

‘A Shared Future’
Community Relations Consultation

Consultation: Belfast Boy’s Brigade
Date: 26th August, 2003
Facilitator: Joanne Murphy
Recorder: -

Vision

- The Group felt that the vision should be for a shared future and that this should be the aim of the Government and the communities themselves.
- The vision also included a Northern Ireland without paramilitary activity.
- The Group felt that paramilitary activity controlled and destroyed communities and left people frightened and disempowered. It also made it very difficult for organizations like the Boy’s Brigade to sell their message effectively.
- The BB as an organisation felt that had taken on board the message of community relations, both in relation to the issues of religion and race and wanted to be responsive to the changing community around them.
- They felt that ethnic minority communities should also be responsive to the wider community and that ‘good relations’ was a two way thing that required all sections of the community to work together.
- The vision was for an integrated school system but the group acknowledged many problems with this model that were difficult to address.

How to get there...

A number of issues arose which the Group felt needed action but in many cases a lack of consensus emerged in terms of what that action should be. The following section details key issues and some of the concerns within the Group.

- Segregated education came up as something which needed to be confronted. Some members of the Group felt that the sooner you got kids learning together the better and that if everyone went to the one school there would be less division and segregation. Others pointed out however that it wasn't just schools that were divided but communities and that the infrastructure of schools and transport would make it almost impossible financially to integrate the school system. Many present thought that Churches had a role to play in this issue that that the view of many churches (in particular the Catholic Church) were so opposed to integration that it was hard to see a way forward without serious government intervention. So while the vision was for an integrated education system it was hard to see that developing.
- Housing was another issue which participants felt strongly about. Again segregated housing has increased in the last number of years but it is difficult to see how this situation could be addressed. One suggestion was that communities themselves should be effectively resourced and funded to build strong community organizations and develop good relations with other communities close to them. Safety was regarded as the most important determinate in any change in housing policy.
- There was a view expressed within the Group that the Protestant population in Northern Ireland were feeling increasingly isolated and under pressure. Fear of a united Ireland was one concern, as was the demographic shift from traditional protestant communities to new communities outside Belfast.
- Flags / Murals / Football shirts was also raised as examples of territoriality among communities. It was felt that the aim of government policy should not be to suppress or destroy identity, but to develop confidence in identity and respect for the identities of others.
- There was a feeling that 'citizenship' as a concept and as a reality within society was not being taught enough. There needed to be an increase in respect for other people and for the worth of other people within society.
- The role of the Churches was raised. Some participants felt that the Churches didn't reach out enough to each other and that they further fragmented an already insecure Protestant population.
- The need to develop community relation's networks and protect and reinforce those networks that already exist was cited as an example of building on existing good work. This was about building relationships and finding interests and themes people can agree on. Good work should get more publicity and people should be aware and speak positively

about events that go on. People should focus on the eighty or ninety years of experience we have collectively as a community.

- Politicians should focus more on the good of the whole community and not just on developing their own political careers.
- The Government should do more to promote a 'shared identity' and this must include minority groups as well as the two major communities.
- Many of the problems arose from socio-economic issues and these should be urgently addressed. Many problems confronted in Northern Ireland were also problems elsewhere and we should remember that violence and crime takes place in all societies.
- The role of the civil service and policy makers was regarded as important and concerns were raised about key decisions about the future of areas being made by people who knew little about the areas or who were a long way personally from being part of those communities.
- Funding (especially small strategic grants) was seen as vital to support and develop effective intra-community and inter-community work. It was felt that young people needed help and guidance and that covered both those who were already in difficulty and those who were not as yet sucked into sectarian violence. The role of responsible citizens and the voluntary sector shouldn't be underestimated.
- Leadership (political, community and organizational) was seen as vital to change and organizations such as the BB could play a key role in such change.
- Work needs to be realistically monitored and evaluated but groups have to jump through too many hoops at present to get funding – the whole system could be simplified.
- Indicators, which were seen as sensible, were things like; a decrease in sectarian incidents; increase in integrated education; decrease in the display of flags and emblems; an increase in mixed housing.

Who should deliver it...

- The group were largely against community relations funding being more widely distributed by local councils and felt that organizations like theirs would lose out in this arrangement.

- Organizations like CRC were seen as Quango's but there was no real consensus in the Group as to the best method of distributing funding in the future.