



# **Ulster Unionist Party**

**response to**

**“A Shared Future”**

**a consultation document on**

**Community Relations Policy**

**in Northern Ireland**

**October 2003**

## A Shared Future – consultation paper on Community Relations Policy.

### 1. Introduction

A review of Community Relations Policy is to be welcomed. It is also necessary particularly when housing is more segregated than before, interface areas remain susceptible to heightened tensions and there is evidence that tolerance is not increasing.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that despite spending huge amounts of public on “Community Relations” projects, their lasting value has been at best only minimal.

The Harbinson Report identifies (in section 5) the disappointing results of the Community Relations work to date.

- a. “The evidence does not suggest that significant progress has been made towards a more tolerant or inclusive society” - 5.06
- b. “More recently an indication of a decrease in levels of tolerance and respect for diversity”.– 5.05
- c. Progressively higher levels of residential segregation– 5.05
- d. Central Community Relations– “has found itself heavily engaged in grant making activities ..... this has limited its ability to further policy development”. 5.13
- e. Community Relations Council- recent “evaluation concluded recent political dynamic had fundamentally altered the community relations environment and raised questions over the appropriateness of the current status and scope of the body”.– 5.17
- f. District Council Community Relations Programme–“recent developments questioned the programmes, aims and delivery”. –5.21
- g. Education initiatives– “there is little evidence of positive impacts on attitudes or behaviours”- 5.23

Point 5.29 makes an overall assessment of effectiveness and impact of current programmes:

“Policies and policy instruments have had limited but positive impacts and achievements”

When the gloss is removed from the above statement it is clear that current community relations policies and programmes have had little success in dealing with the community problems we face. Our analysis is that this situation has arisen because community relations policy has been based on the wrong premise. That premise being an undefined notion of ‘equality’ in the sense of a policy designed to achieve ‘neutrality’ as opposed to one of tolerance and mutual respect in a truly pluralist society.

## 2. Response to A Shared Future.

*Do you agree that the overall aim for policy must be a more shared but pluralist society?*

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that the overall aim of any Community Relations (CR) policy must be a pluralist society. This we believe to be a society where the plurality of views and opinions, consistent with democratic values, coexist and are respected. It is only within such a context that a truly modern, cosmopolitan society can develop. Whilst realistically the main relations at issue are those between the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities, any policy must be able to embrace and promote other communities such as those to be found in other faiths, other ethnic groups and those with disabilities.

Whilst the objective of a Shared Society is important, it is essential that policy makers accept that due to the legacy of 30 years of violence and the continued political uncertainty, there are many within our society unable at this point to endorse such an aspiration. These views are legitimate and must be respected but equally these must not constrain others who are able and willing to develop a more shared society.

In essence the policy objective must be to develop a society where tolerance and mutual respect are the main drivers. Progress would be much quicker and easier if violence and paramilitarism ended. However, it would be unrealistic to set this as a precondition. Whilst the developing of a pluralist society is regarded as part of the process of hastening the end of these negative influences, it will not be nearly enough on its own. Nonetheless communities need to have confidence that the forces of law and order are serious about getting to grips with paramilitarism.

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*What do you think should be should be the main policy aims and outcomes which should drive the new approach to promoting good relations in society?*

The overall aim of any Community Relations policy in a modern society must be developing tolerance and respect within society. **The acceptance of diversity and the promotion of diversity as an asset must be developed** as opposed to the current pervasive attitude, which suppresses expressions of difference and sees diversity within the workplace, school or society as the cause of conflict.

CR policy must strive to develop respect in such a way that different cultures and traditions can be celebrated in such a way as to add to society as opposed to being seen as a cause of offence.

In many areas community cohesion has broken down and the community often feels isolated, embattled and belittled. CR policy must seek to develop structures within communities to raise confidence and community self esteem. In many cases there is a need to break the dominance of paramilitaries so that genuine community leadership and community structures can emerge. Apathy and a general malaise towards building improved relationships must be removed. Throwing money at the problem has manifestly not proved to be the solution.

New policies to develop community cohesion must recognise that the "two main communities" approach the subject in very different ways. Consequently the same model will not fit, nor must it be made to fit, both communities.

The outcome of such policies must be confidence within communities and society, so that individuals will have the freedom to choose where to work and live, unrestricted by fear. Furthermore individuals and groups will be able to express and promote their views and beliefs in a climate of respect and tolerance.

Under a CR policy promoting diversity and respect it is essential that Civic society and Government be proactive in the promotion of Cultural diversity and the current policies of neutrality and avoidance must be replaced by tolerance and respect.

New community structures need to be developed to replace the paramilitaries. These structures must be able to show that difficulties within and between communities can be addressed through other routes than violence. The relative calm of the summer sets a recent precedent, but should certainly not be regarded as evidence that any problems have been solved.

One of the things emerging from a case-by-case study of successful community relations initiatives is, that very often good outcomes were driven by one or two exceptional people in the area concerned. Often these people had only limited resources but were able to inspire their community. The key requirements seem to be a base, a modest budget for office fixtures and communications and one or two staff (often part time). These are the

types of projects that should be encouraged and built upon, successful models should be adopted and adapted in other areas.

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*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 lack of local political accountability both at Governmental and local level has been a major handicap to the CR structures. While it is accepted that local Councils have played a major role, the quality and productiveness of Local Government provision has varied from council to council. Therefore any new structures must be open and transparent, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities split between Central Government and local councils.

As a principle it is essential that local Ministers within OFMDFM control policy. These policies will be directed through local Councils to areas of greatest need. Each local Council will be required to carry out a community audit to establish the needs within their Council area and CR plans will be developed to direct resources to areas of greatest need.

Within the first three years of the new CR policy the main target areas for development and resources should be.

- Communities in conflict at interface areas.
- Community development/capacity building projects
- Projects designed to reduce intra-community conflict
- Youth programmes
- Projects promoting diversity and tolerance
- Projects developing community links East/West and North/South

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*What action needs to be taken at Local Government and community level to underpin the development of good relations between and within communities?*

Local Government will be the main delivery and funding body for this new CR policy. They will be required to develop an overarching CR policy specific to the needs of the Council area yet reflective of the Policy as outlined by Central Government.

Following on from the CR policy, Councils will be required to identify the needs of the areas and develop CR plans. Community Relations Plans will clearly establish priority areas/communities within which CR work or projects are to be carried out. These plans will detail financial aspects of projects, plus give details of targets and outcomes for each project. The plans will establish clear linkages with the Government's CR policy and these will be used to assess the success of projects both in financial terms and in CR terms.

Whilst it is clear that most CR work will be done at the community level, Councils will also be responsible for the promotion of tolerance and diversity within the Council area. This will require councils developing programmes enhancing the cultural acceptance within the civic life of councils, ensuring that ethnic minorities are fully represented in the cultural life of the community.

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*What functions do you think should be carried out at regional level/ should these functions be delivered within Government or by an independent body, such as the Community Relations Council or a new statutory authority?*

We contend that current Community Relations Council should be abolished and replaced with a Community Relations Board. The majority of the members on this board will be elected representatives, on the basis of party political strength in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The balance of the membership should be selected from applicants with track record in the Community Relations. These lay members will be required to bring expertise to the board both of an academic and a practical nature and be appointed by the First Minister.

The major role of the board will be to advise Government on the development of policies, giving support to local Councils in the delivery of Community Relation plans, scrutinizing Community Relation plans and evaluating the work being carried out by local councils.

At a Regional level it is recognized that some specialist services will be required and the board will be responsible for ensuring that these services are available and that they are being properly delivered.

As a statutory body the Board will have the function of producing an Annual report commenting on the progress being made by each Council and suggesting improvement actions where Councils are not making significant progress.

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*What actions do you think central Government should take to improve relations?*

As outlined previously Ministers within OFMDFM should have the responsibility of setting the overall Community Relations policy. This policy should be devised on a short term (1 year), medium term (3years) and long term (10 years) basis.

The development of policy and the provision of funding should be based within OFMDFM, however it is essential that other government departments actively promote the policy within their areas of responsibility.

It is clear that the departments of Education, Culture, Arts and Leisure and Social Development have major roles to play in creating a new and vibrant society. DE and DCAL have a central role in changing attitudes and perceptions within society. Each department will be responsible for developing programmes and procedures that will compliment the overall CR policy and where appropriate departments will introduce programmes, which will promote tolerance and respect.

CR should be an overarching aim of government policy and OFMDFM should be vested with a power of direction to ensure that each department complies with the centrally determined policy.

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*How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored?*

It is clear that the main role of the CR board will be to monitor progress at the local council level plus, as community relations will be a central part of any Programme for Government, the Assembly as a whole will be key to monitoring progress.

However, as previously noted, the policy will have to be regularly monitored and review to ensure the needs and priorities remain valid. It is envisaged there should be a mandatory review of policy that every three years and this report should either confirm the policy or serve as a guide for change.