

Community Relations Consultation on *Shared Future*

Feedback from Community Sector

**Ardoyne and Marrowbone Consultation held at the Landsdown Hotel,
20th September 2003.**

**(This report should be read in conjunction with the report prepared by
Brid Ruddy).**

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1 Policy Aims - key issues identified

Inclusion and decision making - Discussion initially focussed around the process by which consultations and decision making forums are constructed. 'Who gets to sit at the top table'; 'Who gets to represent opinion'; 'What constitutes the voice of a community'; 'Who chooses'; 'Who gets invited into the conversation/discussion'; 'Who are the 'good and great" etc. The very processes themselves are flawed. 'Leadership' should be about creating inclusivity so that all voices are enabled and encouraged and all opinion valued, listened to and respected. Silence itself is a statement. Voices that are silent remain so for reasons and those reasons should be explored. That some people feel unable to express their voice, through lack of confidence or lack of experience or anxiety about 'getting it right' or 'saying the right thing' or 'following the party line' or whatever, needs to be explored by those who purport to speak for a community. This is the reflection of a healthy community and encourages openness, honesty and debate. One of our key problems in Northern Ireland is that we do not know how to talk about the problems that face us and many feel excluded from the debate.

Apathy is a major factor in our communities. Lots of people are not interested in engagement and are disillusioned.

There are many issues which need to be resolved within communities which are outside the remain of policy makers.

Historical legacy: The document does not address the context of the last 25 years, including the role Government and Government policy played in shaping sectarianism and the problems and issues

arising from unequal access to power at all levels within our society. This role and particularly the history of the Northern Ireland statelet need to be acknowledged. The Governments - both locally and nationally, need to recognise within its revised CR policies that they have created and been part of the problem and must 'make good'. CR/GR (Community Relations/Good Relations) does not exist in a vacuum - 'out there'. The document, in not addressing the structural factors which created sectarianism then goes on to place the responsibility for the promotion of CR/GR onto the people of Northern Ireland as though the people were the problem and the people need to sort themselves out. The Government has a responsibility in resolving and promoting and funding activities which will promote CR/GR. The Government and politicians have the capacity and access to the power structures which will help transform our society.

Housing/Interfaces: There is considerable anxiety that housing policy will be developed based on 'stacking' - creation of high rise flats. No-one wants more Divis Towers/return of the old Unity Flats type accommodation. Places like Ardoyne have an expanding population who need housing. Sectarian policy created land-locked, ghettoised areas. This was reinforced by the military mapping of 'Orange and Green' areas and the NIHE have fallen in line with the this mapping/design. The Northern Ireland state got it all wrong in the beginning. Undoing the legacy of sectarian housing policy means creating policy to enable expansion of land use beyond the edges of estates based on NEED. Catholic communities in N Belfast are not only having to live with the stress of unmet need through overcrowding and the anxiety of being left to linger on long waiting lists, They are also subjected to increased sectarianism living along interfaces which are changing shape and where ownership of property is moving from that of a Protestant tenant to that of a Catholic tenant, as has been happening in Deerpark. Protestants perceive this shift as territorial encroachment whereas Catholics are attempting to resolve problems of need. There are 800 families on the NIHE waiting list. The group agreed this is unacceptable, unfair and outrageous. Meanwhile, empty houses are available in the Cliftonville/Torrens area and single people are allocated houses. Catholics are shoe-horned while in some Protestant NIHE estates in N Belfast people have garages and back and front gardens. This is unfair and a source of continuing conflict. The NIHE response which

is to propose 'stacking' instead of resolving land-use is unacceptable. The NIHE is a statutory agency and as such, it is the responsibility of Government to resolve this issues instead of allowing it to further inflame sectarianism and leave people along interfaces in an extremely vulnerable situation. This is a matter for urgent resolution. The group agreed that the Loyalist community - UVF/UDA - are stamping their authority on land use and controlling this. 'Regeneration strategies must respond to need and not greed.' These strategies must also respond to the need for safety so that Catholic families moving along interfaces are not intimidated out of their homes or left in danger. New housing developments - for example - the Old Dunmore site - are becoming new interfaces.

'Northern Ireland' is a failed entity. Removal of the border is still an issue that must be resolved. Clarendon House does the planning and designing and not local people. Power resides in the Privy Council. Once again, this goes back to the issue of 'inclusion' and 'equality'. Agendas and strategies to redress exclusion and inequality must go straight to the source of the problems - structural frameworks for decision making. Sending a few people on empowering personal development or cross/community training courses does not mean 'inclusion' and promoting 'equality'. It is access to the power structures and the decision making forums that is important. Homeless people are excluded. They cannot make policy. They cannot vote. They are disenfranchised. Northern Ireland needs to start with a blank piece of paper and map provision on the basis of need. Local people need to participate in this process at all levels. (Which goes back to the first issue raised as to how people get included in processes.)

Creating a shared future and creating equality means going back to fundamental principles - the protection of people's most basic human rights such as the right to shelter.

Resolving this type of situation is not easy. We must resolve fundamental questions and we need to get the 'hard men' round the table in this process and discuss questions such as - 'Are we going to live together or not'. 'We must put the issue of needs on the table and when it comes to housing, then we are talking about the needs for land, for housing, for giving homeless people and families in need a place to live. Its basic.' ('Hard men' in this instance was defined as 'people in the community who are vested with leadership'.) CR is

about ensuring people understand and not feeding into sectarian nonsense that it has to do with anything other than need. We have to talk about what is common sense. We must have dialogue on these issues. (The example of what happened in Rathcoole when the PSNI gave ground to the UDA and colluded in sectarianism was sited. Policy and legislation must provide against this kind of collusion and the rule of violence.)

Policing: There must be urgent resolution of the Policing issue. Policy must ensure that the PSNI do not collude with sectarianism and must implement the law equally. Their activities must be strongly monitored and openly reported and their must be strong, disciplinary action taken, immediately, as offenders violate their responsibilities as a Police force.

Graffiti/marketing of territory. Policy and legislation must be enforced to remove and prevent sectarian graffiti.

Equality: Equality relates to everything that has been said above. Equality is about ensuring policy which contributes to the quality of life, to equitable housing access and jobs and the taking of positive action as necessary to redress imbalances. The quest for CR/GR should not supercede the Equality Agenda. The quest for equality is the meeting of need. Equality is more important than CR/GR. People in Northern Ireland are currently working within unworkable parameters and equality means looking at these parameters and changing them - root and bole where necessary. CR/GR means that policy must ensure that inequality is not perpetuated or maintained. CR/GR means looking at the structures and frameworks and processes.

One participant raised the issue and questioned the extent of discussion that takes place on sectarianism within Government and 'golf-clubs,' - i.e. among those who make the rules but seem to live apart from them or whose lives are largely unaffected by the policies they create.

The issue of political stability underpin any strategy or policies was raised.

There remain within our communities very deep reservoirs of hurt, sectarianism and hatred that must be addressed. The impact of the

'Troubles' remains very powerful and defining within many aspects of people's lives including their ability to discuss politics and issues. Raising these issues remains a very difficult process and people are still finding ways of being able to talk about these issues. This is a long term issue.

Education: Integrated education was considered to broaden perspectives and multi-culturalism. Half of the participants did not feel integration would work. Sectarianism runs too deeply within communities and children return from school into segregated communities. It is only when integrated living becomes a reality that integrated schools will be meaningful. It was felt that Catholic youth are becoming more sectarian. Sectarian language is built-into the language that is in common use in schools, including among teachers. Values are needed to promote sharing.

The idea of people having local visions and short-term achievable goals is more important than big vision statements.

Adopting a Community Development approach to community peace-building is still very important. Long-term sustainable funding is paramount. Community Development needs to be mainstreamed within local areas and local Community Development workers are crucial to peace-building. Quantitative measures for Community Development are less important than qualitative measures. Bridges must be built to create opportunities for understanding, education and dialogue. Communities must be involved in decision making and consultation must be a real process at all levels. The class issue remains at a distance in consultation processes. Grassroots people need to be included in the shaping of policies that affect their lives.

In this context, Community Relations policy has not worked and has changed nothing, especially inequality. CR policy must be contextualised within an analysis of power relations. The Equality Commission has failed because it institutionalises inequality within its very make-up - the people who are employed to work on Equality issues, their class background, their distance from ordinary working class people and the exclusion of working class people from the structures which direct Equality and the policies designed to address inequality. CR must take a bottom up approach which includes Community Development workers/local activists and local

political leaders. CRC and the Equality Commission are bestowed upon us and not accountable to local communities. Agreed persons from within the communities should be the 'guidedogs' and 'watchdogs' of CR/Equality policies.