

**ARDS BOROUGH COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO - A SHARED FUTURE –
CONSULTATION DOCUMENT ON IMPROVING RELATIONS IN
NORTHERN IRELAND**

Do you agree that the overall aim for the policy must be for a more shared but pluralist society?

Ards Borough Council is in agreement that the future of Northern Ireland, must by nature of the society in which we live, be a shared one. We note that the community sector has worked in partnership, within communities and between communities for many years, and would trust that this pattern of interdependence can be replicated into all sections and sectors of Northern Ireland's society. However, we are uncertain about the commitment of government to create a future which is truly shared. Democratic processes must be accountable and provide leadership if the development of a shared society is to be cascaded down through all sectors of society.

A pluralist society is by definition one with a plurality of views and we acknowledge and respect the right for all reasonable viewpoints to be heard, understood and given the right of expression. In setting forward the concept of pluralistic society within the policy aim we would trust that active measures will be implemented to allow the continued identification and expression of all viewpoints, and that all viewpoints are accounted for in the development of the policy actions resulting from this consultation.

What do you think should be the main policy aims and outcomes which should drive the new approach to promoting good relations in society?

In developing a new policy context we would be concerned that government should put in place the correct building blocks upon which stable structures can be built. We have therefore considered that as a minimum the government should put in place policy aims that will contribute to, or result in the following outcomes:

- (i) ***Stable Political Structures*** – we believe this to be imperative. Community based community relations initiatives have been continually jeopardised over the last five years by the instability of political structures. Government in partnership with political parties who are totally and peacefully committed to peace must therefore strive to ensure that accountable and stable structures are in place that will allow long term peace building to occur.
- (ii) ***Communication – Dialogue*** – communication is key to building relationships. For many years communities have felt that they have been told what government felt they needed to know and consulted on what government felt they had to consult them on. Therefore the Council would urge government in developing new community relations policy aims to consider how effective communications can be developed both at grass roots levels and between grass roots and those who formulate policy. Dialogue is a progressive step that can only occur after evidence of meaningful communication.
- (iii) ***Enabling Trust To Be Built*** – a fundamental policy aim must be the creation of trust. The legacy of the conflict shows that mistrust and suspicion have been a major contributing force to the divisions within our society. Trust building must therefore be an outcome of any future policy being developed which must be based on mutual respect and

respect for the democratic will of the majority of people within Northern Ireland.

- (iv) ***Peaceful Society*** – The Council is committed to working towards a peaceful society throughout the Ards Borough and would trust that government put in place a policy aim that would reaffirm its commitment to support and resource those community relations activities that contribute to a peaceful society.
- (v) ***Inclusive Society*** – Northern Ireland has for many years been regarded as comprising of two communities. We wish to see government move beyond reference to the two communities, and towards recognition within the community relations policy of the presence of many “communities” in Northern Ireland. Therefore we would be pleased to see a policy aim that widens the scope of community relations to ensure it is a programme that promotes relations within and between all communities, but recognises that communities are made up of individuals.

What do you think ought to be the principles upon which a new approach to promoting good relations in Northern Ireland should be based?

Firstly the Council acknowledges and welcomes the introduction of the term “good relations” into community relations policy. This must now be underpinned by policies that will ensure that relations are improved within and between *all communities*, including ethnic minority communities. We would propose that the government move forward by consideration of policies that will lead to:

- (i) ***Changed Attitudes*** - Northern Ireland is still a country that is deeply divided, particularly the in terms of attitude. Therefore Ards Borough Council would believe that a fundamental building block

of good relations policy has to be the development of a change in attitudes. This will be a generational process, but one which must be resourced now to achieve long term gains

- (ii) ***Openness To Understanding Others Beliefs/Views*** – mutual respect and respect for diversity must continue to be developed, but Ards Borough Council believes that this must now go beyond respect for the two main communities and be developed into respect for an individual's human rights to be different.
- (iii) ***Development of Good Practice*** – strong role models and examples of good practice are an essential requirement of good relations policy and Ards Borough Council would wish to see a good practice information sharing network established whereby performance of good relations projects can be enhanced.
- (iv) ***Individuals*** - have responsibility to be accountable for their own words and actions.

What action needs to be taken at local Government and community level to underpin the development of good relations between and within communities?

Ards Borough Council is pleased to note within the report that there is likely to be an enhanced role for the District Council's Community Relations Programme. The function of the Community Relations Officer within District Councils has been a vital source of support and encouragement for community relations project promoters. Much work has been done, but even more remains to be done.

In developing a wider remit for Community Relations Officers, Ards Borough Council would emphasize that the Community Relations role needs additional central government resources support if this wider remit is to be fulfilled. Ards Borough Council would be concerned that the

Community Relations role could become policy focused at the expense of the support currently given for “*on the ground*” action.

To ensure the development of community relations at local level, Ards Borough Council would advocate that:

- There must be recognition that these are long term problems which require long term solutions
- Local people still need the opportunity to tell their stories
- There must be support for integrated education and a strong focus on good relations work with a focus on young people
- Training must be available for all, symptoms i.e. particularly anti-sectarian training
- Community groups need to be given resources and support to enable them to be effective.
- There needs to be better structures of communication between local councillors/government and people in the council areas.
- Zero tolerance of paramilitarism and their Flags, murals, graffiti etc.
- Effective policing that promotes law and order and equality of access to this service.

What functions do you think should be carried out at regional level?

Ards Borough Council is of the belief that there is need for regional co-ordination of policy and funding support that will enable the achievement of a shared future.

Should these functions be delivered within Government or by an independent body, such as the Community Relations Council or a new statutory authority?

Ards Borough Council would support the development of a body, which would merge the functions of the Community Relations Unit and the Community Relations Council into one organisation and believe that this body would be able to achieve maximum results if it were a partnership of representatives from government and from the community i.e. a cross sectoral partnership of equals.

What action do you think central government should take to improve relations?

Central government must continue to be the catalyst for the development of good relations policy in Northern Ireland. To achieve this Ards Borough Council believes that there must be support for:

- Cross community education for school children
- Government funding for more restorative justice projects
- Funding of cross community projects for training/development.
- Community associations to engage in "hard issues."
- Development of stronger political leadership
- The provision of means to celebrate each others culture.
- A successful peaceful Northern Ireland where all are stakeholders in the future.
- The formation of a Regional Government without paramilitary parties if they cannot accept democracy and to put their past behind them.

How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored? (for example: a decrease in sectarian and racist incidents, a decrease in flags and emblems in public places, an increase in shared facilities and services, an increase in integrated education, an increase in cross community contact and co-operation.)

Only local communities themselves can be the judge of whether or not the community relations policy is being effective. In real terms it is difficult to measure community relations outputs but the Council would suggest that monitoring of policy objectives be undertaken in an inclusive manner with the community sector having a direct input into the monitoring process

Other comments on the document:

There needs to be a proper, commonly accepted **definition** of Community Relations and Good Relations.

Interfaces are too narrowly defined in the document. Sometimes silence is as much a symptom of an interface as violence. Interfaces exist throughout Northern Ireland – not just in urban areas. There are also intra-community divisions.

Ards Borough Council hopes that the views outlined in this response will be taken into consideration.