

To: Don Leeson
Head of Corporate Services
Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
Temple Court
39 North Street
Belfast, BT1 1NA

From: The Community Relations Council
6 Murray Street
Belfast
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Contact person: Gemma Attwood, Policy Development Officer
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Date: 24th August 2009

Dear Mr Leeson

RE: Draft Strategic Plan 2009-2011 & Draft EQIA Consultation

The Community Relations Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the NIHRCC's draft strategic plan 2009-2011. CRC is committed to the principles of equality, diversity, tolerance and our mission 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'*¹ and is interested in how this strategy can impact positively on community and good relations.

Policy environment

Council acknowledges the changing environment in which the Commission operates. Council works under a similar set of constraints as we await the development and publication of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration by OFMDFM and we recognise the need to develop an adaptable strategy. The development of a flexible plan should enable the re-prioritising of resources and staff commitments in light of policy developments e.g. legacy of the past recommendations, education and local government reform. CRC would like to maintain a regular dialogue with the HR Commission to deal with this changing environment and the emerging issues.

Legacy Issues

CRC is heavily involved in legacy issues - both practically and strategically. Council is therefore pleased the Commission has identified the legacy of the conflict as an important policy context which they must monitor and consider

¹ COMMUNITY RELATIONS COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN 2004-2007

when carrying out their strategic duties. In recent years the debate has been elevated, in particular with the setting up the Consultative Group on the Past and its subsequent report. The current NIO public consultation on the Report's 31 recommendations is a continuation of the debate and offers further opportunities for discussion on this important matter.

Council is also aware that the NIO intends to have a further consultation on its own recommendations in 2010. The past is a difficult and highly contentious issue and although moving forward is the only option, it will require the development of challenging actions. The Commission, like other interested groups, will hope to have a role in influencing the development of proposals that will build confidence in how we, as a community, tackle the past. The proposed monitoring role by the Commission on human rights compliance and related advice given to the government will be a crucial part of the overall response.

The Bill of Rights

Council awaits the forthcoming consultation on a Bill of Rights. As the Community Relations Council has stated in previous correspondence to the Commission, a final bill will need to have the confidence and consensus of the community and the Council therefore supports the aim of the Commission to communicate and promote human rights with groups and individuals who feel excluded or alienated from the debate.

Outreach

Council also supports the Commission's aim to engage with vulnerable groups and to mainstream a human rights culture throughout our society i.e. institutions, communities and formal education. Council would welcome the opportunity to discuss this area of work particularly in terms of challenging sectarianism and promoting good relations.

As you will know outreach work requires the continued development of user friendly resources and materials to raise awareness of the benefits of human rights. The design process should involve discussions with community and voluntary groups to ensure that the language used in the resources and approach to outreach does not alienate people and prevent dialogue and engagement. The use of local case studies should also help to illustrate the relevance of human rights to everyday situations. This would also, no doubt, highlight some of the dilemmas related to potentially competing rights between groups. This is where the interface between human rights and community relations and cohesion is most keenly felt and the Community Relations Council would be interested in working with the Commission to explore responses to these situations.

Partnership

The Council was please to see the Commission take up membership on the Good Relations Forum. This will enhance the Forum and build on the existing

collaboration between the Council and the Equality Commission. The forum promotes discussion on good relations issues between policy makers and practitioners, and we look forward to developing this area of work with the Human Rights Commission.

EQIA

The Commission's EQIA data has identified the need for targeted engagement with individuals and groups who identify themselves as Protestant, Unionist or Loyalist. Council supports the Commission's desire to tackle exclusion and alienation from identified sections of our community. Council encourages the development of a process that facilitates discussion, debate and understanding over a period of time. A continued engagement with groups and individuals will be required and the Commission will no doubt need to plan for a programme of sustained interaction and engagement.²

The Commission has identified political parties as a target group. The Council wonders if consideration has been given to specifying some other groups or constituencies in society i.e. Churches, youth and women's groups.

Partnership will be an important aspect of this work and the Commission may intend to utilise its connections with key stakeholders to aid introductions to targeted groups for the delivery of awareness raising and development programmes. Furthermore, the Council suggests that the Commission should actively encourage inter-community dialogue on human rights issues (social and economic) in communities, schools and churches etc. The Community Relations Council would be interested in partnership to support such work.

The Council is pleased that the Commission has identified the need to develop a good relations strategy and would welcome the opportunity to discuss a course of action over the coming months.

We look forward to continuing our work with the Human Rights Commission during the lifetime of this strategic plan.

² 2007 NILTS Identity Question - 10% of those surveyed identified themselves as belonging to no religion.
2008 NILTS Political Attitude Question - 29% of those surveyed from a Protestant background did not consider themselves to be a unionist.