

Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration
Response of ULTACH Trust
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ULTACH is an independent charitable trust which promotes the Irish language as the shared heritage of everyone in Northern Ireland. A core objective is to encourage cross-community involvement in the language, and the membership of the Board of Trustees reflects both major religious traditions.

Given our interest in promoting community relations, we welcome the publication of the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (hereafter CSI) consultation document. We hope that the document marks the beginning of the road to a genuine shared future.

However, we do have some reservations about the document, beginning with the issue which is central to our concerns.

A section in the document entitled 'respecting cultures' cites a key aim for the CSI programme as:

Promoting greater understanding of cultural diversity and expressions of cultural identity (pg 35)

Despite this recognition of the importance of cultural diversity, language issues are set aside in the document, and are left to be dealt with by a Regional or Minority Languages Strategy. This seems to us to be a mistake. The Regional or Minority Language Strategy will focus primarily on the issue of promoting and/or supporting the languages concerned. It may also deal with the place of the languages within a good relations framework. However, there is no reason why government should have to wait until the languages strategy is prepared before it can take a position on the role of languages in our society. It is quite obvious that a programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration will involve regional or minority languages. It is also obvious that government should acknowledge that the principles underlining CSI should be integrated into the languages strategy. We believe that CSI should establish the broad principles under which that element of the languages strategy should operate and leave the languages strategy to work out the detail. Failure to do so is not only a wasted opportunity, it could also marginalise the language issue within government policy.

We believe that the issue of prejudice against Irish speakers should come within the remit of good relations programmes, and that linguistic diversity training should be provided for civil servants and others. Such actions would underpin the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement's recognition of 'the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance' of the Irish language and Ulster Scots. ULTACH is concerned that some authorities avoid any promotion, recognition or even exploration of Irish language issues on the assumption that such actions would actually be detrimental to community relations and could even infringe the rights of individuals.

The consultation document assumes that cultures and cultural identities are fixed and immutable. There seems to be no recognition that self-concepts of identity can change. The consequent essentialisation and reification of identity in Northern Ireland arising from these mechanical concepts can themselves hinder progress. It is well known that contact can lead to significant attitudinal change and a lessening of negative preconceptions. Furthermore, there must be a recognition that while equality

and good relations are linked, they are not interchangeable. A group can achieve equality with another group through legislation, yet those groups may remain antipathetic to one another. If their relationship is expressed through and defined by legislation, there is a grave danger that the result will be a public culture structured around antagonism, litigation and third-party intervention.

On a more general level, we have some other comments to make. Clarification is needed in regard to the terms of reference and the issues which are to be addressed by CSI. There is no definition of what Sharing, Cohesion, and Integration actually is. There is also an element of confusion as to the forms of prejudice to be addressed. The opening statements in the CSI document are very broad in scope, stating that the Ministerial Panel to implement CSI will work ‘to achieve the full participation of all sectors in all aspects of society’ (pg 7) and the foreword notes:

We aim to build a strong community where everyone, regardless of race, colour, religious or political opinion, age, gender, disability or sexual orientation can live, work and socialise in a context of fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect (pg 1).

Despite these opening statements, the main body of the document seems to be concerned only with racism and sectarianism. Hate crime in the text appears only to concern with sectarianism and racism; only these two issues are mentioned in the reference to the PSNI Statistical Report on Hate Incidents and Crimes (pg 39). Yet this PSNI report also covers other hate crimes, such as those deriving from homophobic motivations or those related to disability. Other parts of the CSI document hint that hate crime encompasses other forms of prejudice e.g. ‘sectarian, religious, racist or hate prejudice’ (pg 6) and ‘issues of sectarianism, racism and hate’ (pg 57). While the CSI document proposes a separate ‘sexual orientation strategy’, the conceptualisation of ‘hate crime’ in the document does not do full justice to that term as commonly understood.

A comprehensive CSI strategy should consider the nine categories of people in the Equality clause of Section 75 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act. There should be a programme to deal with ‘hate crime’ in the fullest sense of the term.

In addition to the scope of the work envisaged, ULTACH also has concerns about the implementation of good relations programmes. We are concerned that no timelines are provided for comprehensive good relations work. There is no mention of a monitoring or evaluation process in the CSI document.

While the CSI document values the role of schools in establishing good relations, community relations training is not mandatory for students at most of the teacher-training colleges here. Community relations exercises are left to interested individuals in schools, often with little institutional support. While the CSI document highlights the role of the Citizenship programme at post-primary level, in our experience many teachers of Citizenship are wary of introducing political or religious topics pertinent to Northern Ireland as they are not trained to deal with the ensuing debates or what they perceive to be potentially divisive outcomes. In terms of the ‘Local and Global Citizenship’ element of the Citizenship programme, teachers are far more enthusiastic about ‘global’ issues than ‘local’ ones. Few Irish-medium schools are involved in

cross-community activities; in this respect they lag behind the rest of the educational sector.

ULTACH has concerns about the four models presented for the delivery of funding and policy advice. They would diminish the capacity of the Community Relations Council CRC (hereafter CRC) or bring it under greater direct government control. Given the debilitating and combative atmosphere at Stormont, and the poor track record of the Executive in establishing good relations between the two main political/religious groupings in Northern Ireland in the Assembly, or beyond, ULTACH is wary of greater political control of the CRC. Such control would undermine possible risk-taking by the CRC in a climate of accountability to government. On the other hand, little would be achieved if non-governmental involvement is to be reduced to advice given by 'critical friends'.

The dangers of political control are highlighted by the situation of Good Relations Officers of district councils, whose work is highlighted in the CSI document. Political control of these officers has reduced some to mere council functionaries, afraid of taking risks in case they irritate their political masters. Some Good Relations officers are re-categorized as Equality Officers, thus having a far wider remit to their work, with the attendant danger that their work as Equality Officers (often involving a monitoring role) could actually undermine their functions with the less focused, but no less essential role as Good Relations Officers.

ULTACH is aware of unwarranted attacks upon the CRC blaming the organisation for the lack of macro-level improvement in good relations within Northern Ireland. In point of fact, the political climate is among the most critical factors in inhibiting the process of reconciliation, yet the CRC has no role in this area. ULTACH believes that the CRC should remain as an body independent of government and able to 'speak truth to power', criticising the Executive if necessary.

While ULTACH welcomes the CSI document, we are concerned that it appears to be overly aspirational in nature. The document recognises the withdrawal of international partners from peace funding in the medium and long term. We are concerned that this may be used as an excuse to do little or nothing in terms of good relations. Inactivity will in itself prove to be an expensive option, given the high costs incurred by public disorder and the duplication of services and facilities that are a by-product of inter-communal division.