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### **Issue: Day of Private Reflection**

Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society and as indicated by the most recent Life & Times Survey local communities remain largely segregated. The long-term after-effects of conflict continue to shape life and experience in Northern Ireland. The Troubles period has created much suffering and the hurts of the past will not quickly or easily be overcome. The Council believes that in order for us to move forward in building a shared, inclusive and peaceful society, we must effectively deal with our past.

Work in healing the wounds of the past requires much in the way of time, commitment and energy from society as a whole, involving organisations at all levels with our society.

The Community Relations Council proposes that peace building is properly recognised as a process which allows communities to work through and beyond the legacies of the past. It involves an investment of time and resources in building relationships which acknowledge both differences and interdependence.

### **HTR Proposal**

This proposal from HTR is one that the Council welcomes. It is a proposal which will go some way to support those most affected by the troubles to be acknowledged. Acknowledgement and recognition of the past is one of the primary needs of those that have suffered from the conflict in NI. This proposal begins to acknowledge the suffering and hurt of the past in a positive venture.

The Council would strongly recommend that this proposal primarily focuses on the responsibility of the whole of the NI community to recognise and remember the impact of the conflict. CRC maintains that Northern Ireland society as a whole has a duty to ensure that those most hurt by the Troubles are cared for in

the process of building a peaceful future and believes that this will support victims in the important route towards healing.

The conclusion to move forward on a Day of **Private** Reflection initially displays sensitivity and maturity to the needs of society at this time. It is important to note that for many victims they do not need further reminders of their pain and hurt. They have significant dates i.e. birthdays, dates when their loved one died/was injured, special anniversaries, family occasions all serving as reminders of what is missing from their lives. Those isolated individual victims and survivors in NI with little support should be at the forefront of our minds and it is essential that support and awareness of support is mobilised as much as possible.

The research that HTR has conducted is helpful in outlining lessons learned in similar conflict situations. The proposal offers a huge challenge for our society to reflect on the conflict, acknowledge the hurt and suffering, examine ways in which we were involved or affected, but ultimately what we can do to reconcile our past with our future. Leading experts – e.g. Dr Yael Danieli would suggest that there is a “conspiracy of silence” within communities coming out of conflict which includes victims and survivors and the majority of those not adversely affected by conflict i.e. accounts of trauma are too horrifying for most people to listen to or believe, in addition bystanders’ guilt led many to regard the survivors as pointing accusing fingers at them. This has a significant negative impact on the victims/survivors’ post-war sociocultural adaptation to life and on their long-term capacity for integration and healing.

However, this proposal offers a positive step in the right direction. It is noted from the discussions held that there is widespread support from some sections of our community for this particular day. Council is pleased that a large number of people in our society want to embrace this initiative, and we hope that our comments can help shape the day in a positive and meaningful way.

- Long term process of healing – it is vital that this is not viewed as just a one-off acknowledgement process. This work will require a great deal of commitment and energy to help people come to terms with the past. There is no quick fix to dealing with our past. It will be an on-going process.
- Private. We are pleased that the day of reflection is ‘private’. Feedback from some of our groups working with victims and survivors would suggest that a public Day of Reflection is much too soon. Council understands that whilst some people are ready to participate in a day of reconciliation, for others, it is still too soon. Participation must be totally voluntary, people must not be forced into acknowledging or taking action; instead it is about providing a focal point for those ready to remember and examine the impact of the conflict on themselves, their family & friends and the wider community. Careful thought is needed in relation to balancing public and private.

- Short-term and long-term preparation is critical. Regardless of the number of people participating it is essential to engaged widely with individuals, groups and all of society, to inform people what the merits and challenges of the day are, what the outcomes could be, what support will be available and moreover, that this is just the beginning of the healing process for our society as a whole. The Council would suggest that work is initiated immediately to ensure support mechanisms are firmly in place.
- Inclusiveness is vital and there should be broad support across various organizations at all levels within society. Engagement needs to take place with District Councils, Health Service Trusts and Boards, Victims & Survivors groups, Schools, and Faith Based organizations. Awareness and support is necessary from society's stakeholders.
- Signposting and referrals will be central, both on and after the day. This will require forward planning and preparation with those tasked with providing support and information – family, friends, faith based organizations, schools, counselling services, and help lines. It will be essential to develop information in a number of formats to allow people to understand the principles and ethos of the day and what happens afterwards e.g. schools - preparing teachers during the run up to the day, the day itself and the impact it could have on themselves, children and young people, and how to focus positively in the aftermath. Transgenerational impact of the conflict is important to note.
- Council agrees with the proposal to increase representation on the subgroup. It is essential to build strong partnerships which will enhance the development of this day.
- The proposal also discusses media involvement; again it is important to have widespread debate among subgroup members as to the appropriateness of a large scale media campaign, or whether it is best to keep it low key. There is a wealth of expertise in the field of media preparation and the subgroup would benefit from expertise on their preparation committee.
- It is important to clarify who is going to be involved and what exactly happens on the 'private' day of reflection. CRC views it primarily as a day that aspires to be safe and private, and a day that is totally optional. The day should be kept simple, with various ways to reflect and acknowledge the conflict. A wide range of venues should be open to the community to enable, as wide or as little, participation as possible.
- The HTR preparation team should consider using the 2007 day as a day of preparation, an awareness raising day and consequently allow it to gather momentum, to allow growth at a pace set by those wishing to reflect. The size of the day is not important, but rather it evolves slowly and safely. The private day of reflection will be a useful day, a day of responsibility and should be fluid and flexible. The proposal also examines the need to monitor and evaluate the day and this feedback will assist developmental plans.

- Council is concerned that the Day of Reflection could be seen by some of those who have most suffered as a result of the conflict in NI as the *ONLY* initiative to support and remember their loved ones and deal with the past. Other initiatives, activities and work supporting people should be promoted and possibly a pack produced to outline this work.
- Other funding bodies/district councils etc. should be engaged with to ensure that the principles of inclusion, acknowledgement and reflection associated with running a **private** day of reflection remain to the fore in any future public demonstrations.

Council congratulates Healing Through Remembering for all the work that has gone into developing this proposal and for the opportunity to contribute on how the day should be brought forward. Our society, as a collective, now has the opportunity to begin a journey of reconciliation. CRC looks forward to continuing our work with the subgroup and to support the evolution of the private day of reflection.