

Community Relations and Housing

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Working Group



Summary Conclusions and Recommendations
September 2003

**Housing
Executive**

The Regional Strategic Housing Authority

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Community Relations and Housing

NIHE Working Group

Summary Conclusions and Recommendations

The Programme for Government, 2003 says:

"We will improve community relations and tackle the divisions in our society. During 2003, put in place a co-ordinated plan of short term actions across government and key agencies to help build trust and confidence within and between communities including: action to support the capacity of local communities to deal with matters of dispute or division, including the proliferation of sectarian graffiti, unauthorised flag flying, the erection of memorials that can lead to community tensions; improving communication at interfaces; underpinning community development; and developing intervention programmes for young people."

The Community Relations and Housing Working Group Report demonstrates the extent of progress in housing in a divided society. The Housing Executive has assembled a wide range of systems, instruments and practices that have a meaningful contribution to make to improving community relations. These should be supported, developed and networked to maximise their effectiveness; set alongside the recommendations in this Report, they will provide a framework for improving community relations through housing.

Housing Executive Policies and Initiatives

The Housing Executive has made a substantial contribution to Community Relations through a range of mainstream policies and initiatives over the years. Examples of these include our local presence on the ground, our long-standing relationship with Community Groups through the Community Advisory Framework. We have also been to the forefront in dealing with community conflict in responding to intimidation and property damage, and in implementing the SPED and the POPPI schemes. In recent times we have worked with local groups to clean up the manifestations of violence and have worked with the Common Ground Consortium, Habitat for Humanity and mediation services to support this work.

This section of the Report describes the Housing Executive's multi-level and multi-functional approach to community relations from high level strategic commitments to focused operational programmes;

and describes the extent of the Housing Executive's policy and practice intervention. While these approaches have developed incrementally they are, nevertheless, an indication of the commitment within the organisation to deal with housing in a divided society on multiple fronts. Providing they are inter-connected and aligned to maximum effect, both internally and externally they offer a firm foundation for a coherent Housing Executive Community Relations Strategy.

KEY THEMES

Residential Segregation / Integration

This section of the Report shows that the conditions for integrated housing on a large-scale basis do not, at the present time, exist in local society. Trust and safety will ultimately dictate the pace of de-segregation and integration but there is limited evidence that they are sufficiently present to affect residential patterns in the short term at least. Therefore the expectations of any new policy instruments must be realistic and viewed over the longer term.

Research undertaken for the Community Relations Working Group suggests that integrated housing schemes may be feasible, in the medium term, in areas such as Armagh, Banbridge, Lisburn, Magherafelt and South Belfast. A pre-requisite of any integrated scheme is that it should have the support of the wider community and their political representatives.

Currently 92.5% of the social housing sector is segregated. From interviews conducted by Dr Murtagh for this Report there is an expectation among Government and others that the Housing Executive is the natural locus for facilitating and encouraging integrated housing in the social and affordable sector as far as this is practicable, desirable and safe. The Community Relations Working Group supports this view and makes a number of short, medium and longer-term recommendations.

Flags, Emblems and Sectional Symbols

This section of the Report shows there is no prescriptive solution to sectional symbols and records the progress that is being made through the Housing Executive working with others at local level. Any new policy instruments must be sensitive to local circumstances. The volume of sectional symbols increases with a rise in the political temperature and if the political climate stabilises more progress could be made. The recommendations reflect a menu of options for local managers to tailor to local needs.

Interface Areas

This section of the Report concludes that the interfaces issue cannot be resolved by the Housing Executive on its own. It is beyond the ability of any single agency and may even be beyond the ability of an interagency task force. For the fact remains that "good relations cannot be imposed from above but need to be built on consensus" (former NIO Minister Des Browne)¹. The agreement and participation of local communities, with leadership from their elected representatives, is the only way for real progress to be made.

Communities in Transition

This section shows that within the last decade some community districts, especially in Belfast, have undergone considerable change. In certain cases this has been characterised by a change from a mixed or exclusively Protestant community to a Catholic community; in others the transition has led to market failure, vacant houses and consequential blight. This process has been fuelled by a combination of factors including demography, civil disturbance and bad housing. The Housing Executive should target communities undergoing change.

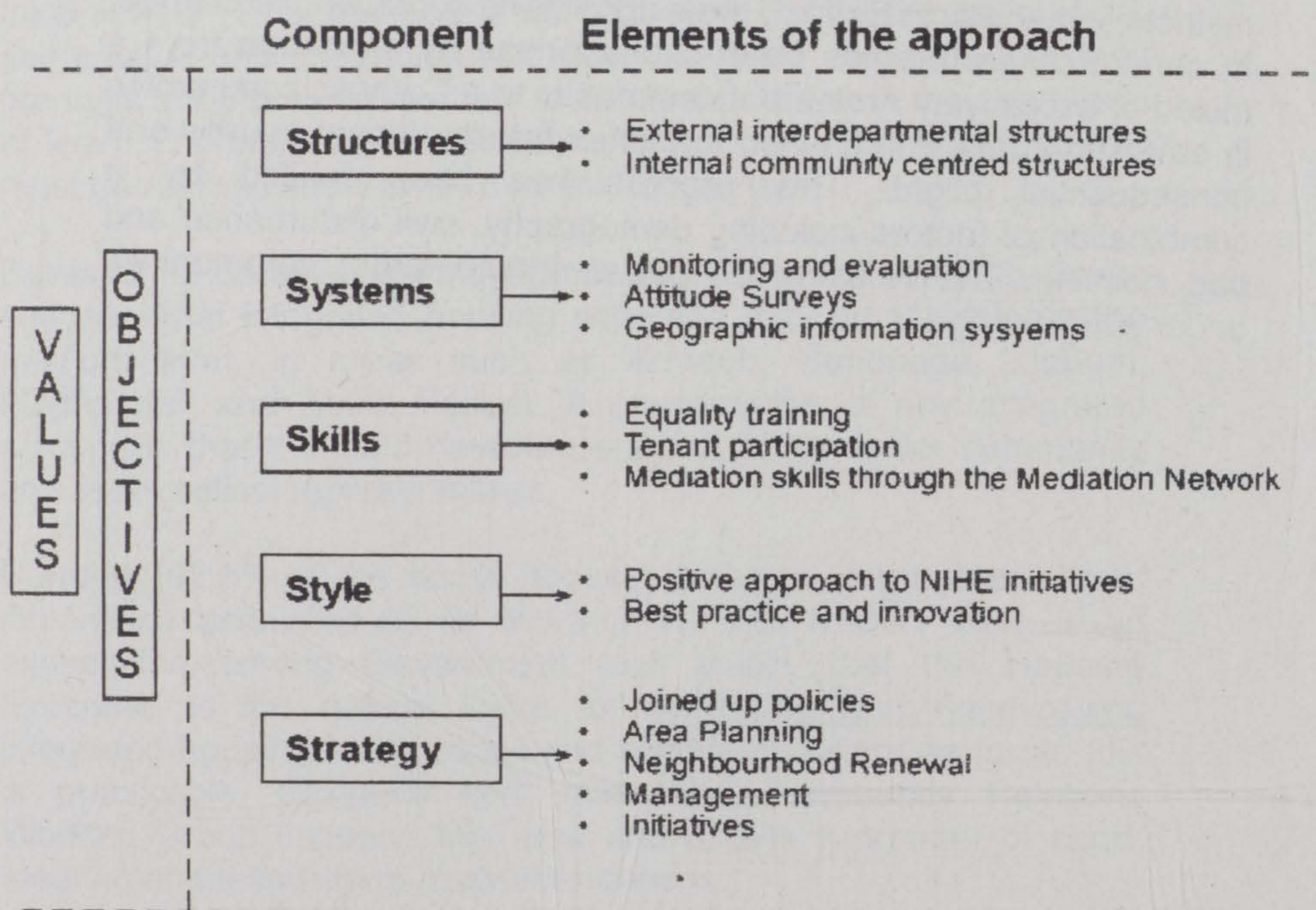
¹Everyone must work towards creating good community relations – Browne
www.nics.gov.uk/press/ofmdfm, (28 May 2003)

Recommendations

Housing Executive Policies and Initiatives

The diagram below suggests that a comprehensive response to community relations can be best thought of in terms of strategic development including values and aims, structures, systems, skills and style.

Main components of the Housing Executive's strategic response to Community Relations



The NIHE and Community Relations

The Housing Executive should:

- make a clear statement on its community relations policy. This should *inter alia* explain the organisation's analysis, the aims and limits to policy and the need for monitoring and review. The statement should be flexible and adaptive on the basis that what might not be possible now could be considered in the longer term. The Housing Executive should relate these analyses to the 8 key principles set out below.

Corporate Objectives

Operational planning and programmes sit within the context of high-level strategic objectives and organisational values.

The Housing Executive should:

- make an explicit commitment to promoting good community relations in its Corporate Objectives and, in turn, this should be reflected in the business improvement plans.

Corporate Aims

The Housing Executive should link its higher level community relations objective to the following community relations aims.

The Housing Executive will:

- a) respond quickly and effectively to the needs of people in danger as a result of community conflict;
- b) work in partnership with others to address the complex housing needs of a divided society;
- c) respect the rights of people who choose to live in single identity neighbourhoods;
- d) facilitate and encourage integrated housing as far as this is practicable, desirable and safe.

NIHE Key Community Relations Principles

The Housing Executive should explain the values and key principles upon which its policy response to community relations is based.

Key Principles
1. Acknowledgement: Acknowledgement that poor community relations are a major problem for Northern Ireland as a whole and impact upon the delivery of housing services. 2. Safety: Safety is paramount in that no policy or programme action should endanger the lives of tenants, staff, communities or property. 3. Choice: The imperative of promoting good community relations is to create real choice and not to socially engineer communities. The Housing Executive will support the choice of people who choose to live in single identity or integrated neighbourhoods. 4. Housing Need: Need has informed housing policy in this area for decades and needs based planning and resource allocation should continue to set the context for housing policy and delivery. 5. Equality: Equality of opportunity has been embedded in the organisation since its formation. The Housing Executive cannot advance policy options that run contrary to the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. 6. Mainstreaming: Actions must be mainstreamed to consider how each housing policy and practice may contribute or otherwise to maintaining or creating good community relations. 7. Support for Local Initiatives: Successful projects are most likely to be those based upon on self identified local need where the communities initiate and undertake the projects supported by the Housing Executive and others when and where required. 8. Partnership: Partnership should underpin the analysis of problems and responses to segregation, integration and territoriality. Clearly the problems identified and the responses envisaged require an integrated approach in which the Housing Executive, as a single agency, is committed to playing its part fully.

Structures and Relationships

The Housing Executive:

- in its response to *A Shared Future*, proposes that an effective strategic and operational structure is put in place to enable the different agencies and interests to work together on community relations issues;
- in its response to *A Shared Future*, proposes that progress on specific initiatives such as flags and graffiti could be supported by the development of the Community Action Group as a mechanism for this;
- under *A Shared Future*, will take the lead in bringing together the 'housing family' with other key stakeholders to examine the potential for improving community relations through housing;
- set up a NIHE community relations unit;
- will continue to be represented on the many structures designed to facilitate joined up management of territoriality, conflict and community relations such as the DSD *Interdepartmental Steering Group on Neighbourhood Renewal* and on the OFMDFM *Community Action Group on Interfaces*. The Housing Executive's high level strategic commitment should be explicitly identified;
- will develop the Community Involvement Framework in the context of improving community relations;
- examine with the CRC how they could assist the organisation with the delivery of the community relations dimension of its work;
- will develop further the overlap between Mediation Northern Ireland and the organisation's obligations under Section 75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;
- will continue to implement initiatives including Mediation, Creating Common Ground and Habitat for Humanity.

Spatial planning

The Housing Executive's new spatial housing strategies make reference to the implications of conflict in local plans and this should be recognised and identified as a contribution to local community relations in the broadest sense.

The Housing Executive will:

- develop its approach to community relations particularly in the light of the policy commitments in the Regional Development Strategy on segregation and integration and in the DSD urban regeneration programmes. This will involve specific statements in the context of territoriality where relevant initiatives to reduce conflict, manage supply in sensitive ways and facilitate and encourage integration are underway. The Housing Executive's Derry/Londonderry and the North Belfast Housing Strategies should be the basis for models of good practice in other areas.

Research, Intelligence and Monitoring

The residential sector operates within a fluid and dynamic market and the Housing Executive has important monitoring (or intelligence systems) systems in place as part of its role as the strategic housing authority. In fact the Housing Executive has, since the PSI studies of the late 1980s, routinely measured the impact of its policies and programmes on both religions. For example, the latest House Condition Survey identifies differences in the housing stock for both religions whilst the Housing Executive has measured public and tenant attitudes to segregation/integration since the early 1990s.

The Housing Executive will:

- present a more detailed analysis of spatial segregation and what this means for Housing Executive estates;
- make more explicit the connections between information monitoring/intelligence gathering and its specific policies or initiatives;
- given its GIS capability, monitor spatial change through its data capturing processes, providing a baseline monitoring tool that can relate to other data sources to build up a comprehensive picture of housing in a divided society.

Policies and Programmes

Mainstream policies and programmes have had a positive impact on community stability, integration and segregation. We will continue to build on these. There is a perception that some policies may not work fully in support of Community Relations objectives. For example, some believe that allocations and transfers facilitate segregation and some have suggested that the Housing Executive should manage the waiting list to secure integrated housing. However, the corollary is also true. The House Sales policy has created community stability, which in turn has reinforced the ethnic-religious cohesion of some mixed estates.

The Housing Executive should:

- identify all of its initiatives and projects that address directly the housing effects of a divided society.
- make the connections between them and related policies and programmes as part of the organisation's comprehensive approach to improving community relations.

Community Development

Extensive development of tenants and residents' associations through thematic participation is an investment that has yielded greater stability and less sectarian volatility. Related to this, the development of community infrastructure and capacity building has also had a positive effect on community relations and creating possibilities for contact that were not there before.

The Housing Executive will:

- seek to build on its community development approach whilst developing community capacity, targeting those areas where this is a pre-requisite for better community relations;
- *create opportunities* for Consumer Panels from different community backgrounds to meet, share and learn from experiences;
- consider the role of the Consumer Panels in facilitating discussions around chill factors on estates.

NITAP

The Housing Executive will:

- ensure that community relations work can be embedded within the work of the NITAP
- consider negotiating with NITAP to have cross-community contact and trust building around commonly confronted issues a more explicit part of the organisation's work. This could be presented as a *networking function* to support a number of cross-community initiatives and structures.
- engage with NITAP on programmes to target specifically those areas with weak community infrastructure and community capacity.

Neighbourhood Wardens

The Neighbourhood Warden scheme under the Community Safety umbrella has played a major part in reducing sectarian graffiti, inter-community conflict and anti-social behaviour. With 53 Neighbourhood Wardens this Housing Executive service has the potential to develop community relations within and between estates.

The Housing Executive will:

- provide more explicit training particularly in locations where there is the potential for wardens to connect with locally based networks and cross-community organisations.

Profile of NIHE as an organisation

The Housing Executive will:

- diligently implement its Affirmative Action Programme;
- consider a secondment from the education sector to assist with the delivery of the Affirmative Action Programme;
- continue its commitment to maintaining neutral workspaces;
- seek to ensure that resources allocated by the Housing Executive such as community houses are used solely for the purposes for which they are intended.

Developing NIHE Skills and Learning through experience

The development of practice through learning from previous experience is a positive and creative response to community relations. The Housing Executive has a wide range of operational expertise in the management of conflict and initiatives to reduce tension. The organisation's experiences of removing graffiti in

contested areas, cross-community environmental schemes or emergency response planning indicate the diversity and depth of practice within the organisation.

The Housing Executive will:

- audit and describe its interventions, looking at other projects (e.g. the work of the Belfast Interface Project) and making the material available both internally and externally. This would be consistent with the Housing Executive's role as the regional housing authority and could act as a valuable resource as well as providing an opportunity for the organisation to communicate its progress on this issue;
- develop, as a business imperative, a toolkit for managers to enable them to formulate an approach which is less 'personality dependant';
- value, promote and support local initiatives and risk taking through tailored training, support systems and pastoral care;
- prepare a tool kit for managers to assist them to support initiatives in relation to community relations/development;
- develop, in the short term, its mediation services to provide staff with the skills for dispute management and conflict resolution especially in those districts and in those communities with high rates of segregation, intimidation and/or interface areas;
- provide the opportunity for staff to share experiences on a regular, organised basis;
- consider carefully the skills that might be required to enable staff to deal effectively with paramilitaries and sectional symbols;
- continue to ensure that adequate and appropriate skills and support are provided to assist, sustain and enable staff to deal with some of the most difficult issues in the community.

Communications

Research undertaken by the Queens University on behalf of the Community Relations Working Group in June 2003 suggests that the Housing Executive has not communicated the level, intensity and diversity of its activities to deal with sectarian graffiti, managing estate stability, disputes over bonfires, work with police and work with communities through Consumer Panels.

While there will be understandable concern about publicising some of these issues, especially where it could threaten the fragile trust that is being built across the ethno-religious divide the Housing Executive's work is adding real value to community relations.

The Housing Executive will:

- seek to find a balance between the imperative of 'getting its message across' and the sensitivities around many of these issues by preparing a communications strategy for Community Relations;
- shift its communications approach from being defensive about waiting list choices, over which the organisation has little if any control, towards the identification of its policies and initiatives that have positive impacts on community relations;
- publish its contribution to improving community relations through housing;
- showcase some of the practices and models of intervention such as the work of the *Common Ground Consortium*, within and outside Northern Ireland, in terms of community relations and regeneration work;
- make explicit its work on community development, removing graffiti and sectional symbols, managing the demographics of the stock and the potential impact of its work with Habitat for Humanity;
- make explicit the role Housing Executive programmes have in planning and urban regeneration strategies in highly contested places including URBAN II in North Belfast and the PEACE II interface pilot neighbourhood renewal areas.

KEY THEMES - RECOMMENDATIONS

Residential Segregation / Integration

Short term

The Housing Executive proposes to:

- change its policy on integrated housing from enabling and facilitating. It is proposed that the new policy should read:

“The Housing Executive will facilitate and encourage integrated housing in the social and affordable sector as far as this is practicable, desirable and safe.”

- in its response to *A Shared Future*, propose that a strategic and operational structure is put in place to enable different agencies and interests to work together on residential segregation;
- target as a matter of priority, the 7.5% of social housing that remains integrated both in an effort to sustain them and to inform future policy for integrated social and low cost housing schemes;
- commission research to investigate why certain areas remain integrated while others do not;
- continue its work through the Community Involvement Framework, Community Safety Partnerships, Creating Common Ground Consortium and Green spaces programme, Mediation and Habitat for Humanity to improve relations within and between communities.

Medium Term

The Housing Executive should:

- prepare detailed proposals to enable providers to develop and sustain integrated housing schemes. These should include:
 - (a) Proposals for the location of two pilot integrated housing schemes.
 - (b) Proposals for the initial allocation of properties to ensure a religious mix in proportion to the make up of the wider community and a commitment that the balance would not shift beyond a ratio of two-thirds: one-third in favour of either religion.

- (c) Proposals for a local lettings policy where appropriate which continues to be predicated on the basis of need, but includes religious affiliation as an additional criterion. This will be the subject of discussion with the Equality Commission.
- (d) Proposals for intensive housing management and conflict resolution.
- (e) Proposals for the sustainability of the pilot integrated housing schemes. For example, tenants within an integrated housing scheme would have the Right to Buy. Ordinarily the sale and resale of properties would provide a degree of stability in an area. However in this instance the resale of properties on the open market could threaten the integrated nature of the scheme. To preserve the integrated nature of any scheme proposals could include a policy of buying back units from the private sector.
- (f) Proposals for examining the associated risks and harnessing the full commitment of Government, key stakeholders and the community. Integrated housing should not be advanced at the expense of general social housing provision and the pilot integrated housing schemes should be in addition to DSD's social new build programme. It may be appropriate to seek ring fenced funding for these experimental schemes.

Longer term

The Housing Executive should work in partnership with the other stakeholders to achieve a position where integrated social housing becomes a viable option for those who wish to avail of it.

Flags, Emblems and Sectional Symbols

The Housing Executive will:

- make explicit the connections between its policies and practices and the issue of sectional symbols to ensure that every possible avenue is pursued;
- use the Creating Common Ground, Community Safety and Local Strategic Partnerships as vehicles for addressing sectional symbols locally and tackling the most offensive sectional symbols first;

- train its Neighbourhood Wardens to enable them to maximise their effectiveness in dealing with issues around sectional symbols;
- consult with local residents and community representatives about the removal of sectional symbols;
- provide help in kind to support local communities with the removal of sectional symbols;
- work with others to moderate the content of sectional symbols with the focus on more acceptable expressions of cultural identity;
- promote and engage in capacity building measures within communities with weak infrastructure as a means to encourage dialogue around issues of sectional symbols;
- propagate models of good practice throughout the organisation and beyond;
- record those initiatives which are particularly effective in addressing the issue of sectional symbols as a resource for staff and other stakeholders.

Interface Areas

The Housing Executive will:

- look for and develop opportunities to bring communities and their representatives together to act as a catalyst for producing greater community cohesion;
- continue to build on programmes for capacity building within those communities with weak social infrastructure;
- participate in any interdepartmental body set up to examine the issues surrounding interface issues;
- implement practical measures to protect public and private property;
- implement a pro-active programme for maintaining the environment around interface areas where this is practicable and safe;
- examine new and creative potential uses for land.

Communities in Transition

The Housing Executive will:

- ensure early identification of communities currently at risk;
- identify areas for timely and appropriate interventions;
- conduct research to identify areas of best practice and the dynamic which allows areas to remain integrated;
- work in partnership with public and community representatives to create an environment which allows this intervention;
- engage with representatives of adjacent communities to foster an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and understanding, based on the broadest possible community support;
- conduct regular audits to prepare tailored local plans, which could include a dedicated resource, a local lettings policy and the buying back of properties.

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