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From: Community Relations Council
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Date: October 2006

Issue: Community Festivals Fund Policy & Guidance Framework

The Community Relations Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on DCAL's Community Festivals Fund Policy & Guidance Framework. 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".

A Festivals Fund

We support the need for a festival strategy and believe that festivals can make a positive contribution to the quality of life within our communities, allowing local communities and organizations to develop and plan activities at local and regional level. CRC is committed to the principle of inclusion and good relations as outlined in Section 75 and the A Shared Future Policy, and that festivals should be open to all and complimentary to the social and economic fabric of NI.

CRC is also of the opinion that due to the finite resources available within this strategy it is crucial that all festivals and their subsequent applications are judged on merit and how they meet the objectives as set out in the core criteria. It is important that all applications are treated equally and the process is clear and transparent.

Practical Support

The policy states 'the NIEC will wish to encourage uptake of its support services in areas where community infrastructure and capacity are under developed in order to move towards an equitable distribution of funding across the community'. CRC welcomes the decision to offer support and assistance to festival organizers in advance of submitting a funding application. The Council emphasizes the

need for this support to be offered to all who require it, regardless of their community background or level of expertise providing they meet the criteria and support the promotion of good relations. We would like to stress the need to treat all communities and organizations equally and provide support mechanisms on the basis of need.

A Shared Future

The core values of the Community Relations Council are 'Equity, Diversity and Interdependence'. CRC has previously funded aspects of community festivals with the objective of increasing opportunities for dialogue and understanding of our different cultures; to develop networks of communications and to enable groups to challenge stereotypes and acknowledge and address differences. Frequently community festivals are seen as single identity in nature. CRC acknowledges the importance of single identity work within communities and we fund projects and initiatives which provide opportunities for communities and groups to reflect on and address issues of identity within a safe space. However, we expect these groups to progress onto cross community and multi cultural work. CRC strongly believes that as with our funding, community festivals must support communities as they grow and change, and ensure active participation in the development of a pluralist society characterized by the core principles of Equity, Diversity and Interdependence.

Furthermore Council supported the move by government to devise and implement the strategy, A Shared Future, and its aim to mainstream the above principles throughout government departments and deliver 'the establishment over time of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals...'¹

The policy and guidance framework refers to the need to adhere to government priorities when developing and submitting an application for funding (annex 2) of which economic competitiveness, building equality and community cohesion are central. However there is a need to factor in ASF and its objectives within the funding process. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has already committed itself to embracing the values of ASF within the first Triennial Action Plan (April 2006), and its principles and objectives should be followed through within the framework and embedded in the subsequent strategy which NIEC are tasked with developing.

Core Criteria & Good Relations Duty

The core criteria sets out a number of objectives which festival organisers must meet in order to secure funding. Unfortunately the Good Relations element of the criteria does not merit enough importance within the core criteria, it almost seems to be an 'add on', a tick box exercise. This is not sufficient in the context of the government priority ASF or equality legislation.

¹ A Shared Future Policy & Strategic for Good Relations in NI. 2005. P7.

Good Relations needs to be heavily weighted as a priority for securing funding. Section 75 (1) and (2) need to be mainstreamed within the criteria in order to assist festival organisers realize a festival that is open, accessible and welcoming to the whole community.

Collaboration

The Policy & Guidance Framework offers an opportunity for communities to work together and develop festivals that will benefit everyone within the locality. There is a wealth of information within our communities with regards to festival organization and we would support the formation of local partnerships to learn from each other and build capacity within the differing communities. The end result will be stronger communities, opportunities to learn new skills and ultimately deliver a festival that celebrates our diversity. These collaborations should focus on building good relations between differing communities.

The Festivals Committee

Balanced representation on any committee is a positive action and highlights the wishes of the organisation to be open, transparent and accountable. The NIEC should consider the inclusion of co-optees who have experience or background in festivals organization.

Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are a crucial part of any funding strategy. The learning from successful festivals should be recorded as models of good practice and should be used to inform potential applicants. The good relations aspect of these events should be monitored and evaluated not just via the organizers but also through participants and onlookers.

Conclusion

It is the Community Relations Council's core business to help build relationships between the different communities within Northern Ireland. A Shared Future and Good Relations set a standard whereby we have to explore our diversity, encourage dialogue, respect our differences and find ways to work in partnership. These policies and their legal obligations must be incorporated within the criteria for the Community Festivals Fund. CRC stresses the need to

1. Strengthen the core criteria to include reference and adherence to Section 75 and A Shared Future policy.
2. Promotion of Good Relations needs to be firmly set as a core criterion that has to be clearly delivered by festival organizers and monitored by the funding body.
3. The priority in funding should be towards inclusive festivals.
4. The Development Plan for community festivals should prioritize the development and delivery of inclusive events.

