

Comments on  
  
The Proposed Single Equality Bill for  
Northern Ireland in Relation to  
Volunteering

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I believe that if the definition of employment to be used in the Single Equality Bill is widened to include volunteering – for example by including any activity which involves an agreement to do work which is predominantly performed in person – then volunteering with North and West Trust and other organisations could be seriously undermined. My concern is for the possible effects at two levels: with individual volunteers, and with the Trust and other recruiting organisations:

Inclusion of Volunteering Within the Definition of Employment: At the Level of Individual Volunteers

- 1) Inclusion may deter many or most volunteers. They will look at the requirements of strict employment procedures, and conclude: “its not what I volunteered for.”
- 2) Inclusion is likely to interfere with the payment of social security benefits to volunteers and so reverse the work done by the Volunteer Development Agency in clarifying the position of volunteers receiving social security. I would have to reverse the advice I now give to volunteers and tell them: volunteering will affect benefits.
- 3) Inclusion would impose obligations on the volunteer as being in effect an employee: especially with regards to receiving instructions and giving notice. Many or most volunteers, we believe, will think: “why bother? I didn’t volunteer for this.”

## Inclusion of Volunteering Within the Definition of Employment: In Relation to the Trust as a Recruiting Organisation

My experience leads me to believe that recruitment of volunteers will become much more difficult and uncertain because:

- 1) Many potential volunteers will be deterred by the effects of 'inclusion' (see above).
- 2) It may be considered that volunteer placements which have begun prior to the introduction of a Single Equality Bill, have to be made to conform to the requirements of the Bill. If so there is a risk that many existing volunteers would drop out rather than submit themselves to employment-like procedures which had not been used when they started volunteering. And if existing placements are not required to conform to the terms of the Bill, some volunteer placements will be regulated by the Bill, alongside others which are not.
- 3) Will people who participate in Trust planning or focus groups, or contribute to staff training, on a voluntary basis, be included in the scope and the requirements of the Bill? If they are many or most may ask: why bother?
- 4) Volunteers within the Trust who were previously users of Trust services may be deterred from proceeding to a volunteer placement by the requirements of inclusion. Or they may simply be obstructed from doing so. For example, someone who has been attending a day centre and then takes up a specific volunteer role

(which does happen) may be obstructed from doing so, because the volunteer role has to be the subject of employment – like recruitment procedures. Or if someone who has been receiving support because of a disability and is therefore known to Trust staff wants to contribute to some aspect of Trust services as a volunteer e.g. in group activities, staff training or peer support (which does happen) they will be obstructed by the application of employment-like recruitment procedures.

- 5) The application of employment-like recruitment procedures to volunteering under a process of 'Inclusion' may make it difficult to provide volunteer opportunities for special groups as requested by agencies such as MENCAP or New Horizons Employment Service. If such an agency contact me and asks (as they do): would you have an opportunity for X? I will have to ask their client/member/trainee to go through employment-like recruitment processes.
- 6) The application of employment-like recruitment procedures to volunteering will impose considerable extra administrative demand on the Trust in general and the Human Resources Department in particular. Recruiting participants for interview panels, making arrangements for interview panels, introducing the full application of supervisory, disciplinary and grievance procedures; conforming to contractual obligations where previously there were agreements and understanding; - these factors will call into question the Trust's continued involvement in volunteering. I may have to ask ourselves: is it worth it?

## In Conclusion

All my experience tells me that the effects of the application of employment-like procedures to volunteering could be devastating. I believe that there are other ways of dealing with the issues of equality in relation to volunteering which do deserve attention.

I would recommend strongly that any proposal to include volunteering within a definition of employment be dropped from the Bill, so that discussions can proceed on how issues of equality in relation to volunteering can be tackled in a constructive way.