

BASW(NI) SUB-COMMITTEE

“Promoting Good Relations – Inclusion in Action

RESPONSE TO – A SHARED FUTURE

Introduction

As the largest professional organisation representing social work in Northern Ireland and across the UK, the British Association of Social Work recognises and supports the importance of striving to create a more pluralist and open society in Northern Ireland.

Social Work is a professional activity with obligations to a range of people, families, communities and society. Social workers work with individuals and communities from different backgrounds and different cultures. Social work involves questions of ethics, morals and values about individual rights, and welfare, about inequality and structural oppression and about the distribution of scarce resources. Social workers are trained to practise in situations of great complexity, to manage change and diversity. Respecting diversity, different cultures and values is a core social work value which is basic to good social work practice.

BASW (NI) welcomes the opportunity to comment on this consultation document.

Policy Aims

Q.1. Do you agree that the overall aim for policy must be for a more shared and pluralist society?

There is no doubt that in the next 5 to 10 years an ongoing emphasis on developing a more stable society and managing conflict will be required. This is likely to be particularly so for “interface” areas with a history of conflict. Currently there is an increasing number of people from other countries who seek to live and work in Northern Ireland and this number is likely to rise in the future. There needs to be a greater recognition of the other cultures who share this space.

The British Association of Social Work would agree that there is a need to create a longer-term shared vision within society and that this vision can contribute to stability in Northern Ireland. Our vision for the future would be of a society where there is respect for different cultures and values. BASW as a professional organisation representing social workers is prepared to play its part along with other sections of society in trying to promote “more rapid progress towards a more integrated and shared society”.

The level of conflict which has existed over the last thirty years has led to a professionally “neutral”, “treat them all the same” response from social

workers. We now find ourselves in a period of transition and recognise that we must begin to move away from such a response and both create and encourage the development of pluralist communities wherever we have influence.

The process of creating a more shared society relies heavily on the existence of effective local political institutions. The “democratic deficit” created as a result of direct rule has led to a lack of accountability and ownership. The ceasefires and devolution offer an opportunity to begin to develop more accountability for local institutions.

Specific Policy Aims

Q.2. What do you think should be the main policy aims and outcomes which should drive the new approach to promoting good relations in society?

An overarching policy objective, shared by all government departments and which could lead to the creation of a more shared and pluralist society would be to shape policies, practices and institutions to enable trust and good relations to grow. All other objectives could be linked to this.

Whilst not wishing to dismiss the reality of the deep divisions in our society, it does seem particularly important to set out aims and objectives using positive, non-threatening language.

“Getting off the Fence “ which was published by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (1999) concluded that challenging sectarianism and hence promoting good relations needed to be done at several levels. To achieve effective change there must be leadership at the highest level along side individual or community effort.

The work of “Future Ways” (University of Ulster) is fairly well known through the development of the Equity, Diversity and Interdependence Framework and is widely respected in terms of providing an effective model for developing good relations within the institutions in our society. This work also highlights the importance of leadership and the interdependence of all of the aspects of peoples lives..

Fundamental Principles

Q.3. What do you think ought to be the principles upon which a new approach to promoting good relations in N.I. should be based?

Any new approach to promoting good relations should be founded on the principles of inclusion, respect for and celebrating difference, maintaining open dialogue and choice. It is equally important that there is a realistic vision of the difficulties around this work, that both long term and short term goals

are set which are realistic and practical. If individuals and communities are to engage in this work, they are more likely to proceed voluntarily to take specific action in order to achieve agreed objectives. We must accept that individuals and communities may choose not to be involved in taking some action and no doubt individuals and communities who are involved will demonstrate varying levels of commitment.

Implications for Action

Q.4. What action needs to be taken at local government and community level to underpin the development of good relations between and within communities?

The broader political context is obviously influential in terms of what can and cannot happen at local government and community level. Politicians have a clear leadership role to play in terms of encouraging any work related to promoting good relations. This is crucial if real change is to happen at local government and community level.

Community Relations Programmes should be mainstreamed in the sense that they are funded permanently and become part of all local government work including all associated community based partnerships.

Initial funding allocations should be based on assessed need and all allocations should be subject to ongoing review. There should also be some flexibility in funding so that projects can compete for additional funding.

Action at Regional Level

Q.5. What functions do you think should be carried out at regional level? Should these functions be delivered within government or by an independent body, such as the CRC or a new statutory authority?

An independent body but with real authority appears to be the best means of delivering on “good relations”. Independence from government would allow the risk-taking inevitably involved in this work to be undertaken. The Community Relations Council has laid good foundations, however its remit needs to be broader to ensure all communities living in Northern Ireland are embraced by its work.

Central Government

Q.6. What action do you think Government Departments should take to improve relations?

Government departments have a very critical role to play. It is important that a consistent approach is taken by all government departments and that real leadership is given. There needs to be a commitment within each department to maintain agreed principles in spite of local political pressure at key times. A cohesive and comprehensive approach is required if we are to make any progress in promoting good relations. Priority also needs to be given to resources. Resources need to be made widely available to encourage change at all levels of our society.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Q.7. How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored?

The complexity of issues being addressed in promoting good relations demands a sophisticated approach to monitoring and evaluation. Use of both quantitative and qualitative measures are essential. It will be important to set standards and bench marks by which outcomes can be judged.

The presentation of factual information through quantitative measures would seem essential to ascertain the success or otherwise of the strategy. Direct causal links may be difficult to establish between the “New Strategy” and for example decreases in sectarian and racist incidents, however, some indicators are required.

There is a need for a clear definition of Good Relations, otherwise it will seem that Good Relations is dependent on perception and therefore subjective, a high degree of reliance on sound qualitative evidence is inevitable. This is likely to be of particular significance in the initial years of the “new Strategy”.

As “trust” develops within and between communities more tangible results which can be measured quantitatively are likely to arise. If responsibility is not taken for the measurement of outcomes achieved, any policy developed will be worthless. It could be the responsibility of the Community Relations Council to set the standards, and monitor and report on achievements.