

To: Developmental Branch
Sustainable Schools
Department of Education
4th Floor, Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Bangor, BT19 7PR

From: Community Relations Council Northern Ireland
6 Murray Street
Belfast, BT1 6DN

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Issue: A Consultation on Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools

The Community Relations Council (CRC) is primarily concerned with promoting Community and Good Relations and the development of a shared and peaceful future. In recent years, CRC has actively sought to bring pressure to bear on all public agencies to take seriously the implications of 'A Shared Future', which has tasked government departments and agencies to develop and implement policies that establish ***'over time of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence'***.

Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and we will focus on the opportunity to create a shared sustainable schools policy which complements A Shared Future (ASF) and the Independent Strategic Review of Education (ISRE) and how it meets the obligations and actions set out within these two policy priorities. CRC wants to re-emphasise that ASF is a government policy priority area, which government departments have subsequently committed themselves to via departmental headline commitments to devise and implement policies and strategies that meet the objectives of ASF. Therefore any sustainable schools policy must have ASF at its core.

Council acknowledges the growing problem within the schools estate in terms of surplus spaces and the need to provide a more effective and efficient system. According to Bain developing schools that are 'effective in meeting the needs of all pupils, are educationally and financially viable, and are sustainable long-term'¹ are the goal. Council's response to the ISRE stated that whilst any rationalisation policy has to be financially viable it must also be socially viable. Council is determined that these objectives should be core to this strategy.

How will this policy maximise sharing and collaboration, and how will the department and schools take advantage of the rationalisation process to ensure the future does not simply reproduce the past? Council notes the document refers to

¹ ISRE. 2006.

cross sector collaboration and whilst this is creditable it does not ensure this happens on a cross community basis. A generic commitment to ‘collaboration’ cannot be allowed to disguise the imperative for inter-sectoral sharing which must result. Of course, some schools will have more opportunities than others to engage on a cross-community basis and there are already a number of schools delivering this in practice. However without an obligation to explore all options some schools may opt out of this opportunity. This collaboration can not be allowed to occur on an ad-hoc basis - this could simply come down to it being easier to engage/collaborate cross sector (not cross community) and also happen at the discretion of Board of Governors or the Principal. As we stated in our response to Bain ‘sharing does not mean the elimination of difference’, and whilst this is a real challenge in Northern Ireland there are indicators that suggest there is considerable support for increasing opportunities for sharing within the education system i.e. Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. There are also indicators including sectarianism and racism that necessitate the need to increase collaboration and rationalisation on a cross sector and cross community basis. (Annex A)

The consultation refers to creating an education sector that plays a ‘powerful and positive role in the normalising of society in Northern Ireland, helping to make it sustainable and vibrant, with greater sharing amongst communities’². A Shared Future has become a popular phrase in public policy but Council is more interested in making it a reality on the ground and guaranteeing its mainstreaming throughout all policy decisions. We agree there are many considerations in terms of protecting the ethos of schools and parental input. However Council also maintains that a strong sustainable policy can protect those values and principles if ASF principles are mainstreamed from the beginning of the policy development process. Schools and managing authorities need to ASF proof policies and ensure that all avenues have been explored to develop strong collaboration and sharing.

Of course, flexibility is needed but this cannot equate into opting out – sustainability must translate into shared sustainability. The sector faces a number of challenges due to changing demographics, and as said before it will be easier for some geographic areas to amalgamate cross sector/cross community due to their particular geographic circumstances. Schools in rural and small urban areas may have more opportunities than some towns and cities – but this should not become an excuse not to explore and examine options. Discussions should occur at different levels to investigate what could happen within a specific geographic area. There is also the need to support flexible amalgamations – children in city schools should not lose out in being educated together on a cross community basis because of the particular geographic area they live in, and the last thing amalgamations should create is more segregation, at a larger level.

Furthermore a genuine shared sustainability policy should obligate all sectors to engage in sincere dialogue to investigate collaboration opportunities concerning teaching staff; specialist facilities i.e. sport, IT or science facilities and shared sixth forms. These explorations will guarantee the development and implementation of a wide range of partnership programmes and more importantly on a cross-sector-community basis.

² Schools for the Future; A Policy for Sustainable Schools. 2007. Page 5.

Sectarianism and racism are still very relevant and this policy must factor in ASF and EDI into the framework and final strategy. A number of organisations are calling for ways to proof ASF and recently the Secretary of State announced an ASF accreditation scheme within education. CRC would support a similar approach that proofs government policy in a similar way to Section 75. There is a tendency to analyse these proofing mechanisms in a way that as long as individuals are not discriminated against and groups get equal treatment then there is no adverse impact. However Council wants to go further and explore what the next step has to be, what can we, or rather what should we be doing on a proactive basis to deliver the policy or policies in a sharing capacity – look for best practice, be realistic, but also think about what kind of educational system we are trying to create for the next generation, not forgetting that the next generation is already here and currently learning in a largely religiously segregated system.

ANNEX A

GOOD RELATIONS INDICATORS – OFMDFM. PUBLISHED 2007.

SECTARIANISM

- 1,470 sectarian crimes and 1,701 sectarian incidents in NI in 2005/06.
- Attacks on churches/chapels/schools/orange halls was greater in 2005 than 2004. (PSNI)
- Almost 2/3 of criminal damage offences with a hate motivation in 2005/06 has a sectarian motivations (61%). (PSNI)
- Over 1/3 of Census Output Areas in NI are segregated (that is ,90% or more people are from one community background). 30% of protestants live in mainly Protestant areas and 44% of Catholics live in mainly Catholic areas. (Census 2001).
- 36% of P's would avoid work in a mainly catholic area and 37% of C's would avoid work in a mainly protestant area (NILTS 2005).
- The majority of people believe that schools are not yet fully effective at preparing pupils for life in a diverse society or at encouraging understanding of the complexity of our history (NILTS 2005)

RACISM

- More than 2/3 of people believe there is more racial prejudice than there was 5 years ago (NILTS 2005)
- 1% of people are very prejudiced and 24% of people say they are a little prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities (NILTS 2005).
- Racial offences increased from 322 in 2004/05 to 351 in 2005/06 (PSNI 2005/06).
- Only 17% of people agree they know quite a bit about the culture of some minority ethnic communities in NI (NILTS 2005).
- Half of the population believe minority ethnic communities are less respected than they once were (NILTS 2005).
- Need to dispel myths such as the responsibility of ethnic minorities to integrate into the Northern Ireland culture, migrant workers had had a negative effect on both the economy of the area and social activities.
- Fifty-four percent of students had witnessed some form of racism. This had mainly taken the form of verbal abuse (50%) or rudeness and hostility (33%), while 21% had witnessed property being damaged and a further 21% had witnessed physical violence. Of the 54% who had witnessed the acts of racism, the majority, 38% had ignored the incident, while 13% reported that they had challenged the behaviour. Only 2% had reported the incident to the PSNI and 1% had reported it to someone else. *New Migrant Communities in East Tyrone, A Report for East Tyrone College, July 2005.*
- Exploitation of the growing number of migrant workers in Northern Ireland was confirmed yesterday in a study by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). It also highlighted widespread racism and sectarianism experienced by those who have travelled to the province in search of work – suffered both in the work place and outside. It concluded that trade unions had both a duty and the capacity to organise and represent migrant workers.