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Dear *Chris*

**BELFAST INTERFACE PROJECT**

Thank you for your letter of 20 February about the Belfast Interface Project which requested comments from CCRU about aspects of its work relevant to the interface areas.

CCRU has been in existence since 1987 and is currently organised in three branches, which deal respectively with (1) community relations; (2) equality and equity policy; and (3) research. In answering your questions I have attempted to integrate the work of all three branches.

CCRU's interest in interface areas is essentially twofold. First, the Unit has a remit to encourage greater contact and respect between the two main politico-religious communities in Northern Ireland. The interface areas present a special challenge in terms of the virtually complete communal segregation found there. While segregation is clearly undesirable, we nevertheless accept that it is a reality of life in these areas of Belfast. Physical segregation need not, however, preclude the possibility of inter-community contact on social and economic issues. CCRU would encourage, where possible, steps taken by the Community Relations Council and the Belfast Action Teams to encourage confidence in communities on either side of the peaceline as a means of reducing fear.

CCRU's second main area of interest lies in the high levels of social disadvantage found in North and West Belfast. CCRU is not a direct operator of social programmes and is not in

1249/TC/MM



direct contact with the communities in interface areas. However, it does have overall policy responsibility for the Targeting Social Need (TSN) initiative through which the Government aims to improve social and economic conditions by targeting resources on Northern Ireland most disadvantaged areas and people. This initiative was introduced because of concern about the persistent socio-economic differentials between the two communities. Economic and social disadvantage exist on both sides of the community, but, on all major indicators, there is a greater degree of deprivation among Catholics generally than among Protestants. Under TSN, Departments are encouraged to direct resources to areas and people objectively defined as being in greatest need, irrespective of community background, with the effect of eroding communal differentials over time.

I will turn now to your specific questions.

**(A) What do you feel are the community needs in interface areas that relate to policy areas within the remit of CCRU?**

CCRU sees a continuing need for work which builds confidence and trust between both sides in interface areas. These are perhaps the urban areas in which sectarian feeling and segregation are seen in their most intense form. In the present fragile climate, opportunities remain for positive cross-community contact within safe boundaries, on issues of mutual concern. This is one of the issues addressed by the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. In the formulation of the programme, CCRU pointed out that the 1994 ceasefires had created opportunities for initiating cross-community contacts in areas which had experienced violence and polarisation. This is reflected in several of the measures in the programme, notably 4.5 "Promoting Pathways to Reconciliation".

In the area of social disadvantage, Belfast interface wards figure among the most needy in Northern Ireland (Robson indicators - PPRU Occasional Paper No 28, September 1994). As such, they should be a particular focus of the TSN initiative. In addition to this position as an important public expenditure priority, which reinforces, and is complemented by, the top priority of promoting self-sustaining economic growth, TSN is manifested in the skewing of existing expenditure baselines and the implementation of its principles in EU funding provisions. All Departments take TSN principles into account in drawing up policies and determining expenditure priorities, and most NI expenditure programmes have elements of TSN objectives.



Of particular relevance to the interface areas is DOE's Making Belfast Work initiative, DED's Community Work Programme, piloted in West Belfast, and DENI's Raising School Standards initiative.

**(B) What do you see as the strengths of CCRU's approach in addressing those needs?**

In terms of community relations, CCRU has resources available to respond to requests for financial assistance towards soundly based proposals which seek to improve community relations in interface areas. We also have the ability and commitment to fund suitable research projects. An example is Dr Brendan Murtagh's work on sectarian interfaces. Research studies assist in the analysis of the needs of peaceline communities and influence the consideration of relevant issues within the Governmental system.

As mentioned above, CCRU is not in direct drive on the implementation of TSN. Our role is, therefore, to encourage departmental activity and the creation of appropriate systems. For instance, monitoring the delivery of services by community background helps to ensure that programmes are targeted on need, objectively defined, and are not perpetuating community differentials. We would also encourage Departments to adopt objective criteria for defining need, notably the Robson indicators, when undertaking new initiatives. These indicators have, for instance, been used in establishing the weightings for local area partnership allocations under the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.

**(C) What do you see as the challenges for CCRU in addressing community needs in interface areas?**

In the coming months the fragile conditions of peace which have been experienced since 1994 will be subjected to a number of threats. There is a particular challenge in maintaining cross-community contacts in interface areas. In some cases (eg Duncairn Gardens) these areas may also be the scene of sectarian confrontation over parades. A deterioration in the community relations situation in the interface areas may have serious consequences for security generally and hopes of progress in political development.

If, however, peace can be maintained, there will be a challenge in ensuring that economic benefits are felt



in disadvantaged interface areas. The optimistic post-ceasefires scenario envisaged increased inward industrial investment and tourism as the motors for regenerating the Northern Ireland economy. These would not, however, necessarily have a direct impact on depressed inner city areas. CCRU will face the challenge of encouraging the economic departments to find mechanisms whereby interface areas can share in the benefits of peace.

I hope the above is helpful.

Yours sincerely

*Henry Canavan.*

J A CANAVAN

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