

YCNI Response to TBUC enquiry, October 2014.

Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) wish to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for OFMDFM for the opportunity to submit written evidence to the current Inquiry into Building a United Community.

In May 2013, when OFMDFM launched the 'Together: Building a United Community' (TBUC) Strategy, although not directly involved in its development, YCNI very much welcomed its intent to 'reflect the Executive's commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society', and in particular its key priority to children and young people.

Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) was established in 1990, with a key function to encourage and develop community relations. Over the years a number of initiatives and review processes have highlighted the important contribution of Youth Service to the creation, development and maintenance of a peaceful society (see for example 1999; DENI, A Model for Effective Practice, 1987 (*updated 2003*); DENI, A Youth Service for a New Millennium; DENI, CRED Policy Guidance notes, 2011).

Potentially the most significant piece of work in terms of policy direction for youth service in recent times, Priorities for Youth, launched by the Education Minister in 2013, reflected the central role that youth work has to play, noting that 'equipping children and young people with the skills, attitudes and behaviours needed to recognise, understand and respect difference... is particularly important as we continue to deal with the legacy of the conflict and move towards a shared and inclusive society'. Within this context the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) Policy plays a vital role in supporting youth service providers (and schools) to deliver on this area. However, the task of embedding CRED within all youth and school settings is large, and resources limited; thus any desire to draw on the skills and expertise within youth work to contribute to the wider aims of TBUC will require additional, long term resourcing.

The YCNI wishes to highlight that youth work practitioners, particularly those with many years commitment to peace and reconciliation work, want to make a direct contribution to the implementation and delivery of a strategy aimed at improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society.

The YCNI recognises and welcomes the commitment under the TBUC children and young people priority to develop a United Youth programme, and related efforts taken forward by DEL to promote co-design between those involved in the delivery of community relations based work within youth work, with those who are re-engaging young people who are not in education, training or employment (NEET). YCNI views this as an important development aimed at equipping young people who are not in education, training or employment with the skills, attitudes and behaviours needed to recognise, understand and respect difference as part of a wider package of support aimed at enhancing employability; and endorse the view that there is a complementarity between youth work outcomes and the key competencies and qualities identified by employers as important to employability.

The YCNI also welcomes developments aimed at enhancing the shared experience of our young people through formal education and the vital role this work has to play in continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. Voluntary sector organisations, particularly those from the youth sector, have played a key role in supporting schools to embrace this work, and have a range of skills and expertise which should be effectively utilised to achieve this aim.

The United Youth programme targets young people not in education, training or employment. This cohort make up an estimated 14% of the total population aged 16-24 (DFP, LFS Quarterly Supplement: April – June 2014, published 27 August 2014). Youth Service aims to provide services for young people aged 4-25. An estimated 29% of the total population falls into this age bracket (NISRA, Population Estimates, 2013). Whilst NEET young people are an important and vulnerable group of young people, it is notable that both peace building theory and local practice experience would point to the need for participation of all young people in efforts aimed at securing an inclusive and shared society and early intervention as modeling good practice.

YCNI also wishes to draw attention to the importance of engaging with the wider civic society in order to bring forward a peace-building strategy that not only matches the vision and aspirations of both the Belfast and St Andrew's Agreements, but the aspiration and hopes within and across local communities.

Relationship building across divided communities remains central to the process of maintaining lasting reconciliation and must underpin OFMDFM's commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. Robust community consultation and transparent decision making processes will also greatly enhance confidence.

Peace-building should be positioned within a strong legislative framework, with international obligations and standards. However, tasks such as defining sectarianism or racism must draw from existing bodies of work in this area in order to avoid protracted and costly exercises which may distract from the key task in hand; which is to ensure there is on-going work to address sectarianism and racism and the outworkings of these manifestations at grass roots level.

OFMDFM's commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society (including the list of practical outcomes outlined within TBUC) will benefit from a sustainable, well-resourced package and accompanying operational plan outlining the breadth and range of underpinning activity required to make each of these proposed outcomes a reality. Prioritisation of financial investment would reflect the stated political commitment to this area. Existing models of good practice should be built upon (including whole organisational approaches to embedding this work such as that modelled by the JEDI initiative (see: www.jedini.com). In addition, a regional body, at arm's length to Government, would be beneficial to securing co-ordination and ongoing challenge for peacebuilding work.