

**A VALUES BASED APPROACH TO INCORPORATE AN EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS FOCUS**

**IN WORK WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

**BY**

**THELMA BLEHEIN, NIALL CROWLEY, RACHEL MULLEN & KIERAN DONOHUE**

## **Introduction**

Children and Young People's Services Committees exist in each County to plan and co-ordinate services for children and young people. Our goal is improve outcomes for children and young people through local interagency working and cross-sectoral collaboration. The Committees are key for joint planning and each Committee has to develop and oversee the implementation of a three year Children and Young People's Plan for their area. The actions and priorities identified draw from the 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures' national policy framework for children and young people.

This paper will present some of the innovations we have pursued, through the Wexford Children and Young People's Services Committee in bringing equality and human rights into this work of preparing a Children and Young People's Plan. It starts by setting out the new public sector duty that has been the stimulus for this innovation. It then presents the values-based thinking that has shaped our approach to equality and human rights. The actions that we took to make equality and human rights more central to our work are then described before a brief assessment of the innovations that we pursued.

## **The Imperative for Equality and Human Rights**

Equality and human rights bring a particular and important focus to bear on children and young people. This is evident from the 'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures' policy framework, which is rooted in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and which identifies the rights of children as one of its guiding principles.

Equality, with its concern for access to resources, having a voice, being respected, and holding status in society, is a vital concept if we are to improve the situation of children and young people. The focus on diversity required in a concern for equality reminds us that children and young people are not homogenous and that we need to address the practical implications of diversity if we are to improve the situation and experience of all children and young people.

## ***New Duty on Public Sector Bodies***

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 introduced a duty on the public sector that brings a focus on non-discrimination, equality and human rights centre-stage in planning, policy-making and service provision. Public bodies must have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity for staff and service users, and protect the human rights of staff and service users in carrying out their functions.

More specifically, public bodies are required to set out, in their strategic plans (or similar exercise), an assessment of the human rights and equality issues relevant to their functions and to identify the policies, plans and actions they have in place, or propose to implement, to address these issues. They must also report on developments and achievements in relation to their action on these equality and human rights issues in their annual reports (or equivalent report).

The scope of the duty is broad. All Government Departments except the Department of Defence and the defence forces are included. The local authorities, the Health Service Executive, Education and Training Boards, and public bodies established under an enactment or charter or any scheme administered by Government and financed wholly or partly by Government are all covered.

Public sector duties similar to this have been in force for some time in a number of jurisdictions, notably Northern Ireland and Britain. Far from being an administrative burden they have been found to hold significant potential. In particular, they have been found to:

- Enhance the provision of quality, inclusive, accessible and accountable public services that can reduce inequalities and advance the fulfilment of human rights.
- Support an informed and evidence-based approach to the work of public sector bodies and bring a greater breadth of experience, knowledge and perspective to the design and delivery of services and policy-making.
- Improve the experience of and outcomes for employees in the public sector, including, thus enhancing organisational commitment and performance.

- Enrich the culture within public sector organisations and ensure value for money in public sector provision.

The Irish approach is particularly ambitious in bringing equality and human rights forward within the public sector duty. In other jurisdictions the duty has been limited to equality and the grounds covered by equality legislation.

Equality and human rights, at one level, sit easily with each other. However, they are two very different traditions.

Equality is concerned with the resources, status, influence, and respect held by different groups in society. It involves social change and is addressed in national legislation that prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender, civil status, family status, sexual orientation, age, disability, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community.

Human rights are concerned with minimum standards for all individuals in society. They are addressed in a range of international instruments, at United National and EU levels, that cover economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. Ireland is held accountable in a number of international fora for these standards.

The public sector duty, therefore, challenges public sector organisations to find an effective way of integrating these two traditions. At the same time, public sector bodies need to establish a way of implementing such a broad duty in a manner that is manageable but that avoids tokenism.

## **The Centrality of Values**

### ***The Importance of Values***

Values, public sector values, and values that underpin both equality and human rights offer an innovative, effective and efficient route into implementing the public sector duty. Values are those beliefs, ideals, principles that we hold to be important. Our personal values guide our attitudes and behaviours. They inform our choices and commitments. However, values also operate at the level of organisations and public sector bodies have a particular and proud track record of value based operations.

Shared values within organisations guide organisations in how they implement their mandate or functions. They inform the issues that organisations prioritise and shape the way organisations work on issues.

### ***A Values-Based Approach to Equality and Human Rights***

The valuing of human worth underpins both equality and human rights. This points to the potential in values to integrate a concern for equality and human rights. Values held at the level of an organisation can underpin and drive that organisation's ambition to eliminate discrimination, achieve equality and fulfill human rights.

Addressing equality and human rights concerns at the level of values would involve identifying the values that connect equality and human rights. These values can then be used to frame the approach of a public sector body in implementing the public sector duty.

The Equality and Rights Alliance have valuably identified five values that underpin equality and human rights and provide a framework to implement the public sector duty in an integrated way. These are the values of:

- **Autonomy:** A value that encompasses choice, agency, freedom, self-determination, and the absence of coercion.
- **Democracy:** A value that encompasses participation, voice, empowerment, and accountability from those in power.
- **Dignity:** A value that encompasses respect, relationships of care and love, human worth, and the absence of inhumane and degrading treatment, harassment and discrimination.
- **Inclusion:** A value that encompasses a sense of belonging and community, interdependence, collective responsibility and a valuing of diversity.
- **Social Justice:** A value that encompasses redistribution of wealth, income, jobs and social goods such as housing, health and education and the

### **The Experience: Bringing Equality and Human Rights into Planning**

The Wexford Children and Young People's Services Committee were concerned to implement the public sector duty in preparing our Children and Young People's Plan. We worked with Niall Crowley and Rachel Mullen of the Values-

Lab to develop and implement a values-based approach in this. We used the framework of values developed by the Equality and Rights Alliance.

The first step in this process was to hold a workshop for all members of the Committee. This was facilitated by the Values-Lab with a view to producing an equality and human rights statement for the Committee. An equality and human rights statement is a tool for putting our values into play in our planning and evaluating cycle.

The process involved discussion and agreement on the values framework of autonomy, democracy, dignity, inclusion and social justice. We worked to develop a shared meaning for each of these values. For each value, we then identified an objective that we wanted to achieve through our work and service provision. Finally, for each objective, we then established the equality and human rights issues that we need to address in our work and service provision. In this last exercise we paid particular attention to the diversity of children and young people across the nine grounds covered by equality legislation and the additional ground of socio-economic status.

Out of this work we drafted and agreed an equality and human rights statement that sets out our values and objectives and the equality and human rights issues we are concerned to address in our Plan and subsequent work. This is available on our website.

We are currently using the equality and human rights statement to inform our planning process. It is helping us to shape who we consult and what we consult them about. It is guiding us on the data that we need to gather and analyse. It will help us in prioritising what we are going to do and in designing indicators to measure progress. In the longer-term it will assist in managing the implementation of the plan and in evolving the plan as necessary over this period. It will be a key tool when we come to evaluate the plan and its impact.

### **The Experience: Building Organisational Capacity to Advance Equality and Human Rights**

The organisations involved in developing and implementing the Wexford Children and Young People's Services Committee are concerned to ensure their

capacity to give life to the equality and human rights statement in their work and in their contributions to implementing the Children's and Young People's Plan. In effect, they want to respond to the challenge of bringing the values of autonomy, democracy, dignity, inclusion, and social justice more centrally into their own organisations.

We developed a capacity building programme to respond to this challenge, again with the Values-Lab. This is currently taking place. It involves a mixture of training days, practical action to implement the training ideas, and review days to explore learning and insights from this practical action. The training is organised around three two-day modules taking place over a nine month period:

- The first module focused on developing skills, knowledge and awareness of the potential, operation, and practice of values within organisations; building an appreciation and shared understanding of values that might underpin the commitment to equality and human rights and how to make these explicit within organisations; and exploring the legislative, policy and institutional infrastructure in this field of equality and human rights.
- The second module focused on the tools to bring a more explicit values-based approach into organisations to underpin their commitment to equality and human rights. These tools included an equality and human rights statement to bring these issues into planning; an equality and human rights policy to bring these issues into work processes; and an equality and human rights impact assessment to bring these issues in policy-making and service design. There was a particular focus on diversity in this module and on responses to diversity in our work.
- The final module will focus how we communicate with the general public, with those we are targeting with our services, and internally among ourselves. This will explore the values carried in this communication and the potential for public bodies to be guardians and advocates for this value base on foot of our commitment and of the public duty.

## **Conclusion**

There are challenges in implementing this values based approach to equality and human rights. It was, at times, almost like learning a new language. It took time

and effort from the individuals involved to become comfortable and familiar with this language and way of thinking. Time was a constant pressure. We all come from busy and under-resourced organisations and, while the initial preparation of an equality and human rights statement was not at issue, the time for the capacity building training was always at issue.

However, it quickly became clear that a values based approach was enabled by the roots for values in both public sector bodies and civil society organisations. Both sectors take pride in a value base to our work and this provided a bedrock from which to develop a values based approach to equality and human rights. Our values need tending in these times of reform and resource constraints and this process was a powerful contributor in this regard.

In many ways that tending of values is the key potential in this values-based approach. The approach did ensure our compliance with the new public sector duty. It went further in reminding us of our commitment to equality and human rights for children and young people and in giving us a means of keeping that commitment before us as we confronted all the complexities and pressure in preparing the Children and Young People's Plan.

Each organisation involved has benefitted in deepening a capacity to engage with equality and human rights and in using the tools explored to draw these issues to the fore in their work. This has not necessarily about huge change. It is as much about aligning what we do more closely with our values. That ultimately is the core contribution of a public sector duty to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and protect human rights.