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COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Communal divisions have persisted in Northern Ireland for centuries. The traditional religious cleavage between Protestants and Catholics largely coincides with political differences. Almost all Protestants would regard themselves as Unionist and British; whereas most Catholics, (42% of population) are Nationalist and identify culturally with the traditions of the rest of the island. There is also a socio-economic dimension to these differences as Catholics, on the whole, fare worse than Protestants in terms of major indicators, eg unemployment, education performance, poverty.

The Government's policy is to increase contact between the two communities, to encourage greater mutual understanding, and to widen appreciation of cultural diversity. It facilitated the establishment in 1990 of a Community Relations Council, independent of Government, which currently receives over £2m in grants, much of which is distributed onwards to local projects. The Government also provides grants to District Councils for their own local programmes. Most District Councils employ Community Relations Officers to manage these programmes. In all, Government provides over £9m per annum for community relations initiatives, including work in schools and research. In the recent public expenditure announcement, this expenditure was largely protected. The European Union and the International Fund for Ireland also provide funds for community relations projects.

Regular surveys over a period of years indicated that the population at large believed community relations to be improving. There was, however, a major setback this summer with confrontations over marches leading to outbursts of sectarian ill-feeling. This has been manifested in localised boycotts of Unionist traders by Nationalists in rural areas; in demonstrations by Protestants outside Catholic churches in the Ballymena area; by intimidation of residents in some areas where they form a minority; by arson attacks on schools, halls and churches associated with a particular community; and by continuing tension over marches. The latest survey evidence indicates that people are more pessimistic about community relations, though there are also strong indications of a continued desire for an improvement. Those who have worked in this field for many years, though initially

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disheartened by the events of the summer, are firmly resolved to continue their efforts on the ground.

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