

Karen Jardine  
Clerk to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister  
And Deputy First Minister  
Room 285  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

7<sup>th</sup> October 2014

Dear Karen

**Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.  
Inquiry into Building a United Community**

We are a diverse group of women from working class areas across Northern Ireland i.e. Greater Shankill, North, East and South Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Newry, Co. Down.

**Evidence Base**

We have been working together, sharing experiences and learning from and with one another as part of the Glencree Women's Programme.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's Inquiry into Building a United Community.

We have chosen only to respond to the terms of reference which are relevant to the dialogue processes we have undertaken and these have been focussed on sharing, learning and building understanding of one another's needs in relation to developing good relations. In these extended conversations we have taken time to unpack many of the issues which continue to divide our people and in a spirit of generosity agreed on the main areas of concern for all of us, our children and grandchildren and now wish to share our suggestions for moving forward together.

**The Challenges to Good Relations**

During our dialogue sessions we were introduced to the Government's strategy document "Together: Building a United Community" and read together the Ministerial Forward, signed by both ministers. We then read the Executive Summary and discussed the key priorities:

The Strategy outlines how Government, community and individuals will work together to build a united community and achieve change against the following key priorities:

1. Our children and young people
2. Our shared community
3. Our safe community; and
4. Our cultural expression

## **The Long Term Vision – A United Community**

To assist our ability to look at developing good relations in a step by step process, we then agreed to vision what a truly united, integrated society would look like and prioritised the following as long term goals:

### **Education**

One fully inclusive, planned, shared education system from pre-school, through primary, post-primary, college, university to life- long learning opportunities where the mix re diversity in each centre of learning would be approx. 40/40/20 percent i.e. 40% Protestant/Unionist, 40% Catholic/Nationalist and 20% new peoples making their homes here.

### **Social Housing**

That all new public housing areas would have sharing at their heart and again allocation would be made on the same 40/40/20 percent basis acknowledging the reality of more mixed religion/culture families in today's society and the need to end division, segregated living and the fear of one another which resulted from deeply divided housing areas.

### **Cultural Celebration**

We agreed that all cultural events funded from the public purse would ensure a welcoming, inclusive, non-triumphalist, planned, and shared ethos and implementation.

### **Community**

We felt that any future applications for funding of community/women's/youth/sporting centres/initiatives should only be successful if they could demonstrate that they were planned and implemented as fully shared places and spaces and that existing separate facilities/initiatives should be financially incentivised towards mergers and sharing.

We added the following as the positive outcomes of the above:

Ease with difference  
Celebration of cultural differences  
Support for mixed relationships of all kinds  
Sense of belonging for all  
Good management of immigration  
Shared community facilities the norm  
Quality, inclusive, affordable childcare  
Fully integrated education and housing  
Politicians of all shades and community working together

### **The Reality of Today - The Challenges**

To get a baseline of where we are now we shared what we see as the real challenges we as women from working class communities face today. These are as follows:

- The very real fear that persists both within and across communities and makes it very difficult for women in particular to raise their heads above the parapet and speak out.
- The power struggles at the heart of communities. The continuing reality of local gatekeepers who still dictate the level and pace of change.
- The political stalemate and lack of vision around a future that is truly shared. We often hear good words but find that very few of these words result in positive action.
- The lack of political leadership and risk averse politicians which is paralysing and it seemed it was always the same people, saying the same things with nothing new to offer a community hungry for positive and inclusive moving forward.
- The level of division which sees such a high proportion of housing and educational facilities divided.
- The reality of many more mixed relationships amongst our children and grandchildren and how the high segregation here leaves little room for this growing trend.
- The worrying resentment towards migrant workers
- The continuing and in some areas evidence of new interface barriers which in reality help people on both sides to feel safe in their homes in the current atmosphere of fear and lack of understanding.

- The lack of implementation of many areas of the Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement, sixteen years after it was passed at referendum. We feel that politicians are selecting areas of the Agreement which suit their own political ideologies and ignoring or interpreting areas of the Agreement to fit their own agendas. We are concerned that the spirit of generosity and compromise envisaged by the broad range of politicians who created this international Agreement and “commended” it to the people at referendum is being lost and in particular are very disappointed that the Civic Forum, the vehicle included to ensure engagement with civic society in all areas of peacebuilding has not been re-instated. This would certainly help women to engage and we feel the voice of women has been ignored by many politicians in recent years.

### **“Breakthroughs” – Our Ideas Around Initial Steps Towards Building a United Community**

We are very clear on the issues requiring priority and urgent action in our communities.

These are:

- Health and Wellbeing
- Housing – more focus needed on creating mixed housing areas, attractive, welcoming and supported. Pilot more schemes based on learning from the challenges of the past in this area.
- Education including community education
- Dealing with all paramilitary activity, racketeering and drug dealing.
- Opportunities through dialogue, storytelling, sharing opportunities of all kinds to build understanding of one another, dispel myths, challenge stereotypes and create a sense of belonging and respect for all. This will include working with the new challenges immigration brings.
- Creating cultural harmony, even around the flying of flags and other contentious issues. Cultural expression shouldn’t be about marking out territory of creating fear.

We found it very interesting that the intensive dialogue we had engaged in had not included any in-depth discussions on the current divisive and contentious issues of flags, parades and the past. We felt that these are red herrings that enabled the focus to be removed from the bread and butter issues that communities are most interested in. We do feel that the issues of the past would be best served by revisiting the recommendations made at the end of the Eames Bradley process.

Integration in Northern Ireland needs strong leadership and we feel the present situation contributes to inconsistent and ambiguous policies that hints at the fact that the status quo will remain as long as violence continues. We feel that the Agreement gave politicians a mandate that they are long overdue in fulfilling to enable Northern Ireland to enjoy a fully functioning, inclusive democracy.

We hope that you find our comments helpful. We would be very keen to meet with the Committee to provide oral evidence and to further elaborate on the issues we raise and our suggestions re moving forward.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Kelly – North Belfast  
Irene Williamson – East Belfast  
Roberta Gray - Greater Shankill  
Donna McIlroy – Greater Shankill  
Megan Lewis – Belfast 8  
Kay Smith - Newry  
Marie Gillespie – Derry/Londonderry  
Theresa Holmes – Derry/Londonderry  
Patricia Quigley – Derry/Londonderry  
Maisie Crawford – Derry/Londonderry  
Margaret Irvine – Derry/Londonderry  
Siobhan Brinkley – Derry/Londonderry  
Jennifer Doherty – Derry/Londonderry  
Beth Neely – Derry/Londonderry

and Anne Carr  
Belfast  
Point of contact re meeting with Committee