

Concordia comments on the A Shared Future Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009

- 1.0 All of the social partners in Concordia are agreed that a shared and pluralistic society based on equality is the only desirable future for Northern Ireland. While we welcome the fact that government has finally raised this issue high up the policy agenda, we were all disappointed following the publication of the Shared Future Triennial Action Plan and wanted to make some brief comments to OFMDFM to capture our collective reaction.
- 2.0 **Transforming Northern Ireland in to a shared society will require major behavioural and policy shifts, plus substantial resources.** The fact that the TAP has neither budget nor sufficiently focused actions leads us to believe that implementation of this action plan will not bring about the kind of change required. While we accept that this is the first iteration of a rolling programme and that none of the answers required are simple, a much more concrete and outcome-focused plan is required to set the precedent for how a shared future is to be brought about.
- 3.0 **The overall structure of the action plan should include a smaller number of strategic objectives and the actions required to implement them.** These should include a much longer timescale for some aspects of the plan, incorporating benchmarks to measure progress. Many existing actions are unfocused and are listed as 'ongoing' so are without a definite timeframe. Also, many are process orientated rather than outcome focused and thus will be very difficult to measure.
- 4.0 **There needs to be much more consistency in how departments approach the action plan.** Some use the term community relations, some refer to good relations and some to A Shared Future and terms are used interchangeably. This would seem to betray a lack of clarity in how departments understand and interpret the policy they are trying to implement and outcomes they are trying to achieve. We do not underestimate the size of this task, but the differential in departmental approaches is not conducive to consistency of action and outcomes.
- 5.0 **We have a concern that this action plan is simply a collection of existing ongoing pieces of work pulled together under a new heading.** One definition of madness is to keep doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome. If an action plan is to deliver a new shared future, then presumably some new and innovative actions will be required. These are not apparent in the TAP and it is not clear how any of the ongoing current actions will deliver a situation that is any different from the one in which we currently find ourselves.
- 6.0 **Based on previous experience, we have little faith in the promised skewing of budgets.** While ideally all of the Northern Ireland bloc would be contributing to delivering sharing rather than separation, in the early days of a new policy a budget is required to ensure that certain things happen and that departments prioritise certain actions. Delivering sharing and changing the way we live will not be cheap, although we believe that ultimately there will be savings to be made from living in a more

peaceful and integrated society. Without a costed plan with a budget it is hard to envisage how the desired outcomes will be delivered, nor indeed how effective prioritisation could take place.

7.0 The social partners are agreed that one of the major successes of the last 30 years has been the maintenance and development of workplaces into neutral working environments and the reduction of sectarianism achieved as a result of joint efforts between employers, trade unions and employee representatives. It is therefore disappointing that the TAP has little to say about workplaces or indeed the wider role of economic development and how such successes can be built upon. It also promises little change in the external environment surrounding many places of work. Workers may be leaving a comfortable neutral environment for one which is festooned with flags and sectarian symbolism. The TAP contains few commitments to change this – rather it offers processes and agreements which may or may not lead to a more shared public environment. This issue is certainly key to changing perceptions of territoriality and threat within Northern Ireland.

8.0 There is a lack of consistency across the TAP as regards government departments as employers. ‘Headline’ commitments from DHSSPS include:

- *Ensure that all existing HPSS premises are maintained as shared spaces in which sectarianism, racism and homophobia are not tolerated*
- *Continue to treat sectarian, racist or homophobic harassment as a serious disciplinary matter*
- *Ensure that all new facilities commissioned for the HPSS are shared spaces in which sectarianism, racism and homophobia are not tolerated Department’s vision is to have a culture where differences are recognised and valued, with a view to maximising the efforts of individuals and optimising their contribution to the Department’s corporate aims and objectives. We will do this by promoting a culture of diversity through implementation of the Department’s Diversity Strategy and Action Plan*

Commitments such as these should be made by each department along with a declaration to deliver public services in locations, which are not perceived to be the exclusive preserve of one section of our community while complying fully with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

9.0 Concordia welcomes the fact that ‘the plan will not be set in stone’ but will be adapted and refined to address changing needs. As social partners Concordia would like to play a role in this as the document suggests we should, and look forward to working with OFMDFM as the co-ordinating department.