



Office of the Chief Executive

29 April 2003



A Shared Future – Improving Relations in Northern Ireland

I refer to the above paper and would offer the following comments on its contents:

Introduction

As a public body providing services to all the population in the area we serve and a major employer in the area, we believe that the fostering of good community relations is essential if we are to be able to deliver our services in the most effective and efficient manner. I also acknowledge our responsibility as a public body, to promote good relations as part of our commitment to the equality agenda set out in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act and our Equality Scheme.

It is recognised, as clearly illustrated in the statistics provided in the document, that our population is segregated into distinct geographical locations. This can provide challenges to public bodies in terms of equity of access to services particularly when these services need to be provided from physical locations that are historical and well established, e.g. major hospital buildings.

Vision/Specific Policy Aims

The proposed vision 'to develop a more shared and pluralist society' is supported. While this is an obvious statement the achievement of this will be very difficult. While recognising the existing problems of division within our society are likely to remain with us for some time, efforts must be made to ensure rapid progress towards the stated aims.

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Mr Stephen Hill

Fundamental Principles

Whilst acknowledging the problem there must not be any sense that it is insoluble and that the divisions that currently exist can shape the future in policy terms. The recognition that this issue requires a long-term commitment from the Government is welcomed and it is hoped that this translates into the area of funding of community groups and reduces the uncertainty that exists through the reliance on grant funding particularly through the EU schemes.

The commitment to working in partnerships with local communities is also important. In all situations the importance of the individual communities taking responsibility to play their part in the partnership must be highlighted.

Targeting of those areas with a history of deprivation is also welcomed as improvements in this area can have significant impacts on the health and social services.

A further principle that may need to be articulated is that Government actions will not be seen to perpetuate the existing divisions in our society but will be seen to move the community relations agenda forward.

Implications for Action

The priority given to the building and maintaining of leadership capacity within communities is welcomed. Local people need to be supported to find local solutions to local problems but without this leadership capacity and support this is unlikely to happen. This leadership and community capacity can also be of benefit in promoting partnerships with the statutory agencies in addressing the issues around service needs within the local areas.

The local District Councils have an extremely important role to play in this area. Again the commitment to more permanent arrangements is welcomed as this should enable sustained effort to be maintained in this area. They should become the focus for all community relations developments in their local area to ensure a co-ordinated approach is taken and to avoid duplication of effort. However they must not stifle innovation in this area. District Councils must also show leadership in the way they conduct their business so as not to undermine the initiatives they have set in place through their community development schemes.

Action at Regional Level

There must be clarity at the regional level about the roles and responsibilities of bodies involved in community relations. Overall responsibility for community relations must rest with the Government. The oversight and monitoring of the effectiveness of the policy should be retained within a Government Department. Those functions requiring particular expertise in the area could be discharged through a statutory authority.

Central Government

There is a clear need to ensure that the Departments in Central Government are co-ordinating their work in this area and it would be important that there is a mechanism for ensuring the compatibility of different Department's plans. All policies and action plans should be assessed to see how they are contributing to the fostering of good community relations and ensuring that they are moving us forward towards our vision.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The difficulties in monitoring this area of work are acknowledged. It would be important that a number of key indicators are developed that will enable progress to be measured over time. It must also be recognised that it may be some time before significant changes take place in any indicators such as housing locations so earlier indicators may be around research into attitudes.

I hope you find these comments helpful.

Yours sincerely



STELLA BURNSIDE
Chief Executive