

A Shared Future
A Report on Consultation Seminars held by
The Centre for Peace Building
An Teach Ban, Downings, Co Donegal.



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Introduction

These seminars arose out of the **Centre for Peace Building** in Downings, County Donegal wishing to consult the community and voluntary sector in advance of its preparation of a response to the public consultation document on the future direction of community relations “**A Shared Future**” which was launched in January 2003 by the Government of Northern Ireland.

The Centre consulted with a wide range of representatives of the community, voluntary and local government sectors, for the benefit of all organisations in Northern Ireland and the neighbouring border counties in the Republic of Ireland.

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Question 1. – “Do you agree that the overall policy must be for a more shared but pluralist society?”

The groups accepted that there was now a requirement for a change of policy. While all were in agreement that the answer to the question as posed should be a resounding yes, the feeling of the group was that the question itself was flawed and could have been posed differently.

Having considered carefully the wording of paragraphs 2.2 & 2.3 of the consultation paper the group agreed that, while existing patterns of segregation should be accepted, there should **also** be (rather than alternatively as suggested in paragraph 2.3) promotion of more rapid progress towards a more integrated and shared society

A re-wording of paragraphs 2.2 & 2.3 of the consultation paper was suggested to form a better question, for example,

“Should we could accept that the existing pattern of segregation & division is likely to remain for some time and focus our efforts on stabilising & managing the worst consequences of division, or should we try to promote more rapid progress towards a more integrated and shared society?”

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It was agreed that for society to be shared there was no alternative but for genuine contact between communities. However, fears were expressed about what integration might lead to and, in particular, caution against the loss of cultural identity.

While the groups accepted the need for a pluralist society it was agreed that pluralism should not necessarily be perceived as integration and that the notion of pluralism in the Northern Ireland context should be widened beyond simply Roman Catholic and Protestant.

The group also expressed the view that “pluralist” has a broader meaning in the Northern Ireland context than simply the Roman Catholic / Protestant religious denominations or the nationalist / unionist political affiliations.

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Question 2. – What do you think should be the main policy aims & outcomes which should drive the new approach to promoting good relations?

The groups felt strongly that there should be a recognition of community relations issues across the broad spectrum of society.

A number of particular spheres were highlighted including the workplace, local government and the education system where pressures existed which did not facilitate integration of communities in Northern Ireland.

The specific policy aims & outcomes as posed in paragraph 2.5 of the consultation paper were agreed by the group as broadly acceptable, with particular emphasis placed on a number of these. While the specific policy aims & outcomes, as posed in paragraph 2.5 of the consultation paper, were agreed emphasis was placed on the need for support for the development of integration and shared communities.

Fundamental was considered the promotion of awareness, contact, and the development of trust between communities. Another important aim was the celebration of different faiths, traditions and cultures with the emphasis on celebration as opposed to simply tolerance. The promotion of respect, encouragement and celebration of different cultures, faiths and traditions was also given high importance in recognition that, with these, the promotion of good relations in society might be more easily achieved.

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Education was also considered fundamental. While it was expressed by some that, in the long term, education should be provided in a non-religious environment, for others the religious basis of education was considered important but with the view to celebration of all faiths as outlined above.

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Question 3. – What do you think ought to be the principles upon which a new approach to promoting good relations in Northern Ireland should be based?

The groups considered and accepted all the suggested principles outlined in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.9 of the consultation document and felt that paramount was the principle of leadership which was considered to have been lacking for many years in Northern Ireland.

Effective leadership in a new society was viewed to be the responsibility of many different sectors including local and regional politicians and the churches.

The groups were agreed that the quality of leadership, in particular at political level in Northern Ireland, needed to be substantially improved and suggested that this could be addressed through focused education and learning in leadership skills.

The power of media (television, newspapers etc.) was recognised as critical to the development of a new society and some considered that the media had an obligation to create hope through more positive reporting.

However, there was broad agreement that the greatest responsibility lay with individuals to make their own contributions to improving community relations.

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Under 3.7 **Targeting** the specific action focusing on **children and young people** was given high priority in recognition that today's youth are the future of Northern Ireland.

Given the cross-border make-up of this particular group of people there was a strong acceptance of the principle of the **broader perspective**, as outlined in paragraph 3.9 where opportunities such as cross-border co-operation between local communities and local authorities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and also the position of Northern Ireland in a wider European context, were important to recognise.

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Question 4. – What action needs to be taken at local Government and community level to underpin the development of good relations between & within communities?

The groups felt that incentives were required through provision of grant aid and advice, for example, to encourage greater involvement in community relations at a local level. The group welcomed the Government's long-term commitment, made in the Foreward by Des Browne MP and later in the main body of the consultation document, and the associated investment of time, resources and effort and expressed the hope that such commitment would be honoured and the resources referred to would be substantial.

The importance of an enhanced and more permanent community relations programme to provide what the group hoped would be more facilitated support for project development at a local level was particularly welcomed.

However, there was a difference of opinion on how such provision should be delivered. While some felt that the local council should continue to be the focal point others feared political interference in local community relations support provision and suggested, as an alternative, support through a locally-based neutral body. This would be discussed again later under question 5.

Actions which it was agreed should be taken at a local level included provision of more opportunities for communities to engage in local events which celebrated difference; training and increased learning/skills development in cross-community projects; and dedicated youth work.

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The groups felt that, while there should be a central role for local government in future community relations policy at a regional level, there needed to be greater partnership between local government and social partner organisations at local level in the management and delivery of local actions.

Concern was expressed at the danger of channelling a disproportionate level of funds at areas of greatest conflict. While recognising the necessity to adequately address complex community relations issues in such areas, the group emphasised that the majority of Northern Ireland consisted of local communities where less obvious but no less contentious community relations issues existed in the form of “non-conflict division”.

The groups felt that funding should not be diverted from actions which address such issues in order to support more high profile community relations problems in inter-face areas.

Participants also supported the recognition of the need to continue to support good practice in community relations.

The groups reiterated their emphasis in the answer to [Question 3](#) in relation to leadership and participants were agreed that support should be available for actions which enhance individual and community capacity building, as well as specific actions which contribute to the nurturing of future political leaders.

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Question 5. – What functions do you think should be carried out at regional level? Should these functions be delivered within govt or by an independent body such as CRC or a new statutory authority?

The groups was supportive of the option of an **independent body** as referred to in paragraph 4.16 – either the Community Relations Council (CRC) itself or a body evolved from CRC.

There was agreement that regional functions should be delivered by one independent organisation which should also be non-political and contain strong local representation.

While recognising that such a body would have to be accountable to government (and the community) the group supported the notion of a body whose independence would allow it to be flexible and innovative.

The groups envisaged the role of such a body as strategic as well as one which would hold the practical and functional responsibilities at a regional level as outlined in paragraphs 4.11 and 4.12.

The view was expressed that recognition must be given to regional differences in community relations in Northern Ireland. For example, community relations issues in Belfast might differ from issues in a rural, border communities.

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A view was expressed that any independent regional body should endeavour to have a local presence, however, it was recognised that limited resources, coupled with the presence of community relations officers at each district council level, would make this unlikely.

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Question 6. – What action do you think central government should take to improve relations?

The groups recognised the statutory duty on central government departments and others in relation to Section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 as outlined in paragraph 4.18. The role of central government, after its obligation to finalise the new community relations strategy, was considered to be one primarily of provider of meaningful financial resources towards effective implementation of the strategy.

Furthermore, there was a strongly held view with regard to implementation that central government should pass on responsibility for delivery of community relations programmes and activities to the independent regional/local organisations. Participants articulated concern that the proposed cross-Departmental Group had the potential to turn into yet another quango.

However, there was clear dissatisfaction with the proposed role of the cross-Departmental Group as outlined in paragraphs 4.21 and 4.22. Indeed it felt strongly that such a group was unnecessary at that level in the context of the existence of an independent body.

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It was also agreed that all government departments should adopt a community relations approach to their work both internally and externally whereby all their activities would be community relations-proofed.

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Question 7. – How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored?

It was accepted that monitoring and evaluation of community relations was extremely difficult. Nevertheless, it was agreed that challenging but realistic targets should be set, from a baseline study, for the effective monitoring of the new community relations strategy.

Participants were agreed that the priority for an effective monitoring and evaluation framework was to achieve the correct balance between assessment of the qualitative and quantitative impacts of actions and interventions.

The groups also emphasised the imperative to get it right from the very beginning and to ensure that it is ongoing, from the stage of initial application through to project completion.

Finally, there was agreement that it was essential for feedback from the monitoring should inform future policy development. It was felt that this monitoring should be ongoing and that the strategy should be flexible to allow change where necessary.

Attitudinal change was considered to be an important factor in measuring impact and, while the need to ensure value for money was recognised, the importance of measuring qualitative as well as quantitative indicators was emphasised. The importance of recognising good practice, both positive and negative, was highlighted together with the importance of monitoring regional disparities in community relations issues and activities.

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General Responses To The Consultation Document

- Need to avoid war being over but conflict not. The problems are in our hearts and minds and the onus is on individuals to heal divisions.
- Policy needs to be determined by practice and therefore we need to have communities connecting at same rate as politicians.
- In line with the theme of the conference we need to have a vision of integration – Beyond us and Them. The document is a good template to start the process of developing a shared future. However it is very technical and lacks life. It is uninspiring. It needs the input of poets, artists, musicians and children. There is a need for innovation. People are tired of hearing the same old thing, over and over.
- The document could be strengthened by a structured consultative process. It needs to be acknowledged that there are difficulties in achieving consensus on anything and particularly on issues about which people feel so passionately.
- It should be owned at all levels of society. Need to involve all people – particularly the disempowered. Need to work out how to involve people at all times and not just when there is a document doing the rounds.
- There is a need for new leadership, new voices to emerge and to be encouraged and there is a need for action. We need to adopt a more childlike approach based on respect, empathy an unconditional positive regard. There should be compulsory training for politicians and civil servants in community relations, mediation and conflict resolution.
- Democracy is not the same as civil society. Community starts with sharing experience, taking care of each other and listening to experiences. Community Development is also about community relations.
- The process of a shared future should include an all island dimension, and an east - west and European dimension. There is almost no mention of people in the Republic having an impact or being affected by the implications people in N. Ireland working towards a shared

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future. This raises questions about the vision and about the commitment to inclusivity of the authors. Cross- border work is critically important. We need to interact with people who are not wrapped up in our despair. How do we move from 'Ourselves Alone' to 'Nothing about us without us.'

- Single identity grouping is potentially problematic and is not encouraging people out of the sectarian space. We need to make peace with difference. Peace must be big and must have space around it. We need to ask what kind of space politics can provide. We need to acknowledge that we don't share a nation we share a predicament.
- The document talks about pluralism but doesn't make reference to other groups. The growth of pluralism and moves towards promoting pluralism are to be supported but bring with them their own problems for some people e.g. Does pluralism push religion out. Is school the place to deal with religion? While integrated education is supported these are real issues. We need to ask how children are learning to communicate.
- There should be integrated teacher training and support for all teachers. We need smaller classes and the promotion of citizenship from the early years. We need to ask questions about education - who is being educated? What is being taught? Who is doing the educating?
- It would be beneficial to include NGO's/middle tier translators and to define a role for them. Centralising the solution in a few hands reinforces dependency and further dis-empowers. A key principle should be the empowerment of individuals and communities at the Grass roots. Respect for oneself is the first step and leads to respect for difference. We need both to think globally and act locally and to think locally and act locally.
- Government policy in relation to equality needs to be reviewed in legislation and in implementation. Boxing, labelling or categorising people and allocating resources accordingly is problematic and disempowering.
- The promotion of good relations should be shown the same level of importance as equality. The guiding principles should be partnership, pluralism, equality, quality environment, and accountability.

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- Government structures and policies need to be reviewed to ensure there is a connection between the community level and political level, e.g. review of policy as it relates to racial discrimination in Britain.
- The importance of evaluation and monitoring was highlighted along with the need to set relevant measurable targets and outcomes from the outset. It is also thought important that this is carried out in a participative and consultative manner. It was suggested that there is a need for more imaginative instruments of measurement and clear independent evaluation.
- We need to highlight models of good practice and collate the work being done by community groups.
- We need to keep talking and listening, emphasise more dialogue, more story telling and more risk taking. We need to work out what we are prepared to be reconciled to as well as who we want to be reconciled with. Relationship policy is difficult. We need to ask under what conditions relationships are possible.
- The question of the timeframe for action was raised.