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Issue: Review of Public Administration: Policy Papers

The Community Relations Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the debate around RPA and Education. The comments below are set against the relevant policy papers.

The primary objective of the Council is to engage as an active partner, through funding, partnership and development, to those groups and bodies wishing to take steps towards sharing over separation. Council is primarily interested in the various papers with regards to building community and good relations, and how the proposals can advance efforts to build relationships among young people and make A Shared Future (ASF) a reality.

Paper 1 – The RPA in Education: an overview

Council is pleased the government priority 'A Shared Future' strategy is acknowledged as a central goal and that RPA has a responsibility to devise policies and structures that can assist in its implementation.

Paper 2 – The Relationship between the Education and Skills Authority and Schools

Council welcomes the inclusion of A Shared Future and the Independent Strategic Review of Education (ISRE) recommendations as policy areas that will be taken into consideration when developing future strategic plans (point 24 & 25). Council would be keen to explore further how proposals regarding sharing and collaboration, in terms of strategic planning, connect with the accountability and challenge function of the ESA e.g. ISRE and ASF want to enhance opportunities for sharing and collaboration; what are the ramifications for schools who do not pursue these proposals, specifically where opportunities exist.

Paper 5 – Governance & Accountability

Council welcomes the decision to put in place a code of practice for the appointment of governors. Council feels it is essential that governors are kept informed of various government priorities e.g. ASF, the Racial Equality Strategy (RES) and Section 75 (1&2). The code of practice becomes a job description with a set of essential criteria, used to

inform the decision making process and the outcome reflects the numerous cross-cutting government priorities.

Council would also hope to see a fully inclusive Board of Governors that represents the diverse society we now live in; this diversity should be reflected throughout the various school structures.

Paper 6 – The Schools Estate

The paper refers to the inefficiencies in the current planning process (3.3) e.g. lack of integration, co-ordination, differences between sectors and duplication of activity. Council pointed out to the ISRE that whilst the sector needs to be financially viable, any rationalisation programme, whatever the extent, must also be socially viable. In a society that has come through decades of violent division and conflict, this means ensuring that education is actively structured to prevent the emergence of opposing 'sides', to ensure a culture of tolerance, mutual understanding and inter-relationship and to underpin our peaceful future together. The need to restructure and rationalise the schools estate provides a historic opportunity to ensure that the future does not simply reproduce the past but points in a different direction. Council agrees with the area based approach (4.2) and believe that all sectors have a collective responsibility to work together to maximise the delivery of education and learning opportunities in an area and to fully explore the opportunities needed to maximise sharing and partnership.

Paper 9 – Youth Work – A Review of RPA

CRC's work with groups working in the most divided and social disadvantaged communities has shown clearly that young people are viewed as contributors to the conflict, victims of the conflict and most definitely key players in the development of a more shared and stable society. However, community leaders are generally of the view that not enough long term, meaningful and sustained youth work is available in the worst affected areas.

Youth Work has a key role to play in helping to deliver A Shared Future despite it only receiving a brief mention within ASF: 'the youth sector, has an important role to play in developing coherent programmes to promote good relationships between children and young people, within and between communities'¹. It positively contributes to the development of young people within a divided society. The department acknowledges the important work carried out by the youth sector, both statutory and voluntary, in terms of promoting participation of young people in society as active citizens, challenging prejudices and developing programmes and activities that build tolerance and open-mindedness. It is crucial that this work continues, and Council wants to see ASF and good relations as a core part of this work.

The principle's of the Community Relations Council, 'Equity, Diversity and Interdependence', need to be a central part of the youth service and already the rhetoric and vision of ASF is embedded within a number of government policies that impact on young people. The Youth Work Strategy's vision is one where young people

¹ A Shared Future, 2.4.12

are able to 'participate as active citizens in a secure and peaceful society' and one of the objectives of the strategy is to 'encourage understanding of diverse groups in society and the involvement of young people in peace building and conflict transformation'². The work of the youth service is also expected to compliment the vision of the recently published Children and Young People's 10 year strategy; within this strategy are a number of pledges including '...we will ensure that our children and young people are supported to grow together in a shared, inclusive society where they respect diversity and difference'³. Unfortunately there has been no further development to date on the publication of the plan which is disappointing for the sector.

Almost immediately it is worth noting the numerous strategies and action plans in place to meet the needs of children and young people and this, perhaps, is one of the biggest challenges for RPA, in terms of delivering youth work. Joined up approaches and strong partnerships are key to delivering meaningful policies.

Recently the Community Relations Council engaged with a number of key stakeholders in the youth sector to discuss and identify the main issues for those involved in the delivery of youth work and community relations, and we hope that by drawing attention to these issues we may positively contribute to the future of youth work within RPA. Council is not too concerned with structures; moreover that the outcomes have a positive impact on good relations.

Council would like to highlight the following issues:

- **Joined-up approaches.** It is planned that the Department of Education (DE) and the new Education Skills Authority (ESA) will have responsibility for devising and developing strategic plans to meet the needs of young people. It is crucial that this is carried out in conjunction with the voluntary youth sector to ensure the sharing of knowledge and the development of strong deliverable policies. A lack of cohesion exists within the sector and a holistic approach is needed with a long term strategy on how communities can engage with their youth.
- **Good practice.** Council recognises that for much of the time community and good relations work is a matter of experimentation. Mainstream experimenting must continue in order find out what works well and also to recognise that a 'one size fits all' approach does not exist. Good practice does exist within both the statutory and the voluntary sector and it is crucial that mapping occurs to identify these models. It needs to take place on an area based model and should be on a cross sector and cross community basis.
- **Training.** Need to define more widely the training needs of youth workers who are still unsure or anxious about tackling the difficult questions within a divided society.

² Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in NI 2005-2008. Appendix 2.

³ Children and Young People's 10 year Strategy, page 17.

- **Participation.** Important that processes for developing plans and schemes are as inclusive as possible and Council agrees with the introduction of a statutory duty on those responsible for delivering youth services to consult with those who use the service, in particular those from voluntary youth sector. This will ensure that policies are relevant to the young people it wants to target; DE and ESA should consider the Basque model whereby a Youth Plan is devised by young people and their partner organisations e.g. voluntary and statutory and then presented to government for consideration (a bottom up approach). Advisory groups on youth service delivery should be fully representative of the youth sector and have members from statutory and voluntary organisations, as well as young people themselves. Participation and ownership are key principles of this process.
- **Accountability.** Robust monitoring and evaluation is required for all strategies and it is important that clear indicators are established to measure progress. It is important that both the Department and the Authority are held accountable for the implementation of youth work. All processes should be open and transparent, and Council agrees with measures to ensure updates occur on a regular basis, and the flexible approach of amending and updating plans to guarantee relevance.

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