

HAIN HIGHLIGHTS A SHARED FUTURE FOR ALL

Secretary of State Peter Hain MP has emphasised the important role education, inclusive local government and shared town and city centres will enable Northern Ireland to enjoy a shared future.

Speaking at a NIC ICTU conference at the Canal Court Hotel in Newry, Mr Hain said education is at the heart of the Government's Shared Future programme which aims to create a modern, prosperous and inclusive Northern Ireland. Education is also key to the Review of Public Administration, providing the cornerstone for the future prosperity of the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Hain said: "The segregation of our school system comes at a high price, particularly at times of surplus capacity and sharply falling rolls. The result is that resources are spread more thinly.

"We need to explore new ways of schooling which involve sharing facilities. That will give children and teachers not only better facilities but higher standards through a better use of resources."

The Secretary of State said he had already announced a strategic review of education which will examine the funding of the education system and will focus on the strategic planning and organisation of the estate.

Said Mr Hain: "As we plan and develop school buildings to provide replacement schools or amalgamations in the context of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, we need to explore the options of how those assets could contribute to our Shared Future objectives.

"Integrated education is one important model but there will be other ways of sharing. Our ultimate aim must be to ensure that we are integrating educational provision across the board more effectively. That is an obligation on all of us who wish to see a better future for Northern Ireland."

Peter Hain also highlighted a new drive for civic leadership and shared, inclusive Government. He said: **“In the past, local Government in Northern Ireland has been associated with sectarian fiefdoms and some of the most blatant acts of prejudice and segregation, leaving a legacy of mistrust. To ensure a new-found confidence in an inclusive society which embraces diversity, we have placed *A Shared Future* at the heart of the RPA.**

“In devolving powers to a local level again, we will therefore embed equality of access and opportunity, so that every citizen – of whatever background or belief – can have confidence in their council’s ability to deliver services even-handedly, whilst also providing a genuine forum for political debate and dialogue”.

“To this end, a system of strong safeguards will form the centrepiece of the new model of local government. So there cannot and will not be any question of one community dominating another in the old divisive and oppressive way”.

The Secretary of State stressed the importance of sharing beginning at a young age, giving space to young people to build their understanding of what they have in common as well as what defines them as being different.

The Secretary of State also spoke of the need for Northern Ireland’s public spaces and town centres to be shared spaces and of the need to clean up our environment.

“The public and private sectors are investing millions of pounds in developments in Belfast City Centre, in the Titanic and Cathedral Quarters and at Sprucefield. All will succeed if they become the hubs of a new economy. They will fail if they degenerate into sectarian scrambles, in which success is measured in square feet of territory rather than employment, housing and services for all.”

He added: **“Manifestations of sectarianism and racism must be removed, particularly illegal and aggressive paramilitary displays. They do nothing to lift the confidence or economic prospects of those communities. In their place must be created safe and shared spaces for people to meet, play, work and live together.”**

The Secretary of State assured that much is changing in Northern Ireland – for the better.

“Like any worthwhile advance in life, this needs time, hard work, patience, persistence, good will and, above all, the determination to succeed.”

He added: **“There is now a real opportunity to ensure that future generations in Northern Ireland are not brought up to identify with exclusive and competing ‘sides’. In the future they will instead be prepared for the challenges of diversity through an education system which promotes tolerance while acknowledging the citizenship and human rights of all.”**

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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