

Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

Response by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland

October 2010



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Introduction

The Youth Council for Northern Ireland is an executive NDPB, established in 1990 under the Youth Service (NI) Order. One of the YCNI statutory functions is to encourage cross community activities by the youth service. Since 1998, YCNI has been the lead partner in a youth service partnership entitled Joined in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (JEDI). The vision is *"to increase the ability and confidence of youth organisations and young people to be at ease with difference, acknowledge one another as equals and promote improved relations between all"*.

Since the inception of the JEDI initiative, key partners within the youth service have been engaged with a view to developing a more coherent strategy for community relations work, specifically within the context of the post conflict era in Northern Ireland. The initiative has involved research into community relations issues for youth work practitioners, and a joined up approach to developing policy, practice, and training across the Service. JEDI is essentially about the principles and values that underpin youth work, and about a planned approach to improving relationships at every level. It is asking practitioners, young people and policy makers to visualise the role the Youth Service has to play in creating a better society and to consider the policy, training, practice, and research and evaluation implications of this vision.

Whilst the legacy of sectarianism and segregation between the two largest communities is its fundamental focus, JEDI is also concerned with redressing wider issues of prejudice and division to reflect the diversity of issues confronting young people in Northern Ireland.

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General comments

Based on YCNI's statutory functions and experience with the JEDI initiative, the main focus of our response is Section 4 : 'Empowering the Next Generation ' and in particular the contribution which youth services make towards realising the vision of a shared and cohesive society.

There are some overarching features, however, which we believe weaken the document. Most fundamentally, it appears that the CSI conceptual framework is one of developing a society of peaceful co-existence as opposed to a reconciled and interdependent society. Whilst the document does refer to 'eliminating segregated services' and 'encouraging shared neighbourhoods' as long term themes, these are not sufficiently explicated, and we would question whether the short and medium term activities would effectively contribute towards realising the long term themes.

In this respect, whilst appreciating that the CSI represents a high-level strategic framework from which more detailed action plans will follow, the lack of reference to reconciliation approaches and the absence of detail on some proposed actions detracts from the document.

We believe that the CSI consultation document would be strengthened with the following additions :

- i) In respect of terminology, a clear definition of the key phrases used would be important
- ii) The document at times fails to rationalise proposed actions by omitting the evidence base, nor does it explain the correlation between short, medium and long term themes
- iii) In the absence of action plans and indicative budgets, it is difficult to comment on the viability of implementation

We strongly support the statement in the Foreword *'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'* and likewise support the proposal to develop a 'family of policies' which will tackle prejudice in all forms and to all groups. Ideally, this family of policies should be developed simultaneously or in rapid succession, to provide a coherent approach to integration.

Northern Ireland has an increasingly diverse demographic, particularly since accession of the A8 countries. The needs and experiences of settled BME communities, alongside those of newly emerging communities, require multiple responses. For this reason, we suggest that race relations merits a dedicated strategy, as this agenda risks being downgraded within CSI.

Similarly, we welcome the commitment to publish a sexual orientation strategy, and believe it would be helpful to indicate the projected timescales for this within the CSI 'family of policies' to ensure synergy.

We welcome the commitment to Ministerial leadership in CSI, although would seek clarity on inter-departmental obligations. We believe, however, that successful implementation will depend on much more than resources and the establishment of panels. International experience points to the critical role of political leadership and cross-party consensus on a shared vision for society, whereas the NIA Private Members' debate on Equality and Good Relations (Hansard, 28.09.10) reflects ideological division amongst parties here in respect of CSI. Without political unity on the central vision, we believe that the goal of a shared and integrated society is very much hindered.

Comments on section 4 : Empowering the next generation

We note that the Department of Education is currently consulting on a policy for Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education (CRED), and that YCNI will be submitting a full response to that parallel consultation. We propose that policy decisions about CSI and CRED should be compatible, both in vision, aims and underpinning principles.

We strongly welcome the inclusion of young people as a target group for the CSI strategy, and the recognition that they have a significant contribution to make in communities and society.

Para 4.2 We have concerns about the simplistic narrative in respect of 'flawed judgements' and the messages implied within this paragraph. This is a one-sided presentation of the role of young people which belies the range of experiences encountered by them and the complexities of growing up in a post conflict society. It presents a case for targeting only those deemed at risk of perpetrating overt sectarian or racial conflict, which we believe is a short-sighted policy and one which fails to reflect the need for broad coverage. Young people are portrayed as a problem rather than a source of positive change.

The case study provided in this section – The Junction – is one of several exemplars within the document which outlines the role of reconciliation-based approaches. Despite their inclusion as case studies, we note with concern that the theme of reconciliation, which was prominent in the previous Shared Future strategy, appears to have been downgraded in the CSI agenda. Reconciliation, involving both intra-group and inter-group interventions, is still a valid and necessary approach to building and maintaining good relations, and we suggest that CSI should be more reflective of this.

Para 4.3 We note that this paragraph is the sole reference to attitudinal survey data, and presents a limited picture. It would be helpful to cite data sources, and to include additional evidence-base to support Section 4 of the document.

Para 4.4 Whilst agreeing with this paragraph, we highlight that summer-based interventions are valuable, especially when integrated within longer term approaches. Indeed OFMDFM recently commissioned KPMG to conduct a study of interventions, entitled 'Research and Evaluation of Youth Intervention Schemes' This detailed and well-constructed publication provides robust evidence of the social and financial values of youth interventions. We endorse the recommendations of the KPMG report in respect of the sustainability of diversionary projects, and particularly the finding that the role of suitably qualified, dedicated and experienced youth workers is pivotal to success. Whilst the study indicates that short term approaches are ineffective in isolation, the authors recommend year round schemes supplemented by additional summer interventions (rather than the removal of support for summer programmes).

Para 4.6 We strongly recommend that DoJ draws on the expertise within the youth service sector, which has demonstrated impact in relation to cross community, reconciliation, citizenship, prejudice reduction and conflict resolution programmes. In respect of developing critical reflective skills among young people we believe that that media campaigns are no substitute for sustained youth interventions – which in turn require strategic investment. However it is hard to comment further on this proposed role for DoJ in the absence of further information.

Paras 4.7 to 4.12 We very much regret the lack of reference within this section (and indeed throughout the entire CSI report) to the vital role of the youth services in promoting good relations. At any one time, over 30% of

young people aged 4-25 are involved in some form of youth service provision. One of the underpinning principles of the youth work curriculum is to 'encourage acceptance and understanding of others' and the sector has developed sophisticated models of intervention to support diversity and good relations.

There is substantial evidence of the positive outcomes of this work. To cite one source, the Young Life and Times survey 2007 found positive correlation between involvement in out of school cross community projects and increased numbers of friends from other religious backgrounds. The study also found correlation between participation in schemes and increased numbers of disabled friends, suggesting that youth work interventions enable young people to consider their perceptions towards difference in general.

One of the strengths of the youth work approach is the diversity of methodologies which ensure that interventions are responsive to context and tailored to individual needs, eg. peer based learning, international and cross border exchanges, detached and outreach work, interventions within schools, residential courses, citizenship and volunteering projects, as well as traditional centre-based clubs and groups, are all vehicles for developing greater social cohesion and mutual understanding.

As such, we strongly recommend that the proposed CSI actions acknowledge and invest in the expertise within the youth service, as opposed to developing new or parallel initiatives.

Key aims

In principle we support the key aims listed in section 4, although the lack of detail makes it difficult to respond in any depth. We reiterate the need to harness the expertise, and build upon the success, of the youth work sector.

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We welcome the aim to develop a more strategic approach to helping marginalised young people. Such an approach, however, must build upon existing policies and practices.

As previously indicated, however, we have concerns that CSI appears to focus exclusively on young people deemed at risk, and fails to reflect the significant contribution which **all** young people have in building a more coherent society.

In response to the aim of encouraging civic responsibility, we note that these projects should be underpinned by core youth work principles, such as acceptance and understanding of others, and involvement in decision making. Simply twinning youth groups to undertake externally-identified projects – without any element of reconciliation work or engagement of young people in decision making – would regress back to the basic contact model which has proven to have had limited impact.

With reference to the key aim 'focusing on education and promoting greater understanding of shared values' we suggest that 'formal and non formal' is included in parentheses after the word 'education', in order to recognise the contribution of the youth work sector.

With reference to multi-agency partnerships involving indigenous and minority ethnic communities, we reiterate the need to acknowledge the work which currently exists in this area, and to build upon these established links. For example the Diversity in Action NI (DIANI) project aims to promote and develop partnerships to develop practice in work with migrant, asylum seeking and refugee children and young people.

As noted previously however, we believe that the area of race relations merits a dedicated strategy within the CSI 'family'.

Comments on section 11: Delivery of funding and policy advice

We regret that the options presented for community relations infrastructure appear weaker than the current mandate of the Community Relations Council. We believe that the element of independence is vital, and support retention of the CRC in its current format.

In closing, we reiterate support for the long term aim of CSI ‘.. *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*’ and we endorse the inclusion of young people as a specific target group. We emphasise the need to recognise and invest in the existing expertise, including acknowledgement of the significant role which is already played by youth services. Whilst we believe that the CSI document has several significant omissions, nevertheless we welcome the release of the consultation document as a step towards a more peaceful and cohesive country.

For queries about any issues in this response, please contact

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