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From: The Community Relations Council
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Issue: Housing Executive Draft Corporate Plan: 2006-7 to 2008-9.

Introduction

The Community Relations Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NIHE Corporate Plan which outlines its strategy for the next four years. We are encouraged by the Housing Executive's recognition that they have an important role to play when it comes to working with and shaping local communities. We also welcome the commitment from the Executive that their work needs to be undertaken in partnership with social partners and other government agencies to ensure proper, affordable, and safe housing, and build vibrant communities.

Under "A Shared Future" Strategy the Housing Executive's role is to help to:

- tackle the visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism
- reduce tensions at interface areas as part of a framework led by local councils and in collaboration with key agencies and other stakeholders
- develop shared communities as well as supporting and
- protecting existing mixed areas
- develop shared workplaces that encourage and enable dialogue and engagement

Comments

CRC will focus primarily on how the Corporate Plan impacts on the area of Community & Good Relations. Overall CRC is pleased that the Housing Executive has shown its commitment to the developing area of Community and Good Relations and we are encouraged that the key area of "Building a Stronger Community" forms one of the key strategic objectives over the next four years. "A Shared Future" Strategy needs to be central in the development and delivery of all government strategies over the coming years, and partnerships and joined up government approaches are essential when supporting and empowering communities to change their neighbourhood and communities for everyone.

The continuing policy development and implementation in the areas of community relations, race relations etc reveals the commitment from the NIHE to support and develop the important area of community development, and more importantly fulfill its responsibilities in helping society move towards a shared future. “A Shared Future” Strategy and its implementation is primary to developing and achieving Community Relations and Good Relations.

CRC would like further clarification on a number of issues:

Strategic Implementation – Community Cohesion Unit

- CRC would welcome specific information about how the Community Cohesion Unit intends to implement its five core themes:
 - Flags, emblems and sectional symbols action plan
 - Segregation/ integration
 - Race Relations
 - Interface areas
 - Communities in transition

For example

Protestants in North Belfast often see themselves being 'squeezed out' of many of the areas they live in and community infrastructure is generally weaker in Protestant areas. Added to this is the recent vicious ongoing loyalist feud. Working class Catholic communities in the same area often feel that their need for housing is not being taken seriously and that they are trapped behind 'walls of fear' even though there may be available space within Protestant areas.

This problem covers a number of issues identified both within the Shared Future Strategy and within the Community Cohesion core themes including segregation, interfaces, shared space, communities in transition etc.

Integrated Housing

- A Shared Future Strategy focuses on building and developing

“Shared Communities where people of all backgrounds can live, work, learn and play together. Supporting and protecting existing areas where people of different backgrounds live together”.¹

CRC is aware that in 2005 the Community Cohesion Unit continued to look for areas suitable for mixed community housing schemes and we welcome the identification of Drumbawn in Enniskillen as a successful pilot².

¹ A Shared Future Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland March 2005 p29

² Housing Executive's Board, 25th May 2005

CRC urges the NIHE to undertake further initiatives to increase the level of integrated housing. It was emphasised in 'A Shared Future' Strategy that Northern Ireland has "less than 10% of social housing integrated". This is not constructive to building 'shared communities' and the Housing Executive has an obligation under 'A Shared Future' Strategy to take the lead role in both prioritising pilot schemes on integrated housing, whilst at the same time continuing its partnership with other agencies, e.g. the PSNI, to protect existing mixed housing areas. The Community Relations Council wants to see measurable progress taken by the NIHE on integrated mixed housing during the next corporate planning period.

Budget

- Have specific budget proposals been set aside for each area for example, The Community Cohesion Unit and Race Relations?
- Are there any proposals within budgetary control to increase programme staff on the various regeneration and environmental projects?

Monitoring

- How will progress on community/good relations be monitored, reported back on and what is the process for any consequent re-assessment that needs to be carried out?

Partnerships

- Clarification on the joined up approach of the Community Cohesion Team, Race Relations Officers, Creating Common Ground Consortium, and Neighbourhood Wardens.

Other Comments

- The Community Cohesion Unit has the difficult but essential task of dealing with divided and segregated communities. Are there any proposals to make the work of the Unit more accessible within each of NIHE's regional offices and residents groups? What advisory structure will be put in place to help inform the work of the Unit which includes organisations such as CRC?
- In the associated business objectives, the plan states that the Housing Executive will continue to implement *improvement programmes, deprivation programmes and creating common ground programmes* – CRC would like more specific information about the location and nature of these programmes, e.g. will they be a continuation of existing programmes and/or will new areas be targeted.

Travellers

New sites and new housing schemes are proposed under objective 2 "Promoting Independent Living". CRC welcomes the efforts by the Housing Executive to ensure

proper housing and facilities for the travelling community. However, some clarity is required in relation to:

- What additional resources been identified to meet the travelling communities needs, especially after the passing of the 'Unauthorised Encampments (Northern Ireland) Order 2005'?
- What work has been undertaken to communicate the Travelling Community's culture and increase tolerance within the settled community?
- What work has been undertaken with the settled community prior to the development of these sites, and who is taking the lead role? Cooperation and positive relations between both groups are essential for these new beginnings. (The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission stated that "the Traveller minority also experiences hostility and discrimination: a recent survey revealed that 40% of the public did not believe the nomadic way of life traditionally followed by many Travellers to be a valid one that should be supported by Government."¹)
 - Has the Community Cohesion Unit engaged with both groups?
 - What partnerships exist?
 - We strongly advise engaging and developing ties between both groups to ensure openness and promote good relations.

Conclusion

CRC is pleased that Community Relations and Good Relations are among the key objectives in the Housing Executive's Corporate Plan. It is imperative that all government departments and agencies work together to develop and implement the objectives of "A Shared Future". We are currently awaiting the publication of the Governments Triennial Action Plan for this strategy, however in the meantime CRC calls on all those involved in the important work of helping our communities, to undertake pro-active measures to begin the process of developing a more shared and pluralist society.

NIHE have an enhanced responsibility under 'A Shared Future' Strategy to commit themselves to take a lead role in supporting, directing and enacting change with our communities. This commitment will be measured by future actions and CRC looks forward to working with the NIHE to help deliver a shared future.

¹ NIHRC Response to the Draft Unauthorised Encampments (NI) 2004 p2