Response to Office of the First and Deputy First Minister Evidence Hearing on Building a United Community

October 2014

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the evidence hearing on Building a United Community.

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation working to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Belfast and beyond. The organisation acts as the link to the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network on behalf of Belfast as a WHO Healthy City, and currently holds the WHO secretariat for the Network. Belfast Healthy Cities' key partners include Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Bryson Group, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Public Health Agency, Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster, as well as Departments including Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Department for Social Development and Department of the Environment.

The Healthy Cities approach focuses on bringing organisations and sectors together to consider how their work contributes to health and wellbeing; to share evidence and build capacity, and to introduce and pilot new concepts linked to core themes identified by the WHO European Healthy Cities Network. A core principle of the Healthy Cities movement is tackling inequalities in health and strengthening equity, and all Belfast Healthy Cities' work focuses on how equity can be strengthened, with a view to enabling people to take control of their own lives

As a member of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, which has a strong membership throughout Europe, Belfast Healthy Cities has access to both academic evidence and good practice on tackling disadvantage and inequalities in health.

Belfast Healthy Cities has previously responded to key OFMDFM consultations, including the Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People Strategy and the Active Ageing Strategy 2014-2020.

Belfast Healthy Cities would like to submit evidence on two aspects; the important role of communities in addressing health impacts and the including the views of children in building a united community. The inquiry is interested in how decision making in respect of building an strengthening communities and it is vitally important that all age groups are included.

Impacts of Violence and Unrest on Communities
The World Health Organization states that '[beyond deaths and injuries] violence has serious, life-long, and far-reaching consequences. These include mental health problems; job, school, and relationship difficulties; involvement in further violence as a victim or perpetrator; and the adoption of high-risk behaviours such as alcohol and substance misuse, smoking, and unsafe sex. Often years later, these can lead to cardio-vascular disease, cancer, sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS and other diseases.'[1]

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[1] Global Status Update on Violence Flyer, WHO, 2014

Living in a state of unrest and in divided communities has well acknowledged and wide-ranging socio-economic influences on the lives of citizens. The built environment in areas that are physically divided tends to be of poorer quality and incomes tend to be lower and deprivation levels higher. The lower people are on the socio-economic gradient, the more vulnerable they are to the negative health impacts of environmental factors such as poor air quality, poor quality living environments and waste tipping that contribute to the gaps in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest areas.

Professor Sir Michael Marmot, in a review of social determinants and the health divide across Europe, makes a range of recommendations on how to address this divide at a community level including to 'ensure championing of partnership and cross sector working by local leaders' along with more extensive partnership working that uses local knowledge, resources and assets in communities[2]. Belfast Healthy Cities believes that these observations, which are based on extensive research throughout the WHO European region could form a basis for improved collaboration between decision makers and communities.

Belfast Healthy Cities currently provides the secretariat for the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, and would be pleased to support in identifying and sharing relevant evidence. This includes access to a database of case studies from cities across Europe, providing experience and learning from concrete interventions and approaches that could potentially be adapted for use at a local level. Through its role in supporting WHO Europe in facilitating the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, Belfast Healthy Cities has access to internationally leading expertise, including the Institute of Health Equity at University College London, which is led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot, cited above.

Belfast Healthy Cities believes that stable and resilient communities have a vitally important role in addressing these challenges. Communities are the core of our society, and play a key role for the wellbeing of people, at a physical, mental and social level. The environment within which communities exist sets the context for the opportunities and choices that are open and realistic to people, and as such shapes the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Strong communities depend on supportive environments, which also play a role in tackling disadvantage.

Tackling disadvantage remains one of the 'wicked' issues, as it is a complex and multi-faceted problem. Belfast Healthy Cities believes that it is vital to build future work on a strong evidence base and understanding of the causal and event chains that affect disadvantage, and the solutions that tackle these.

Sharing evidence and capacity building are among the core roles of Belfast Healthy Cities, and Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to explore opportunities to share learning from WHO Europe on tackling disadvantage and building shared communities. Many approaches from across the European region would be complementary to initiatives already under way and adaptable to the process of strengthening communities in Northern Ireland. (See appendix 1)

As part of previous capacity building programmes, speakers have included Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Dr Erio Ziglio, then Head of the World Health Organization European Office for Investment for Health and Development, who contributed to the Committee for

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[2] Review of social determinants and the health divide in the WHO European Region: final report UCL Institute of Health Equity 2013

Health, Social Services and Public Safety inquiry into health inequalities in 2012. As part of the organisation's 25th anniversary celebrations in 2013, we also welcomed Dr Agis Tsouros, WHO Europe Director of the Division of Policy and Governance for Health and Well-being, which led to collaboration between DHSSPS and WHO Europe on the Making Life Better policy, which now reflects key themes of the WHO Europe public health strategy Health 2020.

Children in Communities

Belfast Healthy Cities has a particular interest the impact that the physical environment and communities have on the lives of children and their health. Our Child Friendly Places programme has involved children in assessing their own environments and making recommendations about how places can be improved and spaces used in a different way.

Programme1: Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children worked with 400 primary school age children across Belfast. Children participated in guided walks were they identified healthy and unhealthy aspects of the built environment in the areas surrounding their schools. While many children identified features associated with violence and sectarianism, including graffiti, vandalism and dereliction; there was also a clear sense of optimism. All the children identified positive aspects in their communities, most felt safe in their neighbourhoods and almost all mentioned the importance of feeling part of their community.

The culmination of the programme in 2014 was the development of Children's Voices- A Charter for Belfast, which collected a series of recommendations from the children on issues including open space, clean and safe environments and liveable communities. Belfast Healthy Cities believes that these recommendations should be used to inform the strategy.

Programme 2: KidsSpace has successfully transformed under used city centre space in accessible, family friendly venues that offer children and their families active, creative and free play activities. Since the first event at the newly constructed St Anne's Square in 2011, sessions have been held across streets in the city centre, in a community café and in an empty shop unit in CastleCourt shopping centre demonstrating that model is adaptable to location.

Both programmes have the aim of supporting children to be active and visible members of their communities. Belfast Healthy Cities believes that the strategy should reflect their views and aspirations as we move forward towards a united community.

Appendix 1

Evidence from WHO European Healthy Cities Network:

Udine, Italy: The healthy municipality of Udine has taken approach to developing community gardens similar that being undertaken in many areas of Northern Ireland at present. Their approach differs slightly in that they have developed the growing spaces as 'green plazas', public meeting spaces that are used as multifunctional spaces to bring members of the community together, increasing green space and providing functional venues for education, entertainment and recreation.

Over a number of years, Udine has also involved citizens in planning the built and environment and services in their communities, which is particularly relevant to Northern Ireland as increased public involvement in planning at a community level is introduced. Experiences of their approach, including the challenges could provide valuable learning for communities in Northern Ireland seeking to achieve similar goals.

Belfast Healthy Cities has collated case studies from previous WHO European Healthy Cities Annual Conferences (2010-2014) detailing examples of good practice under a range of WHO themes, including Health Equity in All Policies, Healthy Urban Environment and Caring and Support Environments, and would be happy to share further evidence to inform and support policy development.

Appendix 2

Reports from Belfast Healthy Cities
Children's Voices: A Charter for Belfast
Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children
KidsSpace- Exploring Child Friendly Space