

Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

OFMDFM Consultation Document

RESPONSE

November 2010

**Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative
Queen's University, Belfast**

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Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative

Based at Queen's University, Belfast the *Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative* (CTSJI) adopts a critical rights perspective grounded in, but moving beyond, international conventions and standards (civil and political rights/ economic and social rights).

Previous Queen's-based research for the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Children's Rights in Northern Ireland*, identified two overarching determinants in the lives of children and young people: the legacy of conflict and violence; the concentration of poverty (Kilkelly et al., 2004). Economic marginalisation, social exclusion, criminalisation and 'community punishments' form the context in which a disproportionate and increasing number of children live.

Our most recent research *Understanding the Lives of Children and Young People in the Context of Conflict and Marginalisation*, in partnership with Save the Children and The Prince's Trust, was published in 2009 as the report *Childhood in Transition*, and addresses inter-linked themes: Images of Children and Young People; Personal Life and Relationships; Education and Employment; Community and Policing; Place and Identity; Segregation and Sectarianism; Violence in the Context of Conflict and Marginalisation; Services and Support; The Rights Deficit. Within these themes the Report raises 94 'key issues' to be addressed by policy-makers and state institutions responsible for resource distribution and interventionist provision.

This research revealed that notions of difference are perpetuated by a lack of inter-community contact and understanding. That segregated education and housing remain a significant barrier to ending sectarianism, often actively ensuring its continuation. Also, that one of the key issues for children and young people was the lack of safe social and leisure space, that actual and feared intimidation, abuse, verbal and physical violence remain key factors in sustaining exclusivity and maintaining geographical boundaries (McAlister et al., 2009). Such conditions, and the interpersonal and social tensions they create, destabilise the lives of children and young people who are excluded from active participation, experience egregious breaches of their rights, are denied their 'best interests' and risk abuse, violence, exile, mental ill-health, self-harm and suicide.

Summary

Our consultation response details key concerns with the proposed strategy, with particular reference to children and young people. More general concerns include:

- The narrow definition of good relations. The terminology of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration relates only to specific identities, cultures and communities. The remit of the document, and to whom it applies should be clearly and unambiguously stated at the outset.
- The potential lack of independence and level of accountability of the proposed Ministerial Panel.
- The potential dismantling of an independent body, free from state control and political interests to monitor and review policies and programmes related to good/ community relations.
- The consultation document is high on aspiration, but lacks a clear action plan detailing targets, time frames and associated financial resources.
- The consultation document lacks a vision for future integration and interdependence, instead envisioning an 'intercultural society' (para 7.1) based on 'mutual accommodation' (para 7.2).
- The consultation document fails completely to consider the specific experiences of women in Northern Ireland as well as their contribution to achieving a shared society.

Concerns specific to children and young people, and discussed in more detail in our response, include:

- Children and young people are presented in a negative light – as a threat to cohesion, sharing and integration, and as separate to their communities. The positive contributions that children and young people make to society and to their communities are not recognised.
- The consultation document does not explain how children and young people were strategically involved in the development of this framework policy or how they will be included in its implementation.
- The impact of segregated housing and education on the lives of children and young people is not recognised.
- The institutional and structural processes and relations that perpetuate sectarianism and racism are downplayed. This decontextualises attitudes and behaviours and leads to the demonisation of children and young people.

Rationale for Response

The Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative welcomes the Government's attention to the crucial task of establishing a more inclusive society in Northern Ireland, along with many of the aspirations of the *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*. We are submitting the following response to outline concerns with particular reference to the inclusion of children and young people. We find the consultation response questionnaire inadequate for expressing these concerns and have prepared our written response accordingly. We have attached the *Childhood in Transition* report (McAlister et al., 2009) as this provides a detailed insight into the experiences of children and young people across contemporary Northern Ireland.

The legacy of thirty years of armed conflict continues to impact most acutely on those communities in Northern Ireland that experience the highest levels of socio-economic disadvantage (Horgan and Monteith, 2009; McAlister et al., 2009; Hillyard et al., 2005; Horgan, 2005; Fay et al., 1998). The consultation document recognises that: "It is clear that poor physical and mental health and other multiple deprivation indices such as low education attainment, and low rates of employment are prevalent in the areas which have suffered most from the legacy of the conflict" (CSI, 2010: para 3.15). Moreover, "Evidence also shows that segregation has a correlation with levels of deprivation. Fourteen of the fifteen most deprived areas in Belfast are highly segregated" (ibid: para 3.27).

The First and Deputy First Ministers state their commitment "to build a strong community where everyone, regardless of race, colour, religious or political opinion, age, gender, disability or sexual orientation can live, work and socialize in a context of fairness, equality, rights... and respect" (para 1.7).¹ Despite this aim, scant attention is paid to issues other than those relating to the two main religious/cultural traditions in Northern Ireland or minority ethnic groups throughout the consultation document. A strategy entitled 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration' which fails to recognise the complexity and multiplicity of 'identities', 'cultures' and 'communities' is flawed from the outset - limiting its aims to the promotion of rights, equality and fairness, respect and diversity to specific identities and cultures.

Recent research conducted for the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust notes that many peace processes "fail to last" and "few overcome communal antagonisms" (Todd et al., 2010: 3). The consultation document notes that the majority of people in Northern Ireland feel "success is not being achieved at making Northern Ireland into a place free from displays of sectarian aggression" (para 3.31). Approximately

¹ Although this list includes 'responsibility', all members of our society possess rights independently of 'responsibilities' and this concept has been removed accordingly.

one in four people would avoid working in an area that was predominantly the 'other' community (para 6.2). More than half "did not feel that the government had achieved the objective of making town centres safe and welcoming places for people of all walks of life" (para 6.3).² These findings indicate the need for strategic action, and young people must be involved meaningfully in the process of designing and implementing policies aimed at strengthening the communities in which they live.

Todd et al. (2010: 3) argue that the conditions in Northern Ireland are favourable for moving towards 'a shared future', but "a sustained strategic effort on behalf of government is necessary to translate political change into better community relations". Comparing the previous framework strategy for an inclusive society, *A Shared Future* (2005), to the current proposals, they contend that CSI "may underestimate the difficulty of the task, both in its conceptualisation of its goals, and in its strategic orientation" (ibid).

The CTSJI response focuses specifically on the inclusion of children and young people with the expectation that the Government will receive other responses addressing broader concerns. Young people have been excluded from, and neglected by, the transitional process. Some experience confusion about their cultural identities, others feel their cultural identities have been undermined by recent developments. Many feel that the Peace Process has not brought anticipated benefits or entitlements to them or their communities (McAlister et al., 2009). There has been little dialogue with young people about the implications of transition from conflict. A perceived lack of political commitment to the needs and aspirations of children and young people has the potential to undermine their participation in the democratic process (ibid). It is with this in mind that we submit our response to the current proposals.

Inclusion of Children and Young People in the Strategy

Representation of Children and Young People

- In Chapter 4, 'Empowering the Next Generation', the Government recognises the important role of children and young people in society and the contribution they make in the development of an inclusive society (CSI, 2010: para 4.1). When young people are mentioned subsequently, however, it is often in the context of 'flawed judgements' (para 4.2) or as "disaffected young people" (Foreword: 1). Such language, and a focus on 'negative behaviours', presents young people as a 'threat' to cohesion, sharing and integration. No recognition is given to the leadership and positive engagement many take in their schools, communities and youth organisations in relation to

² The *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* consultation document relies heavily upon figures from the 2009 Life and Times Survey conducted by ARK.

exploring and tackling issues of sectarianism and racism. It is vital that the positive contributions young people make to society are recognised, otherwise we risk excluding and alienating them from future initiatives.

- The consultation document emphasises Civic Education (paras 5.6, 5.7, 5.8), suggesting an apparent lack of ‘civic responsibility’ among children and young people. This assumed lack is not equally related to adults, from whom children and young people learn many of their attitudes and beliefs. While *some* children and young people, like *some* adults, may be involved in “civil disturbances, anti-social behaviour or interface violence” (para 4.2), this is not contextualised. Research consistently demonstrates that children and young people learn the messages of the past from their families and communities (e.g. Connolly and Healy, 2004). The violent past of Northern Ireland remains celebrated, glorified and ‘normalised’. Murals, commemorative events, parades and stories act as reminders of institutional and interpersonal violence. Cultural violence is reproduced in the language of opposition politics, the direct experiences of families and communities, the segregation and marking of space (McAlister et al., 2009). This is the context within which many children and young people live and grow. The Executive has a responsibility to consider the social, historical and political contexts when discussing current incidents of sectarian and violent behaviour (i.e. the structures and institutions which perpetuate sectarianism and violence).

Strategic Inclusion

- The Government states that the CSI strategy will be “one of a family of policies which seeks to tackle prejudice and hate” and has committed to “bring complementary policies” to address the equality and rights needs of “all the Section 75(1) groups” (para 1.8).³ The CSI document prioritises Section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act,⁴ emphasising its relationship to the Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-10. Regrettably, the consultation document does not explain how CSI will engage with existing equality strategies such as the Gender Equality Strategy⁵ or the ten year Strategy for Children and Young People.⁶ There is no strategic analysis of how Government will

³ Section 75(1)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities to “have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity... between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation”.

⁴ Requires public authorities to “have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.”

⁵ ‘Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016’, OFMDFM, <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/gender-equality/our-strategy.htm>.

⁶ ‘A ten year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland 2006-2016’, OFMDFM, <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/children-young-people/children-and-young-people-strategy.htm>.

ensure that this framework strategy will address the complex needs of children and young people growing up with the legacy of the conflict.

- As children and young people represent almost a third of the population of Northern Ireland,⁷ the Government should have developed a thorough proposal articulating how the CSI strategy will identify and address the needs of all children and young people experiencing the legacy of the Conflict.
- The key aim of “establishing a major initiative aimed at developing a longer term strategic approach to helping marginalised young people” (para 4.13) is welcome, although it is disappointing that the remit and scope of this ‘major initiative’ has not been included in the consultation process.

Ideological Inclusion

- The Government identifies a number of ‘themes’ in CSI to be addressed by the Ministerial Panel. One ‘medium term’ goal is listed as the “relationship between young people and the community” (para 2.6). However, young people are not *separate* from ‘the community’. This language entrenches a false division within the strategic goals of the implementation mechanism. Research with young people in communities most affected by the conflict reveals a strong attachment to their communities (McAlister et al., 2009), which needs to be recognised, harnessed and used as the foundation for constructive, necessary interventions.
- The assumed distance ‘between young people and the community’ could have particularly dangerous implications when coupled with the proposed ‘zero tolerance approach’ (para 2.3). For example, the consultation document states that “All forms of intimidatory graffiti and the targeting of people’s homes should not be tolerated and the community must unite in condemnation of these attacks” (para 7.4). Our research demonstrates that young people remain targeted by quasi-paramilitaries who encourage their involvement in sectarian and racist behaviour, and that there was some level of support in communities for this (McAlister et al, 2009). Asking ‘the community to unite in condemnation of these attacks’ is problematic.
- The intention to ensure clear protection for newer arrivals to our communities is welcome. However, the Government must ensure that young people are not made more vulnerable by the use of ‘zero-tolerance’ language.

⁷ Children and Young People’s Unit, OFMDFM, <http://www.allchildrenni.com>.

- Young people are the main victims of sectarian harassment and violence. Fear of being identified as ‘the other’ limits their freedom of movement and opportunities for play and leisure as well as impacting on their feelings of safety (McAlister et al, 2009; Roche, 2008; Leonard, 2004).
- The Executive must ensure there are clear mechanisms for children and young people to become active participants in processes seeking to move Northern Ireland towards a more inclusive future.

Rights-Based Inclusion

- Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, ratified in 1991 by the United Kingdom, requires the Government to ensure that the child has the right to express his or her views and have those views accorded due weight in all matters affecting the child (UNCRC, 1990: Art 12). As the CSI strategy seeks to promote ‘Cohesion, Sharing and Integration’, it is vital that any proposals include the voice of children and young people. Their views, and recognition of their particular experiences of the transition, should have been considered in identification of the key issues and throughout the consultation process.
- The Government’s commitment to “place a particular emphasis on engaging young people and the community in long term strategies” (para 4.5) is welcome. But the consultation document does not clarify how children’s and young people’s views will be heard and taken into account.

Government Actions

- The consultation document notes an intention to work with Department of Justice “to reduce the risk of young people becoming engaged in hate crime” (para 4.6). It is not clear what form this work will take, or how children and young people will have an input into this process. A strategy for this work should have been developed prior to this consultation period to allow sufficient input from children and young people on this crucial matter.
- The consultation document notes that “In empowering the next generation, we must recognise the range of issues and challenges that face our young people in all aspects of their lives” (para 4.11). While welcome, this statement is made with reference to the Department for Employment and Learning’s scoping study about young people not in education, employment or training. These young people are not representative of all young people, and education/employment

are not the only issues faced by those living through the transition from conflict in Northern Ireland.

- Strong emphasis is placed on the role of education in securing a more inclusive future, with reference to the development of a Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education (CRED) policy (para 4.8). Further, Citizen Education is promoted as a way to “develop the capacity of all young people to participate positively and effectively in society, to influence democratic processes and to make informed and responsible decisions as local and global citizens throughout their lives” (para 5.7). However, reliance on such initiatives for community cohesion and integration indicates a narrow understanding and approach to young people’s meaningful participation. Our research (McAlister et al., 2009) indicates that barriers to young people’s participation do not reflect a lack of citizenship education but substantial socio-economic marginalisation.
- Young people who have been suspended or excluded from school are denied opportunities to participate in such programmes. For these young people in particular, community-based informal education and youth work provision is a key element of personal, social and cultural development (Haydon and McAlister, 2009).
- While the consultation document emphasises the desire for more integration in education, it does not promote expansion of the integrated education sector (paras 3.7, 3.13). Nor do the proposals suggest an alternative for achieving such integration (paras 4.13, 5.7, 7.20). Lack of serious engagement with the impact of segregated education indicates a failure to appreciate the seriousness of this issue.
- The consultation document takes a ‘gender neutral’ approach, resulting in the presumption of a male subject for all policies and proposals for action. The document does not mention *any* of the particular needs and experiences of women and girls during the transition from conflict. Girls and young women continue to experience violence, use of public and private spaces and opportunities for participation differently than boys and young men (Gray and Neill, forthcoming). The Government should review the CSI strategy with the aim to appropriately address the full range of priorities for girls and young women. Research demonstrates that when young women are ignored in discussions about the impact of the conflict, resources are likely to focus on young men (ibid).
- The lack of consideration of the LGBT communities is potentially damaging to young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or transgender. These young people experience

isolation and alienation in many areas of their lives. Their omission from a document about cohesion, sharing and integration reinforces this exclusion. Reference to hate crimes is only related to sectarianism and racism, demoting the seriousness of other forms of hate crime (including that motivated by homophobia and transphobia). Research continues to demonstrate the prevalence of homophobic harassment and bullying experienced by young people, particularly in schools, and the impacts this can have on many aspects their lives (McNamee et al., 2008; Rainbow Project, 2006; YouthNet, 2006).

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