



Tullyvallen Parents Focus Group

27th April 2006

'A Summary of Findings & Recommendations'

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 wish 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
- Loyal Orders
- Bands
- Churches

Parents Focus Group

The Parents Focus Group was organised for the same time as the youth focus group, on 26th April 2006 in Tullyvallen Orange Hall. This was to ensure that the views and needs of parents living in this area were captured. The focus group was attended by some 9 parents from Tullyvallen and the surrounding area.

The focus group was co-ordinated by the Community Conventions facilitated by Dawn Shackels of Community Conventions and Marion Weir of Rural Community Network. Marion is also a member of the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist Networking, an organisation established in 2002 to provide a forum for positive participation and promotion of the value of community development within the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist family.

The focus group ran from 7.30 pm until 10 pm and had no particular prescribed format, in order to ensure it was as informal as possible and to allow for open and honest dialogue to ensue. That said however, in order to provide some structure to the focus group, two questions were posed:

- 1. 'What brought you here tonight?' and**

- 2. 'What are the issues that you feel need to be addressed within your community.'**

The discussion which followed was rich and varied with much debate taking place particularly around funding, where to go, who to contact and what to do when you get the form, through to exploring the issues of community, lack of facilities, networking and transport to name but a few.

There was also much debate around the issue of perceived discrimination against community organisations whose activities are based in Orange Halls who

it was felt often fail to access funding because of where they are based, or because of their religious background.

A summary of the discussion arising out of the focus group is highlighted overleaf. For clarity, the report will be divided into a number of sections, in order to accurately reflect the discussion which took place.

Accessing Facilities and Information

Discussion took place around the impact the lack of facilities and premises or more importantly a 'central hub' can have on the development of an organisation and the community it seeks to represent. It was apparent that the lack of facilities was and continues to severely hamper this group's progress and development and perpetuates feelings of frustration, isolation and alienation. This fuels the argument that the lack of permanent community facilities has a 'knock-on' effect on a community in terms of building capacity since people's skills; expertise and knowledge are being left untapped. Arguably, if these skills, knowledge and expertise were encouraged and stimulated, they could contribute not only to the development of the individual, but to the progress of the community itself in terms of enhanced capacity building and long term sustainability.

Based on feedback and experience of similar organisations, also located in rural areas, it is clear that where organisations have a 'central hub', like an Orange Hall, these feelings of isolation and alienation are reduced as the hall becomes the 'focal point' and the 'life blood' of the entire community, irrespective of age. Quite clearly, for some of the groups, an Orange Hall is key to the sustainability of the community and in helping to create, or in some cases recreate, community spirit. Indeed, as one participant highlighted, 'Orange Halls, have to some extent, taken over from where churches left off in the sense that the Orange Hall has become the place to meet people and socialise rather than the church.' The difficulty here is that while individuals in some Orange Halls are more progressive than others, the custodians of other Orange Halls are more traditional and are concerned that by allowing others to use the hall, it will result in a loss of cultural identity. In this instance, the hall is merely viewed by these custodians as a place for Orange Lodge meetings, rather than the hub of community activity that it could and should be.

Encouragingly however, in Tullyvallen this is not the case, the Orange Hall is indeed the life blood of the community, the problem is that it is too small and outdated to meet the needs of the community it serves. The problem is not unique to this organisation, many groups operating in P/U/L areas often face the same difficulty in that not only is there a lack of facilities, but often and more critically, the facilities that are available are too outdated to meet the needs of the community.

Finally, of particular concern to the parents in addition to the lack of facilities and activities in general is that there is nothing for young people, especially young girls to do in the evenings or weekends. This was also raised by the young people in their focus group who stated that because there are no facilities and nowhere to go, they simply sit in the house and watch TV, or go to a friend's house to watch a film. Clearly the young people felt no sense of being 'citizens' in their own community and felt undervalued.

This sense of being a 'non-citizen' can become problematic to the long term sustainability of a community, if young people have no facilities, feel they have no worth and no voice they will inevitably move out of the area when the opportunity arises, to live somewhere where they feel valued and can have a voice.

In order to turn the situation around and ensure that young people feel part of their community, both the parents and the young people stated that more social and recreational facilities are required and in conjunction with this, more dedicated youth officers and youth outreach officers to work directly with young people. It was envisaged by the young people that this, in conjunction with a 'community hub' would allow for activities and events to take place, minimise boredom and allow them to experience a more rounded social life, which will in turn improve their social and communicative skills, increase confidence and self esteem and perhaps even prevent them from moving out of the community.

Networking and Sharing Information

Allied to the above was the overwhelming feeling that the lack of networking, poor communication and sharing of information within and between the Protestant community in general, led to increased feelings of isolation, alienation and in some cases, not feeling part of the community. In some cases, it may even give rise to a question of being a community at all.

Similar to that of the women's focus group held in February, was the sense that participants felt that networking and sharing information can often be viewed as asking a favour from someone and is not seen as something which can benefit both parties concerned. Clearly, there was a fear that when you share information you might 'lose out' on accessing something because someone else has 'beaten you to it.' In this case, this fear was built on actual experience. In fact, competition for funding, resources and the increase in the number of community organisations has magnified this problem in general within Protestant communities. In many instances, it was evident that the funding has created and intensified mistrust and fragmentation, rather than reduced it and Tullyvallen is no different.

Throughout the discussion it was apparent that while the information needs of each individual citizen within a community varies according to their personal, family and social circumstances, making and maintaining contact with the growing number of organisations, groups and agencies that impact on our daily lives is a complex and sometimes impossible task, with some individuals and organisations better at making and maintaining this contact than others.

Quite clearly, however, there was recognition among the participants that there is a problem within P/U/L areas in terms of accessing information, indeed accessing the right information, at the right time, and in a user friendly and understandable format. This, together with the ability to communicate with appropriate organisations should be a basic right in today's information society.

However, it was agreed by the participants that in areas suffering from social exclusion, deprivation, disadvantage and isolation, particularly within the Protestant community and more specifically rural Protestant communities, much work needs to be done to develop trust, confidence and self esteem to allow networking and the sharing of information to take place in order to eliminate the deep fragmentation that is so often found in Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist areas of Northern Ireland.

Funding

This topic stimulated the most debate among the group, particularly given the fact that within Protestant communities, there is a lack of knowledge and skills in relation to community development, which impacts on the competence of the community to take advantage of resources, both financial and non financial, which may flow from EU funding or from central or local government.

This issue of being undersubscribed in terms of applications for funding from Protestant communities has been subject to much debate and discussion at both the central government and EU level. In terms of Peace monies, the Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB), carried out a 'Community Uptake Analysis of Peace II' in 2005 and found that in terms of funding received by the two main communities in Northern Ireland, the 'Catholic share of approved funding under Peace II is estimated at 51.4% of the total, compared with a Protestant share of 48.6%. In comparison, Catholics make up 45.2% of Northern Irelands population, whilst Protestants represent 54.8%.'

Under Peace I 'the Catholic share of approved funding was estimated at 55.8% with a compared Protestant share of 44.2%. At the time of Peace I, Catholics made up 43.2% of Northern Ireland's population, whilst Protestants represented 56.8%.'

Although the Community Uptake Report shows a '4.4 shift of percentage points towards the Protestant Community in comparison with its share of uptake under the Peace I Programme, this shift has occurred within the context of an increase of 2 percentage points in the Catholic share of population between 1991 and 2001.'

Some of the arguments put forward to explain the disparity in funding between Protestant and Catholic communities include the fragmentation that exists within the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist Community. As a result, the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist community have been 'left behind' in terms of the Peace Process. Issues of educational underachievement, population decline/imbalance, growth in paramilitarism, physical degeneration, alienation and stigmatisation are perhaps more apparent in Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist communities than they are in Catholic, Nationalist, Republican communities.

Many of the participants agreed with this and added the fact that Noble (a tool used to calculate levels of multiple deprivation) does not accurately reflect disadvantage and deprivation in rural areas. Furthermore, given that this is used by all funding bodies across Northern Ireland, rural areas and indeed rural Protestant communities are placed at a further disadvantage. This has been subject to much discussion, particularly following the Rural Community Newtork's launch of their report entitled 'Low community infrastructure in rural areas' which concurs with the views of the participants.

At a more local level, in terms of accessing funding from either Armagh City and District Council or Newry and Mourne participants very felt strongly that Protestant groups failed to secure their 'lion's share' of funding for a number of reasons, citing party politics as one example. Participants believed that within Council, party politics plays too much of a role when deciding whether a project will or will not be successful and stressed that each project needs to be assessed on merit and eligibility not religion.

In addition to the above, participants were perhaps most vocal in what they see as a lack of understanding among funders of the importance of an Orange Hall, or single identity community hub, for community life in rural areas. Specifically, it was felt that funders have a preconceived idea that not only would funding an Orange Hall be single identity, but that it is not inclusive of all of the Protestant

Community. In order to combat this trend it was emphasised that much awareness raising needs to be carried out among funders by the community.

Participants also stressed the need to have long term agencies or officers who are accessible and in their words 'around for the long haul' to be a point of contact, provide information, advice and guidance to groups to help them develop themselves and their community. Although the Government announced £250k over two years for a pilot scheme for rural areas to provide these 'one-stop' shop information points, one of which is likely to be Armagh, the problem is that it is only for two years when longer term, sustainable posts, programmes and funding are required.

Finally the participants stressed the need for more face to face contact with funders to try and build relationships with them. They also stressed the need for funders to meet with and assess applications at the premises of the applicant to gain a better understanding of the organisation, the application and rural issues.

Throughout the conversation, much comparison was made with what the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) community have accessed through grants for their community and lack of funding and facilities available for the PUL community. Despite trying to explain about funding criteria and guidelines, the perception is that the CNR community 'will always get what they want' while the PUL community 'will always lag behind so what's the point.' This level of apathy is not surprising; in fact it is 'rife' throughout the Protestant, Unionist, and Loyalist community in general. As a community they feel that their expectations have been raised many times, (Anglo-Irish Agreement Rally for example) but it 'didn't do any good' again exacerbating feelings of apathy in terms of peaceful protest and further emphasising the perception that the P/U/L community is tired ('war weariness'), traumatised and overburdened.

Transport

Discussion around this theme echoed that of the youth focus groups, highlighting once again that the lack of public transport, adequate footpaths and pedestrianised zones within rural areas reinforces the feelings of fear, alienation, isolation and cultural estrangement that many of the participants felt. Once again there was consensus that the frequency of buses, at any time but especially at weekends is poor and that the cost of public transport is too high and only set to increase each year. As a consequence, participants felt they had no choice but to have two cars per family, where they can afford to, in order to ensure that they and their families did not miss out on opportunities offered to them because of inadequate public transport.

Once again, as noted within the youth focus groups, there are links being clearly demonstrated between social mobility, social isolation and community cohesion, which are at the heart of sustainable communities. A successful public transport network is a necessity, not a luxury to the long term sustainability of a community and its people, particularly people in rural areas.

Similar to the youth focus groups, the parents raised the fact that both they and their children have at times feel threatened or intimidated when using public transport in predominately Nationalist areas. The parents also raised the fact they and their children would not go into Newtownhamilton wearing anything that might identify them as Protestant. Indeed, the fact they and their children felt threatened and insecure when wearing their school uniform or other clothing in shared public places was enough to confirm that two car families are necessary to pick up and drop your children off to school or other activities to reduce this fear and intimidation.

In terms of solutions to these identified problems, particularly in relation to schooling, it was suggested that the school bus either picks the children up from their home, or that the children are given a free bus pass to travel to and from school, irrespective of how close to the school they live.

Culture and Identity

While culture and identity was not discussed in any great depth, throughout the evening it was clear that the participants felt that the Protestant culture is being repressed by Nationalists, government and funders to name but a few. This perception reinforces the respondents' feelings that their cultural identity and cultural symbols, which includes industrial symbols such as shipbuilding, engineering and textile manufacturing, are both declining and being left unprotected, an issue which was noted within the church and youth focus groups. Feelings of decreasing cultural identity often enhance the importance of minor markers of identity such as symbols and rituals, the 'attacks' on cultural traditions perhaps only underscores feelings of estrangement and isolation that the participants feel in other areas of their lives.

Conclusion

The issues noted throughout the report in relation to transport, isolation and alienation mirror the issues raised in other focus groups carried out not only within Mid and South Armagh, but Protestant communities across Northern Ireland, that said however, some of the issues raised require specific and targeted initiatives and programmes for Protestants in rural areas.

It is encouraging therefore that the report of the taskforce on 'Protestant Working Class Communities' launched in April 2006 notes that;

'particular consideration needs to be given to the specific needs and circumstances of rural and border PUL communities when developing Government policies aimed at tackling disadvantage. It is acknowledged that key challenges identified by the Taskforce are likely to manifest differently in rural and border areas as a result of their particular circumstances.'

Unfortunately, the difficulty and concern is that the government programmes and policies as noted in the 'Renewing Communities - The Government's response to the report of the taskforce on Protestant Working Class Communities' also launched in April 2006, offers little in the way of effective programmes and initiatives to address the needs of PUL communities in rural areas. Significant progress is required in order to provide 'a strategic response to the needs to disadvantaged P/U/L communities to enhance communication and information in and across these communities in order to assist them in articulating their needs and in making their own contribution to the formulation of a response.' (Taskforce Report on Protestant Working Class Communities' April 2006)

The role of the challenge for Community Conventions through the Convention on 12th September 2006 will be to ensure that the voice of rural P/U/L communities are heard and reflected in government programmes and policies.