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CBI Response to ‘A Shared Future – A Consultation Paper on Improving Relations in Northern Ireland

General remarks

- 1 The CBI is an independent, non party-political organisation funded by its members in industry and commerce. Its mission is to help create and sustain the conditions in which businesses in the UK can compete and prosper. CBI members come from all sectors of UK business and include more than 250,000 public and private companies, as well as more than 200 trade associations. CBI Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to respond to ‘A Shared Future’.
- 2 CBI has long been on record as a supporter of improving relations between the communities in Northern Ireland. We have also recognised the damage that community strife and tension have caused to the Northern Ireland economy. Indeed, as far back as 1996, in its response to the Independent Review of Parades and Marches, and following the Drumcree disturbances of that year, we highlighted the subsequent increase in sectarianism and community polarisation which we felt was likely to set back the progress which was being achieved in addressing the barriers to fair participation and equality of opportunity. In the intervening years, CBI has continued to emphasise the importance of good relations and the elimination of sectarianism to achieving a favourable environment for doing business in Northern Ireland, thus creating more opportunities and greater prosperity for all the citizens of the Province.
- 3 More recently, we have set out our vision for the future, which is one in which our political and community leaders join forces with business to develop quality living and working environments for everyone. We have emphasised that most people want a more inclusive society, with equality of opportunity, high quality public services and effective use of all our resources. As the Harbinson Review has shown the ongoing community relations problems is a cost burden to everyone in Northern Ireland.
- 4 CBI continues to stress the importance of offering a high quality of life to those who wish to live and work in Northern Ireland – this is an increasingly important factor if we are to retain existing highly-skilled employees and attract those people needed to drive the increasingly knowledge-based economy. Northern Ireland does continue to suffer from a poor international image, and the damage to our reputation and profile of street violence, sectarianism and organised crime should not be underestimated.
- 5 Around the world, investors and customers expect that by now Northern Ireland should have moved forward, but we are in danger of being left behind. We accept that we all have a responsibility through our words and actions to do what we can to create a more tolerant and pluralist society. We need to create a sense of pride in our local

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communities and rid our streets of the hatred and abuse that some parts of society continue to embrace. Our political leaders have clearly an essential role to play in achieving such an environment.

- 6 CBI commends all those involved at community, political and security force levels for their efforts in ensuring that the summer of 2003 was such a relatively peaceful one. Perhaps this year could be taken as a model of good practice for future marching seasons.
- 7 More specifically, CBI's primary interest is to ensure that the environment in which business operates is conducive to investment, wealth creation and growth. This is essential if the Northern Ireland economy is to become more self-sustaining. The events which took place every summer since 1996 - although largely absent in 2003 - in relation to parades and marches have been extremely damaging to many aspects of the local economy including an increase in sectarianism and community polarisation, delaying the transition to a stable society which the community wishes to see and which is essential if Northern Ireland is to achieve the competitiveness essential for success in the global economy.

Specific Comments on the Consultation Document

The Vision and Policy Aims

- 8 The CBI strongly supports the proposal that the overall aim for policy must be to develop a more shared and pluralist society.
- 9 We support the set of policy aims and outcomes set out in Section 2.5. Clearly these need to be developed into longterm objectives/outcomes together with a set of shorter-term milestones.

Fundamental Principles

- 10 We support the fundamental principles set out in Section 3. In particular we see extensive merit in identifying, supporting and sharing good (if not best) practice. In addition there must be greater recognition of the cost of the problem to society in Northern Ireland. We also welcome the recognition that the problems extend well beyond those areas facing social deprivation.

Proposed Actions

- 11 While we can welcome the overall thrust of this section we note that it is light on details and specifics.
- 12 In particular:
 - we welcome the role identified for Local Councils – a more strategic approach at this level is required. Fragmentation and consistency need to be addressed.
 - The Community Relations Council should be developed to provide the independent challenge function identified in the consultation paper
 - A range of proactive policies and initiatives must be undertaken at central government level. In terms of monitoring, a number of high level outcome measures should be developed against which the success of the strategy will be judged – and to avoid an undue focus on operational inputs.

- 13 One area of particular concern to the business community is the display of paramilitary flags and emblems, and painted murals/paving around workplaces - employers have made significant efforts, with a high level of success, over the last decade to create neutral environments within their factories, offices and shops. Yet many face an external environment which is often anything but neutral, yet government, political and community representatives have in general failed to address it. Some encouraging local developments have occurred over the summer of 2003 but such illegal activities should be addressed in a more rigorous and determined way.

Concluding remarks

- 14 Improving community relations and achieving a more shared and pluralistic society is an important strategic goal for Northern Ireland. We welcome the government's determination to address this issue.
- 15 Business does have an important role in helping to find solutions to the problems of improving community relations and promoting social inclusion. In addition to providing neutral working environments within their businesses which encourages people from different religious and community backgrounds to work together, employers want to operate in neutral external environments – they want to be able to attract the widest range of people with the best abilities to work in their businesses. An increasing number of employers are also recognising the business benefits of having a diverse workforce.
- 16 Many employers are also actively involved in their local communities, though smaller enterprises do have severe resource issues to address which can limit their participation. This role can vary but can include provision of mentoring, technical expertise, facilities, leadership training to community groups and other small businesses, as well as the more practical side of involvement in the New Deal, Business in the Community activities, various business-education partnerships and environmental initiatives.

CBI Northern Ireland
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