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Josie

To note & arrange
filing on the
"Holy Cross" file. LF 7/4

FROM:

TO:

EXECUTIVE

NORTH BELFAST

Memorandum E (01) 164

1. The purpose of this paper is to update members on the statement on North Belfast that was issued jointly by Sir Reg Empey, Seamus Mallon and the Secretary of State on 7 September, and to outline proposals to take the matter forward.

Background

2. Following discussion at the Executive meeting on 26 July, the Community Relations Council (CRC) was asked to undertake an initiative on the North Belfast situation in conjunction with Mediation Network. Efforts to reach agreement on a process of dialogue had made significant progress some three weeks ago, but faltered largely as a result of a loss of confidence in the process on the loyalist side. In addition, during the summer period, officials from the Department for Education liaised directly with the CCMS, Belfast Education and Library Board, Holy Cross Primary School and Wheatfield Primary School.
3. On 7 September Sir Reg Empey and Denis Haughey (representing Mr Mallon) met the Secretary of State, Jane Kennedy and Des Browne to assess the situation and the scope for further action to contribute to a resolution. Subsequently, a joint statement was issued (copy attached) setting out the agreed approach. The statement stressed the need for dialogue at local level to address a full range of social, economic and community issues both now and in the longer term, and emphasised that, to be effective, such dialogue needs to take place in a constructive and peaceful atmosphere.

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4. The statement announced the intention to seek to establish a formal mechanism for dialogue. It emphasised the need for a careful, measured approach, recognising the seriousness of the situation, the complexity of the issues involved, and the need for careful preparation to build trust across the community. The focus should be firmly on local issues.
5. Discussions with the Secretary of State focussed on three aspects of the situation:
 - access to Holy Cross Primary School;
 - inter-communal issues and behaviour; and
 - underlying social, economic and community issues.
6. Whilst these issues are closely interwoven, the Northern Ireland Office shall of course continue to concentrate on the first two, which have a strong security dimension. The overarching social, economic and community issues fall to the devolved administration. Progress on the resolution of these issues would be best achieved in the context of a constructive and peaceful atmosphere.
7. I envisage two pre-requisites for progress. Firstly, in order to ensure that there is an effective channel for energies, there should be a high-level liaison office, accessible to local communities; and, secondly, an effective means of co-ordinating a response across Departments, including NIO. On the first point, I recommend the appointment of a Senior Liaison Officer, with a local office within the area. A suitable location could be the Everton complex, a social services facility operated by the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. Initially the office would be operated by a senior official from OFMDFM, Derek Wheeler, who has experience of this community-based role. Derek would act as liaison between the

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Executive and local community representatives. This would be a temporary measure which would be reviewed periodically.

8. On the second point, I recommend the establishment of a liaison group of senior officials, involving Executive Departments and the NIO. I suggest that the group should be chaired by Mrs Mary Bunting, Director of Equality who has responsibility for community relations policy. As a first step the group will identify the issues which need to be addressed and report back to the Executive. All Executive Departments with an interest in the issues and the Northern Ireland Office could be invited to nominate a senior official to participate. The model would be the successful Foot and Mouth Group which operated during the recent crisis.

Recommendation

9. Members are invited to note developments and to agree to the establishment of a local office, and an interdepartmental group of senior officials to take forward work on establishing a formal mechanism for dialogue with local communities to address a full range of social, economic and community issues both now and in the longer term.

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Executive Information Service

Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

7 September 2001

PROMOTING DIALOGUE IN NORTH BELFAST

Following a meeting on the current difficulties in North Belfast, Sir Reg Empey MLA, Seamus Mallon MP MLA and the Secretary of State, the Rt Hon John Reid MP, today agreed the following statement:

“Dialogue is essential between the communities of North Belfast. Such dialogue can only be effective if exchanges take place in a constructive and peaceful atmosphere. We appeal to all concerned to ensure that this is the case. We commend the useful exchanges and initiatives which have been taken by local community and church leaders in the last few days.

“We have had extensive contact with those from the area. There is substantial agreement about the issues to be addressed. There is also widespread acceptance of the need for a formal mechanism for dialogue, which would involve both the Executive and the Secretary of State, addressing a full range of social, economic and community issues both now and in the longer term. We believe that this would help to create the environment in which the immediate issues can be addressed.

“For an effective mechanism to be created, there needs to be careful preparation to ensure that there is confidence across the community. We have therefore asked senior officials to consult immediately with local interests, drawing on relevant experience and expertise.”

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