



Mid-South Armagh Band's Focus Group

28th February 2006

***'A Summary of Findings &
Recommendations'***

Mid-South Armagh – A Community Convention

The Community Conventions

In March 2003, an ad-hoc group of politicians and community leaders, known as 'The Think Tank' met informally to discuss the state and future of local Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities (PUL). The reason we use this term is because the use of any one of these labels over simplifies the issue of interpreting the complexity of political and cultural identity in Northern Ireland and particularly in Protestant communities.

After a few months of discussion it was agreed it was imperative that a programme to 'Transform Loyalist Communities' should be developed. The analysis was based on the belief that whilst many issues of deprivation are common to disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland, there were issues, experiences and dynamics that are particular and distinct to PUL communities. These issues express themselves, for example, around levels of educational underachievement, population decline / imbalance, paramilitarism, physical degeneration, alienation and stigmatisation governed by a sense of loss. The Think Tank believed mainstream Government programmes were failing to effectively address these problems and if transformation was to be achieved it would require a particular focus and special programmes.

The Convention Model

A number of the Think Tank members had been involved with the first Shankill Convention, a community based response to the devastating paramilitary feud. The Greater Shankill Community Convention, held in May/June 2002, was organised around a two-day exhibition emphasising community achievements, involving over eighty local interests, followed by two days of discussions around key local issues facing the community. The agenda was set by the community itself which reflected local ownership of the Convention.

The Shankill Convention succeeded in establishing a new sense of community confidence, a unity of purpose and a resolve to work together. It became a mechanism which the community could use to come together to address strategic issues such as, housing, unemployment and education.

The Work Begins

The Think Tank believed the process of transformation could be enhanced, in the first instance, by using the Convention model in other PUL communities and they successfully lobbied government for funding to run four pilot conventions across Northern Ireland, the first of which was a successful follow-up Convention held on the Shankill in September 2004. Also that month, the Community Conventions was formally established with a board representative of the different interests of the PUL community. A staff team and base was established in January 2005.

The Aims of a Convention?

The aim of the Convention is:

- To encourage and reinforce individual and community confidence
- To improve relationships within disadvantaged Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities and with government
- To develop a positive vision for disadvantaged Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities
- To identify areas for action e.g. capacity building
- To lobby for policy change

The process of developing a community convention is underpinned by the values of inclusiveness and transparency.

Mid and South Armagh

The representatives of Protestant Unionist Loyalist Networking, (P/U/L Networking), keen to follow up on the work of previous focus groups, believed a Community Convention was a way forward for P/U/L communities in mid-south Armagh. A Community Convention would enable all sections of the P/U/L community in the area to come together, to identify their needs and to ascertain what they need to do together and on what issues they need to challenge Government and public sector bodies.

P/U/L Networking have agreed to act as a co-ordinating body for the Mid-South Armagh Convention with the support of the Community Conventions staff team. However, the P/U/L Networking and Community Conventions want to include more local people in the preparations until a fully representative Local Area Committee can be established to oversee the Convention and the implementation of its recommendations.

In the interim and as a result of a series of meetings with P/U/L Networking and Community Conventions it was also recommended that a number of focus groups be conducted in order to get as many local people as possible involved in the planning and preparations not only of the focus groups but the Convention itself in order to ensure everyone's voice is heard.

It is with the latter in mind and following meetings between P/U/L Networking and Community Conventions that it was agreed five focus groups should be organised as soon as possible, these focus groups are to be developed around:

- Youth
- Women
- Churches
- Bands
- Loyal Orders

Band's Focus Group

In accordance with the Community Conventions model for a Convention based approach to assess the needs existing in Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist communities throughout Northern Ireland a workshop was organised on Bands for 28th February 2006 in the Old Courthouse, Markethill. Understanding that the process of developing a Community Convention is underpinned by the values of inclusiveness and transparency, invitations were sent to various representatives of bands throughout the Mid and South Armagh area.

The focus group was co-ordinated by the Community Conventions and facilitated by Martin Snodden and Karen Jamison. It ran from 7.30 pm until 10 pm and had no particular prescribed format, in order to ensure it was as informal as possible to allow for open and honest dialogue to ensue.

Ten bandsmen and women gathered in the Old Courthouse to discuss what their experiences of being part of a band have been to date, what issues exist for them, and what they would like to see happen.

Beginning the evening's dialogue the assembled group were asked the following questions:

'Why did you come tonight?' and 'What made you come to represent your band?'

Those present talked about a need to highlight that bands are under attack from a variety of sources including:

- The Republican movement;
- An unfriendly government through its agendas and policies;
- The Parades Commission;
- The police; and

- Those perceived to be 'our own' people who think that being involved in a band is negative and that depending on what type of band you are involved with you are identified as being aligned to, or a member of, a Loyalist paramilitary group.

Participants agreed that there needs to be an end to what they called the 'Orange Bashing' being carried out on bands, lodges and the Protestant culture in general. They also wished to raise awareness that despite this 'Orange bashing,' or perhaps even because of it, bands particularly in mid and south Armagh are thriving. Mention was specifically made of the rise in 'Blood & Thunder' bands simply because these types of band are part of an individual's identity, part of the Protestant culture and identity and also provide a means of expressing one's culture and identity at a time when many feel it is being repressed by the organisations and groups mentioned above.

The participants also highlighted that in addition to the above they wished to discuss the following:

- The difficulty that bands people have in accessing/securing funding;
- To examine the competitive view bands have of each other;
- To discuss how the media portrays them;
- To discuss the Parades Commission;
- To discuss why civil servants do not engage or seek the opinion of bands on various issues;
- To discuss how politicians, or 'so called' politicians represent bands;
- To discuss the lack of recognition bands receive for the good charitable work they do in the community;
- That a band is a community group;
- That running a band is like running a small business;
- To raise awareness of the amount of time and effort that goes into running a band

- To raise awareness of how much money bands, parades, uniforms and competitions generate for the Northern Ireland economy.

With all the above noted, participants wished to focus the discussion on the media and in particular, its often negative and antagonistic portrayal of bands and the damaging effect this is having on the bands culture. Thoughts in the room suggested that 'soft' Unionist's views of bands were being influenced by this negative media portrayal. In order to transform the situation it was suggested that the media themselves needed to understand what constitutes band culture and identity and realise that not all bandsmen and women are 'Loyalists.' The participants hoped that through this increased understanding, knowledge, respect and insight into 'band life,' it would encourage the media to portray the bands in a more positive light which could facilitate the re-engagement of middle class Unionists within the culture of bands, as had been the case years ago.

Thoughts next turned to the influence a band has on young people. It was strongly emphasised by all those present that the culture of the band has a positive influence on young people. Participation in a band instils a sense of discipline, helps with confidence building through learning new skills and contributes to the personal and social development of the young person. Participants reported that parents can see the positive benefit being part of a band can have on their child and are often contacting band members to ask if their son or daughter could join the band.

With local perceptions changing rapidly, those present agreed that external perceptions could best be swayed through communication, negotiation and the development of leadership within the bands fraternity. They recognised that negotiation is the way forward and that to develop leadership within the bands fraternity a full time worker was needed, someone who had the skills, knowledge and a sound understanding of band culture and identity to pull all the bands in

Northern Ireland together. Acknowledgement was made of the good work of the Ulster Bands Association because of the geographical scale at which they operate. At a local level, there was also recognition for the Band's Forum which had recently been formed for the Armagh District and was being led by REACT, Armagh, (Reconciliation, Education, And Community Training, a community organisation based in Armagh City covering the Mid Ulster area), to support marginalised groups and individuals through a range of projects to empower communities, develop skills and promote reconciliation through community development, education and training.

Participants also acknowledged that leadership within the bands emanates from within working class Unionism. Participants expressed their desire to reach out once again to middle class Unionism and work towards removing the myths and perceptions they have, for example, that all bandsmen and women are Loyalists and that all 'Blood and Thunder' bands are paramilitaries or thugs.

Finally, participants were most vocal on other people's perception that the only reason they parade is to deliberately antagonise others. Participants wanted it to be known that the last thing on their minds when they go out on a band parade is to antagonise Catholics, Protestants or other members of the community. In qualifying this, the participants highlighted that only 2% of band parades are controversial the other 98% are peaceful and respectful of everyone's culture.

In moving the discussion on from issues of leadership and media portrayal, participants were asked what they perceived to be the top six issues for bands. They identified:

- Policing
- Funding
- Youth Development
- Media

- Formal and Informal Education – Protestant religion & identity to be explored in schools
- Transport

The participants recognised that training in negotiation skills would be useful to help empower, develop and transform them as a movement. They also suggested that they could benefit from study trips to other areas that facilitated parades of one form or another. Participants also noted the need for Intermediary Funding Bodies and other funding based organisations to recognise that a band is a community group and as such, they should not automatically be disqualified from accessing grants because they are a band, single identity, or generate their own funding.

It was noted that improving the 'visual' experience of bands and band parades, making them a celebration of culture and positively challenging people's impressions of them would help to eliminate these negative perceptions. Once again, the participants noted that not only do they have a major role and challenge in improving the 'visual' but crucially so does the media.

The issue of 'policing' parades was a major one for the participants and their thoughts focused on the need to transform policing at parades into a more informal affair, similar to that in parts of Scotland. It was also thought that bands people could educate the police on what it takes to run a band and thus raise their awareness of the skills and experience existing within the band culture. Participants were keen to see the elimination of what they felt is the 'in your face, in your space' police tactics at band parades. Dialogue with the police, joint risk assessments and a reduction in the heavy police presence often found at parades were all viewed as steps which could be taken to build positive, good relations between the police and bands.

Participants recognised that building positive, good relations with the police is something which needs to be worked on all year round, not just during the traditional marching season. Participants also felt that such open and honest dialogue would allow both the bands and police to raise any concerns they may have about something at an early stage; for example, some bands are currently in discussion with the police over the fear that in the not too distant future, they will have to pay to police their own parade. Finally, it was felt that this type of dialogue would also be an opportunity for the police to deliver training to band representatives on laws, rights and legislation.

After a short break for tea/coffee the bands representatives present were encouraged to add any other thoughts they may have previously missed.

Participants resumed by expressing their desire for more Band Forums to be created, similar to the forum established by REACT, Armagh. These Forums, possibly operating in each District Command Unit, could work together to become a successful lobbying group for bands in their area and possibly feed into one overarching forum.

The participants also voiced their desire to see the development of a relationship with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, to allow visitors to the country to benefit from a positive promotion of the parades. Participants believed that the marketing of bands as a tourist interest would be mutually beneficial. One participant said 'Where else in the world do you have as many people celebrating their culture and identity on one day?' Marketing of the bands culture was recognised as a major need.

With all that had been said up to this point in the evening, participants were encouraged to think of one thing that they could start doing now that would help with the situation they described. The following highlights the extent to which the participating group had applied themselves during the course of the evening:

- To develop more co-ordination;
- To suggest the establishment of a band forum(s) to meet bands needs;
- To continue contributing and attending meetings organised regarding the establishment of a band forum(s);
- Continue the positive movement and work that takes place in bands;
- Continue to seek recognition for the work bands do in relation to youth and the economy;
- To generate more involvement of women and children in band culture;
- Carry out research into the following:
 - Number of bands in Northern Ireland; current estimate 24,000 bands people exist.
 - Amount of money bands fundraise
 - Amount of money bands generate and pump into the local economy.
- To explore the marketing of the bands
- To work together as a team '**Together Everyone Achieves More**'

Finally mention was made that the bands collectively pump millions of pounds into the economy in terms of making and purchasing uniforms, the use of transport and the very fact that a parade brings people into many towns across Northern Ireland to spend money in shops etc.

In closing, the participants input, as evidenced by this report, was acknowledged. As leaders within their respective local communities they undoubtedly have a lot to offer and given the opportunity to learn more skills to develop their bands and their community, they will be even greater resource for the Protestant people, for government, statutory agencies, tourism and the Northern Ireland economy.

Band Focus Group Tuesday 28th February 2006

Why did you come tonight? What made you come to represent your band?

- To look at policing and parades issues
- To examine funding issues and the difficulty bands have in accessing funding to develop the band
- To examine the view bands hold of each other
- To discuss how the media portrays bands
- To examine how politicians, or 'so called politicians' represent bands
- To discuss the parades commission
- To discuss why civil servants are not engaging and seeking the opinions of bands
- To discuss the lack of recognition bands receive for the work they do
- To raise awareness of the amount of time and effort that goes into running a band
- To emphasise that being part of a band is part of your identity, part of your Protestant culture and identity.
- To try and stop the 'Orange Bashing' being carried out on bands, Lodges and the Protestant culture in general, by Republicans, 'English' Government, Churches, Media, 'Moderate' Unionists and Civil Servants who are intent on attacking the culture and identity of those who are part of a band
- To raise awareness that despite this 'Orange Bashing' bands are thriving
- To highlight that bands have rejuvenated themselves
- To highlight that there has been an increase in 'Blood and Thunder' bands as these types of bands provide a means of expressing your culture and identity. There is a feeling that bands people are experiencing a sense of victim-hood, the primary source causing this is Republicans. This is also part of the reason why Blood and Thunder bands are increasing.
- To highlight and be given recognition for the fact that running a band is like running a small business
- To be given recognition that a band is a community group
- To highlight that bands are under attack by:

Republican Movement, Agendas and Philosophy

Government, Police, Parades Commission etc

Our 'own' people who think that being involved in a band is negative and that depending on the type of band you are involved with you are a loyalist paramilitary

Media

- To try to highlight the damage the media is doing to bands
- To highlight that the media is tarnishing the 'soft unionists' view of bands

- To highlight that bands are having to manipulate the media to try and ensure they are shown in a positive light
- Need to use the media to bring back the upper and middle class unionists who have drifted away from the bands

Youth Work

- To discuss the youth development work a band carries out with young people and gain recognition and support for this work
- To emphasise that participating in band life instils a sense of discipline in young people, helps their confidence and personal and social development
- To emphasise that parents are phoning band members and are asking if their son or daughter can be in the band because they realise the benefits of band life in terms of personal and social development.

Communication, Negotiation, Development and Leadership

- To highlight that bands are recognising that negotiation is the way forward
- To highlight that more leadership is required to pull all the bands in Northern Ireland together, the Ulster Bands Association has allowed for this on a small scale, but we need something bigger
- Need a full time worker to develop the bands
- To highlight that traditionally, the leadership for bands came from the upper and middle classes but they are now apathetic towards the bands
- To highlight that the leaders are now coming from the working class

Perceptions

- To break down the perceptions among upper and middle class Protestants that people in a band are law breakers and loyalists
- To remove the perception that all loyalists are paramilitaries, thugs etc

To antagonise or not to antagonise?

- To highlight that the last thing on a band members mind when they go out on a band parade is to antagonise Catholics or other Protestants, but the media portrays it as if their sole purpose is to deliberately antagonise others
- To highlight that only 2% of band parades are antagonistic the other 98% are not but you only hear about the 2%

Major Issues to be addressed out of all of the aforementioned issues

- Policing
- Transport
- Funding
- Youth Development
- Media Formal and Informal Education- Protestant religion and identity to be explored in schools

What do we need in order to address and try to tackle some of these issues?

- Training in negotiation skills
- Best practice study trips
- Recognition from funders and others that a band is a community group as this may allow funding to be channelled through bands
- To improve the 'visual' and make bands and parades a celebration

Policing

- More informal looking Police Officers
- To raise awareness among Police Officers of what it takes to run a band
- To eliminate the 'in your face, in your space'
- To have the Police carry out risk assessments on a parade
- To reduce the number of riot Police at a parade as they can serve to antagonise and aggravate the situation
- To discuss with the Police the number of officers deployed at parades to alleviate the concern that bands will soon have to start paying for policing at a parades
- To stop Police playing on band members ignorance when it come to laws, rights and legislation

What would you like as bands people to have happen? What is the desired outcome? A wish list if you like

- Parity of esteem- similar to that of the GAA
- To have full time permanent Development Officers to develop bands- this person needs to understand bands and band culture- ideally they need to come from a band themselves. This would help the bands be proactive rather than reactive
- 1 major band in every town to be funded
- Drums, flutes etc to be taught in schools
- For Politicians to lobby Government to engage with the marching band movement
- For Civil Servants to consult with bands people
- More co-ordination between bands and band associations
- Relationship building with bands needs to be development
- Bands to undertake media awareness training to become more media conscious
- Training on presentation skills- want to be able to present solutions to Government, not just a list of problems
- Need a band strategy
- Bands need to be represented in other agencies- eg Board of Governors etc

Summary of Needs

- Cultural Identity Funding
- Paid Worker
- Development of Volunteers
- Skills development and training
- Resources
- Equality

Why have you not accessed funding to date?

- Hierarchy said we should not touch it
- Didn't know where to start looking
- Republican agenda- they have accessed the lion's share of the funding

Is there anything else that needs to be said? What else is the vision for the future?

- For the oppression that Protestants have faced to be recognised and removed
- For bands or a bands forum to become a successful lobby group
- Friendly and informal police service
- Educate ourselves to challenge police on laws and legislation
- To have our entitlements honoured by State and its agencies
- To market bands as a tourist opportunity- where else in the world do you have as many people celebrating their culture and identity on one day?
- To develop a relationship with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board who can promote the bands
- Want a future for bands that is different from today, a future where you can freely express your culture and identity without threat or intimidation

What one thing can you start doing on your own while this other work is being done?

- More co-ordination
- Establishment of a bands forum to meet bands needs
- To continue contributing and attending meetings organised regarding the establishment of a band forum
- Continue the positive movement and work that takes place in bands
- Continue to gain recognition for the work bands do in relation to youth and the economy. The bands collectively pump millions of pounds into the economy in terms of transport, making of uniforms, bringing people into the town to spend money in shops etc. This is one of the bands biggest bargaining chips. Need to estimate the amount of money bands generate
- More involvement of women and children in band

- Carry out research into the following:
 - Number of bands in Northern Ireland
 - Amount of money bands fundraise
 - Amount of money bands generate and pump into the local economy
- Market the bands
- To work together as a team 'Together Everyone Achieves More'