

FROM A SHARED FUTURE TO COHESION, SHARING AND INTEGRATION: DEVELOPMENTS IN GOOD RELATIONS POLICY

The purpose of this paper is to examine the planned shift in Community Relations policy in Northern Ireland. A new community relations policy is due to be published by OFMDFM which will take the place of the current strategy document *A Shared Future*. This paper will track the developments of this and examine how the new policy of *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* differs from *A Shared Future*.

BACKGROUND TO A SHARED FUTURE

In March 2005 *A Shared Future - Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland* was published with a Ministerial statement from the Rt Hon John Spellar MP. The *A Shared Future* (ASF) policy framework was the product of a lengthy consultation exercise, the focal point of which was *A Shared Future a Consultation Paper on Improving Relations in Northern Ireland* which was launched on 28 January 2003. As well as responses to the consultation report a survey was carried out of the NI population and a number of focus groups were conducted. The conclusion from this work was that:

*Government was urged to take a cross-departmental approach that explicitly encouraged “**sharing over separation**” in delivering policies and services for good relations.*¹

The responses to the consultation indicated to government that:

*there is **overwhelming support for a shared society**. Specifically, three public policy areas attracted most attention during the consultation: security and law and order, education, and housing.*²

In light of this the Government took the stance that they would adopt a proactive approach to promoting a more shared society. They drew on research evidence to support this approach, identifying that the conflict had a number of economic implications and that it led to a duplication of services:

*Division in Northern Ireland is costly in terms of both social and public resources. There is, unquestionably, **an economic imperative to tackle these costs**, particularly when government has to face up to hard decisions relating to balanced investments across public services. Adaptive*

¹ Para 1.3.4 <http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/policy-strategic.pdf>

² <http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/policy-strategic.pdf>

policymaking and inefficient resource allocations to address segregation are not sustainable in the medium to long-term.

The document also tries to alleviate the fear some had that a policy to build Good Relations could mean that some parts of society were helped more than others.

The good relations agenda is not – and should not be – in conflict with the equality agenda.

SHARING OVER SEPARATION

In developing its thinking on promoting a shared society, the direct rule government was building on policy initiatives emerging in England as a result of race riots in the Bradford, Burnley and Oldham during the summer of 2001. Up to this point the policy in England had been to ensure ethnic minorities rights by promoting their cultures facilitating ethnic neighbourhoods, and separate schools. The result, as concluded by the Cantle Report³, had been that ethnic minorities developed communities that became very self-reliant and which had little contact with the majority population. This led to feelings of mistrust and alienation. After the riots this policy was reviewed and considered to be a large factor in the unrest.⁴

A Muslim of Pakistani origin summed this up:

'When I leave this meeting with you I will go home and not see another white face until I come back here next week'

Similarly, a young man from a white council estate said:

'I never met anyone on this estate who wasn't like us from around here'

The resulting policy initiative had the aim of promoting community cohesion in a number of areas⁵.

Government policy must promote cross-community relations wherever possible – through youth work, schools, health and social care provision, regeneration, culture and sport.

This policy initiative filtered through into the thinking behind A Shared Future.⁶

*Important though it is for government to tackle unfairness and inequalities in people's life chances, a key challenge for government is to build strong **cohesive communities**. Northern Ireland as a society is still too far away*

³ P9. Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team, Home Office, December 2001.

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<http://www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/resources/About%20Community%20Cohesion/communitycohesion%20cantlereport.pdf>

⁵ P21

<http://www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/resources/About%20Community%20Cohesion/BuildingCohesiveCommunities%20Denham.pdf>

⁶ P13. <http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/policy-strategic.pdf>

from achieving that aim. We need to build upon our strong legislative and public policy frameworks to progress our goal of a more equal and inclusive society.

The policy document points to the building of relationships across communities in workplaces, schools, community initiatives and district councils among others, and for the need to ensure “shared spaces” where no parts of society feel alienated or unsafe.

The policy areas of education, housing and law and order were seen as the focal points of A Shared Future.⁷

Separate but equal is not an option. Parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable both morally and economically.

Good relations must build on the significant progress that has been made on the equality agenda. No one is arguing for an artificially homogeneous Northern Ireland and no one will be asked to suppress or give up their chosen identity. However, the costs of a divided society - whilst recognising, of course, the very real fears of people around safety and security considerations - are abundantly clear: segregated housing and education, security costs, less than efficient public service provision, and deep-rooted intolerance that has too often been used to justify violent sectarianism and racism. Policy that simply adapts to, but does not alter these challenges, results in inefficient resource allocations. These are not sustainable in the medium to long-term.

THE SHARED FUTURE TRIENNIAL ACTION PLAN

The Shared Future policy identified the need to baseline the current situation and monitor improvement across a number of priority areas. A Triennial Action Plan⁸ was produced giving the government departments responsibility for actions under each of the areas to make progress on a baseline for Good Relations indicators⁹. The Triennial Action Plan also incorporated the priority areas coming out of the Race Equality Strategy¹⁰. The priority areas detailed in the Action Plan which departments had obligations under were as follows:¹¹

- *Tackling the visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism*
- *Reclaiming shared space*
- *Reducing tensions at interface areas*

⁷ P15. <http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/policy-strategic.pdf>

⁸ A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009, OFMDFM, April 2006.

http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/triennial_action_plan-2.pdf

⁹ Good Relations Indicators Baseline Report, OFMDFM January 2007.

<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/good-relations-report.pdf>

¹⁰ A Race Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland, OFMDFM, 2005

<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/race-equality-strategy.pdf>

¹¹ P41. A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009, OFMDFM, April 2006.

http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/triennial_action_plan-2.pdf

- *Shared education*
- *Shared communities*
- *Supporting good relations through diversity and cultural diversity*
- *Developing shared workplaces*
- *Good relations, community development and tackling disadvantage*
- *Ensuring that voice is given to victims*
- *Shared services*
- *People from minority ethnic communities and the majority community shared equality of life chances in all aspects of their lives*

COHESION, SHARING AND INTEGRATION

With the resumption of devolution in May 2007, OFMDFM initiated the development of a new strategy that would integrate the race and community relations strategies. In the Programme for Government 2008-2011, the Shared Future strategy is not mentioned but instead the document refers to the creation of a *shared and better future, based on tolerance and respect for cultural diversity*.¹² The PfG goes on to promise:

*We will bring forward a programme of cohesion and integration for this shared and better future to address the divisions within our society and achieve measurable reductions in sectarianism, racism and hate crime. If we do not take this opportunity **now** there is a very real risk that the divisions of our past will be replicated in the new communities that have come here to live and work among us.*

However, and possibly in light of the early stages of the new strategy at the point of writing, the PfG's stated goals do not include Community Relations. In addition, within the framework of the 23 Public Service Agreements detailed in the PfG to reach the Executive's goals, none are Community Relations targets. The envisaged CSI programme is included for Objective 5 of PSA7 "Make Peoples Lives Better". Under this objective, to *promote equality and the enforcement of rights*, one of the targets attributed to OFMDFM is the implementation of "a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future for all."

In an update report to the OFMDFM Committee on 9 April 2008, the head of the Equality Directorate in OFMDFM pointed out that the department's:¹³

Good Relations Division is currently developing a Programme that will take into account our PFG commitments on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration as well as those on Racial Equality and Social Inclusion in order to reflect the changing context we are facing as a community.

The update report goes on to point out that the new programme will deal with sectarianism and racism whereas the A Shared Future document dealt with only sectarianism and there was a separate, albeit related, Race Equality Strategy. The new

¹² <http://www.pfgbudgetni.gov.uk/finalpfg.pdf>

¹³ Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration: Update report to Assembly Committee for Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 9 April 2008.

policy too promises to work at different levels. While A Shared Future was lead by objectives for government departments, the new programme is to put more emphasis on the local and community levels. One of the aims is for there to be Action Plans produced at district council level to be the main vehicle for implementing the programme. In an early draft of the new CSI programme it states: ¹⁴

CSI signals a significant departure from previous policy in its emphasis on delivery at the local level. It empowers district councils – in partnership with local and community organisations - to develop relevant responses to suit local circumstances through active programmes to support cohesion, sharing and integration. This emphasis is accompanied by a significant long-term shift of resource and responsibility for delivery to the local level.

The intent is also that this localised action is monitored by localised and “tailored” targets and indicators. In continuity with A Shared Future, the draft report emphasises that the Good Relations Baseline Indicator Report will be retained in order to measure future successes.

QUESTIONS FOR THE NEW CSI STRATEGY

Although the detail behind the new CSI strategy is still not available there are a number of questions to be asked when the strategy is finalised:

1. Does the new strategy take the place of both A Shared Future and the Race Equality Strategy?
2. Does the executive remain in favour of promoting sharing over separation?
3. If the Baseline indicators from A Shared Future are to remain – does this mean that the aims of CSI are the same as they were for A Shared Future?
4. Will government departments have targets to meet in promoting and delivering the new strategy or is it left for district councils and communities to deliver?
5. Do the high level aims of CSI differ from A Shared Future or is the difference in how they are delivered?
6. Will there be a statutory basis for the new strategy such as a duty on councils to introduce Good Relations Plans?

June 2009

¹⁴ Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration: Update report to Assembly Committee for Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 9 April 2008.