

ANTRIM BOROUGH COUNCIL'S

RESPONSE TO "A SHARED FUTURE: A CONSULTATION PAPER ON IMPROVING RELATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND"

BACKGROUND

The following response from Antrim Borough Council was tabled at the August meeting of Full Council and was subsequently agreed to be submitted to the Community Relations Unit.

COMMENTS

Section 1: Introduction

1. There is broad agreement with the analysis set out in the Introduction. A shared society in Northern Ireland is desirable. This model would strengthen the promotion of eliminating sectarianism and aiding the development of more sustainable policies. There is a concern that so much duplication of service delivery by institutions has actually caused segregation at times within Northern Ireland society.
2. Aiming for a "shared society" is a laudable aspiration but it has to be acknowledged this would take time and that "rapid progress" may not be attainable in the short term – progress would be over a long timescale. There is a need for recognition of a transitional stage.
3. A shared society would mean sharing services and communities that are still very much at "different levels"- would not necessarily be easy. Acknowledgement by policy makers of the huge development and capacity building to be done by and within communities to reach this goal is paramount.
4. The warning of clear evidence of deep division remaining after 30 years of conflict must remain at the heart of the community relations' debate. Thinking that 'the war is over' or the trouble is located only with people living at the interfaces is faulty because
 - these are not the only places that breed distrust;
 - we are in danger of creating an "interface culture" because people think resources follow places defined in such terms;
 - proliferation of interfaces within previously recognised civil or public spaces will have a detrimental impact in terms of safety, community safety and perhaps employment and economic development.

5. It is an ongoing community relations issue that everyone can be fearful and distrustful across the lines of religion and politics; some manage to mask this by the ability to avoid or politely deny our involvement in the conflict.
6. There is a widespread acceptance of the need to build an interdependent culture but it is often seen as someone else's responsibility.
7. The rush to focus largely on TSN areas
 - takes resources away from some districts that need stabilisation in terms of building trust and understanding between communities;
 - can reflect the wider denial that there are neighbourhood community relations issues;
 - does not challenge people who do not want to acknowledge any problem regarding good relations.
7. Misfortune can be blamed on the troubles without recognising there are powerful and influential sections of society that have participated in practices that have fed separation and segregation. Such a society is not well placed to face the challenges of living in a more interdependent world of jobs and opportunities.
8. It could be argued also that the troubles protected us from seeing wider trends in social issues, employment and investment. We need to link the requirement for a Shared Future to both local and international challenges. The broader social issues such as global investment, employment patterns and environmental factors affect the prosperity of Northern Ireland. Trust building, economic development and sustainable development are interwoven.
9. The use of the term "shared" is preferable to the term "integrated" which has come to be associated with integrated education. The term "integrated" has connotations of assimilation – which engenders fear. The idea of "*rapid progression towards an integrated....society*" might put some communities off becoming involved. Some may perceive it as a hidden agenda.

Section 2: Policy Aims

1. Equity, Diversity and Interdependence are seen to be central themes and this is to be welcomed, as it brings a clarity and purpose to the work.
2. We need to value **all** cultures more than **different** cultures.
3. Denying people their place on religious, political and racial grounds can be ascribed to "unease" with difference.

4. We would concur with the wish to see the promotion of “community relations” in the broadest sense, in particular the issue of race, in preparation for the inevitable transition towards a more cosmopolitan and outward-looking society.
5. There is a need to define community relations more widely to incorporate the multi-dimensional aspects of people, ie, to give consideration to gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, class, disability, etc.
6. It should be a fundamental principle that everyone needs to feel at home within their own culture, and to understand it and value it. This points to the need to build confidence within single identity communities so that they can later engage positively with others.
7. While getting used to the term ‘good relations’ it has to be asked whether the rush to adopt it is also creating an opportunity to ignore the real and continuing challenge of promoting trust and reducing fear; this challenge must be the priority for the foreseeable future for all that work in the area of community relations.
8. The concern to stabilise and manage conflict limits improving community relations because many living here, and many in significant positions within public bodies, private agencies and voluntary and community organisations, would settle for separation and management of distinct and separate areas. This could become an accepted norm and should not be a valid goal of public policy.
9. Education is a the key policy area to be addressed either structurally in terms of allowing more opportunities for children to be educated together, or ensuring the curriculum allows for meaningful discussion of diversity and dealing with conflict, or both.

Section 3: Fundamental Principles

1. There is a need to promote a shared political commitment and a shared civic vision that supports relationship building and trust.
2. Policy interests need to be aimed at inviting those holding positions of civic and public leadership at the (often) comfortable centres of community and institutional life to
 - grasp the need to build trust and move beyond hostility;
 - stand together on a civic well-being platform;
 - target trust building projects not only at the young.

Section 4: Implications for Action

1. Policies need to address fear, intimidation and harassment.
2. Explicit reference needs to be made to identify the underlying causes of conflict and division.
3. A common view by local people is that public services in some areas were inadequate and left a vacuum which the paramilitaries entered. Public services, particularly policing, housing and social services need to be of a high quality not only of provision but of responsiveness and also 'joined up' in delivering strategic objectives.
4. There should not be an undue emphasis placed on combining the need for good relations with areas of deprivation. The need to tackle deprivation and address good relations are distinct issues and require distinct interventions. It is possible that they may be linked but it should not necessarily be assumed to be so. Good relations can be poor even in areas of affluence. Concern would be that, in some cases, public money is "thrown" at deprived areas with the intention of producing positive results. Much good relations work can be undertaken with only modest financial outlay. As such there should be a principle which uncouples deprivation from good relations and deals with each of the attendant issues in its own right.
5. We support the retention of the Community Relations programme at district council level because
 - it is the only locally based, democratic institution at the moment;
 - Community Relations Officers have access to these important "centres of local influence".
6. The delivery of good relations to communities should be at the heart of all local council policies and to do this effectively requires training.
7. Legislation only approaches are weak and do not necessarily motivate creativity and risk taking. Councils with enlightened political and civic leaders who wish to commit to this work should be rewarded with additional resources.
8. There remains a need for management that is more active and committed to Community Relations, although work has rapidly changed from the old perception of funding 'tea dances' towards a more strategic focus.
9. Organisations that are externally focussed on promoting good relations without looking at the internal culture of the organisation in terms of how staff are treated would be missing an integral component of

imbedding a culture/ethos of promoting good relations, thereby missing a golden opportunity to generate true openness and transparency.

10. A common view is that Northern Ireland needs good leadership at all levels, at community level and at the top political level. A shared future is thought to depend on good leadership that builds capacity, understanding and positive action.
11. The role of drama and arts is allied to sport as being a unifying influence. DCAL has a crucial role to play in ensuring the mainstreaming Community Relations work through activities.
12. It is desirable to see one of the principles make explicit reference to the need to tackle division "within" communities.
13. More cross community involvement is crucial. We must analyse the messages being given by extremist groups and find ways of dealing with these and of bringing these in within a consensus.
14. A possible approach to reducing polarisation would be to have a principle of encouraging shared resources within communities eg sharing of community facilities etc. There should be incentives created by policy makers and funders to encourage communities to work co-operatively rather than the duplication of provision.
15. Other issues for Government include
 - giving public servants the resources of time to listen and consult with local people;
 - recognising that while "good relations" may be a more useful term than "community relations", other expressions are needed at times to fully describe a situation, eg community division or community conflict ;
 - noting that the development of capacity building and community development are a **prerequisite** to community relations / good relations;
 - the energy generated by the Harbison review could have been built on earlier had this information been released when available ;
 - the paucity of information given on the practical steps required to undertake the proposals presented in the consultation document;
 - the need for clear leadership and attention from senior civil servants of Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Ministers themselves if/when the Assembly is reconvened;
 - using a joined-up approach to community relations at central government level.

Section 5: Monitoring & Evaluation

1. Any monitoring and evaluation of a new strategy should be independent to create trust in the new vision of moving forward in society.
2. There are real difficulties in measuring this work and rudimentary measures should not be applied in areas of sensitivity. In the past, methods of evaluation of Community Relations work have been overly focused on the harmony index, which is often remote from the reality on the ground.
3. The skills to effectively monitor and evaluate community relations may not be available; establishing a skills base for this may be required.
4. It may be possible to measure by looking at the increased numbers of shared facilities', the 'increase in integrated education' and the 'increase in mixed housing'; however, these are not necessarily appropriate indicators of improved relations, as changes in lifestyles can effect those differences.
5. Better tracking and audit of grant could help.
6. PSNI statistics on Sectarian and Racist violence could be fed into local measurements.
7. A survey of territory marking trends, whether changed for better or worse, could assist.
8. If NISRA is to develop the monitoring framework, there could be a concern that too great an emphasis might be placed on quantitative rather than qualitative measurements; a balance of both types of indicators is needed.
9. It must be acknowledged that any improvement on the quantitative measures may be attributable to other factors.
10. Publicising good practice and case studies that may be able to be replicated in other parts of Northern Ireland, would be a useful training tool.
11. Risks should be permitted as part of Community Relations practice and any evaluation and monitoring process has to be careful how it defines failure. There needs to be a sense of realism and a culture of learning.
12. Monitoring and evaluation should not merely be "outward-focused" ie on initiatives and organisations that are funded through government,

but also “inward-focused” in terms of how well government performs its duties with regard to good relations.

13. Our comment on the various suggestions on how community relations should be delivered are as follows:

- If the need is for a new Regional Body it needs a challenge role, a support role and a development function.
- A new Regional Body would need to be staffed in a manner that is not overwhelmed by the needs of civil servants.
- The responsibilities outlined for a new Regional Body do not state any statutory function in terms of building Community Relations. This would be important.

14. Within Central Government the following is recommended:

- Each Department will acknowledge and review the extent to which their current and future policies acknowledge the impact on Community Relations.
- Each Department could internally addressing its culture to ensure that a broader civic vision of trust building is served.
- Cross Departmental approaches should be a challenge to all Departments, not some.
- Audit, challenge and innovate functions undertaken currently by CRU should be the remit for a Cross Departmental Group.

Signed on Behalf of Antrim Borough Council



Geraldine Girvan
Director, Development & Leisure Services

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