

Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration



Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Response to the Consultation by Rural Community Network

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October 2010

Background to RCN

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN has 400 members across Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half of its representatives (12) elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

Under the aim of actively working towards an equitable and peaceful society RCN has had a long track record in developing community cohesion and promoting reconciliation in rural communities. We see community and good relations work as an integral part of our community development practice contributing to the sustainability of rural communities. Some of the work we have been involved in includes:

- Delivering Peace I & Peace II funding through a specific small grant programme for rural communities.
- Equality Diversity and Interdependence programme.
- Capacity Building towards Rural Reconciliation (funded by Peace II) delivered training on community development and good relations to grass roots groups which included a small grant element to allow groups to develop a project which addressed reconciliation and peace building in rural areas.
- Community Halls Advisory Service to facilitate groups to develop shared space in their communities.
- 'More than a Familiar Stranger' research into the perceptions and attitudes of migrant workers and rural host communities to the challenges of working and living together
- Research report on the 'Experience of Protestant Communities in Border Areas'.
- Research report on 'Experiences of Catholic Minority Communities in Counties Antrim and Down'.
- Research report on 'Experience of Ethnic Minority Communities in Co Fermanagh'.
- 'Sharing over Separation' research report a precursor to the Rural Enablers programme.
- Rural Enablers programme, a Peace III funded regional programme. The Programme places a staff member in each of the 6 Northern counties and 6 Border counties to develop work with community organisations and rural institutions to address sectarianism, segregation and racism.
- Forthcoming research 'Beyond Belfast' examining issues of segregation and division in rural communities.

Sectarianism and Racism, the Rural Context

“There is no question that in a rural context, issues of attachment to area, locality and in some cases the very land itself, are emotive. Such emotion, in conjunction with sectarianism, makes issues around division, which permeates through housing, schools, sport and leisure, basic services and community and cultural activities, challenging to address. This is particularly true when the lines of division can be much more subtle than in many urban areas and are not characterised by obvious physical structures and separation, but rather are based upon subjective perceptions of where is, and subsequently where is not, suitably safe and ‘neutral’. The cost of such division both financially, in terms of duplication of services, and socially, in terms of the impact on people, continues to have detrimental consequences to the sustainability of rural communities both now and in the future. Black and minority ethnic communities also face distinct issues due to often increased isolation, visibility and distance from sources of support, information and services.” (RCN Rural Manifesto 2010).

The PSNI recorded 1,020 sectarian incidents in the Urban region and 820 in the Rural region in 2009/10. They also recorded 637 incidents with racist motivation in the Urban region and 401 incidents in the Rural region in 2009/10 (Source: PSNI Annual Statistical Report, Report No. 3 Hate incidents & crimes 1st April 2009 – 31st March 2010)¹. These statistics may represent a visible manifestation of sectarianism & racism but we need to consider that in many rural communities whilst physical barriers don’t exist as they do in some urban areas segregation is still widespread but can be harder for outsiders to perceive. Indicators of where sectarianism and segregation may be an issue in rural areas include:

- Communities where flags & emblems and memorials are perceived as “marking territory”,
- Communities where land and property is sold only to members of the same community thereby maintaining segregation
- Communities where contentious marches take place
- Communities where attacks on symbolic buildings e.g. Orange halls and GAA premises have taken place.

RCN Response to the Consultation

Rural Community Network welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. We welcome the fact that the Programme, as finally presented for consultation, was agreed between the DUP and Sinn Fein. However we believe that the Programme would have been stronger and would have carried more legitimacy if all the political parties involved in the Executive had been involved in its development. We recognise that the position of other political parties in NI is likely to be critical of aspects of the Programme.

We welcome the clarification that the Equality of Opportunity provisions as set out in Section 75 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 underpins good relations and the recognition that good relations cannot be built on inequality.

RCN welcomes the expression of concern for individuals who are migrant workers but have “no recourse to public funds” and who, through no fault of their own, may find themselves destitute and in need of

¹Whilst these figures are problematic bearing in mind Derry City, Newry, Omagh, Ballymena and Enniskillen are all large urban areas that are included in the PSNI statistical breakdown of the rural region (based on their district council definition) that couldn’t be considered as rural they do represent an indication that sectarian and racist crimes also take place in rural areas.

short term support. However we are disappointed that the document makes no concrete proposals to examine or address this issue.

RCN welcomed the fact that the consultation sessions organised by OFMDFM were held across Northern Ireland with a good geographical coverage. We were concerned at the format of the events where officials gave short presentations on the themes of the CSI document but failed to explain in any detail the main aims of the programme. This meant that most attendees were only able to give impressionistic comments on the programme as the majority of people would not have read the document in any detail.

Work towards cohesion, sharing and integration is incredibly difficult and challenging to all political parties and to many of our citizens. There are no easy answers. However RCN's position has always been informed by community development principles. We believe we should start by naming the issues and allowing communities to voice their own experiences of the conflict and the division that remains a part of daily life for many in rural areas. We believe that this honesty is fundamental to any attempts to tackle issues of sectarianism, racism and other forms of prejudice in this society.

In our view, the Programme does not set out a compelling vision. CSI should be about the type of society we want to see, or work towards, based on rights and reconciliation and not about how government disperses funding. RCN is concerned that the programme makes no mention of reconciliation or work towards reconciliation. "Reconciliation" is referenced in several case studies within the document but is noticeably absent from the programme proposals.

Whilst RCN would endorse many of the sentiments included within the document we would be concerned that the programme does not clearly define cohesion, integration, community relations, sectarianism or segregation. The failure to set out clear definitions means that the programme is more ambiguous than it should be and many of the key terms are open to interpretation. This lack of clarity fundamentally weakens the programme.

We would also be concerned that the Programme does not clearly set out an action plan for implementation with clear timescales, resource allocations and hoped for outcomes.

RCN is concerned that there is no analysis within the programme of the origins and historical background of the conflict. Whilst we recognise that this is highly contested we believe that the programme must set out some broad analysis or at least identify the main points of contention between the two main traditions. The document also fails to recognise that Government and the institutions of the state are, and have been, part of the problem. Segregation was exacerbated by the Troubles but was allowed to develop unchecked as it was convenient in security and political terms for the authorities in managing the conflict.

We were also concerned that several sections of society are notable by their absence from the programme. Victims and survivors of the conflict are not mentioned within the document. We believe that the programme must address the needs of victims and survivors as a key building block for long term reconciliation in this society. It is surprising that current policy to address the needs of victims and survivors has not been integrated into the CSI programme. Ex-prisoners and ex-combatants are another glaring omission from the programme.

Members of the LGBT community are also missing from the document despite the fact that they suffer from homophobia and are subject to hate crime attacks. We believe that CSI should be an overarching framework for dealing with all types of prejudice, discrimination and hate crime. The document does

refer in several places to the determination of the Executive to have a zero tolerance approach to hate crime. In this context we were surprised that the programme failed to address homophobia and the prejudice suffered by the LGBT community in NI.

The programme also fails to acknowledge or examine the role of women in peace building and reconciliation work. Churches, trade unions, the Orange Order and the GAA are other significant institutions that provide leadership in rural communities who could make significant contributions in developing a shared society who are also absent from the programme.

Rural communities are mentioned three times within the document and it is to be welcomed that the Programme recognises that the manifestations of sectarianism and racism in rural communities are different from those in urban communities. It is to be welcomed that the programme recognises the contributions RCN, NI Rural Women's Network and the Rural Support Networks have made in building the capacity of those in rural areas and ensuring that the voices of people living in these areas are heard. However there is no analysis of how sectarianism, segregation and racism manifest differently in rural communities and how policy makers need to take account of these differences when developing policies and programmes. The case studies included in the document highlight areas of good practice but the absence of rural case studies reinforce the lack of rural focus within the CSI programme.

RCN would also be concerned that the references to rural communities are located within the ambit of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development despite the important role other government departments have to play in tackling these issues across rural Northern Ireland. The Department of Education and Department of Health, Social Services and Public Spending are two departments who deliver vital services in rural communities and we would welcome an analysis of how these Departments could work differently to address issues of cohesion, sharing and integration in rural areas. The programme does not address the particular issues faced in border communities around sectarianism, segregation and racism. It also fails to outline how the NI Executive needs to work on a cross border basis with the Southern government to address these issues in border communities.

The document does refer to the context of constrained resources several times but makes no sustained analysis of the financial, social or human cost of division beyond an acknowledgment that shared services need to be developed to reduce costs. It also fails to make reference to previous research undertaken in this area such as the Deloitte report 'Research into the Financial Cost of the Northern Ireland Divide' published in April 2007 which estimated the financial cost of maintaining a segregated society at £1.5B per annum. The programme does reference the huge financial investment in community relations work and peace building invested through EU Peace funding, the International Fund for Ireland and other independent charitable trusts and funding bodies. It also acknowledges the run down of these external sources of funding.

RCN welcomes the fact that the programme states that it will adopt a zero tolerance approach towards hate crime and refers to the Hate Crime Action Group that is working on a number of issues including the management of hate crime cases through the Criminal Justice System, recording of hate crime cases and a common definition of hate crime. However there are no actions outlining how this zero tolerance approach will be implemented. Since April 2007 out of 5019 reported sectarian incidents, of which 3337 translated to sectarian crimes, there have been only 520 clearances by the PSNI. The low clearance rate for sectarian crime indicates the level of action needed before citizens can begin to have confidence that the criminal justice system is serious about tackling hate crime.

Reference is made to shared housing but no targets are set beyond what is already planned by the NIHE. It is our view that shared housing cannot happen on its own and the need for shared public spaces, shared services and shared schooling must underpin the development of shared housing.

Whilst the programme does recognise the need for work to be undertaken with young people to tackle sectarianism and racism RCN is concerned that the language in the document problematises young people rather than viewing them as an asset within communities. The key aims identified in relation to young people are very broad and it is difficult to see how these will impact on addressing sectarian and racist attitudes held by some young people.

The Programme fails to acknowledge that there are people and groups who are outside the peace process. Whilst the numbers of active dissident republicans and loyalists are small and the support they may have in the wider community is limited they have, by their actions, the potential to exacerbate inter community tensions.

The role of integrated education is acknowledged as is the role of other schools in promoting a shared society. The Programme does not outline any actions that will enhance the role of education in developing a shared society and tackling sectarianism and racism. It also fails to address the financial cost of separate education. Recent research, undertaken by Oxford Economics for the Integrated Education Fund, estimates that NI pays a premium of almost £300M per annum to maintain a sectoral education system.

RCN believes that the expertise of the Community Relations Council needs to be retained and strengthened. It is critical that an independent body can sit outside government to criticise policy, offer advice and promote debate and understanding on these issues. This is especially true in the context of a divided society and an equally divided party political system. In these circumstances an independent critical voice on these important and often highly charged policy matters is crucial.

Whilst the involvement of OFMDFM Ministers in chairing the Ministerial Panel is to be welcomed it is unclear whether or not the Programme will become the collective responsibility of all government departments or will remain focussed within OFMDFM. We would support the involvement of community organisations and the Racial Equality Forum within the Ministerial panel. RCN would advocate that the Executive adopt an open public appointments process to the Ministerial Panel to maximise community confidence.

The production of this programme demonstrated a lack of engagement with key stakeholders, which sets a bad example for local councils in developing local action plans. The programme also misses an opportunity by failing to link issues of community cohesion, sharing and integration into the local action plans developed by the community planning process that will be devolved to local councils as part of the Review of Public Administration.

RCN welcomes the commitment given to building the capacity of local and minority ethnic communities to support people who have experienced hate crime. We would be concerned that the programme does not address how it will tackle the barriers to integration and how it will address the needs of migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees. It also fails to address in any detail how it will support host communities to respond to the challenges brought about by diversity and inward migration.

Suggestions for improvement

- That OFMDFM and the wider Executive re-engage with the breadth of civic society groups including community and voluntary sector, trade unions, churches, sporting organisations and loyal orders to develop a comprehensive CSI policy with an accompanying wide ranging action plan.
- That said action plan includes specific actions, timescales, resource allocations, hoped for outcomes and effective systems for monitoring and evaluation.
- That the CSI programme acknowledges the legacy of the conflict, even though the nature and causes of conflict are contested, and provides an analysis of how the legacy of the conflict continues to impact on cohesion, sharing and integration.
- That the vision for the programme is re-visited and that reconciliation is adopted as a key theme for CSI.
- That the CSI programme sets out clear definitions for cohesion, sharing and integration so terminology is clear and debate on the policy is better informed.
- We would suggest that short term goals should set out achievable and realistic outcomes that can then be built on as government and communities move on to deal with more contentious issues.
- That the Executive commits to preventing migrant workers who lose their livelihood, through no fault of their own, from falling into destitution.
- That CSI includes an analysis of how the programme relates to policy on victims and survivors.
- That CSI analyses how sectarianism, segregation and racism manifest differently in rural communities and that specific actions are developed to address these issues in rural areas.
- That CSI explores how these issues manifest in border communities, and how government North and South, can adopt a cross border approach to tackling sectarianism, racism and segregation.
- That the programme clearly affirms the cross departmental nature of the programme and sets out how government departments will be expected to address these issues across their remit.
- That the Community Relations Council is retained as an independent, critical voice that can offer advice and promote debate and understanding on these issues.
- That CSI considerations are embedded as a key theme to be addressed by local councils through action plans developed by the community planning process.
- That CSI addresses the racism faced by migrant workers as well as addressing how it will support host communities to respond to the challenges of diversity.

Conclusion

Political leadership will be crucially important in dealing with these issues. Dealing with the past, tackling sectarianism, racism and segregation will be a long and difficult process but political parties must lead by example in addressing the legacy of the past and naming difficult issues rather than playing to their respective constituencies if society in Northern Ireland is to move on.

RCN developed a Rural Manifesto 2010 in the run up to the General Election in May. This was a declaration of rural issues and potential solutions for consideration by the political parties leading up to and beyond the 2010 General Election. The manifesto made a number of “asks” across a range of themes important to rural sustainability. Under the Building a Shared Future theme our ask was: “... that the Executive brings forward to implementation a strategic programme aimed at building a better and shared society which recognises the distinct issues around sectarianism and racism in rural

areas and which obligates both government departments and local government to actively deliver meaningful actions on the ground to address these issues.”
The CSI programme, as it stands, falls far short of this ask.