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Issue: Strategy for Promoting Good Relations

The Community Relations Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Probation Board's Strategy for Promoting Good Relations. CRC's aim is to lead and support change in Northern Ireland towards reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust. 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.

Good Relations is a legislative duty for all public bodies and we are pleased that the PBNI have committed themselves to developing and delivering a Good Relations Strategy. CRC's Good Relations Framework aims to assist organisations with the development of similar strategies. Our framework emphasises the need to understand the part sectarianism and racism play in dividing Northern Ireland and outlines approaches to assist organisations to move beyond this division and appreciate our diversity with all its challenges.

PBNI have recognised the need to challenge perceptions of one another, to encourage staff to engage in an open and safe environment and subsequently to put in place a strategy that allows this dialogue to continue. We would like to congratulate you on the process you have used. It is important to engage with all staff, and it is essential that the strategy is owned and implemented by the senior management team – there needs to be a top down approach. This emphasises the importance to all staff to engage with each other, challenge negative attitudes and promote good relations within the organisation and with its client group.

PBNI's developmental process has been thorough – the use of external consultants who are experts in the field, monitoring attitudes of staff in the form of audits, establishing a delivery team, and ensuring that the strategy is delivered throughout the organisation and its 300 staff members. A lot has been achieved and your

commitment to building and sustaining good relations is even more evident by the creation of good relations champions within the organisation. All the key components of the process have been carried out carefully and underline PBNI's commitment to getting it right.

Another important aspect of the strategy should be its evolution. CRC noted that 45% of staff in the 2005 staff survey 'agreed that PBNI valued diversity'. We would be keen to monitor this aspect and would hope to see an increase once the good relations strategy has been formally implemented following the consultation process. As with all organisations there are time constraints on staff and their responsibilities, however an essential aspect of good relations is continued awareness training at all levels of the organisation and we would encourage PBNI to ensure that all staff are given adequate time each year to reflect on current good relations within the organisation and to feedback any thoughts on how it could be improved.

CRC would also be keen for PBNI to carry out an external audit with their client group – with both offenders and victims. This audit would help inform the organisation of any negative perceptions from the public and subsequently revise policies and practices to improve these opinions.

Another initiative which the probation board could adopt is the incorporation of Good Relations training into their various programmes. We are pleased to note that they are already committed to sharing models of good practice among partners in the criminal justice system, but we believe it would be especially beneficial to share this knowledge with their client groups as well. For example this could take shape as a training tool within programmes such as the interpersonal skills training or the mentoring programme. Furthermore it could become part of the criteria for the Community Development Grants which would enable the local community to discuss good relations and even develop their own good relations statement of commitment and strategies.

CRC's Good Relations Framework states 'good relations is a developmental process and is not prescriptive'. The Community Relations Council is supportive of this Good Relations Strategy and believes it will be a positive addition to the organisation and an important action for the delivery of Government's A Shared Future Strategy which commits to placing the promotion of good relations at the centre of policy, practice and delivery of public services.

'Good relations and equality go hand in hand. Equality cannot stand alone without reinforcing scaffolding of good relations. Real equality needs good relations to underpin and strengthen it'.

CRC looks forward to building its relationship with PBNI and is willing to assist with this important work.

Yours sincerely

Duncan Morrow
Chief Executive