

SPEAKING NOTES

HOUSING FORUM THURSDAY 8 JULY 2004

Review of Community Relations Policy

The former devolved administration's Programme for Government set out the Executive's vision that Northern Ireland should become:

'A peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust, with the protection and vindication of human rights for all.'

In working together to create a new future the PfG accepted that the Executive had to deal with very deep and painful divisions in our society after decades of division and conflict.

Through the PfG, the Executive committed itself to review and put in place a cross-departmental strategy for the promotion of good relations, leading to measurable improvements in good relations and reducing the causes of conflict between and within communities.

In 2001, a review team led by Dr Jeremy Harbison examined the background to, and development of, existing community relations policy, its aims and objectives and a policy framework for monitoring and evaluating the impact on community relations of

future policy.

The review team found that historically the aims and objectives of community relations policies and actions had been designed to improve relations between the two main traditions in Northern Ireland through the encouragement of greater contact and development of mutual understanding and respect for different cultural traditions.

However, the review also found that policies and policy instruments have had positive but limited impacts and achievements and that in the changed context of Northern Ireland, current policies and programmes would need to be reconsidered.

Changing context

Belfast Agreement and Northern Ireland Act 1998 – outlined the basis for sharing between and within communities in Northern Ireland.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provided a legislative basis for promoting equality of opportunity and also good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Introduction of Anti Social Behaviour Orders – clear messages now being set out - what behaviour is acceptable in Northern Ireland.

The increased presence and contribution of ethnic minority groups highlights the changing nature of communities in Northern Ireland.

The consultation

That we are going to have a shared society is beyond doubt. The question is, how are we (Government, Voluntary and Community sector etc) going to share that society.

This was the question posed by 'A Shared Future', the consultation on improving relations in Northern Ireland, launched by Des Browne, MP on 28 January 2003.

A Shared Future sought:

- To stimulate the widest possible debate on what the fundamental aims and objectives of a future policy should be, and the principles that should underpin that policy.
- To obtain views on proposals for measures and actions that should be taken to achieve these aims and objectives.

The vision for the future of Northern Ireland was expressed by the Government as the choice between two different alternatives;

Either - Accept that the existing patterns of segregation and division likely to remain for some time, and focus our efforts on stabilising and managing the worst consequences of division, both between and within the two main communities.

Or - Alternatively, we should try to promote rapid progress towards a more integrated and shared society.

A Shared Future Questions

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

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

What do you think ought to be the principles upon which a new approach to promoting good relations in Northern Ireland should be based?

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

What functions do you think should be carried out at a 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?

What action do you think central government should take to improve relations?

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

Consultation period ran from 28 January 2003 to 30 September 2003 and during this period the Department with the support of the Community Relations Council engaged with young people, faith based organisations, ethnic minority groups, political parties, businesses, trade unions and the wider voluntary and community

sector. Responses were gathered through focus groups, workshops and public advertisement.

Consultation process was very successful in generating and encouraging dialogue and debate with over 10,000 people contributing to the consultation; 6,500 copies issued, more than 500 formal written submissions received, and 15,000 hits on the website.

Professor John Darby, University of Notre Dame, Indiana and Professor Colin Knox, University of Ulster carried out an independent analysis of all the responses for OFMDFM to draw out the key themes and sketch out the main policies resulting from the conflicting views of respondents.

A conference on 'A Shared Future' was held on 27 January 2004 at QUB to maximise the involvement of civic society in the consultation process and to ensure a high public and political profile for the presentation by Professor Knox and Darby on the main themes emerging from the consultation process. There was also contributions from key stakeholders such as political parties, elected representatives, public authorities and local community groups, churches and other faith-based organisations.

A report of their findings of 'A Shared Future' was published in March 2004. The majority view concurred with the vision of a more shared and pluralist society but realistic acceptance that the existing pattern of segregation and division likely to remain for some time. So promoting progress to a more shared and integrated society is not an alternative future but an overlapping

reality.

Specifically, three public policy areas attracted most attention during the consultation: security & law and order, education and housing. Respondents also urged Government to deliver policies for good relations which will address 3 issues as a priority:-

1. Eliminate sectarianism and racism and to enable individuals to live and work without fear or intimidation.

Hence, to take the lead and begin by tackling the worst excesses of sectarianism and racism in a pragmatic way and put in place policies and programmes which encourage communication, tolerance, trust and respect for different cultures, faiths and traditions over time.

To attain the goals of an integrated and shared society there must be a recognition that fear cements the *status quo*. People's lives must change significantly if they are to feel the sense of safety/security necessary to enable them to engage with each other. Sectarianism and racism must be tackled to alleviate fear.

2. Reduce tension and conflict at interface areas.

Clear support for targeting interface areas because of the attendant violence and community tension, funding should not reward "the bad behaviour syndrome". There are many non-violent interfaces which deserve attention.

3. Support the development of integrated/shared communities where people wish to learn, live, work and play together.

Integrated/shared communities is a middle class concept predicated on people having the resources to make choices to live in this way, in the absence of affordable mixed tenure housing.

In summary, Government was urged to take a cross-departmental approach that explicitly encouraged "sharing over separation" in delivering services.

Achievements to date

Ministerial meetings have taken place with all parties. Officials from OFMDFM have had a series of meeting with other departments and agencies on developing proposals for a new cross-departmental strategy and framework to promote better relations between and within communities.

The Northern Ireland Grand Committee met on 17 June 2004 to discuss the future direction of community relations policy in Northern Ireland. The motion was tabled by the Ulster Unionist party.

In his speech to the Grand Committee, John Spellar spelt out that 'the costs of a divided society are abundantly clear to all who wish to see it: segregated housing and education; parallel service provision and, regrettably, intolerance that is often a precursor to sectarianism and racism. Separate, but equal is not an option. Parallel living is not an option. Adapting public policy in Northern Ireland simply to cope with community division holds out no prospect of stability or sustainability in the long-run.'

He outlined some of the key elements he sees in a new policy

framework:

“Good relations needs to be based on partnership, equality and mutual respect.

Good relations, cannot be built on unequal foundations. Good relations will only be achieved on a sustainable basis if it is built on the significant progress that has been made on the equality agenda. The good relations agenda is not – and should not be – in conflict with the equality agenda.

Moving from relationships based on mistrust and defence to relationships rooted in mutual recognition and trust is the essence of reconciliation. Where relationships have been shaped by threat and fear over a long period, we must make changes through policy and law to address that threat and fear.

We need to move from conflict management to conflict transformation. We must be prepared to think creatively.

Everyone in Northern Ireland has a responsibility to take steps (often very small steps) to help society move forward – to move forward in sharing responsibility and responsibility sharing.

The Government's response to the consultation will set out just how all sections of civic society – the business sector, church and faith-based organisations, trade unions, the voluntary and community sector and elected representatives - can play a part in moving forward to a more pluralist, more tolerant society

It is clear from the work that Government is progressing across the

disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland that there are particular difficulties and issues facing working class protestant areas. The problems of these areas are characterised by weak community infrastructure, poor delivery of public services, limited access to funding programmes and difficulties for young people in terms of educational attainment and access to employment”.

Mr Spellar had this to say on key areas of policy

Security and Law and Order

“All forms of intolerance whether based on racism, sectarianism or any other extremism is abhorrent.

The draft hate crime legislation which I published for consultation earlier this year included proposals to deal with crimes motivated or aggravated by race, religion, or sexual orientation.

Government has decided to provide the same protection in law to disable people as in respect of race, religion and sexual orientation.

Northern Ireland is in a process of conflict transformation. It is right that many communities across Northern Ireland are seeking to move forward.

Together we need to help them deal with the trappings of the past (the imagery of the conflict) – the offensive murals, the sectarian (and racist) graffiti, painted kerbstones, illegal paramilitary flags

We need to be absolutely clear in the policy framework that there

is no place in society for these trappings: we need to move forward and remove the fear and hostility that they represent both within and without those communities.

As with the hate crime legislation (and the prosecution of criminality in those communities), equally there are norms and behaviours within society that are acceptable and those that put simply are not acceptable. I expect the police and the criminal justice system to deal firmly with behaviour that is not consistent with what is acceptable in a civilised society.

Education

Education has a significant part to play in any society. In a divided society particularly, the right to maintain schools where a distinctive culture can be passed on is a central issue. Since 1990 the Department of Education has had a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. Integrated education is an important contribution to greater sharing.

We will, however, need to do more to promote sharing and good relations in both the education and further and higher education sectors.

The current review of post-primary education and the proposals outlined in the Costello report together with the current review of Further Education '*further education means business*' provide an opportunity to explore new ways of promoting sharing within education. The policy framework will develop this point further.

Housing

Choice and safety are crucial components in housing. However, since 1998, Government has been committed to exploring ways of providing those who would choose to integrate with the choice of mixed housing.

Those who formally responded to the consultation argued that efforts should be made to sustain areas that are already mixed and to encourage greater 'integrated' living areas. During Community Relations Week the Northern Ireland Housing Executive announced plans to bring forward proposals for a number of pilot integrated housing schemes. I very much welcome this initiative. Again I will develop this issue further in the policy document.

Shared Space

Continued sectarianism and inter community conflict within and between communities act as significant barriers to social and economic growth and recovery. Planning choices are often constrained by a strong sense of communal 'ownership' of territory.

This is not compatible with the vision of a more shared and inclusive society. The new policy should seek to promote safe, shared town centres; arterial routes free from sectarian flags and emblems; shared neighbourhoods including mixed housing, shared leisure facilities and shared educational opportunities.

Governmental Level

Public authorities already have a statutory obligation concerning the promotion of good relations under Section 75 (ii) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The new policy and strategic framework will provide a mechanism through which departments can more effectively mainstream good relations considerations into policy development. And of course the Equality Commission will have an important role to play in continuing to advise public authorities and others on this important duty

Managing enmity is not the same as building good relations.

Managing conflict usually means segregation and permanent mistrust.

Interface areas are the tragic symptoms of a systemic lack of trust rather than – as some would have us believe – the sole cause or only evidence for it. The building of trust involves all of society, including **political and civic leadership**.

Trust building – as the peace process has shown us – is a long process. Instant – or surface - harmony cannot be the measure of success in community relations: progress must be measured by an increasing confidence across Northern Irish public life and in our ability to address real differences and conflicts”.

The overall tone of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee debate

was positive and in relation to the forthcoming policy on good relations the following points were specifically endorsed:

- Status quo not an option;
- Clear central policy role for Government;
- Need for political representation on a regional body; and
- Enhanced role for District Councils including the production of a good relations action plan.

However, the endorsement was set against a cautionary note mainly from the unionist benches, advising against moving too quickly, too soon. Particularly in the area of greater sharing on housing; members stressed the importance of freedom of choice.

Reflecting on the views expressed by the Northern Ireland Grand Committee, John Spellar will over the coming weeks bring forward for discussion with key stakeholders a draft policy and strategic framework. It is envisaged that a substantive document will be published in the Autumn following which action will be taken to modify existing structures and mechanisms at central government, regional and local level ~~to~~ as necessary to deliver the new policy.

The new policy and strategic framework will provide a mechanism through which Departments can more effectively mainstream good relations considerations into policy development.

It will seek to promote greater sharing – safe, shared town centres,

arterial routes free from sectarian flags and emblems; shared neighbourhoods, shared leisure facilities and shared educational opportunities.

We firmly expect it to change Northern Ireland society for the better and in closing I would reiterate a further point made by Mr Spellar with which I am sure we can all agree, clearly standing still is not an option.