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Blog article by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Sharing this place we call home

Every year about this time the Community Relations Council sponsor Good Relations week, a series of events encouraging people to "engage and foster new relationships". This annual focus allows us to offer or take part in an activity which is aimed at trying to build a better shared future.

The issue of "good relations" is of vital importance for Northern Ireland and, if we are to make any progress in this contested area, we need to have a common understanding on what we mean when we talk of building a "shared future" in this place I call home.

Let me be clear, for me this would mean a society in which my future would include yours, and where we can work together to create better opportunities for our children, grandchildren and others who choose to come and live amongst us.

It is all too easy to place this work in the "too hard box", justifying our stance by referring to the current political stalemate, the plethora of stories, on radio and television, newspapers and social media, where shared and generous attitudes are absent.

I am not denying this rather negative context, but I am heartened by the fact that such incidents are increasingly being condemned by people from all sections of our community. This, to me at least, is clear evidence that most of us want to live and work together in peace and safety. The reality is that to create such a space needs work - and work which must involve all of us, as well as our politicians.

We cannot afford to see public discourse reduced to "it is their responsibility" or "it is their fault". That is a self-deluding narrative, which absolves each one of us from our responsibility to create and defend that shared future. We cannot simply opt out, and be bystanders while our future is being shaped by others.

Good relations, as a term, is much talked about, but rarely explained, and in this "creative ambiguity" there lies a number of potential problems. The suggestion that good relations can sometimes be seen as a threat to equality presumes that the advancement of one might preclude growth in the other. It has been suggested, for example, that our society can deliver good relations for all only when equality is fully achieved and firmly embedded. Of course, equality is an essential prerequisite for

good relations, but the focus on one should not be allowed to set aside the importance of the other.

Any misunderstanding of the interdependence of equality and good relations holds the risk of delaying work to create shared and safe places until we have established a society free from discrimination. In fact, both are essential elements which must operate together. That is the only way to create an environment where discriminatory attitudes are reduced and better relationships between everyone here develop more fully.

The challenge to pursue these two goals together is not new. Over the past four decades many of our employers have worked hard to create good and harmonious workplaces - spaces where people from a wide variety of backgrounds can work together safely, free from discriminatory practices. Good practice in Northern Ireland workplaces has seen good relations and equality working in partnership through often challenging difficulties. The lesson learned has been that the vigorous application of one does not preclude the good work of the other.

Our strong equality legislation underpins such approaches, but the law needs to be supported by positive leadership and good example from all those in positions of power and influence if we are to create that truly shared future we all desire.