



***Mid-South Armagh Women's Focus
Group***

20th February 2006

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

DRAFT

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, 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.

The Protestant Unionist Loyalist Networking (P/UL 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 meeting 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 it was agreed that four focus groups should be organised as soon as possible, these focus groups are to be developed around:

- Youth
- Women
- Churches
- Bands
- Loyal Orders

Women's Focus Group

The Women's Focus Group, took place on 20th February 2006 in the Old Courthouse in Markethill and was attended by 8 women from three different community organisations, Ballyrea, Mullabrack and Hamiltonsbawn.

The focus group was co-ordinated by the Community Conventions and facilitated by Anne Carr of Community Dialogue, Marion Weir of Rural Community Network and Olive Bell of Edgehill Methodist Theological College. The facilitators were also members of the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist Networking which was 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 9.30 pm and using the learning from the Church focus group which was held on 26th January 2006 it was decided that the Shared Future approach should not be used. It was also felt that the focus group should be as informal as possible. That said however, in order to provide some structure to the focus group, two questions were posed:

- 1. 'What positive things are taking place within your community at the moment?'**

- 2. 'What are the issues that you feel need to be addressed within your community and broader within the PUL Community of Mid and South Armagh.'**

The discussion which ensued was rich and varied with much debate taking place around funding, where to go, who to contact, what to do when you get the form, through to exploring the issues of community, culture and identity and the need for community, culture and identity education and training.

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.

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. This can severely hamper a group's progress and development and perpetuate feelings of frustration, isolation and alienation. This fuels the argument that the lack of permanent community facilities has a 'knock-on' effect in 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.

Interestingly, from the mix of organisations represented, it was 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 itself 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.

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.

In this sense, the 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 fact, competition for funding, resources and the increase in the number of community organisations has magnified this problem within Protestant communities. In many instances, it was evident that the funding has created and intensified mistrust and fragmentation, rather than reduced it.

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 a recognition among the participants that there is a problem within PUL 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, there needs to be more proactivity in terms of networking

and sharing of information in order to build trust and eliminate the deep fragmentation that is so often found in Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist areas of Northern Ireland.

Moreover, the participants felt that this issue needs to be addressed and action taken as a matter of priority.

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 Ireland's 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 is because of the fragmentation that exists within the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist Community. In many ways, 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.

At a more local level, in terms of accessing funding from Armagh City and District Council, 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. However, it is hoped by the participants that the new Good Relations strategy will see significant changes being made to the autonomy and transparency of local councils in decision making.

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 in 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.

Finally the participants 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 is required.

It is encouraging to note however that Armagh College was mentioned throughout the discussion as being a good point of contact and link to the community. The flexibility in their approach to training (bringing the training to the community) has enhanced their profile and reputation within the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist community. Unfortunately however, cuts in funding have meant that this type of service and flexibility is no longer available.

Culture and Identity

Whilst there was no specific mention of what constitutes Protestant culture and identity, for all the participants, it was clear that band parades and the band culture gave them the opportunity to meet other people and allowed them, not only to learn more about their own identity, but provided them with the chance to celebrate and be proud of Protestant culture. It was apparent that cultural days and band parades were viewed as an opportunity to find out about and celebrate your own culture, whilst at the same time bring people together and in this sense, needed to be encouraged. Indeed, there was a strong feeling from the groups that Protestants, Unionists and Loyalists needed to learn more about their history and identity to celebrate and be proud of it as this can also create and instil a sense of pride in your community.

In order to achieve this learning, respondents wished that Protestant Culture be addressed and taught in schools and that the perceived imbalance in equality and access to provision be addressed as there was a fear among the respondents that the Protestant community is being left behind. As one participant stated, 'while we were making band uniforms, nationalists were building community infrastructure'.

The participants felt that in order to address this imbalance, more funding needed to be directed by Government into 'Protestant Communities' whilst at the same time have the Government recognise and acknowledge that financial assistance alone will not solve the problems being experienced within PUL communities. Only through open and honest dialogue can problems and issues of concern within Protestantism be redressed.

However, while some of the participants were certain that identifying and addressing the root causes and symptoms of these problems will be difficult, especially in areas of weak infrastructure, which is often the case with isolated

and alienated Protestant communities, where 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. Others felt that identifying the causes and symptoms of the problems is the 'easy' part, the challenge comes in knowing what to do when the problems are identified and who to seek help from without being perceived of as 'asking a favour' as alluded to earlier.

Generally however, what was believed to 'unite' Protestants, Unionists and Loyalist is the fear that the Protestant culture is being repressed by Roman Catholics and Government. Of particular note was the arson attacks on some Orange Halls within areas that the participants came from and the perception that not only have the Police Service done little to investigate the matter, but are perceived to allow such attacks and intimidation against Protestants to continue.

This perception reinforces the respondents' feelings that their cultural identity and cultural symbols are both declining and being 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.

Transport

Discussion around this theme echoed that of the youth focus group held on 15th October 2005, 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, especially at peak times and 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 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 group, 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.

However, unlike the youth focus group, the women did not place as much emphasis on the feelings of threat or intimidation that many of the young people felt they experienced when using a particular bus stop, using bus depot, or when you wore your school uniform. In many ways this could be explained through age difference and levels of maturity. Nevertheless, the fact that their children felt threatened and insecure when wearing their school uniform in shared public places was enough to confirm that two car families are necessary to pick and drop your children off to school to ensure this does not happen.

In terms of solutions to these identified problems 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 you live.

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 however is that the Government programmes and policies 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 in order to provide 'a strategic response to the needs to disadvantaged PUL 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)

