

Response to the Single Equality Bill from Causeway Volunteer Bureau

The principal remit of our organisation is to support and promote volunteers, potential volunteers and volunteer involving organisations. Our response to the document primarily concerned with the effect it will have on volunteering.

Causeway Volunteer Bureau welcomes any legislation that protects the rights of individuals and different groups within society. However we at this organisation believe that with regard to volunteering there are some serious flaws with the proposed Bill that will adversely affect volunteers, potential volunteers and the organisations they volunteer with.

In the accepted definition of volunteering it states that volunteering is **“the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, the environment or individuals outside one’s immediate family. It is undertaken freely and by choice without concern to financial gain”**. Clearly lumping in the term volunteering into a definition of employment as suggested in the document is an ill judged idea that will have many negative implications for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

The gift of volunteering will be formalised into an activity that will be equated as a form of employment. This will deter many people who cherish the voluntary nature of the volunteer role. Potential and existing volunteers may be suspicious of signing any type of agreement. People may feel that they are obliged to carry out the voluntary work where previously they did it out of their own free will. Those individuals who are on benefit may feel that to start or continue volunteering will jeopardise those benefits. There may well be safeguards to ensure that this is not the case however it is often the fear of being “caught out” that will prevent people from volunteering.

Volunteering should be complimentary to employed work, however this Bill will blur the lines of demarcation between the role of volunteers and employees. Unions would be very suspicious if they thought that there was potential for job substitution. Volunteers could then be viewed with mistrust by employed staff.

The Bill also poses a series of potential concerns for organisations who involve or wish to involve volunteers. There could be a large increase in the cost of administering a volunteer scheme, both financially and in staff hours. Will a small community group which has a few volunteers be expected to have the same administrative

systems and controls in place that a large voluntary organisation should have? Also with the greater likelihood of litigation, insurance on volunteers will surely have to increase, which will be another burden on groups. Organisations, on the balance of things, may decide that volunteers are not worth the risk. That would be a great pity as we are trying to increase the scope of volunteering within the community.

It is also being suggested that the new legislation will differentiate between more formal volunteering (where an agreement of sorts has been signed) and those volunteers that are deemed to be casual volunteers e.g. church volunteers or those who help at the Women's Institute (where no agreement has been signed). The idea is that *formal* volunteers will be covered by the legislation and *casual* volunteers will not. This will clearly not work. If volunteers are to be given legal redress for infringement of their rights it would be very difficult to deny those rights to those who have not signed an agreement of sorts. It could lead to great confusion as to the legal rights of volunteers. It would be deeply ironic if this Bill were to discriminate against certain categories of volunteer.

In what ways can we protect the right of volunteers? At the very least there should be a voluntary code and volunteer involving organisations should be encouraged to follow good practice models. A system of arbitration should be established for volunteers and a pool of trained advocates should be established to represent volunteers and seek a resolution to the problem.

To make such a scheme effective there will have to be adequate sanctions for those organisations that are found at fault. Ideally some sort of sanction which will have to be found which will encourage good practice. This will need to be discussed with the relevant parties. Ideally this legislation should require organisations to have a pro-active approach, like that encouraged by Section 75, i.e. the organisation has a positive duty to promote equality of opportunity but is given the freedom to devise relevant strategies in consultation with affected groups.

Finally the government should remember the promise that it made in the compact, i.e. that there is **“Government commitment to assess proposed legislation, new policies and policy changes for their potential impact on the voluntary and community sector and on volunteering and to consider where possible the scope for mitigating any unintended negative impact”**.

There needs to be further discussion on how best to protect the rights of volunteers and ensure that organisations needs are taken into account and that they are willing to improve their support and practice towards volunteers.

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