

Response to Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation Document
Prepared by the Labour Party in Northern Ireland
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CSI Consultation Document Response Labour Party in Northern Ireland

1. Introduction and Overview

The Labour party holds true the values of social justice, equality of opportunity, strength of community and rights matched with responsibilities. As a Labour Party in Northern Ireland, we seek to uphold those values in the context of a society trying to move beyond sectarian division and find a common ground based on values, rights and responsibilities we all share. We seek a new political paradigm that is not dependent on territorial politics. The Labour Party in Northern Ireland welcomes a policy which seeks to address the divisions in our society, however we believe the CSI document in its current form fails to do that. In this response, we will outline the concerns we have with the proposed CSI strategy, highlight the areas of weakness, and put forward what we believe are the most crucial elements of a policy which would encourage a shared space for the people of Northern Ireland.

While there are specific and technical issues with the document which will be addressed later in the response, there are also fundamental ideological and thematic problems with CSI. These problems threaten to undermine the document as a whole: its failure to adequately address the importance of a shared society; the separation of education from the strategy into a separate document; the serious problems with socio-economic inequality and poverty which are symptomatic of the history of conflict and which underpin so many of the social problems in the region; and the difficulty of government in its current form within Northern Ireland to address issues of division when its existence is based upon those very divisions. It is important to remember that the Cohesion Sharing and Integration document is not “better than nothing.” It is less than we have currently, and entrenches in policy the cultural divides which have long caused deeply damaging conflict in our society. *CSI fails to acknowledge the commonalities of our society and instead upholds an ideal of “separate but equal.”* People from both communities share more values than not, share the same desire for quality of life, have shared histories and many aspects of a common culture. Composed by a government department which is led by two rival sectarian parties forced to work together, CSI itself has fallen victim to the very problems it seeks to address. Without emphasising the links between people in Northern Ireland as a basis for moving forward together, CSI will do little more than perpetuate division while protecting the equal rights of those living within the divided society. The negative implications of this are not just cultural, but economic as well. The Labour Party in Northern Ireland believes that the people of Northern Ireland want, and deserve, more than this compromise.

Our consultation process

To ensure that the response reflected the views of Northern Ireland's Labour Party members, a detailed consultation process was undertaken over the course of two months. First, members were sent an electronic copy of the document and the attached questionnaire, and invited to send written responses, either using the questionnaire or written independent of a template. Next, a consultation event was held, including a speaker who gave an overview of CSI, as well as brief discussion on the development of public policy. Members were then invited to discuss the document both in the context of Labour values and more generally. The notes from this discussion, as well as written responses, were incorporated into a draft response, which was then presented at a general meeting where further comments were invited. The final document was written and revised by a working group established for this purpose.

The following sections outline the response to the questions which framed discussion at our consultation event, highlight problems with structure and implementation, and provide comments and critique on specific areas of strength and weakness within the document.

2. Consultation questions

i. What do we understand by 'a shared future' and 'shared space'?

A key goal of the consultation document is 'to provide and expand safe and shared spaces'. However, it appears to us that the policy actually seeks to promote neutral rather than shared space. Labour believes in moving towards a truly shared society, in which individuals may express any aspect of their identity securely, rather than living in a society where expressions of identity are outlawed in the interests of coping with division rather than addressing its root causes. We accept that the development of shared space may require specialist training. For example, Asda has commissioned the organisation Trademark to train staff and work with the company across Northern Ireland, to develop truly shared space after a sectarian incident in one of their stores. Strategies to increase shared space in Belfast are particularly important as it is such a divided city.

ii. What do we think would be the consequences of continuing to live in a divided society? Why do we need integration?

Labour believes integration is fundamentally important to Northern Ireland society in order to create and acknowledge that identity is more fluid and complex than the 'two communities'. If we don't get beyond the current duality of our society, good relations issues will continue to arise. Everyone can play a part in integration through action in their own institutions and

local neighbourhoods. Integration includes our position within these islands, not just within our own society.

There are economic and political reasons why we need integration. We note the widely quoted Deloitte Report on The Costs of Division, which estimated additional costs of up to £1.5bn per year. This money could be put to better use at the best of times, but it is particularly important to make the economic impact of division a key theme given the UK Coalition Government's cuts agenda. Given the proven costs of division, Labour believes economic incentives for integration should be explored. In this context, the NI Executive should continue its support for the independent Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland.

Labour believes that the political impact of a divided society has been profound. It has been reported widely that the CSI draft aims to tackle the symptoms of sectarianism rather than the cause, but we should expect nothing else from a divided political system. As it was expressed in our consultation meeting: 'turkeys won't vote for Christmas'. The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive is set up on a communal basis which devalues the votes of the 'other' designation and thus hampers the efforts of those working to develop a third strand of politics that is neither unionist nor nationalist. *A political system based on communal division cannot provide the leadership to implement a policy to abolish such division.* A different ideological framework is needed. In addition, politics as it is presently constituted in Northern Ireland leaves many people with no party they feel they can support, and so they lose interest, which is not healthy in a democracy and hampers our politicians' ability to be true accountable.

iii. What should be the key priorities for the CSI policy?

Services

We identified three services which we thought should be a priority for further work on integration: education, housing and sports initiatives. Our top priority is ***education***. We regard an integrated education system as crucial for an integrated society. Having a child at an integrated school has an impact on the entire family. Integrated education will also make best use of resources at a time of cuts, however this should not be the primary reason for its wider adoption. It needs to be acknowledge that 'integrated' education is more than simply merging schools, otherwise conflict will arise within schools and children will not be truly educated together.

Housing is a more complex issue. The starkest divisions occur in social housing and in poor areas, raising additional issues of class inequality. We acknowledge that there are areas of Northern Ireland where people still believe it is not safe to live in mixed communities and where the priority is to ensure public safety. Government departments need to work together

to ensure there is a 'safety net' for those who want to take a risk and move into mixed areas, as is being done in the Housing Executive's Shared Neighbourhoods and Shared Futures schemes.

One of the CSI key themes is to address sectarianism in *sport*. We are aware of examples of good practice in this area, for example in football. Sports initiatives are a good way of reaching young people and also involve the private sector working positively with state agencies such as the police and local councils.

iv. What should Labour members be saying about reconciliation and peacebuilding?

Even though we as a society generally cannot agree when the 'conflict' started, or indeed how it ended, Labour members strongly believe that there remains a long term process of peacebuilding yet to be done. A long term process which needs long term ambition and the connectivity and co-operation of diverse elements and sectors of society.

Labour members believe that the CSI document is startling in its absence of any language or goals towards reconciliation. The absence of the word in the text reflects the enduring divisions on the nature of our common history within wider society and indeed at the very heart of the Executive. There has been much international investment and analysis on the processes needed for reconciliation. Analysis by Hamber & Kelly (2005)¹ has been accepted by the European Union as a vital framework within which to deliver work on building peaceful societies. This analysis describes a reconciliation process generally involving five interwoven and related strands:

1. *Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society:* The development of a vision of a shared future requiring the involvement of the whole society, at all levels. Although individuals may have different opinions or political beliefs, the articulation of a common vision of an interdependent, just, equitable, open and diverse society is a critical part of any reconciliation process.
2. *Acknowledging and dealing with the past:* Acknowledging the hurt, losses, truths and suffering of the past. Providing the mechanisms for justice, healing, restitution or reparation, and restoration (including apologies if necessary and steps aimed at redress). To build reconciliation, individuals and institutions need to acknowledge their own role in

¹ Hamber, B. & Kelly, G. (2005). "The Challenge of Reconciliation in Post-conflict Societies: Definition, Problems and Proposals" in O'Flynn, I and Russell, D (eds), *New Challenges for Power-Sharing: Institutional and Social Reform in Divided Societies* Pluto Press: London.

the conflicts of the past, accepting and learning from it in a constructive way so as to guarantee non-repetition.

3. *Building positive relationships*: Relationship building or renewal following violent conflict addressing issues of trust, prejudice, intolerance in this process, resulting in accepting commonalities and differences, and embracing and engaging with those who are different to us.
4. *Significant cultural and attitudinal change*: Changes in how people relate to, and their attitudes towards, one another. The culture of suspicion, fear, mistrust and violence is broken down and opportunities and space opened up in which people can hear and be heard. A culture of respect for human rights and human difference is developed creating a context where each citizen becomes an active participant in society and feels a sense of belonging.
5. *Substantial social, economic and political change*: The social, economic and political structures which gave rise to the conflict and estrangement are identified, reconstructed or addressed, and transformed.

Labour members believe that short term ambition will achieve short term solutions. Without the ambition of an overarching process towards reconciliation we will limit our society to the relentless cycle of conflict, violent or otherwise.

3. Strategic approach and implementation

Strategic approach

The document lacks strategic coherence. The aim (page 1) sets out an admirable ‘equal opportunities’ vision, but does not mention the importance of shared space, even though shared space is mentioned in the key goals (pages 6 – 7). There are eleven key goals, which are too many. Three or four relate to specific services or initiatives, which are inappropriate for a strategic overview, and others overlap in their subject matter. The goals focus on safety and on social inclusion, but again with an emphasis on ‘confidence in our different cultural identities’ (goal 7). The overall vision appears to be one of encouraging respect for difference within a culture of equality between these differences, with an underlying implication that difference may lead to violence and intimidation which must be controlled by the state. There is no sense that the state might encourage greater pluralism and complexity of identity which we see in many parts of the world including the more economically successful cosmopolitan cities.

The least credible aspect of the strategic framework is the ‘themes for action’ section (pages 8 -9). Here, the division into short, medium and long-term makes little sense. Some themes span all three timescales (e.g. enhancing community capacity); again there is overlap in subject matter, and other statements are either unclear (‘interfaces’) or platitudinous. There is no sense of how the themes are to be operationalised through government structures, and indeed a widely reported criticism of this document is that it contains no action plan or indication of resources available for implementation.

Chapters 3 – 9 contain ‘chapter aims’ and it is unclear how these relate to the earlier strategic statements, particularly the ‘themes for action’. Some chapters contain good material, for example chapter 4 on ‘empowering the next generation’ (which, however, fails to mention integrated education). But the chapter aims are often well-meaning statements of intent without a practical basis. Some of the chapter contents overlap, for example chapters 5 and 7, and 6 and 8.

The document is also weakened by the ambiguous approach to minority ethnic groups and by the exclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights. First, it is stated that a separate strategy for ‘racial’ equality will remain, following an existing action plan. However, minority ethnic groups appears also to be included in the CSI strategy in a very high profile way, not least in chapter 7, ‘a cohesive community’, in which the challenge of building connections between the two main communities in Northern Ireland is completely sidelined and ‘hate crime’ is seen entirely in terms of racism. Secondly, although the overall aim of the strategy includes LGBT groups (by implication), paragraph 1.9 commits the Executive to publishing a separate sexual orientation strategy at a later date. Labour regards this as unacceptable; it constitutes further discrimination against this group.

Finally, the proposed implementation mechanism includes five ‘Actions Plans and Funding Contracts’ (Page 58) about which no further information is provided. The five subject areas are: hate crime, interfaces, young people, racial equality and shared spaces. It is unclear whether these areas are the only ones for which funding will be available, or how they are linked to the key goals, themes for action and chapter aims. The five areas overlap and could be reduced to two: safety and inclusion. This highlights once and for all the lack of attention to services in the document.

Implementation

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with aspects of implementing the strategy. Implementation is of course crucial if CSI is to be anything other than symbolic policy. Labour welcomes the commitment to provide strong leadership through OFMDFM including the establishment of a Ministerial Panel. However, as stated earlier, we doubt that a political system based on community division has the capacity to deliver a strategy which seeks to abolish it. It is for

this reason that we believe an external body needs to continue to be involved in the delivery of CSI, and indeed wider good relations and community relations work, although ideally the state would be strong enough to be able to fulfil this function itself. Therefore in Chapter 11 Labour supports either option 3(a) or option 3(b) for the delivery and funding of policy advice. *We believe further work is necessary on exactly the kind of external body that would be most suitable*, and we lack the knowledge and information to assess whether the Community Relations Council in its present form would be the most appropriate organisation to carry out this role.

A final important point raised several times in our consultation is that much better communication is needed to ensure that the public is aware of the reasons why CSI is necessary, especially at a time of economic retrenchment. Without public support, it will be impossible to implement the strategy.

4. Specific Comment and Critique

This section addresses specific points and uses the headings and numerical identification used within the document.

Section 1: Relationship between Good Relations and Other Key Policy Areas

1.2 The use of the word “citizens” could be deemed problematic given that the document seeks to protect the rights of migrant workers and ethnic minorities, who might be citizens of other countries, but still have full rights to live and work in Northern Ireland.

1.10 We welcome the retention of the Racial Equality Strategy, which we recognise as a significant achievement and believe that the development of this strategy should be held up as best practise for future policy-making.

1.11 We recommend that the government work with the voluntary and community sector to ensure that gatekeepers are not dominating the process of consultation, particularly within the Race Forum, and that care is taken to ensure that participants have the capacity to participate in a meaningful way. This is especially important for smaller, less organised groups and those individuals who are not well connected in civil society.

1.14 We welcome the acknowledgement that immigration, while not a devolved issue, has a substantial impact on the country. We urge the policy to look closely at existing research on the problems facing those who have no recourse to public funds and the recommendations that follow that research. We point specifically to research produced by the Human Rights Commission on housing provision for migrants.

Section 2: Political Leadership/Community Engagement

2.1 We welcome a ministerial-led panel, and encourage the use of a “shadow panel” similar to that used during the composition of the Racial Equality Strategy in order to help build capacity for non-governmental stakeholders so that they might be able to engage fully in the process.

2.3 We urge the government to think carefully about membership to the racial equality forum to ensure that no groups are underrepresented. We also encourage that political membership on forums should overlap with the appropriate select committees, as this has been proven to be one of the most effective ways of delivering on the objectives set out in consultative forums. We suggest that the Migrant Worker Forum be involved in decision making processes in the same way that the Race Forum has been in the past. This is extremely important as the issues facing migrant workers can be significantly different from those affecting other ethnic minority groups.

On the objective: “To build a society where cultural diversity is embraced and celebrated and to promote pride in who we are and confidence in our different cultural identities.” We agree with the importance of celebrating diversity, but think that it is important to have an objective where we celebrate what we share as a society.

2.6 There are huge problems with these “themes for action.” The seemingly arbitrary division into short, medium and long term goals is confusing and often times contradictory. Terms like “good relations” and “community renewal” are used without clear reference to what they mean. Reducing segregation and cultural identity issues are seen as long term, while developing shared space and tensions around interface are short term. This seems illogical and needs to be re-examined - ideally with more specific goals and plans.

A spelling error was noted in this section - In “Tackling the multiple social issues effecting and entrenching community separation, exclusion and hate,” effecting should be affecting.

2.7 We welcome that the Assembly and Departmental Committee will play a robust role in scrutiny of policy delivery, but would argue that in the example of the Racial Equality Strategy that has not been the case thus far. We would ask that the failure to wholly implement the Racial Equality Strategy over the last five years be examined and used as a learning process for further implementation.

Section 3: People and Places

3.13 and 3.14 We believe that the education segment of this document is completely inadequate. It ignores the evidence that the majority of people in Northern Ireland questioned would prefer to send their children to integrated schools, or the plethora of evidence that integrated schooling has the capacity to improve social cohesion amongst students as well as parents and communities. We recognise that movement towards more integrated schooling is something that needs to be done with sensitivity, careful planning and support for communities who wish to continue to send their children to faith schools. However we have concerns that the hesitation to fully support integrated education is borne out of sectarian protectionism rather than the best interests of the majority of parents and students.

3.32 We welcome the commitment to update the Flags Protocol and to remove displays of sectarian aggression, however this is inconsistent with the timeline which places it as a long-term objective. Like in several other places in the document, the commitment to update or implement existing policies which to date have been either abandoned or poorly supported lends the question - what has prevented this from having been done already and what will ensure that it will not be sidelined again?

Section 4: Empowering the Next Generation

Overall this section seems to place majority responsibility for anti-social behaviour and sectarian disturbances in the summer on young people, with little regard for socio-economic factors in anti-social behaviour, and outside organisers who deliberately target certain areas and young people.

Section 5: Respecting Cultures

5.13 We express our dissatisfaction with the proposed Public Assemblies, Parades and protests Bill and contend that it causes undue restriction on peacefully organising groups who have rights to public assembly.

5.16 We have concerns that political and sectarian agendas will have a negative impact on the development of the Regional or Minority Languages Strategy. We also express concern that there is little being done to address the issue of access to English language courses for migrants - particularly the refusal of DEL to identify ESOL as an essential skill which makes it impossible for migrants to access free English classes. We believe that a discussion of languages which does not support the development of English for minority ethnic communities is inadequate.

5.26 Regarding Orangefest Initiative, we welcome the move to make July celebrations less sectarian. However there have been exclusive incidents since this initiative has begun - specifically the refusal to allow Chinese dragon puppets participate in the parade on the part

of the Orange order. We believe that multicultural expressions should be welcomed in such initiatives if they are to be successful in integrating the wider community, particularly given the welcome presence of local traditions in many of the cultural festivals held by ethnic minority communities.

Section 6: A Secure Community

6.21 We welcome the development of a transport strategy which will help to better connect various parts of the community, however wonder how this will be possible given the current cuts happening in the transportation sector and the fact that more cuts are coming.

Section 7: A Cohesive Community

7.2 We welcome the proposal that integration and intercultural exchange is a two-way process, but suggest that the Executive must ensure that politicians publicly reflect this view. This is particularly problematic given comments made over the past year by certain individual politicians about race relations and migrant workers. We recommend that the executive take pro-active steps to ensure that politicians openly support the diversity and equality priorities expressed in this document.

7.9 While great strides have been made to improve access to interpreters and translation service in the public sector, there is still a massive deficit in some areas. These initiatives need to be extended to areas of services such as homeless hostels, drug and alcohol support, and other public services which are provided in the voluntary and community sector.

7.10 We recommend that the Executive look to current best practise being carried out by organisations like the Law Centre, South Belfast Roundtable on Racism and GEMS, as well as some local councils in providing welcome packs and information on settling in for new migrants to ensure that we are proactive in helping new migrants settle in to local communities. We also recommend that English Language classes be made more readily available for minimal or no cost.

Section 8: Race Equality Forum

We welcome the reconvening of the Racial Equality Forum but ask that consideration be given to supporting the reconvening of a shadow forum to ensure that the participants have the capacity to participate fully in the development and implementation of policy.

We have not commented on the final sections of the document in a specific way as we believe these issues are addressed at length in other areas of our response.

5. Final comments

Throughout the consultation process for this document, people's personal histories and experiences were constantly used to frame the discussion. This is an important point, because it emphasises that this is a strategy which has the potential to profoundly impact individuals' daily lives. This point should be taken very seriously, and no strategy which seeks to improve community relations should ignore the actual experiences of the people living in the communities most affected by its implementation (or lack of). We had a difficult time with terminology, as so many words are laden with historical significance: integration; assimilation; neutral; shared and inclusive. It is clear that we must remodel language to suit a new culture, and that this will be an important part of the community relations agenda.

The Labour Party in Northern Ireland acknowledges the significance of a draft of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration and respects the wide ranging consultation process that is has been undertaken by OFMDFM. We recognise what a massive undertaking this has been given the diametrically opposed views of the two main parties involved. However we believe that this fact is also a fundamental flaw in the development of a community relations strategy, and that serious questions must be asked about the ability for a political system based on entrenched sectarian division is capable of delivering a strategy on social cohesion. We also believe that a policy which aims to create a shared society without emphasising shared values, integrated education and living spaces, which excludes the LGBT communities and pays insignificant attention to victims, which does not acknowledge the socio-economic problems that belie sectarian and racial division, and which holds a negative attitude towards young people cannot be successful in creating a more integrated society.