

My thanks to Ricky for his warm welcome and introduction, my thanks also to the North, West and Greater Shankill Partnerships who together with the Springvale Community Outreach Initiative invited me here to speak today.

This morning's seminar is very welcome for many reasons, not least as it comes on foot of the recent launch of the "Science and Skills" fund. In a few days we will announce the spending plans for the "Children's and Young Person's" fund. Both are significant developments in the process of renewing and regenerating disadvantaged communities.

You know, better than I, that Northern Ireland has suffered severe deprivation for many years, we are all agreed that this must not continue.

While much has been achieved in Northern Ireland over the last few years, I recognise that many parts of the Province have not benefited as they should.

You will be glad to know that I am not going to deliver a long and dull speech about Government policy. Instead I want to share with you my vision for a new Northern Ireland.

My Northern Ireland of the future is in complete contrast with the picture of deprivation and despair with which we have become familiar.

I want to see a future where our communities

- have ownership and pride in their neighbourhoods,
- where they feel safe and happy to live there with their families and neighbours, and
- where they can fulfil their own potential and encourage and nurture the next generation.

Where we, collectively, can make Northern Ireland a much better place for all to live.

How do we get there?

Many parts of Northern Ireland are not so different from the community where I grew up; people in working class communities experience the same problems and feelings no matter what country they live in. My experience of living and working in such communities, gives me great reassurance and confidence that deprivation and disadvantage CAN be successfully tackled and DOESN'T have to be tolerated.

There are many routes that people can take to leave deprivation and disadvantage behind, be it education, a better job or whatever.

For Government, Neighbourhood Renewal represents one of the main ways that community renewal and regeneration can be tackled, but we must build on your efforts and hard work.

Some of you here today no doubt think this process has been slow. We are all impatient for change we can see and feel. I share your impatience, but to use a well worn phrase “Rome wasn’t built in a day”. Regeneration is a long term process, communities are at differing stages and many of the problems we are working to tackle have built up over many decades.

There are many things we can do more quickly. I know that the active involvement of other parts of Government is crucial, like the curate’s egg involvement of statutory agencies is good in places but needs a lot more effort. This is a priority for me and my colleagues in Government.

The Ministerial Group which I chair includes senior people from the relevant Government Departments and shows how seriously regenerating communities is taken at the heart of Government.

Neighbourhood Partnerships are crucial to making renewal real. In many communities Partnerships have already set a vision for their future, I have seen many of these visions and several recurring themes dictate what communities aspire to.

They want a community that:

- Has a high level of community participation.
- Receives high quality public services.
- Has a healthy and safe environment.

- Has accessible recreation opportunities.
- Has employment and educational opportunities for all.
- Has a sense of optimism about the future.
- A community that is confident in itself and in its relations with others.

Neighbourhood Partnerships across Northern Ireland are now setting about the job of agreeing what priorities they need to focus on and agreeing the actions they want to see in place to address these. This is not an easy task, there are many challenges and obstacles and it would be easy to become disillusioned, but we must continue, as we know that real and long lasting gains await us.

Let me give you an example. Earlier this month I paid a return visit to the Greater Village area in South Belfast to report on progress following the publication of reports on Sandy Row and Greater Village. Many of you here today will know the areas well.

Before this work started it would be fair to say that both communities felt they had been left behind, abandoned by Government and statutory agencies alike, raising serious questions about their future.

Local people were either unaware of or unable to use public services.

Key problems facing this community, like so many other working class communities, included:

- Education –including a disconnection between families and the people providing the services.
- Disaffected youth, lacking essential skills to gain employment.
- Leadership, cohesion and lack of positive role models.

We have now begun to address these problems and to move on to transform these communities as part of the Neighbourhood Renewal process. Whilst there is still much to be done, a solid foundation capable of delivering improvement and change is now in place.

In this part of Belfast you have been very determined and focused in your efforts to address the problems you face; equally you have been proud ambassadors when it comes to sharing the results of your commitment, determination and problem solving work.

Working together with Government agencies, you are addressing important community issues – crime, littering and anti – social behaviour, across a number of areas in Belfast.

There are many examples where regeneration work is gathering pace:

In West Belfast a key site on Lanark Way has been acquired and marketed, resulting in the proposed development of retail units and office accommodation and which will bring in private sector investment of £3.3 million.

There are proposals to develop the former Lawnbrook Avenue Mill complex and to build up to 80 townhouses on land at Cupar Way and Lanark Way.

Development proposals which will provide 71 much needed new homes on a site located at Westrock/Brittons Parade in West Belfast in the Lower Falls/Clonard Neighbourhood Renewal Area have now been approved.

In North Belfast the Hillview Retail Park, has been developed with £1.3m assistance from my Department through its Urban Development Grant programme. Dunnes Stores is the anchor tenant for this site.

I am constantly impressed by the level of commitment and determination I see as I visit and meet people in all parts of Northern Ireland. But I don't underestimate the difficult task we all face in regenerating and renewing our communities. We are working together and we are seeing results and there is much more to be achieved.

If Neighbourhood Renewal is to deliver fully on its commitments there is a need for real engagement between Government and the communities it serves. It has not always been possible for those from the most deprived communities to enter into a meaningful partnership with Government.

We intend to change this through Neighbourhood Renewal. Local Partnerships will provide both the vision and action plan to address needs within their communities. We will respond by supporting the Partnerships to implement those plans. We will also support these communities through our 'Community Engagement Programme' which focuses on the transfer of skills and knowledge to communities. This programme will ensure that they have the necessary skills to become meaningful partners with Government.

You will know that as part of my work as Minister for Social Development, and at the request of the Secretary of State, I have been looking carefully at Protestant working class communities to examine and understand why some of these communities have not been benefiting as fully as they might from public services.

This builds on the work of the Taskforce which was set up over a year ago. I am bringing this work to a conclusion shortly and will use what I have learnt to focus on making Government money work harder in disadvantaged working class areas across Northern Ireland. In this way I will address the key issues I have mentioned today - education and youth, training and employability, community capacity and regeneration.

Through the delivery team, headed by Nigel Hamilton – Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, we will focus on improving performance by bringing together all the associated Government activities to drive forward improvements on the ground.

So what are the challenges in regenerating our most disadvantaged areas?

Although Neighbourhood Renewal and much of our City Centre work is area based, it is important that the benefits are available and impact neighbouring areas.

Good public services are needed by everyone, particularly those living in disadvantaged communities, but they only add value if they are accessible, coordinated and responsive to the particular needs of the community.

All of us here today have a common purpose to improve the quality of life in our communities; we can only do this if we work together in partnership- Government, community and voluntary organisations, to the man on the street. It is only by working together can we tackle the complex multi dimensional problems we face.

We live in a changing society and this bears particular relevance for the voluntary and

community sector. Many funding streams previously open to us are now coming to an end. Some impacts from these funds have been very valuable , others, unfortunately, have been less so. It is up to us, and by that I mean all of us, through community planning tools such as those in Neighbourhood Renewal to ensure that the resources available to us now have positive and lasting impacts on the ground that are obvious and contribute to the support of the needs of communities they serve.

In closing my address today I want to once again thank you for your kind invitation, I found it a useful and timely opportunity to review publicly the progress we , collectively, are making, in bringing about improvements for our community. It is always good to acknowledge the difficulties and lessons learnt along the way.

I hope you have a productive and useful morning's work, unfortunately I am unable to stay for the remaining presentation and discussions, I would very much like to, but other prior commitments make this impossible.

I know that John McGrath will be participating on the panel discussions later this morning and John will ensure that I get feedback on the conclusions.

Before leaving, I do want to emphasise my understanding of the difficulties of the task, my appreciation and admiration for your hard work and determination. I urge you to keep this enthusiasm alive, so together, Government and communities can achieve the vision of a renewed, healthy and confident Northern Ireland.

Thank you.