



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY
FIRST MINISTER

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Northern Ireland Community Relations
Council**

9 December 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)
Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Jim Shannon
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Duncan Morrow)
Mr Tony McCusker) Northern Ireland Community Relations Council

The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):

Good afternoon, Mr Morrow and Mr McCusker. Thank you for your attendance. I welcome you on behalf of the Committee, and look forward to an exchange of views.

We are here to consider your annual report and accounts for the year ended 31 March 2009, and your paper ‘Beyond the Crossroads’, which is to be launched with the annual report on 14 December, so thank you for giving us notice of that. The meeting will be reported by Hansard. You may wish to make an opening statement to set the scene, or highlight something in the annual report and accounts or the paper, after which there will be questions.

Mr Tony McCusker (Northern Ireland Community Relations Council):

Thank you for the invitation. Now that we are under the jurisdiction of the Northern Ireland Audit Office, we have been audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General for the year past. Therefore, this is the first time that the Community Relations Council (CRC) has formally led a report for the Audit Office.

It was important for us to go through that process and to have the Comptroller and Auditor General's opinion, which appears on page 20 of the report. His opinion summarises our view that in all respects we have applied the expenditure and income to the purposes that were intended by the Assembly and all the financial transactions conform to the authorities that govern them. That reassured us that our governance arrangements met with what was required by government. The report sets out a comprehensive range of grant making activities, but there are some complexities, such as how we deal with funding through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and EU Peace programmes, which does not formally go through our accounts. I will ask Duncan to give you a résumé of that, after which we will be happy to answer any questions.

Mr Duncan Morrow (Community Relations Council):

The two papers will be published as part of our annual review. We took the decision to publish the accounts in one document because they are read by one audience, and we tried to address community relations issues in another document. As Tony said, this is the first time that we have prepared such a report for the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

The Community Relations Council operates as a sponsored body of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) through its community relations grant giving, particularly by way of core funding and what is called the community relations and cultural diversity small grants scheme. There are a number of other small grants schemes. After being successful in a publicly advertised tendering process, we also operate as the organisation responsible for distributing grants to victims' and survivors' groups under the development scheme and the small grants scheme. All the accounts cover our grant giving as well as our role in development and administration and the events that we organise or support.

We also operate two other accounts on behalf of other agencies, one of which is for the EU Peace II programme. In those accounts, the Community Relations Council accounts only for

what is called technical assistance money. The grants that are distributed under that amount are separately accounted for by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). Although charges appear in those accounts for our work, the grants that we decide on and give out are recorded elsewhere in the accounts of the SEUPB. The other account — for the community bridges programme — is operated on behalf of the IFI. There again, what appears as our accounting responsibility is for support and technical assistance costs, but the grant aid, although it is administered through us, is accounted for separately by the IFI.

I am putting that on the record simply to say that there is £14 million per annum in additional grant aid that the Community Relations Council has a role in, and which is not accounted for directly in our accounts, whereas the technical assistance charges are included. That changes the way that the accounts appear for grant aid. Is that enough information on that document?

The Chairperson:

Yes.

Mr D Morrow:

Do you want me to speak about the paper that we sent to the Committee?

The Chairperson:

Yes. It might be helpful to give us a brief overview.

Mr D Morrow:

The document tries to outline what it is that we have learned in practical terms in the past year. I will speak to the headings and leave the discussion for later. First, it is self-explanatory that the issue of the past continues to be a distraction and a difficulty for the victims' groups and others that we are working with. The past casts a heavy shadow over what people feel able to do in moving forward. To summarise that, one of the great obstacles to our future is how we deal with the past, and that continues to be a reality.

Secondly, in the context of local circumstances in which issues arise, fear is a recurrent issue for young people and manifests itself in a number of ways. For young people in the towns, there are issues around where people can go and what they are prepared to do. The quality of life in the night-time economy of many town centres is something that we have to confront and deal with. It

is an ongoing reality that has not gone away.

The questions of equality and good relations are, tragically, disputed, but they belong together at some level. There are no aspects of our good relations strategies that are not committed to the equality of all citizens, and we must deliver that in practice. At the same time, for equality to mean anything, it must be equality between people who acknowledge one another in an inclusive way as members of a community together. The two issues belong together.

The age of relying on foreign donors is over. We are very aware that the majority of the money that is available through the grants that we give is accounted for through bodies that gain money from external sources, especially the Special EU Programmes Body and the International Fund for Ireland. The IFI has indicated that it will make its last three-year grants next year, which will come to an end around 2013, and that the Peace III programme, one of a series of programmes that has run for 15 years, will make its last grants in 2013. The large amounts of money that go to support what we call “bridging social capital” across the whole region are about to disappear. That raises a significant question for the future. We have relied largely on foreign donation.

Real change still needs huge leaps as well as small steps. We have worked closely with the One Small Step campaign, and have been very successful at engaging a large number of people in consideration of that. There have also been media campaigns on it. We believe that small steps make most sense when they are accompanied by large leaps. Some issues continue to confront us, such as interfaces and other issues that are identified.

Finally, we believe that we should be at a point of transformation in supporting the future rather than simply managing the difficulties of the past. However, that balance has not fully moved towards transformation. I will leave it there.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much indeed. It is helpful for you to set the scene. Do you have any concerns about the balance between your organisation as a Community Relations Council and a funder? Do you feel comfortable with that arrangement and that your organisation, being in charge of community relations, if you like, is in the best position to allocate funding from the various streams? Is there ever any tension, or any sense that you are perhaps too close to it, or that the

funding might be better delivered by another agency or another arm of government?

Mr McCusker:

Historically, when the Community Relations Council was established almost 20 years ago — I worked in the area of government that actually set it up — the debate was about whether it should be a statutory or an independent body. The overriding conclusion at that stage, following the experience of the Community Relations Commission in the 1970s, was that it should be set up as an independent body but that government could ask it to undertake work on its behalf in that particular field.

There was a debate at that stage as to whether it should take on a funding role. Again, the discussion led to the conclusion that it could operate the two aspects simultaneously: it could be the advocate for societal change for good community relations and could be the organisation that facilitated others, particularly at a community level, to undertake that work. In the four years that I have been associated with the council, I have not been aware of any difference of attention in that position. In fact, I do not think I have heard from any external organisation — either from those who see us as advocates of policy change or those who receive funding, whether for community relations or victims — that they see a dilemma in that regard. Some actually see it as useful.

Mr D Morrow:

Although the status of the council is that of an arm's-length body, it is largely treated in practice as an arm of the public sector in a number of areas: it is under the authority of the Northern Ireland Audit Office; it replies to freedom of information requests; it is subject to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and is subject to the ombudsman. The council has to, and does, comply with all the various aspects of a public body. All its accounts have to be prepared in that way.

Secondly, all the schemes that we administer for funding come with, if you like, a clear direction as to their purposes and criteria. Under equality procedures, our job is obviously to ensure that we apply those criteria fairly and appropriately before distributing the money.

The review of A Shared Future was a large consultation that took place between 2003 and 2005. Apparently, some 10,000 or 20,000 people responded to the consultation, which was one

of the largest that has been undertaken. It would be useful if members read what was said. Of the respondents, 90% said that it should definitely not be delivered by the Civil Service. There was an almost 50:50 split in opinion on whether it should be a close non-departmental public body (NPDB) or an arm's-length body. We have always taken the view that the key issue is clarity. The Community Relations Council is not going to stand in the way of that.

We believe, and it is reinforced constantly in the feedback that we receive, that a dedicated body in that area that has to make fine decisions is nearly always preferred by the client group than a body that relies simply upon civil servants who move between Departments. Some of those areas are extremely difficult and require sensitivity and a skills base. Therefore, from the council's point of view, the possibility of maintaining principles when some of them are disputed is important.

Mr McCusker:

I want to make an additional point about the shared future proposal, to which, as we know, there has yet to be a resolution. Under that proposal, the council's role as a funder was going to change quite dramatically, because much of the funding that the council currently administers would have to be transferred to local government. The council would have had a more regional role, rather one to deal with local funding. Therefore, it would change in that context. Where it sits at present is a separate discussion.

The Chairperson:

There is no doubt that we will arrive at that discussion shortly. In the document 'Beyond the Crossroads', you perhaps criticise politicians, if that is fair to say. The paper states:

"The bitter political battles over the 'definition of victims' are particularly cruel here. From the perspective of CRC, it sometimes seems as though we are more concerned to ensure that nobody unworthy is compensated than to ensure that all the human costs of conflict are addressed."

While accepting that dealing with the past is a sensitive issue with which it is difficult to come to terms, do you not have any sense that politicians accurately reflect the views of their communities? Is it not a bit unfair to blame politicians, as it were, rather than, I suppose, to acknowledge the fact that we reflect the views of the various sides and traditions. It is a fact of life that —

Mr D Morrow:

There is no doubt that it is a fact of life.

The Chairperson:

Certainly, within the unionist tradition, the definition of victims is an important issue. It is felt to be central to dealing with the past. It is not just, perhaps, politicians' fault; rather, it is more reflective of wider society.

Mr D Morrow:

First of all, I accept that, clearly, there is huge disagreement on the issue. When there are battles about such issues in public, real people are in the middle. When handling such situations, the Community Relations Council must deal with the consequences. Therefore, in a sense, what we are doing is feeding back to politicians, as opposed to blaming them.

The Chairperson:

Politicians are also engaged in feeding back, of course.

Mr D Morrow:

Absolutely. Our feedback suggests that it is not politicians but political rows that cause those situations. There is no doubt that political rows on the matter do have that consequence.

Secondly, we are working with a group on victims. The council's approach has largely been to try to meet need as it is identified in the schemes that we must undertake. Our priority has been to identify and meet need without creating any additional distinctions. We are trying to address the definitional discussions that create all sorts of waves, particularly when there is a statutorily defined responsibility on the Victims' Commission to consult on that at the same time. We manage those waves. That is the truth. We are also trying to say that the debates have a real effect on the public.

The Chairperson:

Politicians are entitled to reflect the views of the public.

Mr D Morrow:

Yes, they are. We are simply feeding back to you the consequences.

Mr McCusker:

At one level, such debates create tensions in the victims' sector, which the council then has to deal with. Within the wider victims' sector, it is fair to say that the council has established quite a strong reputation for how it deals with those tensions.

I should also mention that the absence of a strategy from the Executive on victims, although one has emerged in the past week or so —

Mr D Morrow:

It only emerged within the past day.

Mr McCusker:

The absence of such a strategy creates a void, and the council has to then manage the expectations of different groups. That can sometimes be difficult in light of the public debate at the time.

Mr Molloy:

Thank you for the presentation. It could be argued that it would be better if the Community Relations Council stayed out of the victims' issue, because there are so many structures in place to address it with a more hands-on approach.

On behalf of Martina, I want to express surprise at the link that was drawn between the debate over the name of Derry city and the conflicts that have occurred over the past year. That implies that the debate over the name of the city is a new one. It was unfair to link that debate with the death of Kevin McDaid and other acts of sectarianism and racism, because it is a political debate that is separate from those issues. Linking the debate with sectarian incidents, the deaths of the two soldiers and racist incidents takes away from the relevant issues. There are people in Derry who think that the city should be called "Derry". Others call the city "Londonderry", and some do so to be provocative. That begs the question as to whether the Community Relations Council has a role in the present situation.

Mr McCusker:

I will come back to the victims' issue, because you made a throwaway remark about structures that I want to address.

Mr Molloy:

It was not a throwaway remark.

Mr McCusker:

It was not a throwaway remark, but you skipped on rapidly after you mentioned structures.

You referred to the links drawn in the second part of Duncan's paper, which talked about fear. You have to read that part of the paper in its totality, because it reflects a series of events that happened over the course of a year that illustrated that society still has serious problems with division, sectarianism and conflict. The paper was not making a judgement about the scale of any particular problem, nor was it making a judgement about any problem.

The debate about calling the city "Derry" and "Londonderry" has significant sectarian overtones. That is the reality. The paper was not saying that the debate was sectarian per se; rather it was saying that people took sectarian positions within it. All the other events in that particular paragraph of the paper were part of what happened in this society over the past 12 months.

The argument for a community relations strategy from the Executive becomes more critical in light of those events. The discussion is not about how to create a structure around that, but there seems to be a strong argument for there to be strong leadership from the Executive to address the problems that lead to such events.

The structure of the victims' sector has been created by the Executive, and the delay around an outcome for victims is clearly an issue for the Executive. Like the whole victims' sector, we have said quite clearly that we do not see the need for an additional body to deal with victims' funding. On the contrary, the victims' groups that I am aware of are quite content for the Community Relations Council to continue in that role. We reflected that back to the Government. It is ultimately a matter for the Executive as to how it wants its policy to be delivered. In the situation that we are in, the council is a delivery vehicle for the Executive.

Mr D Morrow:

The Derry/Londonderry dispute was included in the paper in light of representations that were made across the city that it caused huge issues and did not contribute to a creative debate. The

concern of the Community Relations Council is not to resolve it one way or another but to ensure that it has local accountability and that we get out of the “yes or no” and “us or them” type of political resolution of those symbolic matters. However, that is why that point was included.

The Community Relations Council successfully applied to distribute funding to community relations victims’ schemes through open tender. A decision was not simply made to go to the Community Relations Council. Our proposals were the best and we won those schemes through open tender.

All the victims’ groups as well as various other people attended our victims’ conference. The overwhelming majority of all the politically divided groups told us in public and through feedback that there was no requirement for a new NDPB and that we should continue. We have not taken the view that that is the case, but there is a question of whether a new structure or a new NDPB would be more effective.

Whatever structures the Executive agrees need to take account of the work that has been done and it needs to be taken over in a useful, transitional way. We look forward to working with it once the service paper is published and once we know what the developments are. At the moment, we have no indication of the transitional arrangements. Unless we get an indication of those, we will have to issue protective notice to our staff about the three months from the beginning of January and we will have to indicate to the groups the fact that the scheme is winding up because no transitional arrangements have been announced.

Mr Shannon:

I am a positive person, as I am sure you know, but the paper is very negative. It is difficult to get from it any crumb of positivity for the future. That could be because it is so factual.

I have some concerns around the definition of victims. My concerns are very similar the Chairman’s. We reflect the views of the people who we represent. I try to keep a very close ear to the ground on that. The paper refers to the Eames/Bradley group and to the virtual silence of politicians. I was not silent. I was quite vociferous in my condemnation of the Eames/Bradley report. That was not just my opinion; other people were telling me the same thing. Please do not underestimate the people who come and tell us about their issues. I like to reflect those views, and I am sure that everyone in my party and in other parties would also reflect those in the

groundswell of opinion.

I am not a pedantic person when it comes to place names, but the first paragraph of your paper refers to the “north of Ireland”. Many people find that offensive. That is your terminology. You picked that term, not me. I do not make that comment to try to catch you out or to be smart, but people raise that issue with me regularly. This week, I received letters from people who feel quite annoyed when that term is used, and I do not believe that those letters were part of an orchestrated campaign. You used that terminology, and I am reflecting the opinions of the people who tell me that they are annoyed by it.

Your paper also refers to disputes over the name of Derry/Londonderry. I am a member of the Apprentice Boys of Derry, which originated in Londonderry. The terminology that you use in the paper has not been all that helpful, Duncan. That is disappointing.

Mr D Morrow:

The reference to Derry/Londonderry was included mostly because people from different communities, many of whom are Protestants and from the Waterside, raised it as a significant issue, which was also being debated in the chamber of Derry City Council. We reflected an issue that has been alive locally in the past year. The paper does not say how that issue should be resolved or try to blame anyone, but it notes that that issue was one that was seriously divisive at local level.

The use of the term “north of Ireland” is a matter of historical accuracy. That part of the paper refers to issues throughout generations that predate Northern Ireland, and it was not intended to make any political comment. You will find that “Northern Ireland” is used throughout the report where appropriate. There is no intent to say one thing or another, but to make a comment on generational history in this part of the world.

Mr McCusker:

The Eames/Bradley group’s report made the broad and general statement that remaining silent on the past was no longer tenable, and that was not aimed specifically at politicians. We referred to political battles on other issues. I took the paragraph of Duncan’s paper that refers to that to mean that that issue referred to a difficult debate that reflected divisions across the political spectrum. We were saying no more than that.

Mr Shannon:

We will agree to differ on that issue.

Perhaps I have missed it, but the paper lacks recognition of the commitment that all political parties make everyday. Personally, I have come a long way, and I am the first to say it. Other politicians at this table have also come a long way. Why is that not recognised? I am not saying that that is the end of the story, far from it.

Mr D Morrow:

I hope that some of that is recognised in the final paragraph of the paper. I agree that huge progress has been made, and, year-on-year, we have recognised the huge role of politicians. The report states:

“united, consistent and decisive action will be critical to the success or otherwise of any attempts to tackle these issues.”

Two and three quarter years into the experiment, it is deeply frustrating to me as chief executive of an organisation that requires direction and needs to know in which direction we are moving that it has been so difficult to agree a policy to refresh A Shared Future. That policy is organisationally critical for us. We were named as a regional body, and we do not know what the status of that is. The consequences of trying to manage in a way that is consistent with the wishes of the Assembly are complicated, and the fact that that the Community Relations Council has been trying to deal with a number of crucial questions in the past year is possibly reflected in this year’s report.

We must ensure that we take advantage of all the efforts that have been made by creating a united, consistent policy on those issues. In the absence of that, it is our experience that fear will continue to fester. That is a reality for the people on the ground and affects their quality of life. We now need to agree on which direction to take that policy so that that can be delivered against the objectives that are set by the Assembly.

Mr Shannon:

I wanted to make those points to set the context for my question. However, I am conscious that other members also wish to put their points across, so I will be brief.

I have not yet seen or heard the Chancellor’s pre-Budget report, so I am unaware of its detail.

However, this morning, there was talk of a 10% reduction in the block grant for Northern Ireland. I do not know whether that has yet been confirmed, but it was talked about on this morning's news. If that is the case, there will clearly be a knock-on effect for every Department, including OFMDFM. I agree with your point that work must happen and continue to happen to help build community relations, but how do you think that that can be achieved? It is not all about money, because we cannot throw money at something and expect a result. As politicians and community leaders, we must show leadership. Given that we face a 10% reduction in the block grant and that there may no longer be enough money to encourage projects in the community, how do you think that that will affect community relations?

Mr McCusker:

Fortuitously, two blocks of money are locked in for the next four or five years. The first is the Peace III money, which has a total budget of —

Mr D Morrow:

It has a total budget of £50 million, and there is also £1.2 million that we administer with Border Action.

Mr McCusker:

A large block of money is committed to that sort of work. The second block of money is from the IFI, which has made a significant commitment until 2013. That area of work is luckier than most in the sense that it has that as a backstop for a lot of the work to continue.

We will increasingly have to consider the issue of community relations — Duncan raised this point in his report — not just as an isolated piece of policy but as piece of policy that cuts across a range of government interventions. For example, on one level, the issue of interfaces is about communities getting on with one another, but it is also about how we deal with the regeneration of interface areas. The challenge might be to recognise that there is not an awful lot that we can do about that funding reduction. The challenge that that presents might throw up an opportunity to try to make other government policies that are aimed at delivering good relations work better.

Public authorities are still bound by section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to deliver policy in a way that promotes good relations. That probably leaves a lot to be desired as to whether it is actually being taken seriously. In future, we may need government resources go

further in delivering better community relations.

Mr D Morrow:

I do not want to labour those points, but they are important. First, as regards Assembly voted money, the Community Relations Council receives £3.3 million per annum for community relations work, which works out at approximately £2 a person. The special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme spent £9 million moving people out of their houses. That is the comparator. The SPED scheme spent £9 million, and we got £3.3 from the Executive. Most of our money comes from foreign donors, which will be a significant issue in the future. As the review of public administration (RPA) progresses, we need to engage with district councils through a systematic policy to see how that is built on the ground at local level. As part of A Shared Future, we want the issue of community planning to be taken seriously as well as how the distribution of resources has implications for local life.

You referred to the issue of a 10% Budget reduction. One of the big breakthroughs for the Community Relations Council in A Shared Future, and one which we would love to see reproduced in the Assembly's refresh, was that it ceased to be about simply supporting groups on the ground and started to be about how we ensure that those issues are beginning to be addressed. Part of that is the better use of resources. There are whole areas of resources, for example, swimming pools or libraries, which are accessible only to one group or the other. Public resources are then spent from a budget that does not meet the whole market. Up until now, the option has been to spend. However, we cannot go on doing that. There are real questions about how we ensure people's safety in accessing legitimate resources that are there for all.

We see the change that is coming — as dictated by what the Treasury is going to do — as a real challenge and as an opportunity to look at how we can ensure that the resources that we do have are best used. For us, the issues of regeneration and how budgets are allocated need to be taken seriously. It must be realised that we do not have to waste money on producing everything in double.

Since the events in Coleraine took place, meetings have been held by the junior Ministers about to what could happen in those areas. Such meetings are not fully covered in the paper. MLAs from all the parties — Sinn Féin, the DUP and all the others that were represented — agreed that it was the small things, such as schools and youth clubs, that held the community in

that part of Coleraine together and that needed to be enhanced. We have serious worries that if there is not a focus on how that is sustained through youth budgets, education budgets, and so on, those small things, which represent important ways in which people link together, will simply go by the board and be treated as nothing. At a local level, all the MLAs recognised that, in times of crises, those were critical issues.

As budgets come up, we should not just be dealing with community issues and how to organise public services. Secondly, foreign money is being relied on and we need to look at whether we want to build bridging capital into our community development strategies at a local level. Thirdly, some of the small work being done needs to be protected or we will not have those connections any more, a potential consequence of which is sectarianism. Those things cannot go by the board because they are not considered important. We think that they are.

Mr Elliott:

Thank you for your presentation. I am sorry that I missed the start of it.

Jim Shannon talked about the negativity of the report, and I can appreciate that. However, to me, it is more about reality. Those are the things that are happening. There are some positives in the report. You have to look for them Jim, but they are there.

Mr Shannon:

Is that not the point that I just made?

Mr Elliott:

The reality is that there is an underlying sectarianism throughout the community. I believe that and I want to know whether you believe that. Is there an underlying sectarianism, particularly among the younger generation, which in some areas is getting worse?

Mr McCusker:

I will give you an example from another organisation that is involved with the Community Foundation which, on behalf of the Executive, provides support for ex-prisoners groups. At a recent launch, a loyalist ex-prisoner said that he perceived a level of sectarianism amongst young people that had not been evident in his day. I thought that that was really frightening.

Mr Elliott:

My second question is about the finance and funding that you have provided to various groups and organisations. I do not believe that all the funding that you delivered has resulted in successful outcomes. However, by and large, do you believe that most of the funding that you have delivered has been successful or do you feel, in some instances, that it has just gone into a black hole?

Mr McCusker:

Duncan is the accounting officer and he will speak about that shortly. There are two levels that we must look at. One is the individual projects and whether they did what they said on the tin, and there is a robust mechanism for doing that. The second level, which is more difficult, relates to whether it makes a contribution towards reducing the macro-indicators about the state of this society. There have been a number of Life and Times studies carried out under the attitudes survey that show a change in people's attitudes towards each other and shared schools, for instance. That gives the impression that things are changing. However, there is a trend, particularly among young people, that demonstrates that things are not improving. One statistic that worried me in the Young Life and Times survey was the fact that more than 80% of young people do not know anybody from the other community. With that level of division, the tensions and possibilities of sectarianism are strong.

Recently, we have been looking at how to try to build a more effective monitoring process, which, at one level, would track what is happening across the urban and rural areas of society, but, at the same time, give a better indication of the impact that the investment of resources is having. That is in its early stages, but we hope to be doing that later. All our evidence suggests that the projects do what they say they do and make a contribution towards improving things here.

Mr D Morrow:

We do not intend our general negativity to add to depression. We intend it as a warning that sectarianism has not gone away, you know. There is work to be done, and we need to agree a programme of work. The next part is about —

Mr Elliott:

There will always be work to be done. I am trying to get a handle on how well the money is

being spent. Has there been enough improvement? Or, has a lot of the money been wasted?

Mr D Morrow:

We could stand over the investment and the difference that projects make to lives, organisations and communities across Northern Ireland. It works through interface communications; work that is undertaken in trade unions; churches; at local level between different agencies where specific interventions can be made; at festivals; and with victims, which continue to mitigate against all sorts of problems. The difficulty arises when it is expected that work at community level alone will deliver the change. The Community Relations Council will say that it works only if it is carried out in tandem with a general commitment across the education, local government, policing, cultural and political systems. That will bring us towards a better, shared, just, equal and fair society. Although we stand over the value of that intervention, which is £2.00 a person, it requires to be supported across a broader level. I believe that I can show you that there have been specific and real changes, as a result of the investment that we have made, in every case that we have monitored.

Mr Attwood:

We have to take forward the issue about transitional funding with the work of the CRC and the work of any future body, given that staff may be put on protective notice within a matter of weeks. That is not a healthy way to go into the new year. We have some obligation to take that forward, after this. The Committee has some dry issues to deal with, and, compared with them, it would be useful to think about scheduling a conversation such as this every year around the time of your annual report, independent of what may come out of OFMDFM about a shared society.

To go back to Jim Shannon's comments: I have been around long enough to know that we do not have to agree with everything that Duncan Morrow says. However, it is equally hard to disagree with any of the five or six themes that are outlined in the paper. Never mind where we have to go as a society over the next 30 years and longer, it is time, given the state of politics at the moment, that we address the themes that Duncan outlined.

The SDLP thinks that the CRC should have an enhanced role. Our recommendation to OFMDFM was that the service for victims and survivors should be located in the CRC. We also think that CRC should have had an enhanced role in taking forward some of the Eames/Bradley group's recommendations.

I agree with Jim Shannon that your paper categorises politicians and parties in a narrow way, just as the Eames/Bradley group did in its analysis. I find that offensive and ethically flawed, but that is an aside.

The Eames/Bradley group is going nowhere.

Mr D Morrow:

Are you saying that I was offensive and ethically flawed?

The Chairperson:

We will have to take a vote on that. [*Laughter*].

Mr Attwood:

The analysis of the Eames/Bradley group was. For the record, Denis Bradley is a very close friend of mine, and he is aware of my views.

My point is that Eames/Bradley group is not going anywhere. The British Government ensured that it would not go anywhere by setting false standards when it said that it would not legislate by consensus. That meant that none of the difficult issues were ever going to get consensus. Therefore, the Eames/Bradley group is not going to deal with the issues. The state and non-state organisations do not want to deal with the past because of the exposure, individually and corporately, that it would have for them. Therefore, we have a situation in which the Eames/Bradley group is going nowhere and the Tories are hinting that they will close stuff down, rather than open stuff up, if they get into government.

There is a huge gap in the perspective that you outlined in your paper and it is a gap that we cannot afford. In the absence of the Eames/Bradley group, has the council any ideas about how to begin to address the past and the issues that the Eames/Bradley group usefully scoped out? I did not agree with the model that was proposed by the Eames/Bradley group or its narrative in many cases, but it scoped out the problem. Is there any other way to look forward?

The Chairperson:

At last we have a question.

Mr D Morrow:

The council has consulted independently and responded. We believe that the context of a shared and better future, as the direction in which this has to be dealt with, is correct. We do, though, have issues about the structures.

Under the SEUPB, it is responsible for a programme called acknowledging and dealing with the past. Through that programme, we are assessing whether there are mechanisms to encourage a public debate or conversation about some of the issues and to try to engage public agencies. We want to find out whether we can engage broadcasters, museums, archives and memory as a way to create an informed public conversation on some of those issues. Those examples are given without prejudice, because decisions have yet to be taken. Through the SEUPB, the European Union has made money available and we will be allocating some of that after decisions are taken this month.

At every conference that we organise and at many events, we provided opportunities for victims' groups, individual victims and others to have a serious conversation and debate about how this issue should be taken forward from their perspective. It is likely to be an iterative process. The issue will not be dealt with in a single moment. Some of the issues that the Eames/Bradley group raises will remain real, because, as we go on, more information will enter the public domain, and how that will be dealt with will have to be coped with.

I want to put on record that I think politicians have an extremely difficult job and a huge responsibility. If I made a swipe at them, I am open to correction. However, from the Community Relations Council's perspective, over the past year, the issue has been about asking for political engagement on the question of getting a strategy together on those themes and not getting any response. If that is a misinterpretation of what has happened, I am open to correction.

In private meetings and in public statements that we made, we tried not to be overly critical of politicians who have an extremely difficult job to do on the issue of victims and the issue of positivity and negativity and setting a tone, as has already been identified. However, it feels like, at the moment, there is a difficulty in getting sufficient political consensus to create structures, policies and dynamics in this area. That is evidenced across the board. We think that that is significant for the long-term survivability of the political project. In the end, it is about small

budgetary matters, which do not matter. At a symbolic level, it is part of the symbolic heart of where we are going as a society. It is also about agreement on what a shared, better, fair, equal, just society begins to look like, the commitment and design of what the policy looks like and where the levers should be to create that kind of change or, at least, to begin to move in that direction.

If I have a plea, it is that, if possible, we can get some direction on that policy and the issue about how the past is going to be dealt with, along with all the legacy and justice issues and the questions of how we cope with acknowledgement and how that works. Such issues remain, and perhaps are a serious obstacle to getting consensus. Therefore, to put it simply, the Community Relations Council will do what it can within the realm of its practical activity with victims and with the wider community relations groups to bring it to the attention of the appropriate people. Furthermore, we ask that the matter be taken seriously as a political task, because we believe that if it is left lying, it will infect more than the small policy area under which the Community Relations Council works; in fact, it will infect everything.

Mr Spratt:

I, too, must say that the report has been presented in a negative way. You picked out three or four high-profile cases, such as the murders of the two soldiers and the murder of the police officer Stephen Carroll. From a political point of view, many positive things happened during those times.

Mr D Morrow:

I tried to say that.

Mr Spratt:

Very powerful things happened. For instance, there was a very powerful photograph of the First Minister and deputy First Minister standing shoulder to shoulder with the Chief Constable. The First Minister and deputy First Minister also did some positive work around the time that Kevin McDaid was murdered. Four different political parties sit on the Policing Board. I sit on that board with Alex Attwood and we work together and agree on the vast majority of issues. Therefore, a lot of positive work is being done in many areas. Furthermore, since devolution, significant additional finance has been put into the work, including the money for administering the 26 councils throughout Northern Ireland. There is a lot of positive stuff. That has worked

much better since you have had an input into that area as well.

To a degree, the report has been presented a bit negatively. You could have done better, and better has been done since. It is not all perfect, but we are slowly moving forward. I am sure that you recognise that significant additional finance has been made available. I agree with you about the uncertainty, and that all needs to be sorted out. It is not proper for any organisation such as the CRC to be facing financial uncertainty. A similar situation happened with some of the victims' groups. I suppose that that is more a comment than a question. However, I also feel that the paper could have been a bit more positive.

Mr McCusker:

We note what has been said. In one sense, with a report from a body such as ours, there will always be the tendency for the balance to fall on the negative side. When the two soldiers and the policeman were murdered, the council did a lot of work round that. We recognised that a lot of the work was done locally. The paper reflects two difficulties. First, there is still an undercurrent of sectarianism, and Tom Elliott made that point. Police statistics refer to 30 to 35 sectarian incidents a week. The pressure on us at community level reflects the sort of work that they are doing around —

Mr Spratt:

Tony, you must accept that an awful lot of work is going on about such issues in the Policing Board and other places. Quite frankly, the people who are causing the problems are not politically represented by anybody. They are a small minority. The vast majority of people have moved on, although there are still problems. However, today's situation is a lot better than it was during the 30 years that I spent in the police.

Mr McCusker:

I do not disagree. On the broader political perspective, the council comes under criticism for not being more outspoken about what was happening at a political level about the absence of policy and so on. Up to this point, we refused to make that a public issue. We dealt with it by means of correspondence with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers. We have not had any engagement on that. Equally, we have not made it a public issue. We recognise that significant resources have been made available to deliver work around a policy that does not exist. However, we have tried to shape it within the terms of what we think the Assembly and the

Executive would want.

Mr Spratt:

It is certainly not our side of the House that is holding it back.

Mr D Morrow:

We are grateful to have been asked here today. We should take the opportunity to speak to the Committee more regularly. In some ways, the annual reports need to be read in a row, and this is the first time that we have met. Therefore, it refers to the specific context of now.

Mr McCusker:

Was it better the last time?

Mr D Morrow:

It was a bit happier the last time. The next issue to put on the record is the fact that there has been an increase in the budget. Most of that does not run through us. However, that is not a complaint; it is simply a statement of fact. It goes through district councils. We know that we need greater local responsibility for those kinds of decisions and we are not opposed to that. We have developed good relations with a number of district councils, which we have found useful, and we have developed ways of co-funding either through the European programme and the work that we do with the clusters or, indirectly, in policy issues and on issues of grant giving. For example, some of the bonfire schemes have been developed in the way in which councils wished to deal with them, starting out from a health and safety or an environmental perspective. The Community Relations Council said that it would also make an addition and sought ways to change the more difficult aspects of the cultural celebration while still making it a cultural celebration. We worked with the councils, the councils took the lead, and we were able to do things together.

The Chairperson:

I am conscious of time. The Deputy Chairperson, Naomi Long, has been patient.

Mrs Long:

I have been patient. I hope that my comments will not be cut short because you are conscious of time.

The Chairperson:

I will be patient with you.

Mrs Long:

You have done what a body outside of government should do, which is to make us feel slightly uncomfortable and, therefore, challenged us about the future. If you had come to the Committee, patted us all on the back, told us that we are doing a wonderful job and that there is nothing to worry about, we might have gone home a bit happier but not necessarily feeling that we have been challenged.

I am not particularly uncomfortable with the fact that you have produced a report that highlights some existing significant community relations issues that need to be tackled in a serious way. I do not consider the report to be negative. It is sobering and challenging, which is a good thing. I want people to come to the Committee and talk in challenging terms about what we need to do. However good things are — we could debate that for ever, but I will not test the Chairman's patience — huge issues still need to be addressed.

I accept other members' points that political progress has been made. However, at the same time, sabre-rattling is happening in the public domain, and that undermines community confidence. Those things do not necessarily add up to the pretty picture that we want to see. Therefore, if we look back and say that everything has been good so far, we perhaps ignore the precipice that is ahead. We need to take that into account because it has ramifications for the community.

In terms of the issues that you raised, there are a couple of things. You raised a number of issues, and different people picked their own issue that resonated either positively or negatively with them. However, you raised a number of issues that were, if you like, subject to debate or challenge in the past year. Is your issue about the issues or is your issue about how those issues are being handled and addressed in the public arena? When I read the report, I got a sense that these were issues and that nobody was ignoring those issues, but that they are sometimes handled in a way that lacks the maturity that is required to build confidence in the community. I want to know whether the issue itself, such as changing the name of a city, is divisive or whether it can be handled in a way that is not divisive. That is one of the issues.

You talked about a move from emergency intervention towards more sustainable long-term work. The flip side of that coin is trying to find a basis on which to develop community relations work that is not crisis-driven and, therefore, does not reward negative behaviour in its most base sense. I know that it does not actually do that; you do not tell people to have a riot and that you will give them some money. However, it essentially creates difficulties for communities that are ready to move beyond the tension monitoring and beyond some traditional routes, if you like, to get access to support. There is not necessarily anything to move on to. For example, I had such a conversation with bonfire groups in my constituency. They considered the issue of bonfires and said that the bonfire is no longer central to their work. However, they cannot obtain any help with their festival programme unless a bonfire is part of that.

Emergency intervention will move towards more long-term work. Therefore, does that require better progression for the groups that are engaged in that? In turn, that could address Tom Elliott's concern that, although money is thrown at a problem, it remains. In some ways, the fact that the problem remains is the only way for groups to receive continued support for development. In some ways, that has taken them beyond where they started. However, they cannot do that effectively.

The third issue —

The Chairperson:

It will be interesting to read that back.

Mrs Long:

It will. The third issue is to do with the victims. There are two aspects of this, the first of which is the transitional arrangements issue. I want to know two things. You mentioned how it affects the staff who administer that funding and the fact that there is the issue of protective notice. Have you received any clarification from the Department on that situation? The other aspect is about where it leaves the groups who access that funding?

The second thing on the victims issue that you raised was specifically around the issue of, if you like, the battles over the definition of a victim. You used the phrase "bitter political battles". Many people took that to mean that those were battles among politicians. I can think of political

battles that do not involve elected representatives. Therefore, we should not be too sensitive about that.

Around that issue, you raised the issue about the challenge of ensuring that the human costs are addressed without ignoring, if you like, right and wrong issues and moral issues. I am keen to explore the notion of how to get to a point at which the issues of people, whether they are victims, perpetrators or whatever other category, can be addressed and the traumas of the past can be dealt with so that the situation is not replicated in the future, but without creating moral equivalency among everyone. Has the CRC had any dealings with victims' groups or others? You also work with groups that are involved with ex-prisoners and so on, so do you have any sense that there is a form of work that could be done around that particular issue? It is my sense that if the needs of some people are left unaddressed, it is an open wound waiting to become quite a dangerous situation. I just wanted to ask you about that. I am sorry that I asked quite a lot of questions.

The Chairperson:

I have to say that in a closely fought contest, that was probably the longest question. *[Laughter.]*

However, a number of points were made.

Mr McCusker:

I think that the issue versus the issues also feeds into the second point to some extent. In some ways, it goes back to the debate in the early 1970s about whether an underpinning political settlement would reduce or take away the need for a continuing policy and programme to build peace in the future. There has never been a great consensus about whether that is accepted dogma. I have never had the sense that everybody believes that although we have a political settlement, we must approach the issue of peace-building from a number of perspectives, including a political perspective and a community perspective, because it needs to be copper-fastened at local level.

In the absence of that sort of commitment to the issue, and I hope that I am addressing the point that you made, it will always be difficult to relate what is happening at community level to the bigger picture because it ends up with a confrontation between what is happening at community level and political level. There really should not be a confrontation; we should all be heading in the same direction.

One of the large charitable funders asked us recently, in another context, why it should continue to put money into Northern Ireland now that we have a political settlement. The simple answer that we gave was we need the funding because we need to ensure that the settlement works so that we can give an example to the rest of the world that conflict resolution can work.

The second point was about emergency interventions. I like to think that we have moved away from having a crisis every week and the notion that we are throwing a few bob here and there just to deal with crises. The various streams of work are now aimed much more at the longer term rather than a one-off. Although summer schemes around bonfires may be isolated individual projects, they are still part of a longer-term strategy to deal with the issues in that regard, or to deal with the issues around events in August and so forth. A longer-term strategy is emerging, and we have moved away significantly from emergency interventions.

We have one budget line in our books about pathfinder projects, which, in a way, are the crisis-type projects. For example, if something happened and we did not make an intervention, a major initiative or piece of work could fall by the wayside. However, that usually amounts to about a couple of hundred thousand pounds, which is a very small amount of money compared to the ongoing balance of work. Therefore, I like to think that we have moved significantly from that crisis approach to a more strategic approach. We would like to implement that in more detail at interfaces. We have carried out significant work to identify the location and nature of interfaces and the issues associated with that. At this stage, however, we lack a convincing overarching policy between ourselves, government and the security forces to tackle the problem. Presently, in the main, there is intervention, which does not contribute to the long-term strategy for change in Belfast and, indeed, in rural areas, where peace lines and interfaces are, in essence, virtual. Therefore, although we are making progress, in the absence of a strategic approach by everyone, in the short term, interventions will continue in a significant number of areas.

I am not sure whether I addressed the victims' issue. Perhaps Duncan will deal with it. Although a lot of work has been done on the subject of victims, it emerged only as a policy issue in the past 10 years, post-Good Friday Agreement. Prior to that, it did not feature as a big political or policy issue. The Administration's response, whether during direct rule or devolution, has been to provide resources without saying exactly what they are attempting to achieve.

The Community Relations Council, in collaboration with a wide range of victims' organisations, has attempted to form the bones of a strategic approach based on activity. In the past six or eight months, in an attempt to shape policy and future activities, we have started to draw together experiences from work that has gone on. John Hunter, who used to be the permanent secretary in the Department of Finance and Personnel, is leading the review, which will try to draw out the issues to develop a victims' strategy. The review is important because of the suck-it-and-see approach that there has been to financial interventions. We need to see whether the money has had an impact, but we have not yet had significant feedback from victims to do so. Nevertheless, to make progress on a victims' strategy, policy and programme, we need the benefit of that hindsight.

Mr D Morrow:

All that can all be summarised by the following: having achieved the political institutions and given the possibility of people working together in government, implementation issues persist across the board. Rather than talking about what CRC has done, I shall attempt to respond directly to the question. We must identify what needs to be done in the various areas. Part of the difficulty is that asking questions about the definition of x or y tends to result in a discussion about defining what is meant by a "victim". However, to get results, various interventions need to be made in various places, so we need to work through what they are and ensure that everything is done, which is why we would like a coherent policy framework.

Experience tells us that a balance must be struck. Tony is right: when something happens in Craigavon, Coleraine, Derry/Londonderry or Belfast, the media immediately asks us what we are doing. First, we and the Government look to see whether we have the things in place that need to be in place. There is a demand for us to be proactive in ensuring that we do what we can.

Secondly, we want to support forward-looking projects by ensuring that they are publicly advertised, so that people can make judgements based on those that are most committed to trying to show through their work that they can contribute to the quality of life on a shared basis or on the basis of a society in which there is normal interaction.

There is a third element, which is that some districts have different issues. We need to find the basis on which to carry out engagement work and move forward in harder-to-reach areas, and I am aware that eventually I may have to resile from such terms. Much of the process is an art

rather than a science. To achieve maximum benefit, we must design the projects that work best in the various places.

Tony gave an example of interfaces. Research carried out by the Community Relations Council reached two conclusions. The first of those is that interfaces cannot be removed until security concerns have been resolved. Safety is, and must be, paramount. The second conclusion is that any policy in a peace process, or in an attempt to normalise society, is a false policy unless its ultimate goal is to take down walls and protect people. When we raise those issues, people get alarmed and think that the Community Relations Council is about to walk in and take walls down. That is nowhere near our agenda. Our agenda is to work with people to try to find sensible security alternatives. However, we also believe that it is important to put those questions on the table.

Your initial point concerned the council's task. Our somewhat complex role as a licensed irritant is ongoing. We must continue to put complex and difficult issues on the table at some level or another. It is not our intention to blame people or not give due credit where changes have been made. It is simply our task to raise the issues that need to be addressed so that we can have a sustainable society. Those are some of the core issues. We raise complicated questions in pursuit of that function.

Mrs Long:

At least you are licensed. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

We will finish on that helpful comment. I allowed the discussion to run longer than intended, although I had little choice. The session was useful, and it will be useful to have ongoing discussions on those important issues. On behalf of the Committee, thank you very much for your attendance. We look forward to seeing you again soon.

Mr D Morrow:

Thank you.

Mr McCusker:

Thank you.