

‘A Shared Future’  
Community Relations Consultation

Consultation: Belfast Jewish Community  
Date: 27th August, 2003  
Facilitator: Joanne Murphy & Brid Ruddy  
Recorder: -

This facilitation was carried out in a Group format with both facilitators jointly managing the event. Brid Ruddy began the event with a brief outline of the consultation process along with the aims and objectives of that evening.

During the course of the consultation, a number of issues arose. These tended to be grouped into a number of themes. These themes appear below, along with specific points that were raised in conjunction with them.

*Education*

- Concern was raised by many participants about the scheduling of exam times / dates on specific Jewish holidays. One person present made the point that ordinary desk diaries detail quite clearly when major holidays and festivals occur for most religious denominations. Dates that clash create difficulties for many in the community and unnecessary stress for children and young people. This was the result of bad policy decisions in the programming of exam times and didn't have to occur. If the Department of Education were serious in their duty to all children this shouldn't happen.
- The portrayal of Judaism in the syllabus was another major issue of those present. Many had great concerns with the way religious education was taught, the lack of any balance in the syllabus used and the 'singling out' of children who were from non Christian denominations and who had to leave class during religious education lessons. One person made that point that she had encounter 'sensitivity but complete ignorance' in terms of how religious education was taught and that this needed to be turned into an awareness of the needs of non-Christian children and young people. Another expressed that view that it was not religious education

that was taught – but rather religious indoctrination. Some questioned the role of the education system in relation to RE.

- In general the Group felt that the teaching of RE should be broadened considerably and that the 1 day a year of non-Christian teaching was simply not appropriate in a society which is rapidly becoming more multi-cultural. Adhering to minimum standards doesn't make for a mainstreaming ethos.
- The fact that many extra circular school events were held on Saturday mornings also excluded and separated Jewish children from their peers – in many cases schools were simply completely unaware of the issues involved.
- Food provided in schools was also another issue raised. The Group felt that substitute food should be offered where appropriate and that in many cases this was an issue with contractors and subcontractors who were often responsible for school meals / snacks.
- The need for more widespread cultural education and understanding and awareness of non-Christian cultures and traditions was also raised as an area where schools had an obvious role to play. One participant made that point that there was more to Jewish culture than the Holocaust and Israel and that they would like to see broader understanding of Jewish culture, and the place that culture has had in Northern Ireland and particularly in North Belfast for generations.

#### The Provision of Services

- One of the key points which arose was the issue of hospital care. A number of those present commented that even though that had made their religious affiliation clear they were still visited by Christian ministers and priests. This was regarded as inappropriate, unnecessary and also possibly a form of proselytizing. Conversely, while it was acknowledged that if a patient asked for the Rabbi he would be contacted, it appeared that hospitals didn't behave proactively when faced with an ill member of the community and that this may be something that could be raised with them.
- The lack of even one or two specific care places for elderly Jewish people in a specifically Jewish environment was regarded as one of the reasons for the movement of older community members to larger communities abroad.

- The lack of specific health screening for illnesses likely to affect the Jewish community was also raised. The fact that there was no provision for specific blood tests within Northern Ireland was an issue of concern.

### The Growth of Racist / Anti-Semitic Organizations

- The recent growth of racist and anti-Semitic organizations was an obvious issue of concern to the community. A number of incidents were cited such as graffiti near the Synagogue, the emergence of the BNP and the KKK near the University area and an event in last year's Belfast Festival where members of the community were verbally abused while attending an event. The lack of adequate realistic policing at this event was also raised as an issue of concern.

### Official Language used

- The phrase 'ethnic minority' was felt by some of those present to be a term they didn't relate to. Some regarded themselves more as a religious minority community and resented in particular fair employment forms that tried to identify them with one tradition or the other.

### What the Community needs at this time..

- There was a view expressed that the community did not know enough about funding and that funders themselves had some responsibility to make themselves known and to reach out to groups more than they were doing at present.
- Some members felt strongly that the community required a specific 'needs analysis' to get a true picture of where it was at present and the resources it needed to develop to maintain its position. This would involve an exploration of how the community wanted to develop, the specific needs of its young people and elderly, the state of its facilities and its interaction with other communities in Northern Ireland. It was also include an analysis of the difficulties faced, including (until recently) a rapidly shrinking community, the difficulties of sourcing Kosher meat,

Shabbat bread etc. and the state of the small Jewish graveyard in the City Cemetery which has fallen into disrepair.

- The kind of structures that those present thought were possible in the future with support were things like after schools clubs, playgroups and summer camps. A Youth development worker and a community administrator were regarded as key posts.
- The community also felt that work that has been going on quietly for years should also be protected and supported. This included the work with the Council for Christians and Jews and a recent event, supported by Co-operation Ireland, that involved a trip to meet other Jewish communities in Dublin.
- The Group also felt that things like community festivals should be much more inclusive of all identities in Northern Ireland and not just the two major religious denominations. Inclusively means all communities, not just two communities.
- This was also an issue for the media who, it was felt, don't give other faiths much of a look in. One person pointed out that 'Thought for the day' on Radio Ulster rarely included a non-Christian perspective.