

# Inquiry into Building a United Community



**Rural Community Network**  
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

## Response to the Inquiry by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister by Rural Community Network

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## Background to Rural Community Network

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN has 300 plus members across Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half of its representatives (12) elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

Under the aim of actively working towards an equitable and peaceful society, RCN has had a long track record in developing community cohesion and promoting reconciliation in rural communities. We see community and good relations work as an integral part of our community development practice contributing to the sustainability of rural communities. Some of the work we have been involved in includes:

- Delivering Peace I & Peace II funding through a specific small grant programme for rural communities.
- Equality Diversity and Interdependence programme.
- Capacity Building towards Rural Reconciliation (funded by Peace II), delivering training on community development and good relations to grass roots rural groups; including a small grant element allowing groups to develop a project which addressed reconciliation and peace building in rural areas.
- Community Halls Advisory Service to facilitate groups to develop shared space in their communities.
- 'More than a Familiar Stranger' research into the perceptions and attitudes of migrant workers and rural host communities; highlighting the challenges of working and living together.
- Research report on the 'Experience of Protestant Communities in Border Areas'.
- Research report on 'Experiences of Catholic Minority Communities in Counties Antrim and Down'.
- Research report on 'Experience of Ethnic Minority Communities in Co Fermanagh'.
- 'Sharing over Separation' research report a precursor to the Rural Enablers programme.
- Rural Enablers programme, a Peace III funded regional programme. The Programme placed a staff member in each of the 6 Northern counties and 6

Border counties, to develop work with community organisations and rural institutions to address sectarianism, segregation and racism.

- Research report 'Beyond Belfast' examining issues of segregation and division in rural communities. A steering group of rural practitioners, voluntary/community organisations and statutory bodies regularly meet to discuss issues of rural contested space on a regional basis. This paper submitted to the inquiry is on behalf of representatives of that steering group, representing the rural sector across Northern Ireland.
- Facilitated development plan for the Confederation of Ulster Bands and subsequent action plan for the way forward.
- Currently delivering a substantial core funded programme (Community Relations Council) across rural Northern Ireland. This programme offers a wide range of initiatives to support community cohesion and peace building in rural areas.
- Currently delivering "Breaking the Silence" programme, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs. This programme offers rural communities the opportunity to engage in dialogue on hard and soft issues affecting their communities.

### **RCN Response to the Committee Inquiry**

RCN's response is informed by our work over the past twenty years in rural communities addressing issues of community relations, good relations and reconciliation. Whilst this paper is a response to the inquiry by RCN we would like it noted that these issues are recurring themes raised at the Beyond Belfast steering group. For further information on the terms of reference of the Beyond Belfast steering group see Appendix 1.

The most important issue to address from our perspective is the need to recognise that sectarianism, segregation and racism, whilst less visible in rural communities compared to their urban counterparts are still prevalent:

*"There is no question that in a rural context, issues of attachment to area, locality and in some cases the very land itself, are emotive. Such emotion, in conjunction with sectarianism, makes issues around division, which permeates through housing, schools, sport and leisure, basic services and community and cultural activities, challenging to address. This is particularly true when the lines of division can be much more subtle than in many urban areas and are not characterised by obvious physical structures and separation, but rather are based upon subjective perceptions of where is, and subsequently where is not, suitably safe and 'neutral'. The cost of such division both financially, in terms of duplication of services, and socially, in terms of the impact on people, continues to have detrimental consequences to the sustainability of rural communities both now and in the future. Black and minority ethnic communities also face distinct issues due to often increased isolation, visibility and distance from sources of support, information and services."*

**(RCN Rural Manifesto 2010)**

In many rural communities, whilst physical interface barriers do not exist as they do in some urban areas, segregation is still widespread but can be harder for those living outside the area to perceive. Indicators of where sectarianism and segregation may be an issue in rural

areas include:

- Communities where flags, emblems and memorials are perceived as “marking territory”.
- Communities where land and property is sold only to members of the same community thereby maintaining segregation.
- Communities where contentious marches take place.
- Communities where attacks on symbolic buildings e.g. Orange halls and GAA premises have taken place.

The Beyond Belfast report commissioned by Rural Community Network and the Community Relations Council in 2009 highlighted the issue of rural contested space whereby whilst physical interface barriers did not exist, rural communities were still segregated. This concept of rural contested space was developed and formulated through this research and in recent years, has become accepted within a number of key strategic government policies, in particular “Together Building a United Community.”

The Beyond Belfast report identified a number of typologies which characterise contested space across Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup>

*“Our research suggests that a number of key factors are necessary for segregated spaces in small towns and rural areas to become contested spaces. These include:*

- *Demographic factors that impact upon a sense of control or dominance over space;*
- *The emergence of a degree of contest over space, resources and or services;*
- *The quality of relationships between members of the local Protestant unionist and Catholic nationalist communities, including the quality of political and community leadership;*
- *The presence of trigger events and activities;*
- *The existence of temporal triggers;*
- *The availability of target sites; and*
- *The experience of acts of sectarian violence.”*<sup>2</sup>

The Rural Enabler Programme and the Cohesion Sharing and Integration programme, through RCN have undertaken a number of initiatives to try and break down those invisible barriers that still exist in rural areas. An example of this was the work carried out with Portavogie Cultural and Heritage Project. Participants in this project wished to engage with their Catholic neighbours in nearby Portaferry. There was some communication between

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<sup>1</sup> Click on this link to access a copy of the Beyond Belfast report  
[http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.co.uk/DatabaseDocs/doc\\_3480212.pdf](http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.co.uk/DatabaseDocs/doc_3480212.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Beyond Belfast pp4

the villagers and through a local storytelling and heritage project which developed dialogue and relationships and witnessed more positive relationships between the two villages allowing for more open channels of communication. The out workings of the programme were joint training with both communities, a family fun evening and a local historical publication. RCN has many other examples of the work it has undertaken in rural contested spaces.

### **What works in tackling good relations and sectarianism at community level?**

Without an agreed definition of good relations and sectarianism, Rural Community Network work towards the principles and definitions used by the Community Relations Council , as an expert organisation in the field. *“Challenging sectarianism and racism, promoting equality, developing respect for diversity, and raising awareness of interdependence of the people and institutions within Northern Ireland.”*

**RCN is of the view that the TBUC policy should have presented a definition of good relations and sectarianism. The absence of definition of these terms is a weakness of the TBUC policy.**

Clear identification and articulation of the issues and feelings at local level is also a crucial element to dealing with good relations and sectarianism. Having the ability to relate to community issues, working at the pace of the community, clearly identifying community need and working towards addressing those needs are all key components to addressing good relations. Relationship building and trust at a local level are crucial, alongside working in partnership with those in the locality.

There is a recognition that effective community development work at local level must address issues of community/good relations. Taking a community development approach to building good relations is essential.

RCN is also acutely aware that there needs to be an acknowledgment of the impact of the Troubles and the trauma that still exists amongst victims and survivors in the community. RCN staff are trained in recognising and dealing with trauma, with two members of staff trained in positive encounter dialogue and storytelling. This approach allows rural communities to begin to open up and discuss the hurts of the past in a safe and non-judgemental way. Linking in with expert organisations in the field, RCN have worked with many rural communities to begin this process of recovery, with an excellent track record. This is highly sensitive work and is a long term process and there needs to be a clear recognition that there are many rural dwellers that were significantly impacted by the conflict who still have not engaged in any process of recovery.

Independent and skilled facilitation is a key feature of tackling and working on good relations and sectarianism within Northern Ireland. Having an independent organisation dealing with the issues means that people can feel safer and freer to discuss issues

important to them without political or institutional influence. RCN also values the importance of a skilled workforce and regularly trains staff in skills necessary for this type of sensitive work, ranging from basic good relations training to anti sectarianism training, cultural diversity, mediation skills, negotiation skills, recognising trauma and dealing with contentious issues.

Empowering local communities to begin to engage in good relations at a pace that is suitable to their situation and community is essential. There must be a willingness to engage in this type of work and communities must feel empowered to engage in this type of work. Communities also need a “hand up” when it comes to this type of work, in that a rural expert to support, advise and guide them towards good relations is very important. Many communities do not have the skills or resources to engage in this type of work, even if the willingness is there.

It is also important to note that in terms of breaking down barriers and building relationships, short term interventions do not have the same impact as the development of longer term initiatives, therefore good relations programmes must be viewed in terms of at least a five year programme.

Given the clear linkages between racism and sectarianism the Community Relations Council recently facilitated a number of discussions with a wide range of stakeholders to discuss and reflect on OFMDFM’s draft Racial Equality Strategy, A Sense of Belonging. Emerging from this discourse was the desire to find common ground on a number of issues that concerned those working for and with people from a BME and minority faith background living and working in Northern Ireland. Subsequently, a unified response was developed and launched in the form of a ‘Common Platform’ paper<sup>3</sup> which highlighted an agreed twelve common themes and principles critical to the successful implementation of a strategy.

## **Recommendations**

RCN welcomes the specific references within the Together Building a United Community strategy to the challenges of tackling sectarianism, segregation and racism in rural communities. We also welcome the recognition of the existence of rural contested space and the need for adopting different approaches in rural communities. However, to date, we have seen little evidence that Together Building a United Community will be rural proofed – delivered in a different way to meet the particular needs of rural communities.

We recommend:

- That OFMDFM ensures that programmes and policies that are emerging from TBUC meet the needs of communities in rural areas through a robust rural-proofing process.

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.community-relations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CommonPlatform.pdf>

- That OFMDFM and the wider Executive continue to engage with the breadth of civic society groups including community and voluntary sector, trade unions, churches, sporting organisations, loyal orders etc to develop further actions that will deliver on the ambitious objectives within the TBUC policy. The action plans themselves must also be accompanied with sufficient resourcing and funds to sustain interventions and programmes both in the short, medium and long term. We believe the example of the co-production of the United Youth programme which is being developed in partnership with stakeholders by the Department of Employment and Learning is an example of how the development of good relations programmes should take place.
- That OFMDFM and the wider Executive analyses how sectarianism, segregation and racism manifest differently in rural communities and that specific actions are developed to address these issues in rural areas.
- That OFMDFM and the wider Executive further investigates how these issues manifest in border communities, and how both governments North and South, can adopt a cross border approach to tackling sectarianism, racism and segregation where appropriate.
- That the programme clearly affirms the cross departmental nature of the programme and sets out how government departments will be expected to address these issues across their remit. The strategy should require government departments to set out SMART objectives which will realise the vision of TBUC strategy.
- RCN is concerned that the headline actions have come to dominate the delivery of TBUC to date. We recommend that OFMDFM give equal attention to the four priority areas.
- That the Community Relations Council is retained as an independent, critical voice that can offer advice and promote debate and understanding on these issues.
- That OFMDFM and other government departments ensure that issues of sectarianism, segregation and racism are taken seriously as key issues to be addressed by local councils through action plans developed by the community planning process and in the broader reform of local government process.
- That there needs to be an agreed definition in law of sectarianism and good relations and these definitions are communicated to all government departments, intermediary bodies and grass roots development organisations to ensure there is a common approach to this type of work.
- That there needs to be an agreement that equality and good relations are interrelated and that for a more sustainable cohesive community, we cannot have one without the other.

- TBUC must also address the racism faced by migrant communities as well as addressing how it will support host communities to respond to the challenges of diversity.

### **The effectiveness of the Good Relations indicators –**

With regards to the effectiveness of the Good Relations indicators RCN, independently, responded to the OFMDFM consultation earlier in 2014. Some of the issues we raised were:

- How will the indicators be used to monitor good relations in rural areas – there are no interfaces as they are understood in towns and cities although rural communities can be just as segregated? There does not appear to be any question posed in the OFMDFM Good Relations surveys that specifically asks people in rural areas about their experiences of contested space as opposed to interfaces.
- With regard to the use of indicators from the NI the Life and Times survey it may be possible that more extreme views are not disclosed to researchers. Most of the NILT survey is administered face-to-face although there is a self completion element – under these conditions there is a risk that people do not express their true attitudes thereby under-estimating the extent of sectarian attitudes within the population.

### **Conclusion**

RCN welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. We welcome the opportunity to meet with the OFMDFM committee either as an individual organisation or as part of a delegation from the broader Beyond Belfast group to explore these issues further.



# Appendix 1

## Beyond Belfast Steering Group

### Terms of Reference

#### **Vision**

*A peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society free of contested spaces and interfaces and founded on tolerance, partnership, equality and mutual respect as a basis of good relationships.*

#### **Mission**

To assist government, community and voluntary and others in working to transform and remove contested spaces and interfaces beyond Belfast.

#### **Strategic Aims**

The Beyond Belfast Steering Group (BBSG) was set up in 2009. It aims to:

- Influence Government policy and practice in relation to contested spaces and interfaces beyond Belfast (POLICY)
- Initiate or support peace-building initiatives in interface or contested spaces outside of Belfast. (PRACTICE)

#### **Strategic Objectives**

With these in mind, BBSG will:

- Support existing or new work that helps create the conditions for contested spaces to become non contentious and for the removal of all interface barriers beyond Belfast. (PRACTICE)
- Initiate work which will address contested space issues and supports where this is possible the removal of interface barriers as part of an inclusive, community centred approach towards building a shared society. (POLICY AND PRACTICE)
- Gather together information on interfaces and contested spaces beyond Belfast. (POLICY)

## **Indicative Strategic Actions**

- Bring together key policy-makers and experienced practitioners working in the field of good relations, conflict transformation and community regeneration (POLICY and PRACTICE)
- Stimulate debate on contested space and interface areas beyond Belfast, through delivering a series of seminars, workshops, conference and research aimed at mainstreaming ideas and policy proposals and highlight challenges which need to be addressed to achieve transformation. (POLICY)
- Engage with and advise Government Departments on potential and existing Government interventions that are relevant to contested spaces and interfaces outside Belfast. (POLICY)
- Develop a programme with specific outcomes in partnership with other key organisations that pilots possible approaches to addressing contested spaces and interfaces outside Belfast (PRACTICE)
- Disseminate any learning from BBSG work (POLICY)
- Create opportunities for policy makers and practitioners to share experience and good practice. (PRACTICE)

## **Approach**

The BBSG approach is based on 3 key elements:

- It must be inclusive and prioritise the needs of the local communities
- Strategies must be developed to meet the specific local context
- It will build upon existing good practice and address any gaps in provision

## **Membership**

The membership will initially focus on representation from any statutory/community and voluntary organisation across the region with a remit for addressing contested spaces outside Belfast. Members will participate as named individual representatives of organisations, to try and promote consistency of attendance. Organisations may opt in and out of the process if and when they desire but no group will have the authority to disrupt the process.

## **Principles**

This will require members of the BBSG to:

- Be influential within their agencies
- To encourage a flexible approach to practices which may be beneficial to enabling or sustaining good relations approaches which takes full account of the problems and opportunities for local areas.
- To share relevant information and best practice

- To ensure that all responses to the legacy of physical segregation the safety and security of the people living near to contested spaces and physical interfaces must be a priority.

### **Values**

- The work of the Steering group will be carried out through promoting
- Mutual understanding
- The acquisition and dissemination of new knowledge
- Respect and tolerance
- Shared ownership of common issues, concerns, resources and opportunities
- Creativity and innovation, equality and accountability
- Self help and mutual support

### **Subgroups**

Subgroups of members with particular expertise may be established for specific pieces of work

### **Partnership working**

All partners within the process will be values participants, who are committed to the process and principles, which seek to meet the above aims and objectives. Individuals will take responsibility for their own actions and for regular communication to their agencies and organisations.

### **Meeting schedule**

Meetings will be scheduled annually and will take place on a quarterly basis