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**POLITICIANS AND COMMUNITY
RELATIONS
IN
NORTHERN IRELAND**

INCORE REPORT

NOVEMBER 2004

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INCORE

INCORE (International Conflict Research) is an international centre of excellence for peace and conflict studies. INCORE is a joint project of the United Nations University and the University of Ulster. Combining research, education and capacity-building, INCORE addresses the causes and consequences of conflict in Northern Ireland and in other global conflict zones and promotes conflict resolution strategies and peace-building processes. It aims to influence policy-makers and practitioners who are involved in peace and reconciliation issues while also contributing to academic research in the broad international peace and conflict studies area. INCORE works in partnership with a variety of institutions and organisations at local, national and international levels. Partner organisations include community groups, civil society organisations, peace and conflict-oriented NGOs, think-tanks and academic institutions. INCORE's work is interdisciplinary in nature and is comparative in focus.

Within the University of Ulster, INCORE coordinates the varied peace and conflict-related activities, projects and research that occur across the University. Such work encompasses a wide range of disciplinary areas including politics, international studies, social policy, social work, education, geography, architecture and sociology, as well as in peace and conflict studies. These activities, projects and research are carried out by INCORE staff and by INCORE Associates. For further details, please refer to INCORE's website: www.incore.ulster.ac.uk

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Our final and most sincere thanks go to the politicians, community relations officers, community relations practitioners, voluntary and community sector representatives and policy-makers who made time in their busy schedules to participate in this study. Without your co-operation, time and openness this study would not have been possible. We hope that this report will contribute constructively to our search for improved community relations in Northern Ireland.

Responsibility for the content and presentation of the work presented here, however, rests with the authors.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this project is to give an account of the perspectives of Northern Ireland's politicians on community relations and communal division. It is also concerned with acquiring a greater understanding of the role of politicians in the broad task of building good relations, and assessing the range of political opinion on the field of community relations work.

A project survey was mailed to 621 politicians (all MLAs and District Councillors) in March 2004 and 190 completed questionnaires were returned. This gave a response rate of 31%, which is very satisfactory for a postal survey. The questionnaire attracted a good response from across the political spectrum and reflects nationalist, unionist and other perspectives. The study also conducted semi-structured interviews with 34 individuals (20 politicians and 14 community relations, community and public sector representatives) between May and early July. A focus group for District Council Community Relations Officers was held on 1 June and a 'Politicians' Seminar' was arranged at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, on 23 June to discuss the preliminary findings of the project.

The findings were then presented at a conference, *Politicians and Community Relations in Northern Ireland*, held at the Waterfront Hall, Belfast on 9 September 2004. INCORE Research Associate for this project, Frank Foley, presented the findings of this report to the approximately seventy participants who attended this conference and confirmed. There was a panel discussion on the role of politicians, chaired by Jeremy Harbison with contributions from the CRC's Duncan Morrow, Avila Kilmurray, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and Brendan McAllister, Mediation Northern Ireland. Robin Wilson chaired a Politicians' Forum on Community Relations, with input from Gregory Campbell, DUP, Mitchel McLaughlin, Sinn Féin, Michael Copeland, UUP, Mark Durkan, SDLP and Stephan Farry, Alliance Party. Conference participants acknowledged the findings of this report.

Turning to the research findings, a brief review of politicians' understanding of the term, 'community relations', (CR) confirmed at the outset the variety of political approaches to this issue. Definitions focused on a range of concepts, from 'toleration of

difference' to an emphasis on the 'quality of interaction' between people from different backgrounds. Politicians also offered different views on the issue of *where* the problem of poor community relations manifests itself.

Responding to the project survey, a large majority (82%) of politicians agreed that the objective of community relations policy should be 'to encourage a more shared and integrated society, whilst also promoting respect for cultural diversity'. In interviews, however, most politicians took a sceptical or gradualist approach to the idea of policy changes in support of this objective. Some elected representatives do favour sharing-oriented policy reforms and referred to proposals they have made in areas such as education, housing and public service provision. However, most politicians appeared to regard the idea of policy changes in these areas as either unrealistic or inappropriate.

The report outlines the views of elected representatives on projects and initiatives designed to improve relations in Northern Ireland. A significant degree of ambivalence was found amongst politicians vis-à-vis the management, impact and the concept of 'community relations' work, as generally conceived. For example, considerable levels of dissatisfaction were shown with the management of community relations policy and programmes by the Government and, to a lesser extent, the Community Relations Council (CRC). However, large majorities of elected representatives acknowledged the importance of particular instances of work in the field of community relations, such as cultural exchanges designed to promote respect for diversity and interface work. Indeed, while a significant minority expressed deep dissatisfaction with the current approach in this field, over two-thirds of politicians signalled their broad support for the current approach to community relations work.

In interviews, politicians' reactions to the community and voluntary sector ranged from enthusiastic to withering. The project survey indicated that a majority of politicians are broadly supportive of the community sector's CR work, with a significant minority showing a neutral or sceptical attitude. Community sector and elected representatives agreed that good working relationships have, in many cases, been built between them in the context of Local Strategy Partnerships.

The report reflects on how some of unionism's and nationalism's political priorities interplay with their perspectives on the community relations issue. Issues such

as inequality, paramilitarism, constitutional uncertainty and the role of the state were identified by politicians as impacting on their attitudes to community relations. While concerns about these issues led some politicians to question the point of improving relations, others believed that progress on these issues was crucial to the task of building good relations. There were also those who argued that these and other divisive political issues should be made a core subject of dialogue and exchange in the field of community relations work.

The most fundamental question addressed in the report is: what is politicians' level of commitment to improving community relations? On the one hand, elected representatives' rate of participation in the project survey and willingness to be interviewed indicates a considerable level of political interest in the issue of community relations. On the other hand, the assessments of CR and community sector interviewees ranged from those who were sympathetic to politicians' dilemmas regarding reconciliation to those who focused on political neglect of community relations issues and the failure to challenge highly segregated living patterns. However, whether supportive or critical of politicians, the common thread running through all assessments was that building good relations and a shared society does not feature highly on most politicians' list of priorities. Indeed our survey indicates that many elected representatives (50%) themselves recognise that politicians are not doing enough to support the development of better community relations.

In this context, project participants saw both dangers and opportunities in party political and other proposals for greater involvement of elected representatives in CR programmes. A large majority of politicians agreed that elected representatives should be given a greater role in public bodies tasked with the management of CR work, although many acknowledged the need for safeguards to avoid a politicisation of community relations programmes. The main arguments made in favour of such a move at regional level were the desirability of greater democratic accountability and financial prudence, as well as the opportunity it would provide for elected representatives to take greater responsibility for community relations. Similar arguments were made in favour of the proposal that district councils should be given an enhanced role in CR decision-making and funding allocation. People working in the area of community relations gave a mixed

reaction to these proposals on the regional and local administration of CR programmes. They are cautious about giving a greater role to district councils and do not agree that politicians should exercise majority control over the CRC, for a number of reasons. These include a fear that political disagreement or instability could be transferred to the level of CR programmes in certain circumstances, misgivings about the potential for clientelism and a belief that some MLAs and councillors lack understanding of the nature of community relations work.

However, CR and community sector workers do see potential benefits in the appointment of more (although not a majority) of politicians to the board of the CRC. These include the argument, made by some politicians, that a greater involvement of elected representatives in regional and local CR administration could increase their knowledge of the issues and encourage them to take greater political responsibility for community relations. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, some politicians and CR/community sector representatives highlighted the need for more regular and better quality communication between elected representatives and those working in the field of community relations.

Beyond the issue of specific CR programmes, the final section of this report touches on the ‘bigger picture’ of politicians and community relations. It reflects the argument that politicians’ primary responsibility on this issue is to ‘become Government’ and implement a cross-departmental strategy that would build community relations considerations into every public policy decision. Secondly, political and community/public sector interviewees made a number of suggestions concerning the less clearly defined issue of how elected representatives can best provide civic leadership. Reflecting on both the private and public spheres, interviewees called for more trust-building work, as well as compacts between politicians regarding their public behaviour and involvement in disputes.

Our research confirms that politicians want a greater say in the management of CR programmes, but are they prepared to make a greater commitment to the concomitant role of providing civic leadership? This, in essence, is the question posed by people working in the field of community relations. If the political parties want to secure the agreement of this sector to their assumption of a greater role in peace-building policy and

work, they will need to demonstrate that community relations can be as high a priority to them as equality, security or political development. In this scenario, the roles of civic leadership and political involvement in CR programmes could complement each other to the benefit of funding recipients and the wider society.

1. INTRODUCTION

INCORE initiated this project on ‘Politicians and Community Relations’ as part of its programme of research into Management of Diversity issues. The aim of the project is to acquire a greater understanding of the perspectives of Northern Ireland’s politicians on community relations and communal division. The role of politicians in the broad task of building good relations will be explored, while an assessment of political opinion concerning the field of community relations work will also be presented. It is intended that this research may provide a knowledge base for the development of a more cohesive and agreed approach to community relations work by politicians, practitioners and policy makers. The specific objectives are:

- To outline how Northern Ireland politicians understand and define ‘community relations’.
- To achieve an understanding of how current community relations (CR) work is viewed by Northern Ireland politicians, and the variety of such views.
- To achieve an understanding of the kinds of CR work politicians are willing to support, as well as the kinds of work that they are reluctant to support.
- To outline the range of political opinion on policy responses to communal division.
- To present CR practitioner and community sector views on the role of politicians in the task of improving community relations.

The suggestion for the research arose from a context where the importance of the potential role of politicians in contributing to the improvement of community relations is recognised, yet the perception in some cases is that they are fomenting division between communities rather than assisting in peace-building. Several specific issues highlight the need for this research study. First, Northern Ireland faces problems of continuing sectarianism, which continue to undermine the building of sustainable peace. A problem that pervades every sector and level of society, it manifests itself most publicly in ‘interface’ areas in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, for example, and in relation to tensions arising from parading and local territorial power. Some local politicians have

tried to contribute positively to the resolution of these issues but accusations have been made that not all such political interventions are helpful. Second, under devolution (currently suspended), the transfer of responsibility for community relations to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister gave responsibility to local politicians. It is important that they, and the communities they serve, are well informed about the current debate on what this responsibility entails. Third, this research could contribute to the development of further understanding between those involved in the Local Strategy Partnerships which were set up to develop cooperation between politicians, business people, trade unions and community groups on issues of funding for social and economic needs. Finally, this study follows the Review of Community Relations Policy process and will complement it.

The research is funded by the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation within measure 2:1, Reconciliation for Sustainable Peace, via the European Directorate of the Community Relations Council and commenced in February 2004. The study employed a range of research approaches with the overall aim of being as inclusive as possible within the tight timeframe of the project and the busy schedules of politicians.

Following a review of relevant literature,¹ the first stage involved the design of a brief (18 question) survey questionnaire (see Appendix 1) which included questions on politicians' opinions on the current approach and its impact, their views on a range of different types of CR work, and what they see as the overall objective of CR work. The questionnaire also sought their views on funding of CR work and the management of CR programmes and policy. Finally, the questionnaire investigated their perception of their role in CR and how much they should be involved in the public bodies tasked with the management of CR policy and programmes. The questionnaire was mailed to 621 politicians (all MLAs and District Councillors) in March and a reminder was issued in April. A total of 190 completed questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 31%. This is a very satisfactory response to a postal survey and exceeded our expectations. The data were entered into SPSS software and analysed to provide basic tables and cross-tabulations.

¹ Reference to a range of literature is spread throughout this report.

Respondents to the survey represent a good cross-section of politicians, by gender, age, religion and political status (see Appendix 2). The survey attracted a good response from across the political spectrum and reflects nationalist, unionist and other perspectives. However, it is notable that responses to this survey are over-representative of the Alliance Party, the UUP and the SDLP, and under-representative of Sinn Féin and the DUP when compared with the 2003 Assembly Election results. For the purposes of in-depth analysis we recoded the variable to include only the major parties (Alliance, UUP, DUP, Sinn Féin and SDLP). Further analysis showed that MLAs were distributed across the major political parties.

Table 1: Political Party Affiliation (full list and major parties only)

	Full List %	Major parties %
Alliance Party	9	9
UUP	30	33
DUP	17	18
Sinn Féin	12	13
SDLP	25	27
Conservative Party	1	
Northern Ireland Women's Coalition	1	
Progressive Unionist Party	1	
UK Unionist Party	1	
Independent	6	
<i>n</i>	188	172

In addition to this quantitative approach, the study also conducted semi-structured interviews with 34 individuals between May and early July. All interviews (except 2) were tape-recorded and transcripts prepared. All interviewees were assured of confidentiality and no individual is identified in this report. Table 2 shows the range of interviewees.

Table 2: Semi-structured interviews.

	Number
POLITICIANS	20
<i>Alliance Party</i>	2
<i>UUP</i>	4
<i>DUP</i>	4
<i>Sinn Féin</i>	4
<i>SDLP</i>	4
<i>Northern Ireland Women's Coalition</i>	1
<i>Progressive Unionist Party</i>	1
Community Relations, Community and Public Sector representatives	14
TOTAL	34

In order to obtain the views of Community Relations Officers (CROs) a focus group was convened in Belfast in June. All 26 CROs were invited and 10 were able to attend. The proceedings were recorded and transcripts prepared. Finally, an interim seminar was arranged at Stormont in late June for politicians. All 621 were invited to attend to discuss the preliminary findings. Eleven politicians attended the event and key points from the discussion were noted.

Over the summer months, this matrix of information has been analysed and a draft report was prepared for discussion at the final project conference on 9 September 2004 at the Waterfront Hall, Belfast. Following the conference the final report and research summary were prepared for publication and wide dissemination.

The increasing use of the concept of 'good relations' in Northern Ireland reflects a number of changes, particularly the need to move beyond a binary model of Catholic-Protestant relations in order to reflect broader concerns about relations between people of different ethnic, cultural, religious and racial backgrounds or sexual orientations. There are different views on what the terms 'community relations' and 'good relations' denote and how they relate to each other. Due to practical considerations, we decided to use the traditional and more familiar term of 'community relations' for the purposes of our survey of and interviews with politicians. Also, we noted but did not have time to study in depth, the apparently increasing problem of racism and its relationship to sectarianism.

In particular, the role of politicians in the race relations issue in Northern Ireland warrants dedicated study that we are unable to provide given the time constraints of this project. However, we note here that racism has a harmful impact on positive community relationships.²

This report presents the findings from our research and Section 2 begins with an outline of how Northern Ireland politicians understand and define ‘community relations’. This is followed by a discussion of political responses both to the vision and the policy specifics of a ‘shared future’. Sections 4 and 5 present the range of political attitudes to community relations projects and initiatives. A brief outline of politicians’ views on the community and voluntary sector is then given, followed by a section on how some of nationalism and unionism’s political priorities interplay with the community relations issue. Section 8 looks at politicians’ level of commitment to improving community relations, while Section 9 addresses the issue of political involvement in community relations programmes. The final section contains the thoughts of elected representatives and CR/community sector interviewees on the future role of politicians in the task of building good relations in Northern Ireland.

² See Paul Connolly and Michaela Keenan, *Tackling Racial Inequality in Northern Ireland: Structures and Strategies*, (2002) Belfast: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency; and Paul Connolly and Michaela Keenan, ‘Racist harassment in the white hinterlands: the experiences of minority ethnic children and parents in schools in Northern Ireland’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, (2002) 23, 3: 341-356.

2. POLITICIANS' UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS

What do politicians understand by the term 'community relations'? Concepts of tolerance and respect for diversity featured prominently in the definitions of certain interviewees. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) believes that the overall objective of community relations policy should be the fostering of a more pluralistic society. This point was developed by one party member, who said that greater knowledge of other traditions, leading to '*increased tolerance of difference*', was central to his conception of community relations.³ Similarly, a Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) politician understood the concept to mean '*tolerance and respect for each other...live and let live*'.⁴ A Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MLA defined community relations work as a process of '*building good relationships*' and '*understand[ing] the other community*'.⁵

Sinn Féin representatives also spoke of the importance of understanding the concerns of other sections of society and they emphasised the political dimension of community relations. One senior member of the party said that community relations was about ensuring that '*competing nationalities or political aspirations can actually work together in a qualitative way or at least have their competition... [within] some kind of framework which actually doesn't polarise*'.⁶ Another Sinn Féin MLA said that community relations '*means that people have the right to be strong about their identity or aspirations or indeed demands and at the same time have a degree of civil discourse or interchange of experience*'.⁷ A member of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) argued that community relations was about '*giving people information*' which, notwithstanding their religious or cultural differences, highlighted the fact that they face the same socio-economic problems.⁸

An Alliance Party representative said that community relations was concerned with '*improving the quality of interaction between the people in Northern Ireland*'.⁹

³ Ulster Unionist Party, *Response to 'A Shared Future' consultation document on Community Relations Policy in Northern Ireland* (October 2003), p. 2. See: http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/pdf_documents/uup.pdf, accessed 8 July 2004; Author interview with a member of the UUP (23 June 2004).

⁴ Author interview with a member of the SDLP (27 May 2004).

⁵ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004).

⁶ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

⁷ Author interview with a member of Sinn Féin (30 June 2004).

⁸ Author interview with a member of the PUP (11 June 2004).

⁹ Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (1 July 2004).

Similarly, an SDLP politician defined community relations in terms of *'the degree, health, nature and comfort levels of just ordinary every day interaction among people living in different areas, of different backgrounds'*.¹⁰ On the other hand, the definition of one member of the UUP reflected a concern for organisational principles, rather than relationships or interaction: *'community relations to me has always been about accommodation... it can be an accommodation of the classes, it can be accommodation of religion, religious differences, ethnic differences, but it has to be about accommodation'*.¹¹

Others defined community relations in more general terms, such as: *'knowing exactly what is going on within your community'*,¹² or *'people living together who live in Northern Ireland'*.¹³ Finally, there were those who saw 'community relations' as an industry or a profession, exemplified by the following comments. *'To me, community relations appear to be a field of study that has been bought about and propagated by those who have an interest in it'* (UUP MLA).¹⁴ Another interviewee thought that *'Community Relations...must put more effort into abolishing injustice. They must also be aware of the implications of funding the wrong people'* (SDLP councillor).¹⁵

Most politicians interviewed gave a downbeat assessment of the current state of community relations in Northern Ireland. Relations were seen as 'fraught', 'broken', and 'terrible', for example.¹⁶ Although community leaders were said to have improved their knowledge of each other's work, working-class communities themselves were characterised as *'more polarised now than they were before the ceasefires of 1994'*.¹⁷ This appraisal, from a DUP politician, summed up the sentiments of many: *'Here and there, there are bright spots but there is a very long, long way to go before we get to the sort of society we want to see'*.¹⁸ On the other hand, a minority of more positive

¹⁰ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

¹¹ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

¹² Author interview with a member of the SDLP (30 June 2004).

¹³ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (14 May 2004).

¹⁴ Author interview with a member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

¹⁵ Comment made in 'Response 169' to Project Survey of MLAs and District Councillors.

¹⁶ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004); Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004); Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

¹⁷ Author interview with a member of the PUP (11 June 2004).

¹⁸ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004).

politicians believed that community relations were, despite the problems, ‘surprisingly...quite good’, as one member of the Alliance Party put it.¹⁹

While most politicians acknowledged that poor community relations were the responsibility of all in society, there were differences on the issue of *where* the problem manifests itself. One SDLP politician said that there were no major community relations issues in his area: ‘*we don’t actually have that problem in [this town] because [the town] would be 95% Nationalists, 5% Unionists*’. Commenting on community relations across Northern Ireland as a whole, he said: ‘*There are problems in areas but... that is the very small minority, very, very small*’.²⁰ Reflecting on the socio-economic aspects of the issue, an Ulster Unionist MLA commented: ‘*if you are above a certain salary, community relations are fine... basically there is an immunity there as to what else is going on [and] it could only be, in many places, a quarter of a mile away but it might as well be light years away and, therefore, the focus in community relations seems to be in the working-class areas in places that people have now called interfaces*’.²¹ Another member of the UUP described interfaces as the areas ‘*where the problem arises*’, although he recognised that ‘*everyone could be the problem*’ because community relations is also an attitudinal issue.²²

From a different perspective, one PUP politician argued against any implication that community relations was primarily a problem in interface areas. While community relations problems among the middle-classes do not lead to violence, he said, they have equally serious implications: ‘*If middle-class people are sectarian, then they are the people with the power and the money and what they do is that they actually discriminate, because they have the power [to do so]*’.²³ Similar points were made by other parties, such as the Alliance Party’s argument that ‘*the underlying causes of violence...are deeply ingrained in the entire population, including in the leafy suburbs and down at the golf club*’.²⁴ It is not the aim of this section to analyse the relative merits of politicians’

¹⁹ Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (11 May 2004).

²⁰ Author interview with a member of the SDLP (30 June 2004).

²¹ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

²² Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (14 May 2004).

²³ Author interview with a member of the PUP (11 June 2004).

²⁴ Alliance Party, *A Shared Future: Alliance Party Response* (September 2003), p. 6. See http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/pdf_documents/alliance.pdf, accessed 8 July 2004. See also, *Alliance Party*,

definitions of community relations or their analyses of where the problem manifests itself. However, this brief review of their understanding of community relations does offer hints as to their views on policy detail and confirms at the outset the variety of political approaches to this issue. A more in-depth study that analyses and critically evaluates these diverse views on community relations is warranted.

3. 'A SHARED FUTURE?'

In the project survey, politicians were asked to give their opinion on what the overall objective of community relations policy should be. Respondents were presented with two formulations, which reflected the options put in the *Shared Future* Government consultation document,²⁵ and asked to indicate which objective they preferred.

Table 3: Opinion on the objective of community relations policy

<i>The overall objective of community relations policy in Northern Ireland should be...</i>	%
To accept trends towards a divided society and attempt to stabilize relationships within and between the two main communities	15
To encourage a more shared and integrated society, whilst also promoting respect for cultural diversity and identity.	82
There should not be a community relations policy.	2
Can't choose	1
<i>n</i>	188

The first option was 'to accept trends towards a divided society and attempt to stabilise relationships within and between the two main communities'; only 15% of politicians were in favour of this objective. 82% of politicians said that they preferred the second option, which was 'to encourage a more shared and integrated society, whilst also promoting respect for cultural diversity and identity'. 94% of Alliance Party members supported the 'shared society' objective, while 93% of SDLP politicians, 87% Sinn Féin, 79% UUP and 63% of DUP members expressed their support for the objective. Although members of the DUP showed lower levels of support than other parties, the overall

²⁵ *A Shared Future. Improving Relations in Northern Ireland. A Consultation Document*, (28 January 2003), www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk, accessed 8 July 2004. See also Community Relations Council, *A Shared Future. Response by the Community Relations Council*, (2003) Belfast: CRC, www.community-relations.org.uk, accessed 8 July 2004; The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, *A Response to 'A Shared Future'. A Consultation paper on Improving Relations in Northern Ireland*, (September 2003), Belfast: Community House; and John Darby and Colin Knox, 'A Shared Future': *A Consultation Paper on Improving Relations in Northern Ireland. Final Report*, (21 January 2004), www.asharedfuture.ni.gov.uk/knox.doc, accessed 8 July 2004.

support level of 82% for the objective of a shared society was clear. In interviews, however, whilst supporting the objective of a shared society, most politicians doubted that policy changes designed to foster integration were appropriate or realistic at this point. Overall, the spectrum of opinion ranged from those who favoured sharing-oriented policy reforms as a matter of urgency to those who were unenthusiastic about or critical of the idea that public policy should be reformed in order to foster a more integrated society.²⁶

Considering first those who favour structural reform to address communal division, the Alliance Party has said that all Government departments and public agencies should be required to ensure that their policies have the effect of encouraging sharing over separation. For example, it believes that the promotion and maintenance of mixed housing should become an explicit objective of the NI Housing Executive, and that the current demand for mixed housing should be better met. However, although the Alliance calls for mixed estates to be built and monitored, it does not favour quotas to enforce mixing and believes that housing should always be awarded on the basis of strict need.²⁷ The SDLP, while it warns against the adoption of a prescriptive approach to fostering integration, does favour a cross-departmental Government strategy to encourage a shared society, including more access to integrated education and action in support of mixed housing.²⁸ One party member regretted the fact that many decisions on public expenditure take communal divisions as a given, leading to a wasteful duplication of services. This needed to be addressed, he said.²⁹ Another SDLP MLA argued that all public policy should be proofed for its likely impact on community relations.³⁰ A representative of the Women's Coalition also called for measures to address communal division at the

²⁶ For earlier work on public policy, see Clem McCartney, *International Review of Public Policies Towards Improving Inter-Community Relations*, (2001), A Paper prepared for the Review of Community Relations Policies, INCORE.

²⁷ Alliance Party, *A Shared Future: Alliance Party Response* (September 2003), See http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/pdf_documents/alliance.pdf, accessed 8 July 2004, pp. 15, 20, 25-26. Although we refer to some party documents, we do not have space to include a detailed comparison of parties' policies on sharing and integration. This section is more concerned with recording politicians' reactions to the concept of a shared society.

²⁸ SDLP, *Beating Sectarianism, Building a Shared Society, SDLP Policy Document* (November 2003), pp. 6, 22-23. See: http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/pdf_documents/sdlp.pdf, accessed 8 July 2004.

²⁹ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

³⁰ Comment made in 'Response 15' to Project Survey of MLAs and District Councillors.

structural level of policy and public services, arguing that *'if we keep on replicating...two of everything, then we are just reproducing the status quo'*.³¹

Other politicians warned that moves to foster a more shared society should not compromise personal values or cultural traditions. An SDLP MLA said that there needed to be *'a much greater debate around the whole idea of integrated education'* especially regarding the protection of religious instruction within that system.³² A Sinn Féin MLA said that the demand for integrated education needed to be better met in his constituency. However, he supported the principle of parental choice and expressed a personal preference for Irish-medium education and Catholic-maintained schools.³³ UUP leader, David Trimble, has also argued for free choice, but he doubts that integrated education should be further supported by the state in a context where the education system is already characterised by fragmentation and incoherence.³⁴ A DUP politician said that there was no incentive for him, as a member of the Orange Order, to support mixed housing if some of the new tenants objected to a traditional Orange parade passing through their area. He felt that if people could live *'side by side in harmony'* in the short term, that would be progress: *'I know we are talking about benign apartheid and so on, it's not a great word to use but it may be that that is what we have to accept initially'*. Arguing that many unionist communities felt under threat, he thought that it was important to build up single identity communities that have haemorrhaged over the years and sustain unionist communities in areas which used to have a strong unionist presence but which are now overwhelmingly nationalist.³⁵

Some Sinn Féin representatives questioned whether the aim of a shared society was realistic in the short term and were sceptical about the policies they believed might flow from such an objective. As one MLA put it: *'I would love to see [more mixed communities] absolutely, but how do you create that? Do you turn around and say...every second house will have to be unionist, nationalist, unionist, nationalist or*

³¹ Author interview with a member of the Women's Coalition (15 June 2004).

³² Author interview with a member of the SDLP (27 May 2004).

³³ Author interview with a member of Sinn Féin (30 June 2004).

³⁴ Comments made in the Northern Ireland Grand Committee, Debate on Community Relations Policy, (17 June 2004), see <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200304/cmstand/nirelg/st040617/40617s01.htm>, accessed 8 July 2004..

³⁵ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004). For a greater understanding of single identity see Cheyanne Church and Anna Visser, *Single Identity Work*, (2001), Local International learning Project, INCORE.

Catholic, Protestant’?³⁶ Another Sinn Féin member said that he preferred the second option (a shared society), but the problem with this aim is that *‘it means that we try and create these pilot schemes where we channel people into integrated housing... and we all sit and watch this Big Brother type experiment and see does it succeed’*. A more sensible approach would be to invest in single identity communities, he argued: *‘if communities become strong in themselves they’d begin to build up a better relationship with the other community and then from that may flow the type of integrated society that we would aspire to’*.³⁷ One SDLP MLA thought that if normal relations could be established between political leaders, then a more shared society would follow in time: *‘things will evolve naturally...it will probably take another generation, if not two generations, maybe five generations’*.³⁸

Scepticism about the ‘shared future’ objective bordered on hostility in some cases. One UUP politician said that debate called for by the *Shared Future* document was artificial and dangerous in so far as it frightened people into thinking that society must either totally separate or totally integrate. Focusing on housing, he claimed that people’s freedom to choose could come under threat from ideas contained in the Review of Community Relations Policy, carried out by Dr Jeremy Harbison (also known as the *Harbison Report*),³⁹ and the *Shared Future* document: *‘I am totally against this idea that they have come up with, almost forced integration. You just cannot make people integrate and to use a subject such as housing to bring that about, to me, is quite irresponsible’*. Warning that any such policy would backfire, the MLA said: *‘what they are talking about is trying to create some super settlements where people in there would be superior beings to the rest of Northern Ireland because they have conformed to a dictate from a civil service report. I’ll repeat this, the Harbison Report...is flawed, consistently flawed and it is tampering with people’s lives’*. If the intention was to enforce mixed housing, that would constitute a ‘Big Brother’ approach with catastrophic implications, he argued: *‘Are we going to empty places to move people?...[for example, a*

³⁶ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

³⁷ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004).

³⁸ Author interview with a member of the SDLP (30 June 2004).

³⁹ Jeremy Harbison *Review of Community Relations Policy: Main Report*, (January 2002), Belfast: CR Unit, OFMDFM.

*settlement] which is predominately Protestant, are we just going to empty that, to take the Prods out of there and move them into an integrated area’?*⁴⁰

However, the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Paddy McIntyre has said that that the body ‘*does not have, nor would it seek to have, any powers to force people to live where they don’t want to live*’. Citing an estimated 400 families on its waiting list with a mixed background, the Housing Executive has insisted that their plan to launch two pilot projects of integrated housing is an attempt to meet a freely expressed need that currently is not being met. The housing body also restated that supporting people who choose to live in single identity neighbourhoods is a key strand of its policy.⁴¹ Nevertheless, comments by some politicians indicate a belief that mixed housing initiatives imply a negative judgement on single identity communities. The UUP politician’s description of integrated housing projects as ‘*super settlements*’ containing ‘*superior beings*’ (quoted above) was echoed to an extent by a Sinn Féin MLA, who argued that experiments in integrated housing would ignore the reality of struggling single identity communities: ‘*What would you say to those people? You are misfits? This is what you should aspire to...[and] nobody is going to deal with you until you change yourself into what we would consider a model citizen that can live in harmony with your neighbour and integrate fully with your neighbour?*’⁴²

On the overall vision presented in the *Harbison Review* and *Shared Future* document, one member of a public agency took a different view to the UUP politician quoted above. It was argued that while the Government wants to encourage a more shared society, this was based on recognition that individual choice is paramount.⁴³ For example, the *Harbison Review* and *Shared Future* documents propose that Government ‘*facilitate the development of integrated/shared communities where people wish to learn, live, work and play together*’.⁴⁴ However, a DUP representative thought that such a policy could waste a good deal of public money. Reflecting on the Government’s proposed objective

⁴⁰ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

⁴¹ *Integrated Housing proposals announced*, Northern Ireland Housing Executive ‘News Release’, (6 April, 2004). See: <http://www.nihe.gov.uk/news/news.asp?Id=589>, accessed 18 July 2004.

⁴² Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004).

⁴³ Author interview with a senior member of a public agency (1 July, 2004).

⁴⁴ Jeremy Harbison, *Review of Community Relations Policy, Belfast*: Community Relations Unit, OFMDFM (January 2002), p.6 (emphasis added). See <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/community/harbison02.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2004. See also: *A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland*, <http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/>, accessed 8 July 2004.

of encouraging a shared society, he said of different sections of the community: *'they don't socialise, they don't mix, they don't worship [together], they don't live in a mixed environment. Why would anybody expect that if you throw millions of euros or pounds at them that they would suddenly start'?*⁴⁵ He nevertheless believed that *'it most certainly can happen over the long term. I would be very, very hopeful that it could happen over the longer term'*.

However, echoing the Sinn Féin MLA cited above, this DUP representative was reluctant to advocate changes to the policy approach in favour of a shared society if single identity communities would lose out in any way through this process. He was not in favour of a principle or presumption of sharing being introduced to Government policy or public service provision.⁴⁶ For example, a family that wanted to live in a mixed environment *'should be facilitated as much but not more than'* a family that wished to live in a single identity environment, he argued. Similarly, if two communities are content with the provision of a common public facility that offers equal access to both of them, then that route should be taken. Where that is not the case, however, facilities should be offered within both communities, he said. In principle, therefore, Government *'should respond to the wider community'*, he argued, and not impose its model against the community's wishes. When a demand is made by a section of the population, as in the example of the integrated schools movement, then it should be responded to. (Indeed, reflecting on the planned integrated housing pilot schemes, he said he was *'happy to support them as projects, and if they work then I think that they should be built upon'*). However, if Government were to take too much of a lead on this and make sharing a key principle of policy-making, that would smack of a *'Big Brother'* approach, a *'shared future where everybody is seen to have a single identity that is pluralist and positive and all that...a one size fits all'*.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004). The Alliance Party takes the opposite point of view, arguing that the costs of implementing a fully fledged community relations strategy would be relatively minor, compared to the huge policing, service duplication and other costs involved in managing a divided society. See Alliance Party, *A Shared Future: Alliance Party Response*, p. 21

⁴⁶ This principle, favoured by many public sector actors and community relations practitioners, has been articulated in one policy paper as 'a presumption that [Government] would always act in ways that will promote and sustain a shared future'. See Ronnie Spence, Jeremy Harbison, Bronagh Hinds and Robin Wilson, *An Agenda for a Shared Future: a policy paper*, Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research Briefing Paper GOV/BP/2004/1, (2004), Queens University, Belfast, p. 6. <http://www.governance.qub.ac.uk/bp20041.pdf>, accessed 18 July 2004.

⁴⁷ Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004).

Although a large majority of politicians say that they support the objective of a more shared and integrated society, it appears that most take a sceptical or gradualist approach to the idea of policy changes in support of this objective. Some politicians do favour policy reforms, but most tend to regard such proposals as unrealistic, inappropriate and, in some cases, dangerous. Indeed, with housing and education being sensitive topics for many, there is a striking ‘gap’ in the perception of sharing-oriented policy reforms between those who favour integration and some of those who are wary of the idea.

4. POLITICAL OPINION ON COMMUNITY RELATIONS PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

The project survey and interviews revealed a complex range of political opinion on projects and initiatives in the field of community relations (also known as ‘CR’). Survey respondents answered a series of questions on topics ranging from their overall opinion of community relations work to their opinions on the management and impact of CR programmes. Responding to the first question, 10% of politicians thought that the current approach to policy and work on community relations was ‘basically right’, while a further 59% deemed the approach to be ‘broadly right although it needs some improvements’ – thus indicating broad support for current CR work among almost 70% of elected representatives. However, a significant minority of 28% believed that the current approach to CR policy and work was ‘basically wrong’ or ‘seriously misguided’.

Table 4: Opinion on the current approach to CR policy and work.

<i>Thinking about <u>policy and work on community relations</u>, do you think the current approach...</i>	ALL PARTIES %	Alliance %	UUP %	DUP %	Sinn Féin %	SDLP %
is basically right	10	0	12	10	9	9
is broadly right but needs improvements	59	92	63	47	30	75
is basically wrong	15	0	18	10	44	9
is seriously misguided	13	8	8	30	17	2
can't choose	3	0	0	3	0	5
<i>n</i>	<i>179</i>					

Looking at this by political party shows that members of Sinn Féin and the DUP are most likely to think that the current approach ‘is basically wrong’ or ‘seriously misguided’ (Sinn Féin 61%, DUP 40%). The other parties have majorities believing that the current approach is broadly right but needs improvements. This rises from 63% of UUP responses to three quarters of SDLP responses (75%) and up to the vast majority of Alliance Party responses (92%).

Political opinion on the management of community relations in Northern Ireland is divided, with 49% expressing broad support for the Government’s efforts in this

regard, and 61% showing broad support for the CRC. However, a significant minority (45%) think that the Government’s policy management needs to be radically reformed, whilst just over a third (35%) call for radical reform of the CRC’s management of community relations programmes (see Table 5). Sinn Féin and the DUP find some common ground here as members of both parties (Sinn Féin 74%, DUP 53%) believe that the management of community relations policy by Government is ineffective and needs to be radically reformed.

Table 5: Levels of satisfaction with management of community relations

	%
<i>The management of community relations <u>policy</u> by the Government, primarily the Community Relations Unit of the office of the First Minister/Deputy First Minister...</i>	
...is effective and does not need to be changed significantly	6
...is effective in general but needs some reforms and improvements	43
...is ineffective and needs to be radically reformed	45
<i>The management of community relations <u>programmes</u> by the Community Relations Council...</i>	
...is effective and does not need to be changed significantly	7
...is effective in general but needs some reforms and improvements	54
...is ineffective and needs to be radically reformed	35

While 44% of politicians agreed with the statement that CR work *is* having a positive impact, 31% disagreed with this statement and an unusually large 23% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Respondents were more positive about the future, however, with 59% agreeing that CR work will have a positive impact on relations in future years. A majority of politicians (58%) also agreed with the statement that CR work ‘*is impacting as well as possible given the limited nature of the resources allocated to it*’. Overall, although the survey indicates broad political support for the current approach to community relations work and an awareness of funding limitations, it also reveals a significant degree of ambivalence amongst politicians vis-à-vis the management and current impact of CR work.

The project interviews provide more detail on the opinions of different politicians on 'community relations' work, generally conceived. Amongst those who were positively disposed towards the concept, a member of the SDLP argued that community relations initiatives have on the whole been providing value for money and have had effects or 'spins-offs' that are not widely recognised.⁴⁸ A DUP politician said that although CR work in his experience has not 'brought communities together', it has improved their understanding of each others' cultures and concerns, and helped to build good working relationships between community groups.⁴⁹ A Sinn Féin MLA echoed these sentiments. 'Community relations projects carried out by local community groups are worthwhile and beneficial the majority of the time', he said.⁵⁰ However, an Alliance Party representative, whilst he was supportive of CR programmes, was concerned that the debate on community relations focused too much on funding and projects. These were *not* the most important issues, he emphasised. A 'root and branch' approach to the structural issues of division was needed, he said, because 'continuing along doling out money for community relations projects is just scratching at the surface'.⁵¹

Other politicians had definite criticisms of what they saw as the philosophy underpinning community relations work. A second Sinn Féin MLA argued that over the last twenty years, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has directed a community relations policy that has attempted to create 'a kind of neutral person, to divest them of their own community identity and their own political outlook, and try, as they would have seen it, to shore up middle ground'.⁵² Rather than facilitating dialogue between 'the sharpest edges' of society about the real issues on which they were divided, CR work had largely been about 'getting polite Catholics to talk to polite Protestants' in the hope that this would foster a neutral identity for both, and lead to the creation of a 'Northern Ireland person'. This failure to deal with the reality of different and sometimes clashing single identity communities was 'completely, utterly wrong', he said, and was highlighted when 'a

⁴⁸ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

⁴⁹ Author interview with a member of the DUP (21 May 2004).

⁵⁰ Author interview with a member of Sinn Féin (24 May 2004).

⁵¹ Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (1 July 2004).

⁵² Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004). See also Paul Burgess, *Community Relations, Community Identity and Social Policy in Northern Ireland*, (2002), New York: Edwin Mellen Press.

Glenbryn or an Ardoyne situation... explodes onto your TV screen'.⁵³ The Ulster Unionist Party also believes that community relations policy has been based on a misguided objective of 'neutrality'.⁵⁴ With some echoes of his Sinn Féin counterpart, a UUP MLA warned against any CR policy that would be based on 'homogenising into some... new type of Northern Ireland person'.⁵⁵ Of relevance here is the survey finding that most politicians (62%) do *not* agree that attempts to improve community relations may undermine a community's identity and cultural tradition, although a significant minority (26%) is concerned about this possibility (see table, below).

Table 6: Opinion on community relations and identity

	Strongly agree/ agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree/ strongly disagree %	Can't choose %	<i>n</i>
Attempts to improve community relations tend to undermine a community's identity and cultural tradition	26	12	62	1	187

Of the quarter of respondents that were concerned that attempts to improve community relations may undermine a community's cultural tradition, it is the DUP that has the most concerns here. 60% of respondents from that party agreed with the proposition stated in Table 6, although this possibility concerned just 29% of UUP members, 14% of Sinn Féin, 9% of the SDLP and 6% of the Alliance.

On another theme, a UUP politician said that 'cross-community' projects encourage tokenism and that people only come together 'if they think they are going to get money out of it'. He continued: 'That is the only reality: they do not have anything in common'. Indeed, 'it could be that you improve the relationships between the communities in some circumstances by not bringing them together, by leaving them alone', he argued. This MLA struggled to think of any community relations initiatives

⁵³ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004).

⁵⁴ Ulster Unionist Party, *Response to 'A Shared Future' consultation document on Community Relations Policy in Northern Ireland* (October 2003), p. 1.

⁵⁵ Author interview with a member of the UUP (23 June 2004).

that he would have regarded as worthwhile: *'I'll have to pass on that...what did well. Personally, I don't know of any. I mean, I am pretty confirmed in my own mind that it has been a waste of bloody time'*.⁵⁶

Not only a waste of time, community relations work has also been a waste of money given that the civil service has been *'reckless'* with public spending in this area, the UUP representative continued. He said that rather than allocating a specific budget to community relations work, the Government should first define a programme of work, and *then* work out how much funding was needed for it. The current approach of beginning with a certain budget was the wrong way around because if one allocates a sum of money first, *'people will find a way of spending it'*, he said.⁵⁷ Indeed, perceptions of both the level and the effectiveness of community relations funding varied considerably between politicians. Edwin Poots of the DUP has argued that community relations became worse after 1994, despite the spending of £115m in the area between 1991 and 2001. *'So are we throwing good money after bad'*? he asked.⁵⁸ A DUP party colleague said that *'millions upon millions of pounds'* has been wasted because *'republicanism has milked the system'*.⁵⁹ Whilst not calling for a reduction in community relations funding, a Sinn Féin MLA perceived the CR spend to be a large one. He spoke of the Community Relations Council implementing the failed policy of the NIO and spending *'millions of pounds with little or no product, and I mean millions upon millions of pounds'*.⁶⁰ However, an Alliance Party member presented the funding of community relations in a different light: *'The amount of money that is pumped into genuine community relations work is quite pitiful. I mean it is single figure millions of pounds'*.⁶¹ An SDLP politician made a similar point in positive terms: *'a lot of this work does deliver positive benefits in terms of raising people's sights, widening people's perspectives for not a huge amount of money'*.⁶²

⁵⁶ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

⁵⁷ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

⁵⁸ Edwin Poots, *The DUP View*, speech to the 'Shared Future' conference, Queens University Belfast, (27 January 2004).

⁵⁹ Author interview with a member of the DUP (26 May 2004).

⁶⁰ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004).

⁶¹ Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (1 July 2004).

⁶² Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004). In terms of Government funding, the Community Relations Council spends approximately £2m per annum on projects, a further £2m is allocated by district councils, and £3.5m is spent by the Department of Education.

5. ATTITUDES TO THREE TYPES OF CR WORK: EXCHANGE, INTERFACE AND SINGLE IDENTITY

In the survey and in interviews, then, a significant degree of ambivalence was found amongst politicians vis-à-vis the management, impact and the concept of ‘community relations’ work, generally conceived. However, when elected representatives were asked about their attitude to *particular instances* of work in the field of community relations, significantly higher levels of support were recorded. Asked in the survey about projects designed to promote respect for diversity (e.g. joint cultural events and educational initiatives), 64% of politicians felt that such projects were ‘very important’ and 28% thought them to be ‘fairly important’ – amounting to 92% support in total. A similar proportion – 93% of respondents – thought that the facilitation of dialogue between individuals and groups from different sections of the community was either very important (57%) or fairly important (36%).

Table 7: Particular instances of work in the field of community relations

<i>Opinion on particular instances of work in the field of community relations:</i>	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not important %	Can't choose %	<i>n</i>
Promoting respect for diversity (e.g. joint cultural events, educational initiatives)	64	28	8	1	184
Arranging meetings between individuals and groups from <u>different</u> communities	57	36	7	1	185
Conflict resolution initiatives (e.g. at interface and other areas)	63	31	6	0	183
Cross community work for social and economic gain	55	39	5	1	184
Development work with groups within <u>one</u> community (‘single identity’)	33	49	16	2	178

Support for such work also emerged in interviews with politicians, such as a UUP MLA who gave priority to ‘*creating space, dialogue, interchange between*

representatives' and thought that joint cultural events were worthwhile.⁶³ A member of the Women's Coalition also affirmed the importance of facilitating dialogue, given that 'there are so few safe spaces, neutral spaces in our community for people to exchange'.⁶⁴ Cross-community and cross-border exchanges were praised by an SDLP MLA for enabling people to see the variety in groups that they would previously have regarded as homogenous blocks, thus adding to comfort levels and reducing suspicion and fear. It was possible to achieve real community relations outcomes from such exchanges, a second party member commented, in terms of 'increased communication or increased contact'.⁶⁵ A member of the DUP said that he supported events designed to promote greater understanding of cultural differences and had seen them work well in respect of Orange and Unionist culture. However, he was sceptical about some cultural diversity initiatives, especially cross-border work that hinted that unionists might discover their 'long lost Irish roots' as part of the process. He also argued that cross-community work does not always take account of the different and less cohesive community structure on the unionist side.⁶⁶ A Sinn Féin politician said that cross-community initiatives or meetings have no real impact unless they focus on political issues. Joint action on common social or environmental problems was welcome, he said, but it 'ignore[s] the wider political issues. They are as far apart at the end of the day as they were at the start'.⁶⁷ This MLA was more supportive of dialogue on divisive political issues and of the 'tremendous work' carried out by supposed 'enemies' to resolve disputes in interfaces areas.⁶⁸

Overall, 94% of politicians surveyed thought that conflict resolution work at interface and other areas was either very important (63%) or fairly important (31%) [see Table 7]. Indeed some argue that interface work should be made a key focus of community relations policy. David Trimble has said that the Holy Cross dispute of 2001

⁶³ Author interview with a member of the UUP (23 June 2004). See also the comments of Roy Beggs MP (UUP) in support of cross-community links between schools, Northern Ireland Grand Committee, debate on Community Relations Policy, (17 June 2004).

⁶⁴ Author interview with a member of the Women's Coalition (15 June 2004).

⁶⁵ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004); Author interview with a member of the SDLP (27 May 2004).

⁶⁶ Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004).

⁶⁷ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004). Notwithstanding this interviewee's opinion, 55% of politicians thought that cross-community work for social and economic gain was 'very important'. 39% felt that it was 'fairly important'. See Table 7, p. 30.

⁶⁸ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004). Sinn Féin's focus on the political aspects of community relations is further discussed below, pp. 44-46.

led him and his colleagues to the conclusion that *'we must devise a community relations policy that focuses on real problems. Rather than disperse what we hope are good works over a broad field, it should hone in on key problems'*.⁶⁹ However, a senior member of the SDLP struck a different note when stating his opposition to any concentration of funding in interface areas. Warning that this *'would become not so much a community relations strategy [but] a riot-driven fund'*, he argued that such a reactive focus might generate *'a perverse incentive for people to create difficulties or magnify difficulties to qualify'*. The MLA added that local communities, which had succeeded in reducing tension or violence, should not be punished for their success by a reduction in funding. *'We need to keep supporting work that has already delivered'*, he said.⁷⁰ A number of unionist politicians agreed with and expanded upon the SDLP member's reservations about interface work. A DUP MLA said that although some interface work was worthwhile and needed, much of the violence in these communities was *'switched on'* by individuals with paramilitary connections in order to attract funding to their area. He spoke of cases where *'somebody who one night is out organising the petrol bombing is on the screen the next night as a conflict transformation worker'*.⁷¹ A UUP member went a step further by claiming that negotiations between *'community based people'* on two sides of a fence had taken place in some instances, leading to weeks of rioting, increased funding and *'positions of employment for the aforementioned community workers'*.⁷² Paramilitaries engaging in dialogue about an interface problem were no great thing, another UUP man concluded, because it simply confirmed that *'whoever could switch off the violence, could turn it on [again]'*.⁷³ One SDLP councillor echoed the views of these unionists when he commented: *'Stop rewarding those who can turn the violence on or off'*.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Comments made in the Northern Ireland Grand Committee, debate on Community Relations Policy, (17 June 2004). This focus follows logically from the comments of UUP party colleagues on the issue of where the community relations problem manifests itself (see above, p. 16)

⁷⁰ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

⁷¹ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004).

⁷² Author interview with a member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

⁷³ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 June 2004). This MLA believes that community relations funding is being used to address violence, which should actually be dealt with as a security matter.

⁷⁴ Comment made in 'Response 113' to Project Survey of MLAs and District Councillors. UUP and DUP councillors in 'Response 4' and 'Response 28' made similar comments.

However, a PUP representative said that violence instigated by loyalist paramilitaries at interfaces needed to be viewed in a broader context. Firstly, mainstream unionist politicians repeatedly send out the message that Protestant communities have no capacity, are discriminated against in funding terms, and that republicans are being given concessions for threatening violence, he said. Loyalist paramilitaries respond to this negative logic by instigating violence of their own, he continued, and sure enough, the Government rewards their communities with funding. So, while accepting that paramilitaries do switch violence on and off, he argued that the other two parties (unionist politicians and the Government) should also take some responsibility for perpetuating this phenomenon.⁷⁵

On the broader issue of funding for ex-prisoners, republican ex-combatant groups are perceived by some unionist and SDLP politicians as being particularly effective at drawing on funding. This leads to resentment among others in society who feel that they are not getting as much attention as those who were involved in violence, according to one DUP MLA.⁷⁶ The point was echoed by two SDLP interviewees who, whilst recognising the need for ex-prisoners to be re-integrated into society, felt that some were in receipt of excessive funding and were using it for political ends.⁷⁷ Others felt, however, that a distinction should be drawn between ideologically-driven paramilitaries and criminally-oriented ones. A representative of the Women's Coalition said that re-integration of ex-prisoners was vital to any conflict resolution process and that many ex-combatants were positive leaders, helping to build up their communities.⁷⁸

Surveyed on their attitude towards single identity work or development within one community, 33% of politicians thought that it was 'very important', 49% opted for 'fairly important', but 16% felt it was 'not important'. With just one-third of politicians awarding single identity work a 'very important' rating, it compared unfavourably with direct community relations and conflict resolution initiatives, which were deemed very important by almost two-thirds of respondents (see Table 7). Among those that rejected

⁷⁵ Author interview with a member of the PUP (11 June 2004).

⁷⁶ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004). Scepticism about the funding of ex-prisoner groups was expressed by a number of other DUP and UUP politicians both in interviews and in the responses to the project survey.

⁷⁷ Author interview with a member of the SDLP (27 May 2004); Author interview with a member of the SDLP (30 June).

⁷⁸ Author interview with a member of the Women's Coalition (15 June 2004).

single identity work, an Alliance Party interviewee said that this approach has often reinforced division, especially given that many communities are uninterested in moving to 'Phase II' – engagement with the 'other side'.⁷⁹ An Ulster Unionist MLA said that single identity work was important for community infrastructure and confidence, but he doubted that it contributed anything to community relations.⁸⁰

Although more politicians thought it was 'fairly important' rather than 'very important', single identity work still received a very high level of political support – 82% in total. Indeed, it was clear from interviews that many politicians place a strong value on this kind of community development. Apart from being something that might lead to better community relations at a later stage,⁸¹ single identity work was also seen as a vital end in itself. Looking at this by political party reveals the importance of single identity work to members of the DUP. Some 57% of their respondents believe this to be 'very important' compared to 38% of Sinn Féin, UUP 34%, SDLP 27% and Alliance 14%. A DUP representative said that unionism's communal identity is weaker, less cohesive and less confident than that of nationalism, and that single identity work has been important in areas where it has addressed that deficit.⁸² Another DUP person said that dwindling unionist communities needed to be reinforced⁸³, whilst a UUP politician argued that there should be more focus on community capacity, skills and infrastructure, rather than ineffective mural projects and 'cross community' initiatives which encourage tokenism.⁸⁴ A Sinn Féin MLA also emphasised the importance of building up capacity and infrastructure. If interface communities are not confident or able to articulate their viewpoints, then they clash violently, he argued. Far better to invest in them, rather than in polite discussion groups, he said: '*If I was to spend community relations funding...I think the sensible option is to channel that funding into communities where there are difficulties to try and build an infra-structure there that allows [them] to act as*

⁷⁹ Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (1 July 2004); see also, *A Shared Future: Alliance Party Response* (September 2003), p. 6.

⁸⁰ Author interview with a member of the UUP (23 June 2004).

⁸¹ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

⁸² Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004).

⁸³ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004).

⁸⁴ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

communities, to get a sense of community and begin to relate with communities with which they have difficulty'.⁸⁵

Other politicians talked about community development in terms of a traditional discourse of local politics: 'getting the investment in' to an area. Crèches, community halls, industrial zones and other facilities were cited as evidence that 'a lot of good things have happened through European money'. Figures were given to indicate the level of investment in a politician's locality: '[Project A] sitting at I suppose two or three million...[Project B] sitting at a million pounds'.⁸⁶ Investment in infrastructure was seen as a road to community confidence, which in turn could lead to better relations with other communities at a later stage.

As part of the research carried out for this project, a Focus Group composing ten District Council Community Relations Officers (CROs) reflected on their first hand experience of politicians, including councillors' attitudes to exchange, interface and single identity work. CROs said that some councillors had a preference for 'soft focus' exchanges or meetings, for example tea parties or music societies, and believed that this 'is great community relations work because the society has Catholic and Protestant members'. It was thought that such councillors did not understand the nature of community relations work and this was a cause for concern given their decision-making role vis-à-vis CR funding. It was also noted that councillors were eager to support and fund single identity work, particularly projects focussed on the vulnerable, including children, or the socially disadvantaged.⁸⁷

On the whole, politicians demonstrated a significant degree of ambivalence towards the management, impact and concept of 'community relations' work, generally conceived. However, large majorities of elected representatives acknowledged the importance of particular instances of work in the field of community relations, such as cultural exchanges designed to promote respect for diversity and interface work. A

⁸⁵ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004). For the background to this interviewee's argument, see Sinn Féin, *Sinn Féin's Response to the Consultation Document, 'A Shared Future'*, p5, p8. http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/pdf_documents/sinnfein.pdf, accessed 8 July 2004. Emphasising that 'addressing disadvantage is the primary objective', this document states: 'it is crucial that community relations are not funded out of money for economic development of areas of greatest need'.

⁸⁶ Author interview with a member of the SDLP (30 June 2004); Author interview with a member of the DUP (21 May 2004).

⁸⁷ Comments made at a CRO Focus Group (1 June 2004); Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004).

significant minority expressed deep dissatisfaction with the current approach in this field, but over two-thirds of politicians signalled their broad support for the current approach to community relations work.

6. POLITICIANS AND THE COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Politicians’ reactions to the community and voluntary sector ranged from enthusiastic to withering.⁸⁸ The first evidence of this is the project survey’s finding that 55% of politicians said they would support a rise in funding for community and voluntary groups working in the field of community relations; almost 30% preferred funding to continue at current levels, while 12% favoured a decrease in funding. This indicated that a majority of politicians are broadly supportive of the community sector’s CR work, with a significant minority showing a neutral or sceptical attitude.

Table 8: Opinion on public funding of community and voluntary groups’ CR work.

<i>In relation to the public funding of the work of community and voluntary groups in the field of community relations, would you support...</i>	%
A rise in funding	55
A continuation of current levels of funding	29
A decrease in funding	12
can’t choose	5
<i>n</i>	189

There are considerable differences between the parties here, with a majority of the Alliance Party (75%), the SDLP (70%) and Sinn Féin (64%) supportive of a rise in funding, while lower percentages of UUP (45%) and DUP (36%) would support such a rise.

Among the supporters of the community and voluntary sector, two Sinn Féin representatives said that such groups are often the most accurate indicator of the real needs of an area. As one MLA put it, not only can such groups empower communities, they can also help politicians and the Government to do their job: *‘If I want to get*

⁸⁸ For a study of the community and voluntary sector, see Fergal Cochrane and Seamus Dunn, *The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in the Northern Ireland Conflict* (2002), Cork: Cork University Press.

something done, I just can't go and get it done myself... I mean when you have a good community network you usually have less anti-social problems, less crime or if there is a health problem emerging they will spot it early and they will go and tackle it'.⁸⁹ Two SDLP representatives reflected on the broad range of work carried out by the community and voluntary sector, from dealing with the psychological effects of conflict during the Troubles to delivering public services in the contemporary context.⁹⁰ One Ulster Unionist MLA spoke of excellent groups working in areas such as education and training for the long-term unemployed, which were helping individuals who the state system had missed.⁹¹ A DUP MLA said that community groups played a vital role and needed to be sustained: *'the Protestant community leaders in this city... they are on the ground, they are hard working, [they have] instilled confidence within the Protestant community... their names go before them in the work they do'*.⁹²

However, another DUP representative said that unlike nationalist community leaders who were forthright about their *'nationalist politics with a small "n"'*, unionist community leaders stepped back from unionist politics. *'Politically, you don't see the same sense of awareness and the same sense of confidence, the same assertiveness'*, he said. Thus, many such community leaders did not accurately reflect the broader unionist community because they were *'quite reserved, quite liberal or moderate'* in their political views, he commented.⁹³ One Ulster Unionist MLA said that there is no emphasis on accountability in the community and voluntary sector, adding: *'They have women's networks and groupings where I am not exactly sure what is being achieved, money is being spent, they are busy doing busy things, busy talking to each other'*. Noting the improved atmosphere in Northern Ireland over the last number of years, he said that some of this may be due to CR work carried out by community and voluntary sector, but he could not be sure – he did not know what the actual outcome of this work was. He could

⁸⁹ Author interview with a member of Sinn Féin (24 May 2004); Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004). See also M. Hall, *Restoring Relationships: A community exploration of anti-social behaviour, punishment beatings and restorative justice*, (2000) Newtownabbey: Island Publications.

⁹⁰ Author interview with a member of the SDLP (30 June 2004); Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

⁹¹ Author interview with a member of the UUP (23 June 2004).

⁹² Author interview with a member of the DUP (21 May 2004).

⁹³ Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004).

not *'relate input to output'* in this field, he said.⁹⁴ A third DUP representative said that many people at the more professional end of the community sector were failed politicians, and that they represented nobody.⁹⁵ Although DUP and UUP politicians made most critical comments, some members of other parties were also sceptical of the community and voluntary sector. An SDLP MLA was unimpressed by community groups with *'anti-establishment and anti-politician'* tendencies and felt that some groups had lost touch with their grassroots. Referring also to the abuse of community relations funding, she said that there needed to be more investigation of exactly how this money is spent.⁹⁶ An Alliance Party representative said that the community and voluntary sector is a *'huge industry'* and impossible to hold to account. *'I don't think anyone knows exactly where all the money is coming from and going to'*, he said, adding that he would like more of the funding in the sector to be allocated towards real community relations work.⁹⁷

The issue of duplication of community work exercised some politicians. One member of the UUP complained of cases where a number of groups in one area are *'all chasing the same pot of gold and there is no co-ordination'*. As a response to the problem of duplication, this MLA favoured the setting up of a local steering group, which would be the arbitrator of an area. If a number of community groups proposed different ideas, the steering group would choose one proposal and attempt to rally the other groups around it.⁹⁸ From a different perspective, a Sinn Féin politician said that duplication of community work can be resolved informally and that he was prepared to accept situations where *'the lines are not always just crystal clear'*. Referring to community groups, he commented: *'I would rather they were doing [the work] rather than not doing it'*.⁹⁹ An SDLP politician argued that reform of the community and voluntary sector is more likely to be successful if it comes from within, and going on past experience, he claimed that people within the sector are prepared to make changes on their own initiative when the need arises. *'[The] sector has proved itself to be flexible and creative'*, he said. *'As*

⁹⁴ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (14 May 2004). However, another UUP MLA said he 'wouldn't be a total sceptic on this one' – that the nature of community relations work means that it may not always be measurable, especially in quantitative terms.

⁹⁵ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004).

⁹⁶ Author interview with a member of the SDLP (27 May 2004).

⁹⁷ Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (1 July 2004).

⁹⁸ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

⁹⁹ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

different funding programmes come along...they [are able to]...bend the focus of their work... and engage in specific partnerships with other community groups or indeed with...local government or other public bodies'.¹⁰⁰ A member of the Alliance Party said that although there was a need to reduce duplication and ensure that groups are effective, there should not be an excessive drive to professionalism in the voluntary sector. While some organisations would die, it was important that smaller community groups did not lose out too much.¹⁰¹

A community worker, who believed that while most councillors had a good understanding of the community sector, many MLAs expect the sector to mimic political methods of organisation, echoed this point. Such Assembly members believe that small community groups should fall under larger umbrellas according to the representative model of democracy that they, as politicians, recognise. They fail to see how a participatory model of democracy validates the existence of a large number of small community groups.¹⁰² Some political interviewees were clear about their lack of contact with the community and voluntary sector: *'I haven't actually met any of them and I am not conscious of having met any of them, I'm not conscious of any of them asking me...it is a niggly sort of thing and you know maybe it is like air: they are there but I am not conscious of them there, but they are right beside me'*.¹⁰³ Other politicians had more contact with the community sector, for example, through involvement in the District Partnerships and their successor, the Local Strategy Partnerships (LSPs).¹⁰⁴ Although there was a history of mutual suspicion between politicians and the community sector, according to one MLA, the LSPs provided a structure within which trust grew between the two groups at local level. This positive experience of the partnership model should be taken into account in decisions about the future makeup of the CRC and the role of district councils in CR programme management, it was argued.¹⁰⁵ Community sector representatives agreed that good working relationships have been built in many cases

¹⁰⁰ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

¹⁰¹ Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (11 May 2004).

¹⁰² Author interview with a member of a local community organisation (4 May 2004).

¹⁰³ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (14 May 2004).

¹⁰⁴ See also J. Hughes, C. Knox, M. Murray and J. Greer, *Partnership Governance in Northern Ireland: the Path to Peace* (Dublin, 1998).

¹⁰⁵ Author interview with a member of the SDLP (27 May 2004). See also below, Section 9.

between the community sector and politicians in the context of Local Strategy Partnerships.¹⁰⁶

The traditional context for relations between the political and community sectors changed in 1999 when local politicians took governmental power for the first time in over twenty-five years. However, the short-lived nature of that exercise of power, the LSP experience and other factors mean that political-community sector relations are in a state of flux. It is in this context that politicians, in their very different ways, make a judgement on the community and voluntary sector and issue proposals on the management of community relations programmes at local and regional level.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Project interview with the director of a community sector organisation (13 May 2004). Author interview with a member of a local community organisation (4 May 2004).

¹⁰⁷ See below, Section 9.

7. POLITICAL PRIORITIES

A recent policy paper highlighted two issues that are often cited by politicians as reasons for the continuance of community division. These are: inequality on the one hand, and paramilitarism and constitutional uncertainty on the other.¹⁰⁸ As one politician interviewed for this project put it, *'I think there are bigger issues in Northern Ireland to settle before you can push either community to do [community relations work]'*.¹⁰⁹ For this section, we will focus our analysis and consider how the two largest parties' expression of some of unionism's and nationalism's political priorities interplay with their perspectives on the community relations issue. For both the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, certain steps need to be taken on other levels before real progress can be made in improving community relations.

Responding to a survey question, a majority (55%) of DUP members agreed with the proposition that *'attempts to improve community relations are not appropriate in the face of ongoing violence and injustice'*. (On the whole, however, most politicians did not agree: just 27% of UUP members agreed with this proposition, 20% of the SDLP, 19% of the Alliance and 14% of Sinn Féin).¹¹⁰ In interviews, DUP representatives argued that improved relations or a more integrated society requires an end to paramilitary activity and the conclusion of a new political agreement. One party member said: *'we are a long way off from [integrated communities]. I think the key to all of this is when both communities are at ease...when there is trust there...if we can get the issue of paramilitaries right across the board resolved... [and] have a fair deal on a political settlement...we can move forward'*.¹¹¹ A second member emphasised the constitutional issue: *'I believe that the basis for good strong community relations is when terrorism is defeated, when...those who live within this society respect that the vast majority of people, Protestant and Roman Catholic, want to be a part of the United Kingdom'*.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ronnie Spence et. al., *An Agenda for a Shared Future: a policy paper*, Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research Briefing Paper GOV/BP/2004/1, (2004) Queens University, Belfast, p.4.

¹⁰⁹ Author interview with a member of the DUP (21 May 2004).

¹¹⁰ This means that, taken altogether, a sizeable majority (64%) of politicians reject the proposition that *'attempts to improve community relations are not appropriate in the face of ongoing violence and injustice'*. 28% agree with the proposition and 8% neither agree nor disagree.

¹¹¹ Author interview with a member of the DUP (21 May 2004).

¹¹² Author interview with a member of the DUP (26 May 2004).

One DUP councillor thought that community relations missed the point as he claimed a violent conspiracy was afoot: *'what you people fail to understand is that no matter how much you attempt to improve relations, the Church of Rome in this province, with an armed wing at her behest, is intent on driving Protestants out, and will do so, when the security situation gets so relaxed as to allow them...'*¹¹³

Although the issue of paramilitarism was raised by a number of politicians, there was much more focus on the relationship between perceived inequality and the state of community relations. Traditionally an issue associated with Sinn Féin, equality was indeed emphasised as important for good community relations by representatives of that party.¹¹⁴ However, members of the DUP interviewed for this project tended to stress the issue even more than Sinn Féin representatives, as they outlined a number of inequalities that they felt were suffered by their section of the community. For example, Gregory Campbell put the DUP argument on discrimination in employment in a recent article. *'Figures released by the Equality Commission'*, he wrote, *'show that in the last ten years, there have been 22,000 more Roman Catholics and 5,000 fewer Protestants in work...discrimination against our people has to stop'*.¹¹⁵

A second point emphasised by DUP representatives is that, for various historical and political reasons, *'the nationalist community...seem to be ahead of the game when it comes to drawing down funding'*, as one MLA put it. Although unionist community development workers had made progress in addressing the imbalance, the MLA believed that *'there is still a long way to go yet to be up to speed and to be where the nationalist community is'*.¹¹⁶ A party colleague agreed that there is a *'lack of advancement amongst...[those] who complete application forms and try to build confidence within the unionist community'*.¹¹⁷ As a result, *'the level of community development in the unionist communities is lower than [that of] the nationalist communities'*, a third DUP MLA argued. The unionist community did not benefit as much as nationalists from the two Peace programmes, he said, the expenditure differential being significant and, in one

¹¹³ Comment made in 'Response 3' to Project Survey of MLAs and District Councillors.

¹¹⁴ See below.

¹¹⁵ Gregory Campbell, 'Are Republicans serious about making politics work', available at <http://www.dup.org.uk> (July 2004), accessed 18 July 2004.

¹¹⁶ Author interview with a member of the DUP (21 May 2004).

¹¹⁷ Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004).

case, *'about ten to one'*. *'Now that does not encourage good relationships'*, he commented. However, it was not simply a case of nationalists being more skilled and experienced in community development and funding applications, he claimed: *'Where people feel that they have been betrayed or they are being subjected to discrimination they will automatically feel resentful. As a simple example, [I was] standing not so long ago in a small park with a playground in it with two swings and a broken slide and the community said, "look up the road at that fantastic park that the other community has, they get everything", and you can just sense the resentment there, the frustration that "how do they get it, we can't get it", people feeling a sense of impotence'*. Citing threats to unionist rights and identity, he argued: *'there is an ongoing process...a hollowing out of the traditions of Ulster and getting to the point where people feel like strangers in their own land'*. This had implications for community relations, the MLA argued: *'If communities are to work together in partnership, it has to be on a basis of equality and we are not there at the moment'*. It appeared that he sought an equality of outcome: equal size and strength to nationalists. Many unionists, he said, feel that their relationship with the nationalist community is *'like being in bed with an elephant...[the elephant] is in danger of rolling over and squashing them...partnerships work when people have roughly equal capacity, equal resources, equal skills, then they begin to see we have all something to bring to the table, we benefit when we work together and it starts to happen'*.¹¹⁸

Of the five largest parties in Northern Ireland, the DUP was the only grouping not to submit a response to the *Shared Future* Government consultation paper. One party member said that this was related to dissatisfaction with the Government: *'we noted the document, we didn't get over-excited about [it] because we do believe... that there were issues that the Government created themselves'*. He felt that the Government were trying to *'unload a problem that they had created [on]to politicians'*. They had *'thrown money*

¹¹⁸ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004). These DUP perspectives can be seen in the context of attitudinal surveys, which have noted a 'picture of declining Protestant confidence in their position in post-agreement Northern Ireland.' See Joanne Hughes *Attitudes to Community Relations in Northern Ireland: Grounds for Optimism*, ARK Research Update 20, (November 2003); and Joanne Hughes and Caitlin Donnelly, 'Community Relations in Northern Ireland: Shifting Attitudes?' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, (2003), 29, 4: 643-661. Taking a different point of view to the members of DUP cited above, a PUP representative did not agree that unionist communities lacked capacity or that they were discriminated against: 'it is a very sectarian excuse...that the people on the other side get everything and we get nothing' [Author interview with a member of the PUP (11 June 2004)].

at projects' in the hope that they could 'buy people off', and had forgotten about the genuine victims of the Troubles, he claimed.¹¹⁹ A party colleague said that it was 'significant that the largest political party in the country did not make a submission' to the *Shared Future* consultation. There were 'concerns about the whole community relations world within the DUP', he explained. Elements of the Government had been 'poisonous', he said, having 'engaged in practices that were in my view, immoral'. Citing what he argued was a politicisation of, and major concessions to, the Irish language by the Government in the context of the Belfast Agreement, he remarked: 'people do not necessarily look favourably on those who generated such things'.¹²⁰

Turning to Sinn Féin, we will consider how the party's political priorities interplay with their perspective on the community relations issue. Sinn Féin's response to the *Shared Future* consultation claimed that the Government document did not fully engage with the Irish national aspiration. As the Belfast Agreement asserts that both the unionist and nationalist identities should have expression in the structures of governance, any new policy should reflect the need to build good relations across the island of Ireland, it was argued. Affirming 'the primacy of equality', Sinn Féin's response also stated that the wording of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) 'is no accident'. It confirmed that while the good relations issue cannot be ignored, neither can it 'allowed to take precedence over equality of opportunity'.¹²¹ A Sinn Féin interviewee argued that a shared society is not a realistic aim 'at the moment', and so the best approach is 'to stabilise relationships between the two communities and [say]... "whatever comes, hell or high water, you're all going to be equal"'. Indeed the concept of equality was central to this MLA's understanding of community relations: 'for me, community relations is really about communities having to come to terms with the fact that there are others out there who will shout for their beliefs and who are entitled to argue for their beliefs but one should not be allowed to dominate the other'.¹²²

Rather than the equality aspect, however, it is the highly politicised nature of their vision of community relations that stands out from interviews with this and other Sinn

¹¹⁹ Author interview with a member of the DUP (21 May 2004).

¹²⁰ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004).

¹²¹ Sinn Féin, *Sinn Féin's Response to the Consultation Document, 'A Shared Future'*, pp 4-5. See http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/pdf_documents/sinnfein.pdf, accessed 8 July 2004.

¹²² Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

Féin politicians. The problem, according to this party member, is that many CR groups *'think it is good community relations not to introduce politics'*. However, this means that project participants *'are as far apart at the end of the day as they were at the start'*. To be effective, cross community work should facilitate discussion on divisive political issues, such as equality, policing and truth processes, he argued.¹²³ A second Sinn Féin MLA said that while a focus on common interests was important, *'to focus on those to the exclusion of the things that divide us is just to ignore the elephant in the living room'*. Political debate on such issues could give unionists *'a greater sense of how nationalists view a united Ireland'*, he said, while *'nationalists [could] have a greater sense of unionist concerns...their experience of the conflict, their view of the history of the Northern Ireland state'*. A Good Relations Forum in his town, involving politicians, business, community representatives and others had facilitated private debate over a five year period on *'the issues that divided us: parading, policing, IRA activity...'*. As a result, he believed that participants had developed friendlier personal relations and had *'a much clearer understanding'* of each others' views. However, *'we are not going to agree'*, he added, *'I am not going to become a unionist... unionist people are not going to be Irish republicans'*. No agreement had been reached on the local parading dispute, nor was the forum meant to be a negotiating body, he said. Nevertheless, the process had contributed to a situation where tension had reduced and violent confrontations around the parade issue had ended.¹²⁴

This MLAs' support for the Good Relations Forum matched his party colleague's view that community relations work can allow people to *'promote their political arguments'* in a manner which does not cause *'undue offence to the other side'*. It was not about *'ramming [your politics] down somebody's throat'*, he remarked.¹²⁵ Rather, friendlier relations and a clearer understanding of different political perspectives were cited by these interviewees as the most important outcomes of such an exchange: *'You have a clearer understanding of... OK, we have a dispute here, we have differences, we have to share a piece of ground together and how do we do that without falling out over*

¹²³ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

¹²⁴ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004).

¹²⁵ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

it'.¹²⁶ However, a third Sinn Féin MLA offered a slightly different version of community relations as politics. *'The courageous work that I am looking for is the ability to look people in the eye and stand up for what you believe in'*, he said. He recalled being asked at a meeting, *'did I think that the IRA was a legitimate organisation, and I said that I did think they were, yes, yes I did, and that hurt a lot of people, seemingly, around the room from a unionist tradition'*. However, he liked the *'honesty that was happening in that room'* as the IRA and the British Army were being debated. Such meetings needed to discuss *'the question of Ireland and Britain'*, he argued. In this context, however, political awareness led one to question the point of trying to improve relations at all: *'if we get too much caught up on relationships between unionists and nationalists'*, the MLA argued, *'then we are missing the point and allowing the British Government off the hook for creating division in Ireland... for giving privilege to one section of the population over another and for partitioning the country. I wouldn't be inclined to let them off the hook. The British Government is bad for community relations'*.¹²⁷

Issues such as inequality, paramilitarism, constitutional uncertainty and the role of the state were thus identified by politicians as impacting on their attitudes to community relations. While concerns about these issues led some politicians to question the point of improving relations, others believed that progress on these issues was crucial to the task of building good relations. There were also those who argued that these and other divisive political issues should be made a core subject of dialogue and exchange in the field of community relations work.

¹²⁶ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004).

¹²⁷ Author interview with a member of Sinn Féin (30 June 2004).

8. POLITICIANS' LEVEL OF COMMITMENT TO IMPROVING COMMUNITY RELATIONS

In the project survey, we asked MLAs and district councillors to give their opinions on politicians' level of commitment to improving community relations. 50% of elected representatives agreed with the statement that politicians in general are 'not doing enough' to support the development of better community relations. However, 41% thought that politicians were 'doing a lot of valuable work' in support of community relations. Thus politicians are split in their opinion of their contribution to community relations, with political parties differing considerably on the issue, as the following table indicates:

Table 9: Opinion on what politicians in general are doing/not doing to support the development of better community relations

	Alliance %	UUP %	DUP %	Sinn Féin %	SDLP %
Politicians are <u>not doing enough</u> to support community relations	88	39	7	65	61
Politicians are <u>doing a lot</u> of valuable work in support of community relations	13	52	73	30	35

This table reveals stark differences in opinion, with the nationalist parties and the Alliance sharing the feeling that politicians are not doing enough, while the UUP and DUP believe politicians are doing a lot.

Amongst those who defended the work of elected representatives, an Ulster Unionist MLA felt that some CR professionals believed '*somehow that because I am in politics, I am not in community relations*'. Rejecting this idea, he said that his party had taken risks for peace and made a significant contribution to attempts to heal the community divide.¹²⁸ An SDLP politician said that it would not serve the interests of

¹²⁸ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (14 May 2004).

community relations activity for one party to try to make itself the party of CR work. His party recognised, he said, that the real task for politicians is to recognise *‘the scale and the breadth of the community relations challenge and not see [it] as just a wee marginal budget line’*.¹²⁹

A member of the DUP said that where a community is perceived to be under threat, a politician can only act within certain confines. In such a context, *‘if I was to say to them... what we really need is to open up our hearts and develop greater understanding of people across the wire... I would be an ex-politician come the next election for very understandable reasons’*. Politicians’ primary and more realistic responsibility, he argued, is to reduce tension and lower the political temperature.¹³⁰ Sinn Féin representatives referred to initiatives in support of community relations taken by their party in Ministerial Office and in Belfast City Council, and argued that their increasing vote, far from being a *‘hardline’* message, actually showed that the public can support parties who are willing to work with others.¹³¹ A different message emerged in the project survey, however, when elected representatives were asked whether involvement in cross-community work is more likely to win or lose votes for a politician. 26% of politicians said that it was likely to win votes, 16% said that it loses votes but 47% said that involvement in cross-community work neither wins nor loses votes for a politician. This indicated a significant degree of ambivalence as to whether working with ‘the other side’ wins or loses votes.

Table 10: Opinion on whether involvement in cross-community work benefits or damages politicians electorally.

Involvement in cross-community work...	%
...is more likely to <u>win</u> votes for a politician	26
...is more likely to <u>lose</u> votes for a politician	15
... <u>neither wins nor loses</u> votes for a politician	47
...this issue is not important	8
...can’t choose	4
<i>n</i>	188

¹²⁹ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

¹³⁰ Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004).

¹³¹ Author interview with a member of Sinn Féin (30 June 2004); Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

Looking at responses by political party shows that all parties (except Alliance) agree that cross-community involvement does not impact on voting. While 40% of Alliance members believe that cross-community involvement will win votes, the same percentage (40%) sees it as not having any impact. A fifth (20%) of UUP members and a quarter (26%) of DUP members are of the opinion that involvement in cross-community work loses votes.

If 50% of elected representatives think that politicians are not doing enough to improve community relations, what do people working in the field of community relations think? On the positive side, some interviewees pointed out that Northern Ireland has changed considerably for the better over the last ten years and that the greatest leaps forward have been made at the political level, by politicians.¹³² Some CROs and other CR practitioners also spoke highly of individual politicians who have engaged constructively in private discussions with members of other parties. This often depended on the practitioners or facilitators building up credibility with the politicians over a number of years.¹³³ However, other agencies that have organised residentials and conferences, aimed at building political understanding between parties, found a lack of engagement on the part of the politicians they met. One organiser of such events felt that the parties would send along a person for an hour just so they could ‘*tick the box*’ and say that they had attended. She didn’t get any real sense that the politicians involved were interested in building relationships or improving their understanding of each other.¹³⁴ Another spoke of some politicians’ eyes glazing over at the very mention of the phrase, ‘*shared future*’.¹³⁵ A CRO said that some councillors lack commitment to even discussing community relations issues. ‘*They will come along*’, he said, ‘*they will let hot air out for the first two or three minutes and [then] they will leave because they will get their expenses*’. Another CRO said that councillors, in her experience, ignored their district’s Community Relations Programme, except at times of crisis, at which point, they claimed

¹³² For example, Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004).

¹³³ Comments made at a CRO Focus Group (1 June 2004); Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004); Project interview with a CR practitioner (22 June 2004).

¹³⁴ Author interview with the director of a community sector organisation (14 May 2004).

¹³⁵ Project interview with the director of a community relations organisation (21 June 2004).

'it is not my responsibility', and asked: 'what is the Good Relations programme doing [about this]?'¹³⁶

There was a good deal of frustration that cordial or civil relations in private were put to one side when politicians engaged in public disputes. Responding to the proposition that this was simply the nature of electoral politics, one community sector representative said: '*it is ordinary party politics, except people die for it here*'.¹³⁷ Instances of politicians strongly identifying with 'their own side' in an interface or other community dispute were also seen as evidence of a lack of leadership.¹³⁸ Here and in cases where elected representatives failed to challenge bad behaviour emanating from their section of the community, politicians were said to '*lead from behind the mob*'.¹³⁹ (The role of the media in this dynamic was criticised, particularly in cases where the press assume that a politician would not have much to say about intimidation emanating from 'their own side'.¹⁴⁰) However, it was also recognised that challenging one's own section of the community can pose an electoral dilemma for councillors and sometimes lead to threats to their personal safety. Indeed, examples of politicians being facilitated to 'stand together' – in their condemnation and challenging of intimidation – were cited as hopeful signs for the future.¹⁴¹ From a different perspective, one CR practitioner said that it was unrealistic to expect politicians to make reconciliation a core aspect of their work in a context where '*the physical war*' has ended, but '*the political war*' over the constitution continues.¹⁴² While one side is trying to ensure that policy developments are not creating an all-Ireland dynamic, the other side is guarding against any copper-fastening of the Union, and both sides are busy with frequent election campaigning and negotiations on the review of the Belfast Agreement. This practitioner argued, therefore, that '*there is an unrealistic expectation of politicians to give a certain kind of leadership*

¹³⁶ Comments made at a CRO Focus Group (1 June 2004).

¹³⁷ Author interview with the director of a community sector organisation (14 May 2004).

¹³⁸ For a general study of this issue, see Stanley Renshon 'Political Leadership as Social Capital: Governing in a Divided National Culture', *Political Psychology*, (2000), 21, 1: 199-226.

¹³⁹ Project interview with the director of a community sector organisation (13 May 2004).

¹⁴⁰ Author interview with the director of a community sector organisation (14 May 2004); Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004).

¹⁴¹ Comments made at a CRO Focus Group (1 June 2004); Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004).

¹⁴² Project interview with a CR practitioner (22 June 2004). See also R. McVeigh, 'Between Reconciliation and Pacification: The British State and Community Relations in the North of Ireland', *Community Development Journal*, (2002), 37, 1: 47-59.

*when the real issue as to why we have had a conflict and why we have a community relations problem, is still actually a live issue’.*¹⁴³

Speaking about the consequences of segregated living spaces, one interviewee echoed the sentiments of other CR and community sector workers on this issue: *‘The problem about apartheid is that it eventually means you can’t use the same toilets, the person who walks up the street in the wrong jersey is the wrong one, not the community that stops them’.*¹⁴⁴ However, this sense of outrage about Northern Ireland’s divided society was not shared by many of the political interviewees, most of who tended to take a more sceptical or gradualist approach.¹⁴⁵ In this context, one CR practitioner claimed that a new middle-class housing division was the great unspoken subject of politics. *‘Politicians... haven’t stood for living together’*, he said, *‘their absence from this debate has in fact fed separation’.*¹⁴⁶ It was argued that division and dysfunctional relations at every level of society meant that the current situation was inherently unstable. Frustration was expressed that political leaders did not seem to recognise the potentially grave consequences of these divisions.¹⁴⁷ Others offered a more fundamental criticism of the political system in Northern Ireland. It was argued that politicians are not encouraging the development of more integrated public services, housing and education, because their electoral interests are best served by the perpetuation of a society divided along sectarian lines.¹⁴⁸ Indeed the political class have never had to make hard choices in this regard because the very high levels of public expenditure here allows the duplication of services to go on. Politicians in Northern Ireland are *‘delinquent’* in this sense, as one director of a community sector organisation put it. They believe that the extra costs of segregation *can* be afforded, he claimed, whereas in reality *‘the opportunity cost is massive...we are forcing people to live in worse conditions...than they need to...if we made better use of the resources’*. Although he did not underestimate the difficulties involved nor did he

¹⁴³ Project interview with a CR practitioner (22 June 2004). For a relevant view on the ongoing political ‘battle’, see Robin Wilson, *Flagging concern: the controversy over flags and emblems* (2000). See <http://www.democraticdialogue.org/working/flags.htm>, accessed 18 July 2004.

¹⁴⁴ Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004).

¹⁴⁵ See above, Section 3.

¹⁴⁶ Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004).

¹⁴⁷ Author interview with a senior member of a public agency (1 July, 2004).

¹⁴⁸ Project interview with the director of a community relations organisation (21 June 2004); Project interview with the director of a community sector organisation (13 May 2004).

expect rapid change, this interviewee despaired at what he sees as the failure of political leaders to at least begin to encourage more integration of services and facilities.¹⁴⁹

Our project survey indicates that many politicians themselves recognise in general terms that there is an issue to be addressed here; that they may not be doing enough to support the development of better community relations. Meanwhile, CR and community sector opinion regarding political influence on community relations ranged from sympathetic to scathing. However, whether supportive or critical of politicians, the common thread running through all assessments was that building good relations and a shared society does not feature highly on most politicians' list of priorities.

¹⁴⁹ Project interview with the director of a community sector organisation (13 May 2004). For a discussion on the integration and segregation issues, see Joanne Hughes and Caitlin Donnelly, *Integrate or Segregate? Ten Years of Social Attitudes to Community Relations in Northern Ireland*, Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, No. 9, (December 2001), University of Ulster/Queens University of Belfast; and Joanne Hughes and Caitlin Donnelly, 'Ten years of Social Attitudes to Community Relations in Northern Ireland' in A. Gray, K. Lloyd, P. Denine, G. Robinson and D. Heenan (eds) *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: the 8th Report*, (2002), London: Pluto Press, pp.39-56.

9. DECISION-MAKING IN THE FIELD OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS WORK

The *Harbison Review* of CR policy (2002) and the *Shared Future* consultation document (2003) raised a number of questions about the management of community relations programmes at regional and local level. In this context, the point has been made that any debate about the CRC and district councils should acknowledge the fact that their role is a relatively minor one when compared to the broad cross-departmental task of Government to tackle division at the structural level.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, it is not intended to re-examine in detail the policy and institutional issues already covered in the Knox/Darby report on responses to the *Shared Future* consultation.¹⁵¹ However, it may be useful to outline politicians' perspectives on the issue of their involvement in decision-making in the CR field, and present some responses from individuals working in the area of community relations. Outside of the narrow issues involved, arguments made in this debate reveal much about how politicians and those working in the field of community relations perceive each other.

On the issue of regional structures, the Ulster Unionist Party has proposed that the CRC '*should be abolished and replaced with a Community Relations Board*'. The majority of members of this board would be elected representatives, selected on the basis of party strength in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The rest of the board would be made up of lay members, with expertise in community relations, all of who would be '*appointed by the First Minister*'.¹⁵² The thinking behind this proposal, one UUP MLA said, is to '*take community relations...out of civil servants hands, they do not have the competence to do this*'. In government, one cannot even find out the budget spent on community relations, he claimed: '*that is just how reckless the whole thing is*'. With '*the Community Relations Board and Stormont here deciding on the money*', he said, an overall strategy could be developed and district councils given greater responsibility for implementation. The MLA spoke of children's holiday schemes and mural projects that

¹⁵⁰ Comment made by an MLA at the INCORE 'Politicians' Seminar' on Politicians and Community Relations, (23 June 2004).

¹⁵¹ John Darby and Colin Knox, '*A Shared Future*': a consultation paper on improving relations in Northern Ireland, (19 January 2004). See <http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/knox.doc>, accessed 8 July 2004.

¹⁵² Ulster Unionist Party, *Response to 'A Shared Future' consultation document on Community Relations Policy in Northern Ireland* (October 2003), p. 7.

had failed, as well as piles of reports and books commissioned from community relations funding: *'imagine the amount of money, and where the hell are they, they are sitting on the shelf gathering dust'*. The new strategy should be *'ruthless where necessary'*, he said, *'and cut out a lot of these things which time has proved they haven't really worked'*. This would have to be handled sensitively, he commented, because *'by necessity and just by sheer organisation... a lot of the small groups will go by the wayside'*.¹⁵³

A second Ulster Unionist MLA admitted to shortcomings in what he called the *'cultural'* aspect of Unionism's response to the field of community relations: a sense that *'this is a group of people: we don't really know them and we will just stay apart from them, we don't really like these people who are experts in this area...we don't understand them and we maybe don't really want to understand them'*. However, there was also a *'reasoned critique from Unionism'*, he said, which contends that *'community relations has been something of a technocratic elite project'* driven by people who have arguably never been *'subject to any... local democratic accountability'*. As such, they may not *'have much connection with what is happening on the ground and indeed it also means that the political parties haven't had any sense of ownership over the process'*. Speaking of *'roughly £100 million'* being spent over 10 years on community relations, he said that there had not been *'much sign of output'* from this investment.¹⁵⁴

Echoing some of the views of his UUP counterpart, a DUP MLA spoke of the *'community relations and academic world that are often not living in the real world'*. He sometimes listened to *'discussions about obtuse and obscure things'*, he said, and worried that some CR practitioners did not have a grasp of *'the reality'* on the ground in working-class communities. The DUP had not discussed the makeup of the CRC, but his own view was that the presence of more politicians on their board would bring *'a strong sense of openness, accountability, transparency, things will be done by the book'*. However, it would also be important to ensure that appointees actually had some knowledge and could make a contribution to work on community relations.¹⁵⁵ A second member of the DUP said that unlike other more controversial *'quangos'* that his party had criticised, the CRC *'for the most part are looked on in a fairly benign sense'*, apart from some specific

¹⁵³ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

¹⁵⁴ Author interview with a member of the UUP (23 June 2004).

¹⁵⁵ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004).

funding issues. Nevertheless, the DUP's overall preference for greater elected representation on 'quangos' would apply to the CRC, as would the party's policy of reducing expenditure on non-departmental public bodies.¹⁵⁶ A third DUP politician said that 'quangos' should be scrapped because they are not fully representative of the community. For example, their committees rarely include individuals from, or sympathetic to, the Democratic Unionist Party, he claimed.

Whereas the UUP favours majority political membership on the CRC's successor organisation, the SDLP proposes that one-third of the places on a new 'Good Relations Commission' should be reserved for elected representatives and allocated on a proportionate basis.¹⁵⁷ One party member said that this partnership model had worked well in other fora and that it was inappropriate to insist on '*majority rule*' for politicians over community relations programmes.¹⁵⁸ For Eddie McGrady, the adversarial nature of politics means that it is difficult for political parties to be the forerunners or primary promoters of reconciliation.¹⁵⁹ However, the SDLP also believes that the current policy of keeping politicians at arms length from the CRC has left the former's prejudices unchallenged and encouraged their caricaturing of community relations as a waste of money, perpetrated by '*feel goody, do goody types*'. It was further argued that raising the political representation on the board could lead to more political buy-in to the good relations agenda and increase elected representatives' knowledge of complexities involved.¹⁶⁰ Whilst agreeing that there probably should be increased political representation on the CRC, the Alliance Party was the most unenthusiastic of the parties in relation to this proposal. One party member wanted an independent CRC to play '*much more of a challenge role*' to inactive politicians and the Government. This function would not be facilitated by producing a '*Community Relations Board that...mirror[s] the politicians who are elsewhere taking the Government decisions*', he concluded.¹⁶¹

Arguing that relations need to be improved across the island of Ireland, Sinn Féin has proposed the establishment of a Commission on National Reconciliation, which

¹⁵⁶ Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004).

¹⁵⁷ SDLP, *Beating Sectarianism, Building a Shared Society, SDLP Policy Document* (November 2003), p 21.

¹⁵⁸ Author interview with a member of the SDLP (27 May 2004).

¹⁵⁹ Comments made in the Northern Ireland Grand Committee, debate on Community Relations Policy, (17 June 2004).

¹⁶⁰ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

¹⁶¹ Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (1 July 2004).

would operate under the aegis of the North-South Ministerial Council.¹⁶² In terms of the CRC, one party member said that he supported the further involvement of politicians on the board of this body, while the precise balance of political and lay membership could be discussed further. *'People involved in what we would call quangos'*, he commented, *'[tend] to say that they are the nice people and the decent people of society and the politicians are corrupt and that if we could build up an alternative society to our politicians, everything would be ok'*. Politicians reflected *'the democratic wishes of ordinary voters'*, he argued, and so it was unrealistic of CR professionals to imply that *'these people [politicians] are causing the difficulties... we wring our hands and we wash our hands and we don't know what to do with them'*. If hard arguments were to break out about community relations, it might be better to debate these issues at an early stage rather than let the disagreements fester: *'maybe at times, at the CRC table, hard arguments [need] to be heard'*. The MLA cited the example of the NI Assembly, where divisive issues and crises did not prevent politicians from doing their business professionally, he said. A second Sinn Féin representative agreed that more elected representatives should be appointed to the board of the CRC, emphasising that this should not be about political control, but political accountability. It needed to be done in a way that *'forces politicians... and others to take responsibility'* for community relations, it was argued.¹⁶³

What do people working in the CR and community sectors think of the politicians' arguments? On the issue of accountability, it was argued that bodies such as the CRC are held to account, financially and in other respects, through very clear Annual Reports. One does not have to give politicians direct *'control of everything'* in order to have effective accountability, it was maintained.¹⁶⁴ One community sector representative argued for a separation of roles, which ensured a balance between overall democratic control of policy and independent implementation of that policy: *'politicians, I think, should concern themselves with ultimately setting the political agenda and the policy agenda. I think they then need organisations like the CRC to operationalise these*

¹⁶² Sinn Féin, *Sinn Féin's Response to the Consultation Document, 'A Shared Future'*, p.1. See http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/pdf_documents/sinnfein.pdf. Accessed 8 July 2004.

¹⁶³ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

¹⁶⁴ Author interview with the director of a community sector organisation (14 May 2004).

things'.¹⁶⁵ Referring to politicians' argument on financial prudence, a public sector worker said that the nature of community relations work meant that one could not always point to an obvious return on investment in this area. However, this was no argument for a reduction in funding, nor did this worker see why politicians would spend CR funding more wisely than the current administrators.¹⁶⁶ There were fears about the potential implications of a more political CRC. One community sector representative warned that at times of political instability or crisis, conflict at the political level could be transferred by politicians to the level of community relations programmes – and that would be 'disastrous'.¹⁶⁷ A local community leader said that the CRC has shown integrity and consistency in its decision-making. If the funding body started to change as political party agendas changed, that might create an 'unsettled environment', she feared: 'it would permeate right down to the grassroots, oh God help us, that would be a disaster'.¹⁶⁸

Although not in favour of majority political control over the CRC, this individual – along with other CR workers – did see the value of increased political representation on the body. Another CR practitioner said that insufficient political input was one of the weaknesses of the CRC. Politicians should not form a majority on its board, however, because community relations does not have a strong legal framework (unlike policing, for example), and there would be little to stop them from 'playing politics' with this politically contested field of activity. Elected representatives should constitute more than 30% of the board, but less than 50%, he said.¹⁶⁹ A third CR practitioner also claimed that benefits could be derived from greater political involvement in community relations. 'It would be an interesting discussion to get into with politicians'. If they could 'narrow their egos a bit' to be part of, but not a political majority on a board, 'that could be an important sign to the wider community that they are part of the society, not all of it'. Politicians needed to build up more of a track record in the field, he argued. If they rose to the challenge and implemented policies across all Government departments in support of trust-building and a more shared society, he believed that a political majority could be

¹⁶⁵ Project interview with the director of a community sector organisation (13 May 2004).

¹⁶⁶ Author interview with a public sector worker in the field of community relations (15 June 2004).

¹⁶⁷ Author interview with the director of a community sector organisation (14 May 2004).

¹⁶⁸ Project interview with a local community leader (17 May 2004).

¹⁶⁹ Project interview with a CR practitioner (22 June 2004).

established on the CRC or its successor in five or ten years.¹⁷⁰ A fourth practitioner felt that the CRC was ready to accept more politicians on its board, perhaps constituting up to a third of the board's membership. There was a need, he said, for the CR sector to build on their existing contact with elected representatives: '*to talk to politicians, to bring them in*'. It was important in this context for the main CR structure to be fixed so that the nature of the relationship would be clear and '*we [would] know how we are talking to each other*'.¹⁷¹

The issue of political involvement in the CRC is closely related to debates on the role of district councils in the fostering of good community relations. The *Shared Future* consultation document stated that local government should play the central role in co-ordinating action at local level, and that the current District Council Community Relations Programmes should be upgraded and given additional funding and high level support.¹⁷² In this context, a question arises as to whether district councils should be given more power over decision-making and funding allocation in the field of community relations work. Politicians make the case for such a move on the basis of similar principles to those outlined above in the case of the CRC: financial prudence, democratic accountability and increased political responsibility.¹⁷³ In their assessments of this proposal, CR and community sector workers developed their arguments on politicians and community relations at regional level (see above), and made some additional points.

A number of interviewees said that a decentralisation of responsibility for community relations would be a good thing '*in theory*', given that district council officials have the best knowledge of the state of relations in their area. In practice, however, it was felt that district councils on the whole do not have the capacity to administer effective community relations programmes.¹⁷⁴ Councils had a valid role to play in CR administration, one interviewee argued, but they had not yet proven

¹⁷⁰ Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004).

¹⁷¹ Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004).

¹⁷² *A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland*.

¹⁷³ See above, pp. 52-56.

¹⁷⁴ Project interview with a local community development leader (18 May 2004); Project interview with the director of a community sector organisation (13 May 2004); Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004); Project interview with a CR practitioner (22 June 2004). This point was also made by some CROs. CRO Focus Group (1 June 2004).

themselves capable of developing imaginative or risk-taking programmes.¹⁷⁵ Although it was recognised that the commitment of greater resources and high level support could change this situation, there were different views as to the likely effect of the Review of Public Administration on the issue. If the boundaries were redrawn to form a smaller number of large district councils areas, it was argued, the restructuring process would keep councils very occupied for some considerable time. In such a scenario, community relations could be seriously neglected.¹⁷⁶ However, the point was also made that the formation of larger councils could provide an opportunity for local government to offer a more professional and co-ordinated approach to community relations.¹⁷⁷ But would these enhanced local programmes really bring greater democratic accountability? Some community leaders and one CRO referred to district councils and LSPs where senior officers control information and dictate funding decisions, without elected members having any significant input.¹⁷⁸ This raised a question about whether an enhanced role for district councils in CR programmes would necessarily provide increased democratic accountability or indeed lead to councillors taking greater political responsibility for community relations.

Beyond the issues of capacity and administrative influence, some deeper misgivings were expressed about the implications of local politicians exercising greater direct control over CR funding allocation. Some CROs and other practitioners referred to their experiences of councillors mispending community relations funding on items ranging from hamster shows to Christmas trees.¹⁷⁹ It was felt that some funding abuses reflected a lack of understanding of community relations work, while others reflected a basic lack of commitment to the task of improving relations. As one CRO put it, *'there is that notion that this money could be better used somewhere else'*.¹⁸⁰ It was also argued that *'politicians [in Northern Ireland] tend to represent their community, rather than the broader community...and will talk in those terms'*. In such a context, elected

¹⁷⁵ Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004).

¹⁷⁶ Author interview with a public sector worker in the field of community relations (15 June 2004).

¹⁷⁷ Project interview with a CR practitioner (22 June 2004).

¹⁷⁸ Comment made at a CRO Focus Group (1 June 2004); Project interview with a local community leader (17 May 2004); Project interview with a local community development leader (18 May 2004).

¹⁷⁹ Comments made at a CRO Focus Group (1 June 2004); Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004);

¹⁸⁰ Comment made at a CRO Focus Group (1 June 2004).

representatives *'by their nature, will only be interested in the money or the projects going into their...bit of the community'*.¹⁸¹ References were made to *'sectarian trade offs'*, cases where one bloc of councillors will vote for resources to be allocated to a single identity group on the *'other side'*, in return for others voting for resources to go to a similar group in their section of the community. In summary, the fear was that involving politicians in funding allocation brought with it a danger of *'clientalism'* and *'politically partisan decisions'*.¹⁸²

One UUP MLA was unimpressed by this claim: *'If I thought that a board would sit down and determine whether it funded something on a sectarian headcount or not, then you walk away from politics... we have to get beyond that'*. Arguing that politicians would not be partisan nor would they stymie the workings of community relations programmes, he said that they could work together: *'if a unionist says, "that project in the Falls Road deserves to be funded", to some people that would be sensational, but you know, it shouldn't be different, it just should be, "that's a good project, let's fund it", and hopefully some republican will say, "yes, there is the fund for the Portadown Orangemen... that's a good idea, give them the money". You know I mean I'm being a bit frivolous there but that cross-pollination of things has to work and has to happen...'*¹⁸³

However, it was noticeable that politicians who were part of a political minority in their council area agreed with the misgivings of the community sector. One member of the DUP from a predominantly nationalist council area cited an *'abuse of power'* in funding allocation, which raised questions in his mind about whether councils should be given a greater role in community relations programmes. The Government would have to provide checks and balances at regional level, he concluded.¹⁸⁴ Similarly, a member of Sinn Féin in a predominantly unionist council area said that he would not be in favour of more responsibility being given to his council in the field of community relations. Outlining a number of grievances, he said that his party was not even included in the councils' community relations committee: *'[The] fact that certain sections of the*

¹⁸¹ Author interview with the director of a community sector organisation (14 May 2004).

¹⁸² Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004); Project interview with the director of a community sector organisation (13 May 2004); Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004).

¹⁸³ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

¹⁸⁴ Author interview with a member of the DUP (21 May 2004).

community are excluded... doesn't exactly send out a good signal', he commented.¹⁸⁵ However, whilst not disputing the potential for abuse, some politicians made the point that safeguards could be put in place to ensure proper allocation of funding at local level.¹⁸⁶ In this context, a number of CR practitioners argued that the CRC or its successor organisation should be given real powers not only to prevent abuse of funds by councillors, but also to motivate and induce councils into taking a proactive approach to community relations.¹⁸⁷

The issue of safeguards also featured prominently in politicians' responses to a project survey question on whether elected representatives '*should be given a greater role in public bodies tasked with the management of community relations policy and programmes*'.

Table 11: Opinion on politicians' role in CR policy and programmes

<i>Should elected representatives be given a greater role in public bodies that manage community relations policy and programmes?</i>	%
I am in favour of this proposal as it would take some decision-making power away from officials and place it in the hands of elected representatives.	34
I am not in favour of this proposal as it would undermine the independence of the public bodies concerned, and politicise the management of community relations	15
I would support this proposal if safeguards were put in place to guarantee the independence of the public bodies and avoid a politicisation of community relations management.	49
This issue is not important.	1
Can't choose	1
<i>n</i>	<i>189</i>

¹⁸⁵ Author interview with a member of Sinn Féin (24 May 2004).

¹⁸⁶ Author interview with a member of the UUP (23 June 2004); Author interview with a member of the SDLP (27 May 2004); Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (19 May 2004).

¹⁸⁷ Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004); Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004); Project interview with the director of a community relations organisation (21 June 2004).

A large majority of 83% agreed that politicians should be given a greater role, but 49% of these would only support the idea *'if safeguards were put in place to guarantee the independence of the public bodies and avoid a politicisation of community relations management'*. The remaining 34% were less concerned about safeguards, agreeing instead with the statement that politicians should be given a greater role in order to *'take some decision-making power away from officials and place it in the hands of elected representatives'*.

This division of opinion was reflected in politicians' arguments for giving district councils more responsibility over CR programmes, and their comments on the implications of such a move for the CRC. A DUP politician said that increasing the role of councils *'will lead to more transparent decisions because...meetings are open to the public [and] committee minutes are extremely detailed'*. However, he was clear that *'you cannot simply hand it over to local authorities in its entirety [because] there are province wide projects that would require a central body to deal with funding'*.¹⁸⁸ Although one Ulster Unionist MLA agreed that *'the CRC has a place, but not the place that it has at the moment'*,¹⁸⁹ a second UUP politician had a different view as to what the effect of his party's proposals would be: *'what we are saying is... let's develop the strategy, let's do away with the Community Relations Council and let's hand the thing down, in a manner of something similar to how we have handled the police board here'*.¹⁹⁰

Against the strong decentralising focus of this MLA, a member of the SDLP cautioned against approaching the issue as if there was *'a fixed amount of responsibility for community relations [and] saying right, we want to re-carve that so it falls to the district councils'*. Instead, his party wants *'to see everybody have a greater sense of responsibility in terms of community relations'*, including district councils and all public bodies.¹⁹¹ At local level, this would mean a stronger role for Local Strategy Partnerships. Under the SDLP's proposals, district councils would be required to agree their good relations strategic plans with the LSPs in their area. The regional Good Relations Commission would be given the power to refuse funding to a negligent council, and, in

¹⁸⁸ Author interview with a member of the DUP (14 May 2004).

¹⁸⁹ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (14 May 2004).

¹⁹⁰ Author interview with a senior member of the UUP (19 May 2004).

¹⁹¹ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

the event of funding being refused, to administer the good relations programme in that council's area, in consultation with the LSP.¹⁹² The Alliance Party agrees with the creation of '*an enhanced role*' for district councils in the delivery of CR programmes. However, as one party member put it, '*there is a danger that [giving] people who don't have much of an affinity for community relations issues bigger responsibility could lead to an absolute mess*'. For this reason, the party does not want district councils to become the primary locus of responsibility for policy making, nor even for the delivery of projects and programmes.¹⁹³

Sinn Féin believes that local government should undertake reconciliation work on the basis of principles set out by their proposed National Reconciliation Unit.¹⁹⁴ Reflecting on the experience of Belfast City Council and the Belfast LSP, one member of the party argued that district councils had the potential to make real progress on the community relations issue.¹⁹⁵ The best way to achieve this would be to involve LSP partners, such as business, trade union, community and church representatives, and attempt to give the issue a greater public profile: '*I would say to them, go out and book all the big leisure centres and just do big public listening sessions to let them know that you are there*'. Using the corporate status of the council and the moral authority of the social partners, he believed that such a group could not only allocate funding, but also organise seminars in different areas and tackle local disputes. Reflecting some of the concerns outlined above, this Sinn Féin politician said that he wouldn't trust certain councils to do a good job if they were given more power over community relations funding. Nevertheless, he was in favour of giving them a greater role, because that might make councillors take ownership of the issue. He said: '*if we don't make them take the responsibility for it they will never ever change and in another twenty five years time, you'll be getting the very same problems that we have today*'.¹⁹⁶

In this context, some public and community sector interviewees set a challenge for politicians and the Government: if local government is to be given more responsibility

¹⁹² SDLP, *Beating Sectarianism, Building a Shared Society, SDLP Policy Document* (November 2003), p.19.

¹⁹³ Alliance Party, *A Shared Future: Alliance Party Response* (September 2003), pp. 13-14; Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (1 July 2004).

¹⁹⁴ Sinn Féin, *Sinn Féin's Response to the Consultation Document, 'A Shared Future'*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁵ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004). See also *Belfast City Council Good Relations Strategy. Building Our Future Together* (September 2003).

¹⁹⁶ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004).

over community relations programmes, then councils and elected members should be required to assume a similarly enhanced role in the area of civic leadership. One interviewee said that there should be a legislative requirement on councils to build good relations into all areas of their work. A similarly fundamental requirement should be placed on councillors to assume a greater role in the promotion of good relations in their areas – it should not be left to chance, he said.¹⁹⁷ One director of a community sector organisation said that if the granting of an enhanced role to councils and local politicians was simply about exerting political control over community groups and other local actors, then nobody would co-operate with them. However, if councils could take the opportunity to become a *‘lead body for civic representation in their area’*, then they could achieve results with their enhanced powers, he argued: *‘if they can convince people that what they are trying to do is animate and co-ordinate... the voluntary and community groups, the local private sector, the local trade unions...[to] harness all their energies... I think they could add an awful lot of value in the community relations field and all others as well’*.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Author interview with a senior member of a public agency (1 July, 2004).

¹⁹⁸ Project interview with the director of a community sector organisation (13 May 2004).

10. THE ROLE OF POLITICIANS IN BUILDING GOOD RELATIONS

Outside the debate on the position of elected representatives in CR funding administration, a more basic question remains: what roles can politicians play in the task of improving community relations in Northern Ireland? Responding to this question, political and community sector interviewees considered the future role of elected representatives at two distinct levels. Firstly, as one CR practitioner put it, the politicians' role is *'to become Government'*.¹⁹⁹ Although some ironic references were made to the fact that society had to wait for a Direct Rule Minister to launch the *Shared Future* document, there was widespread agreement on the importance for community relations of a fully functioning NI Executive and Assembly. It was felt that the suspension of devolution meant that *'all of a sudden, there [was] no message of hope coming from the top'*, thus making it more difficult for local leaders to *'keep their communities on board'* and maintain peaceful relations at ground level.²⁰⁰ SDLP and Alliance Party representatives emphasised that if the devolved institutions are restored, any new power-sharing executive would need to implement a cross-departmental strategy that would build community relations considerations into every public policy decision.²⁰¹ Indeed a member of the latter party said that the four largest parties in Northern Ireland should develop more detailed policies in support of good relations and challenge the trend whereby *'arguably...the most important issue in Northern Ireland has been relegated right down the political agenda'*.²⁰² A CR practitioner added that such policies should reflect the fundamental principles of community relations: equity, respect for diversity and recognition of interdependence. Politicians were also urged to make the task of improving relations a central preoccupation of Government, rather than *'mak[ing] it look marginal'*.²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004).

²⁰⁰ Project interview with a local community leader (17 May 2004). Similar affirmations of the importance of devolved government for community relations were made by other interviewees, for example: Project interview with the director of a community sector organisation (13 May 2004); Project interview with a local community development leader (18 May 2004).

²⁰¹ See above pp. 18-19. See also, Ronnie Spence, Jeremy Harbison, Bronagh Hinds and Robin Wilson, *An Agenda for a Shared Future: a policy paper*, (2004), Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research Briefing Paper GOV/BP/2004/1, Queens University, Belfast), pp.6-7.

²⁰² Author interview with a member of the Alliance Party (1 July 2004).

²⁰³ Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004).

Outside of their policy-making functions, it was also felt that elected representatives could develop their role in a second area – that of civic leadership. One SDLP politician who agreed with this point nevertheless argued that community workers and leaders had not been specific enough about what they want elected representatives to do. He explained, *‘nobody actually has come to politicians and said, “right, here is something that actually needs to happen, we are involved in a number of things in this community and it seems to us that this is the big thing that is missing and you make this intervention”’*. If anything, he continued, *‘people are wary as to how far politicians should directly identify with community relations approaches’*. It is seen as a *‘specialised field’* dealing with sensitive issues and *‘therefore, some politicians parachuting into it isn’t actually what they want’*, he concluded.²⁰⁴ A member of the DUP agreed that he had to be careful not to be seen to usurp the role of a community sector that is *‘quite jealous of [its] role’*.²⁰⁵ Some community relations practitioners seemed to confirm that politicians do need to be careful in their interventions. As one interviewee remarked, *‘I don’t want them running around on the ground sticking their fingers in every pie’*.²⁰⁶ However, CR, community sector workers and politicians did have some answers to the question posed above regarding what exactly elected representatives should do to provide leadership. Their ideas related to both the private and public spheres.

Some CR workers felt that politicians needed to engage in private trust-building work amongst themselves before they could offer civic leadership in public. As one practitioner put it: *‘When every other space they need is public and highly political...the private space is the space where elements of civic imagination can be explored’*. He believed that more forums should be established where politicians could speak openly and honestly about the difficulties of leading or building bridges to the *‘other side’*. At councillor and other levels, a culture of *‘training’* was thought to be patronising of politicians, whereas *‘learning’* and *‘reflection’* on the subject of community relations was seen as more useful.²⁰⁷ A Women’s Coalition representative said that politicians *‘building*

²⁰⁴ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

²⁰⁵ Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004).

²⁰⁶ Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004).

²⁰⁷ Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004).

good relations amongst themselves’ should lead to a greater understanding of *‘what it is like from the other person’s point of view’*.²⁰⁸

Apart from engaging with members of other parties, it was also felt that politicians could improve their communication with CR practitioners. One UUP MLA agreed that Unionism has had a difficult relationship with people working in the field of community relations. While there has been contact at grassroots level, *‘I don’t think we probably talked enough with the leading actors’*, he admitted. Unionist politicians and CR practitioners would not necessarily agree on many issues if they did have more contact, he said, but *‘that lack of connection at the human level’* should still be addressed. He thought that unionists *‘need to talk to the people involved in community relations, especially at the higher level’*. By the same token, he was *‘not sure [that] they have really tried all that much to engage with us’*. Therefore, these professionals also needed to make an effort to improve their communication with unionists, he concluded.²⁰⁹ Reflecting on similar concerns, an SDLP MLA said that he had been disappointed with *‘the lack of response and engagement’* from some CR professionals to proposals put by his party. Referring to plans for a stronger role for LSPs, he said that although this idea was not meant to threaten the CRC or other organisations, some elements of the CR sector were keener to defend their *‘patch’*, rather than acknowledge the benefits of extending the partnership approach. *‘The usual turf, defensiveness stuff came out’*, he said.²¹⁰ CR and community sector professionals also had their criticisms of politicians,²¹¹ but they agreed with the need for better communication between elected representatives and those working in the field of community relations. *‘We need to have more regular conversations with more politicians about community relations issues’*, said one CR professional.²¹² It was also thought that practitioners could improve their efforts to communicate and explain the content of their work to politicians.²¹³ Others agreed that *‘lines of communication’* should be maintained in a context where both groups

²⁰⁸ Author interview with a member of the Women’s Coalition (15 June 2004).

²⁰⁹ Author interview with a member of the UUP (23 June 2004).

²¹⁰ Author interview with a senior member of the SDLP (18 May 2004).

²¹¹ See above, Section 8.

²¹² Author interview with the director of a community relations organisation (30 April 2004). See also above.

²¹³ Project interview with the director of a community relations organisation (21 June 2004).

acknowledge that the other has a valid role to play in the task of improving community relations in Northern Ireland.²¹⁴

There were a number of suggestions as to how politicians can best provide leadership in the public sphere. A Sinn Féin MLA said that *'too few politicians will go beyond their own patch'*. In this context, although it sounded basic, it was nevertheless important, he argued, for elected representatives to *'organise and to sponsor, facilitate and support dialogue'*.²¹⁵ The example provided by politicians who *'cross the divide'* in public, to attend a church service or a public debate for example, was also seen as having a positive influence on the wider society.²¹⁶ Others had more modest suggestions, such as the wish that some politicians would *'temper their language and their speeches'*.²¹⁷ Developing this idea, a member of the DUP said that it is good if politicians can maintain contacts during tense public disputes and *'issue statements after consultation with each other'*.²¹⁸ Certain politicians were praised by one community leader for being *'out on the ground trying to patrol areas that have interface problems...[trying] to resolve difficult issues'*. However, she regretting the fact that they worked in isolation and failed to come together to address *'the bigger picture'* and help to build a sustainable peace in these areas.²¹⁹

This echoed the views of many CR sector workers: that politicians needed to discuss and define what they could stand together on *in public*. This could be an environmental or a health issue or a challenging of intimidation, as has happened in some cases. It could also be a 'Declaration of Principles', including agreement between councillors to engage in respectful politics and avoid behaviour that could exacerbate community divisions.²²⁰ A Women's Coalition representative called for more agreements between politicians which set out in principle how they will behave in public during

²¹⁴ Author interview with the director of a community sector organisation (14 May 2004); Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004).

²¹⁵ Author interview with a senior member of Sinn Féin (11 May 2004). This MLA also argued that politicians' refusing to talk to members of other parties *'is not the way to build community relations'*.

²¹⁶ Project interview with the director of a community relations organisation (21 June 2004).

²¹⁷ Author interview with a member of the Women's Coalition (15 June 2004); a similar wish was stated in: Author interview with a senior member of a public agency (1 July, 2004).

²¹⁸ Author interview with a senior member of the DUP (6 August 2004).

²¹⁹ Project interview with a local community leader (17 May 2004).

²²⁰ Substantial work has been done in this area by the Future Ways Programme (University of Ulster) and Counteract with Newry and Mourne District Council. See Karin Eyben, Duncan Morrow and Derick Wilson, with Joe Law and Stevie Nolan, *Investing in Trust Building and 'Good Relations' in a Public Sector Organisation*, Summary Report, Belfast: CRC, (14 January 2003).

interface disputes or other crisis points.²²¹ Part of this could involve local politicians agreeing compacts on what they will *not* do in public. One community sector representative questioned the common practice of politicians involving themselves in an interface dispute, even if they are trying to be helpful by articulating concerns or negotiating a resolution. Their involvement simply confirms them as single constituency politicians, and sometimes ramps up the situation, she claimed. It would be more helpful if they agreed *not* to become involved immediately; to let mediation professionals do confidence-building work and let local community leaders play out the dispute. If one politician '*breaks ranks*' and gets involved, then all elected representatives have to wade in, she said. To counter this tendency, rival politicians could agree a compact not to get involved, or only to get involved at certain well-defined points.²²²

The final category of suggestion regarding a political contribution to improving community relations was the hope that politicians, rather than stressing difference, would begin to speak publicly about the idea of a shared society. One CR practitioner summed it up as follows: '*I personally would love politicians to be able to speak about how they secure a future together, rather than a lot of their work in the past [which] has been about maintaining and giving space for the competing identities we have*'.²²³

²²¹ Author interview with a member of the Women's Coalition (15 June 2004).

²²² Author interview with the director of a community sector organisation (14 May 2004). A DUP MLA agreed that disputes are best resolved at community level: Author interview with a member of the DUP (21 May 2004).

²²³ Author interview with a CR practitioner (23 June 2004).

11. CONCLUSION

As this project has addressed different aspects of a very broad theme, politicians and community relations in Northern Ireland, our project findings are themselves mixed. There are two sides, for example, to politicians' overall vision for the community. Faced with the options of a divided but stable society, and a shared society that ensures respect for cultural diversity, a large majority of politicians agree that a 'shared future' should indeed be the objective of Government policy. However, when the question of actually making policy changes in support of this objective is raised, most politicians respond sceptically or argue that a more integrated society should be seen as a long-term goal. Some elected representatives do favour sharing-oriented policy reforms and referred to proposals they have made in areas such as education, housing and public service provision. However, most politicians took a more sceptical or gradualist approach and tended to regard such ideas for policy change as unrealistic, inappropriate and, in some cases, dangerous.

Outside of the debate over sharing and integration, other questions were addressed, the most basic of these being: what is politicians' level of commitment to improving community relations? On the one hand, elected representatives' rate of participation in the project survey and willingness to be interviewed itself indicates a considerable level of political interest in the issue of community relations. On the other hand, the assessments of CR and community sector interviewees ranged from those who were sympathetic to politicians' dilemmas regarding reconciliation to those who focused on political neglect of community relations issues and the failure to challenge highly segregated living patterns. However, whether supportive or critical of politicians, the common thread running through all assessments was that building good relations and a shared society does not feature highly on most politicians' list of priorities. Indeed our survey indicates that many elected representatives themselves recognise that politicians are not doing enough to support the development of better community relations.

The project survey and interviews gave elected representatives an opportunity to state their opinions on projects and initiatives designed to improve relations in Northern Ireland. A significant degree of ambivalence was found amongst politicians vis-à-vis the

management, impact and the concept of 'community relations' work, generally conceived. For example, considerable levels of dissatisfaction were shown with the management of community relations policy and programmes by the Government and, to a lesser extent, the CRC. However, large majorities of elected representatives acknowledged the importance of particular instances of work in the field of community relations, such as cultural exchanges designed to promote respect for diversity and interface work. Indeed, while a significant minority expressed deep dissatisfaction with the current approach in this field, over two-thirds of politicians signalled their broad support for the current approach to community relations work.

A large majority of politicians agreed that elected representatives should be given a greater role in public bodies tasked with the management of CR work, although many acknowledged the need for safeguards to avoid a politicisation of community relations programmes. The main arguments made in favour of such a move at regional level were the desirability of greater democratic accountability and financial prudence, as well as the opportunity it would provide for elected representatives to take greater responsibility for community relations. Similar arguments were made in favour of the proposal that district councils should be given an enhanced role in CR decision-making and funding allocation. People working in the area of community relations gave a mixed reaction to these proposals on the regional and local administration of CR programmes. They do not, for example, agree that politicians should exercise majority control over the CRC, for a number of reasons. These include a fear that political disagreement or instability could be transferred to the level of CR programmes in certain circumstances, misgivings about the potential for clientelism and a belief that some MLAs and councillors lack understanding of the nature of community relations work.

However, CR and community sector workers do see potential benefits in the appointment of more (although not a majority) of politicians to the board of the CRC. These include the argument, made by some politicians, that a greater involvement of elected representatives in regional and local CR administration could increase their knowledge of the issues and encourage them to take greater political responsibility for community relations. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, some politicians and CR/community sector representatives highlighted the need for more regular and better

quality communication between elected representatives and those working in the field of community relations. Overall, elected representatives and other interviewees perceived both dangers and opportunities in the proposals for greater political involvement in CR programmes.

Beyond the issue of specific CR programmes, the final section of this report touches on the ‘bigger picture’ of politicians and community relations. It reflects the argument that politicians’ primary responsibility on this issue is to ‘become Government’ and implement a cross-departmental strategy that would build community relations’ considerations into every public policy decision. Secondly, political and community/public sector interviewees made a number of suggestions concerning the less well defined issue of how elected representatives can best provide civic leadership. Reflecting on both the private and public spheres, interviewees called for more trust-building work, as well as compacts between politicians regarding their public behaviour and involvement in disputes.

A conference, *Politicians and Community Relations in Northern Ireland* was held at the Waterfront Hall, Belfast on 9 September 2004. INCORE Research Associate for this project, Frank Foley, presented the findings of this report to the approximately seventy participants who attended this conference. There was a panel discussion on the role of politicians, and conference participants endorsed the findings of this report.

Our research confirms that politicians want a greater say in the management of CR programmes, but are they prepared to make a greater commitment to the concomitant role of providing civic leadership? This, in essence, is the question posed by people working in the field of community relations. If political parties want to secure the agreement of this sector to their assumption of a greater role in peace-building policy and work, they will need to demonstrate that community relations can be as high a priority to them as equality, security or political development. In this scenario, the roles of civic leadership and political involvement in CR programmes could complement each other to the benefit of funding recipients and the wider society.

12. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This report has concentrated on a descriptive overview of the findings of the questionnaires and interviews. It also has provided some analysis of the implications of these findings for the contested understandings of community relations. In conclusion, we suggest there is need for further research that adapts a critical evaluation of the implications of these findings to some key questions raised by this research.²²⁴ In particular:

- Are there some perceptions of community relations that are more conducive to the development of positive cross-community relationships compared with other perceptions?
- Why don't good relations and a shared society feature highly on most politicians' priorities?
- Why is 'benign apartheid' not benign?
- To what degree can policy actually influence ideas and practices on community relations?
- Can participatory models of democracy within civil society facilitate dialogue around those divisive political issues that still work against good community relations?
- How might civic leadership provide role models for building enjoyable community relationships?
- What is needed to overcome a dualistic them/us mentality?
- What are the conditions through which people learn that in a pluralist society, there is no 'other side', but rather, there are many sides?
- What strategies and forms of interaction are most likely to foster a shared society in which mutual respect leads to a diverse, plural and flourishing Northern Ireland?

²²⁴ We thank Elisabeth Porter for suggesting these questions for further research.

Appendix 1. QUESTIONNAIRE

POLITICIANS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Survey

Please read each question and follow the instructions given (*in italics*). Thank you.

Q1 Thinking about policy and work on community relations in Northern Ireland in general terms, do you think that the current approach in this field...

(Please circle one number only)

...is basically right	1
...is broadly right although it needs some improvements	2
...is basically wrong	3
...is seriously misguided	4
Can't choose	8

Q2 Thinking about the impact of community relations policy and work, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

In general, policy and work on community relations in Northern Ireland...

(Please circle your preferred number in each line)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Can't choose
...is having a positive impact on community relations.	1	2	3	4	5	8
...will have a positive impact on community relations in future years	1	2	3	4	5	8
...is impacting as well as possible given the limited nature of the resources allocated to it	1	2	3	4	5	8

Q3 Below is a list of some different kinds of work in the field of community relations. What is your opinion on the importance or otherwise of each type of work?

(Please circle your preferred number in each line)

	Very important	Fairly important	Not important	Can't choose
Conflict resolution initiatives (e.g. at interface and other areas)	1	2	3	8
Arranging meetings between individuals and groups from <u>different</u> communities	1	2	3	8
Development work with groups within <u>one</u> community ('single identity')	1	2	3	8
Cross community work for social and economic gain (e.g. on infrastructure)	1	2	3	8
Facilitating inter-church discussion on models of peace-building	1	2	3	8
Promoting respect for diversity (e.g. joint cultural events, educational initiatives)	1	2	3	8

Q4 A number of groups have highlighted what they see as problems in the field of community relations, and some of these are listed below. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

(Please circle your preferred number in each line)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Can't choose
Attempts to improve CR are not appropriate in the face of ongoing violence and injustice	1	2	3	4	5	8

Attempts to improve community relations do not include enough analysis of the role of power/the state in a divided society	1	2	3	4	5	8
Attempts to improve community relations tend to undermine a community's identity and cultural tradition	1	2	3	4	5	8

Q5 Please read these statements and indicate which one is closest to your own opinion on what the overall objective of community relations policy in Northern Ireland should be:

(Please circle one number only)

To accept trends towards a divided society and attempt to stabilise relationships within and between the two main communities.	1
To encourage a more shared and integrated society, whilst also promoting respect for cultural diversity and identity.	2
There should not be a community relations policy	3
Can't choose	8

Q6 In relation to public funding of the work of community and voluntary groups in the field of community relations, would you support:

(Please circle one number only)

a rise in funding	1
a continuation of current levels of funding	2
a decrease in funding	3
Can't choose	8

Q7 It has been suggested that the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission might enable society in Northern Ireland to deal with past violence and injustice.

Which of the following statements would come closest to your own opinion on this suggestion?

(Please circle one number only)

In principle, I am in favour of the establishment of such a Commission	1
In principle, I am against the establishment of such a Commission	2
I would support the establishment of such a Commission if its remit was clearly defined and broadly accepted	3
This issue is not important	4
Can't choose	8

Q8 Different groups are viewed as having a part to play in improving community relations in Northern Ireland, and some of these are listed below.

Which groups, in your opinion, have most responsibility for this task?

(Please rank them [1,2,3,4...] according to level of responsibility)

Community and Voluntary sector	
Community Relations Council	
Government	
Politicians/elected representatives	
Community as a whole	
Other <i>(please specify)</i>	
Can't choose	

Q9 Which of the following statements is closest to your opinion on whether involvement in cross community work benefits or damages politicians?

(Please circle one number only)

Involvement in cross community work is more likely to <u>win</u> votes for a politician	1
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Involvement in cross community work is more likely to <u>lose</u> votes for a politician	2
Involvement in cross community work <u>neither wins nor loses</u> votes for a politician	3
This issue is not important	4
Can't choose	8

Q10 Different viewpoints have been expressed about what politicians in general are doing/not doing to encourage the development of better community relations.

Which of the following statements would come closest to your own opinion on this issue?

(Please circle one number only)

Politicians are <u>not doing enough</u> to support community relations	1
Politicians are <u>doing a lot</u> of valuable work in support of community relations	2
Politicians are <u>doing too much</u> in support of community relations to the detriment of other priorities	3
This issue is not important	4
Can't choose	8

Q11 Now, two questions on the overall management of community relations in Northern Ireland.

Which of the following statements would you agree with?

The management of community relations policy by the Government, primarily the Community Relations Unit of the Office of the First Minister/Deputy First Minister...

(Please circle one number only)

...is effective and does not need to be changed significantly	1
...is effective in general but needs some reforms and improvements	2
...is ineffective and needs to be radically reformed	3
This issue is not important	4
Can't choose	8

Q12 Which of the following statements would you agree with?

The management of community relations programmes by the Community Relations Council (CRC)...

(Please circle one number only)

...is effective and does not need to be changed significantly	1
...is effective in general but needs some reforms and improvements	2
...is ineffective and needs to be radically reformed	3
This issue is not important	4
Can't choose	8

Q13 It has been suggested that politicians/elected representatives should be given a greater role in public bodies tasked with the management of community relations policy and programmes.

Which of the following statements is closest to your own opinion on this proposal.

(Please circle one number only)

I am in favour of this proposal as it would take some decision-making power away from officials and place it in the hands of elected representatives	1
I am not in favour of this proposal as it would undermine the independence of the public bodies concerned, and politicise the management of community relations.	2
I would support this proposal if safeguards were put in place to guarantee the independence of the public bodies and avoid a politicisation of community relations management.	3
This issue is not important	4
Other <i>(please specify)</i>	5
Can't choose	8

Q14 Finally, some general questions on your background.

Are you:

(Please circle one number only)

A member of the Northern Ireland Assembly (<u>MLA</u>)	1
A member of a <u>District Council</u>	2
<u>Both</u> an MLA and a member of a District Council	3

Q15 Which party you are a member of?
(Please circle one number only)

Alliance Party	1
Conservative Party	2
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)	3
Labour Party	4
Northern Ireland Green Party	5
Northern Ireland Women's Coalition	6
Northern Ireland Unionist Party	7
Progressive Unionist Party (PUP)	8
Sinn Féin (SF)	9
Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)	10
UK Unionist Party	11
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)	12
United Unionist Assembly Party	13
Independent	14
Other (please specify)	15

Q16 Are you male or female?
(Please circle one number only)

Male	1
Female	2

Q17 Which age group are you in?
(Please circle one number only)

Under 25	1
26-35	2
36-45	3
46-55	4
56-65	5
Over 65	6

Q18 And can you record your religion, if any?
(Please circle one number only)

Protestant	1
Catholic	2
Other (please specify)	3
No religion	4

Appendix 2: TECHNICAL DETAILS OF THE SURVEY

1. Tables are percentaged as indicated and the relevant number (*n*) from which the percentage is calculated is provided.
2. In tables, an asterisk (*) indicates less than 0.5% but greater than zero, and 0 indicates zero.
3. Percentages have been rounded up to whole figures and this means that percentages will not always add to 100%

Questionnaires and reminders were distributed by post to all 621 MLAs and District councillors. 190 completed questionnaires were received back, a response rate of 31%. This is a very satisfactory response to a postal survey and exceeded our expectations. Looking at the characteristics of the respondents it is clear a good cross-section of people chose to take time to let us have their views and the table below presents summary detail on gender, age, religion and political status.

Table A2: Characteristics of the respondents

		%
Gender		
	<i>Male</i>	80
	<i>Female</i>	20
Age Group		
	<i>Under 35</i>	5
	<i>36-45</i>	14
	<i>46-55</i>	25
	<i>56-65</i>	37
	<i>Over 65</i>	19
Religion		
	<i>Protestant</i>	55
	<i>Catholic</i>	38
	<i>Other religion</i>	2
	<i>No religion</i>	5
MLA or District Councillor		
	<i>MLA</i>	5
	<i>Member District Council</i>	81
	<i>Both MLA and member District Council</i>	14



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<http://www.wider.unu.edu/>

UNU Institute for New Technologies (UNU-INTECH)

Based in Maastricht, The Netherlands, UNU-INTECH conducts research and policy-oriented analysis and undertakes capacity building in the area of new technologies, the opportunities they present, the vectors for their generation and diffusion and the nature of their economic and social impact, especially in relation to developing countries.

<http://www.intech.unu.edu/>

UNU Institute for Software Technology (UNU-IIST)

UNU-IIST is based located in Macau, China. UNU-IIST's mission is to help developing countries strengthen their education and research in computer science and their ability to produce computer software. UNU-IIST collaborates with research institutes on research projects - helping them to develop contacts within the wider international research community.

UNU-IIST helps companies and other public and private institutions design and develop high quality software using advanced software development techniques.

<http://www.iist.unu.edu/>

UNU Institute for Natural Resources in Africa (UNU-INRA)

Based in Accra, Ghana, with a Mineral Resources Unit in Lusaka, Zambia, UNU-INRA's mission is to strengthen the capacity of Africa's universities and research institutions to conduct research and produce well-trained, well-equipped and motivated individuals capable of developing, adapting and disseminating technologies that advance food security and promote conservation and efficient use of the continent's natural resources for sustainable development.

<http://www.unu.edu/inra/index.htm>

UNU Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS)

Located adjacent to the UNU Centre in Tokyo, UNU-IAS is one of the newest research and training centres in the UNU system.

UNU-IAS undertakes research and postgraduate education on issues at the forefront of knowledge, policy development and learning.

UNU-IAS is committed to contributing creative solutions to pressing issues of global concern.

The term advanced studies refers to a multidisciplinary approach to research problems. UNU-IAS engages experts from traditional disciplines such as economics, law, biology, political science, physics and chemistry and ask them to pool their specific knowledge in an attempt to understand and resolve key challenges to sustainable development and the most pressing global problems.

<http://www.ias.unu.edu/>

UNU Programme for Biotechnology in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNU-BIOLAC)

Based in Caracas, UNU-BIOLAC conducts research into biotechnological issues in the Latin America - Caribbean region.

<http://www.biolac.unu.edu/>

UNU International Network on Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH)

Based in Hamilton (Ontario) in Canada, UNU-INWEH's mission is "to contribute, through capacity development and directed research, to efforts to resolve pressing global water problems that are of concern to the United Nations, its Member States and their Peoples".

UNUINWEH promotes capacity building for countries affected and a more participatory approach based on North-South co-operation in dealing with global water issues.

<http://www.inweh.unu.edu/unuinweh/>

UNU International Leadership Academy (UNU-ILA)

Based in Amman, the UNU Leadership Academy was established in April 1995 by agreement between the United Nations University and the Government of Jordan. The UNU Leadership Academy's mission is to promote, encourage and facilitate leadership development for a secure, just and equitable, humane and democratic world."

<http://www.la.unu.edu>

UNU Programme on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS)

Based in Bruges, Belgium, UNU-CRIS seeks to contribute towards achieving the universal goals of the UN through comparative and interdisciplinary research and training for better understanding of the processes and impact of intra- and inter-regional integration.

To do this, UNU-CRIS builds policy-relevant knowledge about new forms of governance and co-operation, and contributes to capacity building on issues of integration and co-operation particularly in developing countries.

<http://www.cris.unu.edu/>

UNU Food and Nutrition Programme for Human and Social Development (UNU-FNP)

Co-ordinated from Cornell University in the US, UNU-FNP seeks to:

- strengthen international capacities in food and nutrition in all developing countries by promoting institution building with special emphasis on facilitating advanced professional training
 - identify research needs and opportunities to improve the health and well-being of individuals and communities in all countries
 - serve as an academic arm in the area of food and nutrition for the United Nations System and to work in this capacity with other agencies in the public and private sector.
- <http://www.unu.edu/capacitybuilding/foodnutrition/cornell.html>

UNU Geothermal Training Programme (UNU-GTP)

Based in Iceland UNU-GTP seeks to assist developing countries with significant geothermal potential to build up or strengthen groups of specialists that cover most aspects of geothermal exploration and development.

<http://www.os.is/unugtp/>

UNU Fisheries Training Programme (UNU-FTP)

Based in Iceland, the Fisheries Training Programme (FTP) of the United Nations University (UNU) was established at the Marine Research Institute in Reykjavik in 1998.

<http://www.unuftp.is/>

UNU Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS)

Based in Bonn, UNU-EHS examines and researches on issues relating to the effects of environment change on human security issues.



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