

FSP Response to Good Relation Strategy - Apr 2019

This response has been prepared by Forward South Partnership in consultation with several local community groups in South Belfast. Views have been captured and support for this response received from several local community structures, including:

- Forward South Partnership – A Board which brings together all sectors – community, statutory, political and private – to strengthen and better target the efforts being made by the community, the private sector and the Government to tackle in partnership the economic, social and environmental problems which affect people in the most disadvantaged areas of South Belfast;
- South Belfast Community Support Group – A group consisting of a number of elected nominees from the community and voluntary groups that operate across South Belfast and seeks to coordinate and promote collective views for the communities they represent

3. Please tell us what you think of the Vision for Good Relations in Belfast

Forward South Partnership (FSP) appreciates that the shared city vision carries a long-term focus and requires an inter-sectoral and inter-agency approach to be implemented. To achieve this long-term goal, Good Relation Strategy needs to be integrated into element of city governance. In other words, Good Relation should be key consideration in Community Planning, the Local Development Plan and BCC Cultural Strategy. The good relation should also inform the synergies created as part of the Community Cohesion Strategy and Resilience Strategy. The objective which could only be achieved through adoption of a comprehensive, multi-layered and integrated planning strategy. Our concern is that the current Good Relation work is not being implemented with enough care or consistency. The initiatives are poorly coordinated, and the focus is on organising events rather than building relationship. The current approach to Good Relation suffers from short-termism and lacks a ‘whole system’ approach that integrates short-term and long-term approaches in policy making.

Urban regeneration is all about inclusive and transformative place making and a commitment to create opportunities for greater connectivity and sharing. In this vein, urban regeneration is essentially a good relation programme that strives for greater social cohesion and inclusion. This recognition would enquire commitment to ‘place-based partnership working’ between agencies that supports community building and building relationships and building quality and value into those relationships in everyday place making processes. As noted in the draft strategy, “Many communities in Belfast still experience poverty and deprivation and the effects of segregated living.” The vision set by the Good Relation Strategy can only be achieved if the underlying problems created by business-driven and developer-led regeneration planning policies are properly addressed. The current efforts in organisation of events and funding stand-alone projects in the name of Good Relation do not systematically target root causes of societal tensions within and in between communities in Belfast.

The draft strategy notes that “some of the communities [in Belfast] also fear a sense of cultural loss, where they feel that their identity is being left behind.” The current city centre regeneration trend reflects a top-down approach to cultural representation, which reveals a marked division between the

support to elite and grassroots activities. The current private-sector-led and regeneration policies in Belfast do not often match the motivations and lived heritage of community, leading to development of social and spatial alienation. For instance, the city has created multiple cultural hubs, but due to lack of adequate integration between economic and cultural policies, development of new trendy cultural neighbourhoods has led to the ‘alienation and displacement’ of the local citizen, misrepresentation and lack of ownership that surrounds most current approaches to city regeneration. Culture-led strategies employed as cathedral quarter and Titanic Quarter are often designed to drive economic regeneration. These production or consumption-oriented models discourage presence of low-income communities and youth and have increasingly led to the gentrification. It should be acknowledged that access to land determine access to urban space and hence special attention needs to be give to prioritization of social functions in land-use; with BCC and other local government authorities committed to use the potential of land markets in broad public interest.

5. Do you have any suggested changes or improvements to the proposed values in Good Relation Strategy?

Good Relation is part of transformational change and needs to be understood within the wider City, Area and Neighbourhood Regeneration Framework. The strategy should facilitate an integrated approach to the promotion of good relations in the city. Instead of being a stand-alone advocacy programme, Good Relation values need to be mainstreamed into design of health and well-being, education and youth, economy and employment services and opportunities.

The Section 75 duties require a designated public authority, when carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity in relation to the nine equality categories and to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of a different religious belief, political opinion or racial group. The Section 75 (2) good relations duty places a requirement on decision makers to ensure that they properly consider the desirability of promoting good relations when carrying out the Council’s functions - such as when developing new policies, or when revising existing ones. The Hate Crime Categories are Race, Religion, Disability and Sexual Orientation, and include Gender Identity operationally. There is a contradiction that good relations are currently promoted only amongst some of the groups that experience hate crime and intolerance.

7. Do you have any suggested changes or improvements to these proposed outcomes within the draft Strategy?

Good relation is essentially about development of a Shared Space and Shared Space is firstly about access to the city and all the facilities it offers. The structure and layout of the city is therefore key to this, as is the development of civic ownership of spaces. ‘Access’ is not just about physical or spatial access. It is important to recognize that communities’ access to places is often determined by their class, gender, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity. Addressing the physical, psychological and socio-economic constraints is hence the key to access employment opportunities, social services, and leisure facilities.

The redevelopment strategy of Belfast during the last 40 years has undermined the access of working-class communities in and around Belfast's inner city. This is particularly visible in terms of access to public transport as the city has, since the late 1960s, been primarily shaped and designed for car users. The structure and layout of the city therefore continues to curtail the access of working-class communities to public space. Similarly, the development of civic ownership of spaces is undermined by limited access to public land and the speculation of land evident in the derelict and under-utilized properties throughout city. To achieve the vision set in the Good Relation Strategy, urban governance structure needs to secure a balanced spatial and social distribution of benefits. It is important that a community perspective and methodology be developed and that this should become a powerful tool to enforce 'shared space' on private sector, public sector and institutional interests which currently, sometimes unwittingly, promote exclusion.

The draft strategy notes that "We must all address issues in equality, sectarianism, racism and prejudice ... ensuring and promoting the safety and inclusion of vulnerable groups, tackling public displays of intolerance, sectarianism and racism, addressing hate crime, promoting equality, integration, cultural diversity..." In many occasions the good relation projects in Belfast have concentrated on managing the conflict rather than addressing the underlying causes of tension. Good Relation Strategy needs to move the focus to transformative change by identifying actions that support preventative approaches in tackling racism and paramilitarism. Promoting economic and social advance in communities suffering from very high levels of economic and social deprivation requires long-term strategic funding approaches which move away from the current Good Relation model of four funds administered every six months. There needs to be a reinvestment in community sector to build civic leadership and improve community confidence in the rule of law. It is only through increased community capacity that communities will be able to move away from intolerance, sectarianism and racism, paramilitarism and improve their lives.

The citizen intervention model would provide direction for community engagement in good relations issues, enable community researchers and connectors be actively engaged in 'place-based partnership working'. Special support should be provided to the capacity of communities that experience harm from paramilitary groups, building positive relations for new and host communities, Traveller, Roma, migrant, minority, refugee and asylum-seeking communities. Council, other decision makers and fund holders need to enhance opportunities for children and young people not only to use shared spaces but also actively engage in creating them. It is only through full participation of children and young people that young people's vulnerability to polarization could be addressed. Finally when measuring Good relations outcomes the needs of all Hate Crime Categories including Race, Religion, Disability and Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity need to be addressed.

8. What are the four biggest issues/barriers that hold us back from building good community and race relations in Belfast?

Lack of political will in implementing actions that support preventative approaches towards embed culture of lawfulness, tackling growing far right racism and paramilitarism and the polarising effects of Brexit

Fragmented systems of urban governance created by business-driven, developer-led and segregationist city planning policies resulted in socio-spatial incoherence, exclusion, and disconnection

Short-term strategic funding approaches which move away from the necessary investment in community infrastructure and Social Renewal. The current funding structure and priorities has resulted in rivalry between different community groups, undermining social collaboration and cohesion in between communities.

High levels of economic and social deprivation in marginalized and working class neighbourhoods

9. Please Tell us anything else that you feel we should include in our new Good Relation Strategy?

Although huge amount of time and resources has been put in preparation of the new Good Relation Strategy, it has not been widely received among ordinary citizens. We could draw from our own experience in South Belfast that most community members are either unaware of existence of such strategy or cannot fully comprehend its concept. Proper community engagement is the key in developing any Good Relation Strategy and this would not be realized within the current limitations in terms of time and resources available in community sector.

10. An Equality and Good Relations screening has been undertaken on the draft strategy. Are there any aspects of this that you would like to comment on, or change?

No.