

## **Belfast City Council's Response to the Consultation Paper 'A Shared Future'**

1. Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the 'A Shared Future' Consultation Paper and agrees with the vision for Northern Ireland and general principles expressed in the Paper since they are entirely in line with its own.
2. The Council is committed to the principles of equality, diversity and interdependence. Good Relations has been a corporate strategic objective since January 2001 and the Council adopted a Good Relations Strategy in February 2003. The Council's Vision in terms of its Good Relations Strategy is for a stable, tolerant, fair and pluralist society, where individuality is respected and diversity is celebrated, in an inclusive manner. This strategy includes specific actions that will aim to promote good community relations and good race relations within Belfast. Despite differences in political views, there is cross-party support for the aims of the strategy and the need to build a better future.
3. The Council has been re-admitted to the District Council Community Relations Programme and will receive 75% grant-aid towards its community relations and cultural diversity programmes. Work has already started on the establishment of a Good Relations Unit within the Chief Executive's Department, to integrate and co-ordinate the Council's work on the promotion of equality of opportunity, the promotion of good community and racial relations and the celebration of cultural diversity.
4. The Consultation Paper was considered in detail by the Council's Good Relations Steering Panel, made up of elected Members of Council from all six political parties, plus representatives from the Churches, Trade Unions, the business sector and the Community Relations Council.
5. The Good Relations Steering Panel made some general comments and specific comments in response to the questions included in the Consultation Paper; the questions posed are in bold in the following text.

### **General comments**

6. The issue of political dissent should be acknowledged; some people opposed to the Belfast Agreement have a difficulty with assumptions made in the document and hold alternative views.

### **Policy aims - Do you agree that the overall aim for policy must be for a more shared but pluralist society?**

7. The Council agrees with this as it is in accordance with its own vision for the City.
8. As there appears to be a difference of understanding and some ambiguity within the two main communities about the nature of identity (1.7) perhaps the use of the term 'identities' would be preferable.
9. Debate on the aims, objectives and principles for the policy should be as wide as possible, involving all sectors of society. It is particularly important that policy issues

should be addressed, since divisions may become 'institutionalised'; these are as important as the individual aspects of social division.

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

10. The Council agrees with the aims outlined in the Consultation Paper but acknowledges that there are particular problems in attempting to achieve them. For example, there are very few examples in Belfast of mixed housing areas where "integrated/shared communities" are possible. Although reduction of tension and conflict at interface areas is in everyone's interest the Consultation Paper does not offer any practical proposals as to how this might be achieved.

11. There is some concern over the potential conflict within the stated policy aim "to promote respect, encouragement and celebration of different cultures, faiths and traditions". The Council agrees that people may respect and tolerate other cultures and traditions but may not want to celebrate them actively.

12. However, faiths, in particular, should be regarded separately from cultures and traditions, since faith is, for many, a moral issue and a matter of right or wrong, and many people consider their faith to be immovable.

13. Relationships in Belfast are complex, on a continuum from the extremes of violence/hostility to complete integration. Movement along this scale is slow; progress at many levels is possible, depending where communities start, although it is not necessarily steady and may involve repetition before moving forward.

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

14. The Council agrees that all the principles listed are important. The common perception that division and sectarianism exists only in deprived and less well-off areas is incorrect and there should be broader recognition of such divisions in more affluent middle-class areas; more widespread ownership of the issue is crucial for its resolution.

15. The costs of sectarianism and dual provision of facilities in a divided community should be borne in mind.

16. References to "local communities" should be interpreted broadly and should refer also to communities of interest as well as geographical communities. In addition, divisions exist within institutions and organisations and the Government must tackle these too.

17. In targeting action, it is important that communities which have been most suspicious in the past are engaged, particularly where they are prepared to reach out to other communities.

18. There should be an equal emphasis on the importance of North-South and East-West links; for example, some current funding criteria supports youth trips to the south of Ireland but not to England and Wales, resulting in imbalances.

**Implications for action - What action needs to be taken at Local Government and community level to underpin the development of good relations between and within communities?**

19. The Council particularly welcomes the statement that "local government should play the central role in developing and co-ordinating action at local level to promote better relations and to manage conflict and community division." As a local democratically elected body, the Council has both the ability and the obligation to provide civic leadership and feels that it is well placed to play an important role in this field.

20. The Council is of the opinion that its own model of a cross-party political group working in partnership with external organisations provides a good example of what can be achieved by a local authority. This could be supplemented by undertaking audits at strategic level to identify duplication and/or gaps in provision.

21. Action must be taken in the short, medium and long term and work with young people is important, perhaps using sport as a medium.

22. The proposal to target funding in only two ways – i.e. towards areas that have experienced the greatest effects of conflict and towards communities that have been successful in developing and maintaining good relations - is restrictive and insufficient, given the complex nature of the problem.

**Action at regional level - 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 Community Relations Council or a new statutory authority?**

23. The Council is concerned to note the proposal that civil servants would have responsibility for delivering the functions. This should be the role of politicians and examples of good practice where politicians work together on a cross-party basis, perhaps including representatives from external organisations, e.g. the Good Relations Steering Panel, should be given; such work is important enough to warrant Ministerial involvement.

24. The Steering Panel queries and would challenge the statement that "it would be preferable to bring these regional functions together in one place". It is not clear why any change to the current structure is required. The Community Relations Unit and Community Relations Council play separate but complementary roles. Each has strengths and weaknesses; if the present system is ineffective, that may not be necessarily be as a result of the structure.

25. The Council is strongly opposed to the proposal that these regional functions be combined in one body. It is of the view that any new policy should have three elements – strong political support at a central level, a clear local focus for delivery (through the Councils) and an independent body committed to ensuring that community relations issues were constantly raised and debated. The Council expresses its strong support for the Community Relations Council and its valuable work in this area.

## **Central government - What action do you think central government should take to improve relations?**

26. The Council is pleased to see that good relations is also an important item on central government's own agenda. There is a need to find a mechanism for ensuring that implications for good relations are taken into account at all stages in policy development by central government, in the way that equality considerations are considered at present; this should include policies for land use planning and development. There is also a need for greater integration among central government departments.

27. There are many commonalities within current initiatives, such as good relations, neighbourhood renewal and community safety and it is important that they are dealt with in an holistic structured manner. The Council welcomes the introduction of greater integration between community development and community relations.

28. The Council welcomes the proposal to mainstream cultural diversity into all policies and points out that it is crucial that consultation takes place with organisations representing all traditions, as this has not been the case in the past.

29. There is a disparity in levels of awareness of identity and cultural traditions between the two main communities, which is particularly evident among school children attending state/controlled schools.

30. In relation to integrated education, there is no evidence that faith or identity based schools are in any way opposed to good relations and care should be taken to avoid this inference. The view was expressed that integrated education where religious teaching was completely excluded from the classroom would be preferable, but the present system is one of faith based integrated education.

## **Monitoring and evaluation - How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored?**

31. The implementation, monitoring and evaluation of any new strategy is crucial and will influence the success of the policy and the realisation of its goals. Qualitative as well as quantitative measures should be used. The Council will monitor and evaluate its own community relations and cultural diversity programmes to ensure effectiveness.

## **Conclusion**

32. The Council agrees that efforts to improve relationships within our society will require a long-term commitment and a joint approach from all organisations to tackle deep-seated problems of division and sectarianism. The Council is already working closely with other agencies in Belfast through its Good Relations Steering Panel and is determined to play its part in helping to promote better community relations, to address prejudice and to increase tolerance within the City.