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NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

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NI COMMUNITY RELATIONS COUNCIL: A CATALYST FOR COMMUNITY HARMONY

Education Minister, Dr Brian Mawhinney, MP, today pledged Government support for the newly formed Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, the independent body which aims to provide a new impetus and support for those engaged in healing community divisions.

Speaking at Stormont, the Minister welcomed the new Council as **"a significant milestone on the long, hard road towards bringing historically-divided people together"**.

Dr Mawhinney said: **"As we enter a new decade I believe this new Community Relations Council will provide a much-needed catalyst to promote community harmony in a province which, for too long, has been divided by myth and mistrust."**

"In giving its full backing to the Council, Government is responding positively to initiatives from within the Northern Ireland community. It is also reflecting its own commitments to good and improving community relations. I fully support the Council's objective of working closely with those at local level to promote greater community understanding and tolerance."

"The enthusiasm, imagination and courage of those already working in the field of community relations has long been evident. I believe that the new Community Relations Council will provide important encouragement and support to ensure that their already valuable contributions are enhanced in the future," Dr Mawhinney said.

"I look forward to working closely with the council in supporting projects which will bring people together and which will encourage greater understanding and mutual respect. I hope, also, that the council will help in opening up a wider debate about our different cultural traditions so that we can all learn ways to live together in greater harmony."

Dr Mawhinney announced that Government would meet the Council's "core" expenditure on staffing, accommodation and administrative costs of about £150,000 next year. Initially it will have 4 staff - a director and 3 development officers. It is a non-statutory body, set up as a limited company.

The Council will have a maximum membership of 24 drawn from both traditions and all walks of life. Eight are appointed by the Government and the Council Chairman is Dr James Hawthorne.

The Council is now engaged on preparing its detailed plans and will be seeking financial support for its work from a number of sources. Two of its main areas of activity are likely to be:-

1. cross-community contact - developing and supporting contact and co-operation between the two sides of the community; and
2. cultural diversity - supporting action which widens understanding of the different cultural traditions in Northern Ireland.

Dr Mawhinney thanked all those involved in launching the new Council. He said **"They deserve the support and encouragement of all people of good will in Northern Ireland."**

"I believe that the establishment of this new body is an important milestone in the continuing efforts by Government and all well-intentioned organisations and individuals to tackle the underlying divisions in this community. Government's budget for community relations will next year be increased from about £3m to £4m and this demonstrates clearly Government's full commitment to the community relations effort."

The Government's eight appointees are:-

Mr Glenn Barr, Chief Executive of Maydown Ebrington Group; an enterprise agency in Londonderry;

Mr Jonathan Bardon, Head of the Academic and Continuing Education Department, Belfast College of Business Studies, and Chairman of the Working Parties on Education and Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage in schools curricula;

Dr James Hawthorne, formerly Controller BBC (NI) Chairman of the Health Promotion Unit and the Cultural Traditions Group;

Dr Maurice Hayes, the NI Ombudsman, formerly Permanent Secretary of DHSS and Chairman of the Community Relations Commission;

Miss Audrey Lamb, Headmistress of Strathearn School, Belfast;

Mr Donal McFerran, a Belfast solicitor, Chairman of Lagan College Ltd;

Mr Christopher Napier, a Belfast solicitor

Mr Chris Ryder, the Ireland correspondent of the Daily Telegraph.

The other members of the Council are:-

Ms V Anderson (Manager of the North Belfast Community Resource Centre),

Mr P Arthur (Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Ulster),

Mrs G Donaghy (Manager of the Confederation of Community Groups in Newry)

Ms C Ferguson (Project Manager, Belcoo District Development Group),

Ms A Graham (Community Worker, Ballybeen),

Mr J Hewitt (Manager, Farset Community Enterprises),

Ms A McCorkell (Secretary, All Saints Church, Clooney).

Ms M McGinn (Co-ordinator of Adult and Community Education Programme for Belfast),

Mr A McLaughlin (NI Director of CBI),

Mr Q Oliver (Director, NI Council for Voluntary Action),

Mr D Stephens (Asst. Secretary, Irish Council of Churches) and

Mr P Sweeney (Director, NI Voluntary Trust).

There are three places still to be filled.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. On 19 June, Dr Mawhinney announced the appointment of a committee, chaired by Dr James Hawthorne, to work with the Government's Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU) in finalising plans for the establishment of a new body to promote the improvement of community relations in NI. Today's announcement is based on Government's acceptance of the main proposals in the Hawthorne Committee's Report.

2. The new body combines the concept of a resource body providing advice and assistance for those working to improve community relations with the efforts of the Cultural Traditions Group started in 1988 by CCRU and the Institute of Irish Studies at QUB to encourage a more constructive debate about cultural diversity in Northern Ireland.

3. The main aims of the Council are:-

to provide support, facilities and recognition for local organisations level which are concerned with the development of community relations, awareness of cultural diversity and conflict resolution;

to promote constructive debate throughout Northern Ireland about community relations and cultural diversity;

develop opportunities at local level for people from the different traditions to meet and do things together and to increase mutual understanding and respect; and

increase public awareness of, and support for, activities which improve community relations and promote awareness of cultural diversity.

4. It will seek to meet these aims by:-

1. assisting and facilitating local groups and individuals to build confidence, lessen tensions and improve relationships with different communities;

2. providing a resource centre for statutory and voluntary agencies and individuals throughout NI working in the area of community relations and

cultural diversity;

3. working with the wide range of existing voluntary, community, business, trade union, church and other relevant organisations to develop community relations policies and practices as part of their activities;
 4. working with all parts of the public sector to facilitate a greater understanding of, and support for, activities which promote community relations and awareness of cultural diversity;
 5. organising the provision of appropriate training and support for people active in the field of community relations and cultural diversity; and
 6. identifying, evaluation and disseminating ideas and examples of good practice.
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5. The Council has already advertised for staff. An announcement about the appointment of the Director will be made shortly. Appointments will be made later to a number of Development Officer posts to promote new cross-community activity at local level, provide support (including training) for those involved in cross-community activity, and increase understanding of the different cultural traditions.
 6. The Council will initially have offices in Belfast City Centre but no decision has been made about its location in the longer term.