OFMDFM - Inquiry into Building a United Community.

Draft suggestions

- Much work has been carried out and progress made in relation to building a shared community and this should be recognised, with lessons learnt and best practice examples built upon.

- In planning for the future we would suggest bring people together around shared agendas which are affecting society today for example: poverty, employment and health issues to include mental health this builds relationships, friendships, reconciliation and in the long-term a sustainable civic society. Recognition needs to be given to civic society, how they succeed / succeeded.

- Whilst there is a need to address good relations issues directly, often groups and individuals can usefully be brought together around a different, but common agenda. This could be used as a means to bring people from diverse backgrounds together through uniting people over shared issues, therefore the theme of "difference" is not the dominating factor. This has been used in England wherein people from neighbouring estates where a gang culture was in operation where brought together through the formation of a community choir, which performed a range of songs that were acceptable to all. Too much focus on "difference" can lose the what we need to achieve, more emphasis on what is common required.

- Sport, the arts and creative medium can be used as a means through which to engage a wide range of people from differing backgrounds. However we would suggest that this should include additional sports beyond Rugby and Football.

- The importance of youth work and education within schools from an early age in terms of promoting shared agendas and acceptance of difference is viewed as a positive contribution towards addressing sectarianism and division.

- The role of local communities in being enabled to contribute effectively towards policy and decision making is of key importance. We would advocate a grass roots community development approach to support local people have their views and voices heard. However there is also a need to ensure that the voices being heard are representative of the wider population.

- Facilitated discussion and mediation with all those who are involved in the peace process and who have influence within their local communities is useful in terms of

continuing to advance towards a shared community and creating ways to move forward.

- We would suggest the funding environment would support this shared agenda and community based approach that would enable individuals and groups to come together on an agreed basis.

- Conflict, mediation and community integration have been well researched and we would suggest that the findings from the research are promoted in developing funding streams to support community intervention.

- There is a clear need to ensure that monitoring and evaluation measures are robust and based upon evidence based research. In times of budget constraint it is imperative that value for money, accountability and results are demonstrated through all the existing fora and funded activity, with clear strategic leadership and evidence based operational planning and review.

- Often money is not the deciding factor, but rather how engaged and committed individuals and groups are to the process and therefore creativity and best practice would be welcomed in order to develop new ways of working. We would welcome new approaches and longer term evidence based strategies for intervention.

- Building a United Community requires attitudinal and cultural change. Attitudes and cultures are perpetuated over the centuries; therefore it is inevitable that change will take a long time. In order to reflect this, we would suggest a long term policy approach with a 20 year strategic plan.

Ten key points:

1   The strategy needs to be ambitious focussing on relationship building and reconciliation as a prerequisite for long-term peace.

2   Definitions of good relations, racism and sectarianism are required. Any definitions should meet international standards and obligations to ensure the development of good practice.

3   Adequate, long term, outcome focused and accessible resourcing for Peace building work is needed on-the-ground, as well as funding for cross Departmental commitments. This financial investment would reflect the priority in government given to the achievement of reconciliation, partnership, equality and mutual trust and a society free from sectarianism, racism and intolerance.

4   Interface work should be about more than just barrier removal. It should be informed by practice on the ground, as well as providing structured support for regeneration initiatives which lead to and enable, the eventual creation of open and vibrant communities free from fear, threat or any obstacle to interaction across the region. Not all barriers are structural.

5   Co-ordination of reconciliation efforts on a regional basis should be facilitated by a regional body, including the management and allocation of long term funding, as well as developmental support for organisations working within communities at a grass roots level.

6   A major rethink of how larger and significant budgets such as education, housing, community development, regeneration, justice and culture intersect and present opportunities for reconciliation and peace-building is also necessary. And how will these be incorporated into "Community Planning" with the new super councils.

7   Proper research and a robust evidence base for the scale and complexity of the challenges in building the peace and reconciliation is required, and should examine and report on the benefits to society (including the public purse) of transforming relationships within Northern Ireland, North and South and between these islands

8   Development of strong structures within government responsible for cross departmental activities is critical. These structures should promote linkages to communities, providing a balance between the need for government to manage, along with civic society's right to influence. This also includes the identification and empowerment of drivers and champions for the delivery of the strategy within each department.

9   Adequate development, monitoring and accountability arrangements within government should involve civic society.

10   The planning process is started now to build on TBUC in the development of the next reconciliation and peace-building plan that involves civic society in its planning and production.

11   There needs to be a recognition that patriarchal societies have major influence on good relations / peace building / reconciliation and we require recognition to address this in helping our society to develop.