

Committee for the Environment
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Dear Committee Clerk

Written submission on the Local Government Bill - Committee Stage

Thank you for your invitation to submit evidence to the Environment Committee in relation to the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill.

Northern Ireland is a society emerging from conflict. Much progress has been made but there are many outstanding issues that have not yet been resolved. CRC believes that the work of building a united community must be embedded across society and for that reason we consider local government (and this Bill) critical in regard this work. It is for this reason that we have an interest in this current evidence gathering process.

Local Government - its structures, policies and practices - have a crucial role to play in building trust, developing partnerships and encouraging dialogue on sensitive and divisive issues. Already local government structures play a significant role in connecting communities and organisations through a range of council activities focused on building good relations. This takes place, in particular, via the District Council's Good Relations Programme and through the implementation and delivery of European Peace Programmes¹. CRC actively supports these approaches through support and developmental work. This includes the work of the Peace III Consortium which has facilitated the sharing of information and experience between Peace III Partnerships, as well as supporting capacity building across the Partnerships in key areas such as Peace and Reconciliation, Cross Border working, and addressing Sectarianism and Racism. Finally, much of this local peace-building work is given recognition during CRC's annual Community Relations Week whereby a large portion of this work is publicised and celebrated.

It is also important to note this legislation in the context of a future Peace IV. While much has been achieved, it is our view that, without further support the focus on Peace and Reconciliation will be significantly diminished. CRC considers institutional capacity building as an area of peace building that needs to continue, and that despite current activity and its many achievements, it remains necessary to place the strategic nature of the Peace and Reconciliation Programme higher on the agenda within local government.

¹ CRC has delivered EU funding on Peace I, Peace II, Peace II extension, and Peace III (the latter in collaboration with Pobal). The Consortium is contracted to support SEUPB in the delivery of Measure 1.1 – Building positive relations at the local level.

CRC is of the view that the Local Government Bill provides an opportunity to underpin the principles of equality, inclusion and cohesion as part of good governance at local government level. These principles offer an opportunity to provide support for difficult conversations and offer a framework for dealing with sensitive and divisive issues such as flags and symbols, and cultural identity. Whilst there will be many more discussions on issues such as the Code of Conduct, the Guidance, as well as training and capacity building, it is important at this stage to position these principles within the legislation. CRC therefore suggests a preamble which highlights a commitment to utilize them across all council business and functions.

In addition, CRC acknowledges the sensitive issue of the flying of flags on local authority buildings, which has been deliberated in recent Assembly debates on this Bill. CRC also notes the current Haass Talks process which is examining issues such as flags, symbols and emblems. It would therefore be important to consider any forthcoming recommendations in due course and to reflect on implications for a final Bill.

Community Planning

Principles of inclusion, partnership, and sharing are critical for community planning. CRC, from its work with groups and individuals, is aware of the commitment to creating better communities. To encourage and support a range of voices in the community planning process it will be important to maximum participation, and accordingly Clause 69 and Clause 70 should include a specific reference to community and voluntary organisations e.g. the Bill should make provision for the participation of community and voluntary organisations in the community planning process.

Structural Support

Finally, has the Bill given any thought to the role of the Community Relations Council, or any new Equality & Good Relations Commission (see Together: Building a United Community), regarding a challenge or support function to the new transitional/future local government structures. It would be useful for the Committee to consider what structural assistance is required to guarantee the practical business of realising equality and good relations e.g. the Bill should make provision for the Regional body to provide guidance and support on the promotion of good relations; Local authorities should have regard to such guidance in preparing and developing policy, delivering services and governance arrangements. .

Conclusion

The comments outlined above offer an opportunity for the Committee to strengthen the Bill in relation to equality and good relations, as well as participation. CRC's comments highlight the need to encapsulate a post-conflict vision for local government and we look forward to continuing this important discussion with the Committee. If you need clarification please contact Gemma Attwood, Policy Officer, at the following email gattwood@nicrc.org.uk

**Policy Directorate
Community Relations Council
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