



Healing Through Remembering Response to OFMDFM Consultation Document on Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

Background to Healing Through Remembering

Healing Through Remembering (HTR) is an extensive cross-community project made up of a range of individual members holding different political perspectives. This includes people from loyalist, republican, nationalist and unionist, British Army and police backgrounds as well as individuals from different religious backgrounds, victim/survivors' groups, academics and community activists. They have come together over the last ten years to focus on the issue of how to deal with the past in relation to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. Through this ongoing process, HTR has outlined a set of core values and principles for dealing with the past that have emerged from the work of the organisation.¹

This submission is intended as a contribution to the ongoing Consultation process. We hope our response to this Consultation document, as an organisation engaged in this debate with a cross-section of society, will prove useful in considering the way forward in achieving a bold yet realistic community relations policy for Northern Ireland.

Response to Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Document

HTR welcomes the publication of the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Document (CSI). HTR recognises that it is not possible to produce in a single report a complete and final set of proposals for dealing with a conflict so protracted, localised and nuanced as the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. There will always be people who think or feel that they or their community has not been properly acknowledged or

¹ 'Making Peace with the Past – Options for Truth Recovery regarding the Conflict in and about Northern Ireland', Healing Through Remembering, October 2006

honoured. Therefore any set of proposals that offer the opportunity to progress the issue of dealing with the past will be incomplete and probably inelegant. HTR acknowledges the energy and endeavour that went into producing the CSI document. However HTR has reservations about some parts of the document. HTR believes in Northern Ireland there remain difficult legacy issues that have to be resolved in order to move towards the building of a shared and reconciled society. This CSI consultation process offers an opportunity to develop a policy which sets goals and establishes structures to build on the peace process. HTR believes it is appropriate that CSI looks not only at issues relating to those affected by the conflict but also at those wider considerations for a society coming out of conflict. This wider engagement is crucial if the objective of “promoting peace and stability in Northern Ireland” is to be achieved.

On reading the document HTR has a number of concerns and questions as follows:

Vision and Context

HTR is concerned that the document is not rooted in a clear understanding of the context in which the strategy is being developed. Throughout statistics and issues are raised for consideration but the document does not provide a framework for why such a strategy is necessary. The document should have a preamble outlining this context and the multiple impacts of the conflict on society. HTR knows the challenges with doing this given our focus on dealing with past and that drafting such a preamble will sway into the difficult territory of debating the causes of the conflict – but it is problematic to develop a strategy to deal with community, integration and sharing without essentially defining the root of the problem. The knock- on effect of this is that the document lacks a clear vision for what the future should embrace. Terms such as good relations, respect and sharing are used but these are never defined. Other terms, arguably essential to moving society forward, such as reconciliation, human rights and social inclusion are completely ignored.

HTR believes that it is imperative that the strategy articulates clearly a coherent vision which will elucidate and lead to consensus and agreement on the challenges of a

divided society. This should focus on the hard but absolutely necessary work of reconciliation as the foundation of a harmonious community.

The impact of 30 years of violence in Northern Ireland has left a society which is deeply divided. The challenge for post-conflict societies, such as Northern Ireland is to actively address the destructive patterns of sectarianism through peacebuilding processes at every level with a time-phased framework. Although the CSI document refers to tackling sectarianism, there is no analysis of its multiple causes and no definition of sectarianism is offered.² This lack of analysis results in an overall superficial approach with a focus on addressing sectarian behaviour at individual or community level rather than a systemic approach that places sectarianism in context and addresses underlying needs and aspirations. HTR believes that there is a need to understand and transform sectarianism and racism in all forms in order to build a reconciled society but this needs to be based on a sound analysis of what the problem is and what has and is causing it. This is both a forward-looking and a backward-looking task.

The CSI document disappointingly assumes that our segregated society and political identities will continue indefinitely. HTR believes that the only viable future for our society is an integrated society in which there is an ethos of tolerance and respect for different cultures and traditions that can enrich all our lives.

As noted above, the CSI document quotes several significant statistics which need to be taken into account in policy and planning:³

- 92% people indicated a preference to work in a mixed religion environment
- 62% people indicated a preference to send their children to mixed religion schools
- 80% people indicated a preference to live in a mixed religion neighbourhood
- 87% people were in favour of greater mixing in sports/leisure activities

² Leichty and Clegg's *'Moving Beyond Sectarianism, Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in N.I.'* (Columba Press, 2001, p103) define sectarianism as a *'system of attitudes, actions, beliefs and structures...., which arises as a distorted expression of positive, human needs especially for belonging, identity and the free expression of difference and is expressed in destructive patterns of relating....'*

³ OFMDFM *'Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation Document,' 2010*

These statistics indicate that people in Northern Ireland, regardless of political allegiance, aspire towards an integrated future, *not a future of equal but separate development as the document seems to imply*. It is therefore deeply dismaying that the approach of the CSI document seems to aspire to little more than a 'separate but equal' society rather than a genuinely shared society. Concepts such as sharing, good relations, human rights, equality, economic development, dealing with the past are complementary and should be treated as such and contained within a preamble and overall vision of the document. HTR takes the view that, in order to attain equality for all, there must be a commitment to a shared society for all. We believe, based on our experience that as a society we need to acknowledge and explore the past (as one part of a wider conflict transformation process) and the multiple ways the division has been fostered and maintained to build a better future.

Past Work

It is difficult to understand how a document on community relations in Northern Ireland can be written with no reference to the work that has already been done in this area. This is our second major concern with the CSI document. At the very least there needs to be some recognition of the vast amount of community relations work that has been carried out over decades within the community and voluntary sector and the impact this has made. The document needs to set a context at the start from which to develop policy proposals, and some of this exploration could be contained in the preamble. There also should be a review of current and past contributions with a view to identifying good practice and to create opportunities for learning from and building upon what has already been achieved. The Shared Future document (2005) should also be acknowledged and lessons from the process, or what has been rejected or used from its approach and why, noted. This will make for better policy writing informed by past work and make the document more contextual.

Omissions

The third concern is about omissions from the document. Many important areas and significant agents/agencies have been left out and overlooked - such as church groups, the LGBT community, women and cross-border initiatives. There is also no mention of the needs of victims and survivors or ex-prisoners, both key constituencies in the process of addressing our past.

HTR expresses deep dissatisfaction that *dealing with the past* has not merited so much as a mention in the document. Any community relations policy should include a commitment to deal with the past as one of its core themes. This is recognized by the Peace III Programme. It is also now well established in organisations such as the UN that addressing the past is part of post-conflict peacebuilding and improving social cohesion.

Based on ten years of experience Healing Through Remembering has routinely found that expecting people to lose interest or to be able to draw a line under the past and 'move on' is to labour under an illusion because the legacy of the past is a living dynamic, affecting the present and already influencing the future. Left unaddressed, the legacy of our past will continue to affect us and future generations in overtly and covertly destructive ways. This is evident in society in terms of contestations over space, memorials, museums, and commemorations, to mention a few.

HTR believes that it is imperative that an initiative based on an integrative and inclusive framework to deal with the past be included within the strategy. Through our work we know this is a sensitive issue but in the course of our work the organisation has learned much with regard to the sensitive use of language and cultural terminology in order to enable, rather than hamper or divert debate and dialogue about the past. In January 2008 HTR drew up the following framework of core values and principles to inform an approach to dealing with the past as part of its submission to the Consultative Group on the Past that we believe could be useful to the strategy document and should be included, or part thereof, in a values statement in the strategy.⁴

⁴ HTR Response to NIO on the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, October 2009

Summary of HTR core values and principles for dealing with the past

Commitment to the future

To build a future that is peaceful, politically stable, and benefits generations to come, we must deal with the past.

Not forgetting

The challenge is not to attempt to forget, but rather to find an appropriate way to remember.

Healing and hurt

The value of actions must be considered in terms of the potential harm, while also realising that individual and societal healing can only take place once the pain of the past is acknowledged.

Inclusive, diverse and participative

A full range of voices and opinions must be heard if understanding is to be generated and mature relationships are to be built. The approach should empower people and create a shared sense of purpose while being realistic about the difficulties that inclusive processes involve.

Language and terminology

The use of language must enable engagement, not hamper or divert debate and dialogue. Terminology may change and develop over time due to a changing context and the working out of suitable processes.

Right to truth

Society has a right to the truth about the past. Foundational principles to truth recovery are honesty, transparency and a willingness to engage. Truth recovery needs a structured and comprehensive approach.

Structured and holistic approach

There must be co-ordination between all the mechanisms for dealing with the past. A range of integrated options is necessary to meet the needs of society and these must unfold over time.

Flexibility

An approach must adapt to changing needs and context, growing awareness, newly unearthed questions, issues and circumstances. Participation should be allowed as appropriate and may change and evolve over time.

Trust, transparency and engagement

Trust must be built at all levels and honesty in engagement is vital to maintain trust. Listening to each other's viewpoint while not necessarily agreeing with it is important – accepting that we have different opinions but can share them.

Independence and political commitment

Processes must be officially sanctioned at a political level while maintaining independence in terms of planning and operation. All political parties must commit themselves to dealing with the past in order to build a better future for all.

Recognition and appreciation of existing work

There is already a wide range of remembering projects underway that look at dealing with the past in a way that will build a better society. It is important to enable these initiatives to continue in their work, and ensure they are seen as complementary to, and not in competition with, any other projects or approaches that may be proposed.

Realistic and hopeful goals

Dealing with the past is generational work, with the potential of real benefit for current and future generations. At the heart of this must be the identification and upholding of hopeful goals.

Government Involvement

HTR believes it is appropriate that the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) policy looks not only at issues relating to those affected by the conflict but also at those wider and deeper considerations for a society coming out of conflict. HTR

endorses the view that the leadership of OFMDFM; of the Northern Ireland Assembly; of the British and the Irish governments; and of civic bodies and agencies is crucial to the implementation of such an initiative to deal with the past. Political leadership and political generosity will be key elements to the success of a policy. In the absence of political commitment, tackling sectarianism, addressing societal issues and promoting reconciliation will take a lot longer. However HTR takes the view that the lack of vision in the strategy also implies that the main political parties and the two governments have in themselves not adequately dealt with the past. Is there a tacit agreement to co-exist and move the political process forward, through various initiatives, but a reluctance to deal with underlying differences and causes of the conflict? HTR realises this is a challenge but dealing with the past is not only a societal issue, but one that requires political perspectives and dimensions. Politicians across the board should provide leadership on this issue.

A wider political and civic engagement is also vital if the objective of “promoting peace and stability in Northern Ireland” is to be achieved. HTR believes that in order to achieve sustainable change in our society, a framework of initiatives for dealing with the past must begin with dialogue and in-depth inclusive deliberations, elucidating a consensus agreed direction and only then arrive at agreed outcomes. Collaborative engagement towards agreement or at least consensus at every stage will enable commitment to realistic achievable outcomes. The process is as important and will help structure the product. Furthermore, the learning offered by international experiences should be taken into account. These proposals present an opportunity to take stock of such existing initiatives, to allow a review of insights learned and to create improved processes.

Conclusion

In summary, HTR calls for the rewriting of the CSI document, with a clear contextual preamble, a vision and a core set of values, clear aims and objectives, and include a proposed integrated process to deal with the past and work towards reconciliation and a shared future.

HTR argues that developing a shared vision of a diverse, fair and independent society is central to reconciliation: in order to build peace, attention needs to be given to building and sustaining relationships. Hamber and Kelly⁵ offer a constructive approach in terms of five inter-related strands to address relationship building. The first is developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society. The second involves acknowledging and dealing with the past. Thirdly, there is a need to build positive relationships. The fourth stage is significant cultural and attitudinal change. Finally, it is necessary to include substantial social, economic and political change, and the building of equality and equity. Reconciliation is also part of this wider peacebuilding process they note, because relationships require attention in order to build peace. These five strands have been adopted by the Peace III Programme as its overarching goals and these goals were agreed by the Assembly in 2007. HTR believes that these strands would be helpful as a framework for action within a new CSI document. HTR argues that the only viable future for Northern Ireland is an integrated and shared society in which individuals are free to define their unique identities in their social interactions. Northern Ireland is a modern multi-faith and multi-cultural society where difference should be celebrated rather than mistrusted. All of the main political actors in Northern Ireland have shown themselves capable of generosity to political opponents, both within and outside their communities.⁶ This political generosity needs to be built upon for the flourishing of our society as a whole. HTR believes that it is imperative that all political parties commit themselves to dealing with the past and support the existing work of relationship building in order to build a better future for all in Northern Ireland.

Healing Through Remembering

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⁵ Hamber, B., & Kelly, G. (2005). *'A Place for Reconciliation? Conflict and Locality in Northern Ireland'* (Report No. 18). Belfast, Northern Ireland: Democratic Dialogue.

⁶ *'Making Peace with the Past – Options for Truth Recovery regarding the Conflict in and about Northern Ireland'*, Healing Through Remembering, October 2006