

**'A Shared Future'**  
**Community Relations Consultation**

Consultation: Arts and Disability Forum  
Date: 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2003  
Facilitator: Joanne Murphy  
Recorder: -

**The Vision**

- The Group felt that segregation was not an option and that the creation of a shared society had to be the way forward.
- They felt it was important to move forward from this premise and that while there may have been historic discrimination in the past it was time to regard this as history and move forward towards a more united society.
- The vision was also for a society that recognizes and respects all people's cultures and traditions.

**How?**

- The Group acknowledged that people feared change and a loss of control. The issue for them was how to get beyond this fear and to engage all of the community in new thinking.
- A number of participants made the point that disability exists through society and is no respecter of class, religion or tradition. People should understand the opportunities that they have and move outside the limited thinking that exists at present.
- One issue which was important to the Group was the consultation process itself. While many welcomed the fact that the consultation was taking place they expressed concern that participation at this level would not be replicated at a higher level within the process. Indeed DCAL's 'Face to Face' consultation and the strategy which arose from it was marked by consultation at a low level which dissipated rapidly as the implementation strategy kicked in. The Group were keen that this not happen with something as important as community relations and that involvement should be maintained. Such 'tokenism' helped nobody in the long run.

- The Group also expressed concern that the ‘Shared Future’ document wasn’t more widely circulated to ordinary people in NI. Why for example, couldn’t it have been distributed to all houses like the Good Friday Agreement and the recent consultation over the Hayes Report on secondary school transfer?
- In general those present felt that sectarianism and all its manifestations was utterly ridiculous. It was characteristic of people living in the past.
- One of the key issues raised by one participant was the need to take religious education out of the Curriculum all together, or out of all state funded schools. Another thought that the generally pervasive influence of religion on schools should be removed. There wasn’t a consensus in the Group on this with some members expressing concern for the teaching of some kind of ethical or moral code.
- Still on the topic of education, some of those present expressed concern at the way evangelical preachers and missionaries were allowed access to schools and to children. This was seen as state support of religious activity and it was the view of some that this should be no longer allowed.
- The promotion of integrated education was something that many in the Group felt strongly about although some raised logistical issues about the need to integrate communities and not just schools.
- Most in the Group felt that the integration of schools should not be forced but rather encouraged through financial or other means. It was important to make integration attractive to parents and children.
- Inclusively within society should mean being inclusive to all people and not just some.
- Schools themselves had a responsibility to be more inclusive to their surrounding communities. They should engage with all around them and make it a part of their policy.
- The Government should spend money actively engaging disaffected young people in a way that is attractive to them, using a language they understand. Young people should be given incentives to behave and to steer clear of paramilitary or anti-social activity – at present a vacuum exists. This means putting considerable resources into ‘prosocial’ work with the young and disaffected – anti sectarianism should be part of that.
- Real thought and time should be spent developing innovative ways to incentivise good behavior and linking this with existing police and social worker services.

- Work needs to happen with parents too. The ‘troubles’ have left a shattered society and the fear that exists hampers the building of relationships.
- The issue of racism also needs to be dealt with. The Group acknowledged that Northern Ireland is a deeply racist society and one participant felt that the media could play a key role in underlining the value of diversity and multi-culturalism.
- The need for everyone to be treated as equal, regardless of race, religion or disability was a constant theme for the Group. Many felt that a culture of ‘disrespect’ had grown up within Northern Ireland and that this needed to be addressed.
- The need for more cultural education (in and out of school) was also raised. The fear of ‘the unknown’ was regarded as one of the biggest problems in both sectarianism and racism. People need to be aware of other people and other communities. Information leads to better relations.
- Opportunities should be created in which people have an opportunity to interact with those from other communities and such encounters should be maximized. Networks that already exist should be protected and strengthened.
- While the Group admitted that violence and prejudice exists in every society there was a view that in Northern Ireland, sectarianism legitimizes thuggery.
- The issue of flags and emblems was discussed and the Group supported engagement with communities to remove flags where possible. Some did feel however that flags and emblems were a manifestation of a much deeper problem and should be dealt with as such.
- As an arts organisation those present were keen to stress the less obvious links between arts and community relations. Many felt that arts work had a significance impact on community relations and that this should be recognized and attract funding on the basis of its holistic approach. However some were concerned that community art shouldn’t be seen as too ‘up – front’ with the CR work it did – sometimes quiet work is more effective in terms of sensitive issues.
- The Group were largely supportive of single identity work and felt that for many groups it was important to be secure in their own identity before embarking on work with others.