

SUMMARY

CCMS Response to ‘A Shared Future’

(A consultation paper on improving relations in Northern Ireland, issued by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister)

INTRODUCTION

- CCMS is committed to the promotion of equality, tolerance and pluralism within and through our schools.
- There is need for new long-term, strategic policy to shape Northern Ireland into a society characterised by mutual respect, diversity and societal inter-dependence.

POLICY AIMS

- The 6 specific policy aims (p.8) are supported, with the following comment:
 - CCMS schools have open and inclusive admissions policies.
 - The outworkings of Government policy should support local situations.
 - Accommodation must precede pluralism.
 - Equality for all children must be promoted within education provision.
 - Priority is to build trust, encourage communication and promote respect.

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

- The fundamental principles (p.9/10) are agreed, with the following comment:
 - Fundamental principles to be based on sound long-term, cross-Government, co-ordinated action.
 - A committed and sustained strategy is required to ensure that joined up government becomes a reality – past experience has shown this to be problematic.
 - The nature, depth and extent of problems need to be examined.
 - Significant resources to be made available, with emphasis on local action.
 - Long-term prioritisation and commitment at Government level is crucial.
 - Emphasis on adequate teacher training for both serving teachers and those in Initial Teacher Training.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

- Agree the need for action at three levels – local, regional and within Government, and for short, medium and long-term plans.

- The importance of local circumstances should be emphasised, with local action supported by Government policy, and well resourced.
- Programmes should be established to provide leadership training at local level.
- The already established cross-Departmental Group (Community Relations) should play a strategic role in devising sound policies and guidance to underpin actions.
- The Equality Commission needs to spearhead the promotion of equality and pluralism in its role in establishing good relations.
- Replacement of District Council Community Relations Programme by a permanent new programme is agreed as a positive step in benefiting local communities & schools.
- Other avenues could be explored in local solutions – eg of Cookstown Clergy Forum.
- Funding is key to success. Some areas will be more resource dependent than others, but all areas should receive adequate funding.
- Financial accountability is necessary.
- Promotion of cross-community as opposed to single community activity is paramount.
- Regional activities (p. 13) agreed, with the combined regional group for community relations to be a statutory authority.
- Lead role of Central Government, with joined up approach, is crucial to success. visionary and effective leadership must be a reality, and not simply a principle.
- Support for role of Department of Education with the following comment:
 - Council continues to promote Good relations dimension and Citizenship.
 - Parental choice must be paramount.
 - Faith-based schools provide and promote an ethos of equality and tolerance.
 - Support ‘integrating’ education using available networks, strategies, activities.
- Inequalities in housing and employment need to be addressed. Pluralism and inequality are not good bedfellows.
- The stated principles are commendable – there needs to be clear planning and action to turn them into realities.
- Monitoring and Evaluation framework to be devised by NISRA. Recommend Monitoring and Evaluation be carried out by an external group/organisation.

CCMS RESPONSE

to

‘A SHARED FUTURE’

**[A Consultation Paper on Improving Relations in Northern Ireland, issued by
the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister]**

CONTENTS

1.0	INTRODUCTION	2
2.0	POLICY AIMS	3 - 4
	The School in the Community	3
	Specific Policy Aims	3
	Foundations	3
	Equality in Education	4
3.0	FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES	4 - 6
	Working in Partnership	5
	Resources	5
	Children and Young People	5
	Revised Curriculum – Resources	6
	Change	6
	Initial Teacher Training & Continuing	6
	Professional Development	5
	Priorities	5
4.0	IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION	7 - 12
	Planning	7
	Cross Departmental Working	7
	Role of Equality Commission	8
	Local Circumstances	8
	Local Voluntary Groups	8
	Funding	9
	Discrimination by Bureaucracy	9
	Role of Regional Group	9
	Community Relations Regional Group	10
	Role of Central Government	10
	Department of Education	10
	External Influences	11
	Citizenship	11
	Faith Based Schools	11
	‘Integrating’ Education	12
	Social Derivation	12
	Housing Issues	13
5.0	MONITORING AND EVALUATION	13
6.0	EQUALITY IMPACT	13
7.0	CONCLUSION	14

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, in their document 'Building Peace Shaping the Future', wrote of the important role that Catholic education has to play in breaking down barriers of ignorance, misunderstanding and suspicion so that our society can be characterised by peace, understanding, healing and reconciliation. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), as the largest employer of teachers in Northern Ireland, is mindful of its role in continuing to promote the values of equality, excellence, tolerance and pluralism within and through its schools. As well as promoting these through an ethos which values all children equally, and cares for their diverse needs, we have sought to further encourage tolerance and inclusivity through our support for Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), Cultural Heritage (CH) and the Schools Cross-Community contact scheme. The Council agrees that there is a need for new long-term, strategic policy that is firmly based on clear vision, values, principles and objectives, and it is in the clear knowledge that education is one of the keys to a peaceful future in Northern Ireland that we make the following responses to the document 'A Shared Future'.

2.0 POLICY AIMS

2.1 While the emphasis currently is on attempts to stabilise society and manage the consequences of division, the Council concurs with the view that Northern Ireland must become a society where there is equality, respect for diversity and recognition of societal interdependence. The second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965) in its decree on Christian Education, clearly embraced the belief

that, through education, people “should be open to dialogue with others and willing to devote themselves to the promotion of the common good”. This belief is central to the ethos of Catholic education. The Congregation for Catholic Education, in its document ‘The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium’ (1998) emphasised the fact that the Catholic school is at the service of society and has a public role to play.

2.2 The School in the Community

Many schools are regarded as central to their local communities, with school facilities and staff expertise being available for community use. This role has recently been expanded by the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) allocation of money to schools for new or improved Physical Education provision. For NOF to approve significant funding an applicant must demonstrate how the facilities will be accessed by the public, with specific reference to section 75 groupings. As a result many schools across Northern Ireland will be more accessible to all sections of their local communities, with many having community or local council-based management groups associated with service delivery in Catholic Maintained schools. **Schools also avail of community facilities where available. For example, the swimming facilities at local Council run Leisure Centres are central to the provision by schools of the swimming requirement in the Northern Ireland Curriculum.**

2.3 Specific Policy Aims

The Council fully supports the specific policy aims. The open and inclusive admissions policy of Catholic maintained schools, which aims at ensuring that our schools are open to all children regardless of religious belief, is a first step in encouraging pluralism. St Columbanus College and St Malachy’s Primary School, both in Bangor, are but two fine examples of how children from different religious backgrounds can learn to work and play together when they are enabled to do so within the ethos of the Catholic school, **and when inter-Church and community trust allows this to happen.**

2.4 Foundations

The Council recognises the difficulties associated with working towards a shared and pluralist society, especially in areas of high tension and where there is significant political and social differentiation. While the policy aims are necessary to move our society into a situation where we can learn to live together in peace, tolerance and acceptance, care must be taken to ensure that the outworkings of the policies are adaptable enough to suit specific situations, and that our citizens feel empowered to make progress at a rate that best suits their potential for development. There needs first to be accommodation before there can be pluralism – we need to discover and celebrate what we have in common before we can move into a shared pluralist society.

2.5 Equality in Education

If education is to play the major role that will be required of it in supporting a society that promotes equality, then equality must first be promoted within education. An education system that values the academic above all else, that promotes the myth of failure at an early age, and that inevitably leads to many children experiencing low self-esteem, can not realistically promote the equality it does not itself practise. CCMS strives to support equality at all levels, believing that our children are entitled to live their lives by Christian standards, embracing inclusivity and equality, and that this in turn will promote these values in wider society

2.6 The priorities must be to build trust and encourage communication to lay firm foundations for supporting integration and promoting respect.

3.0 FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

3.1 The Council is in agreement with the fundamental principles as outlined in the document. The process, from acknowledging the problem through to the key issues of ownership, leadership, partnerships and action at both local and regional levels, appears to be logical.

3.2 Working in Partnership

The Council notes the proposal that the fundamental principles and their outworkings will be based on sound long-term, cross-Government and co-ordinated action. While there are many organisations, both voluntary and statutory, which contribute to the present work on improving relations within our society, progress will be less incidental, embedded more deeply and have more impact if it is planned for and delivered on a joined-up basis. The very fact of Government working in partnership with local communities will add a sense of importance and urgency to the work, as well as offering a level of support and advice that might not otherwise be available. There is concern, however, that despite exhortations of a similar nature in the past on many issues, there is little evidence of this kind of joined up government in practice.

3.3 Resources

The nature, depth and extent of problems need to be examined and faced, both locally and regionally, before meaningful progress is possible. Emphasis needs to be placed on resources, time, personnel and funding, with a strong focus on the importance of local action, and specifically on programmes to develop leadership qualities from an early age to facilitate sustained progress. There is a need for clearly identified leadership at government level, with ongoing commitment and sustained effort. Government's approach must assure communities and partner bodies that this is not merely another short-term initiative, but a long-term priority that will continue to receive the support and resources required in the future.

3.4 Children and Young People

The Council will actively promote the stated principles within its schools, T accepting fully the Northern Catholic Bishops' view that our schools are ideally placed to assist our society to move beyond its deeply ingrained divisions into a new coherence and openness to the world at large. It should be recognised that schools from all sectors have engaged in such activity through the past thirty years often unpublished, sometimes in the face of threats and intimidation, and frequently without adequate staff training or resources. Many maintained, controlled and voluntary schools have felt

slighted by the concentration on the work of one sector only in the area of reconciliation

3.5 Revised Curriculum - Resources

The newly revised Northern Ireland curriculum, at all key stages, will allow teachers the flexibility to engage in programmes that will promote a pluralist society. However, time is only one of the key resources necessary, and there needs to be an acceptance that resources are paramount. Schools must be adequately funded to ensure that they can afford the time, physical resources and personnel to deliver education that prepares our young people to be active contributors to a pluralist society.

3.6 Change

Education is constantly changing, and our teachers and young people are faced with new challenges and opportunities on an ongoing basis. While this has been stressful at times, it has developed within our schools a readiness for, and acceptance of, change. The Council has supported the introduction of Citizenship into the revised curriculum, recognising this as an important step in helping our young people to become more informed about their role in society, and more accepting of other and points of view cultures.

3.7 Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Continuing Teacher Development

There is current good practice in inter-denominational ITT, where students from St Mary's University College and Stranmillis College come together for aspects of their courses. With a further onus on teachers to contribute through the education of young people to a new, pluralist, Northern Ireland, there is a need for current good practice to be built on, both to ensure that our teachers experience what they hope to deliver, and to promote a culture of pluralism within the education sector generally. **Opportunities should also be created for teachers to avail of professional development around a set of agreed principles and values. Such opportunities would be of most benefit if offered at local level, with contextualised input and outcomes.**

3.8 Priorities

The Council would consider the priorities are acknowledgement and analysis of the difficulties and strong, supported and purposeful leadership within communities to create the conditions which will lead to ownership and engagement.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

4.1 Planning

It is apparent that the changes required in Northern Ireland will not be brought about in a short time, and it is, therefore, evident that short, medium and long-term plans for action need to be devised. The various levels suggested in the document – local, regional and within Government – will be necessary to ensure widespread acceptance and support for the initiatives. The Council would caution that action should be planned for, taking into account personnel, resources, time and training needs of participants. In keeping with the best practice within education, action plans should also take account of success criteria, or expected outcomes, and the actions should be time-bound and amenable to ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

4.2 Cross Departmental Group

The Council notes that a cross-Departmental Group, with the remit of leading in the area of community relations, has already been established. This group should play a strategic role in ensuring that any actions towards promoting better relations are developed within the framework of sound policies and guidance, and are delivered in a collaborative and collegial way by all partners. The cross-departmental nature of the group should also be instrumental in ensuring a continuing commitment to joined-up working.

4.3 Role of Equality Commission

The Council agrees that the Equality Commission should continue to play an important role in establishing good relations in Northern Ireland, and supports the suggestion that the Commission should consider how it might further

enhance the quality of advice and guidance it offers to promote better relations, particularly with respect to what might be deemed to be either contradictions in legislation or statements which appear to convey mutually exclusive rights. For the Commission to play an important role in the future it needs to spearhead the promotion of the values of equality and pluralism that underpin the proposals.

4.4 Local Circumstances

While the Council agrees that local government is well suited to play a central role in developing and co-ordinating action at local level, it would stress that such a role must be directed by clear Government policies, vision and resources, and have a clear accountability for actions and outcomes. The replacement of the District Council Community Relations Programme by an enhanced, permanent, new programme should benefit local groups, including schools. The Council supports the ideal of capacity building within local communities to enable them to identify their specific needs and work in partnership to meet these needs. Such positive support will ensure that communities will have the opportunity to become self-sufficient, while retaining the option to seek support and advice when necessary.

4.5 Local Voluntary Groups

There is currently much good work being carried on by local councils in the area of cross-community relations, but there are also other avenues which might be explored. One example is the Cookstown Clergy Forum who actively promote the values of a tolerant, pluralist society through the organisation of inter-denominational events. While many of these events simply bring people together for shared experiences, there are also those that are planned to lead directly to greater inter-denominational understanding – two examples are a joint pilgrimage to Iona, and a conference at which well known representatives from the two main traditions explained the significance and historical contexts of symbols. The Cookstown Clergy Forum are also represented on “Cookstown in Harmony”, a group which organises and facilitates events for cross-community work within local primary schools.

4.6 Funding

Funding is key to the success of any initiative. While the Council is aware that significant resourcing will be required to deliver the aims of improving relations in Northern Ireland, it also recognises that some areas will be more resource dependent than others. It is considered fitting that areas that have experienced the greatest effects of conflict and deprivation should be earmarked for specific attention and support, but the Council is reassured by the fact that communities which have been working towards developing good relations will also receive support. Perhaps the good practice exhibited in the latter might be used as exemplars of good practice for dissemination throughout Northern Ireland, while recognising that local circumstances will impact on that practice. The Council would also caution against negating the effectiveness of the programmes by alienating those areas where most improvement might be effected, ie areas that fit neither of the categories specified for particular attention and support, but where the communities might be more open to change. There must be clear financial and other forms of accountability and an engagement to promote mutual trust and cross-community activity rather than a process committed solely to single community development.

4.7 Discrimination by Bureaucracy

The Council would, however, urge against discrimination by bureaucracy, where funding often goes to those institutions with the personnel, time and expertise to complete applications. Often very deserving organisations are left out of the funding circle because of the overwhelming burden of the application process.

4.8 Regional group

The regional level actions, as listed in the document, are regarded by the Council as necessary to the successful implementation of local actions. It is necessary that an overview be maintained, and that local groups are supported, challenged, monitored and evaluated. The remit of the regional group, including research, raising awareness, funding, developing good practice

guidance and training will help ensure that local actions are well supported, and that good practice can be recognised and built upon.

4.9 Community Relations Regional Group

The Council supports the view that the functions currently carried out by the Community Relations Council and the Community Relations Unit should be combined and carried out by a single regional group. This would lend unity to the programme, and would further enhance the collaborative, collegial approach favoured by the Council. It is the Council's view that this regional group should be a new statutory authority, with the ability to be more flexible and innovative than a government body, while retaining the duty to work within Government policy and to be accountable to Government for its work.

4.10 Role of Central Government

The role of Central Government in leading the development of an over-arching strategic plan is crucial to success, as is its role in harnessing the efforts of a wide range of partners across the various sectors. However, the Council is concerned with what might appear as a charter for inertia. In section 4.15 the document identifies the failure of Government to be flexible and innovative. In section 4.16 the document suggests that Government would not pay sufficient attention to an independent body. Both of these situations are unacceptable. It would seem that a change of approach is required by Government regardless of how the functions are discharged. It is unrealistic to expect other bodies to display the characteristics for successful realisation if the actions of those who are leading do not give visionary and effective leadership. The Council believes that the promotion of positive community actions should be integrated into all Government policy as a priority area.

4.11 Department of Education

The Council has noted that there are plans to ensure that all government departments should contribute to the new Strategic Plan, and recognises this as necessary to the successful implementation of the Strategic Plan. We were particularly interested in the contribution of the Department of Education, as this will impact on the role of Council, and on teachers and young people. The

placing of the good relations dimension at the core of the new school curriculum has already been supported by the Council in its response to the review conducted by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

4.12 External Influences

One of the difficulties facing schools was articulated by the Northern Catholic Bishops in ‘Building Peace Shaping the Future’ when they stated that a school’s efforts to promote peace and reconciliation can be seriously undermined when there is no significant agreement within the local community about values. External influences have often been a negative factor in schools’ efforts to promote tolerance and equality. There is a need for both schools and communities to understand, accept or challenge currently held perceptions that impact negatively on the promotion of tolerance. There is also a need for mechanisms to encourage joint provision within a geographical area without fears or prejudices caused by false perceptions coming into play.

4.13 Citizenship

The proposals contained in ‘A Shared Future’ add relevance to the inclusion into the Northern Ireland revised curriculum of Citizenship. This subject, which is not “morally or spiritually” neutral, can afford many opportunities for a cross community approach to learning and teaching and can have great importance in delivering a curriculum underpinned by shared value systems.

4.14 Faith Based Schools

The Council is aware that the Department of Education has a duty to support positive parental choice. The majority of parents in Northern Ireland select faith based schools, in the knowledge that these will provide a sound education for their children in an ethos that supports the Christian values of tolerance, openness and inclusivity. There is empirical evidence from across the world that highlights the quality of both the formal and informal education offered in Catholic and other faith based schools. The Catholic Bishops, in ‘Building Peace Shaping The Future’, saw as a source of encouragement that “central

government explicitly commits itself to ensuring that parental choice will be a key factor in the provision of educational opportunities for young people.”

4.15 ‘Integrating’ Education

The Council believes that promotion of a structural approach to issues of cross-community engagement both diminishes the impact and contribution of those involved in other equally valuable approaches and limits the potential for development. Formal integrated education through the creation, by whatever means, of specific integrated schools, will not be the main route to delivery and in some cases would exclude those with whom the process most needs to engage. It is important to recognise the good work being done by all schools, and not to devalue current provision. The Council would be more supportive of the notion of “integrating” education using all of the networks, strategies and activities available.

4.16 The Council welcomes the suggestions regarding the contribution that can be made by the Department of Education, and will continue to support the Department in the fulfilment of rational objectives where practical.

4.17 Social Deprivation

The Noble Indicators have highlighted the huge discrepancies that exist in Northern Ireland in housing and employment, with the most deprived areas tending to be in the cities of Belfast and Derry, although not exclusively so. The Council has already stressed the need for equality within education, and would argue that inequalities in both housing and employment also need to be addressed in a pro-active way if people are to live together in harmony. Government needs to take determined action to tackle the issues that have led to a high incidence of child poverty. While the proposals to support communities and good relations, and to prioritise shared spaces and facilities are welcome, they will not go far enough to helping establish a pluralist society while significant inequalities exist.

4.18 Housing Issues

The Council notes, in section 4.27, that the Department for Social Development ‘should lead on action to support and facilitate greater sharing in housing...’. This is a commendable sentiment, and reinforces the belief that communities which live in separation are unlikely to be regarded as a pluralist society. However, the actions that will be taken are not outlined – as is the case elsewhere in the document, where principles are stated without the recognition of what needs to be done to achieve success. The Council agrees that shared housing should be a priority, and would urge that adequate steps be taken to ensure that this can become a reality. A clear statement of policy would be an important beginning.

5.0 MONITORING AND EVALUATION

5.1 The Council agrees that monitoring, evaluation and review should be integral to any process. It is important that a monitoring framework be devised, and it is accepted that the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) should have the lead role in this area, with involvement of other relevant bodies. While monitoring and evaluation can be successfully conducted by those charged with maintaining the objectives of the plan, the Council is aware that the work can be carried out more objectively, and therefore more meaningfully, by an external group/organisation. We would recommend that such arrangements be made.

6.0 EQUALITY IMPACT

6.1 As the main aims of the policy proposals are to promote equality and inclusion it would be unfortunate for there to be a negative impact on any section 75 group within the community. The Council accepts that widespread consultation took place, and that responses would indicate that there is currently widespread negative impact on various groups within the community. The proposals, concentrating as they do on the positive promotion of good relations between all groups, should not impact negatively on any group.

7.0 CONCLUSION

7.1 In ‘The Belfast Agreement of April 10th 1998’ the Northern Ireland Office stated that “an essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society.” The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools has striven to support and guide its schools to ensure that such a culture is integral to our education processes. We feel that we are well placed to guide our young people into a society-wide culture that reflects their school-based experiences, and would reiterate the view expressed in ‘Building Peace Shaping The Future’:

“we see our schools as being ideally placed to assist our society to move beyond its deeply ingrained divisions into a new coherence and openness to the world at large.”