

**Community Relations Consultation on *Shared Future***

**Feedback from Community Sector**

**Age Concern Group held at Omagh, 11<sup>th</sup> 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 every voice is respected and heard.

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.

Building trust between communities is an essential foundation to progress community relations issues.

Vision: The group agreed with the vision in the Shared Future document and added 'that government resources be shared equitably across the community.' They felt the emphasis should be on supporting dialogue between communities and that this work needs to be adequately resourced.

## 2 Specific Policy Aims

The Government maintains and institutionalises old tribal issues and must give leadership in moving away from this.

Poverty and poverty traps (particularly relevant for many older people) and the wide range of issues that keep people excluded from participation in civic society should be a central tenet of public policy.

Equality means not representing one group of people along party lines but representing the people of Northern Ireland on the issues that bind them.

The group agreed that informal steps and bridging mechanisms are crucial to the development of a Shared Future. People come together to share interests and issues in common and it is through this mechanism that more cross-community activity should be encouraged. Formal and forced steps will not work with any age group. Community leaders/Heads of Schools etc. are crucial in creating these bridging opportunities which will help link people together. In this context, there should be no talk of 'who' or 'what' people are. Getting people together to share and learn from each other as people is what is important. Through that learning and engagement, political and religious differences will become less relevant. Age Concern groups are an excellent model of this.

### **Policy should promote:**

Intergenerational work

Community Development (getting ideas from people at the grass-roots/enabling participation of issues which affect people where they live

Measures to overcome paramilitary power within our society

Removal of Graffiti, political flags, marking of territory - street curbs/murals etc.

Safety of all and for all

Growth of leadership. Local leaders should be promoted and more action should be taken to identify local champions who can drive forward CR/GR initiatives particularly between schools

Integration of schools at all levels

Ways of engaging in political and civic activity which is not 'party political'. We live in a culture of politeness and there are many ways to address political issues which do not result in sectarianism and mistrust.

Ways of resolving interface problems including interfaces with the border areas. This area is seldom addressed and is a real problem for people living in rural areas.

Prejudices which exist in the areas of sport. Too many sectarian problems manifest themselves in 'games', which should be fun but end up in rival sectarian clashes

Removal of flags etc from public roads. People should be allowed to fly flags within their own areas if they choose but not along public roads and interfaces

The removal of the negative role of the Media. The media have had a very powerful role in how Northern Ireland is presented internally and externally and this role has been a sensational and negative one. More must be done to promote the positive activities which are occurring all the time through a wide range of projects and activities in Northern Ireland.

Opportunities to create more dialogue between communities on issues which affect them - bread and butter - basic issues.

More help and support for local people and local groups. More resources are needed on the ground and it should be the role of politicians to access additional funding for opportunities to create peace and to achieve a more prosperous society in Northern Ireland. Resolution of the policing issue so that people can feel they have a police force which is competent and to whom they can turn for help and to redress their fears.

The role and responsibility of parents in reinforcing acceptable behaviour of young people.

Community safety strategies

The needs of the growing ethnic communities

An equitable distribution of resources. Housing policies need to be stricter to ensure public housing is allocated only to those in need.

Greater activity to curb the activities of drug dealers and the selling of alcohol to young people. Assets recovery agencies should be strengthened to ensure that gangsterism and racketeering are stopped.

### 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.

Politicians must also take into consideration the specific issues facing older people when formulating principles and policies in relation to Good/Community Relations.

Respect for difference must underlie all emerging legislation, policy and actions.

Schools are fundamental within the change process to create a shared future. Leadership must be given in schools and resources allocated for the provision of more integrated provision and an end to division.

Elderly people have needs which are not currently being met. Part of the peace dividend should be improved provision. Instead, money is still being spent to maintain separation and deal with the worst consequences of the Troubles. There must be more recognition within the public of the consequences of continued spend on conflict so that people realise the impact on the delivery of services - lack of public transport, waiting lists in hospitals, lack of access to hospitals, lack of adequate home help provision, inadequate funding of Health Services generally and the effect on older people.

CR should be divorced from government. It should be resourced by government but not controlled by it. CR agencies/units must be independent. The group felt that CR is best done by people on the ground working within projects rather than CR officers. Community Forums should exist that are accountable to local people and these should oversee CR strategies within local estates/areas. There should be a partnership between areas so that CR can be evidenced through joint work. The group were unclear as to the role of CR officers.

The group felt that the Equality Commission has had too wide a brief and that a CR ombudsman should be established as a watchdog for CR. CR should be located between the Departments of Sports, Arts and Culture since it is within these areas that divisions within our society are most manifest. CR should become depoliticised and models of good CR should be rewarded. Councils that are poor in terms of dealing with CR should be given more resources and support and there should be an appraisal as to the reasons why CR are poor. Councils and organisations that are promoting sectarianism/colluding or avoiding their responsibilities should be penalised.