



Inquiry into Building a United Community

Niamh Written evidence submission in response to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's Inquiry into Building a United Community, July 2014

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1. Introduction

Niamh (Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health) would like to thank the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister for the opportunity to submit written evidence in relation to the Inquiry into Building a United Community. Niamh welcomes a joined up approach from all governmental departments to tackle sectarianism, division and good relations.

2. Niamh Background Information

Niamh, (the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health), is the largest and longest established independent charity focusing on mental health and wellbeing services in Northern Ireland.

Our Vision – Mental Health and Wellbeing for all

Our Values - We provide high quality, professional and innovative services

We enable positive outcomes for the people who use our services

We act with integrity and compassion

We engage with and inspire each other

We influence policy and public opinion

Niamh is structured as a group consisting of the corporate body and four service and programmatic elements Beacon, Inspire, Carecall and Journey Towards Healing.

- As a corporate, Niamh is committed to organisational development, research, advocacy, lobbying and income generation. It provides an evidence base to shape its services, policy messaging to help shape the sector and safeguard its service users and it promotes positive mental health and wellbeing in all its forms.
- Beacon provides support services to people with experience of mental illness through supported housing, day support and advocacy services.
- Carecall provides therapeutic support through employee assistance programmes, and specialist therapeutic services delivered in a wide variety of contexts.
- Inspire provides support for people with learning disabilities in four residential locations in Northern Ireland – Armagh, Antrim, Lisburn and Omagh

Niamh is uniquely placed to provide evidence to this inquiry through its Journey Towards Healing project, which works with disenfranchised communities, politicians, community leaders and international experts to focus on building resilience and community cohesion in a post conflict society.

Issues as defined in Terms of Reference

Issue 1

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 1

1a - an examination of theory and practice with regard to good relations, shared space and shared services

Niamh believes that the creation of greater 'shared spaces and services' in our communities to promote good relations and address the trauma related needs of Victims and Survivors is critical.

It is essential that people are enabled to come together to experience healing and treatment in a shared space environment. To truly create a more cohesive society and make an attitudinal and behavioural change, the trauma related services must;

- be much wider than PTSD
- focus on building resilience
- be accessible to all members of our shared society.

A shared space with wraparound services focusing on the psychological impact of sectarianism, the conflict and building resilience for the future is the only effective way of building a cohesive community and achieving the strategic objective of a united community. This demands not only the development of iconic projects through capital investment but also the development of relationships between and within communities, changing attitudes and behaviours at a local level and addressing deep held beliefs.

Shared Spaces and Services must be designed to move society beyond the management of conflict and on to transformation and reconciliation.

1b - consideration of best practice, both locally and internationally, in bringing divided communities together, and in developing shared space and shared services

Niamh is uniquely placed to provide evidence of best practice and experience both locally and nationally. Through its work in developing and delivering Journey Towards Healing it has reviewed research and engaged in constructive dialogue with a wide range of key stakeholders and influencers in community, local, national and international settings. These groups include:

- Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA), The PSNI, Queens University Belfast, University of Ulster, Coiste Republican prisoners group, The Falls Community Council, EPIC & ACT Loyalist prisoners groups, Political parties locally and regionally, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, WAVE, Mediation Northern Ireland, Healing Through Remembering, The Causeway Institute

- Governmental agencies such as the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors and the Parades Commission.
- Emory University Atlanta, Harvard University Boston, Boston University, Tel Aviv University, Al Quds Jerusalem, Ben Gurion University Beersheba and Fairmont State University West Virginia.
- International experts such as:
 - Lois Clinton (a world wide expert on building resilience in conflict and post conflict zones and uses the TRIM and CRIM--Trauma Resiliency Model and Community Resiliency Model--now used in high conflict zones and post-conflict zones.)
 - Neal Christie (an expert in racism in a post conflict society)

Issue 2

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.

This might include:

- 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 2

Northern Ireland society and its social interactions have been deeply disrupted because of the history of conflict. That history prevents much social engagement that would happen as normal in many other cultures. The traumatic component of this history impacts on the abilities of individuals and communities to engage, interact and build good relations– it is a barrier to accessing services and support. In this context Niamh has developed a number of programmes in a community shared space context that build resilience in this post conflict society. These structured programmes deal with the impact of our collective conflicted past in a psychologically informed way to build resilience and facilitate meaningful, long term reconciliation. Creating a society characterised by good relations and community integration where interface barriers are removed is impossible without taking the psychological impact of this history into account.

Issue 3

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 3

It is essential that we build the capacity of grass roots communities and establish the community context necessary to allow political representatives to move forward on difficult issues with confidence. This requires 'single identity' discussion and capacity building initiatives and increased levels of cross community dialogue.

Niamh recommends:

the development of shared spaces with wraparound services focusing on the psychological impact of sectarianism, the trauma of conflict and building resilience.

Conclusion

We welcome this opportunity to provide written evidence on the inquiry and hope that our comments will help to shape positive policy and decision making that translate to activities that will benefit all communities in our shared society. We would wish to be considered to give further oral evidence to the committee.

4th September 2014