



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Overview Briefing:
Community Relations Council

20 May 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr George Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Ms Jacqueline Irwin	Community Relations Council
Mr Martin McDonald	Community Relations Council

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I welcome Jacqueline Irwin, the chief executive of the Community Relations Council (CRC), and Martin McDonald, the chair of the Community Relations Council. Are you both there online with us?

Mr Martin McDonald (Community Relations Council): Yes, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Will I be passing over to Martin?

Mr McDonald: OK, Chair. Thank you. We fully understand the length of time that it has taken to deal with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. They are critical issues, so it is proper to allocate the time that you did, so there are no problems from our perspective.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much.

Mr McDonald: First, we thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee on the work of the Community Relations Council. I have been chair of the organisation for about a year. I was appointed by the Executive Office last June, along with eight new board members, two of whom had served previously on CRC. I am also a director of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, so, obviously, I am closely involved in the whole COVID-19 side, and the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority. Obviously, COVID-19 has hit our fishing industry and our fishing ports as well. There is no sector, including the good relations sector, that has not been impacted by this.

If the Committee is content, I will give a general outline of CRC's work, and Jacqueline, our chief executive officer, will then present you with some more detailed observations and information on how we have been managing through the COVID-19 emergency. By way of background and for members who may be unfamiliar with the work of CRC, we provided a paper in advance of this presentation. Members will see that, in section 2 of the paper, there is a brief overview of the vision, strategic priorities and functions of the organisation. It is important to say that the organisation is at a juncture. We have just come to the end of our last strategic plan and are at the opening of a new one, which covers the period from 2020 to 2023. The public consultation period for that new plan closed on 3 April 2020, and the board is now finalising the plan. While I say "finalising", obviously, our sector will also have to pick up a lot of learning from the current COVID-19 pandemic, and I have no doubt that adjustments to how we do business will have an impact and should be included in our next three-year strategic period.

This year is also our thirtieth anniversary. To give the Committee a view of our work from the perspective of those who use our services, we have provided a video link that will be operational until 27 May. That will give the Committee the perspective of the people whom we have engaged with and those we have funded and what their views are and have been about CRC and the role that we have performed. The briefing paper that we sent you also outlines two broad delivery methods, and both are equally important. The first, in section 3, is the organisation's funding programmes on behalf of the Executive Office. The second, in section 4, is our community engagement work. As part of that engagement we provide development support, we identify and share best practice, and we facilitate wide community engagement on what we consider to be effective approaches to peace-building and shared community relationships. The work that we do is not always about giving out grant aid; it is about being available, either at a time of crisis or to deal with a particular problem, and offering tools and techniques to find solutions to those problems.

In section 5 we have made some observations derived from our work, and, in section 6, we have provided information on how we are continuing or attempting to continue to deliver as best we can our services during the COVID-19 emergency.

CRC is an arm's-length body of the Executive Office and a delivery agent of the Executive's Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy. The council was established back in 1990 as a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity to lead and support change towards reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and to be a catalyst for good intercommunity and, indeed, intercultural relationships in the region.

The last year has been a big cultural change for the organisation, having moved into a formal arm's-length body structure. Previously, it straddled the line of being an independent organisation that could challenge and, indeed, often criticise government approaches, but clearly the big shift in what we do is that policy is now set by the Executive Office. We are here as a delivery agent. We influence policy by the evidence we gather through our engagement and through our funding programmes. We feed that back to the Executive Office. We are not benign in terms of trying to influence policy, but we do it in a more structured and evidence-based fashion.

As I mentioned, we are completing work on our new plan, which sets out a vision for a diverse, shared and interconnected society and its values, which stress human dignity as a fundamental basis for good community relations. The values are listed and explained in the paper under the headings "interconnectedness", "diversity", "equity", "equality", "respect" and "dignity". The common good, openness, transparency and accountability are important as part of our work. Also included in the briefing paper are our three strategic priorities, which will give the Committee information on our contribution to sustainable development, well-being and the common good, and there is particular emphasis on the goal of embedding and normalising good community relationships in everyday life.

I can look back on a lot of extraordinary work that has been done by CRC in over 30 years on good community relations. Where we are now moving to is make those extraordinary efforts part of everyday life. That is the goal and objective of our new strategy: to really embed it across the government system.

Our second strategic priority is about supporting effective delivery and learning and, finally, continuing to be a well-governed and trusted public service. The vision and strategic priorities are designed to support the Programme for Government, whenever we get that, and the T:BUC strategy. Appendix 1 of the briefing document contains specific indicators and outcomes to which the work of CRC contributes. The organisation has put a lot of effort into helping link the work that we fund at a community level to the strategic outcomes set by government under T:BUC. We operate under an

outcomes-based approach that is designed into both our grant application and assessment processes and our performance monitoring and evaluation processes. A full review of our overall performance and annual accounts can be found in our annual report. The full record of our grant funding is also found on the website and, again, in annual reports.

For the purposes of the briefing, I now ask Jacqueline to draw out some key points from our work in the 2018-19 period, which was our last full audited year. Over to you, Jacqueline.

Ms Jacqueline Irwin (Community Relations Council): Thank you, Martin. Good afternoon, Committee. If members are content, I will start with funding, which is in section 3 of your briefing paper. Grant distribution is central to the work of the Community Relations Council. In our last annual report, for the financial year ending 31 March 2019, we distributed almost £2.5 million to 177 organisations. We have six funding streams, as you will see in the briefing paper. The details and purpose of each are also set out in the paper. Our core fund is the largest with £1.3 million, which went towards the salaries and running costs of 32 organisations. That investment was spread across Northern Ireland and delivered funding for 61 posts, 99 projects and 203 locations. It impacted on over 34,000 people.

Details of the other schemes are in your paper. For now, I draw your attention to the north Belfast strategic good relations programme, as it is slightly different from the others. The purpose of the programme is to improve relations within communities in north Belfast through the work of 11 contract holders. That is a ministerial intervention that CRC has administered at the request of the Executive Office since 2016. The strategy responsibility for that programme remains with the Executive Office, and the structure and funding for the programme is also set by TEO.

In the briefing paper, you will also see a chart of the distribution of funding across the region by council area. There is also a table that sets out the data. Although around 60% of the funding is awarded to organisations that deliver projects in the Belfast City Council area, it is important to point out that the north Belfast scheme forms a significant part of that, with a total investment of £670,000. Areas with low grant applications tend to be the same for most funders, and we work with the Executive Office, district councils and other funders to run funding fairs and information sessions to encourage greater take-up.

If the Committee is content, I will turn to our engagement work briefly. You will find that information in section 4 of your paper. Organisations that receive funding from CRC participate in an annual programme of shared learning events. Additionally, information is circulated to networks of email subscribers through monthly event bulletins, quarterly newsletters and our website and social media channels. In 2018-19, our website had 36,635 sessions, and that involved 83,719 page views. Facebook and Twitter are also used to communicate our activity and the activities that our funded groups undertake. We have given you details of that usage in your briefing paper.

To support engagement between government and the community and voluntary sector, CRC also delivers the T:BUC engagement forum three times a year on behalf of the Executive Office. As members probably know, the objectives of that forum are to enable government and its associated bodies to update the sector on progress in implementing the T:BUC strategy and to enable the sector to address implementation issues, identify good practice and make practical recommendations for improved delivery. CRC has delivered 12 meetings of the forum across the region since they started in March 2016. We have had 1,860 participants. We have moved the locations and themes regularly, and that has encouraged participation. Each forum attracts an average of 150 people — that will include first-time attendees, community practitioners, policymakers and academics — so there remains a very sustained level of interest in building a united community. We were very pleased to welcome the junior Ministers to the last meeting of the forum. A list of all the engagement forums is included in your briefing pack. The next one is due to take place on 15 September, which is during Good Relations Week. We are investigating options to move the engagement forum online, if the emergency restrictions related to COVID-19 remain in place.

As many members will know, we also run the annual Good Relations Week to showcase good practice and encourage wider engagement. That normally takes place in September, and it will happen in the week that will include the International Day of Peace. We normally have an average of around 200 events, and CRC leads on the planning for the week and the related publicity. We also convene a steering group for the week that consists of members from the Executive Office, the Department for Communities, the Department of Justice, the Education Authority, libraries and the Cathedral Quarter Trust. Planning for this year's Good Relations Week is already under way, but we

are considering different ways of delivering it, if the social distancing requirements remain largely as they are now.

We also make an annual good relations award. Again, we have included details of that in your paper. There is also information in the briefing paper on two projects organised by CRC that may be of interest to the Committee. The first is the decade of centenaries project, which is run in collaboration with the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The second is the peace monitoring report. Members will know that the decade project explores ways to engage with commemoration and to ensure that our divided past does not undermine our ability to build a shared future. Members may be aware of the principles for remembering, which were developed and widely distributed. They are included in your briefing pack. CRC and the Lottery Heritage Fund host a decade of centenaries round table that is a multi-agency initiative to develop and share ideas and information. The round table has also organised many events. Members will find details and resources related to all of that activity on our website.

The peace monitoring report was developed by CRC in 2012. It is independently funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. It is also independently authored, and the author's work is reviewed by an independent advisory group. The first report was published in February 2012, and five reports have been produced to date. The report measures progress towards or away from peace under four dimensions, as many members may know: safety and security; equality; political progress; and cohesion and sharing. The reports are available to download from our website, and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust has awarded funding for a further two reports.

In addition to our own work, CRC's expertise is sometimes called on by colleagues in the Executive Office to assist initiatives and delivery structures there, including T: BUC thematic subgroups and assessment panels, TEO grant scheme assessments and other projects. I have listed some of them in the briefing paper.

The strong connections that we have made at community level and in the T: BUC engagement forum give us the opportunity to hear directly from many people. In our briefing paper, we have provided some information on the issues that regularly arise from the work. You will find that in section 5 of the paper, and I will touch on a few of them briefly now.

First, there is a recognition of the need to link good community relationships with newly emerging priorities and issues. We hear very often about how the work of community relations changes over time in response to need, opportunities and new priorities. Some of those new priorities affect all sections of society and therefore provide an opportunity for working together. An example of that would be the environment and climate issues. There is also a recognition of the need to adapt and refresh the language around good relations; terms such as the "common good", "narrative hospitality", "generosity", "kindness" and so on are beginning to emerge more now as ways of describing the work that we are trying to do.

Leadership remains a hugely important issue across all of society, and the need to set a good example is regularly raised, whether by parents, teachers or influencers in the public, private or community sectors. Political leadership is always highly valued, along with practical and public demonstrations of commitment to the T: BUC ethos. Members will not be surprised to hear that there is a long-standing plea for multi-annual funding streams to provide reliable and secure support and stability for community relations work — in other words, moving away from short-term project activity into more sustainable everyday life, as Martin mentioned. Linked to that is the need for greater investment in measuring long-term impact.

We have an increasingly diverse society and more fluid views of identity. People are less willing to be identified as simply one thing or another, so there is an increasing need to encourage participation and ensure that T:BUC outcomes are widely shared across the community.

Community safety remains an issue in some areas, so any remaining safety and security issues must be reliably tackled to engender trust and the conditions for people to live, work and play together at all levels of society. That may also help us deal with some of the fear of change that persists.

Another issue that is regularly mentioned is the need for greater collaboration between funders to coordinate activity and develop a more holistic response to overall investment. That includes practical things, such as the coordination of reporting templates across funders. To encourage that, we also need to find ways to recognise the contributions of the many agencies and funders that might be involved in that sort of collaborative approach.

I will just touch on learning. Learning from experience remains highly valued. There is continued interest in structured links to share learning and to ground practice in theory, so that it can be passed on. There is also concern that many people with experience are leaving community relations work due to job insecurity, retirement or other reasons. Their knowledge and expertise takes time to build and replace. Due to the financial insecurity of the sector, the gap is getting harder to fill. We need to plan for this to sustain skills and standards.

If the Committee is content, I will briefly touch on how we have been responding to the challenge of COVID-19. That is covered in more detail in section 6 of the briefing paper. We have also placed details of our working arrangements on our website, and we update that information regularly.

CRC staff have been working from home since Thursday 19 March as part of our emergency plan and in line with the government guidance. All staff have laptops, phones and access to files and emails, which enables them to work as normally as possible. Phone calls to CRC reception and emails continue to be answered in the normal way. However, all physical attendance at meetings and events has been cancelled, in line with government restrictions, and, in the meantime, most meetings take place remotely, using Zoom or other online platforms. We are also looking at the option of running larger events, including the T:BUC engagement forum and Good Relations Week, using teleconferencing technology, if that becomes necessary.

We were fortunate that our grant administration procedures were already online. In addition to that, we have advised all funded groups of our temporary arrangements, which, we hope, will help them when they electronically submit such things as progress reports and financial claims. The groups we fund are finding many new ways of sustaining connections during the COVID-19 social restrictions. In the briefing paper, we have included some examples, such as working on front-line services, delivering food parcels, development of podcasts, online programmes, training and activities to keep communities connected, including stress management, cookery, and arts and crafts. There are also rural projects, collecting stories of how people have dealt with the pandemic. Some groups use video clips to raise awareness of work and to connect programme participants and funders. There are even virtual tours. More information on all that can be found on the website and social media channels of the organisations mentioned in the briefing paper.

As an example of that, I want to close with information that I received late last night. I found it very heartening. It relates to a north Belfast food bank programme. We have nine organisations that jointly coordinate food banks across north Belfast and the Shankill area. The groups take referrals from elected reps, councils and Sure Start, amongst others. There are a total of 50 volunteers from across north Belfast working on that programme. It supports the production and delivery of 10,000 COVID-19 directories, providing key contacts and information for those in need. There were 550 packs delivered to hostels and sheltered accommodation; 900 homeless packs delivered across Belfast; and 450 delivered to those shielding because of underlying health conditions. There are 200 meals served a day at a north Belfast kitchen. There are 130 older people receiving fresh meals provided by local businesses, with 50 vulnerable adults receiving three meals a day. There are 996 family food hampers delivered, and 1,000 sunflower kits have been delivered as part of the Belfast in Bloom challenge. A series of nine groups have also organised rubbish skips for local areas. The volunteers who work on those programmes work across traditional boundaries to meet daily need in whatever community requires them. That is a great example of community response to a very unusual set of needs.

I will leave it there, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Jacqueline and Martin, thank you very much for that comprehensive review. We also appreciate the fact that you gave us a detailed paper beforehand. I will pass now to members for questions.

Mr Beattie: Thank you very much for your briefing. It was, indeed, comprehensive and extremely interesting. I will keep things quite general. Under the snappily named "New Decade, New Approach" deal, there will be an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. It seems to me that T:BUC will bleed into and dovetail with that slightly. How do you see CRC dovetailing into the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression along with the likes of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition?

Mr McDonald: I will start off, and Jacqueline can come in if I leave anything out.

I watched your session with the First Minister and deputy First Minister before we came on, and a question was asked about the detail of the new office and the new commissioners. At this stage,

because we do not have any detailed information about the structures and will not know that until it is published, it is really hard to comment in detail. However, the role of CRC remains the same: it is about leading and supporting change towards reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust. We have come a long way, but we realise that there is still plenty of work to be done. We hope to hear more in due course about the new structures and, in particular, the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. There is reference in the new deal papers that have gone public that CRC will work closely with it. I have no doubt that the Executive Office and the T:BUC strategy will be impacted as part of that. We are happy to play our part.

The only clear difference that I can see at this stage is that our work in the Community Relations Council has moved on over 30 years from purely single identity work into social cohesion. While it is difficult to comment, you might well think that the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression will look, in particular, at the two identities and cultures in Northern Ireland. There is a fair bit of work to be done there to build up the capacity in both sectors. I think we will then merge at a point when it is moving into the more cohesive approach, and there might well be a role for CRC. However, there is no doubt that, in respect of the tools and the toolkits that we have at our disposal, we are happy to share and to work with whatever emerges out of the new structures. At this stage, it is just a bit difficult to give any further detail on that. I do not know whether you want to add to that, Jacqueline.

Ms Irwin: In the information that is there so far, it is clear that there are potential areas of collaboration not only for us but for tourism, heritage, the arts and so on. There will certainly be plenty for us all to do to make sure that this all ties up well together and that we end up with a cohesive set of options that deliver on the wishes of the Executive but are also really helpful to the community.

Mr Beattie: Martin and Jacqueline, thank you for that. I guess that I am trying to winkle out whether there is anything happening behind the scenes, because, like you, we get a sense that some of these things are maybe not moving at the pace that we thought they would. It is clear that there is a lot more still to come out on that, and I guess that it is nobody's fault that we are where we are at this time.

Jacqueline, this brief, pointed question is probably for you. When I look at the all programmes grant expenditure for district council areas, I see that an extraordinary amount goes to Belfast City Council and that a paltry amount is given to Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, given that it is the second largest council area in Northern Ireland. Is there a reason for that? Even Derry City and Strabane District Council gets a fraction of what Belfast gets. Is there a reason for that?

Ms Irwin: You will see on the charts for the last audited financial year that it was around 60%. As I said, the north Belfast strategic good relations programme, which is a very specific ring-fenced intervention and makes an investment of about £670,000, is part of the overall figure that skews the figures. All that said, the distribution of funding tends to reflect a couple of things: the population distribution and where there are organisations that are already working, because they tend to be the ones that bid to receive grants to us as a funder or, indeed, any other funder. We are always mindful of that. We work closely with organisations such as the Rural Community Network and with the good relations officers in councils to support the development of new projects where they are needed. It regularly happens that the council might be putting money into a project but that group will come to us for a small grant to support some element of what it is trying to deliver. Between us all, we are trying to encourage work to be done where it is needed, but there is no doubt that there are areas that have less of a take-up of grants for a range of reasons.

Mr McDonald: I will add to Jacqueline's reply by giving you a practical example. Our funding also funds a number of core groups, and we had a session yesterday with a few of them to see where things are moving to. One core group of which the Committee might be aware is TIDES Training & Consultancy. While we fund the core group, we fund its core running costs; we do not fund projects for those core groups. The core groups attract funding from a range of sources. Liza Wilkinson, who heads TIDES, is down in the ABC council area doing a lot of good work in Lurgan. While the paperwork and the charts do not show a direct line of CRC funding, because our work is as much about building capacity as anything else, it enables groups that might be perceived as Belfast-centric but, on a practical level, use the funding that they acquire outside CRC to work in those areas because of CRC core funding. Some of the messages that Liza brought forward to us yesterday were about groups on the ground, particularly Communities in Transition. The key current issues with COVID-19 are about poverty and mental health, so our work reaches across the spectrum.

You cannot really judge the impact from the spread of money. The purpose of the core funding scheme is to enable groups to reach out. I am a Newry man, and, when I took over at the council, I

suppose I asked the same questions at board level. When you come at it from the outside, it could be perceived that CRC is a very Belfast-centric organisation, but, when I got my head around that, I started to realise that there is a lot of stuff going on. There is still stuff to be done. As Jacqueline said in her initial presentation, the same areas tend to fall down to the bottom of the list across a lot of funding streams, which really says to me that there is a lot of capacity-building work to be done, particularly in the most deprived rural communities to give them the skill set to target whatever funding streams are available.

Mr Beattie: Martin and Jacqueline, thank you again. You paint a vivid picture. Looking at the table, I find it extraordinary that £1.5 million goes to Belfast City Council and Mid Ulster — a rural council — gets £4,000. However, you have explained it well, and I am happy enough with that.

Ms Anderson: Thank you both. This is the first time that I have had an opportunity to engage with you and exchange views.

I want to pick up on the last comment. People will not be surprised that I am looking at Derry and Strabane, but I am very disturbed about Mid Ulster. You cannot say that any of the assessment takes population distribution into account. The population of Mid Ulster is 146,000, yet it received less than £4,000. Whatever one's political view, all one has to do is read Anne Cadwallader's book about Mid Ulster and the "murder triangle". I assume that much needs to be done in that area on reconciliation. Yet, looking at the funding and allocation, I am really disturbed. I support all the work going on in Belfast on reconciliation — obviously, Pat is from west Belfast. Councils could not but look at that and be most disappointed at how funding has been allocated, particularly to their council area. Mid Ulster is striking, given the population distribution, and Derry is in there as well. When you look at the allocation to advance peace and reconciliation, it is not a good track record at all.

Ms Irwin: Will I take that, Martin?

Mr McDonald: Yes, unfortunately, my sound waned considerably during that. You jump in, and I'll come in on the back of it.

Ms Irwin: Of course.

Martina, thank you for your question. First, it is really important to understand that we are an open funder. Essentially, our calls are open. We take applications from across the region and encourage applications from across the region and fund on the basis of that. Where you see smaller numbers of applications or smaller allocations, it is not because our funding streams are directed in a direction that would run against that; it is simply that we are not getting applications from those areas.

Having said that, I completely agree with you. That is the part of the world that I originally come from, so my heart certainly would be with rural take-up of the programmes. However, organisations such as the Rural Community Network say that, as funding has decreased more generally across the board, many smaller bodies working in rural areas are either not there any more or have gone back to being largely volunteer-orientated. That puts a lot of pressure on core-funded groups such as our Rural Community Network, because the underpinning structures and the posts are not there as they used to be. That is one of the things that happen when you are trying to build capacity: if some of the resource goes away from elsewhere, the organisations are not in a position to bid to do more work because they simply do not have the staff. We are very mindful of all of that and work, as, I think, I mentioned, with councils and with the Executive Office every year to identify the gaps and to work with that council through funding fairs or information events or, indeed, with other bodies that, we know, work in those areas to encourage them to come forward with bids. We find it frustrating as well, but we work collaboratively and do our best to ensure that we encourage more to happen in rural areas, and we will continue to do that.

Mr McDonald: Martina, you asked a very valid question. My background in my working life is that I chaired the Rural Development Council based in Cookstown for over 10 years. We also had the Rural Community Network. At that time, there were large streams of both European and International Fund for Ireland funding, and we managed to deliver that. Jacqueline's response is very valid with regard to our programmes being open calls. In my experience in the rural funding sector, sometimes open calls are just not sufficient; sometimes, funders and Departments need to go in with a more strategic approach, saying, "We have looked at this area. We have taken up the evidence, and there are problems here that the existing funding streams either are not targeting or do not have sufficient funds to cover".

We would be happy to talk to TEO colleagues and come back to the Committee at some stage to look at whether there is an opportunity to take a more strategic approach in the areas that you have identified as either not targeting the open calls or where there are no other funders to target the issues that are so prevalent there. I would be happy to come back to the Committee at some stage with that.

Ms Anderson: It is not just a question of opportunity; it is of strategic importance to do it. I do not think that, given the years that CRC has been in existence, we can have a situation where, for a decade and more, we look at groups and organisations, particularly in rural areas, and can understand that they feel a sense of abandonment. If we are to target the areas that are most in need, with the reference in 'New Decade, New Approach' to putting objective need at the heart of allocating funding, public bodies have a duty and responsibility to ensure that they reach the nine section 75 categories and that, when policy is being devised or work is being done, those categories are not affected detrimentally. If I were sitting here representing Mid Ulster, I would be demanding that something be done about this. As a Committee, we are here to scrutinise on behalf of everyone in the North. That is why I am demanding for Mid Ulster that that has to change.

You have given us a lot of information, and I thank you for that and for the work that you have done to bring this to our attention. However, it would be helpful to us if you could provide a geographical breakdown of each of your funding programmes, with the exception of the north Belfast grant scheme. Appendix 2, on core funding, does not have a geographical breakdown of organisations. May we have that?

What process does CRC apply to funding applications? For instance, how do you apply the section 75 duty that I mentioned and allocate funding based on objective need, as outlined in 'New Decade, New Approach'? I was not able to find that information in the paper. Throughout the document are references to groups of strategic importance. May we get a list of those groups? Where are they? The Committee would find that information helpful.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Will you provide the Clerk with that? We will write formally to CRC to request it.

Ms Anderson: OK. Some people are saying that the screen has gone down and they cannot pick up the meeting.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Is anybody online?

Mr McDonald: Yes, Chair. Unfortunately, my sound was waning towards the end of that, but I got the gist of what Martina was saying. We are happy to take that back, gather the evidence and bring it back to the Committee. She makes a valid point. We are happy to provide the details on that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Martin, it is also important from the perspective of the public purse. If all taxpayers and ratepayers across Northern Ireland pay into a pot from which money is given out and one council area gets £1.5 million and another gets £4,000, it raises questions about how that is balanced. We need to see more evidence on that. That would be useful.

Do we still have Emma, George and Trevor? George, are you still online? Do you have any questions?

Mr Robinson: I am still online, Chair, yes. I have no questions. I am OK, thanks.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Good man. Emma, are you online? Do you have any questions?

Ms Sheerin: I am online. I have to go shortly because I have another meeting. I echo what was said by my party colleague. She has made representations on behalf of Mid Ulster. I agree with everything that she said.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Sure.

Ms Sheerin: That has probably covered everything.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you, Emma.

Mr Sheehan: No parochialism, now *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): The Mid Ulster MLA agrees *[Laughter.]*

Ms Anderson: I did not know whether she was still there, so I had to make sure that I stood up for her.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Trevor, are you still online? No? I think that we have lost Trevor.

Martin and Jacqueline, we have had quite a number of these presentations now. That was certainly one of the most in-depth presentation papers that we have been given. I would not say that the lack of questioning is a reflection of any lack of interest. Much of the information was covered in the briefing paper.

My experience of the Community Relations Council goes right back to the 1990s, when I was a youth work student. We used the library that was available in your offices as a resource to help to inform our studies. My knowledge extends right back to the beginning of your organisation. I want to thank you for coming along and for waiting for so long to come in and answer our questions.

Mr Robinson: Sorry, Chair. It is George here again.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes, George.

Mr Robinson: It was an excellent presentation. It was very worthwhile to listen to the discussion. Although I did not take part, I would like to make one comment.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes.

Mr Robinson: It relates to the north Belfast initiative. It is fantastic, particularly given the current pandemic. The excellent work that those people are doing has to be highly commended. That is my take on it. They are doing brilliant work. I pass on my congratulations on the brilliant work that they are doing up there.

Mr McDonald: That is great, George. Thanks for those comments.

Chair, before we sign off, may I give an assurance to Martina that I have heard the message about Mid Ulster, loud and clear? I give a personal commitment that Jacqueline and I will delve into that. We will come back to the Committee or, if required, to members individually. Thank you for the opportunity to present to you.

Ms Anderson: I do not want you to forget Derry and Strabane *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. We will move on quickly. *[Laughter.]* Thank you very much indeed for your attendance at the Committee via teleconference. We will let you go.

Ms Irwin: Thank you.

Mr McDonald: Thank you. Cheers. Bye.