

Response to Consultation;

The Inquiry into Building a United Community on behalf of OFMDFM



Northern Ireland Youth Forum
October 2014



The Northern Ireland Youth Forum's (NIYF), Champions 4 Change Project welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into Building a United Community on behalf of OFMDFM.

The NIYF aspires to supporting young people to effect change in their communities and we are strong advocates of young people as emerging leaders. The NIYF prides its self in involving young people in the policy making process and supporting young people to engage directly with decision makers at the very highest levels. Young people make up one third of the population of the North of Ireland and have a vital role to play in effecting social change.

We aim to support young people and to help build their self-confidence and belief in themselves, so that they can raise and discuss issues of importance to them. The NIYF's work is cross community in nature and focuses on social issues. We place equality, diversity, independence and interdependence central to our ethos. We believe that all young people should be listened to and respected and we place understanding and acceptance of cultural and political diversity at the forefront of our work. We work to achieve a situation of empowerment – where young people are proactive in the decision making process.

The NIYF, in partnership with BYTES manages a Big Lottery funded project entitled 'Champions 4 Change' (C4C). The C4C project encapsulates the youth model of the NIYF:

- 1/ Personal Change – The belief in young people to affect personal change.
- 2/ Peer Change – The belief in young people to assist and support their peers
- 3/ Community Change – The belief in young people collectively to affect change at a community level.
- 4/ Societal Change – The belief in young people to bring about change in wider society; at local, national and international levels.

The C4C programme seeks to engage young people aged 16-20, who are in Need of Employment, Education or Training. It aims to develop their ability to make personal change and influence peer, community and societal change.

Methodology

As part of this process, C4C staff engaged with twenty-three young people from a diverse range of religious, political, academic and economic backgrounds - to discuss their views on the 'Together Building A United Community' strategy launched by OFMDFM in May 2013.

To facilitate discussion the young people were provided with the following information:

‘Together Building A United Community’

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is undertaking an Inquiry into Building a United Community

What is the Inquiry about?

The purpose of the inquiry is to inform the governments approach in the actions it takes to tackle sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance; and to make recommendations in order to support and enhance policy in uniting communities and community integration, including how communities are involved in decision-making. The Inquiry will also seek to make recommendations based on the evidence gathered.

What is it they want us to look at?

What is ‘Sectarianism’?

What is meant by ‘Division’?

What is meant by ‘Good Relations’?

What is meant by ‘Shared Space’?

What is meant by ‘Shared Services’?

How can ‘Sectarianism’ be addressed?

How can ‘Division’ be addressed?

How can we promote ‘Good Relations’?

How can we promote ‘Shared Space’ and ‘Shared Services’?

What are the unique challenges of interfaces?

How can we respond to the unique challenges of interfaces?

What role do we each play in the above and what role do our communities play?

Background information

Essentially, you are being asked to consider the reasons for the ongoing difficulties that our communities experience in moving from a conflict society to a more peaceful society and to consider ways in which these difficulties can be overcome at both a community and governmental levels. At the heart of this inquiry is whether or not we can and should live together i.e. shared housing, recreational facilities, education etc... However, this does not mean that to achieve one you must agree with the other. Most venues within the city centre would be seen as shared spaces; pubs, shops, restaurants, cinema etc...however these can be maintained and indeed developed further without people having to be educated together or living next to each other.

Group Discussions Agenda

- 1/ Who or what is OFMDFM?
- 2/ What is the role of a government-sponsored committee?
- 3/What is this inquiry about? Why have it?
- 4/What is it they want us to look at?
- 5/Given the information you have discussed thus far, are we looking at the right things? Is there anything else? What do you see is the major problem in your area?

Before we commenced the process of getting the young people to discuss what they thought of the inquiry into the 'Together Building a United Community' strategy, we held informal discussions with them to improve their knowledge and understanding of who and what OFMDFM is, what government committees seek to do and what the original TBUC strategy said.

Summary of Group discussions

What is 'Sectarianism'? How can 'Sectarianism' be addressed?

The young people agreed that sectarianism can mean different things to different people in other places outside of the North of Ireland, however they defined it within their living experiences as; conflict between Catholics and Protestants. This conflict can be violent in its nature, but now is usually limited to verbal disagreements along Political/Religious lines. They gave examples of the flag protests following the removal of the Union Flag, The protests following the Orange Order not being allowed to march back from their 12th July commemorations past the Ardoyne shops and the riots that can break out at certain times of the year, particularly near interface areas. They felt that much of these differences are in relation to those who see themselves as British or Northern Irish and those who see themselves as Irish.

The majority of the young people felt that it was mostly adults who displayed sectarian views and they indicated that they wanted to "move away from all that" and "we don't care what people are or what they believe". Interestingly, when we explored the out workings of these statements they had very clear views. When asked; should the union flag fly above the city hall, or should it fly along side the tricolour or should no flag fly? They all had very clear and divergent views. Equally, when they were asked about "Should there be a United Ireland?" Their responses reflected their opinions on the flags issue. It would therefore seem that whilst many young people do not perceive themselves as sectarian, in that they would not engage in sectarian violence or verbal insults, they do hold similar views that often result in such violence. Given that they hold similar views to those who engage in sectarianism, they were then asked, "How can sectarianism be addressed?" The vast majority of the young people indicated that;

- Integrated and shared education has a role to play.
- Getting opportunities to meet and discuss controversial issues with each other
- Politicians should be careful as to what they say and how they say it.
- The media has a role to play.
- The youth sector has a role to play.

What does 'Division' mean? How can 'Division' be addressed?

Whilst all of the participants agreed that there are many divisions within communities and wider society e.g. housing estates (social housing), private housing developments (people from working class communities who can afford to buy their own house), middle class areas and upper class areas. They defined 'division' within this inquiry as meaning Catholics and Protestants living separately. However, like their description of housing division, they described areas where being a Catholic or a Protestant didn't seem to matter much, at least in terms of feeling divided. These tended to be large social housing estates where you have safety in numbers; private housing developments in close proximity to your original area of residence and middle/upper class areas where they didn't seem to care about the issues that divide people. Where they felt division affects most people was;

- In interface areas. They expressed the view that the fear you might have of the "other side" is nearly directly proportionate to the distance you live from an interface.
- Whilst many of them agreed that we should be aiming towards a society where people can live safely where they like, 'where' might also be with people who share the same political and religious views as yourself. This view was particularly expressed when the young people were discussing their expressed support for shared housing and they were asked "in such shared housing developments could you display your cultural, religious or indeed sporting identity safely"?

The young people identified the same issues that need to be considered as outlined within their discussions on sectarianism;

- Integrated and shared education has a role to play.
- Getting opportunities to meet and discuss controversial issues with each other
- Politicians should be careful as to what they say and how they say it.
- The media has a role to play.
- The Youth Work Sector.

Having discussions about how we respect people's right to be different and how we promote tolerance. It was suggested that;

- These could be undertaken in existing drop in centres in both Catholic and Protestant areas, interface projects, youth provision and schools.
- Some of the young people expressed the view that paramilitary's still exert too much influence on their communities. This leads to community fears to engage with the other community.
- Not forcing interface barriers to come down before people are ready for them to come down, but getting communities to justify why they need to stay up.

What is ‘Good Relations’? How can we promote ‘Good Relations’?

In answering the previous questions the young people felt that they were covering the same issues. They expressed the view that good relations was about respecting your neighbours and neighboring communities. This included people from minority backgrounds as well as different political opinions. Like their previous responses, they felt that education about differences and the opportunity to explore these was at the heart of developing and improving relationships. One of the young people summed up the groups views by saying, “making friends and keeping them, requires constant work. Sometimes you need to agree to have a different opinion on things and not try to get your mate to always agree with you. Relationships in our communities requires you to do the same thing”

What is ‘Shared Space’ and ‘Shared Services’? How can we promote ‘Shared Space’ and ‘Shared Services’?

Through brainstorming exercises the young people identified the following as examples of shared services; hospitals, cinemas, concerts, city centre shops, restaurants and pubs, some leisure centres, some public transport, the response from the fire or ambulance services and the services we receive from our councils.

Through the same exercise they identified; city centres, concerts, some council parks, further education colleges and universities and places where people work as shared space. The young people highlighted that what they had identified as shared spaces and services were shared because the issues that divided people are largely ignored and/or are unknown in these places. When we posed the question “when do you think people will be able to live together and openly share their culture, religious, sporting, political beliefs etc...” they replied “what’s the life expectancy of our current politicians”? (A reference to, things won’t change until we get rid of our current politicians) and “about 15 – 20 years” (This was the timespan chosen by all groups, despite meeting at different times and locations)

When we asked how could we promote both, the young people identified;

- Integrated and shared education has an important role to play in promoting the tolerance and respect necessary to allow people to share space and services.
- Political leadership that supports a shared society.
- Political progress can lead to greater opportunities for jobs and employment. This in turn can lead to greater use of shared space.
- Local councils should look at ways in which council facilities, such as leisure centres can be safely used by everyone
- The government should support trips for young people to visit different countries experiencing conflict or who have recently experienced conflict to learn from them.
- Communities need to be fully informed about the specific cost of

providing separate services and the urgent need to address duplication.

- Opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions about the issues that divide us (They specifically identified the youth work sector as having a role within this).

As noted above the participants were cautious as to the value of identifying shared space/services as indicators of progress, given the often-superficial contact that occurred within them.

What are the unique challenges of interfaces? How can we respond to the unique challenges of interfaces?

As previously mentioned the young people were unanimous in saying that Interface communities need to be fully included in the process to taking interface barriers down. They were aware from the discussions that took place during this part of the process that many interfaces bore the brunt of the violence in the past and that this has left a lasting impression on those who live close to them. Not least in the continued fear and mistrust of those living on the other side. However, the young people felt that sufficient time had progressed for there to be a need to be able to justify the maintenance of all of these barriers. They would suggest that an assessment is made of each interface barrier and that their continued existence would need to be supported by the views of local residents, community leaders and local politicians and a security assessment that supported the retention of them. One of the groups that were consulted with lived in close proximity to an interface. They were unanimous in their belief that the wall dividing them from the “other-side” could not come down for at least 15 – 20 years. In fact their fear at it coming down in the foreseeable future was palpable.

Conclusion

- The young people have a clear understanding as to the nature and causes of sectarianism. Although they would not perceive themselves as sectarian, they hold similar political views as to those that divide us.

The participants were clear in their beliefs that;

- Our education system, including the youth sector, has a role to play.
- There needs to be strong political leadership.
- Political leadership that supports a shared society.
- The media has a role to play to ensure that “Good News” stories are reported.
- Interfaces can only come down when communities are ready for it.
- Each interface should be kept under period review.
- Cross Community “Youth Zones” should be established.
- Young people should be encouraged to undertake international travel that promotes peace building and conflict resolution skills/awareness.

- The influence of paramilitary groups needs to be tackled.
- Local Councils need to proactively support Shared Space.
- The specific financial costs of division need to be highlighted.



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