

NI Housing Executive's Response to Inquiry into Together; Building a United Community

Introduction

The Housing Executive welcomes the opportunity to submit this response to the Committee of the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister as part of the consultation process relating to the Government's Together Building a United Community Strategy.

It is the Housing Executive's perception that the Inquiry seeks to undertake the following:

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.
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 relations 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.
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.

The Housing Executive hopes that the following may assist the Committee in its undertakings and is happy to provide any follow-up information should this be required:

Response

1. **Explore perspectives on sectarianism, division and good relations training 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.**

The Housing Executive's Community Cohesion Unit was established in 2004 to deliver the organisation's Good Relations Strategy including to deliver shared housing where it is 'practicable, desirable and safe'. The Strategy is delivered within five themes;

- Residential Segregation and Integration
- Flags, Emblems & Sectional Symbols
- Race Relations
- Interface Areas
- Communities in Transition
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All Housing Executive good relations work is delivered under existing Housing Executive budgets with funding from the Department for Social Development rather than the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister's Good Relations budget.

Residential Segregation and Integration

Under the Residential Segregation and Integration theme the Housing Executive has adopted a twin track approach. The Shared New Build Programme under which every new build scheme is considered for its shared potential which, since 2006, has delivered 11 shared new build schemes. The unique feature of these schemes is a 'voluntary charter' where new tenants sign up to a set of principles and values to respect difference in their community.

The Housing Executive has also been actively promoting the concept of sharing within its existing housing estates which are still deeply segregated some 15 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. NIHE estates are 90% single identity, with this figure rising to 94% in Belfast. In 2008, funded by the International Fund for Ireland, the Housing Executive designed and delivered the Shared Neighbourhood Programme with the aim of securing and protecting shared neighbourhoods across NI and producing a 'ripple effect' of sharing. Thirty estates agreed to participate in this Programme and it now includes around 60,000 people. The programme was the subject of a very positive evaluation and at DSD's request; it was mainstreamed in 2011 as the Shared Communities Programme. This programme developed a further 20 Housing Executive estates as shared communities.

The Housing Executive has now been tasked with delivering a further 10 shared new build schemes under the TBUC agenda and is establishing criteria for selection and delivery of these schemes in order to meet these required outcomes.

Flags, Emblems & Sectional Symbols

Political and sectarian displays are prevalent within Housing Executive estates and are a form of marking out territory e.g. murals, flags, curb painting, bonfires and paramilitary memorials. Significant transformation of these displays has been made by using proactive negotiations and a local mediative approach and Housing Executive funding of re-imaging initiatives through the Community Cohesion Unit works with both sides of the community, at the communities pace.

This practice has shown that re-imaging work can be the catalyst for physical, social and economic regeneration, but it can only be successful when the community are at the heart of taking such initiatives forward.

A new approach to bonfire funding and management has been very successful with a record number of communities transforming their traditional bonfire celebrations into more family friendly and more acceptable celebrations of culture.

Race Relations

Under this theme the Housing Executive works to tackle and, where possible, develop positive interventions to all forms of hate crime. Race, challenging racial harassment and violence, ethnicity, diverse nationalities, migration, Traveller and Gypsy families are all very important issues and key elements that inform the Housing Executive's Race Relations Policy. We continue to develop our approach to these issues in the context of our Race Relations Strategy which was developed in line with the previous Race Equality Strategy and launched in 2005. It is the Housing Executive's intention to review this policy once the revised Race Equality Strategy is launched.

Interface Areas

This will be addressed under Theme 2.

Communities in Transition

Under this theme the Housing Executive currently develops intervention models for estates which are at risk of descending into inter or intra-community violence. We have a small budget which is used to support local estate based cohesion projects and these small scale; local good relations projects can have significant impact within communities.

Peace III

The Housing Executive successfully bid for £300,000 from Belfast City Council's Peace III funding which enabled us to deliver a further four shared communities in Belfast.

In addition, the Housing Executive, in partnership with the Rural Development Council and TIDES Training, successfully bid for £3.5m to deliver the very successful Building Relationships in Communities (BRIC) Programme.

Examples of Good Practice

BRIC Programme

This Peace III funded 4-year programme commenced in 2010 and was delivered under three main themes:

Changing Minds

A bespoke training programme, delivered by TIDES Training put Good Relations at the heart of the Housing Executive's policies and service delivery functions. The training was designed for staff in the Housing Executive to help the organisation achieve good relations outcomes out of all the work we undertake.

This training was delivered in a bottom up-top down approach and included the training of Board members, directors, policy staff and operational District staff. This training was also delivered to 88 estates across NI with a bursary of £5000 awarded upon completion of the course that allowed communities to deliver good relations projects in their areas.

Sharing Visions

This was intended to provide 2 interface communities with an interactive visioning tool to help communities visualise how their neighbourhoods could look without walls and barriers, to help them move forward and potentially removing sectarian barriers in their neighbourhoods.

This theme also conducted research into how 2 Urban Renewal Areas could be delivered in a manner that embeds community cohesion into the redevelopment process.

Crossing Borders

This research helped inform Housing Executive staff and partnering cross-border institutions on how to develop housing policy on a cross-border housing market delivery model in order to promote cross-border participation and integration in border housing market areas.

Programme Aims

The overall aim of the project was to build the institutional good relations capacity of the Housing Executive through a pilot service delivery model which aimed to empower staff to address the issues of Northern Ireland's segregated housing market.

Key outputs of the BRIC Programme

Description	
Changing Minds	
No of Courses delivered to NIHE staff	183
No of Mentoring Days	359
Reflective Practice Days	176
No of Beneficiaries	2775
No of NIHE staff trained	1669
Good Relations Plans established for estates	85
Residents/Community Associations participating in the Programme	87
Residents/Community Associations implementing GR projects	83
Residents/Community Associations trained in good relations	87
Community Change advocates trained	21
Murals re-imaged	7
Contentious memorials transformed	3

Practice around contentious memorials	1
Technical assessment of NIHE peace walls	1
EA on shared space	1
Community houses upgraded	17
Seminars	3
Sharing Visions	
Research report identifying 2 suitable interface areas for intervention	1
Suitable interface areas identified	2
3D visioning model developed	1
Crossing Borders	
Housing trends in border region research report	1
Cross-border steering housing committee established	1
Seminar	1

Shared Communities Programme

The Shared Communities Programme commenced in 2012 and was aimed at supporting and encouraging shared communities across Northern Ireland. The central purpose was 'To develop shared housing communities where people choose to live with others regardless of their religion or race, in a neighbourhood that is safe and welcoming to all, and threatening to no-one'. The programme focused on existing housing areas.

The Programme aims and objectives were:

- To establish a regional mechanism to provide an integrated and co-ordinated approach to support areas where diversity is welcomed
- To deliver 20 designated Shared Communities over a three year period to existing social housing areas identified through a selection process and community consultation
- To develop cohesive communities where people have a sense of belonging, where people from different backgrounds have similar life chances, where diversity is respected and where people from different backgrounds mix and do not have separate parallel lives
- To provide real opportunities for people who wish to live in shared communities
- To encourage shared communities to engage with their neighbouring estates to show best practice in shared housing
- To develop a community engaged in meaningful dialogue toward mutual understanding
- To draw out best practice to inform and influence the social policy framework and contribute to neighbourhood renewal and associated strategies and work towards any convergence of those strategies where added value can be achieved in doing so.

The Programme was a resounding success with 20 communities signing up to be shared communities. All of the communities underwent Good Relations training. All of them held joint events with communities from different backgrounds ranging from cultural to religious. All of them sought to understand their own culture before opening dialogue with those of different cultures. Taking part in the programme also provided the opportunity to develop community cohesion advocates who, in turn, are now mentoring other communities thus

achieving the 'ripple effect' objective of promoting sharing as the way forward and engaging with neighbouring estates to show best practice in shared housing. Various aspects of the programme in the form of employability training provided access to employment for some communities where unemployment levels were extremely high. Approximately 40,000 are now involved in the programme.

Sandy Row Re-imaging Project

The replacement of a highly contentious mural, depicting a gunman, at the entrance to Sandy Row provided a catalyst for growth in the area with 5 new shops opening in the weeks following the launch of the re-imaged mural.

Better Bonfires Initiative

The Housing Executive has a small fund to encourage communities to transform their traditional bonfire celebrations to more family friendly and more culturally acceptable celebrations. This programme has grown year on year with a record number of 32 applications to date this year. In order to deliver this initiative the Housing Executive works in partnership with local Councils and communities.

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**

There are 88 peace walls in Belfast, mostly within or adjacent to Housing Executive estates. 20 of these are in Housing Executive ownership. There are a further four peace walls in Derry/Londonderry and 2 in Portadown. The Housing Executive is represented on the cross-statutory/community advisory group which is chaired by the Department of Justice and is assisted by funding for the International Fund for Ireland who support local community groups to work towards barrier removal/modification. The Housing Executive also works with and provides support to communities who wish to remove or re-image barriers. To this end, through the BRIC project, we have developed a visioning tool on 2 DOJ interfaces and all 20 NIHE peace lines and we are currently in discussions with a number of communities on how these structures can be re-imagined, re-designed or removed. Through the visioning tool process our architects have shown groups what their areas can look like with the barriers removed. We are currently working with interface communities in North Belfast to see if some of these plans can be realised. A consultation process to define the feasibility of providing a 3D Visioning tool for use by interface communities in Derry/Londonderry is currently underway.

The Housing Executive has also been tasked with delivering the Normalisation Programme/Aftercare Package on behalf of DOJ. Work is required to NIHE owned homes

and private properties to allow the remodelling of the peace wall and to afford residents immediately adjacent to the interface barriers adequate security protection to their homes in the event of attacks resulting from the barrier removal. Work includes the removal of steel grills fitted to windows overlooking the interface and replacing this with toughened glass. Other minor works may also be required such as the provision of protection to oil tanks and work required will be assessed and determined for each location. These measures will provide the properties with security protection yet transform the appearance away from a heavily fortified security environment. This transformation to a more normalised society will be accompanied by ongoing community relations work within the communities affected and it is hoped, will lead to a truly peaceful post conflict NI society. Spend this year for such works is estimated to be in the region of £50k. This will bring the total NIHE spend on interface modification in year 2014/15 to approx. £200k.

The Housing Executive is a member of the Interface Advisory Group, tasked with taking forward barrier removal to interface structures and will continue to play an active role is contributing to the TBUC aim of removing all interface structures by 2023.

A key point for TBUC on interfaces is the very real need for a comprehensive regeneration strategy for each of the barrier locations as the security structures themselves are not all that is keeping the communities apart. The roads, vacant properties, empty spaces, derelict commercial properties and general blight and dereliction all need to be addressed in order to effect a real change in people's behaviour at interface locations. This is why it is essential that a joined up regeneration plan is devised for each of the areas, with the community at the heart, driving forward the project.

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

The Housing Executive believes that tackling sectarianism and racism should be at the heart of all public policy and delivery. Good relations should not just be a side issue but should be central to everything we do in the public service.

All good relations programmes should have the community at the very centre of it and all programmes must look at how the community can be the key catalyst for change in our post conflict society.

Regeneration must be a key driver in all good relations work, with projects providing a transformative outcome for the communities in which they operating in order to deliver real change for our society.