



1. Background

Division and segregation
Deprivation
Ethnic minorities in Belfast
Political competition
Community Relations in Belfast City Council
Consultation with citizens
Influence and Partnership

2. Vision

3. Corporate Strategic Objectives

Civic Leadership
Best Services
Quality of Life
Good Relations

Community Relations Plan

4. Action / Operational Plan

Belfast City Council

Good Relations Unit
Aims of Community Relations and
Cultural Diversity Programmes
Elements of Community Relations and
Cultural Diversity Programmes
Summary of Actions and Timescales

5. Monitoring / Evaluation

March 2002

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minute - more updated
copy may be available
tomorrow morning.

Contents

1. Background

Belfast City Council is the largest of the twenty-six District Councils in Northern Ireland, with 282,500 inhabitants. Although the total population of Belfast has been in decline over the past three decades, due to migration to the surrounding Council areas and smaller housing stock, it appears to have stabilised since 1990. Belfast is the focus of the economic, industrial and social activity in Northern Ireland; the wider Belfast Urban Area region is home to over 500,000 people and two-thirds of the population of Northern Ireland live within a 30 kilometre radius of the City.

1. Background

Page

3

To inform the Council's strategic planning process, the Council prepares a detailed Baseline Profile. This is based on a wide range of statistics and a summary of the external factors which have an influence on life in the City. Recent points have been extracted from that Profile and included in this submission.

Division and segregation
Deprivation
Ethnic minorities in Belfast
Political composition
Community Relations in Belfast City Council
Consultation with citizens
Influence and Partnership

2. Vision

6

3. Corporate Strategic Objectives

6

Civic Leadership
Best Services
Quality of Life
Good Relations

4. Action / Operational Plan

9

Good Relations Unit
Aims of Community Relations and Cultural Diversity Programmes
Elements of Community Relations and Cultural Diversity Programmes
Summary of Actions and Timescales

5. Monitoring / Evaluation

12

¹ Belfast City Council, Baseline Profile, 2001

² Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Towards a Community Relations Strategy: Consultation Paper, May 1999

³ Belfast Interface Project, Interface Communities and the Peace Process, March 1998

⁴ Dr. Peter Shirlow, paper presented at Annual Conference of Royal Geographical Society at Queen's University of Belfast, January 2002

⁵ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Measures of Deprivation in Northern Ireland (Noble Report), July 2001

1. Background

Belfast City Council is the largest of the twenty-six District Councils in Northern Ireland, with 282,500 inhabitants. Although the resident population of Belfast has been in decline over the past three decades, due to migration to the surrounding Council areas and smaller household size, it appears to have stabilised since 1990. Belfast is the focus of the economic, commercial and social activity of Northern Ireland; the wider Belfast Urban Area region is home to over 500,000 people and two-thirds of the population of Northern Ireland live within a 50 kilometre radius of the City.

To inform its corporate planning process, the Council prepares a detailed Baseline Profile¹ of the City annually, based on a wide range of statistics and a summary of the current and proposed plans of external bodies which have an influence on life in the City. Many of the following relevant points have been extracted from that Profile, which is included as a separate accompanying document to this submission.

Division and segregation

Although social divisions are common throughout Northern Ireland, they are most marked within Belfast. The level of segregation in the City is well known and well documented, with levels of polarisation particularly evident in public sector housing, where the Housing Executive estimates that estates are almost wholly segregated.² Belfast has at least 17 purpose-built 'peace-lines', marking interfaces with brick walls or steel fences and the communities living close to such interfaces are most affected by community tension and sporadic outbreaks of violence.³ Half of Belfast's peace walls and three-quarters of the locations deemed as 'flashpoints' by the Police Service, are in North Belfast. Social attitude surveys indicate that there are low levels of tolerance throughout Northern Ireland and a recent report suggests increased community polarisation in Belfast.⁴

Deprivation

There is considerable variation within the City in terms of income, environment and quality of life. Social and economic deprivation continues to have a significant impact on the City, despite a number of Government initiatives undertaken over the years. The recent Noble report, which measures deprivation using a wide variety of existing statistics, ranks Belfast as the most deprived Council area in Northern Ireland in four out of the six measures employed.⁵ The worst ten wards in terms of health in Northern Ireland and eight out of the ten most deprived wards in terms of education, skills and training are in Belfast.

¹ Belfast City Council, **Baseline Profile**, 2001

² Northern Ireland Housing Executive, **Towards a Community Relations Strategy**, Consultation Paper, May 1999

³ Belfast Interface Project, **Interface Communities and the Peace Process**, March 1998

⁴ Dr. Peter Shirlow, **paper presented** at Annual Conference of Royal Geographical Society at Queen's University of Belfast, January 2002

⁵ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, **Measures of Deprivation in Northern Ireland (Noble Report)**, June 2001

Interface communities have consistently high rates of social, economic and environmental disadvantage.

Ethnic minorities in Belfast

Belfast has a higher proportion of resident ethnic minority groups than any other local authority in Northern Ireland, because of its position as regional capital. Although precise census figures for 2001 are not yet available, it is estimated that Belfast is home to 40% of the total Chinese community of Northern Ireland, 25% of the Pakistani community, 10% of the Indian community⁶ and has an Irish Traveller group of around 300.

Political composition

The Council itself has fifty-one elected Members representing nine District Electoral Areas. The political composition of the Council has become more finely balanced over the past decade and, following the elections of June 2001, is currently:

Sinn Féin	14
Ulster Unionist Party	11
DUP	10
SDLP	9
Alliance	3
PUP	3
Independent	1
Total	51

The principle of proportionality was first introduced into the Council in 1993, in relation to the allocation of seats on Committees and Sub-Committees to reflect the overall political composition of the Council. Since June 1999, all positions of Chairmen and Deputy Chairmen of Committees and Sub-Committees have been allocated according to the d'Hondt system of proportionality and since June 2001 this has been extended to representation by Council Members on outside bodies.

Community Relations in Belfast City Council

The Council did take part in the District Council Community Relations Programme for a period of three years between 1992 and 1995. Three full-time Community Relations Officers were employed, based in the Community Services Section of the Client Services Department. Around £180,000 in government funding was drawn down each year and a wide Programme of activities was undertaken. However, following failure to achieve agreement on future staffing, the programme was not continued after 1995.

As part of its work in developing a Good Relations Strategy, the Good Relations Working Group undertook an Internal Audit of the Council, to identify and assess the amount of work already being done within the Council which had an impact on, or was contributing towards, good relations. The audit identified the fact that

⁶ Multi-Cultural Resource Centre of Northern Ireland, **Estimated Population of Ethnic Minorities in Northern Ireland**, January 2001

community relations work was continuing unobtrusively within the Community Services Section, despite the lack of a formal programme or specific budget allocation. Community Development Workers are involved in initiating and supporting a wide variety of activities, many of which are cross-community in nature; some groups are working specifically on projects in difficult interface areas of Belfast.

Consultation with citizens

The Council is committed to consultation with the residents of the City. As part of its corporate planning process, the Council carries out its own major Public Consultation Survey every two years, using the survey results to monitor the performance of its services and identify priorities for the future. The Council had already adopted 'Good Relations' as its fourth corporate strategic objective in January 2001, and the 2001 Survey included specific questions to gauge public perceptions of the state of community relations in the City. Over 1500 people from all areas of the City were interviewed in the survey and 46% of those stated that the worst things about living in Belfast were the Troubles and the level of violence, while 8% named sectarianism and bad community relations. When asked (without prompting) what the Council's main priority should be, 14% stated that it should be community relations (this was the top response).

The findings of the Survey, which indicate sound public support for the Council's taking a more pro-active role in the promotion of community relations in the City, have played a major part in drawing up the actions to be included in the new Corporate Plan.

In line with the commitment given in its Equality Scheme, the Council will undertake formal consultation on the draft Good Relations strategy in due course and will consider incorporating representations made when formulating its final document.

Influence and Partnership

The Council is aware that it cannot bring about a change in social attitudes in society on its own and will co-operate with other public and private agencies in the City in addressing wider policy issues and in examining the issues that cause division and exclusion.

The Council is not only a substantial service provider and employer in its own right, with an annual gross expenditure of over £100 million and a workforce of over 2,400, but is also in a position to exert considerable influence over other organisations in the city. For example, eleven Councillors are also Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and four of these are Ministers. The Council itself is formally represented by elected Members on over 80 outside bodies and has informal links and partnerships with a great deal more. It is consulted on a wide range of issues and as a democratically elected body, is in a prime position to demonstrate Civic Leadership and promote good relations throughout society.

The Council has already made contact with a number of bodies in the community relations and cultural diversity fields and will develop these relationships for our mutual benefit.

2. Vision

The City Council wants to make Belfast a better place for all its citizens. We have a vision of Belfast as a great city, modern and welcoming with a quality of life to rival the best in the world. A City that is never content to stand still, but improves as the years go on. In short, the Council wants to see:

Belfast becoming better.

In our Vision for the City, we are quite clear about what we mean by better, we want to help create a Belfast:

- which is vibrant and prosperous
- which is attractive and clean
- which is safe and secure
- where there is equality of treatment and opportunity for everyone
- where there are good relations between all citizens
- where the quality of life improves continuously
- where the decisions that are made reflect what is best for this generation and the generations to come
- where customer focused Council services are provided fairly for all
- where all organisations work in partnership for the common goal of a better society
- which is a Capital of Culture.

3. Objectives

The Council has identified four key objectives which will help in delivering the Vision and making it a reality. These corporate strategic objectives shape the future direction of all Council services and all Council Members and employees will work towards achieving these aims in everything they do. They are:

- exercising Civic Leadership through building partnerships to achieve common goals
- providing the Best Services
- improving Quality of Life, now and for future generations
- promoting Good Relations.

Exercising Civic Leadership through building partnerships to achieve common goals

There are many organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors working towards making Belfast a better place. There is a need for leadership and focus to ensure that the best solutions are found to the challenges facing the City.

To meet this need the Council will:

- act as a catalyst to bring partners together to develop and achieve shared goals both internally and externally
- on behalf of all the community, work to influence the full range of services provided in the City
- promote the role of the Council in the continuing development of the City.

Providing the Best Services

The Council will deliver the best services it can to the people of Belfast. This means high quality, value for money services that meet the needs of the people who use them; services that will get better all the time.

To achieve this, the Council will:

- listen to and communicate with the public about the services they need
- deliver quality services that are responsive to the needs of citizens in an efficient, effective and economic manner
- continuously review the way services are delivered, coming up with new and better ways to do things
- invest in and develop its employees so that they can give their best in delivering services to the public.

Improving Quality of Life, now and for future generations

The Council will work to create a better quality of life for everyone in our City, now and for future generations. This means a strong economy and a better, more equal society where our environment is respected and cared for – in other words, a City where all development is sustainable.

To achieve this, the Council will become a role model organisation and City-wide advocate for sustainable development by encouraging and supporting:

- a vibrant economy, providing employment opportunities for all
- high levels of physical, mental and social well-being
- maintenance of an attractive and safe environment which supports health and promotes bio-diversity
- prudent use of natural resources.

Promoting Good Relations

The Council will encourage and support **good relations** between all citizens, promoting fair treatment, understanding and respect for people of all cultures. The Council believes that the people of Belfast deserve a society where diversity is respected and celebrated and where all people are treated with fairness and tolerance.

To achieve this, the Council will:

- **promote equality of opportunity in everything it does**, always taking into account the needs of people of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation, of men and women generally, of people with a disability and people without and of people with dependants and people without
- **promote tolerance and understanding throughout the City** by providing support, including the equitable use of available budgets, for appropriate initiatives which celebrate the cultural diversity of Belfast
- **promote good relations between people of different religious and political beliefs and different racial groups** in every aspect of Council activities
- **use its influence as a democratically elected body** to promote good relations throughout society.

4. Action / Operational Plan

Good Relations Unit

The Good Relations Strategy proposes that two new Good Relations Officers and associated administrative support staff will be recruited and located in a new Good Relations Unit, centrally located in the Chief Executive's Department. The Unit will co-ordinate both community relations and cultural diversity issues and assist in mainstreaming the Council's work on Good Relations; this Unit will also include the Council's current full-time Equality Officer.

Cultural diversity forms part of many of the community relations programmes of other district councils. In Belfast, cultural diversity issues have been dealt with separately in recent years, because of the lack of a community relations programme and also because of the larger numbers of ethnic minority groups within the City.

Aims of Community Relations and Cultural Diversity Programmes

The Good Relations Strategy envisages the introduction of both a Community Relations and a Cultural Diversity Programme, the specific aims of which are:

- ❑ To support groups involved in community relations work/ approved local projects⁷
- ❑ To develop new cross-community contacts, to develop trust and understanding; to build confidence to address issues of difference; to promote tolerance and mutual understanding
- ❑ To support single identity and intra-community work in polarised communities, to build capacity where necessary
- ❑ To assist groups in addressing issues of sectarianism and intimidation
- ❑ To be targeted at priority areas of need; to support projects that address local issues at times of tension
- ❑ To be undertaken in line with community development principles and demonstrate sustainability
- ❑ To be targeted at young people, in line with the Council's Corporate Plan and key priority areas
- ❑ To develop opportunities for a wide range of groups to explore cultural, political, religious or ethnic traditions within their own community, which increases their capacity to develop relationships outside their tradition
- ❑ To research and develop programmes that assist people to recognise, accept, respect and celebrate diversity and pluralism

⁷ Projects may include e.g. local history projects, exhibitions, festivals, events, newsletters, concerts, community arts, music, drama, sports, outdoor pursuits etc.

- To bring together people from varying backgrounds to work on issues of collective common concern e.g. justice, poverty, women, education, heritage etc., which increase social inclusion
- To undertake a programme of skills training to enable people, in particular community leaders, to understand and deal with issues e.g. of cultural difference, prejudice or conflict
- To promote the image of the Council as an equal opportunities employer.

The Council has agreed its revenue estimates for the coming year and amounts have already been allocated for both staffing and grant-aid. The Council may provide support for community relations activities either directly through its own well established network of Community and Play Centres or by grant-aid to voluntary community groups.

Elements of Community Relations and Cultural Diversity Programmes

In both the Community Relations and Cultural Diversity Programmes:

- relevant consultation will be undertaken with interested parties
- criteria will be agreed to assess the eligibility of projects / activities for award of grant-aid, based on the existing community development grant-aid policy and criteria.
- a communication plan will be agreed
- a training plan will be agreed, which will include awareness training for employees, Members and local communities (during a promotional period) and specific training for relevant employees and managers
- individual projects and progress will be monitored and evaluated
- the overall programme will be reviewed within a 3 year timescale.

In line with standard Council procedure, Performance Indicators will be established within the detailed Action Plans which will be drawn up as integral elements of both the Community Relations and Cultural Diversity Programmes. The PIs will be a mix of quantitative - i.e. measuring the percentage of the Action Plan implemented over the period in question, amount of grant-aid allocated etc. – and qualitative, i.e. public perception of the state of community relations in the City as reported in attitude surveys.

The Good Relations Strategy addresses issues which have proved contentious in the past within the Council – e.g. memorials and commemorations within the City Hall, festivals and their funding, flags and emblems, and the use of minority languages (Irish and Ulster Scots) within the Council.

The following Table summarises the actions proposed and related timescales for completion of individual projects. The Council has already agreed and approved the sum of £309,250 for inclusion in the revenue estimates for 2002/2003; the accompanying Community Relations Budget outlines the breakdown of this.

Summary of proposed actions and timescales for completion of projects

DATE	ACTION
Good Relations	
By June 2002	develop Good Relations Strategy
By end of 2002	establish a Good Relations Unit, with two Good Relations Officers - Community Relations/Cultural Diversity, to be responsible for strategy/policy – (to complement the work of the Equality Officer, already in post) to integrate and co-ordinate the Council's work in the promotion of equality of opportunity, the promotion of good community and racial relations and celebration of cultural diversity
By end of 2002	establish an inter-Departmental Strategy Steering Group to manage the programme and direct the work of the Unit
Cultural Diversity	
By April 2002	establish Fund to support appropriate approved projects
By end 2002	establish programme to promote the shared history of Belfast, including various Council-led initiatives and public events
By end 2002	include cultural diversity issues in all employee induction training
Community Relations	
By end 2002	establish programme to support and promote good community relations within the City (external focus);
By end 2002	formulate action plan (internal focus) to deliver a training programme for Council workforce (around 2400) and elected Members to promote good community relations and encourage discussion of related issues; to be delivered by recognised credible training agency
By April 2002	obtain 75 % support funding from CRU for programme
Representative Workforce	
By end 2002	formulate pro-active action plan, incorporating the merit principle, to address imbalances and under-representation of certain groups
2002-2006	implement one targeting initiative per year to increase numbers of applications from under-represented groups within the workforce

5. Monitoring / Evaluation

The Good Relations Officers will establish formal monitoring procedures within the Action Plans for both the Community Relations and Cultural Diversity Programmes. Projects will be evaluated on completion and both Programmes will be reviewed fully at the end of the first three years.

An inter-Departmental Good Relations Strategy Steering Group will be established, based on the current Equality Scheme Steering Group, to manage the overall Good Relations Programme and direct the work of the Good Relations Unit. This Group will report direct to the Policy and Resources Committee, the principal Committee of the Council, at least quarterly; the minutes of the Council and of its various Committees are in the public domain and are also made available on the Council's website.

By end of 2002	Establish an inter-Departmental Strategy Steering Group to manage the programme and direct the work of the Unit	Community Relations
By April 2003	Establish fund to support appropriate approved projects	Cultural Diversity
By end 2002	Establish programme to promote the shared history of Belfast	By end 2002
By end 2002	Include cultural diversity issues in all employee induction training	By end 2002
By end 2002	Establish programme to support and promote good community relations within the City (external focus)	By end 2002
By end 2002	Formulate action plan (internal focus) to deliver a training programme for Council staff (internal focus) and elected members to promote good community relations and encourage discussion of related issues	By end 2002
By April 2003	Obtain 75% support funding from CRU for programme	By April 2003
By end 2002	Formulate an active action plan incorporating the most effective to address inequalities and under-representation of certain groups	By end 2002
By end 2002	Implement an ongoing initiative year to increase number of applications from under-represented groups within the workforce	By end 2002

The Good Relations Strategy Steering Group will have a role in the past within the Council's work and committees, and the use of primary languages (Irish and Ulster Scots) will be a priority.