



# *A Shared Future:*

*a consultation paper on  
improving relations in  
Northern Ireland*

*Response by the  
Community Relations Council*

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# Section One

## Background and Introduction

### 1A. THE DOCUMENT

The launch of *A Shared Future: a consultation paper on improving relations in Northern Ireland* represents an important milestone in the development of a public policy strategy to promote better inter-community relations in Northern Ireland. The consultation document lays out some of the serious results of inter-community tension and violence on the political, social and economic development of Northern Ireland and seeks to establish key principles and structures to promote improved relationships into the future.

At present, Northern Ireland finds itself in a political stalemate. In the absence of any unusual or significant security crisis, there is a danger of growing indifference and apathy. This consultation is important because it offers an opportunity to ask real questions in a fresh way. The opportunity to participate offers a practical avenue for all citizens and groups to shape policy and structures for many years to come. There is a consequent danger that without real feedback and response, the consultation will fuel cynicism and apathy rather

than galvanise new energy. It is therefore critical that the consultation should lead to renewed action based on credible and confident policy.

Many of the structures and policies designed to respond to these challenges were established in the 1980s and 90s. The Community Relations Council (further ‘CRC’ or ‘the Council’) wholeheartedly welcomes this consultation and the opportunity it provides to review past practice and design new policies and strategies for the next years. We will endeavour to ensure that as many people as possible, from across Northern Ireland and beyond, participate in this important exercise.

## **1B. THE LANGUAGE OF THE DOCUMENT**

‘Community relations’ as a recognisable element of public policy emerged in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s and was resurrected in the 1980s to describe the crisis in relationships along the axis of nationalism and unionism, Catholicism and Protestantism. Repeated surveys and the results of elections suggest that

the large majority of people in Northern Ireland continue to identify with one or other of these generic labels.

Furthermore, the specific division between Unionists and Nationalists has shaped the design of institutions under the Belfast Agreement. At the same time, the labels continue to be questioned as overly restrictive and presumptive. Objectors maintain that institutionalised divisions tend to ascribe a fixed identity to people of a particular background whatever their personal wishes or may give the impression that people of other religions or ethnic backgrounds are marginal to public life.

In the 1990s, the Community Relations Council redefined community relations as the search for public relationships based on equity, diversity and interdependence, a definition which included both the dominant political issue and other less widely expressed issues of identity, especially those based on religion, race, nationality and culture. The definition also emphasised that justice and fairness and the value of difference were not separate from but integral to any sustainable community

relations endeavour in Northern Ireland. It also allowed the relative scale and scope of particular issues to change and vary over time.

The Northern Ireland Act (1998) introduced the concept of good relations, without defining what the concept means in relation to already existing terms such as community relations. While the concept applied initially only to those areas circumscribed by the Act, the more open quality of good relations has appealed to many within the community relations field. *A Shared Future* now talks about improving relations, again without clear definition of the terminology.

In this response, the Council will use the term community relations to describe efforts to resolve conflicts in which community identity is central and will confine good relations to the

areas covered by Section 75. Improving relations is the task undertaken by all of us in pursuit of good community relations(!) It is our hope that the review will result in a formal clarification of terms.

### **1C. RACE AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

Overwhelmingly the *Shared Future* document refers to the crisis caused by inter-community conflict, although it makes clear reference to the growing problems of racial harassment and violence faced by members of ethnic minorities.

The Community Relations Council believes that the concerns of numerically smaller religious, racial and ethnic groups in Northern Ireland are real and serious. The Council also believes that these issues should be connected to the values of equity, diversity and interdependence, which are central concerns of any democracy. It is important that the political weight of the traditional issue does not eliminate the broader context of relationships. It is also important that the clear recognition of a broader multicultural context does not obscure

the need to take systemic action to address the multiple issues arising from more established conflicts in Northern Ireland. For these reasons the Council believes that the issues should be addressed as separate and connected.

The Council hopes to extend its work with all the people of Northern Ireland, and particularly with minority ethnic groups. This is not a matter of a single approach to all minority groups, but of real relationships with the needs of distinct communities. Issues of funding and support for such work need to be resolved. Public responsibility for acting in this area needs to be clarified. We will be contributing to the current racial equality review, and take an active role on the Race Forum. With this in mind, our comments in this response will focus largely on issues arising from the long-established inter-community conflict.

# Section Two

## Critical Issues for Community Relations in Northern Ireland

### 2A. RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

In recent years, multiple sociological studies of 'social capital' have underlined that the quality of relationships - intimate, friendly, businesslike and political - is a critical determinant of the quality of life in any society. Indeed the quality of relationships in a society matter as much as preordained political goals. Nobody who has lived in Northern Ireland over many decades can doubt the truth of this general insight. The costs of conflict are available for everyone to see. Indeed, it can be argued that the nature and quality of relationships across traditional community boundaries have been and will be the critical determinants of the existence and future sustainability of democracy and civilised society in Northern Ireland.

Moving from relationships based on mistrust and defence to relationships rooted in mutual recognition and trust is the essence of reconciliation. Where relationships have been shaped by threat and fear over a long period of time, as in Northern Ireland, all attempts to make change through policy and law alone are subject to the changes being subverted by that same threat and fear.

The quality of relationships changes through our interactions in numerous 'actual' situations - political, social, economic, community and personal. A focus on relationships in public policy means additional consideration being given to the 'how' of policy and law alongside the 'what'. Encouraging inclusion, reciprocity and partnership needs to be central to any meaningful public policy agenda. Spreading trust should be a conscious goal of all public endeavour in Northern Ireland because the quality of our relationships, as demonstrated in personal, community and public life, will determine the quality of our shared future.

## **2B. THE LEGACY OF CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE**

- Conflict and violence between and within communities have left a profound legacy in Northern Ireland. While much of the cost remains invisible, this legacy is visible in:
  - the deaths, injuries and bereavements which have scarred so many lives;
  - the number of people who served time in prison for activities directly related to conflict, putting a huge burden on families and communities with profound long-term effects;

- the fear and threat which structures the residential and commercial shape of cities, towns and countryside;
- the identification of personal and community safety with avoidance, segregation, suspicion and antagonism;
- attitudes, behaviour and perceptions that are often formed on the basis of a pessimism which presumes hostility and threat and understands or even justifies violence in response;
- a culture that tolerates and promotes paramilitary activity which has become 'normal' in many areas of our cities and towns;

interfaces between areas held to belong to one community or the other which easily become flashpoints of violence;

- policing dominated by counter-terrorism;
- cultural activities that are understood as offensive and exclusive by those who cannot or do not participate - flags and emblems that provide symbols of national unity in other territories have become identified with partisan politics, violence and intimidation;
- the huge costs of conflict for public expenditure through the duplication of services, in-built segregation,

- unusual planning costs, security considerations etc;
- an erosion of public authority in many areas, and a weak legitimacy for the state which requires repair and development.
  - a risk-averse culture in both business and the public sector which protects what is known and is suspicious of the unknown.

## 2C. RECONCILIATION IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY

In Northern Ireland fear of identified 'others' has been 'common sense'. Policy aimed at promoting a shared future will not be a quick fix. Instant harmony is not available. Long term sustainability will require real compromises and new patterns of relationship. For too long, the success of community relations work has been identified with the promotion of instant harmony, in a context where harmony is only achievable if key issues are avoided.

The goal of all policies for improved community relations is not false harmony but an increasing capacity to resolve and address profound differences without resort to violence. Reconciliation for whole societies is not an event. Instead, it is the step by step

replacement of relationships built on the presumption of enmity with relationships based on the presumption of mutuality. Policy to promote reconciliation in this context must be long-term in nature, flexible in approach and supportive of learning, innovation and risk.

If capacity-building is the first task of peace and reconciliation work, then recent years have seen real improvement. Contrary to much received opinion, there has been enormous improvement in the depth and quality of work promoting peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland over the last 15 years. By focusing on the journey still to be travelled, there is a danger that the *Shared Future* document does not do justice to what has been achieved. Since 1990, the Community Relations Council has fostered and supported work with the victims and survivors of violence, with communities on interfaces, with groups of former prisoners, with churches, with trade unions and in the workplace, and on issues varying from urban planning, housing and cultural diversity to policing and local government. Opportunities for dialogue and sharing, for mediation and for cultural diversity have been steadily enhanced.

Community relations issues, once the province of the brave few, are now on the agenda of many organisations and groups. Indeed a glance at the annual reports of the Council shows the depth and diversity of work which has become possible, unthinkable in 1989.

The advent of PEACE II has engaged large numbers of people and organisations in work to promote peace and reconciliation. What is clear is that sustainable reconciliation has not been achieved in Northern Ireland. Political dialogue has addressed many issues and raised other problems. The Council is not complacent about the tasks which remain, but is confident that new ways towards trust and recognition can and should be found in many areas, especially in major areas of public policy.

## **2D. VIOLENCE AND POVERTY**

Sociologists have long noted that poverty and social exclusion breed a context in which violence flourishes. Especially in urban areas, conflict and violence have gone hand in hand. Multiple deprivation in Northern Ireland includes the combined legacy of both poverty and violence, creating an exaggerated pattern of social exclusion and a spiral of decline in specific areas.

There is no doubt, however, that the relationship between violence and poverty is complex. Most importantly, the causal relationship of poverty and violence runs in both directions at once: violence increases the level of deprivation while deprivation increases the possibility of violence.

On a practical level, those who acquire the economic means to move away from the direct impact of violence tend to do so. The demands on health and social services in areas of conflict rise. Investment in education in these areas tends to represent an investment in local emigration. Private investment is either deterred by violence or finds that those with the requisite qualification for employment are no longer resident in areas of high tension. The business costs of parades and protests, difficulties over flags and emblems, journey to work fears, patrolling a neutral working environment, sickness due to harassment and intimidation as well as deterred applications for employment are immense, if still anecdotal. The most vulnerable and least mobile people in society find themselves deserted or stranded in a spiral of deprivation and intimidation. No policy to tackle deprivation and poverty in Northern Ireland is serious unless it seeks to

defuse inter-community violence and find common approaches to public and private investment.

The further consequence of this pattern is that those who have the greatest interest in resolving conflict are often locked into social conditions which make it difficult for them to act. While they have an enormous interest in making progress to better relationships, they have much reduced capacity to influence events. Too often those living on interfaces relapse into reliance on peace walls and paramilitary protection to generate a modicum of safety. Tragically, those who escape the direct impact of inter-community violence, too often become comfortably divided, losing interest in resolving issues even as they acquire objectively greater means to contribute to change. A policy to end community tensions will require the engagement of the comfortably divided as well as the participation of those living in interface and violent areas.

## **2E. CONFLICT AND FREEDOM**

Freedom of movement, freedom of expression and freedom of religious belief are the keystones of western democracy. The European Union is founded on the principles of the

freedom of movement of capital and labour. While all parties in Northern Ireland pay lip service to these principles, it is clear that they are only distant aspirations for many people. Competing community assertiveness has made the application of these freedoms very difficult in Northern Ireland. The issue extends far beyond the highly controversial matter of parades and protests against them, to the fundamental rights of people to live, work and socialise where they choose.

Community relations work is often accused of attempting artificial 'social engineering', portraying current reality as organic and intervention as artificial. It is the strong contention of the Council that current patterns of behaviour are themselves not the result of free choice but are often reactions to external pressures which determine what is considered possible or desirable. Violence and fear have been engineers of social behaviour in Northern Ireland long before the CRC came into existence. Far from representing free choice, the current patterns of residence, work and socialising are often constrained by considerations of security which are unacceptable in a free society – and at some variance from preferences consistently expressed in

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey opinion data. While the Council does not believe in forcing people into relationships against their will, it remains the duty of government to protect citizens from these unacceptable pressures where possible.

In the words of Blaise Pascal, *'Men have not been able to fortify justice, therefore they have justified force.'* It remains true that a decent society depends on the presumption that these freedoms can be taken for granted. Furthermore, they lie at the core of the legally binding commitments of both Britain and Ireland. Community relations policy must tackle the obstacles to these freedoms as a key priority and as a measure of progress towards the vision of a shared society

## **2F. RESPONSIBILITY FOR IMPROVING RELATIONS**

Much of the direct violence in Northern Ireland has been concentrated on specific groups. The work of the *Cost of the Troubles* project demonstrates that poor urban interfaces and ghettos, specific contested rural districts of Counties Armagh, Tyrone and Fermanagh and the police and army suffered the overwhelming proportion of deaths and bereavement associated

with the 'troubles' after 1975. There is a strong temptation to define and confine the problem to those areas and issues which showed the most powerful symptoms. In the view of the Council, this is a temptation which must be avoided and countered.

Relationships that erupt into violence at the interface are not the sole responsibility of those who live in proximity to 'peace walls'. Violence in certain places is also the result of wider social tensions which are shared by others and often emanate from beyond the interface. The power to effect change is usually far greater among people at a distance from direct violence while the risks in doing so are considerably less. Experience suggests, however, that there is a tragic tendency to lapse into indifference and apathy in relation to change once the immediate dangers of security are removed. Public policy must emphasise the centrality of this issue for government, business and core institutions of state and society if change is to be felt where violence has left the deepest scars. Change at the interface also depends on change at the heart of society.

## 2G. ADAPTIVE PUBLIC POLICY

Public policy in Northern Ireland has been a remarkable example of the capacity of the modern western state to adapt to issues of community division. In the face of violence and conflict, the show has been kept on the road in an important way. Public housing demand has been resolved along largely sectarian lines. Dividing walls which were once makeshift barricades have become award-winning permanent 'peace walls'. Services have been provided on parallel lines. Transport services avoid certain interfaces, separate bus stops divide warring groups of young people, leisure facilities and libraries cater for an exclusive clientele, refuse collection is performed by teams selected along politico-religious lines. The contribution of this adaptation to maintaining a basic quality of life in almost impossible circumstances should be recognised. However, this strategy holds out no prospect of stability or sustainability in the long run unless Northern Ireland is to be divided formally into a series of exclusive enclaves and ghettos along the lines of the failed Bantustans of apartheid South Africa. The Council believes that this is an undesirable end product and points to the self-interest of communities in choosing actively to create a shared future.

## 2H. THE DIRECTION AND SCOPE OF FUTURE POLICY

Conflict in Northern Ireland has left scars at many levels. Political progress remains essential to long-term sustainability. Political agreement and stable political institutions are essential for a sustainable future. Widely acceptable government and the rule of law are the *sine qua non* of security and safety. Political institutions provide the possibilities for negotiating differences, raising matters of public importance and ensuring equal citizenship. Conflict has also affected local communities and the provision of core services such as policing, housing, local government, education, health and social services. It has shaped social and personal lives, so that many of our religious and cultural bodies have grown up in its shadow and continue to be shaped by antagonism. For many people, the deepest impact has been more personal, whether through injury, bereavement or a more general terror.

Public policy must play a critical role in shaping the future. Government alone cannot solve the community relations problem; it can however give a strong lead and a context for action. Because conflict has been a holistic experience, serious policy for the transformation of

conflict must include support for the so-called 'soft' areas of community relations policy; promoting healing, supporting the victims of violence, reintegrating former prisoners and encouraging difficult conversations. Policy must move from comprehensive adaptation to violence and conflict to a stance which promotes new generative learning in an area of policy uncertainty.

## 21. LAW AND DEVELOPMENT

Relationships and their quality cannot be determined by law alone. Law should grow out of wider community commitments to values and goals. While the law should and must act to set acceptable limits, reduce intimidation and fear and protect against gross misconduct, the development of a society based on fairness, respect for legitimate difference and recognition of our mutual dependence on one another cannot be determined by public decree alone. Over-reliance on law can lead to resentment, resistance and backlash, as well as generating a culture overly reliant on litigation and third-party intervention. In a project of cultural growth and change, such as reconciliation in a divided society, the balance between compliance and commitment needs to be carefully weighed.

In our view community relations should be driven by three elements complementing one another:

*a. legislation.* there should be a statutory obligation on government and public bodies to have regard for good relations, which should be developed from the current Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. Ideally this should be a platform for an ongoing dynamic public debate. (compliance driven)

*b. public policy and governance.* policy in a wide range of areas should take active account of its contribution to an agreed vision of relationships. Where possible, it should reward good behaviour and penalise bad behaviour. Inevitably this will be a mixture of carrots (benefits) and sticks (costs). In addition, it should be regularly monitored for change. (supporting the business case for improving relations)

*c. development and leadership work which encourages experiment and innovation while actively spreading and multiplying good practice.* it is simply untenable to pretend that good practice in many areas is currently developed to a sufficient degree to warrant universal compliance with a single governmental model. (commitment driven)

The combination of all three elements is essential if sustainable positive change is to result.

## **2J. BEYOND SINGLE IDENTITY**

Many people resist cross-community settings for dialogue and identify community relations with enforced inter-community contact. The Council is acutely aware of the need for real meeting and understanding across traditional divisions. Indeed we are persuaded that without real dialogue, interchange, co-operation and sharing community background will continue to be an obstacle to free human society in Northern Ireland.

Community development and especially its principles of participation, consultation and accountability are central to the quality of life of any democratic society. The Council strongly supports such community development while believing that real development includes an increasing capacity to make mature relationships with others and to adapt to the change which is an inevitable part of modern life. The capacity to make and sustain relationships, embrace and tolerate difference, and enter contracts and reciprocal agreements is crucial to any

real concept of development. For CRC, community relations are not a challenge to community development but central to any real progressive development worth its salt.

Nonetheless, the Council is also aware that many people in Northern Ireland perceive and have experienced some inter-community contexts as threatening or bullying. Under such circumstances, it is not only understandable but also appropriate that people seek a safer space. Beyond doubt, the creation and protection of space for meeting, sharing, playing, working and living which is simultaneously both integrated and safe is the key community relations task in Northern Ireland. That space must eventually be physical but it can also be created in groups and organisations such as public institutions and workplaces as well as community, church or youth settings. Finding and taking such opportunities is a central task for all those charged with funding and development in this area.

Real meeting can only take place in a context where everyone present is free from fear and intimidation. Current reality suggests that this will not be an overnight project but a serious and

sustained commitment, subject to regular setbacks. A really shared future will require creativity, a willingness to take all presenting opportunities and new thinking on how protection is to be achieved for people crossing lines of antagonism in a place where violence has driven people to seek segregated or defensive solutions to the threats facing them.

Often the only visible safe space is identified as 'single identity', meaning a context in which the community background of all participants can be presumed. CRC believes that safe but exclusive space can be an essential part of a process which ultimately ends in engagement and meeting. However, single-identity projects can too often be excuses to avoid reality, building up a false, aggressive or bombastic confidence which does little to prepare people for real confidence in real relationships across cultural lines. Projects which are described as cross community projects in the 'long term' become in effect projects in which any real relationship is put on the long finger.

CRC believes that the key issue is not who attends at all times, but the quality of what happens. There is good and bad cross-community work. The same

applies to single-identity work.

The Council exists to promote good relationship-building work wherever it happens. Provided single-identity work is clearly and unambiguously part of a project which recognises our shared future, good single-identity work can be good community relations work. It can only ever be part of a journey, however. In the end, all groups in a shared society must contribute to an inter-cultural whole. We believe that this recognition should be part of all considerations of financial support for improving relations.

## **2K. HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITY AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Since 1997, CRC has explicitly promoted equity, diversity and interdependence as core values for policy in Northern Ireland. After 1998, the establishment of the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission underlined the public commitment to justice and to the protection of freedoms. CRC believes that better community relations can only be built within a framework of real equal citizenship, including the removal of all discriminatory impediments to employment, public services and civic rights. CRC is concerned that

community relations should be seen as the essential partner of human rights, equality and diversity in the common task of establishing a sustainable and humane community and not, as some fear, as a watering-down or dilution of the purposes of others.

The Council believes that formal and legal obligations must be supported by real opportunities to contribute, share and exchange. The vision of rights and equality can only be achieved and sustained in the long run by the active commitment of the whole community to the value and dignity of each of its members. The Council believes that coherent policies together with a body dedicated to promoting opportunities for reciprocity and interdependence are essential for the well-being of the whole community, for the realisation of the vision of equality and human rights in Northern Ireland and the sustainability of a democratic and open society. Real relationships which promote social cohesion and recognise interdependence are the essential ingredient which will determine the actual impact of human rights and equality. Ultimately each must work to improve the quality of life of all of the people living in Northern Ireland.

## **2L. NORTHERN IRELAND IN CONTEXT**

The relationships which led to conflict in Northern Ireland did not simply emerge out of thin air. Complex and changing relationships between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, between the island of Ireland and Great Britain and between the six counties of Northern Ireland and the twenty six counties of the Irish Republic have always been central to understanding how and why violence in Northern Ireland emerged. The active involvement of the European Union and the United States of America in Northern Ireland since 1994 have demonstrated that this external context is continuing to evolve. While much of the political, economic and social activity of peace-building will be focused in Northern Ireland, it is important to acknowledge the vital role of cross-border, inter-island and inter-state work in securing relationships in the longer term. The consultation should acknowledge that aspects of all of these strands must be part of peace-building over the next years.

## **2M. A SHARED FUTURE?**

The absence of a question-mark in the title of the consultation paper highlights a profound truth. Provided that conflict does not lead us to justify the violent expulsion or elimination of other members of this society, the future in Northern Ireland, under any jurisdiction will, unavoidably, be shared by people from different community backgrounds and national allegiances.

The question at hand is not whether we will share the future but how. Peace in Northern Ireland must mean more than the absence of war but must reach for the absence of fear. For some people, the very notion of a shared future represents an uncomfortable challenge. They appear to hope that the specific

difficulties of Northern Ireland will disappear and continue to hope against hope that 'the others' will cease to pose a problem. Still others identify a shared future with a homogeneous future. The Community Relations Council believes that peace in Northern Ireland must be a peace which recognises and celebrates the reality that people are different. Indeed the future must be held open so as to allow for the development and emergence of greater complexity in our differences than the current duality promotes.

# Section Three

## Shaping our shared future

### 3A. DO YOU AGREE THAT THE OVERALL AIM FOR POLICY MUST BE FOR A SHARED BUT PLURALIST SOCIETY?

The aim as set out is currently too vague and unclear. The first Programme for Government set out the aim of policy as ‘a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust.’ What is required is that this aim be taken seriously and placed at the heart of all public policy. What too often happens, is that it remains ‘out there’ - a pious sentiment, never applied to actual activity. As a result, nothing happens. While in theory the vision has huge short-, medium- and long-term implications there is an immediate need to show that fine words relate to real choices and real changes.

Three elements of this declaration should be clarified:

1. **Reconciliation** is the central project for the next decades in Northern Ireland. Reconciliation in such a complex setting is not an event, but will be a long journey marked by many events and challenges.
- The past must be faced and its destructive consequences addressed.

- Intimidation and the threat of violence must cease, allowing people the freedom to live, work, socialise and play with other citizens of different backgrounds.
- While integration cannot and should not be forced, it must be made possible and sustained.
- Public policy should protect those, at all levels of income, who wish to live as neighbours alongside one another, regardless of their religious or political affiliations.
- The development of institutions with which all citizens can identify remains critical to the success of this project.
- The end of political violence, and the endemic and pervasive fear which it generates, remains essential to progress.

**2. Mutual trust** is learned through relationships in which there is consistency, honesty and recognition. Public policy must be consistent and persistent in the pursuit of the overall aim; it must promote real dialogue rather than patrolled neutrality while protecting human rights for all citizens. The outcome of peace should not be

homogeneity, but a society at ease with creativity, variety and peaceful change. A truly reconciled society tolerates and welcomes more difference rather than less. The goal of policy is not to set existing relationships in concrete, but to enable the growth of trust and tolerance which alone can reap the benefits of the intercultural world which is emerging `

**3. A commitment to fairness and the inclusion of all** citizens is the only meaningful basis of long-term stability. While the Council does not believe that all relationships can be dictated through law, the development of equality legislation represents an important commitment to these core values. A society worth living in Northern Ireland requires policies that promote fairness and inclusion as well as citizens who act fairly.

As set out above, the Council believes that the future will be shared and the only remaining question is how? We believe that acknowledgement of our mutual interdependence into the future is a critical first step which should guide all measures of progress and development.

### **3B. WHAT DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE THE MAIN POLICY AIMS AND OUTCOMES WHICH SHOULD DRIVE THE NEW APPROACH TO PROMOTING GOOD RELATIONS?**

The specific policy aims should include:

- 1. Developing integrated, mixed and shared communities** where people of all backgrounds can live, learn, work and play together. This includes supporting existing areas where people of different backgrounds live and work together.
- 2. Reducing tension at interface areas:** This should go beyond short-term measures to keep the peace to include medium- and long-term proposals to eliminate paramilitary and violent activity, encourage dialogue and communication, develop shared resources and encourage democratic community development.
- 3. Addressing the legacy of the past,** including the development of mechanisms to deal with real hurts, resentments and enmities. Public policy must move beyond neutrality to embrace real dialogue about issues which continue to fester. There should be a commitment to support healing for the victims of violence and the reintegration of former prisoners into democratic community development.
- 4. Increasing local support for policing,** including the development of local policies for inter-community tensions. This might include spreading best practice as new solutions and approaches are developed at local level.
- 5. Developing structures, policies and practices for the workplace which enable dialogue and engagement rather than rely on neutrality and silence:** There should be a measurable increase in the models of good practice where controversial issues are identified, managed and resolved within workplaces.
- 6. Measurably less duplication of services along sectarian lines:** Public services should be provided along integrated rather than presumed sectarian lines. This would affect health and social services, youth services, leisure services, libraries and public amenities etc.
- 7. Developing a strategy to reduce intimidation which penalises 'bad behaviour' and rewards 'good behaviour':** It should be intolerable that when intimidation takes place, the victim is moved while the perpetrators remain unpunished. Harassment at

work should be a disciplinary issue. Where concerns about the health and safety of staff stop public bodies taking steps to confront sectarian harassment (eg taking down flags, moving intimidating neighbours, removing unwanted paint on kerbstones) solutions must be found which result in a change from the current practice of avoidance and blind-eye turning.

**8. Reducing the toleration of displays of sectarian aggression:** Openly sectarian graffiti, aggressive paramilitary flags and murals, campaigns of intimidation and the inappropriate flying of flags and emblems should be the subject of clear policy and prompt action by responsible public bodies.

**9. Pursuing equality and justice on the basis of more openly diverse relationships rather than on the basis of neutrality:** Government should promote public dialogue to ensure that policies intended to extend safety and equality do not embed defensiveness, hostility and political correctness which allow tensions to fester and which fail to identify real and important knowledge and views. Real progress in this area will require resources to allow for the development of practice models and case studies.

**10. Identifying clear departmental responsibilities for dealing with sectarian issues:** The culture of buck passing in relation to the issues addressed in points 7 and 8 should be ended.

**11. Promoting an inter-community and inter-cultural dimension to community development work:** Recent insights from social capital theory, emphasising the critical importance of bridging and linking relationships to the social and economic health of communities, should be integrated into funding strategies.

**12. Supporting the evolution of opportunities for integrated and inter-cultural education** at nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary level: This includes preparing teachers to educate young people for a shared and plural society. While not all schools will be designated as integrated, all schools should demonstrate their organisational commitment to a shared society. This should include the introduction of the personal development and citizenship strands of the new curriculum. Throughout lifelong learning, all citizens could be encouraged to develop a rounded understanding of the history and politics of these islands.

**13. Developing and protecting town and city centres** as safe and welcoming spaces for all citizens.

**14. Integrating equity, diversity and interdependence into youth provision:** Development of the JEDI programme throughout the NI youth service, including the training of youth workers.

**15. Promoting cultural diversity and interdependence as key goals of all cultural policy:** Public cultural policy in Northern Ireland must both legitimise and encourage unique contributions to our cultural life, including those of minority ethnic groups, while ensuring that these contributions work for mutual enrichment rather than mutual antagonism. Museums and the arts have great potential to encourage a more reflective attitude to issues of identity.

**16. Supporting opportunities for volunteering which enable people to experience one another in new settings and which allow for challenge and change.** Volunteering can provide ways of promoting new communities and relationships and real experiences of diversity and citizenship through practical co-operation and activity.

**17. Evolving instruments of monitoring and development which emphasise quality and learning rather than quantity and targets.**

The CRC believes that community relations policy, as all policy-making, should be vision-driven, solution-seeking and problem-solving.

Practitioners and those with real knowledge of evolving situations should be actively engaged in the policy-making process. It is also important that aims and objectives be established and action plans developed. Finally, all actions need to be joined-up, monitored and openly reviewed.

### **3C. WHAT DO YOU THINK OUGHT TO BE THE PRINCIPLES UPON WHICH A NEW APPROACH TO PROMOTING GOOD RELATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND SHOULD BE BASED?**

The Council welcomes many of the principles outlined in section 3 of the *Shared Future* consultation document.

In particular we commend:

- acknowledgement of the problem (although work should be done on defining its dimensions in more detail);

- leadership;
- the need for long-term, cross-government and co-ordinated action;
- widespread ownership and engagement; and
- the location of community relations strategy in Northern Ireland within a north-south and east-west framework.

The Council also agrees that local action, targeted at local needs and conditions, is essential. Areas which have suffered directly from conflict should receive special attention to ensure that they can develop locally relevant ways to move forward. Such intervention should clearly support progressive and practical change rather than reward bad behaviour.

However, local conditions cannot be addressed by local action alone. Events on the interface are not ‘the problem’, but parts of a wider systemic problem which require a broad policy focus as well as targeted local action. Whereas most money and resources should be targeted upon areas of greatest need, improving good relations will not happen if efforts to address the matter are regarded as local in scale or as a matter for interfaces alone. It is the strong view of the Council that

sectarianism is endemic in many parts of Northern Ireland and that core issues such as the conduct of politics, public administration, policing, education, local government, planning, housing, criminal justice, social services, community development, youth work, church and faith matters, cultural policy, sport, economics and investment and workplace culture must be addressed.

The principles behind community relations and good relations refer directly to fundamental values. The CRC believe that community relations must be built on the core principles of liberal democracy. These include a commitment to:

- the peaceful resolution of conflicts,
- the unique value of each person, and
- the inclusion of all citizens and legal residents in the body politic.

The Council believes that the values of equity (fairness and justice), diversity (uniqueness, variety and choice) and interdependence (mutuality and social cohesion) continue to be the key interlocking principles to be applied to public policy-making and to the new culture of public administration and

service. The principles must be seen to apply to the way services are delivered, the nature of the services that are delivered and to the process of engagement and decision making by public bodies. In this way, public bodies and government can contribute to reconciliation not only in the development of policies but in the fostering of a workplace and service culture which embodies the principles.

### **3D. WHAT ACTION NEEDS TO BE TAKEN AT LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL TO UNDERPIN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GOOD RELATIONS BETWEEN AND WITHIN COMMUNITIES?**

Local authorities have a key role in providing civic leadership. Institutions which provide a sense of common belonging play a critical role in transforming and containing conflicts. Change as a result of this consultation should promote a growing sense of responsibility for community relations at all levels of local councils: elected members, administrative structures and local stakeholders and partners.

Currently, Community Relations Officers are too often isolated within District Council structures and distant

from broader issues of social and economic developments. In recent years a number of Councils have recognised this problem and have begun a fruitful search for better relationships, both within Council structures and throughout the council area (eg Newry and Mourne, Coleraine, Belfast, Ballymena, Craigavon and the Western Routes project in Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh). If local authorities are to play an enhanced role in supporting community relations, a number of key principles should be applied:

1. The civic leadership function of District Councils should be formally enhanced. This would imply the development of published good relations strategies towards employees and local residents and annual or biennial reports on progress.
2. Community relations staff must be supported to innovate and develop networks with organisations outside the council. Better relationships cannot be developed through the delivery of events alone, nor by a narrow service-delivery mentality.
3. Local authorities need to demonstrate political and administrative agreement on local policies for better relations on an annual basis.

- Councils should agree and monitor local community relations plans based on broad principles established by the Northern Ireland Executive (or, in its absence, the direct-rule administration).
4. The quality and development of community support plans needs to be monitored by external assessment, possibly by the regional community relations body. These plans should be linked to wider District Council activities and commitments. The possibility of withholding support for unsatisfactory community relations plans should be explored. While monitoring of community relations activity and policy needs to be a distinct and discrete task, there is also a need to relate planning for improving community relations to all other areas of council planning, through the corporate plans of District Councils.
  5. Services should be delivered in such a way as to encourage community co-operation rather than uphold segregation.
  6. There should be co-ordination of community relations strategies between the local councils and the local strategic partnerships.
  7. Community Relations Officers should be central to council priorities and directly accessible to the Chief Executive's Office. Promotion from their current lowly status should be considered.
  8. Community Relations Officers should have direct access to off-line support from a committed community relations body at regional level.
  9. Councils should be required to publish and monitor progress in their community relations strategies on a regular (annual) basis.
  10. Councils should ensure that community relations activity is shaped in conjunction with the community. Creative activity requires creative as well as administrative input and the active participation of community and artists would hugely enhance the quality of this work.

**3E. WHAT FUNCTIONS DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE CARRIED OUT AT REGIONAL LEVEL? SHOULD THESE FUNCTIONS BE DELIVERED WITHIN GOVERNMENT OR BY AN INDEPENDENT BODY SUCH AS THE COMMUNITY RELATIONS COUNCIL OR A NEW STATUTORY AUTHORITY?**

Having considered many options - including the abolition of any body outside government, the establishment of a formal non-departmental public body (NDPB) closely tied to government policy and the absorption of the functions of the current CRC into the activities of other agencies - the CRC believes that a dedicated independent regional organisation like the Council must continue to play a critical role in promoting improved relations across Northern Ireland.

Without such a body, the priority of community relations in Northern Ireland will depend too much on short-term political interest and capacity, rather than on a long-term commitment to democracy and sustainability that informs all parties. While much activity is local and specific, it is essential that the development of community

relations work and policies be co-ordinated on a regional level. We believe that this issue is of such importance that a committed body will continue to enhance, rather than compete with, the necessary work of local authorities and central government.

Building better relations in Northern Ireland demands space for exploration, for non-binding conversations, for the acknowledgement of doubt and uncertainty and for the recognition of dilemmas. At the same time there is a need for decisions and for action.

In the view of the Council, an independent body with strong connections to government, but not controlled by it, is best placed to achieve this difficult balance.

Furthermore, an independent body could be encouraged to attract funds from non-governmental sources.

Future-orientation requires an open-ended approach to risk, better suited to venture capital than to public accounting. An investment fund might be a mix of public and private resources, specifically geared at supporting difficult or unusual experiments or pilots where there is also a real risk of failure. Such projects would be difficult for a government department, local

government or a non-departmental public body (NDPB) to undertake.

In coming to this conclusion the Council also considered the following issues in detail:

## **FUNDING**

### **a. Core funding**

Community relations work depends not only on local groups but also on the support local groups can receive from dedicated practitioners. It is essential that this capacity be built, annually reviewed, developed and renewed. We believe that this function is best retained by a dedicated regional body.

### **b. EU PEACE II fund**

The Council has functioned as an effective and well-focused Intermediary Funding Body under both PEACE I and PEACE II. Unlike many other bodies, we have been able to apply distinctiveness criteria with ease and have been the natural home for inter-community work (2.5% of PEACE II) and reconciliation projects. This funding has enhanced and brought additional value to other PEACE funds. We believe that this function is best retained by a dedicated regional body.

### **c. Victims and survivors core funding**

The Council has recently taken over responsibility for the administration and development of core funding for Victims and Survivors of the troubles. In an area of particular personal and political sensitivity, the Council has been an effective and sensitive funder of many groups in times of budgetary constraint. We believe that this function is best retained by a dedicated regional body.

### **d. Small grants, including cultural diversity, publications and media**

Because the Council has a specific remit to support reconciliation work, we have been able to add value to thousands of projects across Northern Ireland to enhance inter-community and cultural diversity work. We believe that the flexibility which a small scale administration can bring alongside the focus on peace and reconciliation and the core values of equity, diversity and interdependence are important to the success of this scheme. We believe that this function is best retained by a dedicated regional body.

**DEVELOPMENT****a. Developing best practice / investing in leadership / sustaining an infrastructure**

Community relations at local level requires support from external bodies and groups who have developed knowledge and skills and access to creative and innovative people and projects. Over many years, the Community Relations Council has supported emerging leadership, investing in people who have been willing to develop, implement and sustain new approaches to complex problems.

Council support has enabled the development of a pool of highly able practitioners developing community relations and cultural diversity work. The Council has supported the development of local interface work, inter-community contact, mediation, dialogue, cultural diversity support, work with and for the victims of violence, residential support, anti-harassment training, good relations pilot development, educational development, work with churches and much work in the areas experiencing the highest impact of violence. This basic infrastructure in turn supports many

local community relations initiatives. Through direct organisational and personal support, training opportunities, forums for networking and policy development, conferences, publications and tools, a previously underdeveloped body of good and established community relations practice has been nurtured and grown. Together with this network, the Council provides co-ordination and advice to groups in many different contexts.

CRC has also acted to promote community relations values at all levels – local communities, churches, trade unions, business, public bodies, and local government. Support and development requires a dedicated and committed team, as well as efficient and effective systems. This combination is best obtained in a regional body, a repository of considerable tacit knowledge, enhancing rather than competing with practice at central and local government levels.

### **b. Distilling best practice and advocating for change**

The Council seeks at all times to act as a vehicle for the identification and promotion of best practice in community relations work. Over the years, the CRC has piloted new practice ideas and promoted new policies.

Current involvements include:

- participation in the Community Action Group;
- founder member of the Creating Common Ground Consortium;
- development of interface phone networks;
- piloting models of good relations practice in public bodies;
- innovative work with victims and survivors of violence;
- participation in the North Belfast Community Action Unit;
- showcasing models of good practice through Community Relations Week;
- mediation initiatives in areas of immediate violence;
- development of local churches forums;
- establishment of a community relations practitioners forum;

- support for environmental initiatives, including the removal of sectarian graffiti or its transformation into peaceful messages; and
- work to promote community relations in many aspects of culture, sports and the arts.

In most of these initiatives, the Council works in partnership with others, bringing an additional commitment and knowledge. In many cases, the Council has added value to initiatives which are also supported by local or central government. The Council believes that this function can only be maintained through a dedicated regional body committed to development and challenge.

### **c. 'Linking' and 'bridging' social capital**

Recent academic work on social capital emphasises the importance of relationships. However, communities which are overly dependent on relationships with intimates and close associates suffer serious disadvantages. It is imperative for the general health of the community that practical relationships are built between distanced communities (bridging) and between people on the ground and government (linking). This is particularly true in a divided society like Northern Ireland.

The CRC seeks to act as a bridging and linking body within Northern Ireland. The Council makes it a priority to remain in close contact with government, with key strategic partners and with people on the ground. These relationships allow the Council to distil best practice and to assist its transfer into policy (and vice versa).

Relationship building in a context of division and uncertainty requires patience, flexibility and transparency. Many aspects of the CRC's work touch on sensitive issues – such as experiences of violence, experience of prison, internal community feuds, religious and political beliefs, interface violence, multiple contexts (eg urban, suburban, rural, geographical). A combination of efficiency and sensitivity is required which takes time to develop. It is our view that this function is best retained within a dedicated regional body which stands at one step removed from politics, yet can make a useful contribution to peaceful political development and advise government on community relations dimensions of its programme.

### **3. OTHER MATTERS**

#### **a. A structure of support for better relations outside government**

Community relations remains complex and difficult work. Change cannot happen by legislative directive, and to some degree remains a question of educated trial and error. A regional body provides a useful forum for exchange and learning in an area of considerable uncertainty. The CRC stands between the government and the voluntary, community and private sectors in Northern Ireland. This allows for the open exploration of views, the development and distillation of best practice and a useful exchange between practitioners and policy-makers.

Having considered a number of models, the Council has come to the conclusion that community relations are best served by the preservation and indeed enhancement of an independent body, dedicated to community relations. This independence should not detract from the central role which the body must play in public life. Indeed, where necessary, the independent body could carry out designated statutory functions, especially monitoring or reporting on progress on an annual basis. In any new design the regional body must be

sufficiently independent to sustain wider community confidence in times of difficulty and in funding while having sufficient authority to be taken seriously in shaping policy and leading change.

Currently, two thirds of Council members are appointed through independent public advertisement according to published criteria, while one third are nominated thorough OFMDFM, in accordance with public appointments principles. Consideration should be given to allowing OFMDFM appointments to reflect directly the political make up of the Assembly (if the latter is re-elected). This might generate a permanent meaningful connection between community relations and elected politicians, without compromising the overall independence of the Council. CRC believes that any mechanism that both preserves the independence of the Council and creates a real exchange between politics and community relations should be actively and urgently considered.

Consideration should also be given to remuneration for members of a regional body. Currently, membership of the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission, the Parades

Commission, the Policing Board, the Sentence Review Commission and the Life Sentence Review Commission is remunerated on the basis of an attendance allowance. The Council is concerned that work for a regional community relations body should be seen as of similar importance, difficulty and standing.

#### **b. A learning and creative organisation**

The Community Relations Council should be the primary development agency for community relations work in Northern Ireland. This requires operating in uncertain times, and sometimes being asked to extend existing knowledge by piloting new projects and reporting on learning and development. This requirement to generate new practice, rather than simply replicating existing ways of doing things, means that a regional body must be a vehicle for real learning in Northern Ireland. To facilitate this task, a regional body requires five crucial additional functions beyond current arrangements:

- **research:** under present arrangements, most research on community relations in Northern Ireland is commissioned by the Community Relations Unit of OFMDFM. The Council believes

that systematic practical research should also be developed by an independent regional body which reports to government, enhancing confidence in the research while informing all those with responsibility for improving relations of changing needs and activities, and establishing the body as an important independent centre of learning.

- **monitoring:** an independent regional body should produce annual 'state of the nation(region)' reports, illustrating how community relations has changed, highlighting trends and monitoring progress. It should be considered whether the Council should be tasked by government to investigate community relations in specific sectors or areas, designated by the NI Executive (or its direct-rule substitute).
- **investigation:** linked to both research and monitoring, an independent body should be able to produce investigative reports on community relations in given sectors or localities. These could be agreed with the NI Executive (ditto), suggested by district councils or directed by the body itself.
- **innovation:** in an area of uncertainty, such as the future of community relationships in Northern Ireland, it is

important that a regional body has the freedom to invest in difficult and sometimes risky projects.

Independence might allow a regional body to gather funds from numerous sources to support activities which would entail a higher degree of risk than is normally carried by the public sector.

- **training:** the regional body should develop its role as a centre for learning and training. This would involve establishing broad criteria for quality, supporting community relations development in many agencies and creating forums for learning and development, building on the work of the Community Relations Training and Learning Consortium.

### c. Strategic partnerships

The Community Relations Council has developed strategic partnerships with many external stakeholders over the years. The establishment of the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission was of particular importance for the Council's work, providing statutory support for some of the values the Council seeks to promote. Improving relations should be an equal priority in public policy with both equality and human rights.

In the end, relationships need to be developed, fostered and nurtured rather than enforced and patrolled. The Council believes that statutory responsibility for Section 75(2) should remain with the Equality Commission. However, in the area of good relations in public bodies, the regional community relations body should be formally recognised as a strategic partner with particular interest in the development of models of good practice. This could be achieved through a memorandum of understanding which lays out the role of a community relations body in providing practical support and help for organisations taking practical steps to promote better relations. The regional community relations body should also explore models of good practice for the private and voluntary sectors, building on the commitment which is crucial to real change in these sectors.

There should also be a close link between community relations and human rights. Human rights provide a vital framework for the promotion and securing of minimum expectations. For rights to be embedded in the culture of Northern Ireland, however, they need to be experienced in real co-operation and dialogue, as well as through the courts.

Here is a real role for a strategic partnership between community relations and human rights interests.

In sum, the Council believes that a reinvigorated regional body like the CRC, perhaps with enhanced responsibilities and changed membership criteria, has a vital role to play into the future.

### **3F. WHAT ACTIONS SHOULD CENTRAL GOVERNMENT TAKE TO IMPROVE RELATIONS?**

Improving relations is the single most important quality of life issue in Northern Ireland. The Council therefore welcomes the emphasis in the *Shared Future* document on government responsibilities. Active government support for key values is central to any plan for improving relations, especially if that government is made up of politicians from regionally elected parties.

While Section 75(2) sets a useful frame of reference for government objectives, government must also set a series of joined-up objectives for policy. The Council welcomes the establishment of the Community Action Group and hopes to continue to play an active and

constructive role in its deliberations. We further commend the proposal that such an inter-departmental group should develop a strategic plan for improving relations across all departments. Furthermore, the Council commends many of the specific proposals for action along departmental lines.

CRC believes that improving relationships is an important aspect of many areas of policy and strategy in Northern Ireland. Within the context of a coherent strategic plan the Council is convinced that a community relations element could and should be actively included as part of the following policy areas and departments:

Community development  
 Community safety  
 Criminal justice  
 Culture, Arts and Leisure  
 Education, including youth work, higher education and adult education  
 Environment  
 Health and Social Services - including personal social services  
 Housing policy  
 Local government

Planning policy  
 Policing  
 Public administration  
 Rural development  
 Transport  
 Victims policy  
 Workplace relations, including good relations duties under Section 75 of the NI Act.  
 Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy  
 Race Equality Strategy  
 Strategy for children and young people  
 Strategy for the community and voluntary sector  
 Gender Equality Strategy

North-south bodies

This list is not exhaustive, but it provides an initial indicative list of the scale and scope of a joined-up approach to improving relations. In the light of the fact that the PEACE funds from the European Union will come to an end in 2006, it is critical that the government embark on a sustained and comprehensive review at the earliest opportunity to ensure continued mainstream financial support for peace and reconciliation work. It is both

desirable and necessary that the Northern Ireland Executive itself (or its direct rule replacement) make available the necessary resources and indicate their real commitment to the proclaimed goals of a society based on the achievement of reconciliation and trust.

It is important to reiterate that government on its own can only do so much. Hence the importance not only of an arm's-length body like CRC but also of cultivating the rich network of non-governmental organisations committed to reconciliation. The Finnish government has established a 'Committee of the Future' to identify long-term problems and allow for meaningful dialogue and participation. It might be possible to establish a similar institution within the Northern Ireland Assembly combining elected representatives with others appointed for their knowledge and expertise.

### 3G. HOW DO YOU THINK THAT A NEW STRATEGY FOR IMPROVING RELATIONS OUGHT TO BE MONITORED?

There are two sorts of monitoring and evaluation which are crucial to the success of any project:

- *quantitative and qualitative monitoring* of desired outcomes, changes in behaviour and attitudes and changes in patterns of relationship: an independent body should work closely to ensure that data collection develops and remains relevant and targeted. Recent developments in social capital theory have provided new opportunities for measuring changes, and both the Omnibus Survey and PEACE II have developed new methods of monitoring and evaluation. These should be extended and developed by NISRA, providing a spine of statistical and analytical data. The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey also provides much valuable attitudinal data and it should continue to receive public support.
- *evaluative review* which could be sector-specific as well as covering the programme as a whole: the core goal of such evaluation is the development of real learning and a long-term

culture of reflection. In our view, an independent regional body should be responsible for providing an annual assessment of the condition of community relations for the consideration of government. This would involve the public assessment of available data, qualitative and reflective material and the initiation of a debate on policy options. Locating this monitoring function with an independent body would connect research with policy and the network of practitioners funded by the Council.

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