working both internally and in relationships with service users and wider communities.
4. To develop innovative ways of auditing the impact of the process on improving operational goals.

### **Step 1: Invitation and scoping (September to December 2002)**

To establish the partnership, internal dialogue began at board, trade union and senior management levels to clarify understanding and commitment and to identify prospective members for the internal

Development Group. Following a scoping study based on one-to-one interviews with about 10% of PBNI staff, across grades and lengths of employment, Future Ways created a map of current practice, issues and dilemmas faced by the organisation in dealing with difficult issues around identity and sectarianism. This map acted as a baseline for ongoing assessment as well as offering a possible agenda for a programme of work. The main findings of the study were made available to all staff after presentation to the board and senior management. A full report was submitted to senior management and a summary report was then developed with a number of proposed actions concerning internal relationships and relations with clients and the wider community.

### *Internal relationships*

The report proposed that the PBNI:

- Make a sustained commitment to the organisation's public and civic duty in supporting greater interdependence in society.
- Board, senior management and trade unions build their understanding of these themes.
- Support staff to develop their confidence and competence in addressing sensitive issues around politics, culture, religion and race and to hold the line against the movement towards 'benign apartheid'.
- Invest time and resources in developing groupwork practices in this area of work.
- Value ways of work where dealing with difficult issues rather than avoidance would become normal and matter of fact.
- Develop an induction element for new staff and board members focusing on good relations.
- Provide formal and informal support structures to acknowledge the difficulties which face staff, with particular reference to working in a highly politicised and divided community.
- Contribute to team building by offering administrative staff more opportunities to experience the work taking place with clients and in the community.

### *Client relationships*

The report proposed that the PBNI:

- Ensure that assessment tools value and measure the 'relational' base to the work of officers.

- Assess the extent of racially motivated crime and develop preventative programmes in partnership with representatives from different minority ethnic communities.
- Support the acquisition of groupwork skills that address difficult issues rather than ignore or avoid them.
- Acknowledge that officers' caseload demands limit opportunities for local groupwork and community development approaches around offending and that good relations would be assisted if some further development programmes were legitimised that attenuated offending behaviour in local areas.

### *Relationships with the wider community*

The report proposed that the PBNI:

- Examine the possibility of establishing a panel-type structure that would:
  - Have the promotion of good relations as its brief.
  - Determine the internal support and guidance that staff would draw on for work involving sensitive areas, themes and times of year.
  - Promote a range of approaches with clients.
  - Challenge and advocate the role of public and civic leadership within the wider community and public service.
- Acknowledge that staff may need space to reflect on their responses and relationships to former politically motivated prisoners and the extent to which they feel their position and authority is being challenged.
- Examine how the community development programme specifically contributes to wider trust-building and in particular engages with areas of low infrastructure including working-class Protestant communities.
- Through its community links, move the debate and practice dominant in the public service culture beyond 'fire-fighting' responses to community and interface violence and examine appropriate interventions in partnership with community groups and other statutory agencies that engage with such problems 'further up stream'.

The board, senior management and trade unions formally legitimised voluntary teams to explore these proposals so that the organisation might move beyond a neutral culture.

## **Step 2: Growing commitment and understanding across the wider organisation (2003/4)**

### *Establishing a development group*

A Development Group was needed to progress the proposals, to provide a space for learning and reflection and to share responsibility for any emerging programme of work developing out of responding to the summary points above. It was agreed that the membership of the group must include:

- A broad range of staff capable of representing diverse opinion within the organisation.
- At least one-third of each of the key minorities that the organisation wishes to listen to and engage with.
- A range of grades including a proportion of new and middle-ranking staff.
- The presence of at least one senior officer and the active commitment of the PBNI board.

These criteria were designed to achieve:

- A breadth of discussion that can reflect divergent views within the organisation.
- A representative group to ensure internal credibility.
- Sufficient safety in numbers to ensure that minority voices can be raised without fear of isolation or career cost.
- A legacy within the organisation of staff who can carry their learning into the higher grades over time.
- The engagement of the executive leadership in actively learning from the process.

The resulting across-grade Development Group included an assistant chief officer, trade union representatives, area managers, probation officers and administrative staff and therefore represented different voices and positions within the organisation.

The programme's main focus in 2003 was to establish and sustain a critical dialogue within the Development Group. The group met for 4.5 days, including two residential days in April 2003.

### *Establishing a learning programme*

A learning programme was created for the Development Group and the executive leadership, board and senior management. The Development Group members went through an extensive examination of their personal

experiences of living and working in Northern Ireland and of their personal and professional values around the themes of equity, diversity and interdependence and the nature of the social and political context. They established the identity of the Development Group and examined the relevance of the term 'good relations' to the PBNI's work.

The group members were able to identify a range of structures and approaches through which their work could be promoted and quickly came to understand the importance of a whole-organisation approach. They provided the board and senior management with a considered action plan covering a vision statement and principles for good relations practice, a set of individual commitments different staff could be invited to make, a proposal for fieldwork and business teams to take the process forward and a draft corporate plan around good relations.

A shortened version of the Development Group's experience was offered to the senior managers for a full day and on two occasions for the former (2003) and current (2005) board members. The board comprises people from diverse traditions and is therefore an important forum, capable of holding an interdependent vision of the wider society at the centre of the PBNI's business. At the board seminars, Future Ways developed formal inputs and interactive sessions around the good relations dimensions of their work in order to:

- Assist members to reflect on the drivers for this work and how it is understood.
- Explore the extent to which promoting good relations makes sense for the work of the organisation.
- Update members on the work undertaken to date.
- Assist members to reflect on how good relations can underpin and enhance elements of practice outlined in the draft strategic corporate plan for 2005 to 2008.

Session topics included:

- The societal context: the place of organisations in promoting good relations in Northern Ireland.
- What good relations means: the characteristics of good relations in relationships, teams, organisations and society.
- How we learn together: organisational realities and vision.
- A vision for promoting trust and good relations.
- Studies in organisational change in Northern Ireland.
- The development group model.

- The critical dialogue approach.
- Understanding organisational culture and good relations.

*Reflecting on the drivers*

The external levers initially included the good relations duty in Section 75(2) of the NI Act 1998, the Criminal Justice Review, the Justice Oversight Commissioner and proposed legislation on hate crime. These were later added to by the Shared Future Policy (OFMDFM 2005); the Racial Equality Strategy (OFMDFM 2006), which demanded action plans from all public agencies; the Strength in Diversity Initiative (Home Office 2005) for the criminal justice sector that asked organisations to reflect the society they serve; and the Good Relations Triennial Plans demanded of public bodies in April 2006.

Internal levers for good relations included the PBNI as an employer of people from diverse backgrounds, a deliverer of services to people from diverse traditions and backgrounds, an upholder of best public service values, and an organisation giving civic leadership. During scoping study interviews with experienced staff in 2002 it became clear that the PBNI had a history of standing with local communities through advocacy and community grants and also of challenging people when issues of fairness, acceptance and working together had been ignored. As such, the PBNI had knowledge of aspects of good relations work in its history.

There were also corporate levers for good relations and different elements of the corporate plan were identified for their good relations contribution, including:

- The purpose of the PBNI in integrating offenders back into the community.
- The legislative authority to develop work under Community Service Orders.
- The accountability of the PBNI externally in terms of public confidence.
- The core values of staff respecting difference and valuing diversity in working with community organisations and in holding offenders to account but never humiliating them.
- The corporate planning context in meeting government aims for an increase in community confidence in the criminal justice system.
- The need for a diverse agency that reflects the wider community.

All staff working within the criminal justice sector have to work within an equality and human rights standard. In this system staff need sensitivity

in working with people from diverse backgrounds and experience of working in a restorative manner and working across diverse agency boundaries. These requirements, in reality, demand a competence in good relations.

### **Step 3: Implementing new practices into mainstream structures and relationships (2005/6)**

In 2005 the Development Group decided that good relations should be mainstreamed through a coherent and interlinked programme of information sessions and leaflets for staff, induction, post-qualifying development programmes and resources developed for working with clients. The good relations theme also needed to be rooted in the new corporate, operational and unit business plans.

Mainstreaming was secured by the publication of the PBNI's *Strategy for Promoting Good Relations Consultation Document* in April 2006. This document was promoted by a round table consultation session and established a series of internal and external actions that would be completed by year-end with identified lead people mandated to secure these activities. The proposed good relations actions in this plan require that existing policies, management and employment practices, strategic and business plans, quality processes, supervision relationships and promotion opportunities reflect the organisation's commitment to naming and working through difficult issues and to promoting good relations.

Overall the process has taken time and yet the organisation is now structurally committed and has a small team of staff from diverse backgrounds, the Development Group, poised and prepared to drive the programme forward. The PBNI compliance manager is now a full member of the Development Group along with a member of the four-person corporate team and two members of the senior management group. The active and committed participation of people in these positions underpins and strengthens good relations as an internal and external issue for all units and teams.

The Development Group is open to different issues, dilemmas and opportunities evolving across the organisation, depending on the team, area of work and priorities. Since April 2006 each team, in fieldwork, administration, personnel, finance and strategic policy, has set an annual good relations target. This target has to be locally relevant in order that

staff generate new working practices relevant to the good relations theme in each setting. The executive leadership and senior management team are also open to learning from each of these pilots. Meanwhile, the Development Group is:

- Promoting the theme of good relations to staff in all positions.
- Developing several days annually on good relations as a key strand in the induction of all new staff.
- Establishing a pre-qualifying module on good relations.
- Securing post-qualifying modules on good relations for further professional development.
- Developing an accredited course on good relations that staff will encourage clients who have committed sectarian or racist actions to undertake as part of their rehabilitation.

### **Learning points from this developmental practice**

Valuable learning points can be drawn from this creative, asymmetrical collaboration between a medium-sized organisation with over 300 staff and a small developmental organisation with three research staff. Initially Future Ways was asked to lead the process while PBNI staff took the opportunity to reflect together. As momentum picked up and the Development Group developed its awareness and organisational agenda, group members moved into the lead positions. It is useful to return to the programme's original aim and four objectives to assess what has been learned.

*Aim: To grow the PBNI's capacity to work through and learn from difficult issues around identities, prejudice and political divisions*

Within the diverse staff of the PBNI, there was the capacity to distil and discern the strategic work needed on internal relationships, relationships with clients and relationships with societal partners that would improve good relations. Collectively the PBNI had the wisdom to contribute to the good relations agenda and therefore this process could be internally led and informed with the minimum of external support.

*Objective 1: To develop the understanding of the organisation regarding the challenges and possibilities of operating in a politically contested society*

The PBNI has a history of working sensitively within differing political climates. The scoping study brought to the surface a number of issues

known to PBNI senior management as well as some that had not been heard strongly before. Whilst some staff members were unsure or ambivalent about this approach, a sufficient number saw the potential benefits to themselves, their colleagues and the wider service of making the good relations theme central. A considerable number of staff members also spoke about the bridging function that the PBNI had performed in the past and were proud of this role; they expressed the view that the PBNI should continue to be politically aware. Different staff at different levels concluded that the organisation needed to legitimise staff addressing the good relations theme and identified areas where the organisation would benefit from such actions.

In a society more characterised by caution than by risk-taking it is understandable that the public sector changes slowly. However, it is in the move to secure an agreed criminal justice system in Northern Ireland that organisations such as the PBNI can show civic leadership.

*Objective 2: To support the organisation to define and identify key issues that are impacting on its capacity to deliver quality services*

Organisations need sustained and engaged top-level commitment to promote good relations. In the middle of this initiative the PBNI experienced changes in board membership and appointed a new chief executive and a new chairperson. The good relations process had to mark time during these transitional periods and then seek revalidation from the new appointees. There was also downtime when three members of the original Development Group, including two team managers, moved to the new Youth Justice Agency. Such changes are a normal part of organisation culture.

Having received a renewed mandate the Development Group was able to establish and agree proposals for promoting good relations, which have now been incorporated into the new good relations plan.

The process stretched out over a period of three years. It engaged external time of 39 contracted days and an additional 12 days given by Future Ways on a pro-bono basis as their contribution to the development research programme on good relations.

*Objective 3: To pilot and implement new ways of working both internally and in relationships with service users and wider communities*

The programme, whilst emanating from the PBNI's training unit, had to become a strategic corporate theme. The emphasis was initially

understood to be external to the internal working culture of the PBNI, assisting staff to work directly with offenders. It is to the credit of the PBNI that it then made the commitment to look internally at the organisational culture. The corporate policy, strategic priorities and the internal staff relationships were the first good relations priority and the organisation is now working from this base to focus on good relations in its external, offender-based work.

*Objective 4: To develop innovative ways of auditing the impact of the process on improving operational goals*

Target setting and internal audits are needed to underpin a whole-organisation approach and the presence of the compliance manager as a Development Group member is important in this respect. Moving the good relations theme from training into the wider corporate vision, operational plans and business plans has been an essential part of mainstreaming this practice and will be an audit tool to ensure compliance. Allocating a particular budget heading centrally for this work has also been an important institutional marker.

## **Conclusion**

In a contested society such as Northern Ireland, emotions such as fear and anger rise to the surface very readily. In the absence of agreed law and order systems, and in a society that primarily identifies people as members of opposed traditions rather than as equal and different citizens, partisan dynamics can readily dominate professional, political, public and community life. A society moving beyond conflict initially requires enlightened and committed institutions, with a history of community initiative and dialogue, to model a public service vision that mobilises the diverse experiences and interests of staff in pursuit of a more plural society. In the scoping study interviews, longer-serving staff members argued that the PBNI has been one such body (Eyben and Wilson 2002).

The PBNI's good relations initiative was about the organisation developing a way forward on good relations within its structures and internal board and staff relationships as well as in its external relationships with clients, communities and other public and civil society organisations. It reveals a desire to promote and secure equal and

different citizenship at the core of how its staff treat and value one another within the organisation as well as how clients and members of community organisations are viewed. This is an important value position to take in a contested society. It signals a commitment to building a citizen-based society and to securing an agreed law and order system serving citizens from all backgrounds and traditions. This development is timely given the increase in racially motivated attacks on migrant workers and members of ethnic minority communities.

The emerging intercultural agenda in more stable societies and the recognition of racially motivated hate crimes brings this theme to the door of criminal justice and equality organisations in Ireland, north and south. Recent cross-border training initiatives on diversity awareness by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Garda Síochána, and collaboration on racism and promoting intercultural understanding between the Equality Commission and the Equality Authority, are encouraging developments. These initiatives combine best practice from a society emerging from conflict with best practice in a more stable society. They examine lingering assumptions about homogeneity being preferred or a narrow version of the diversity agenda being offered. North and south, inside and outside the criminal justice system, public and civic organisations need to promote the intercultural reality and prepare for the task of having intercultural workforces serving an intercultural public. These realities will demand a good relations competence and ease.

The growing interdependence agenda prompted by an expanded, more diverse European Union and the settlement of migrant workers and those seeking asylum and sanctuary demand new forms of public and civic response. If interdependence and intercultural understanding are to be secured then the probation services should become part of this agenda and strengthen the acceptability of the criminal justice sectors by building public institutions that block demeaning behaviours and establish good relations between a diverse citizenry as a necessity. It is imperative that criminal justice agencies see the goal of wider good relations as central to their practice.

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