

To: Belfast: Capital City Consultation
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From: The Community Relations Council
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Introduction

The Community Relations Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on Belfast City Council's Capital City Consultation. CRC's aim is to lead and support change in Northern Ireland towards reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and promote sharing over separation. We work by promoting constructive and relevant dialogue, by actively supporting those taking real risks for relationship building, by acting as a practical bridge between groups in society and between the public, private, voluntary and community sectors and by promoting wider learning through developing better practice. Our overall aim is "to lead and support change towards a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society founded on the achievement of reconciliation, equality, co-operation, respect, mutual trust and good relations".

Government policies such as 'A Shared Future: Policy & Strategic Framework for Good Relations in NI' (ASF) and the 'Racial Equality Strategy' (RES) set out the aims and objectives of the government in delivering a shared future for everyone in Northern Ireland and its aim of establishing 'a normal, civic society'.

Responsibility for the implementation of these policies lies with both central and local government and organisations such as the Community Relations Council. Belfast City Council, along with other councils, has a key role in delivering A Shared Future, and this task was highlighted in the Secretary of State's statement of 22nd November, 2005 concerning the outcome of the Review of Public Administration, he stated that:

"The aim of community planning is to make sure that people and communities are genuinely engaged in decisions made about the public services which affect them. Allied to this is a new commitment by those who deliver services in the council area to work together to provide co-ordinated high-quality outcomes people rightly expect.....As part of the outworking of RPA, we will establish mechanisms and procedures that will enable Northern Ireland to become a society where the promotion and protection of shared space, shared education, shared communities and shared public services will sit at the very centre of the ethos and culture of government policy and practice".

RPA will set the standards by which all councils will operate and they will be embedded with 'equality of access and opportunity, so that every citizen – of whatever background or belief – can have confidence in their council's ability to deliver services even-handedly'¹. It is clear that Belfast City Council has grasped the 'big picture' for the development of the city. Already the council has implemented a number of positive initiatives, such as creating a Good Relations Unit and placing it strategically within the Chief Executive's Department. This commitment has been further demonstrated in the appointment of a third Good Relations Officer within Council. This illustrates the Council's commitment to ASF and CRC will use this consultation exercise to highlight the importance of driving the development strategy forward with the principles and standards of good relations.

Challenges and Opportunities

Cities provide many challenges for policy providers, and Belfast is no different from many of its counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, UK and Europe. It is a city emerging from conflict and division, and the Council along with the public and private sector are devising strategies that will create new opportunities for the city. However, everyone is aware of the challenges ahead for Belfast – it is competing for business alongside countries like India and China; as we move away from a manufacturing based economy the city, like the rest of Northern Ireland, has 'to retain existing highly-skilled employees and attract those people needed to drive the increasingly knowledge-based economy'² forward; the city's population is below recommended numbers that constitute a sustainable city³; there is large-scale segregation within the city and unfortunately significant numbers of people are living in areas of high deprivation. More recently we have witnessed the falling number of pupils which has resulted in the merging and closure of schools and this mirrors the problem of a falling birth rate. In 2004 Northern Ireland was dubbed the race-hate capital of Europe due to the increase in racist incidents, the bulk of which were centred in Belfast. The Council needs to take a lead role in protecting and promoting an inclusive and pluralist city. Belfast's success will depend on attracting new multi skilled workers to live and work in the city and they will only remain if they are allowed to contribute to the life of the city in a safe and inclusive environment. City Hall should become a focal point for welcoming our new citizens and provide a joined up support system.

The city needs to work in partnership with others to resolve outstanding issues surrounding parades, protests and cultural celebrations, as these demonstrations have had a detrimental impact on the economy and if left unresolved will continue to influence inward investment in a negative way.

On a more positive note Belfast is undergoing an impressive transformation, such as Victoria Square, Titanic Quarter and the re-development of the old Crumlin Road Gaol site. This in turn is attracting inward investment and creating new job opportunities. Moreover recent tourism statistics revealed that more than six million people visited Belfast in 2005 – the highest figure on record (increase of 8%). Belfast has a lot to offer

¹ Secretary of State's speech, NIC ICTU Conference, 25 April 2006.

² CBI Response to A Shared Future, September 2003.

³ Figures presented by the a Representative of the ODPM, Belfast City Council Seminar, State of the City.

and it is imperative that this new Capital City strategy has in place mechanisms that will encourage people to continue to live in the city, attract new citizens, and cultivate new SME's as well as large scale businesses opportunities. Belfast City Council should be a stimulus for other cities, towns and villages across Northern Ireland, as to how to attract people and businesses and develop a vibrant and sustainable community. In addition to this the voluntary and community sector is working in partnership with others to create a more shared and pluralist society e.g. the South Belfast Round Table on Racism and the North Belfast Interface Steering Group. Both CRC and Belfast City Council are key partners in both these initiatives.

Overall the Community Relations Council is very supportive of the draft strategy; however we would like to comment on a number of issues which have particular links to ASF and the RES. As mentioned in the draft document, Belfast City Council has achieved a lot in its previous development strategies and this new plan will continue to promote the overall corporate objectives – civic leadership, improving quality of life and promoting good relations. As many will already know Belfast City Council has become widely known as a 'model of good practice' when it comes to promoting and developing good relations and CRC would like this commitment to continue within this development framework.

Strategic Leadership

It is necessary for the Council to continue to liaise and work with its strategic partners from the statutory, community, voluntary and private sector to ensure ownership and development of the city. There needs to be co-ordinated city wide partnership approach to tackle existing problems, and ensure the successful implementation of the Capital City Plan. It is imperative that there is not only joined up planning but joined up implementation.

One of the objectives under this heading is to 'create a common framework and actions to re-invigorate the city centre'. This links in directly to A Shared Future, and tackling the 'visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism'. The Development Committee should take this opportunity to undertake further initiatives that will create a city that welcomes everyone. The city centre needs to be a shared civic space, with no barriers, either visible or invisible, to either residents, visitors, or the business sector. A lot of work has already been embarked upon to develop the city centre as neutral space and this strategy needs checks and balances in place to ensure that new regeneration or development projects are accessible to everyone. The Council must take a lead role to ensure that everyone has ownership of the city. There have been discussions with community groups and unfortunately some people feel that the city centre belongs to one side of the community and are apprehensive about shopping and socialising there. It is therefore especially important that communities outside the city centre have neutral access points into the city. These 'no go' areas are not acceptable and Lord Rooker stated at the recent launch of the Triennial Action Plan (TAP) for ASF that 'there is no alternative to A Shared Future. Segregation and division is not an option'⁴. Under the TAP Belfast City Council, along with their strategic partners, has responsibility for taking 'forward a programme of work on key arterial routes which link deprived communities

⁴ Lord Rooker, Launch of TAP, CRC Conference, 27 April 2006.

to Belfast City Centre'.⁵ The council has to assure people that the city centre is an open and inviting space and should put in place the necessary strategies to eradicate any 'no go' areas.

An important point to make is that while the city centre is a focus for business and tourists, this development strategy must be rolled out in East and West, and North and South Belfast. The individual regions provide life to the city and there are a growing number of success stories e.g. Colin Glen Forest Park in West Belfast attracted record number of visitors this year revealing that visitors want to experience the extended boundaries of the city. The development strategy will be successful if it embarks on an overall strategy, for both the city centre and its neighbouring areas, with agencies and organisations delivering local strategies that result in robust local projects. Wealth, employment opportunities, and shared civic space need to filter out from the centre into the neighbouring communities. The Council should also ensure that the picture of Belfast presented to tourists reflects, in an equitable way, the cultural diversity of our city. The city and its localities have much to offer in terms of tourist attractions – we have a wealth of history and culture – both old and new.

Partnerships are crucial in any future development of Belfast – it has to be a city that welcomes everyone and can compete at an international level. It is essential that the proposed 'think tank' reflects the needs and make up of the city, and its membership should be balanced and embedded with good relations principles. It should have representatives from all sectors within the city. A Shared Future is the responsibility of everyone in the North of Ireland, and the Council's think-tank can provide a sounding board to hear how ASF can be delivered throughout the city. The think tank should promote open discussions, provide examples of good practice, learn from local projects and help design innovative projects for the city.

Regeneration. The strategy mentions the Titanic Quarter as a project that reveals the hopes and aspirations of the Council. This project along with others, such as the North Foreshore and Crumlin Road Gaol, must be open and accessible to all communities, and the opportunities and benefits need to be transferable and tangible to everyone. Shared spaces should attract businesses and tourists but more importantly local residents. All spaces need to have shared community outcomes. The council should reflect on past projects that have become the property of one community, such as local leisure centres, and ensure this pattern does not continue with new ventures.

Capital City. Belfast is competing with cities all over the world to attract businesses and skilled workers and the city needs to market itself as a vibrant, stable and committed city, and one that can deliver in this fast moving economy. This image of Belfast as a city of choice will attract the much needed investment. The City Council must continue to highlight the negative impact community unrest has in terms of 'lost investment, lost jobs and lost tourism'⁶ and develop initiatives that will enable the city to move forward.

Public Art - Public art can help promote a feeling of pride and build self esteem within the city centre and local communities. There are huge opportunities for the council to

⁵ ASF, Triennial Action Plan, 2006, p 28.

⁶ ASF, Triennial Action Plan, 2006, p 33.

engage with residents and promote greater understanding of the different communities within Belfast. Public art should be used to bridge differences and explore commonalities e.g. the new sculpture intended for Broadway roundabout could ultimately bridge the communities living on the Donegall Road and open up new opportunities which would enable exploration of new surroundings i.e. the Bog Meadows. An international artist is designing the sculpture and this is an excellent opportunity to introduce a global perspective to these pieces of public art. And just recently the Waterworks Park in North Belfast has been chosen by Channel 4's 'Big Art' project to develop a piece of public art. The local community will work in partnership with an international artist to create a piece of public art and the process will build confidence and self esteem within the community.

Civic Leadership - Social and economic progress must be linked to a sustainable peace process, which will ultimately help shape a shared and pluralist city. Belfast is a divided city and if civic leadership is to mean anything then the city fathers as a collective political entity should be committed to good relations and plan for a shared city. The elected representatives on the council need to build confidence within the city and initiate dialogue and activities that will tackle the hard issues and find ways of challenging the 'norm' of some Belfast communities. For example the strategy could commit to a policy of addressing the issue the city's 'peacewalls'. These are legacies of the conflict and the perception of Belfast as a dynamic, cosmopolitan centre while these remain seems slightly flawed, especially when we have communities living within the dead spaces of peacewalls. Of course CRC does not expect these hurdles to be dealt with overnight, but we would like a commitment from the development department to develop their action plan in conjunction with other council departments, the political parties, and key bodies such as Belfast Interface Project to look at ways to remove these walls within a specific timeframe.

Other difficult issues are flags, murals, bonfires, and parades which are used to mark out territories. Whilst we realise that the development department's remit is limited we feel that it is important to stress the need to address these obstacles and we ask the development team to use their leadership role within Council to address these issues and build on the good work already carried out by the Council.

Furthermore the civic leadership function of councils will be enhanced through a permanent 'Good Relations Challenge Programme' which will require the council to prepare a good relations action plan covering employees and local residents. They are also required to develop Community Support Plans that identify how the council will support their local voluntary and community sector; these plans should be cemented with good relations action plans and should feed into the Capital City Plan.

Creating Wealth

Inward investment. The level of good relations existing within the city will be crucial when attracting inward investment to the city. How its people live, work and socialise will influence new investment opportunities and will also impact on whether people choose Belfast as a home (which is crucial for a city to survive in this global economy). Again, this will require joined up approaches between different agencies. Belfast City

Council should ensure that good relations and community relations are at the fore of all development plans.

Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods. Under the objective of ‘supporting business competitiveness and increasing investment opportunities’ it is crucial that this strategy utilises the surrounding neighbourhoods of the city and the skills of the residents. There is a bleak picture of Belfast – large pockets of the city are living in extreme poverty, segregation, unstable neighbourhoods, and high unemployment. The council has responsibility to drive change throughout the city and improve living conditions and job opportunities for its citizens. This objective presents the development department with an opportunity, allowing it to target under developed areas and prioritise communities for business development programmes and business incubation facilities. These initiatives could have a huge impact on interface areas. This is a priority for government and one of DETI’s primary objectives under ASF is to ‘encourage the shared use of industrial space particularly at interface areas’⁷ Often employment opportunities in these areas are severely limited due to the highly segregated nature of the community and Belfast City Council must find ways of developing new trade & industry opportunities in these communities. It is essential that economic growth and employment opportunities are not limited to the commercial centre of the city; benefits must be felt throughout the city.

Future economic developments need to be guided by good relations principles and encourage shared workplaces. There should be an emphasis on training opportunities which incorporate community and good relations; and joined up training and employment opportunities for residents from neighbouring communities. This should be done in partnership with key agencies and joined up action between local partnership and regeneration boards.

Quality of Life

Accessibility. The Council’s recent public consultation with its residents revealed that what concerned people the most was community safety, sectarianism and bad community relations. The results of this survey emphasise the need for all council policies and strategies to be ASF proofed, and acknowledge that economic prosperity goes hand in hand with creating a peaceful society.

People who work and socialise in the city can see the positive improvements the city is undergoing. However, many individuals and families have not experienced this new wealth. The strategy needs to guarantee opportunities for all its citizens, especially those who are living in the most deprived areas of the city – often those who have been most affected by the troubles. It is essential that the living experience of Belfast residents is one that ensures they are safe to live in their homes, to travel throughout the city without harm and to experience city life regardless of where they live or what culture they belong to.

⁷ ASF, Triennial Action Plan, 2006, p 33.

As previously mentioned the North Foreshore site will create a new lifeline for the community living in North Belfast, but the Council needs to ensure that it is accessible to all sections of that community. It needs to be a shared space.

Re-imagining – the ‘Renewing the Routes’ initiative is having a positive impact on the re-imagining of local communities across Belfast. There is an opportunity to widen this scheme and build the principles of A Shared Future into it i.e. it could be linked in with the flags protocol, and other visions of altering the image of communities. There are examples of local initiatives, such as community groups on the Shankill, replacing paramilitary style murals with cultural and historical ones. These schemes need to be encouraged to take place across the city.

Community tourism projects, arts and cultural initiatives continue to play a central role in transforming local communities. Partnerships, such as those between Belfast Regeneration Office and the Partnership Boards, are central to developing local community initiatives.

Inclusive multicultural projects help create a stable city centre and local communities and the council must ensure equal access to the arts, regardless of what part of the city you are living and future projects need to ensure equality of access.

Conclusion

Belfast has to move forward within the context of the European Union and ensure it is open and inclusive to everyone. The regeneration of the city and its communities must seek to generate something different to the sectarian territories, and must be embedded with the principles of A Shared Future.

The development plan must allow the growth of mixed wealth, housing and economics within an area and therefore promote a diverse mixture of citizens. This helps create balanced and diverse communities. We need to move away from the notion that communities are fixed entities and that they progress separately from each other. Economic success has to enable participation from all communities and City Council’s development strategy should guarantee a ‘common future’ for all residents of the city.

The Community Relations Council looks forward to continuing its work with the Development Department and is willing to assist with this important work.

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