

Inquiry into Together Building A United Community

Response from Good Relations Service

Newtownabbey Borough Council

Organisation

This submission has been completed by the Good Relations Service on behalf of Newtownabbey Borough Council. The Council is committed to the promotion of good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group and aims to foster good relations between all those who live in, work in or visit the Borough. This commitment is further underpinned in the Council's Good Relations Strategy for 2012-2016 entitled "Living Well Together".

The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry are to:

Explore perspectives on sectarianism, division and good relations including:

- ***An examination of theory and practice with regard to good relations, shared space and shared services;***
- ***Consideration of best practice, both locally and internationally, in bringing divided communities together, and in developing shared space and shared services;***

Response

Newtownabbey Borough Council welcomes the Government's commitment to good relations reflected in the Together Building A United Community Strategy. The examination of theory and practice relating to good relations needs to be grounded in the context of a society moving out of conflict towards a lasting shared future. A commitment to good relations and a shared society in Northern Ireland will have extensive benefits and gains at both a social and economic level and is both morally and financially more viable than the cost of division.

Consideration of best practice should include the implementation of international obligations and standards including a human rights framework. Existing Northern Ireland and UK wide standards and best practice around equality and race relations also needs to be implemented. Good relations needs to be mainstreamed across the various sectors controlled by government including education, justice, arts and leisure and social development to ensure it is centralised and of key consideration when making policy decisions based on creating a shared society.

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 including:

- ***Seeking views on what issues need to be addressed in order for interface barriers to be removed;***
- ***Examining the role of communities in policy and decision making in relation to community integration and particularly, the removal of interface barriers; and***
- ***Consideration of the effectiveness of the Good Relations Indicators in monitoring and measuring the progress of government interventions.***

Response

The challenge of removing interface barriers reflects the challenges of creating a shared society. The goal of increasing sharing around services, housing and education and increasing feelings of safety and security will create a more natural environment where interface barriers become redundant. In order to create a strong stable society the focus needs to go beyond thinking about 'two communities' and a culture of 'them and us', to thinking of Northern Ireland as one whole society.

Community Planning will provide a vehicle through which each new Council can formulate local plans to address the issue of interfaces. Each new Council area is diverse with different good relations issues which are specific to their Communities; therefore, Community Planning should ensure all voices are considered when planning and agreeing local interventions and solutions.

It will be incumbent on central government to continue to resource local authorities to promote good relations at a local level to maximise the key themes emanating from TBUC.

Good Relations indicators should include a wide range of both fiscal and social indicators to determine the success of the TBUC policy such as:

- Results of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey as a baseline indicator of the general populace;
- Comparative costs of service delivery in a divided society (baseline indicator, Deloitte Report 2007);
- Levels of emergency policing required;
- Levels of territory marking;
- Levels of tourism and inward investment among others;

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.

Response

There needs to be a strong cross departmental commitment to a peacebuilding plan. This needs to be open, sustainable, outcome focused with resourcing for peace-building work

both on the ground and at central and local government. Leadership from central government and a long term commitment to addressing contentious issues is required.

The Council's own Good Relations Strategy for 2012-2016 is focused on "Living Well Together" to be addressed through five key themes including leadership, hard issues (flags, bonfires, sectarianism, racism and prejudice), addressing diversity, equality and cultural identity, building shared and consensual spaces and building cross departmental work and internal good relations which complement the key themes identified in TBUC. The Council will continue to work in partnership at a local level to implement these themes.

It is vital that central government commits to resourcing and monitoring the outcomes of the TBUC Strategy on a cross departmental basis to allow delivery bodies to effect this change in their local areas.

It is vital that an ongoing and long term commitment is made to continue to resource the District Council Community Relations Programme (DCCRP) to support the newly amalgamated councils to effect real change at a local level and tackle sectarian and racism on the ground and promote services to build a united community. Councils are keenly aware of the needs of their local community and are a vital local service provider, a position that will be enhanced even further with the Community Planning process. Since the introduction of the DCCRP in 1991 the programme has changed beyond recognition and has played a vital support role in building community and race relations in Northern Ireland. Local councils have often found themselves at the forefront of these difficult issues and have pioneered programmes and agreements around bonfires, removal and reduction of territory markings and building community confidence, often in the absence of leadership and guidance from Central Government and their associated agencies. The District Council Community Relations Programme should be acknowledged and recognised as a key mechanism for the delivery of the aims and objectives of the Together Building A United Community strategy and as such a long term commitment should be given to resourcing this project with assurances that support will be available for both staffing and on the ground programming.