

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

A Shared Future – Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland

Minister of State for Northern Ireland Office (Rt Hon John Spellar MP): This statement sets out how I intend to take forward the policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland.

The Government's vision for the future of Northern Ireland is that of a peaceful, prosperous, stable and fair society firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and the protection and vindication of human rights for all. The founding principles of partnership, equality and mutual respect ensure a basis for good relationships.

The publication of the policy today sets out our aim establishing over time a shared society defined by a culture of tolerance. A normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, which respects diversity and where violence is an illegitimate means to resolve differences, but where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere. The policy document outlines realistically the scale of the challenge and that good relations will build on the significant progress of the equality agenda.

The policy objectives to achieve the policy aim include: eliminating sectarianism, racism and all forms of prejudice to enable people to live and work without fear or intimidation; reducing tension and conflict at interface areas; facilitating the development of a shared community where people wish to learn, live, work and play together; promoting civic-mindedness via citizenship education through school and lifelong learning; protecting members of minorities (whether for example by religion, race or any other grounds) and mixed marriages from intimidation and ensure perpetrators are brought to justice; ensure that all public services are delivered impartially and guided by economy, efficiency and effectiveness; shaping policies, practices and institutions to enable trust and good relations to grow; encouraging understanding of the complexity of our history, through museums and a common school curriculum; supporting cultural projects which highlight the complexity and overlapping nature of identities and their wider global connections; supporting and learning from organisations working across ethnic divides for reconciliation, including those operating on a north-south basis; ensuring that voice is given to the diverse victims of violence in Northern Ireland, including via archives and victim-centred reconciliation events; encouraging communication, tolerance and trust across Northern Ireland, but particularly in areas where communities are living apart; promoting dialogue between, and mutual understanding of, different faiths and cultural backgrounds, both long-standing within Northern Ireland and recent arrivals to these shores, guided by overarching human-rights norms.

The policy, which is underpinned by a series of fundamental principles, will be taken forward at three levels. First, a triennial action plan covering actions across public authorities will be prepared by the Autumn. Second, the roles and functions of the Community Relations Council will be enhanced to support the policy. Third, a new district council Good Relations Challenge Programme will be established by 2007 to replace the existing district council community relations' programme

Government will lead by example and set the pace to promote good relations with a strong public policy agenda. Ultimately, however, sustained and deeper progress depends on political stability. It will require leadership at political, civic and community levels.

Copies of A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland have been placed in the Libraries of the House and are also available on the website www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk

The Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland will be published in the near future, following consultation with the Northern Ireland Race Forum.

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