



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Peace IV Funding:
Belfast City Council Briefing

21 November 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Peace IV Funding: Belfast City Council Briefing

21 November 2012

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr John McCallister
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Mrs Hazel Francey	Belfast City Council
Councillor Máire Hendron	Belfast City Council
Mr Isaac May	Belfast City Council

The Chairperson: Joining us from Belfast City Council are Councillor Máire Hendron, Hazel Francey, who is a good relations officer, and Isaac May, who is a Peace III programme manager. You are very welcome. Máire, we were just saying that the Department has asked for a copy of your written submission to us. Are you content that we pass it on to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)?

Councillor Máire Hendron (Belfast City Council): Yes, indeed.

The Chairperson: Would you like to make your opening remarks?

Councillor Hendron: Yes, although Hazel and Isaac will know the nitty-gritty. I chair the good relations partnership in the council, which, as you probably know, consists of six elected members — one from each party — and representatives from statutory bodies, churches, and community groups. The partnership, which meets once a month, has oversight of the good relations and equality work of Belfast City Council. Implementing good relations and equality is one of the council's key roles and objectives. We oversee that, as well as implementing the Peace III action plan. As I said, good relations and equality are high on our agenda, and that has been the basis for a great deal of work that has been done in communities under the auspices of the good relations partnership. Perhaps Hazel would like to add to that.

Mrs Hazel Francey (Belfast City Council): The structure of Belfast City Council is slightly different from other councils in that we have one unit, the good relations unit, which combines all our section 75 responsibilities. In other words, the equality officer, our four good relations officers and our peace team all work together in that unit.

When we talk about the impact of EU money and the peace and reconciliation plan under the Peace programme, that is additional money to support the core work that we are doing. That is supported through the district council good relations fund, with core funding from OFMDFM. It is all joined up.

I have just come from a meeting of good relations officers from across Northern Ireland, and the structures in other councils are very different. They look to Belfast City Council as an example of best practice where that work is, if you like, co-ordinated.

Mr Isaac May (Belfast City Council): Belfast City Council has been the lead partner in the delivery of local action plans under the Peace III programme; it has put together and leads on the Good Relations Partnership. Since 2009, under the Belfast local action plan, a diverse range of almost 100 projects has been supported to build and sustain positive relations in the city.

I know that your primary focus is on the consultations for Peace IV. However, we take the view that one of the best things that we can do to assist with that programme is to make sure that Peace III is delivered to the maximum benefit of local communities.

The Chairperson: How would you convince us that that is the case with Peace III?

Councillor Hendron: Last week, we held a conference for all the good relations partnerships from all over the country and the border counties. At it, the head of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), Pat Colgan, said that giving responsibility to local councils was the best way of administering the funding. Local councils know what is needed in their areas and know the people who are working on the ground. From my experience and contact with those on the ground in Belfast, I know that they are dedicated and committed to creating peace, to working together on a cross-community basis and to creating a much better society for everybody.

The Chairperson: To summarise, the representatives of the Community Relations Council, which preceded you today, felt that Peace III was very light on evaluation and very heavy on accountability and audit. I see three nodding heads.

Councillor Hendron: That was very much the case.

Mr May: That has always been the case. SEUPB commissioned an external evaluation the year before last that found that the Belfast Peace Partnership — the good relations partnership — had established good peace and reconciliation policy partners, and that models of good inter-agency collaboration were evident from the work that was under way. It also found that the partnership was successfully encouraging intra-community and intercommunity collaboration and that it had been successful in building positive relations across the city. It also found extensive evidence of a strong bottom-up approach, through the use of community bodies, for the delivery of projects and community involvement in planning. We understand that SEUPB will shortly commission an additional evaluation to capture some of the benefits of the Peace III intervention. That work will commence shortly and will focus on the local action plans that are delivered by clusters of local authorities across the region and in the border region.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentation; I have great experience of the work of Belfast City Council's good relations unit. Councillor Máire Hendron is a colleague of mine, and Naomi Long MP chaired that unit before her.

Councillor Hendron: Tom Ekin chaired it before her.

Mr Lyttle: My interests are declared, and I apologise for the unavoidable bias, Chair.

The staff in the unit also do amazing work. In particular, the decade of centenaries exhibition in Belfast City Hall set an example and tone for how other bodies should celebrate those events. It has led on that issue.

I agree with many of the points that you have made about what you think should be in Peace IV, such as a focus on creating shared public space, interface regeneration strategies and four key points around employment, social inclusion and combating poverty. Are you surprised that one of the key Executive policies around the social investment fund makes little or no reference to good relations

and, as far as I can see, links in with that policy in no specific way? Also, how important is it, from your perspective, to see an Executive policy on peace and reconciliation to help to guide a regional strategy in relation to that work?

Mrs Francey: We would certainly love to see a cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) policy sometime soon. We think that would be very helpful, but we have not sat back and done nothing pending the replacement of the 'A Shared Future' document. We have taken forward work on what we would call the harder issues, including cross-community work around interfaces and anything around sharing and integration. For example, in the past two or three years, we have set up a migrants' forum in Belfast, bringing together all those agencies that work with all the new communities coming to Belfast. That has been very successful. We have also taken forward, under Peace III, a continuation of our bonfire management programme to look at bonfires on 11 July. We could give you very good figures and good feedback from the Fire and Rescue Service and the Police Service, showing far fewer call-outs on the eleventh night as opposed to five or six years ago. We started off in 2005 with eight bonfires out of — then — 91 in Belfast as part of our programme. We now have something like 32 out of a total of 73. The number has been reduced and the number in our programme has grown. With a very limited amount of money, we have shown good and effective management of that in making sure that those are less environmentally dangerous and more family-friendly and that there is less alcohol at them. They are not perfect, by any means, but the behaviour is an awful lot better than it was five or six years ago. That is just one example of that work.

Councillor Hendron: Can I just comment on your comment about the decade of centenaries? It was with great trepidation that we set up a working group to commemorate the forthcoming decade of centenaries, but there was a representative from each party on the group and, I have to say, it was a very constructive group. There was very little acrimony. The first big event that we commemorated, the signing of the covenant, was supported by all the parties on the council. I think it is very important to make that point. There was very little objection to any of the proposals for that event, and it went off peacefully, in spite of what a lot of people would have anticipated. Again, I have to give credit to the staff on the council for the lead that they gave, the way they progressed the events and how they were presented to councillors. It is certainly something that I am very proud of. The exhibition in the east wing of the City Hall is something that we are very proud of. It has given a very good history of Belfast.

Mr Lyttle: If anyone has not seen that exhibition, they should. It throws up some really fascinating incongruities in relation to the time.

Mrs Francey: You might be interested to know that that exhibition was funded largely through OFMDFM. It will be in the City Hall until the end of February, but it will then move to Ballymena from March to June. Ballymena Borough Council sent up a delegation to look at it, and they said that it is one of the first times they have ever agreed on anything on a cross-party basis.

Mr Lyttle: Brilliant.

In relation to the social investment fund, how are councils' good relations units being included in that policy? Sorry, I should declare an interest again. I keep forgetting to do that, Chair; apologies. I am on the east Belfast steering group for the social investment fund. How are good relations units being included in that, given that you have identified a lot of overlapping interests?

Mrs Francey: I suppose we are not feeding in directly as officers, but the council has representation on all the social investment fund working groups and steering groups, so it will make its way that way.

Mr Lyttle: Chair, can I ask one more question?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: Are you going to ask about the social investment fund? I was going to move on. That is OK. I have no interest whatsoever in speaking to the council flag issue, so, parking that, I want to speak about the issue of the public display of flags in respect of good relations and peace and reconciliation. A year back, we had an incident in which a dispute about the public display of flags resulted in very serious rioting. A lot of surveys show that the disrespectful, prolonged and illegal display of flags can damage good relations in areas and can be perceived as intimidatory. How important for you is it to see a flags protocol being put in place and adhered to? At the moment, the

PSNI's public line on the issue appears to be that it is pretty much helpless to act without a clear policy direction from the Northern Ireland Executive. My understanding is that the most recent efforts in relation to a flags protocol include putting the councils' good relations units at the heart of finding agreement on the issue. Do you have any feedback or views on the issue in line with that?

Mrs Francey: There was a flags protocol working group. I think that OFMDFM tried to start one, and it had one meeting back in March or April. At that stage, we were told that it was going to push through something very quickly, but it has not met since. The summer was particularly bad; the flags went up early because of the Balmoral review time in May, and they seemed to stay up longer. If there could be any kind of agreement at a regional level on a flags protocol, the good relations offices would find that helpful.

Mr Lyttle: There has not been particularly close interaction or work on that issue.

Mrs Francey: Not really. There are a series of informal local agreements in various places in Belfast, but there is no consistency at all. It would be helpful if something were agreed at the higher level.

Mr Lyttle: I think that the vast majority of the public understand the time-bound, respectful display of flags. That is the starting point that we are coming from, but that does not seem to be the case in a lot of areas. I would have thought that a flags protocol would have been of extreme urgency to the Department, but that does not seem to be the case.

Mr McCallister: My point is about a comment that you made, Hazel, about the 'A Shared Future' document. We have heard from several presentations, including the previous one, about the CSI strategy and the peace funding and the question of which should come first or whether it should have happened when Peace III was kicking in. Have you been working with the 'A Shared Future' document as your guide on the regional strategy?

Mrs Francey: I suppose so. At regional level, we also developed our own good relations strategy. We have a few leaflets, which are very quick summaries. We developed a good relations strategy just before the 'A Shared Future' document; we updated our good relations plan in 2010. We work to that, and we have performance targets within that.

I am sure that you have heard that, at council level, we have, in the past nine months, produced a city investment programme. The underpinning principles of that are equality and good relations, right at the heart of that. It is not something that we just sign on to and pay lip service to; it runs through everything that we do because we see that good relations underpin the image of Belfast. If we have a poor international image because of pictures going out of rioting and violence, it does not help the investment to Belfast or the job creation or the quality of life of people living near flashpoints and interfaces.

Mr McCallister: You probably agree that you had some success despite Stormont.

Mrs Francey: We — *[Inaudible.]* Yes.

The Chairperson: I finish with reference to your bullet points. You give us four on potential activities and four on how the indicative actions could be delivered in the context of themes. I see a little bit of a potential disconnect; your activities are to promote the use of shared public space, deliver integrated interface regeneration strategies, promote inclusive cultural expression and take actions to align good relations and peace-building. However, the themes are to do with employment and supporting labour mobility, social inclusion, education and skills, and lifelong learning. How do the two connect?

Mrs Francey: The first lot are actions and activities that we think could be included. The four themes are lifted from the SEUPB consultation document and were given to us. We feel that they would probably fit under social inclusion and combating poverty, but they could be tweaked a bit to fit the others.

The Chairperson: So, you have lifted those four out of the 11 criteria for Peace IV. Speaking as an MLA and not as Chair of the Committee, I think that there are intergenerational issues that have gone largely unaddressed. We take it that Peace IV is likely to be the last of its kind. My view is that we are going to use it to tackle the intergenerational cycle in the likes of educational underachievement, social

exclusion and the health issues associated with your postcode, which do not necessarily lend themselves to being addressed by inclusive cultural expression and celebration.

Mr May: The primary focus would be on the thematic objective of social inclusion and combating poverty and the associated investment priorities. We are also of the view that the priority focus should be on young people in particular. That is emerging from SEUPB's consultation to date. It may have given you evidence to that effect.

The indicative actions, which we have outlined in the bullet points, are very much in line with the overarching themes of the Peace III plan — the local action plan. Those thematic objectives go across the entire proposed EU structural funds allocation. We would say that there are significant opportunities for peace building and reconciliation right across the board. It is up to each individual actor, if you like, to give this serious consideration and see how they can help to address those particular issues. The primary focus would be on social inclusion.

The Chairperson: Are you content that the 11 criteria gave you the scope to identify what you wanted to do?

Mrs Francey: Only just.

The Chairperson: Only just?

Mrs Francey: Only just.

Mr G Robinson: Thank you for your presentation. I want to ask about the bonfire situation. I am interested in hearing how you got it reduced from — 70-odd, was it? You gave a figure, anyway, for that reduction. How did that come about?

Mrs Francey: Reducing the overall number of bonfires?

Mr G Robinson: Aye.

Mrs Francey: Some of them happened by chance in an area where there was housing redevelopment and there were simply not enough sites for local people. Some happened where groups came together; for example, there is a housing estate in Highfield that used to have five or six bonfires and now it has one or two.

Mr G Robinson: So they combined?

Mrs Francey: Yes, combined. They were not necessarily any bigger, but there was a combination of circumstances over the year. Some groups, where space is limited, chose to use a beacon, which is like a huge fire grate.

Councillor Hendron: We have a dedicated member of staff who looks after that particular issue. He has made great contact with people in the different groups. He has gained their confidence and they have co-operated with him.

One of the many concerns was the pollution that the bonfires were causing. We have managed to get an agreement with all those groups that they will not burn tyres and old furniture. All that has taken time, and some councillors are getting rather impatient that the funding should stop, that it has gone on long enough and that we should not spend ratepayers' money on this. I am not of that opinion. This is a fairly long-term project. It is like so many other things; it is not going to happen overnight.

Groups should be encouraged to be more responsible when they are creating these bonfires. It is not just about bonfire management. There is a whole cultural programme behind it all, which is to do with why we light bonfires and what we are celebrating, in order to highlight people's culture in a good way. It has been very successful, and, hopefully, we will continue to make progress on that. There is not much advantage to Belfast in having great holes in the road or lovely green spaces destroyed, and having to repair them. It is slow, but we will persevere with it.

Mr G Robinson: Thank you very much.

Mr Lyttle: I want to pick up on a point that you made, Chair. We need to get to the point where we start to discuss how good relations can improve the likelihood of equality of opportunity in health and education. They are linked, and the five activities include making sure that education and housing policies are aligned to this. As Mr McCallister said, you are actually ahead of the Executive, unfortunately, on many of these issues, and that is good to see.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you all very much indeed.

Councillor Hendron: Thank you.

Mr May: Just last week, we published a review of phase 1 of the local action plan and a summary of the projects in phase 2. It may be of interest to the Committee.

The Chairperson: Is there one for everyone in the audience?

Mr May: There is.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you.