



Forthspring Submission to The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister Inquiry into Building a United Community.

Introduction

Forthspring Inter Community Group is committed to working with local people in the Springfield/Woodvale area and promoting good relations within and between these communities. Forthspring is situated on the Falls/Shankill interface and has over 16 years experience of providing services on a cross community basis.

Our vision is of a diverse and peaceful community, where all people are free to live with dignity, hope, respect and understanding.

Forthspring has been successful in providing a much needed safe and welcoming environment where people from both communities can meet and find a different way from the violence and division of the past.

Forthspring brings together Protestants and Catholics to build relationships, understanding and trust by supporting people to talk about their religious, cultural and political similarities and differences within a safe space and to simply socialize and engage with each other.

Using a community development approach, a range of programmes are delivered that bring together people of all ages to move across the wall and to break down barriers. These include a large youth project, work with men and women, Springers after schools and senior citizens. Current projects include the 5 Decades project gathering peoples stories and memories of living through the 'Troubles', the community planning group, a gardening project and a range of art projects.

Key Points

- Ofm/dfm funding: the process of allocating money based on the initial call following publication of TBUC has been simply appalling.
- TBUC is a limited document
- There are major gaps in TBUC if the objective of reconciliation and building a shared future is to be achieved. These include the failure to address dealing with the past, the failure to address divisive issues such as parading and flags and the failure to confront the reality of barriers to reconciliation and sharing, most notably the persistence of sectarian attitudes and behaviours.
- The lack of the ability of political opponents to make progress on allegedly agreed goals undermines confidence in TBUC and in the general public's belief that progress is being made.
- The absence of a willingness or capacity to tackle difficult issues has reduced much of TBUC to agreement around the lowest common denominator of sharing in education and work with young people.
- This focus on the lowest common denominator is likely to skew and emasculate Peace IV funding.
- Whilst the emphasis on shared spaces and young people is welcome, resources committed to young people in particular should be additional and not simply support main stream responsibilities in education and training.
- The vision of a peaceful and reconciled society needs to be approached from two directions – a broad vision within which people can agree to disagree on constitutional and contentious issues based on respect for each other and a legislative framework that includes clear definitions of sectarianism and good relations.
- We would add our voice to those who have engaged in CRC's consultation process and argued that 'interface work should recognise the critical need for relationship-building across interfaces as a necessary pre-condition before complete barrier removal. It should be informed by practice on the ground, as well as providing structured support for relationship-building initiatives which enable communities either side of a barrier to develop the trust and mutual understanding which lessens fear and provides the context for interface barrier removal.
- We would add that relationship building must be combined with a strong emphasis on community safety and regeneration to provide people with the confidence to support the removal of barriers and the evidence that it will be accompanied by social and economic improvement on interfaces.
- TBUC proposes committing resources to community interface workers. Too often community workers are inclined to view young people as part of the problem. There are incidents at interfaces in which young people are involved but the reality is that

most young people are committed to engaging with the other community and are often in advance of adults in their community in relation to this. Resources spent on community interface workers should ensure that such workers have a clear remit to take on board the views and aspirations of all sections of the community, including young people and that there needs to be a youth work approach adopted to engaging with young people, particularly on the streets.

- There should be co-ordination of reconciliation efforts on a regional basis should be facilitated by a regional body that is independent from government. The regional body should be tasked with the management and efficient delivery of long-term funding as well as developmental support for organisations and individuals within communities.
- Much of Ofm/dfm's approach is based on the assumption of two mutually exclusive communities separated by a barrier or wall. An example was the Interface Barrier Support Package outlined in the TBUC statement from the First and deputy First Minister on 9th May 2013 . This only part of the story. In reality, on interfaces, there are existing points of contact and engagement between communities. Resources should be committed, not just to winning support for the reduction of divisions within communities but across communities, encouraging and building on what already exists. In particular individuals and groups who engage in cross community activity in advance of the reduction of barriers should be positively encouraged and supported.
- The delay in releasing Social Investment Fund monies evidenced the limitations of a strategy based on sharing resources out on the basis of the two communities, Protestant/Catholic; Unionist/Nationalist. The competition for scarce resources will always ensure that such an approach is divisive. We acknowledge the reality of community divisions but would argue that to achieve a shared future based on respect the criteria of need and fairness must determine the allocation. And it is not only a matter of who receives what, it is also a matter of how things are done. Do structures and practices promote the breaking down of divisions or the promotion of separation? Locally on the Springfield Road services are provided in a way that naturally reproduces community divisions. One side of the peace wall is policed by Grosvenor Road Police Station, the other side by Tennant Street. The left hand side of the Springfield Road heading up the road from the City Centre is cleaned by Belfast City Council's Environment Services team based in Springfield Avenue, the right hand side is cleaned by the team based in Tennant Street.

Conclusion

Forthspring continues to believe that progress is being made towards a peaceful and inclusive society but there is much to be done in tackling sectarianism, racism and social inequality. Key areas have not been adequately addressed including dealing with the past and contentious issues such as parading and flags. A combination of political agreement, leadership and work on the ground is required to achieve the progress that is both possible and essential.