

Minority Ethnic Arts Forum's response to the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI)

BACKGROUND TO RESPONSE

About the Minority Ethnic Arts Forum

The Minority Ethnic Arts Forum (MEAF) is a lobbying organisation for black and minority ethnic artists and arts organisations.

MEAF's mission statement is:

to enhance creative opportunities for artists from the minority ethnic communities

MEAF welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration.

Community arts and its role in working toward an inclusive society

One important aspect of minority ethnic arts and community arts is their ability to bring people together and allow spaces for challenging racism and celebrating cultural diversity.

Community arts has been used successfully in anti racist projects, cultural dialogue, cultural awareness and diversity projects, truth recovery projects, anti sectarian projects, and projects which have created a voice for groups which may not have a voice in mainstream society.

Groups such as ArtsEkta and Beyond Skin have been using community arts very successfully over the past six years to celebrate the many different cultures present in Northern Ireland. They have used community arts programmes and large scale festivals to teach school children, statutory organisations, youth and community groups and the general public about different religions, cultures and arts practices in a range of countries. This has helped to create a more inclusive society which is more accepting of people from different cultural backgrounds.

1. General comments

1.1 Members of MEAF have expressed extreme disappointment about the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration document and the view that its predecessor (A Shared Future) was much more robust and contained clearer actions.

1.2 MEAF welcomes the recognition of the role the arts can play in cultural awareness work in the document; the Belfast Mela was cited as a specific example. However, MEAF feels that there is very little reference to the role of community arts in peace building work.

1.3 MEAF is concerned that there is no recognition of the key role community development plays in challenging sectarianism.

1.4 Section 10 of the document seems to indicate that OFMDFM wants to take direct control of funding community groups involved in community relations work. If this is the case, the removal of an important independent funding source (the Community Relations Council) may cause community groups to tone down, or eschew altogether, any criticism of government in order to protect their (severely threatened) public funding. This has serious consequences for future public debates about this vital aspect of local society. This would encourage the pursuit of a 'legal equalities' agenda rather than a serious effort to change attitudes, culture and institutions.

2. Context and history

2.1 There is no clear context or reference to the conflict from which this document emerges. There was conflict in Northern Ireland which resulted in over 3000 deaths and polarisation of the two main communities. This is the history and for the document to have context and meaning, this must be referenced and explained.

2.2 There is no explanation of the history of the document. The preceding document (A Shared Future) is not referenced nor is the lack of agreement on a follow up document which led to publication of two separate papers (specifically by two parties Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party) that prefaced this document by OFMDFM - which appears to incorporate but dilute all the previous documents.

This is important as it provides context and illustrates how sensitive and challenging the process of developing a document which all parties can agree to and support is.

3. Language

The document aims to:

'... build a strong community where everyone regardless of race, colour, religious or political opinion, age, gender, disability or sexual orientation can live, work and socialise in a context of fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect'

3.1 More positive language is used in the document than other strategies in the United Kingdom, moving from assimilation to inclusion and integration. This is to be welcomed.

It is positive that the strategy has moved from concepts based around 'tolerance' and 'neutrality' to 'good and harmonious'. This is a positive development for people from incoming communities who want to feel included, welcomed and embraced in a society rather than tolerated. However, it is essential that clear guidelines are developed to outline how this will be achieved e.g. within schools and the workplace.

3.2 While the sentiments expressed are commendable, the language is aspirational and abstract. There are many comments with vague meaning such as one of the key goals listed on page eight:

Interfaces

A goal needs more than one word to make it an achievable action.

3.3 Throughout, the document lacks clear reference to specifics and definitions and - more crucially - includes no actions or measurable outcomes.

Without this clarity of purpose it is difficult to see how the aim will be pursued or what mechanism will be used to assess progress.

Key terms within the document are not defined, specifically:

- Cohesion
 - Sharing
 - Integration
 - Good relations
 - Sectarianism
 - Racism.
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- The word **discrimination** does not appear anywhere in the document. This is a serious flaw as an absence of cohesion, sharing and integration leads to discrimination which can, in turn, lead to appalling hate crimes. People from minority ethnic backgrounds have been subject to horrific attacks in Northern Ireland. MEAF does not feel that this document will help to reduce the number of attacks on people from minority ethnic backgrounds.
 - The word **reconciliation** does not appear in the document. This is another key process which needs to happen to allow the development of a more inclusive society.

3.4 MEAF views the term 'foreign national' as negative, exclusionary, divisive and racist and asks that this is removed from the document and replaced by 'people' (page 5).

3.5 This document must make it clear that the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration is *the* policy framework which will allow the region to move to a more inclusive and equal society. This cannot happen without clear reference to an equality agenda throughout. Reference to an equality agenda is currently absent.

3.6 Racism and sectarianism are treated as the same phenomenon. This is clearly not the case. Both need defined and explained within local and international contexts. The historical role of the state in underpinning sectarianism also needs addressed.

3.7 The document presents sectarianism as a problem affecting and caused by individual peoples' attitudes. There is only passing recognition that sectarian division can be institutional, reflected in bodies such as education, leisure services, health providers and security institutions. The document talks about the symptoms and manifestations of sectarianism, but does not address the causes. Without this recognition and clear actions to address institutionalised sectarianism, it will not reduce sectarianism.

4. Actions

4.1 The document does not contain any actions. This will make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to implement.

4.2 The goals are too aspirational and the related steps too vague e.g. the first short-term goal is 'developing shared space' – details on how this could be achieved need to be outlined in some detail.

4.3 Education is not mentioned in enough detail. Integrated education is one of the main ways by which this society can move out of conflict and become more inclusive and less sectarianism. A strategy to develop integrated education must be a central plank of this document. This should include clear guidelines about how children from minority ethnic backgrounds will be nurtured with the education system.

4.4 Reference to segregated housing is not detailed enough. MEAF recommends that the Semple¹ report recommendations are implemented in terms of on-site provision of a proportion (e.g. 20%) of affordable housing, of which a significant element should be social housing, as part of new private developments.

4.5 MEAF believes that a new parading bill needs to be developed by OFMDFM as a matter of urgency. Parades have the potential to act as a catalyst for extreme civil unrest as happened in summer 2010 in Ardoyne in north Belfast.

5. Policy

5.1 CSI talks about the Race Equality Strategy assuming that it is fully functional, however the strategy ended in 2010 and has in effect been shelved for the last number of years. Will the Race Equality Strategy stay as it is or be updated? Clarity is needed within the document about this issue.

5.2 The wider policy document is not explained in enough detail. To develop cohesion, sharing and integration and transform society this document needs to reflect and enhance other strategies e.g. tackling poverty, hate crime, community safety and promoting race equality.

¹ Sir John Semple launched the Review into Affordable Housing Final Report on 4th April 2007

6. Gaps

6.1 Key groups are barely referred to in the document. The gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered (GLBT) community and disabled community are referred to only in passing. This is a cause of great concern when one considers the amount of homophobic and disablist attacks in the region motivated by hate, fear and ignorance of these two groups.

6.2 This document needs to create a robust policy framework which will make these attacks less likely to happen. It was raised during the CSI consultation that members of the DUP have refused to meet members of the GLBT community². This needs to be addressed immediately.

² This was stated publicly during the consultation on the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration in Grovenor House on Monday 6th September 2010

7. MEAF recommendations

MEAF recommends that community arts is recognised throughout the document as a key way to address difference, to promote cultural awareness, to celebrate cultural diversity and to challenge racism.

In addition, MEAF asks that the document includes:

- Definition of key terms
- A clear action plan – including clear actions for interface areas drawing from existing good practice and interface areas which are less conflictual e.g. the interface at Flax Street in Belfast
- A timeline
- An indicative budget
- Reference to and clear support for *all* groups which are discriminated against in society
- Reference to the policy environment including exactly how it relates to other key policies such as the Race Equality Strategy and the sexual orientation strategy

Concluding comments

This document urgently needs revisited. In light of what has been produced, OFMDFM *must* work with a range of stakeholders to develop a strong, meaningful, robust document. MEAF would welcome the opportunity to work with OFMDFM to develop a new document.

A revised document must create a framework to reduce hate crime and create a more stable, inclusive and equal society in which citizens and visitors can enjoy a life unencumbered by discrimination in any form.

The document must also create a policy environment where people coming into the region to live, work and visit experience a creative, inclusive society free from prejudice. This needs to be the ultimate outcome from the CSI process.

This document must create an environment which will facilitate and support citizens to move on from a conflict which defined the region for over 30 years.