



Report to: Strategic Policy & Resources Committee

Subject: Cohesion, Sharing and Integration – proposed response to consultation document

Date: 22 October 2010

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Relevant Background Information

The Committee will be aware that this long-awaited document *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (CSI) was launched by the First and Deputy First Ministers at the end of July 2010 for public consultation. The draft programme outlines the proposed framework for co-ordination across Government Departments for action against sectarianism and racism and aims to “build a shared and better future for all based on fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect”.

The CSI document lists a series of goals for achieving this future, including, in summary:

- addressing physical divisions at interfaces
- ensuring the safety of vulnerable groups
- tackling visible manifestations of racism and sectarianism
- zero tolerance for hate crime attacks
- promoting equality and tackling disadvantage
- providing shared spaces
- celebrating cultural diversity
- better frameworks for dealing with parades and protests etc.

The intention is that the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFM/DFM) will drive the agenda by co-ordinating input from all government departments and agencies (e.g. councils, community and voluntary sector) involved in its delivery. The importance attached to the programme by the Executive is signalled by the fact that its implementation will be overseen by a Ministerial Panel chaired by OFM/DFM Ministers and cross-departmental activities will be co-ordinated through a Senior Officials’ Steering Group.

The paper lists a number of “themes for action” which include:

- ensuring that good relations considerations are embedded in all government policy making
- reducing and eventually eliminating segregated services
- addressing interfaces and encouraging shared neighbourhoods.

Key Issues

This corporate response is in the format set out by the OFM/DFM and was compiled from comments received from a number of Departments, since the CSI document refers to a wide range

of issues – people and places, young people, community safety, local communities etc.

A series of public meetings was held as part of the consultation process and the Belfast meeting attracted an audience of over 100, despite it being held on a wet Monday evening. This level of attendance reflects the widespread interest in the proposals and general support for greater dialogue, agreement and joint working in tackling these serious issues, which continue to erupt into open violence, as demonstrated in events in Belfast over the past summer.

Members will be aware from media comments that the CSI document has already been widely criticised as being very aspirational in nature, full of good intentions and impressive sound bites¹ but light on detail regarding detailed mechanisms of delivery and incorporating few references to timescales or resources. There are many references to survey results e.g. from the NI Life & Times, rather than hard data on the actual cost of division and dual provision.

The paper stresses the need to share space and services and concentrating on the potential economic benefits of greater sharing of public facilities in an era of increasingly scarce public resources could be more clearly highlighted. Last week, Owen Paterson, Secretary of State, said at a Conservative Party Conference fringe meeting that the NI Executive must address the cost of segregation if it is serious about saving money and providing better services; he said the "British taxpayer should not continue to subsidise segregation".

The CSI document is less progressive than the previous *Shared Future* policy which stated emphatically that "separate but equal is not an option". A report recently published by the Rowntree Trust says that the goal of reconciliation appears to have been replaced by one of "mutual accommodation" and the CSI proposals may not go far enough to heal old divisions.

However, the actual publication of the document itself is to be welcomed and it seems that dialogue is beginning within the NI Executive about the sort of future we want to see for NI. We welcome the fact that difficult issues like sectarianism and racism are being discussed openly rather than ignored or avoided as in the past.

It appears that the paper is intended as an initial skeleton framework policy, with the details to be fleshed out at a later date. Officers from the OFM/DFM have emphasised that the feedback from the public consultation process is essential to provide these details so the Council's response at this stage is crucial.

Resource Implications

None at this stage.

Recommendations

This draft response was approved by the Good Relations Partnership at its meeting on 15 October; the Committee is requested to approve this response, giving comments where required, so that it may be submitted to the Department by the closing date of 29 October 2010.

Officer to contact for further information

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¹ E.g. Mark Davenport "motherhood and apple pie" and Prof. Colin Knox a "woolly benign document"