

Relate presentation to Leeds City Council 16th January 2007

1. Introductions of everyone in the delegation: Kathryn Ashworth (centre manager), Judith Whitehead (company secretary), ~~Muriel Hope~~ and Robert Dyson (trustees), Karen Mitchell (counsellor), Tony Bundock (Rector of Leeds)

2. I think we are very well aware there has been an increase in the number of single parent households in modern times, and in relationship breakdown in our city and in society in general. Of course, we do realise that we need to be very wary indeed of stereotyping individuals and family groups; that a wide variety of entirely functional family patterns has become established in the modern world, and that the term "single parent household" covers a very wide range of circumstances. I can tell you, for example, that during my 11 years as Rector of Seacroft I conducted a funeral for a grandmother of just 31 years of age. At the same time, I have known a number of professional people who, as lone parents, are doing a great job in balancing career and family responsibilities. But it is widely accepted that the kind of help which Relate is able to offer does enable people in a variety of circumstances to make wise and informed choices in their relationships and the kind of quality of family life they wish to enjoy.

You are also no doubt aware of all the associated costs to relevant council support services and individual families consequent on family and relationship breakdown. It does not require much effort for us to make a connection between the cost of family breakdown in human misery and the financial cost of providing care and support for those who do not enjoy what I think we would regard as the birthright of a loving, stable home.

I am privileged to speak to you today, because from my time as a Parish priest in Seacroft prior to becoming Rector of Leeds, I continue to have a passion for supporting efforts to meet the needs of those who are least able to help themselves. It is families in low income households who are far less able to access help from Relate because of the requirement to charge a minimum fee for sessions with a counsellor. Relate is the only specialised relationship counselling agency in the city and I am asking Leeds City Council Members to consider subsidising sessions at Relate for those on low incomes.

3. Relate can provide counselling for individuals as well as couples and the whole family together; and indeed in supporting victims of domestic violence. Feedback from existing clients has been consistently full of praise for the high standard of work and the impact it has made on their relationships. I think it is very regrettable that the council does not help families on low incomes to have access to this service. The minimum fee was introduced in 2006 when the council decided to withdraw their support. The only areas of the city where client numbers have not fallen since then are Adel, Weetwood, Alwoodley, Horsforth, Otley, Morley and Wetherby. Areas noted for their relative affluence. There is a clear and demonstrable divide between rich and poor and their access to services.

4. Sad to say, in my pastoral work, I am all too familiar with the devastation caused by family breakdown. However it is not only the problems caused by the relationship breakdown that need to be addressed, it's the effect on other family members, especially children, the ongoing lowering of self esteem that affects job prospects, and also the increased chance of future relationships failing again. I think the city council would acknowledge an obligation to do what it can to help those on low incomes avoid the spiral of family breakdown. Clearly the effect of family breakdown goes beyond the emotional trauma. Broken families can impact heavily on other council services such as council housing allocation, homelessness, social services, truancy from school and attendance at work.

5. Kay Mellor is the president of Relate Leeds, and hoped to have been here today to front this deputation but because of a prior engagement she is unable to be here. She has however sent a personal testimony of her strong feeling about the issue of low income families being able to access relationship support.

6. I speak as a daughter of Leeds and appeal to you that funds should be made available in line with the needs of families to access Relate's work. There are ever growing numbers of fractured families in our society today and children left bewildered as a consequence of their family break-down. I realise that Relate is neither hip or fashionable nor a charity 'of the moment'. It quietly goes about its own invaluable work, touching lives and improving family relationships. In order to continue doing so, it deserves the recognition and support of Leeds City Council.

7. On a personal level, my husband and I recently celebrated our Ruby wedding anniversary. We celebrated by throwing a huge party at 3 Albion Place. People came from all over the UK to share in our celebrations. However, I think it only fair to say that without the services of Relate there would have been no party and no celebration. In fact, my daughters would probably have been brought up in a single parent household.

Anthony and myself, like many couples, went through a difficult stage in our relationship. Fortunately, Relate Leeds was there to support us through this traumatic time. We visited a counsellor by the name of Stella Zimmerman over a period of months. She helped stabilise our marriage and enabled both of us to flourish as individuals.

We were on a low income at that time and certainly would not have been able to afford to pay for counselling sessions. Instead, each week we made a small donation even though the support we received was huge.

I am just one of thousands of fortunate people in the Leeds area that Relate has helped.

According to the information I have been given, Leeds City Council used to subsidise the cost of relationship counselling for those on low incomes by giving a grant of £23,000. This meant 10% of appointments at Relate could be offered totally free of charge. This opportunity for the less well off has now been lost. So I do ask councillors to consider this situation unacceptable and to take action to rectify it.

The Leeds City Council mission statement as set out the Council's website, has the aim "to bring the benefits of a prosperous, vibrant and attractive city to all the people of Leeds." The draft Leeds Strategic Plan for 2008 – 2011 also sets out the aim of reducing health inequalities between different parts of the city through among other things, "improved access to services."

And so, on behalf of Relate and those least able to access the tried and tested services which Relate is able to provide, I do ask you to live up to these very worthy aims by providing the means of access to relationship support for those who cannot afford to pay for it themselves.