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By Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow

## **Acceptance of diversity is essential**

The lack of political agreement on how we address the past and create a shared future is evidenced on our streets where people are paying the cost for our collective failure to make progress. The price is disruption, confrontation and violence over marches and displays of flags and emblems; and, for members of minority ethnic groups, vicious racial attacks on vulnerable families.

We must push forward urgently with strategies to change attitudes and remove prejudices; but the changes they make will take time to be effective. Peacebuilding is a journey not a destination and it is important to acknowledge that it is primarily a personal one.

Changing behaviour is a core challenge for all and it will take leadership – and that means good example - from all the influencers in our society – the Executive, government departments, churches, the media, and all the institutions of civil society. We need to create a public consensus which promotes an acceptance and appreciation of the diversity of our society and challenges expressions of prejudice and hostility based on negative stereotypes. As individuals and in groups, we should examine whether what we say and do shows a generosity of spirit towards the “other”.

A start could be made by working to persuade people to show a greater acceptance of the legitimacy of difference within our society. We cannot value the right to free expression only in terms of our own identity and beliefs. Many are too eager to take offence at every expression of an identity which is different, or at odds with their own.

It is good to see people value and enjoy cultures and expressions of identity other than their own but, where that is not possible, we should at least be prepared to accept their free expression. That principle should be at the core of every free society, but it is frequently found wanting, not least in our own community.

For a truly shared future, we must seek common values, goals and the common good. This is a big ask, to embrace the other with generosity of spirit. The question is not should we do it, but rather what if we don't?