

# ***Inquiry into Building a United Community (Committee for the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister)***

***Comments by***

**Northern Ireland Environment Link**

**26<sup>th</sup> September 2014**

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 65 Full Members represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

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**Summary:**

- A significant body of research exists that demonstrates that the environment is a key factor in building community cohesion;
- We would suggest that natural shared spaces, green infrastructure and recognition of the services that flow to society from the environment ('ecosystem services') should be embedded in public policy;
- Heritage sites and buildings should be promoted as venues for shared experience – the public should be encouraged to explore and engage with shared heritage, providing a fresh perspective on the present;
- Environmental education is a key way of promoting the integration of young people across communities in shared green spaces and natural/built heritage sites around Northern Ireland;
- We recommend strategic investment in environmental enhancement to provide well-designed and maintained public spaces (with all the social and community benefits that they bring), for example, rolling out the ideas underpinning the Connswater Community Greenway across Belfast and NI;
- Better integration of land and transport planning across Northern Ireland will make steps towards dealing with social exclusion and providing better-functioning spaces.

1. Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's Inquiry into Building a United Community. By way of introduction, we would emphasise the very important role that the environment and heritage can play in the development of shared spaces and services, and ultimately in building a united community in NI. Enhancing the environment, in terms of public space, has been shown to have a positive impact on, for example, social cohesion and inclusion, with an associated reduction in crime and anti-social behaviour. When designed and maintained well, shared public spaces can bring communities together, provide meeting places, and foster the kind of social community building that can so easily get lost in our urban areas. Well-designed spaces and places shape the culture of an area and help to inform the identity of local communities. We recommend that **green infrastructure be promoted as a key mechanism for achieving multiple policy objectives across a wide range of Departments – not least because of its potential for bringing communities together.**

Specific elements of the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry are dealt with below.

2. *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.*
  - 2.1 Green shared space is recognised as a key factor in developing a **sense of community**<sup>1</sup> - it provides us with venues for **neighbourliness and social cohesion**. Access to open and green spaces gives us a valuable chance to socialise with neighbours and others with whom we would not otherwise come into contact. Well-designed and maintained shared green space in urban areas is known to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, contributing to the establishment of stable societies<sup>2</sup>.
  - 2.2 In any attempt to build a more united community in Northern Ireland, our children are crucial. How children connect with the environment, and with other children in that context, can have profound implications for how they develop. Outdoor play and recreation helps to develop children's social skills (including, for example, dealing with confrontation, language and comprehension, physical ability)<sup>3</sup>. Increasing our networks of green areas to enable safe outdoor leisure time in shared cross-community spaces represents a significant positive investment in our young people and a shared future.
  - 2.3 Shared green spaces can also promote social cohesion by being used as venues for **social events** – food and music festivals have seen great success in places such as Botanic Gardens (Belfast), Ebrington Square (Derry-Londonderry), Oxford Island, Crawfordsburn Country Park, and many more.
  - 2.4 **People want to use green spaces and wild places.** There is evidence to demonstrate that the more people use public spaces, the more they are satisfied with them and value

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<sup>1</sup> CABE Space. (2004). Manifesto for Better Public Spaces

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.csd.org.uk/uploadedfiles/files/value\\_of\\_green\\_space\\_report.pdf](http://www.csd.org.uk/uploadedfiles/files/value_of_green_space_report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/the-value-of-public-space.pdf>;  
[http://www.edphis.org.uk/Report\\_on\\_Place\\_and\\_Children.pdf](http://www.edphis.org.uk/Report_on_Place_and_Children.pdf)

them, leading to a developed sense of civic pride<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, people are more likely to use shared spaces if they are ‘natural’ in character<sup>5</sup>.

- 2.5 ‘Green infrastructure’ is a term used to describe green spaces, generally in urban environments, that are used to deliver solutions to social and environmental problems. Green infrastructure is incredibly valuable to society because of the services that it delivers (for example, shared recreation space with associated health and social benefits, safe active travel routes, and environmental benefits such as flood alleviation). We recommend that **green infrastructure be promoted as a key mechanism for achieving multiple policy objectives across a wide range of Departments – not least because of its potential for bringing communities together**. The Connswater Community Greenway (coordinated by the East Belfast Partnership) is an exemplar of what can be achieved – it is a great success story and has the potential to transform its surrounding area, changing how people move around portions of the city and utilise the shared space in their own neighbourhood. NIEL would recommend exploring ways in which this project could be replicated in other areas of Northern Ireland. Funding for the Connswater Community Greenway came from a wide range of sources, each recognising the great benefit of investing in such a scheme.
- 2.6 Heritage (the historic environment) and education can play an important role in shared space and building a united community<sup>6</sup>. The ‘heritage perspective’ can often change attitudes to the present day – when we gain an historic appreciation of how society functioned (well or otherwise) it can have a positive impact on how we view the society in which we live now. We have a very rich heritage environment in Northern Ireland – one that, looking beyond previous decades of trouble, can provide a **sense of shared heritage** – both natural and built/historic. We would strongly endorse the efforts of NIEA in producing their forward-looking Historic Environment Strategy, which makes that heritage central to the prosperity of our society.
- 2.7 Sustainable transport is an important issue for building cohesion in and across communities (and is linked to the idea of green infrastructure, explored above). Increasing sustainable and active travel has been shown to foster a sense of social inclusion – car ownership rates in Belfast suggest that many inner city families are very restricted in the spaces that they use, and suffer from social exclusion as a result. Furthermore, it has been shown that in areas of heavy traffic, sense of community can become eroded – people living in heavy traffic areas are more likely to consider the boundaries of their home as ‘their territory’, rather than reaching out into the broader neighbourhood. In planning for a united community in Northern Ireland, **it is important that spatial/land use planning and transport planning become more coordinated/integrated**.
- 2.8 We would emphasise the importance of initiatives such as the **NIEA Challenge Fund** in building sense of community and civic pride. One clear example of this is the ‘Suffolk

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<sup>4</sup> CABE Space. (2010). Urban Green Nation: Building the Evidence Base

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/the-value-of-public-space.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/imported-docs/p-t/putting-historic-environment-to-work.pdf>

Interface Pocket Plots' project. This project sought to develop cross-community plots on the interface zone between the Suffolk estate and Suffolk Crescent/Ladybrook area, and will eventually include a gardening and tool library, rainwater harvesting, a communal polytunnel and a pond. The project benefited from the Challenge Fund scheme in providing technical expertise.

There are many more examples of Challenge Fund projects working towards the enhancement of community cohesion. In the West Belfast Alleyways Project, local residents transformed their alleyways into attractive, safe and environmental friendly spaces for the local community. In Burrenbridge, a 2.5 acre community field was transformed into five zones with different uses addressing the needs of the local community – a garden for the elderly, a family recreation space, a community vegetable garden, a fruit garden, and a wildlife area. This new space will contribute to building a sense of community and neighbourliness within the local area.

3. *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:*

*Examining the role of communities in policy and decision making in relation to community integration.*

3.1 We would emphasise the important opportunity for **Community Planning** in Local Government Reform. In the new two-tier planning system, structures will be in place whereby communities can become more involved in the development of the vision for their council area, and in its implementation. They can and should be part of decision making in the design of shared spaces and services that different communities can be comfortable with. We recommend that government grasps the opportunity presented by Community Planning, encouraging Local Councils to engage fully with the new processes in the planning system, which we hope will lead to the design of high quality spaces and places in Northern Ireland – something that will lead to greater community cohesion in the ways discussed above.

4. *Make recommendations in order to support and enhance policy and decision-making with regard to building a united community.*

NIEL recommends that:

- 4.1 The environment is recognised as a key factor in building community cohesion;
- 4.2 Natural shared spaces, green infrastructure and recognition of the services that flow to society from the environment ('ecosystem services') be embedded in public policy;
- 4.3 Heritage sites and buildings are promoted as shared spaces for all, and that the public are encouraged to explore and engage with shared heritage as a fresh perspective on the present;

- 4.4 Environmental education is recognised as a key way of promoting the integration of young people across communities in shared green spaces and natural/built heritage sites around Northern Ireland;
- 4.5 There should be strategic investment in environmental enhancement to provide well designed and maintained public spaces (with all the social and community benefits that they bring), for example, rolling out the ideas underpinning the Connswater Community Greenway across Belfast and NI;
- 4.6 There is better integration of land and transport planning across Northern Ireland, making steps towards dealing with social exclusion and providing better-functioning spaces.