

'A Shared Future'

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**Response to the consultation paper on
Improving Relations in Northern Ireland
by Children in Northern Ireland / Child Care NI
on behalf of the voluntary childcare sector**

September 2003

1. Background

- 1.1 Children in Northern Ireland (formerly known as ChildCare NI) is the representative organisation for the voluntary childcare sector in Northern Ireland, providing leadership and support to its members and working to enhance the lives of all its children.
- 1.2 Children in Northern Ireland (ChildCare NI) was invited by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to facilitate a series of consultation events within the voluntary childcare sector and prepare a response to their consultation document on improving relations in Northern Ireland – ‘A Shared Future’.
- 1.3 Children in Northern Ireland acknowledges the commitment and resourcing of OFMDFM to secure a broadly based and effective consultation exercise. This has not always been the practice in the past amongst Government departments and public bodies, and the current inclusive approach is welcomed as a good basis for effective consultation with the voluntary and community sector in to the future.
- 1.3 Children in Northern Ireland held three consultation events (1 in Derry, 2 in Belfast) and invited member organisations to write in response. Over 20 organisations either attended one of these events or made a specific response. Representatives from the Catholic and Protestant communities, from ethnic minority communities, from the Irish Traveller community and from disability groups were all involved.
- 1.4 The comments made by these groups are included, and Children in Northern Ireland therefore considers that this response represents a comprehensive overview of the position of the sector. As is outlined in the report, however, it is considered that a much higher profile should be given to the needs of children and young people in improving relations in our community than was evidenced in either the consultation document or in the practice of ‘community relations’ in the past. This requires more focussed work with the sector which has much to contribute from its experiences in the past.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Children in Northern Ireland, on behalf of the voluntary childcare sector in Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to be consulted on the proposals for 'A Shared Future' on improving relations in Northern Ireland. Whilst some of the intent of the document, and the ultimate aim and vision, will have the support of much of the sector, Children in Northern Ireland must highlight the disappointingly few references to children or young people in the consultation document.
- 2.2 Indeed, more generally, the document contains very few references to good relations on a broader basis than in relation to the impact on the Catholic and Protestant communities. Children in Northern Ireland acknowledges the central importance of addressing inter-community relations between Catholics and Protestants. However a failure to set this in the context of the impact on other groupings in society, be they, for example, the ethnic minority population, young Lesbians and gay men, children and women experiencing domestic violence, or as we would specifically highlight children and young people, will result in an imperfect analysis of the state of 'community relations' in Northern Ireland.
- 2.3 Children and young people have been frequently the primary victims of poor inter-group relations and denied a vision of value and worth in society. Yet, as will be indicated later, some suggestions for the ways in which good relations can be promoted will come from models of good practice within the sector.
- 2.4 Indeed some in the sector would argue that many 'community relations' initiatives have become discredited. They contend that the best results for promoting good relations between different groups do not necessarily come from targeted 'community relations' initiatives. They claim rather that they come from broader initiatives with a focus on a different specific aim eg educational excellence, but where the manner of delivery ensures the process of building meaningful interaction between different groups.
- 2.5 Some in the sector, eg those involved with the education of children with disabilities note that the segregation of their children from education in the mainstream has provided models of how meaningful 'co-education' between Protestants and Catholics can be forged. The paradox, that the marginalisation of certain minority groups in society in the past has resulted in an environment free from sectarianism, is striking. This merits attention and research, and should call into question the process of frequently treating these smaller groups in a marginalised way in the first place.
- 2.6 This report illustrates these general points through specific comments, and sets them in the context of our relevant rights and responsibilities.

3. The context

- 3.1 The rights of children and young people are clearly enunciated in the United Nation's Conventions on the Rights of the Child. This is a comprehensive document which cites a range of rights agreed in 1989, many of which are of direct relevance to a consideration of good relations:

Of particular relevance to our community is Article 2:

'State Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.'

- 3.2 The Strategy for Children and Young People currently being developed has proposed the following draft vision:

'A secure and peaceful Northern Ireland where all children and young people have the opportunity to reach their full potential and to participate as full and active members of society; where they know their rights and that these are protected and promoted; where they know that they are valued, respected and understood; and where they feel happy, safe, cared for and supported by family, community, government and wider society'.

- 3.3 The Programme for Government states as a fundamental aim that 'Northern Ireland should become a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society, firmly founded on achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust with the protection and vindication of human rights for all'.

- 3.4 It is generally recognised that children and young people are amongst the primary victims of the conflict in Northern Ireland over the last thirty years. As society emerges out of this conflict, with inter-community tensions seeming to increase, as Harbison has identified ('Review of Community Relations Policy 2002), children remain amongst the foremost victims, as evidenced in the conflict surrounding the Holy Cross dispute in Ardoyne.

- 3.5 Harbison revealed, that the fundamentally poor relations in society produce disturbing statistics: eg 68% of young people (18-25) in Belfast interface areas have never had a meaningful conversation with anyone of 'the other side'.

- 3.6 Not only have children suffered as being amongst the primary victims of violence and tensions, they have also been denied a vision or a

model for society which respects diversity and allows them to develop accordingly.

- 3.7 Recent research has indicated that children as young as 3 and 4 have some awareness of living in a divided society; slightly older children were noted in the same study to have sectarian attitudes and use sectarian terminology.
- 3.8 There is increasing concern about the impact on children of observing and participating in the on-going violence in interface areas. This is of course concentrated in areas where there are already the highest levels of educational underachievement, mental health problems, unemployment and on-going paramilitary activity.
- 3.9 There is an overall concern that joined-up government is not happening in practice, and specifically not in the area of good relations. It was felt that the consultation document should have drawn explicit connections with a range of other initiatives and strategies which directly relate to the good relations strategy eg the Race strategy, the Human Rights strategy, the Equality Strategy, the strategy for disabled people – especially given that this is European Year for Disabled People – and the Childrens’ and Young Peoples’ strategy.
- 3.10 The sector feels strongly that children and young people have themselves said clearly that they want change – they have been the victims in the past, but despite all the interventions they continue to feel ‘caught in the middle’. Concerted action is needed through a comprehensive strategy which places children and young people at the heart of effective inter-groups relations for the future.

4. The proposed vision, aims and fundamental principles

4.1 The consultation document outlines a vision for good relations:

‘Our vision for Northern Ireland is of a peaceful society in which everyone can freely and fully participate, achieve their full potential, and live free from poverty. We want a fair and effective system of government, underpinned by rights that are guaranteed for all, and responsibilities that all must share. We wish to support dialogue, and to foster mutual understanding and respect for diversity.’

4.2 There was general agreement in the consultation in the voluntary childcare sector that this was a highly laudable aim, although it was suggested that those who are at most disadvantage in society as a result of the divisions are certainly those in poverty, but also those who experience fear. This most specifically affects the most vulnerable, including children and young people. It is therefore suggested that the vision also state the explicit aspiration of a society ‘free from poverty and fear’.

4.3 The policy aim specified in the consultation document is for

‘a more shared but pluralist society’

(a shared society in which people are encouraged to make choices in their lives that are not bound by historical divisions and are free to do so), and

(a pluralist society with respect and tolerance for cultural diversity where people are free to assert their identity)

4.4 Whilst there was again general agreement that the aim well reflected the necessary concepts of sharing and respect for difference, it was noted that this had to be carefully balanced. While our choices should not be bound by historical divisions, our histories cannot be forgotten or denied, there is a need for respect for different cultures and identities and sometimes this will mean facing parts of our histories that are unpleasant. This tension must be acknowledged and a mechanism for managing it and resolving disputes put in place.

4.5 The specific policy aims to support the central aim were considered appropriate, in particular the references to ‘integrated/shared communities where people wish to learn, live, work and play together’. The absence of direct reference to children and young people, on whom a new shared, pluralist society must be built was, however, concerning. There must be a specific aim which recognises children and young people as a key part of the future.

5. The proposed strategy

- 5.1 Whilst the aim reflects the rights of individuals to choose where to be educated, live, work and play, there must be effective incentives to channel society towards a more shared culture. A number of key themes emerged in the consultation on the strategy for doing this.

'Good relations'

- 5.2 It is considered that the two elements of the strategy (plural and shared society) must be combined in some way. As evidenced above there will be many instances when this creates a tension or conflict. An analogy is available in the 's75' legislation - the statutory public equality duties. The two duties of promoting equality of opportunity and promoting good relations are not seen to be in conflict, rather complementary, but it is nonetheless categorically stated how the two should be managed in the event of conflicting interpretations. There may well be benefits in ensuring similar clarity of interpretation in the co-existence of the two concepts – 'shared' and 'plural'.
- 5.3 Considerable effort is needed in terms of communicating clearly what 'good relations' will mean in practical terms. People also need to feel ownership of the strategy alongside the political will and leadership to make the strategy work.
- 5.4 There was a strong feeling in the sector that legislation should be used to give authority to the strategy, to promote diversity and to make it enforceable. It was also believed strongly that it was appropriate to move away from a narrow focus on 'community relations', which had become discredited and associated with failures in the past.
- 5.5 There was widespread support for the use of a new term eg 'good relations' which placed effective interrelations in society on a much broader footing. Definitions were needed from the Government on what 'good relations' actually meant. While it is used in the 's75 legislation' (Northern Ireland Act 1998, s75) and applies to groups of different 'religious belief, political opinion, and racial background', it was noted that the Equality Commission had not yet produced a Code of Practice to highlight what protection these different groups could expect in this regard.
- 5.6 The sector believes that the 'good relations' duty should be extended to all nine equality groups covered in the s75 duty to promote equality of opportunity. This includes age, and would therefore specifically include children and young people, as well as older people.

Education

- 5.7 Any strategy on good relations must clearly identify those elements of society which can facilitate change. Education is referred to several times in the text of the consultation document. One of the difficulties in this area is that the measure for effective integration, sharing and promoting diversity is often taken solely as the proportion of children attending integrated schools.
- 5.8 This of course is one measure of more sharing, but not the only one. It seems likely that a pluralist society must continue to allow parents a say in deciding if their children are to continue to be educated in a specific religious (or other) ethos. Some have concerns that the integrated system in Northern Ireland is based on a Christian model, and does not adequately take account of the needs of children of other or no religious background.
- 5.9 Whilst there were different views in the sector on the value and success of the integrated system, there was a general agreement that to see this as an easy solution to all our community relations problem is grossly simplistic. Given the role of the churches in education, it was also considered unlikely by many that major change to a more integrated institutional model could necessarily be achieved. Others felt that there should be an attempt to establish a secular education system which places responsibility for religious and cultural development with families, community and the church.
- 5.10 It was therefore recommended that more work needed to be done on exploring how respect for diversity could be more effectively built into the education system. There was a strong feeling that Education for Mutual Understanding had not been effective, and that there were more effective examples of intercultural education initiatives. New initiatives in this area were necessary, drawing on the lessons learned from the failures of the past.
- 5.11 A key example of good practice in this area was identified as the anti-bias curriculum, which, if it properly penetrated the education sector, could achieve real change. There is a greater emphasis in early years/pre-school settings on diversity, respect and on an enriched curriculum including areas such as ethnicity, which has not always been recognised by the statutory sector. The quality standards implicit in the anti-bias curriculum require the adoption of non-discriminatory policies, and it was considered that this was an excellent model for change in the wider education sector. It was also noted that 's75' had played an important role here, as it required proactive measures on the part of public sector bodies.
- 5.12 It was considered that since the churches had not been involved in education at these pre-school levels, meaningful diversity practices had been allowed to develop. The suggestion was therefore made that

mainstream primary and secondary education could learn much from the innovative work in this area, particularly from nursery groups and play groups that are not attached to single-religion schools. It was specifically suggested that the churches should be asked to sign up to these quality standards.

- 5.13 Further examples of good practice came from those most marginalised in society. A crèche for Traveller children had been set up in Derry, in which a number of places were deliberately reserved for settled children. This has had an important impact in changing attitudes with the key being to educate across the board, particularly starting in the home.
- 5.14 The example of education provision for deaf children in Jordanstown was also identified. The model in operation ensured effective integrated education, where religious background was never seen as a divisive issue. The paradox is that by segregating some of the most marginalised groups in society from the mainstream education system (segregated along religious grounds), they seem to provide a model for meaningful total integration in mainstream society .
- 5.15 Human rights and equality awareness and an exploration of identity were all highlighted as topics which should be core elements of the curriculum.
- 5.16 It was also noted that good relations was not only important between different communities, but within communities. Examples were given of smaller, more closely knit communities eg ethnic minority communities, and the Irish Traveller community where there is a strong sense of importance of their own identity, which leads to a greater sense of being able to reach out to others of different identity.

Resources following crisis management

- 5.17 There was general agreement within the sector that any strategy had to have the flexibility to meet the specific problems emanating from poor relations, sometimes at flashpoint areas. However there was concern that this could be seen as an alternative to properly resourcing long-term good relations strategies. There was also a need to ensure that managing crises in interface areas did not deflect resources from longer-term work on reducing the likelihood of interface problems by, for example, addressing the poverty, fears and marginalisation of these communities.
- 5.19 There was also concern that undue attention focussing only on managing the overt consequences of poor relations at interface areas failed to address the pervasive tendency to avoid inter-community issues throughout society, frequently most evident in middle-class areas.

- 5.20 Prevailing 'problem issues' need to be managed in the short to medium term – there will always be crises from time to time – but overall a sustained approach must be developed.
- 5.21 The general feeling is that resourcing to date has achieved most in terms of community development and capacity building within communities. The Harbison Report highlights the much greater success of community relations initiatives at grass-roots level compared to larger regional level programmes. Much more still needs to be done in identifying why this is and in achieving effective inter-relations between all communities at regional level.

6. The debate on structures

- 6.1 It was noted that in considering where responsibility for driving forward a good relations agenda might lie much of the debate seemed to centre around institutional responsibility.
- 6.2 The voluntary childcare sector strongly took the view that it was not best placed to comment on the most appropriate structures without further information on the roles and the intended outcomes of the respective bodies: Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU), Community Relations Council (CRC) and the Government.
- 6.3 However, it took the view, that of as much importance as ultimate structural responsibility was the need to strengthen and advance the legislation and policies which already exist. For example, a Bill of Rights must be introduced, s75 legislation needs broadening on good relations to the nine equality categories (see above), and there needs to be more clear enforcement powers associated with the good relations duty on s75.
- 6.4 Above all there was a real need for political leadership on the issue of good relations. There needed to be strong cross-departmental responsibility on good relations issues, and greater transparency in terms of the role of the CCRU.
- 6.5 It was considered that the CRC currently had a low profile, was poorly resourced, and needed more representative participation from the community and voluntary sector.
- 6.6 The general view of the sector was that there needed to be a strong independent body (in particular independent from the local Assembly and Civil Service).
- 6.7 There was a general recognition that the CRC – or any subsequent body - needed an enhanced role and authority as a body to monitor and challenge the local Assembly and administration. Both structures must however work towards the aim of good relations. This requires a set of principles of good relations which apply across the board at all levels.
- 6.8 There was clearly potential for overlap between the responsibilities of the CCRU, the CRC, and indeed in relation to the s75 'good relations' duty, the Equality Commission. Each body may still have a role, or indeed a new body may have a broader remit. What is most important is that accountability, and clear lines of independent monitoring of the performance of Government and public bodies - in relation to good relations - are introduced. These bodies must have the potential to promote change through enforcement, and impose penalties for not promoting good relations, as necessary. As always the balance between litigation and public education is difficult to specify, but

experience in other areas, such as equality, suggests there needs to be ultimate legal sanctions to promote effective change.

7. Experience from the voluntary childcare sector

- 7.1 The impact of poor inter-community relations within society has a profound effect on children and young people. Not only do they directly experience trauma, stress, poverty, alienation and fear, they also miss out on the richness of other cultures and the opportunities which living together can have on the development of relationships. The opportunities to appreciate difference are too often closed down by the dominant adult voices in respective communities.
- 7.2 Opportunities for socialising are still segregated and mainly focussed on good practice community projects, eg Reach Across, where the primary difficulty is usually in finding neutral spaces.
- 7.3 The child's voice needs to be heard in working for good relations. They need to be encouraged and supported to participate in this work, and must be the main focus of the strategy as they will set the tone for the future of our communities.
- 7.4 Key to this is the crucial role played by parents in influencing their children. However this must be seen in the context of the experience of many parents, their fears and their feelings. Any starting point must involve working with parents to educate and challenge them about their attitudes and beliefs in a non-threatening way, examining the social / economic issues of how communities view themselves.
- 7.5 The consultation within the voluntary childcare sector highlighted examples of good practice, where it was felt that a range of initiatives had delivered positive benefits for promoting good relations, sometimes even where this was not seen as the primary aim of the project. A number of representative examples are cited in this section to facilitate the exploration of what might be appropriate strategies for the future.
- 7.6 The Youth Service Community Relations Support Scheme provides significant numbers of young people with practical opportunities of gaining a greater understanding of the main cultural traditions in Northern Ireland. Indeed the Harbison Report concludes that the levels of commitment and support provided by youth leaders and organisations are significant, and that it provides a flexible framework for practical community relations work.
- 7.7 The Lifestart Programme for 0-5 year olds which challenges parents to look at their attitudes and how these influence their children has been effective. This is an example of a good local approach to promoting respect for diversity, which has a clear relevance to good relations.
- 7.8 The Chryalis Programme is a drugs awareness programme where children are given a particular piece of work on the topic which they take home and must do jointly with parents, thus bringing adults and children together and introducing education as a two-way process.

Similar principles could be introduced in to a programme on sectarian and racist issues.

- 7.9 Womens' Aid have piloted a 'Helping Hand' programme in schools for children as young as eight addressing issues of violence; anti-bullying programmes have also been developed by ChildLine NI; all these programmes provide wider community relations benefits than the immediate issue being addressed.
- 7.10 One of the major problems experienced by those involved in running these programmes is the lack of joined-up thinking on resourcing and the failure to core-fund initiatives that are working. These initiatives are particularly effective in promoting understanding, and helping people to learn the basic skills of living together. They succeed because they have formed effective models of working together on a specific relevant issue.. These initiatives are therefore not 'artificially imposed' and the learning and positive results from these programmes could be usefully transferred to the broader scope of community / good relations.
- 7.11 There is also a strong need for more meaningful research into which community relations initiatives have worked most effectively – especially in areas beyond just Protestant / Catholic issues. There has been little research generally on dealing with the impact of poor community relations – particularly the effect this may have on mental health, and some of the most vulnerable groups such as children in care.
- 7.12 A specific project should be launched in the voluntary childcare sector to explore the equality and good relations aspects of immediate relevance to children and young people. It has already been established that groups representing this constituency have been less actively involved in 's75' policy review and consultation than other groups. Specific funding and resources need to be targeted at facilitating the sector to engage in research and the consultation processes around equality and good relations work.

8. Conclusions

- 8.1 There was widespread support for a major review of and revised strategy for on improving good relations in Northern Ireland.
- 8.2 However there was concern that the proposed approach did not seem to be acknowledging the breadth of the groups affected, other than those characterised by purely Protestant or Catholic identity. In particular, children and young people have a major stake in improved relations and must form a key part of any strategy, and in developing it.
- 8.3 The voluntary childcare sector considered strongly that the 'good relations' model identified in 's75' should be extended to all nine equality categories, including children and young people. It however also considered that clearer guidance should be given on this duty and there should be an effective, enforceable mechanism of dealing with non-compliance and promoting good practice.
- 8.4 Much of the concentration on using the education system to embrace change has focussed on the integrated / segregated debate. The sector feels that whilst important, there are other examples of existing good practice in the broad educational system – notably the 'anti-bias curriculum' which could achieve real change for community relations – even if adopted within the current system.
- 8.5 The lack of research on which 'community relations' initiatives had worked, and indeed the impact on the respective groups was highlighted as a problem. Much more work in this area is needed. Specific funding needed to be targeted at undertaking research into the experiences and needs of children and young people, and at facilitating the sector to engage more effectively in equality and good relations reviews (including through the mechanisms of s75).
- 8.6 Examples have been provided of projects and programmes which have had effective 'good relations' outcomes, perhaps especially where the primary focus of the project was not specifically 'community relations'.. This suggests that a certain malaise may have crept in to some 'community relations' work, except perhaps at grass-roots level. It also suggests that 'good relations' can be effectively delivered 'as a by-product' where a project has other more immediately relevant and focussed objectives.
- 8.7 The sector considered that this consultation offered a golden opportunity to a society emerging from a period of intense inter-community unrest to refocus and rebuild a better future for all. It emphasised the need for strong political involvement throughout Government to achieve the necessary change, and a strong independent voice to measure the progress by Government and society.

- 8.8 The sector's key concern, however, remains that unless the position of children and young people is given a central role in the policy, in developing it, and in considering its impact, the changes that children and young people deserve in our society will not be achieved.