



Department for

**Social  
Development**

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Mike Nesbitt, MLA  
Chairman  
Committee for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister

Dear Mr Nesbitt

Please see attached written evidence from the Department for Social Development in relation to the Committee's Inquiry into "Together: Building a United Community".

If you require any further detail or information from the Department, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

**DAVE WALL**

**Director of Communication Policy and Strategic Support**

## Summary

1. The Department for Social Development (DSD) has strategic responsibility for urban regeneration, community and voluntary sector development, social legislation, housing, social security benefits, pensions and child support.
2. DSD's vision statement "helping people change their lives for the better" improving the quality of life and well being of our society aligns with the Programme for Government aim of "a shared and better future for all". Tackling sectarianism and promoting good relations is a core element in much of the work of the Department, including our town and city centre regeneration initiatives and our work in housing to support the development of shared neighbourhoods.
3. DSD considers there is evidence of good practice both within the Department (as above) and across the wider Executive, but that progress has been hampered by a number of factors, including differential community capacities, the often sporadic allocation of funding for good relations initiatives and the lack of agreed outcomes measures and indicators of success.
4. DSD also considers that progress will continue to be hampered unless our way forward is framed with reference to the challenges and opportunities presented by the changing policy and operational environment. In this context, Local Government Reform (LGR) will present a significant opportunity given that this will transfer operational responsibility for many of the levers to address poverty and disadvantage to the new councils. There should therefore be a renewed focus on the promotion of good relations and tackling sectarianism on the ground.
5. Reflecting these and other views, a summary of the Department's recommendations is as follows:
  - The next Programme for Government should set a clear direction of travel for good relations work across Government;

- We must ensure that funding is targeted at specific outcomes and rigorously monitored to ensure that outcomes are achieved, otherwise we risk continuing to focus on processes to the detriment of delivering real and sustainable change on the ground;
- Departments must commit formally to working together to deliver wider good relations outcomes. There is a need for a coordinated approach to tackle sectarianism, deprivation and racism;
- Section 75 could be strengthened with the requirement to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, and racial group given the same focus by public authorities as the promotion of equality of opportunity;
- There needs to be a shift from a 'one size fits all model' of policy development and funding distribution, to a model which recognises and aims to address the often differential needs of our two main communities.
- Developing a cross departmental policy agenda that seeks to address paramilitarism and the criminality associated with it needs to be a key priority; and
- We need to recognise and utilise the potential of Community Planning to deliver real and lasting change in our most deprived areas.

## **Response**

1. DSD's vision statement "helping people change their lives for the better" improving the quality of life and well being of our society aligns with the Programme for Government aim of "a shared and better future for all". We aim to provide access to decent housing, assist the vulnerable through the welfare system, focus support in the most disadvantaged areas and to bring divided communities together by creating urban centres which are sustainable, welcoming and accessible to live, work and relax in peace.

## **Explore perspectives on sectarianism, division and good relations**

2. There is clear evidence of a direct relationship between poverty, disadvantage and segregated communities. This evidence strongly suggests that DSD and the wider Executive will have limited success in its efforts to tackle poverty unless such action also aims to address divisions and promote good relations between communities.
3. The Department recognises that deprivation and division cannot be addressed by government alone but that success is dependent on partnership working across sectors, within and across communities. The Department considers that this will not only ensure that we capitalise on the strengths and skills of communities and all partners but that we deliver initiatives that actually meet the specific and often differential needs of communities.
4. The Renewing Communities initiative (document appended) offers a potential model of good practice in this regard. For instance, this initiative recognised that the Protestant Community had less well developed capacity at community level than their Catholic counterparts and that this negatively impacted on the extent to which Protestant communities capitalised on opportunities offered through government funded programmes and services to tackle disadvantage. It was also highlighted that in terms of educational attainment, a crucial determinant of future life chances, Protestant boys in areas of deprivation consistently lagged behind all other groups.

5. A preliminary evaluation of the Renewing Communities initiative, alongside local anecdotal evidence, suggests that some good results were beginning to emerge. However, success was hampered by the short term nature of many of the projects delivered and, as consequence, many deprived Protestant communities still exhibit that lack of community capacity and continued high rates of educational underachievement. These are priority areas that need to be addressed in order to help these communities out of deprivation and poverty which will, in turn, begin to create the right environment for political stability and long term good relations not just across religious divides but across racial and ethnic divisions.
6. The long term consequences of a failure to address this disadvantage will have damaging consequences for the communities that are so affected. There is therefore an urgency in developing a policy response across government departments that recognises the particular problems of our poorest Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods. Furthermore, a key element of this response must be to address the paramilitary activity and associated criminality that continues to blight our poorest communities.
7. Local Government Reform (LGR) is also pertinent here as councils will have the power to shape their responses to disadvantage and good relations according to the particular characteristics and needs of local communities. In doing so, LGR through community planning will have the added benefit of moving the focus from neighbourhood level. Currently individual communities shoulder a lot of the responsibility for progressing actions to promote good relations and tackling sectarianism. Community planning must refocus efforts to build good relations across the whole community within council areas with all statutory agencies being held accountable through the community planning process.

### **Good Practice**

8. DSD's work on shared city centre and town centres offers some good examples of best practice. The primary aim of these initiatives is to improve the competitiveness of our towns and cities. However, they have also helped create

more attractive, welcoming and safe environments to be shared by all in recognition that shared space is key to building a united community.

9. Specific examples include:

- The regeneration of Laganside and Belfast City Centre shared neutral spaces;
- The Victoria Square Development; and
- The Peace Bridge in Derry~Londonderry (funded under Peace III).

10. Evidence of the success of these types of initiatives is illustrated through hosting of festivals, international events and increased footfalls in Belfast and Londonderry city centres.

11. Religion is still a key determinant of where people live with some 90% of Housing Executive estates being predominantly single identity. However, evidence, such as, the NI Life and Times Survey indicates that the overwhelming majority of people in NI would prefer to live in mixed neighbourhoods. DSD has taken a number of key steps in order to facilitate and support the development of shared housing, include the Housing Executive's work on shared neighbourhoods which has quietly but effectively begun a process of encouraging, supporting and delivering behaviours in some of our social housing estates that both address sectarianism and build attitudes consistent with good relations.

12. In recognition of the opportunities presented by Local Government Reform and Community Planning, the Department has developed an Urban Regeneration and Community Development Policy Framework. This Framework provides a clear policy direction to partners in central and local government and also in the voluntary and community sector in terms of supporting actions to contribute to the promotion of Good Relations.

13. The Framework has at its core the 'Department for Social Development's Corporate Plan 2011-2015' and reflects the strategic priorities therein. The policy

objectives and supporting actions in the Policy Framework reflect the Department's priority "To bring divided communities together by creating urban centres which are sustainable, welcoming and accessible to live, work and relax in peace".

14. Within the Framework, there are 3 policy objectives supporting actions to contribute towards the promotion of Good Relations, for example:

- *Policy objective 2 – To strengthen the competitiveness of our towns and cities* - has as one of its suggested actions – "supporting the development of shared and safely accessible commercial centres and development sites".
- *Policy objective 3 – To improve linkages between areas of need and areas of opportunity*- has as one of its suggested actions "Physical regeneration of interface areas, including environmental improvement, remodelling, securing the release of development sites and the agreed removal of interface barriers where this is safe, practicable and desirable".
- *Policy objective 4 – To develop more cohesive and engaged communities* has as one of its suggested actions – "Strengthening networks and cross-interface schemes to develop positive community responses to social, economic and environmental problems".

15. Looking forward to a post April 2015 context, Councils will be given a statutory duty to have due regard to guidance issued by the Department, including the Policy Framework. This together with Councils' obligations under Section 75 and the Community Planning duties should contribute to good relations considerations becoming an integral part of their work in Urban Regeneration and Community Development.

**Seek views on what good relations means and how sectarianism and division can be addressed, with a particular focus on the challenges at interface areas, both urban and rural.**

16. Good Relations is about improving community cohesion and removing division across Northern Ireland. There are many challenges attached to this task, some of which have been exacerbated over the years by the role of government.
17. The pattern of residential segregation in NI means that the majority of deprived communities, including Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, are single identity. It could also be argued that government has encouraged these single identity areas to be insular as the primary focus of many of its programmes and projects has been on addressing the causes and consequences of poverty within communities to the expense of encouraging and supporting intercommunity working and tackling sectarianism.
18. Evidence from the recent Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy Evaluation (not yet published) however does provide some useful evidence in relation to best practice in mixed community areas. For example, the evaluation showed that in times of civil unrest (even within those areas with the highest interface conflict) the NR partnership structure allowed individuals from across the divisions to continue to meet and engage with each other and discuss areas of common interest and community need.
19. Partnership working has also proved crucial to other areas of the department's work in interface areas including the NIHE's to work to support communities who wish to remove/reimage barriers.
20. It is however essential that our support for communities does not stop at removing images of sectarianism and violence but that we (government and other agencies) help communities tackle the actual violence itself. This cannot be achieved unless we recognise and address the continuing dominance of paramilitaries in our most deprived areas.



**Make recommendations in order to support and enhance policy and decision-making with regard to building a united community, including on actions to tackle sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance, and to help deliver the Executive's commitment on removing interface barriers.**

- Good relations work continues to be seen as disconnected from the work of departments; it is an 'add on' rather than something that is factored into every aspect of government policy and services. It is essential that good relations work across government is supported with a clear sense of direction of travel. This must be part of the next Programme for Government;
- We need to take a fresh look at the Good Relations field and associated funding delivery structures with more co-ordination and smarter partnerships. There is a need to be realistic about future spending constraints and what can be achieved with constrained and decreasing resources;
- Sporadic allocation of funding for good relations initiatives has contributed to a lack of strategic direction in terms of focus for activity and has made it extremely difficult to access the actual impacts of such initiatives. These challenges have been exacerbated by the lack of agreed indicators/ measures for success and our lack of focus on monitoring/tracking outcomes. In moving forward we must ensure that funding is targeted at specific outcomes and rigorously monitored to ensure that outcomes are achieved, otherwise we risk continuing to focus on processes to the detriment of delivering real and sustainable change on the ground;
- Government Departments have a responsibility to promote good relations through their policy interventions. Departments must work together to deliver wider good relations outcomes. Central funding should be delivered in a way that is coordinated with and enhances mainstream programmes – such as city centre development and shared housing. There needs to be a recognition of big drivers, such as, housing and education and better “joined up” thinking to maximise the potential of smaller funding initiatives to deliver real and sustainable outcomes;

- Section 75 could be made stronger with the requirement to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, and racial group given the same focus by public authorities as the promotion of equality of opportunity;
- We must refocus efforts to build good relations across the whole community within council areas with all the statutory agencies being held accountable through the community planning process; and
- Paramilitary activity and associated criminality continues to blight our poorest communities. Developing a cross departmental policy agenda that seeks tackle these issues must be a key priority.

Renewing Communities



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