



# **Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland: The Recommendations of the Consultative Group on the Past**

## **Forthspring Inter Community Group Response**

### **Introduction**

Forthspring Inter Community Group is committed to providing services to local people in the Springfield/Woodvale area and promoting good relations within and between these communities. Forthspring is situated on the Falls/Shankill interface and has over 10 years experience of providing services on a cross community basis.

Our vision is of a diverse and peaceful community, where all people are free to live with dignity, hope, respect and understanding.

Forthspring has been successful in providing a much needed safe and welcoming environment where people from both communities can meet and find a different way from the violence and division of the past.

Forthspring brings together Protestants and Catholics to increase tolerance, understanding and trust by supporting people to talk about their religious, cultural and political similarities and differences within a safe space.

Using a community development model, a range of programmes are delivered that bring together people of all ages to move across the wall and to break down barriers. These include youth provision, work with men and women, mothers and toddlers, after schools and senior citizens. Current projects include a local history project, good relations and planning for your future that engages local people in exploring the potential for social and economic development and the changing planning environment.

Forthspring welcomed the work of the Consultative Group on the Past . We strongly support the view that there is a need for society to address the issues

relating to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland and the issues that gave rise to the conflict in order to build a more peaceful future.

This summer marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of intense communal conflict in the Shankill/Falls area. 40 years on the levels of segregation are higher, there is less contact between the predominantly Catholic and Protestant communities, there is a terrible legacy of loss, pain and hurt, there is ongoing division and sectarianism. If the divisions existed 40 years ago to make violent conflict possible they remain today and need to be addressed. We live in a divided and contested society and division and conflict will not wither away. We need to actively build a shared future.

Whilst we welcome the consultation on the report we have concerns that there is no indication of the Government's proposed response to the report's recommendations or a proposed timetable. The process is being unnecessarily drawn out to the detriment of a constructive and positive debate on the central issue for the future of this society – how we can develop a shared future.

## **Legacy Commission**

Forthspring supports the proposal to establish a Legacy Commission. We believe the potential benefits of situating the roles of reconciliation, justice and information recovery outweigh the dangers of confusion and complexity. Reconciliation cannot be achieved without genuine attempts to honestly address what happened in the past and to provide justice whenever possible. Genuine reconciliation and a shared future cannot be based on avoidance or denial.

The proposed 5 year lifespan may well be too short. There is considerable merit in attempting to draw a line and have the goal of moving from the past to the future. This needs to be balanced with allowing for a time span within which ambitious goals can be achieved. Given the difficult economic and political context and, unfortunately, high levels of pessimism arising from a long drawn out peace process, a more workable timescale could well be 10 years, at least for the societal issues such as division, sectarianism and the impact of the conflict on young people. There may be merit in having a 5 year timeframe for the truth and justice issues and a 10 year timeframe for addressing sectarianism and achieving reconciliation with some degree of resolution on truth and justice issues contributing greatly to achieving the wider goal of reconciliation.

The proposal for a £100m bursary to tackle societal issues is welcome. However the funding, nor the work of the Commission, should neither duplicate existing provision nor seek to replace it. Careful consideration needs to be given to how the Commission is structured and how any bursary is spent to ensure that it is additional to existing work to promote reconciliation. The fund should be seen as a strategic intervention to make an additional and decisive shift in combating sectarianism and promoting reconciliation. The bursary should not fund work that is the responsibility of

mainstream departments which could well be the case in relation to the recommendations made on healthcare that should fall within the remit of the Department of Health.

It is essential that the Legacy Commission is actively supported by the British and Irish governments and OFM/DFM.

There is little current departmental funding to support addressing societal issues outside Peace 3 funding. OFM/DFM should take on the role of ensuring core funding for organizations advancing reconciliation either directly itself or through increased support for CRC.

### **Reconciliation Forum**

We welcome the proposal to establish a Reconciliation Forum and support the suggestion that it should be led by the proposed Legacy Commission, Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland and Community Relations Council (CVSNI). We have reservations about CVSNI taking the lead role in co-ordinating the Forum given the necessarily contested nature of work in the area of victims. A Victims and Survivors Forum exists. It would send out a clearer message that reconciliation is a society wide task if the Forum was co-ordinated either by the Legacy Commission or CRC.

### **Legacy Commission: 4 Strands of Work**

Forthspring endorses the 4 strands as outlined. In relation to the first and overarching strand – helping society to a shared and reconciled future, through a process of engagement with community issues arising from the conflict – we would argue that a shared and reconciled future requires engaging with issues that pre-dated the conflict. Issues such as sectarianism or the use of violence to pursue political ends did not arise during the conflict but pre-existed the conflict. The brief of the Commission should be extended to explicitly recognise this.

There should be an even stronger statement of the need to address social and economic disadvantage within communities and geographical area that predated the conflict and in many cases was exacerbated by the conflict. Although there is recognition of the role social and economic disadvantage plays in maintaining community division within the report more attention is paid to, e.g the role of storytelling in achieving reconciliation than to the importance of tackling social and economic disadvantage in marginalized communities and interface areas that were further disadvantaged by the conflict. Whole communities, particularly on interfaces, have been actively excluded from the process of social and economic gain that arose from the peace process and ceasefires. We are a long way short of ensuring an even spread of economic benefit.

We support the proposal that the Legacy Commission act as champion on tackling issues such as sectarianism and social and economic inequality.

These issues require a voice that is not influenced by the need to speak for or win the support of only one section of society, whether the interest group is defined by religion, ethnic background or social class. We will not get beyond sectarianism or social and economic disadvantage without challenging existing norms.

A key element in addressing societal issues is intergenerational work. Young people, in many cases, have no understanding of the conflict and little sense of the relationships that existed between communities prior to the start of the 'Troubles' and there are clear benefits in older people sharing their experiences, particularly on a cross-community basis.

## **REMEMBERING**

We welcome the support for the existing Day of Reflection and the proposal to extend this to a day of reflection and reconciliation. The key challenge in dealing with the past must be to achieve reconciliation and to confront those who would seek to use the past to maintain divisions.

Again we support the proposal that the First and Deputy First Minister should make an annual commitment to leading society to a shared and reconciled future. We share the report's assumption that beyond specific political and constitutional commitments there is a widespread desire in our society to move beyond division and divisiveness and this and other proposals are examples of an attempt to give recognition to this desire.

The proposal that at the end of the Commission's lifespan there should be a ceremony remembering the past and all those who have suffered during the conflict reflects, in our view, a widespread desire to remember, and to move on, on a shared basis.

## **CONCLUSION**

We acknowledge the enormous difficulties and challenges contained in the report. We know there are very difficult issues that have to be faced up to including conflicting views on victimhood. At this stage implementing the report's proposals may be too difficult a challenge for Northern Ireland's politicians in which case it is imperative that the British government, supported by the Irish government, is prepared to take the lead.

The report in Chapter 2 states: "Many during the consultation process believed that we cannot change the past. Yet to endorse this would mean the continuation of two irreconcilable versions of the past, in the memories and the beliefs of the still divided people of Northern Ireland. These two versions of the past differ not so much in the facts of what happened but more in the moral assessment of the rightness and wrongness of what was done by

opposing sides. But the consultation has also shown that the past as it exists in the memories and beliefs of the people of Northern Ireland can be changed. Those individuals and organisations who spoke to the Group about working for reconciliation and a shared future demonstrate this. They acknowledge that while the recorded facts of the past cannot be changed, the opposing moral assessment of what was done and suffered by each side can be revisited, and in so doing can prove to be the beginning of the road to reconciliation as experienced by many” (p53).

If as a society we are to make the transition to a shared future we must grasp the nettle of dealing with the past and see it as a positive opportunity to develop understanding and acceptance. This may appear impossible in the midst of economic recession and local political deadlock but if we do not attempt to reclaim the hope of 1994 ceasefires and the optimism of 1995 we will remain divided and locked into the divisions of the past.