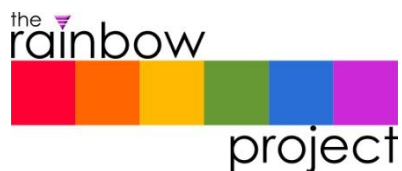


Joint Response to The Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation Document



Introduction

This is a joint response to the draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration ("*Cohesion*") from the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (OFMdFM) on behalf of Disability Action NI, Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative, The Rainbow Project and Women's Aid Federation NI. While this is a joint response a number of the organisations have developed our own individual organisational responses of which should be taken both on their own merit and of which this submission should be taken as a compliment to.

We are grateful for the opportunity to make this submission to the Office of First and Deputy First Minister (OFMdFM) and to offer our assistance and comment on its Consultation Document; Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration.

However, rather than provide answers to specific questions in the 'questionnaire' which does not enable us to provide answers which will fully reflect our thoughts on the programme, we are submitting this response paper to OFMdFM. The Questionnaire is both leading and limited in its scope and does not allow for a true reflection of opinions on *Cohesion*.

General Comment

It is the case that Disability Action NI, Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative, The Rainbow Project and Women's Aid Federation NI endorse the positions outlined herein with respect to *Cohesion* and each organisation endorses the individual submissions made by our respective organisations.

It is also the case that *Cohesion* is exclusive in its out workings and fails to address any of the needs of people living with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered people and fails to recognise the role of women throughout society and the significant inequalities that remain in society regarding gender.

We believe that the document in its entirety is flawed and needs revised to make provision for the recognition of minorities and inequalities and we believe that the exclusion of one impacts on society as a whole.

The process embarked on by government provides a real opportunity to deliver a strategy that will begin to really address the divisions in society, across all aspects of society and deliver a truly shared and safer society for all. However this document fails to capitalise on that opportunity and is disappointing in that respect. *Cohesion* is short sighted, exclusive and doesn't allow for the best use of government resources in difficult financial times.

Statement

Disability

Disability Action believes this strategy has a significant flaw in that it fails to recognise that unless all of our citizens are included then we will never build an equal, prosperous and forward looking society in which we can all play our parts. The focus on only certain S75 groups in this draft strategy means that the other groupings will automatically move down the priority order. Obviously in our view disabled people, those with dependants, women, children and older people and those from the LGB and T community may be disadvantaged.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities confirms that disabled people have the same rights as non-disabled people and state parties must make reasonable adjustments, providing disabled people with the opportunities to live life to their fullest potential.

It is therefore essential that people with disabilities are included in the Programme for Cohesion Sharing and Integration. They should be treated with equality and dignity and provided with equality of opportunity in order for them to fully participate in civic society.

Women

Women's Aid Federation NI shares the views expressed in a joint response to the CSI strategy authored by Angela Hegarty on behalf of and in collaboration with an ad hoc group, led by Women's Resource and Development Agency, with funding from the Community Relations Council.

It is well established that conflict impacts more adversely and in different ways on women than men. Similarly, there is no doubt that the effect and long-term impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland is dissimilar on women and men. It therefore follows that the experiences and needs of women in relation to violence, prejudice and inequality are significantly different. Thus, measures to bring about "a cohesive society ... in which everyone can live, work and socialise together free from intimidation and prejudice" must acknowledge that differential impact and experience and be programmed accordingly.

However, the documents issued for consultation on the Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) do not demonstrate such awareness. There are a number of significant flaws in the approach taken in the draft strategy, which is aimed at bringing about a cohesive, pluralist society. The lack of any concrete goals or timetables is one obvious example. However, the failure to acknowledge the different experiences and needs of women and men and plan accordingly is such a fundamental error that it undermines the purpose of the draft strategy.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

OFMdFM should promote cultural expression and celebrate diversity in Northern Ireland. With little or no resources or support, the LGBT community has been creating cross-community space and challenging discrimination in all its forms, while welcoming people from a wide range of backgrounds for decades. Even in the darkest days of the conflict LGBT people were at the forefront of transcending political, economic, social and religious barriers.

Unfortunately, members of the heterosexual majority, sadly some of whom are in political power, have failed to acknowledge this experience, or to value the role that the LGBT community has played in overcoming traditional prejudice. The contributions that LGBT people in Northern Ireland make to our collective history, culture, art, sport and public life is rarely celebrated or embraced.

Some sections of our society continue to make a concerted effort to denigrate and demonstrate against any form of cultural expression by the LGBT community, and safety remains a great issue of concern for LGBT people. Devolved government departments and agencies have not yet adequately addressed these concerns in either policy or practice.

General Comment

- a) We believe that the limitation of this government strategy to sectarianism and racism is short sighted. While we agree that sectarianism and racism are two blights on our society that need to be addressed, we also feel that there are other issues and instances of marginalisation that need addressed. We would urge the inclusion into *Cohesion* for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community, people living with disabilities and the redress of the significant inequalities and gaps relating to gender that need resolved.

Cohesion is being billed as the strategy from government that ‘*will build a shared and better future for us all.*’¹ This however is not the case, as it is self evidently and consciously limited to dealing with sectarianism and racism only.

Moreover the assertion by officials and in the document which states that, ‘*CSI is one of a family of policies which seeks to tackle prejudice and hate*’² is not very reassuring to those marginalised and excluded from the policy. The fact is that this is much more than a single, stand alone policy to be followed by others. Other government departments are referring to *Cohesion* when discussing their departmental outputs and holding up *Cohesion* as a model of best practice for coordinated government action when addressing division³. This means that the statement about the singularity of the document is inaccurate and *Cohesion* will have a far greater impact than being just ‘one policy.’ Therefore the exclusion of any, not least three, marginalised or isolated communities will have significant impacts.

¹ Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, Consultation Document, OFMdFM

² Ibid

³ [http://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2010-05-](http://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2010-05-24.9.5&s=Department+of+Education%27s+Community+Relations+Budget#g9.39)

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We call on OFMdFM to **significantly amend *Cohesion* and ensure that where an evidence base exists along with an established need and where appropriate and necessary, other vulnerable minorities or isolated groups are included in *Cohesion* and issues addressed.**

- b) It has been claimed by officials and Minister's from OFMdFM that *Cohesion* is intended to address good relations and is therefore limited to s75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We dispute this on a number of grounds.

Firstly, it is impossible to devise a policy in accordance with s75 (2) without showing 'due regard' to the need to promote equality of opportunity in s75 (1). Section 75 (2) is to be implemented "without prejudice to its obligations under subsection (1)." Therefore they cannot be separated or divorced from one another, as *Cohesion* seeks to do.

Secondly, the contents of *Cohesion* directly contradict any assertion that this policy will be, or is, limited to s75 (2). The document covers a variety of areas including education, community safety, hate crime, mental health and others, none of which are in any way limited to s75 (2) of the NI Act 1998. It is therefore not accurate to make the assertion that s75 (2) guides *Cohesion*.

Finally, this is a government strategy. Any government strategy has the ability to transcend many and all government departments, particularly a strategy from OFMdFM, the department with the duty to oversee the fullest implementation of equality responsibilities. It is therefore appropriate and necessary to extend the scope of *Cohesion* to cover those vulnerable and marginalised groups, to ensure their rights and needs are addressed, rather than hide behind a piece of legislation.

We call on OFMdFM to **extend the scope of *Cohesion* to cover those vulnerable and marginalised groups currently excluded from the present draft to ensure their rights and needs are addressed.**

- c) *"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."*⁴

This is the Ministerial forward in *Cohesion* from the First and deputy First Ministers. It is clear that the document in no way lives up to this statement. If the document reflected this statement we believe it would represent a significantly different strategy which would go some way to addressing the needs as well as respecting and promoting the rights of all in society. However it is the case that the content of *Cohesion* is disappointing in this regard.

⁴ Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, Consultation Document, OFMdFM

In that instance, we call on OFMdfM to **either amend the document accordingly to reflect the above statement in the foreword or remove the statement from the foreword and call the document what it is; a strategy to address sectarianism and racism.** OFMdfM cannot have it both ways.

- d) Moreover we would stress the need to not only significantly amend *Cohesion* to ensure the inclusion of Women, people living with disabilities and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community but to make amendments to the structure and out workings of *Cohesion*.

As the document stands, it would make little difference to our constituent groups if we were included if this inclusion was not followed by significant amendments to the way in which the programme will be delivered.

This document contains no real time lines for delivery, no explanations of delivery mechanisms and no means to hold those charged with delivery to account, making the document weak and superficial.

It is our understanding that it may be the case that *Cohesion* is only the bones of a policy and when final publication occurs after the consultation process ends, OFMdfM will publish the final version to include actions and target dates and the like. If this is the case it is not sustainable as that will represent a fundamentally different document.

The inclusion of delivery targets into the policy is as equally important to the policy as the inclusion of the areas *Cohesion* wishes to address. The issues to address and the means to address them cannot happen in isolation. One requires the other. Both are equally important and both are substantial. In terms of OFMdfM fulfilling its obligations to consult; it is questionable to say the least that these are being met if this is the case.

We would therefore call on OFMdfM to **significantly amend the document to include our constituent groups, to amend the document to outline the out workings of *Cohesion* and ensure that their obligations under the Northern Ireland Equality Commissions Equality Scheme are being met regarding consultation.**

- e) It is the case that *Cohesion* is not underpinned in any significant way to relevant human rights standards, duties or actions.

“...the draft CSI programme does not make any reference to binding human rights standards to which the UK is party. Human Rights concepts such as non-discrimination, substantive equality, intercultural dialogue, and prohibition of the advocacy of hatred are of clear relevance to CSI⁵...”

We endorse the call from the NI Human Rights Commission for *Cohesion* to be

⁵ Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; Response to the OFMdfM Consultation on the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

underpinned by international Human Rights Standards and translate the international experience into a local context.

“CSI should also incorporate the duties that such standards entail, and draw on the guidance provided by the regional and global human rights systems in translating international experience to local context.”⁶

We call on OFMdFM to **align *Cohesion* with international standards and ensure that as well as the programme being human rights compliant; it draws on best practice, standards, duties and actions.**

- f) It is evident that those that have drafted this document have for one reason or another, taken no cognisance of the need to include a gender element or the need to include the redress of issues relating to the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered community or people living with disabilities.

As well as recognising these issues, getting them right is crucial.

We would therefore suggest that **OFMdFM officials, as well as relevant politicians, would benefit from gender awareness, LGBT awareness and disability awareness training. We would be happy to facilitate this for officials.**

Conclusion

The decision to make this joint submission was made as it became apparent that *Cohesion* is a limited document and for us represents a missed opportunity if OFMdFM are to continue with the strategy. It is evident that the areas *Cohesion* wishes to address should be expanded to include addressing issues and respecting the rights of women, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people and people living with disabilities and delivery mechanisms and targets should be made clear.

Moreover this submission should be seen as representing the joint views of our organisations as well as a compliment to our individual responses.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and we are happy to meet with OFMdFM officials to discuss any aspect of this joint submission.

It should be noted that we will be giving evidence to the Committee for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister in November regarding our position in November.

⁶ Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; Response to the OFMdFM Consultation on the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration