



Too Easy to Ignore?

Older People and Community Relations in Northern Ireland
Executive summary

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Foreword

Community relations and the effects of sectarian division impact on every section of our society in Northern Ireland. Yet this report is probably the first major work to have examined the involvement of older members of the community and the effects of sectarianism on them.- thus the title *Too Easy To Ignore*.

The research on which this report is based has shown that the issue is much more complex than might originally have been thought. Older people carry the memory of a time before the latest violence; they have been affected in different ways than the generation which has grown up and matured over the past thirty years. They thus represent a potential resource which may contain positive memories of a less segregated society, or painful memories of lost children, or of hurts inflicted on communities.

We should look at the so-called 'third age' and at how it can be developed as an active and positive time in people's lives. Since people generally in the Western world are now living longer and are more active, this is an important issue which we in Northern Ireland need to look at in addition to the effects of segregation and violent conflict.

The Community Relations Council has been very pleased to assist, with Help The Aged and others, in the research and production of this work which is being funded under the European Community's Peace and Reconciliation Programme.

If the research, and the report arising from it, succeeds in opening up the debate around these issues, then it will have served a purpose. The potential is there for much more.

Will Glendinning
Chief Executive
Community Relations Council

February 2000

Introduction

This report presents the results of one year's research commissioned by Help the Aged NI into issues relating to older people's role and involvement in community relations in Northern Ireland. The impetus for the research arose initially from concerns on the part of Help the Aged and other agencies that older people as a group had been excluded from funding designated to promote the work of peace and reconciliation in this society and in particular from the European Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (EUSSP). In light of these concerns, funding for research to explore older people's contribution in this area was granted by the Community Relations Council in its role as an Intermediary Funding Body for EUSSP.

Older People in Northern Ireland

The most recent estimate of the size of the Northern Ireland population is 1.6 million people (Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency 1999). In 1998,

- 371, 100 people (22% of the population) were estimated to be aged 55 or over
- 219, 500 people (13% of the population) were estimated to be aged 65 and over.

While the number of children aged under 16 years has declined by 0.7% between 1991 and 1998, the figure for those of pensionable age (65 and over) represents a 4% increase over the same period, though the proportion of this age group in the population remains the same, at 13%, as in 1991. There are 88,100 males and 131, 400 females aged 65 and over (a 40:60 male/female ratio).

There is evidence that older people have much to contribute to Northern Ireland society in terms of active citizenship, using their skills and life experience. Some have a high public profile, while others participate through community and voluntary activities.

The Aims and Objectives of the Research

The primary aim of the research was to investigate how and to what extent older people can make a contribution to community relations work in Northern Ireland. Community relations work is broadly defined as activities which develop cross community contact and co-operation, promote greater mutual understanding and increase respect for cultural diversity. It includes single identity, as well as cross community work.

The specific objectives were:

1. To examine the extent of cross community contacts among older people in Northern Ireland, either within specific older people's groups, or in other community settings.
2. To explore the effectiveness of any such contacts in promoting peace and reconciliation.
3. To identify specific examples of projects or activities involving older people, which enhance community relations.

The research was confined to sectors in which older people are likely to participate: the community sector, reconciliation groups and religious organisations. A key requirement was to produce case studies of community relations work among older people, in order to make available models of practice to those who have not so far engaged in this work, but would like to do so. While the emphasis is on the two major communities as constituted by religion, political and cultural identity, an acknowledgement of the

presence of other communities within Northern Ireland was made by including the views of representatives of some ethnic minority communities.

Research Design

Both qualitative and quantitative methods of research were employed during the project. Analysis of secondary data from the Cost of the Troubles Study and other documentary sources provided information about the likely effects of the years of conflict on older people, while similar analysis of the 1998 Life and Times Survey and of the 1996 Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey formed the basis of an exploration of attitudes to community relations issues among older people. A random sampling method identified potential respondents to a survey of older people's groups across Northern Ireland. However, the primary method of research was a qualitative one, using in depth individual and group interviews. This approach was chosen, because, given the sensitive nature of an inquiry into relationships across the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland, it was felt to be more appropriate in capturing nuances of perception and attitude, and also more likely than a purely quantitative approach to yield a response.

In all, more than 150 individuals and organisations were contacted during the course of the research, with the aim of obtaining information about older people's role and involvement in community relations work.

Chapter 1: The Effect of the Troubles on Older People

In the five years that have elapsed since the paramilitary cease-fires of 1994 and in the wake of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, a space has opened up in which health care professionals, politicians and researchers can begin to assess the effects of thirty years of conflict on the population of Northern Ireland. Virtually nothing is known about the impact of the prolonged civil unrest on older people, but some insight into this subject can be gained by reference to and extrapolation from recent literature and by reporting on interviews with a number of groups which represent the interests of victims and survivors of the Troubles.

Although less than one in ten of those killed in the thirty years of the conflict in Northern Ireland were people aged over 55, both the existing literature and interview evidence leave no doubt that older people, as much as other age groups, have suffered from the direct and indirect effects of living in a violent and abnormal society. Older people in general may have an advantage over younger people in terms of a greater sense of perspective, gained through memories of living in a more peaceful time before the current Troubles began in the late Sixties. Yet many in the older age groups are living with the long term consequences of physical injury to themselves or the emotional scars of losing someone dear to them.

It is difficult to quantify the extent of the trauma borne by so many in the population. However, interviews with victims' groups indicate that while some older people may cope well through the support of family, friends, the church or self help groups, and by actively volunteering to help others, there are also those who may have experienced a crucial lack of support and help at the time of bereavement. These people may exhibit denial, bitterness, a loss of religious faith and a long term inability to move on with their lives. Some have maintained silence over many years, while for others, current issues in the peace process, such as the reform of policing or the early release of prisoners, or news of renewed violence, may reawaken long held emotional pain. While attention has understandably focused on addressing the needs of young people in the process of building a new society in Northern Ireland, resources must also be found to support those who have been longest in need. The effect of the Troubles on older people is an issue which merits the urgent attention of all health and social care professionals who are charged with the care of this age group in statutory, voluntary and private settings.

Chapter 2: Attitudes to Community Relations Among Older People

By presenting both quantitative and qualitative evidence, this chapter explored attitudes to community relations issues among older people in Northern Ireland, taking into account differences between Protestants and Catholics and men and women. It focused on selected responses to the *1998 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* and to some extent on its predecessor, the *1996 Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey*. Although survey evidence is by its nature ephemeral and attitudes are subject to change with the ebb and flow of political events, there are grounds for concluding that on a number of community relations issues, older people in Northern Ireland show greater optimism and tolerance than might commonly be supposed. Given their potential influence within closely-knit families and communities in many parts of Northern Ireland, this may have implications for their capacity to act as agents of change in the society.

Issues on which older people appear to be more optimistic and/or more liberal than younger people

- Although there is little age differential in the sample as a whole on the issue of community relations now compared to five years ago, 65% of Catholics aged 65+ believe that relationships have got better, compared to 62% of the youngest Catholics (18-34). Although only 44% of the oldest Protestants believe this, it is a higher proportion than the 41% of the youngest Protestants with this perception.
- There is little age difference between the three quarters of Catholics who believe community relations will be better in five years' time, but 53% of Protestants aged 65+ believe this, compared to 48% of Protestants aged 18-34
- Older people are less likely to believe that religion will always make a difference to the way people feel about each other in Northern Ireland. Eighty per cent of Catholics aged 35-54 believe this, compared to 67% aged 65+. More Protestants of all ages think that religion will always make a difference, but while 87% aged 35-54 think this, the figure for those aged 65+ is 79%
- Older people are more likely to believe that there is equality of treatment for the two majority communities in Northern Ireland. Three quarters of Protestants aged 55 and over say this, compared to 44% of Protestants aged 18-34. Fifty three per cent of the oldest Catholics also hold this view, compared to 39% of the youngest Catholics. However, only 36% of Catholics aged 55-64 perceive equality of treatment between Catholics and Protestants.
- In the 1996 NISA survey, more than nine out of ten people aged 55 and upwards (including 98% of Catholics aged 55-64) claimed that they felt no prejudice at all against people of other religions. It was the youngest age group that was most likely to admit to 'a little' prejudice (15% of 18-34 year olds).
- Protestants aged 55 and over are less likely to think that people in Northern Ireland would mind if a relative married someone of a different religion: 18% of Protestants aged 55-64 and 65+ said this, compared to 24% aged 18-34. This is even less of an issue for the oldest Catholics: only 8% of this age group see this as a problem. It is Protestants aged 55-64 who are most tolerant of the prospect of a mixed marriage within their own family: 67% would not mind, compared to 56% of Protestants aged 18-34.

- In the 55-64 age group, 80% of Catholics and 74% of Protestants say they would prefer to live in a mixed neighbourhood, compared to 66% and 57% of the youngest Catholics and Protestants respectively.
- Catholics aged 55 and over and Protestants aged 55-64 are less likely to prefer to send a child to a school of their own religion only. While 41% of the youngest Catholics prefer this option, only 34% of Catholics aged 55-64 and 35% of those aged 65+ do so. Forty two per cent of the youngest Protestants, but only 31% of 55-64 year olds would choose this type of schooling.

Issues on which older people appear to be more pessimistic and/or more conservative than younger people

- Catholics in the 55-64 age group are unconvinced that there is equality of treatment for Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. A 43% minority of Catholics of all ages perceived equal treatment of the two communities, with the percentage falling to 36% in this age group (compared to 73% of Protestants of this age).
- Catholics aged 55-64 are less tolerant of mixed marriages within the family, compared to younger Catholics. Eighty –one per cent of Catholics aged 18-34 would not mind if a close relative married someone of a different religion, but this falls to 64% of 55-64 year olds. Only 54% of Protestants aged 65+ would not mind (though this compares with the 56% of the youngest Protestants who gave this response).
- The oldest respondents are less likely than those slightly younger to favour living in a mixed neighbourhood. While 80% of Catholics aged 55-64 would prefer mixed neighbourhoods, only 69% of Catholics aged 65+ would have this preference. Comparable figures for Protestants are 74% (age 55-64) and 59% (age 65+).
- Among Protestants, the oldest age group has marginally the strongest preference for sending children to a school of their own religion: 43% of those aged 65+ prefer this, compared to 31% of 55-64 year olds (but 42% of 18-34 year olds)

Chapter 3: Older People and the Peace Programme

This chapter briefly describes the **European Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (EUSSP)**, delineates the reasons why older people have not been a priority group for funding and also presents information pertaining to direct and indirect benefits of the Programme for this age group.

Following the 1994 ceasefires, the European Commission announced a Special Support Programme (EUSSP) to build peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The administration of the programme is complex, drawing on a number of European Structural Funds, delivered by government departments, Intermediary Funding Bodies (IFBs) and 26 District Partnerships. It is notable that older people are absent from the list of groups benefiting from the Peace Programme. How did this happen? The answer lies with the interpretation of EU Structural Funds (ESF) criteria. The Structural Funds generally have a labour market/economic focus and a view was taken that older people above pension age could not by definition be re-integrated into the formal labour market and therefore could not benefit from EUSSP funding. Senior citizens were neither explicitly included nor excluded from Strategic Objective 1: 'to promote the social inclusion of those who are at the margins of social and economic life'.

In January 1997, in response to this area of uncertainty and concerns raised by the community and voluntary sectors, the Northern Ireland Partnership Board (NIPB), which oversees the delivery of sub-programme 6 (District Partnerships) issued new guidelines to the Partnerships. NIPB acknowledged that the area which had caused most difficulty for the Partnerships was that of direct support towards conventional projects involving senior citizens and the elderly and it urged them to work at local level to ensure that applications were framed in a manner consistent with EUSSP. Examples included, under Sub-programme 5 (Social Inclusion), Measure 1, 'projects which bridge the generation gap' and which deliberately involve young people and senior citizens. Projects established by older people to address specifically the issues of conflict and reconciliation were also to be given high priority. The guidelines also drew attention to community development and community education initiatives involving several age cohorts, which could bring direct and indirect benefits to older people. NIPB also referred to the eligibility of projects which drew on 'the bank of experience and expertise represented by senior citizens/elderly' which could 'add value' to youth training schemes or 'act in a monitoring capacity to new businesses'. The key objective was that projects should be framed 'within a broader context than simply direct social welfare support to a specific senior citizen/elderly project'.

During the planning stages of the present research project and in light of the NIPB guidelines, the Director of Help the Aged NI wrote in the summer of 1997 to relevant government departments and IFBs to request details of any projects which they had funded, which benefited older people. In the course of the research period, the 26 District Partnerships were contacted with a request for the same information.

Benefiting Older People: Funding Awarded under the Peace and Reconciliation Programme.

Full details of EUSSP funding which directly or indirectly benefits older people are given in Appendix 2 of the main report. The information received by the end of the research period (September 1999) can be summarised here as follows:

- 9 of the District Partnerships had not funded any projects directly benefiting older people. One Partnership (Antrim) replied that it was willing to fund inter-generational projects, but had received no such applications.
- 17 District Partnerships had awarded funding, to a total of 38 projects. However, it appeared from the information provided that not all of these were specifically targeted at older people. Examples of projects which directly benefit this age group include two Senior Citizens' Forums (Newry and Newtownabbey); inter-generational projects (Castlereagh, Moyle and Down); health care (Age Care Dungannon, Cookstown Arthritis Care, Fermanagh Alzheimer's Disease Society); community care (provision of Meals on Wheels in Larne, a shopmobility scheme in North Down); and education (University of the Third Age, Strabane).
- District Partnerships cited grants to projects which offer services to a wide age range in the community, from which older people are likely to benefit indirectly. Organisations as diverse as the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Mencap, a community managed urban farm and various community associations fall into this category.
- Government departments and some IFBs were unable to supply data, either because older people were not their target age group (Youthnet) or because monitoring requirements do not collate data on age profiles (Department of Economic Development, Community Relations Council). However, the Rural Community Network has funded four older people's groups in Tyrone and Fermanagh; Proteus has funded two training projects of which older people are indirect beneficiaries; and the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) cited 19 grants awarded for a variety of community activities directly benefiting and involving this age group.

The Peace Programme has funded 3986 projects in Northern Ireland (figure supplied by NIPB, 9.9.99). The data collated by the end of the research period show that, according to the information received, this included a total of 63 projects which directly or indirectly benefited older people. It is possible that some projects have been missed out and of course there are likely to be numerous other projects, beyond those specifically cited by the District Partnerships and IFBs, which include older people within their remit. The absence of monitoring data showing age profiles makes an accurate calculation very difficult. However, it does seem to be clear that the stringent application of the labour market/economic focus of the ESF criteria has indeed to a large extent excluded older people from EUSSP funding. As a group, older people have not enjoyed the same level of access to this important source of funding as other marginalised groups in Northern Ireland and are therefore disadvantaged in terms of active citizenship and full participation in the task of building peace and reconciliation.

Chapter 4: Interviews With District Council Community Relations Officers

In 1989, the District Council Community Relations Programme (DCCRP) was established with grant aid from the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU). All 26 district councils in Northern Ireland have participated in the Programme, by appointing Community Relations Officers (Belfast has had no Community Relations Officer in situ since 1995). In order to explore the current situation regarding the role and involvement of older people in community relations, interviews were held with Community Relations Officers across Northern Ireland. The interviews took place in the period November 1998 to early January 1999.

The interviews identified three main areas of difficulty for CROs in developing community relations work with older people. These were:

- 1. Officers' perception that older people themselves were resistant to confronting community relations issues.** A recurrent theme from the discussions was that where older people gathered in groups, their aims and interests were almost exclusively social, or least focussed on a specific topic. A community relations dimension might emerge from the activities, but this was not the primary aim of the group. (Such a scenario was not of course confined to older people's groups). A subsidiary and related theme was CROs' perception that older people had lived throughout (and before) Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' and have now had enough of discussing the society's ills. At their stage of life, they may be more preoccupied by other issues. While CROs acknowledged that there was scope for challenging this age group's perceptions that community relations had nothing to do with them, the prevailing impression was that the officers considered work with senior citizens' groups to be more difficult to develop than work with other community groups.
- 2. Time and Resources Issues.** Another reason that emerged for a lack of development of work with older people was the time required for such work. CROs frequently have a number of responsibilities and many demands on their time. In a situation of scarce resources, they may have to assess carefully how they can most productively deploy their energies and several made the point that it takes longer to develop a community relations perspective with older people.
- 3. Funding Issues.** It became evident that there were varying opinions among CROs as to what extent the activities undertaken by older people in senior citizens groups, luncheon clubs or Senior Citizens' Forums fell within a community relations perspective. Not all CROs were convinced that such activities should be funded out of the community relations budget, particularly in light of the Central Community Relation Unit (CCRU) declared funding priorities for the District Council Community Relations Programme. Some officers were quite clear, however, that they were happy to work with senior citizens' groups, provided they were willing to meet community relations funding criteria.

It seems evident that decisions have to be taken at a strategic level regarding whether community relations work with older people as part of the District Council Community Relations Programme should remain at its present static state of development, or whether there are as yet undiscovered opportunities to take this work forward. It may well be the case that senior citizens' groups, in particular, are content with the level of work that they currently engage in, and that it would be inappropriate for community relations professionals to push them in a direction to which they do not aspire. On the

other hand, survey evidence and interviews with other respondents and with the CROs themselves suggest that older people may have more flexible attitudes towards community relations issues and towards mixing with people from another community, than may be generally attributed to them. The potentially positive influence of at least some older people on attitudes within their families and communities may constitute an underdeveloped resource in community relations work. If this potential is to be released, certain issues must be addressed. These would include resourcing additional training for CROs to work with older people; finding means of enabling CROs to devote more time and higher priority to this work; improving district councillors' understanding of community relations criteria; developing partnerships between community relations and other professionals; and, not least, helping older people to have the confidence to believe that they too can play a valuable role in enhancing relations between the communities in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 5: Senior Citizens' Forums

Senior Citizens' Forums or Consortia are a fairly recent development in Northern Ireland and have an important role to play in sharing information and promoting activities among older people in local areas. They may also have an significant campaigning and lobbying function, when affiliated to umbrella groups such as the Senior Network NI. Interviews were conducted with individuals associated with Dungannon and Newtownabbey Senior Citizens' Forums and Newry and Mourne Senior Citizens' Consortium. It emerged that in terms of community relations, the Forums clearly increase the level of cross community contact in senior citizens' groups. Furthermore, the role of Health and Social Services Trusts, community development agencies and District Council Officers in encouraging and financially supporting them is crucial. The Forums would appear to have the potential to engage the community relations agenda in a much more focused way and should consider doing so, with the assistance of the relevant agencies.

Chapter 6: A Survey of Older People's Groups

The next stage of the project was a random sample telephone interview survey of older people's groups, in order to compare the activities and attitudes of the groups with data already gathered, and to invite more direct participation by some of the research population in exploring further the issues surrounding older people's involvement in community relations work. Objectives included:

- collection of data regarding organisational aspects of the groups, including their sources of funding and contacts with Community Relations Officers
- establishing whether they were cross community or single identity groups
- exploring their degree of engagement with cross community and community relations issues
- examining rewards, difficulties and obstacles in relation to older people meeting across the community divide in Northern Ireland.

During the survey, 44 older people's groups, located in cities, towns, villages and rural areas all over Northern Ireland, were interviewed. Half were cross community in membership and half attracted members from one religious/ community tradition only. One of the findings of the survey is that the majority of the Protestant single identity groups interviewed did not have any contact with Catholic or cross community groups and of the four that did, two contacts were either minimal or had lapsed; nor did the 'no contact' Protestant groups express any willingness to change the situation, the obstacles being community attitudes reflected in the membership, or at the least, inertia and lack of motivation. Catholic groups appeared to be more willing to mix with their contemporaries of the other community and, like the three Protestant groups who had made cross community contacts, several had found the experience very rewarding.

Another key finding is that amongst the 22 cross community groups, a majority of which were located in district council areas West of the Bann, none would say that community tensions within Northern Ireland had any effect on relationships within the group or on attendance levels. This was often attributed to good community relations in the area, the fact that members had known each other in their younger days, and to the belief that older people are no longer so bothered about political and religious differences as they once might have been, or as younger people now are. None of these groups had included within their programmes what might be defined as 'high impact' community relations work, such as courses or training in confronting sectarianism or discussing diversity and difference (although some may have done so indirectly through reminiscence work or the study of local history). The preferred option was to avoid discussion of contentious religious and political issues, for fear that to do so would be divisive or simply because it was not seen as necessary or appropriate.

It is clear that older people's groups have a valuable contribution to make to the community in combating isolation and providing companionship and a social outlet, as well as services, for those who join them, and in terms of cross community contact, a very positive picture emerged of older people enjoying activities in each other's company regardless of religious or community background. However, the survey strongly indicates that older people's groups are not engaging in active community relations work much beyond this level. A question remains as to whether respondents were in all cases

prepared to divulge to a researcher the existence of tensions within groups (though the single identity groups appeared to be transparent regarding attitudes and action) or whether we should take at face value, as many interviewees stated, that the divisive issues which preoccupy younger generations in Northern Ireland are no longer so 'live' for older people.

Community Relations Officers certainly do not appear to have a high profile amongst these groups and much less of a role in funding them than do Social Services providers, findings consistent with the opinions reported in the CRO interviews. The survey suggests that there is perhaps scope for CROs and other professionals to develop CR work with at least some older people's cross community groups. Some groups, particularly those within larger community associations, showed an interest in this. Work could also be initiated with single identity older people's groups (particularly those affiliated to churches) to encourage more cross community contacts and to raise the profile of older people's groups generally. If it is the case that older people in Northern Ireland are an important influence on inter-generational attitudes within families, such enhanced contact may in itself have a beneficial effect across all generations in challenging sectarian stereotypes and building trust between communities.

Chapter 7: Ethnic Minorities

Interviews were held with representatives of the Chinese Welfare Association, the Indian Community Centre and the Travellers' Movement NI. The resulting brief review of the conditions of older people in these three ethnic minority groups suggests that this age group shares in the disadvantages of their respective ethnic groups, but that their representative organisations are making efforts to combat the effects of social isolation, prejudice and language difficulties amongst their older members.

It would seem that few older people from ethnic minorities are able to mix socially with those outside their own community and thus a particular burden is placed upon younger family members, in terms of providing care and companionship. Moreover, the relative isolation of these older people does not contribute to their empowerment or their ability to have their voices heard strongly in the various community organisations which represent the interests of older people in Northern Ireland. Sadly, the proportion of older people within the Traveller community is too small to make any meaningful comment at this stage about their contribution to wider community relations, but it can be hoped that the recent development of older people's groups within the Chinese and Indian community organisations will be the genesis of contact with other older people's groups. Such contacts are likely to result in greater understanding and better relations between different communities in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 8: Social Services and Community Relations

A theme which emerged from the research is the perception that Social Services and Health Boards and Trusts are the major providers of services to older people and that the responsibility for funding social and other activities associated with them lies largely (though not exclusively) with this sector. The Health and Social Services sector is the second largest public authority employer in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 imposes a statutory duty upon it and other public authorities to promote good community relations. Section 75(2) of the Act states that 'a public authority shall in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group'. The intention of a subsidiary part of the research was to assess the extent to which Social Services have so far responded to their statutory duty to introduce a community relations dimension into their provision of services and have integrated anti-sectarian policies and practice into their strategy for delivery. This is the focus of a larger research study, 'Getting off the Fence', commissioned by CCETSW, and the issues are dealt with only briefly here.

In April 1999, the Director of Help the Aged NI wrote to Directors of Social Services/Social Care in the four Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Boards and to 11 Health and Social Services Trusts. She invited their participation in the present research and requested written information on the following questions:

1. Does your Board/Trust have or intend to develop a community relations strategy for the delivery of community care services?
2. Do you have or intend to have community relations training form part of your organisation's staff in-house training for professional and social care workers?

Boards and Trusts were also asked to identify key community development staff and to state whether or not they had formed links with local Council CROs. If so, they were asked to provide details of projects involving their community development staff and CROs.

The Response. All four of the Health and Social Services Boards replied. Eight Health and Social Services Trusts made a response, although unfortunately two replies were received too late for inclusion in this chapter. It must be stressed that this section of the research has particular limitations and was not fully developed. It was hoped to follow up the written responses of the Boards and Trusts with interviews, which would have explored issues relating to policy and practice in service delivery in more detail. Because of the difficulties associated with obtaining a response to the initial letter from the Director of Help the Aged and the time constraints imposed by other sections of the research, this was not achieved.

The replies from the Boards and Trusts suggested that in terms of policy and practice, issues of community development, rather than of community relations per se, are starting to be addressed, though, as some replies suggested, the two are seen as intertwined. However, the responses indicated that explicit strategies in relation to community relations have not yet been developed by Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts, but may be implicit in their community development policy and practice. There was an awareness of equity issues in service delivery but these did not appear to

have a high profile in in-service training. Some responses referred to the impact of the Troubles on the Northern Ireland population, while others highlighted grant aid for cross community work among older people, but disparate approaches to the community relations agenda have not as yet coalesced into a specific strategy at the highest policy level, as required by the Northern Ireland Act 1998. At the time of writing (September 1999), the Health and Social Services sector has not produced a document comparable to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's May 1999 consultation paper, 'Towards a Community Relations Strategy'. It may be that the results of the CCETSW research into policy, practice and culture in Social Services will move this agenda forward.

Chapter 9-11: Older People Engaged in Community Relations Work (Case Studies)

It might be concluded from previous sections of the report that the state of community relations work among older people in Northern Ireland is a depressing one: active, focused work to explore issues of diversity and difference between the communities in Northern Ireland does not in general figure in the activities of older people's groups. Although many groups are cross community in membership, and this in itself may play a part in promoting mutual understanding and trust, the general preference is for individuals and groups to avoid or ignore contentious issues of a religious and political nature, lest open discussion should lead to dissension and division. Older people's groups, it must be stressed, are not alone in taking this path. It is acknowledged that where people in Northern Ireland meet across the religious divide, whether in the workplace or in social or community settings, it is a common tactic for issues of difference to be ignored or avoided.

Chapters 9 to 11 present a different and more encouraging picture of older people's involvement in community relations work in Northern Ireland. They do so through presenting a series of case studies, which show older citizens positively engaging, either as individuals or in groups, in activities which are aimed specifically at increasing understanding between the communities, building trust and promoting the work of peace and reconciliation. A variety of modes of engagement with the issues are depicted here, made possible by funding from different sources, including the European Peace Programme.

Information about the projects was initially made available by a number of informants and interviewees (including CROs). It must be stressed at this point that although the community relations focused activities depicted in these chapters are the exception rather than the rule among older people, they are not the sum total of such activities in Northern Ireland. During the course of the research, the researcher was advised to speak to many more individuals than was possible in the time available and also informed of other interesting projects involving older people, which it was not possible to visit.

Examples included a project in Co. Down by the Drumaness Recycled Teenager Club. This cross community club successfully obtained EUSSP funding from the Down District Partnership Board to make a silent movie based on the history of the village. The club members, aged 50 to 82, worked with young people to make the film, assisted by the local further education college and Down Community Arts.

Another interesting initiative is Derry's Harmony cross community choir, comprised mostly of senior citizens, who enjoy giving concerts in residential homes, hospitals and other venues across the city. The members include Protestants from the Waterside and Catholics from the Bogside and Creggan. Their concerts raise money for charity, but the choir is largely self-financing, apart from a time limited Lottery grant. No doubt other examples could be cited of worthwhile activities which unite communities and generations, apart from those highlighted in these chapters, and the omission of other life histories and projects is no reflection on their value in terms of a contribution to community relations, but is due only to limitations in the scope of the research project.

The focus of **Chapter 9** is on allowing older people themselves to speak in their own words about their experiences and memories. Here, Ernest Carroll, PJ McClean, June Mallon and older members of Women Together talk about community relations now and in the past and about what it is like to participate in focused community relations work or in direct action.

Chapter 10 provides further case studies illustrating the active involvement of older people in focused community relations projects, in this instance from the perspective of group facilitators, who highlight both the rewards and the difficulties of working with this age group. The first two projects featured here were reminiscence projects, during which skilled and experienced facilitators from the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Ulster People's College respectively helped older people from senior citizens' groups to recall and record their memories of their own and their communities' past. One project (the 'Paths Through the Past' project with Cregagh OAP Club and pupils from Our Lady and St Patrick's College) was cross-community and inter-generational, while the other (with older people from the New Lodge area of Belfast) was single identity work (but run in conjunction with a similar project involving younger women from the Duncairn community). In the third section, independent facilitators talk about the response of older people to the exploration of cultural diversity through music (Roots and Rhythms). Finally, two representatives of organisations specifically focused on addressing reconciliation issues, the WEA Interface Project and the Corrymeela Community, talk about their experiences of working with older people.

The case studies illustrate a variety of approaches to deepening understanding of the issues which divide, but also unite, older people from both traditions in Northern Ireland. Through reminiscence work and also through the exploration of cultural diversity, participants in these courses and programmes, which encompassed both cross community and single identity work, were enabled to examine their shared past in a way which sheds light on the present. In this type of work with older people, it is clear that skilled facilitators are required if reminiscence work is not to descend simply to the level of nostalgia for an idealised past; but there is also evidence here and in the case studies presented in the previous chapter, of a willingness to confront and work through difficult and contentious issues. This may be particularly challenging for older people within a mixed age group programme, but also increases the opportunities for inter-community, cross community and inter-generational understanding.

For any groups wishing to develop programmes of community relations work with older people, the models discussed in Chapter 10 indicate that:

- Reminiscence work, focused around particular topics or themes, is an excellent vehicle for exploring issues from our past, which still have impact on the present. This can be a suitable method for either single identity or cross community work, especially for those groups which do not wish or are not ready to tackle more 'head on' CR work.
- Working towards an end product, such as an exhibition, helps to focus the work.
- Group dynamics are very important and the services of skilled and experienced facilitators, working to an agreed agenda with the group, can be vital to a project's success.



Chapter 11 focused on church-based projects. Churches are the largest non-governmental institutions in Northern Ireland, and the organisations with the largest voluntary membership (Morrow, Birrell, Greer and O’Keeffe 1994). This membership includes a significant proportion of older people. A study by Boal, Keane and Livingstone (1997) of Belfast churchgoers, states that ‘church-going across the religious divide is predominantly an older-age phenomenon’ (Boal et al 1997: 144). Forty percent of Protestant church-goers, and 33% of Catholics in their sample were aged 65 and over. Radford’s smaller 1993 survey of inter-denominational groups found that a third of their members were aged over 56 years.

A number of studies have assessed the churches’ contribution, or the lack of it, to community relations. Morrow et al, in their 1994 study of churches and inter-community relationships found that none of the churches had developed a clear policy on inter-community relations and that there appeared to be no consistent encouragement from church leaderships for programmes of meeting and encounter across congregational boundaries. Research by Morgan and Fraser (1994) in a small market town and a rural area of Northern Ireland, showed that Protestant and Catholic women church members lacked information about each other’s religion and that there was a low level of contact between women’s church organisations. A small-scale study of inter-denominational church groups identified a lack of time and expertise to deal with community relations matters, as well as geographical and social segregation, as barriers to closer Catholic/Protestant relations (Radford 1993).

There is some evidence, however, that church groups have recently become more proactive in developing positive inter-church contacts. Although the research by Boal et al found qualified support for ecumenical ventures (which did not however translate into widespread direct personal involvement in cross-community organisations), both Catholic and Protestant church-goers called for churches to be much more active in trying to improve community relations. In the 1999 edition of the CRC compiled ‘Directory of Cross Community Church Groups and Projects In Northern Ireland’, the number of groups listed has almost doubled since 1994. In an article tracing the development of local inter-church programmes and inter-church fora, Johnston McMaster, of the Irish School of Ecumenics, argues forcefully that ‘the Christian churches in Northern Ireland have a key role to play in enabling reconciled relationships to be built and a pluralistic, democratic and participative community to be constructed. The signs are that the churches in local communities are finding new ways of relating and participating together’ (McMaster 1999: 14). He describes this ‘upsurge’ in inter-church activity as a ‘bottom up’ model, which seems to be bypassing institutional and traditional ecumenism and which has arisen since the 1994 ceasefires with the realisation among local Christians that they have an important part to play in reconciliation and community building. McMaster also highlights the role of the Community Relations Council and local Community Relations Officers in acting as a catalyst for these initiatives.

The final case studies examine two church-based projects. The first, Lisburn Inter-Church Project is an inter-church initiative which has offered talks, lectures and courses which provide those attending with an opportunity to explore community relations issues. A number of these have attracted substantial attendances by older people. The second project, Dungannon Women and Churches project, is an initiative between a local Community Relations Officer, the Irish School of Ecumenics and women church members. One result is the 'Sharing our Stories around Church' programme, which took place over 8 weekly sessions. The long-term objective of the project is to empower women to be more active within and between churches and to develop relationships between clergy and laity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The report has gathered evidence that could inform actions and strategies by a range of agencies concerned with the matters of equality and social inclusion; and the development of good community relations.

The report is extremely timely insofar as section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities in carrying out their functions to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations “between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation.

”The new duties take effect from 1st January 2000.

The key recommendations within the research could be used to inform and assist appropriate actions and interventions by the following agencies:



(A) Community Relations Unit/ Community Relations Council

- (1) C.R.U. should facilitate Community Relations Officers to devote more time and priority to developing their work with older people's groups.
- (2) Additional training should be organised to increase C.R.O. awareness and appreciation of the aspirations/attitudes and lifestyle of older people.
- (3) C.R.U. and C.R.C. should seek to improve formal links with relevant Social Service Agencies to produce a joint action plan for the support of community development / community relations activity by the ‘Age’ community sector in each locality.
- (4) C.R.U. should raise awareness levels within their organisation of the diversity, capacity, range and size of the ‘Age’ community sector, particularly in relation to its largely unrecognised contribution to the community.
- (5) C.R.U. and C.R.C. should promote positive approaches / good practice initiatives highlighted within the research.

(B) Health & Social Services

DHSS/Boards

- (1) More strategic attention is required to develop policies that recognise the provision of Health & Social Care Services within a divided community.
- (2) Specific training on community relations should be included in the training and development strategies of all Health & Social Care Agencies.

- (3) In developing services Boards and Trusts should be aware of the possible long term effects of trauma and bereavement on older members of the population.
- (4) The 'Age' community sector should be better consulted and involved in strategic planning and implementation of initiatives such as new TSN; Health Action Zones.

Trusts

- (1) Health and Social Services Trusts should develop more formal links with the Community Relations Unit and the Community Relations Council to produce a joint action plan for the support of community development / community relations activity by the 'Age' community sector in each locality.
- (2) Health & Social Service Trusts are major providers of funding to older people's groups. Recognition and financial and developmental support is required to sustain the development of the 'Age' community sector on a like with like basis as with other community development initiatives.
- (3) Older people's groups and 'Age' sectoral interests should be included in planning and delivery of social care and community development programmes.

(C) Ministry for Finance & Personnel

- (1) Future EU funding to promote Peace & Reconciliation in Northern Ireland should have integrated social and economic objectives to tackle the social exclusion of marginalised groups and should recognise all age groups.
- (2) The role of older people in enhancing community relations requires more recognition, as does their individual and collective contribution to peace building.

(D) Voluntary / Community Sector

- (1) The Voluntary/Community Sector should better recognise and raise awareness of the capacity, diversity, shape and size of the 'Age' community sector and its contribution to communities over many years.
- (2) The 'Age' Sector should be included, involved and consulted by the sector on the same basis as other marginalised groups in respect of the range of social inclusion strategies, e.g. New TSN.

(E) The Churches

- (1) As many senior citizens' groups meet in church premises, churches should be more pro-active in promoting cross community contacts.
- (2) Churches have a valuable role to play in involving older people in church-based community relations programmes and courses.

(F) Older People's Groups

- (1) Older people's groups should be more proactive in promoting cross community contacts.
- (2) Older people themselves should recognise that they have a valuable role to play in enhancing community relations in Northern Ireland. Individuals are more effective working together and networking and linkages to take forward this work could be developed, possibly through the medium of Senior Citizens' Forums (with appropriate support and funding).
- (3) For those older people who wish to become involved in CR programmes and activities, there is no single template for this work, but a variety of approaches may be used. These could include reminiscence, the study of cultural diversity and local history, involvement in church-based programmes and in programmes run by reconciliation groups.
- (4) It may be necessary, and equally valid, to begin CR work in a single identity setting, with a progression, if appropriate, to cross community work.
- (5) Inter-generational CR work should be considered by older people's groups. Projects undertaken in conjunction with younger groups have an important learning dimension for all involved. These projects may have added value by more readily attracting funding.
- (6) Reminiscence work may be particularly attractive for older people's groups and is an excellent means of exploring issues from our past which still have impact in the present, but the services of skilled and experienced facilitators are required to keep the work focused and to avoid any tendency to idealise the past at the expense of the present. Facilitators also need to handle such work sensitively and be aware that for some group members, painful as well as pleasant memories may be awakened. This is particularly the case where people have suffered as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland.