

Community Relations Consultation on *Shared Future*

Feedback from Community Sector

Age Concern Group held at NICVA office, Belfast, 10th September 2003.

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Introduction:

The United Nations defines all people aged 50 plus as 'older' and the inputs to this session relate to the needs of this group.

1 Policy Aims

Views were expressed that a Shared Future is one in which all groups can feel they are stakeholders whose specific needs and interests are respected and accounted for within society.

The *Shared Future* document was vague in many respects, particularly in relation to intergenerational issues. There is much positive work going on in Northern Ireland on a wide range of issues and within a wide range of projects and the document did not acknowledge the advances which have been made over the last number of years, particularly since the start of the Peace process.

Significant attention should be focussed on disadvantaged communities as a core problem. The group recognised the role of Government and Government policy in shaping problems and issues. This role needs to be positive and proactive if a shared future is to be created.

It was considered essential that political stability underpin any strategy or policies. However another participant considered the Belfast Agreement framework may not provide that stability for many people (particularly in the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community) in Northern Ireland.

A participant raised the issue of whether local communities find it easier to shift the blame for poor community relations to Stormont and politicians rather than asking themselves some hard questions.

A participant also asked if it was necessary to first build trust before dealing with some of the significant community relations issues being discussed.

Participants felt that, unlike other parts of the United Kingdom, community development was not a priority for the Government in Northern Ireland.

Some participants referred to the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy in Bradford as a useful potential foundation for good relations in Northern Ireland.

Vision: To be able to walk in safety in any area.

2 Specific Policy Aims

The view was put forward that the Government is very fragmented on the issue on peacebuilding and the development of Good Relations between people. On the one hand they are supposed to be engaged in peace making and yet on the other hand are playing into old tribal issues - symbolised in their refusal to be photographed together or be seen to be making progress together on the range of issues which unite the people of Northern Ireland - poverty and poverty traps (particularly relevant for older people) and the wide range of issues that keep people excluded from participation in civic society. Equality means not representing one group of people along party lines but representing the people of Northern Ireland on the issues that bind them.

Policies pursued within any new structures must have an anti-poverty agenda to support families who are struggling to provide for their families and who are experiencing additional hardship as a consequence of living in areas which have been and continue to be affected by the Troubles - particularly those areas considered to have a weak community infrastructure, most subject to problems.

The group agreed that a Shared Future cannot be socially engineered but must take place over the long term through the building of alliances between groups. In this regard, intergenerational work is important in building alliances between people of all ages and utilising the experience of the ageing population.

Policy should promote intergenerational work, should ensure that Community Development is given a high profile, should provide opportunities for ownership of initiatives within the community and should develop caring packages of benefit to the community.

Policy must deal with the issue of paramilitary power over whole swathes of the population and the fear of people to stand up against them. This includes being fearful of reporting crime, of taking individual action against people engaged in graffiti which is offensive, the hanging of political flags which create territorial division, the destruction of bus shelters, young people running riot in the streets etc.

People feel unable to go to the PSNI or statutory agencies for redress of crime/safety issues since they feel isolated and have lost confidence in the ability of agencies to deal with these issues.

Policy must reinforce the role and responsibility of parents in keeping track of young people at all times and in colluding with the bad behaviour of young people. Parents have a difficult job but policy can support them and can create opportunities to constrain the behaviour of young people - especially 9-14 year olds. The idea was put forward that there should be a curfew for this age group, developed in consultation with parents through using a Community Development approach to work with this group. Years ago there was always a common and unspoken agreement that children should be in their homes by a certain hour and that seems to have been lost in the conflict over the years. This needs to be re-instituted and maintained by society with everyone taking a common approach to what is and isn't acceptable behaviour of young people. This is a job the PSNI should be doing at all times and more policing of the streets needs to be done in the early evening to ensure that young people are in their homes and not out causing trouble for the community.

Policy needs to address the culture that children are currently living in. Apart from the issue above, the culture of drinking, hanging around street corners, general harassment of people, drug-taking etc are issues which must be influenced by policy. More pressure needs to be put on the providers of alcohol and drug dealers to remove their supply to young people. Greater levels of prosecution must be evidenced across a range of measures whereby young people are assisted in obtaining substances that lead to anti-social behaviour. In areas where paramilitary activity is strong, young people then move into areas that are consider 'safer' - i.e. where the community is weaker. Additional resources are needed in these areas to support the people living there who are subject to intimidation by young people.

Community safety strategies need to be developed with zero tolerance for social crime.

Policy needs to take into consideration the needs of the growing ethnic communities and especially those who are moving into less developed areas where they are a risk from a weak community infrastructure.

Policy should ensure an equitable distribution of resources. Older people are often thought of and presented as victims and policy needs to address this within any Equality framework and present images of older people as vibrant contributors who have 'paid their dues to society' financially and are still interested in being actively involved in civil society.

It was generally felt that community relations could not be divorced from socio-economic issues and disadvantage.

Ways of talking politics needs to be explored. Engagement of the whole population is important. There needs to be dialogue with every age group and single-issue group so that they felt heard. We need dialogue in order to understand what it means to be a citizen in Northern Ireland. Outside of 'orange' and 'green' there is a deficit of ideology. Our creativity, intelligence, problem-solving skills have been squashed in every way and particularly politically. The terminology of 'politics' needs to be unpacked and people should have a shared understanding of political concepts - e.g. sectarianism/pluralism.

We bear the heavy hand of history and are cynical about change. The role of the media is crucial in helping to change our culture to become more positive and forward looking and joyful.

We need devolved government as soon as possible so that all the issues fundamental to Northern Ireland can be addressed internally and local government can address local needs.

3 Fundamental Principles

Political representatives and Councillors must take seriously their responsibility to all of the electorate. They must show their visible commitment to progressing peace by participating in talks to move the process forward. It is completely unacceptable to pander to the fears of members of their own parties and avoid being seen together publicly. Sectarianism is promoted at the highest levels of Government while there is a refusal to meet and engage in the real issues facing people living in Northern Ireland. Politicians must also take into consideration the specific issues facing older people when formulating principles and policies in relation to Good/Community Relations.

Politicians must be elected on the basis of delivery to both communities. They must produce mandates that help create hope (dreams) for their people instead of the same old predictabilities.

Respect for diversity must be central to all emerging legislation and policy. The reasons for the divisions in our society must be highlighted and understood. These reasons must include poverty, divide and rule tactics, class, sectarianism etc. Shared issues must be central to the development of fundamental principles. Bitterness and religious rivalry must be removed and shared humanity promoted.

Although there is recognition for the need to have some means of engaging in some form of 'ethnic monitoring', the way in which it is done needs to be reviewed. Filling in forms to designate ethnicity/religion of users/job applicants etc. has become destructive and divisory. Not enough effort has been put into the 'hearts and minds' side of the equation - e.g. people on the ground don't understand the need for quotas (e.g. PSNI).

4 Implications for Actions

Policing in local communities, and the role and responsibility of PSNI must be resolved as a matter of urgency.

Flags, emblems and signs of division/segregation must be removed and work done with communities to ensure permanent removal of symbols of territory and intimidation. There must be accountability within government departments re. the removal of these inflammatory symbols.

Integrated schools need to be funded and more work done to create more schools. There needs to be an inclusive process created to address the issue of how schools can be integrated when areas are segregated. While we have parts of Belfast delineated along religious lines - East- and West Belfast - there must be a wide range of opportunities to enable young people to come together in safety and experience relationship building. Education policy must ensure that young people have a greater appreciation and understanding of each other's historical and cultural perspective to break down the dominance of 'the culture of being right' and thus making the other 'wrong'. 'History' and 'culture' in Northern Ireland is strongly influenced by perception and nationalistic overlay. Politicians at all levels must also make themselves available to participate within schools and talk to young people about their perceptions. Nationalist politicians should address unionist children and vice versa. At present politicians are very bad role models for young people

Policy must ensure an equitable spread of resources between rural and urban areas.

An operational plan, as part of the document, was considered by several participants as necessary.

5 Action at Regional Level

There needs to be more work to support people in buying into the idea of a Shared Future. Our society is not there at the moment. Opportunities for dialogue and engagement (such as is taking place through the consultation process) are important. People don't know how to talk about politics or the current situation let alone work together to share strategies on how to move forward together.

The group felt the current structures all had a part to play in creating better community relations and that although Government should resource and monitor the work of CR, implementation should be through local community action. The current structures are not working and the Government should take more responsibility for ensuring that areas under its control are taking a more proactive role, since it is the largest employer. CR should remain the responsibility of a Government Department to oversee.

6 Central Government

7 Monitoring & Evaluation

Qualitative measures need to be developed which allow for change to be examined and validated at the level of 'feelings' and 'perceptions'. These are important to measure change.

The idea was put forward that the Government has wanted apathy and people are only active in so far as the Government can control their activity and contribution. Blatant sectarianism existed for a long time and many places now replace sectarianism with 'codes' (allocation of jobs/Trade union activities etc.) How religious and ethnic monitoring is conducted needs to be reviewed.

Innovation needs to be measured as a mark of progress of our society. For too long, people here have been told what to think and how to think along party lines. How people think can be measured by the degree of diversity and innovation...emigration should be included within this since many of the bright young minds feel their independence is squashed here.

The degree to which there are changes in the way people do politics and talk about politics should be a measure of change. - 'If you always do what you've always done, you will always get what you always got'. We have to measure how we do things differently to achieve a different outcome. The monitoring body is not important but the activity that is monitored is.

We measure progress by changes:

Reduction in crime

Extent of freedom of thought and action and being different

Increase in levels of employment (freedom of capital to come to Northern Ireland)

Political stability

People voting outside their perceived designation (i.e. unionists voting SDLP; nationalists voting Alliance etc. depending on the strength of the programme of the individual in the area - issue based and not allegiance)

Implementation in full of Good Friday Agreement

Desegregation of schools and sporting activities

Creation of an acceptable police force which does its job fairly and cleanly

Equality legislation having an impact
Everyone taking responsibility within their communities and not being over-run by the wishes of those with power (paramilitaries)
The Assembly taking the lead in creating symbols of unity and acting as good role models for all
Greater degree of Community Development and involvement of all
Measures which make the politicians more accountable - forcing them to canvass and be part of their communities
Development of models of good practice so that lessons can be learnt and built upon and recognition is given to what works and doesn't work
Sanctions around sectarian behaviour
Creation of an independent watchdog that has no political affiliations and is made up of people who actually contribute within their communities rather than politicians
Involvement of the international community in overseeing the independence of our processes
Ongoing consultations re. How CR is working and how policy is being progressed
Adequate and equitable allocation of resources to meet needs - community based with local accountability
Creation of better services for all including free public transport for people on low wages and elderly
Empowering communities to participate within Community
Development initiatives across the board
Greater number of partnerships between the statutory and community sector
Increase in the number of intergenerational projects
Greater emphasis being given to the Departments of Education, Sports and Culture in changing the culture of Northern Ireland.