

Community Relations Consultation on *Shared Future*

Feedback from Community Sector

Antrim Forum held at Dunadry Inn, 9th September 2003

Participants:

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The group constituted residents of estates, local people living across a number of areas within Antrim and beyond, members of local political organisations, members of prisoners groups, some people who would identify themselves as victims, people who work in a number of statutory agencies, farmers, business-people, community activists. The group felt it was significant to look around them and see who was and who wasn't at the meeting. They expressed concern at the lack of political representation.

1 Policy Aims

The group considered the key role of government in helping overcome the extent of disadvantage that continues within communities in Antrim.

Political stability must underpin any strategy or policies. The Belfast Agreement framework may not be perfect but it must be implemented in full. Some people felt the Agreement needs to be reviewed.

Sustainable long-term funding and long-term commitment to communities must also underpin any CR/GR strategy and policy.

We must continue to build trust before dealing with some of the significant community relations issues being discussed.

Community development must be a priority for the British Government who should provide resources for this work in Northern Ireland.

2 Specific Policy Aims

Long-term core funding for effective community development must be top of any policy strategy.

The equality agenda is core to community relationship issues in Northern Ireland.

Confidence building must proceed on the basis of single identity to strengthen weaker communities.

Policy must have a strong safety element. The safety of individuals who take a stand in assisting their community - through Church action/Community Development etc must be given high priority.

Specific issues such as paramilitaries, flags, parades etc. are still important issues for many people. Symbols still carry enormous significance for individuals and groups and there must be opportunities for people to discuss their lived experience of what they perceived to be or experience as a 'watering down' of the symbols that are important to them. There must be opportunities to talk about 'meaning' in relation to symbols and analysis of history, events etc. Dealing with these issues is a process which needs time and discussion to resolve.

Policy must protect ethnic communities and create strategies of inclusivity - hearts and minds. People from Ireland, work all over the world and Ireland should be the most welcoming country in the world yet the statistics belie this. The role of the Church and the Schools were seen to be central to this.

3 Fundamental Principles

A participant called for a 'back to basics' philosophy where all the fundamental issues are addressed:

Community safety: There are still sectarian attacks and murders in Antrim. Safety must be top of the agenda.

The current political stalemate is unacceptable. Politicians must be held accountable for giving clear leadership. The statutory sector must also be held equally accountable given that they have long-term funding and public monies yet their strategies to promote peace - especially in relation to housing and education - are not available. Statutory bodies must show they are not afraid of dealing with the 'hard' (long-term) and the 'soft' issues. Targets need to be developed in relation to both with a recognition that it is going to take a long time to overcome the worst affects of the years of conflict. There must be public accountability with report back on targets in the short/medium and long term.

Political representatives and Councillors must find ways to talk with each other and address the real issues.

Politicians need to produce a mandate as to how they will support their communities - practical issues and steps. Support should be on a cross-community basis and not one sided. There needs to be more open government as in England. People must own their responsibility re. Electing and keeping in power politicians who do not do the job.

We need greater choice in the type of politicians we have in Northern Ireland. We need to find alternative ways of doing politics and talking politics. 'Politics' has become a dirty word and the process has been destroyed by politicians.

Mutual respect and understanding must be fundamental principles for a shared future.

There must be a set of principles developed and adhered to by the media. There are many examples of good work, good practice, good neighbourliness, peacbuilding, etc. yet these are not addressed by the media. Only the negative and sensational is addressed. This must be reversed. There are many positive aspects to life in the

Borough and in Northern Ireland and these are rarely represented. We must do more to promote Northern Ireland as a good place for attracting industry and tourism and expanding our economy.

Sectarianism takes many forms. Policy development must address all the different forms. Most people in the group agreed that a fundamental principle is acceptance of the existence and reality of sectarianism within our society - we have been socialised to be sectarian from the moment Northern Ireland came into existence. This has to be a starting point.

Policy must address the growing alcohol and drug problems. More stringent action must be taken to prevent drugs appearing on the streets - action against drug dealers - and the selling of alcohol to young people. Off-licences are the worst offenders and it appears that very little is done to monitor this.

Policy must engage youth who are the future and who have their own set of needs. Specific resources must be allocated to meet the needs of young people. A lot more youth workers are needed on the ground and for evening and weekend work when young people are most vulnerable and most active. Cross community work with youth must be adequately resourced for long term work. There must be continuity in engagement e.g. children and young people participating on programmes must have the programme reinforced by continuity for another 9-12 months. It is ineffective to take children away on holiday together and then return them home without further involvement.

Policy must promote the role of parents and parental responsibility. CR initiatives involving young people do not work unless the parents are on board and participating in the process. Funding does not allow this and the process then becomes undermined at home instead of being underpinned by adults having cross community involvement.

All of the group agreed that schools should be integrated across the board at all levels from pre-school through to teacher training. Faith is a personal issue and all children should learn about different faiths and faith issues in school but schools should not be delivered along faith lines. More work needs to be done in

schools to teach people about all religions, customs, cultures as part of the core curriculum - not negotiable.

Policy to create greater levels of mixed, desegregated social housing where people feel safe are crucial.

Policy must create access to short-term monies that are easily accessible and quickly 'turned around' for use by communities. E.g. there should be immediate responses to remove offensive graffiti with one authority taking responsibility to administer; an immediately accessible budget to provide quick reaction and support to a victim, someone who is put out of their house, violent instances etc.

There must be more 'Skills for life' programmes within the school curriculum and core to all schools (where grammar and 'academic' schools cannot be allowed to opt out of engagement with these issues).

4 Implications for Actions

It is clear from a range of measures that there is a lack of understanding of community relations issues and an inability to shape policy from within the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community. More resources need to be made available to build community infrastructure within Loyalist areas.

Policing issue must be resolved and paramilitary activity dealt with.

Adequate budgets and appropriate resourcing is crucial with more Community Development workers to work on the ground in communities.

CRO's within the Council must be held accountable for CR work and Councils must support their workers in this work. The Government and the Council must have joint responsibility for CR with cross monitoring.

An integrated college is crucial for the development of good relations within Antrim.

A monitoring system for statutory bodies to assess progress toward targets/goals/obligations is important.

An operational plan, as part of the document, was considered by several participants as necessary.

5 Action at Regional Level

Community Relations must remain a role of Government with an independent body acting as a watchdog and guidedog. The Councils should continue to play a role but CR must be unfettered by local Councils whose commitment is weak. There must be penalties imposed against Councils who do not deliver on good relations.

6 Monitoring & Evaluation

There must be monitoring and evaluation at all levels. The group did not have time to address this issue in more detail.