



Tullyvallen Youth Focus Group

27th April 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 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

Youth Focus Group

The Youth Focus Group in Tullyvallen was the second youth focus group to be held in the target area and took place on 26th April 2006 in Tullyvallen Orange Hall. It was attended by some 13 young people aged between 13-17 years from Tullyvallen and the surrounding area.

The focus group was co-ordinated by the Community Conventions and facilitated by REACT, Armagh (Reconciliation, Education, And Community Training, a community based organisation in Armagh City covering the Mid Ulster area), with the aim of supporting marginalized groups and individuals through a range of projects. The focus of their work is to empower communities, develop skills and promote reconciliation through community development, education and training. As REACT, Armagh has a specialist Youth Development Officer and dedicated Youth Development Project, aimed at all young people aged between 4 to 16 years old, they were ideally placed to facilitate the youth focus group, supported by a Youth Development Officer from the Education and Library Board.

The focus group ran from 7.30 pm to 9.30 pm and was broken into six sections dealing with a range of different themes:

Theme One: Is there a lack of youth facilities available to you in your area?

If so, what impact does the lack of youth facilities have on young people?

Theme Two: Is there a lack of public transport available within your area?

If so, what impact does the lack of public transport have on young people?

Theme Three: Do you feel safe going out with friends in your community?

If no, what effect does this have on you?

- Theme Four:** What does culture mean to you?
What does identity mean to you?
- How do you think your culture and identity shapes you as a person?
- Theme Five:** What other issues do you think affect young people from Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities?
- What impact do these issues have on you?
- Theme Six:** Recommendations for a Convention

For clarity, each of the six themes will be discussed in turn.

Theme One

Is there a lack of youth facilities available to you in your area?

If so, what impact does the lack of youth facilities have on young people?

Within this theme, there was an overwhelming sense of young people feeling isolated, alienated and not being part of or belonging to the community. Unlike the previous youth focus group held on 15th October when the participants felt that the lack of youth facilities resulted in them 'hanging around on the streets,' getting bored and participating in 'underage drinking' because there was little else for them to do and nowhere to go, young people within this focus group emphasised that this was not the case for them. They stressed 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, as with the more 'urban' youth focus group on 15th October it is evident that the range of social options open to young people is very limited. Consequently, in terms of the urban focus group the participants felt that this meant they were sometimes wrongly labelled as 'troublemakers', 'vandals' or 'hooligans.' However, within this focus group 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, it was 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 on- moving out of the community.

Throughout this discussion, comparison was made with the number of facilities that the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican community have at their disposal in terms of GAA clubs which the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community cannot use for reasons of personal safety and security. It must be emphasised that when a community does not provide safe and welcoming facilities for its young people, (many of the participants also stated that they felt unsafe in Newtownhamilton, let alone use a GAA facility), the young people will look to create social networks elsewhere. This will consequently contribute to a reduced level of identification within Newtownhamilton and mid South Armagh in general, which will make it easier for the younger generation of Protestants to leave the area altogether.

Finally, while the type of facilities that would attract young people was not discussed in great depth, the young people stressed that for the facility to be a success, it needed to be in a safe area, have accessible transport and if there was a cost attached to using the facility that it be 'reasonably priced.'

Theme Two: Is there a lack of public transport available within your area?

If so, what impact does the lack of public transport have on young people?

Discussion around this theme seemed to prompt the most debate and highlighted that the lack of public transport within rural areas reinforces the feelings of fear, alienation, isolation and cultural estrangement that many of the participants felt. Not only is there consensus that the frequency of buses, at any time and especially at the weekends is poor, but the cost of public transport is quite high, consequently young people are reluctant to use it, which results in an over reliance on parents or friends to provide a 'taxi service' and reinforces the fear that without the parents, young people would not get to go out and socialise with their friends.

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 sustainability of young people in rural communities in the long term. As with the lack of facilities, the absence of accessible public transport can also result in a lack of identification with an area which again makes it easier for the younger generation of Protestants to move away and build a life elsewhere.

The accessibility and inconvenience of bus stops in rural areas was raised by the participants as being of concern. They noted that when they do use the bus, there were times when they felt unsafe because of where the bus stop was situated. This mirrors the feelings of the first youth focus group, they noted that they 'felt intimidated' when using the depot as it is in a Roman Catholic area and they felt unwelcome. Both focus groups stated that standing at specific bus stops wearing a particular school uniform identifies you as one religion or the other, consequently if you are identified as being Protestant because of your school uniform there are increased feelings of fear and insecurity, as some of the

buses are attacked by stone throwers when passing through Roman Catholic areas. This was a particular issue in the first focus group. Clearly however, because school uniforms belonging to, what are perceived to be Protestant schools are visible, the feelings of fear and insecurity therefore derive from real experience in that a school uniform is cause enough to be attacked.

In a context of religious conflict it is easy to understand the problems associated with the displaying of 'symbols' such as uniforms. However, being able to bring up your children safely and to be in a position to send your children to school in safety is a prime consideration for young couples in choosing where to live.

Unlike the previous focus group where a number of pragmatic suggestions were proposed to reduce and minimise fear and insecurity, none were proposed within this focus group. For many of the young people, living with fear of not being able to go into specific areas is simply a way of life.

Theme Three: Do you feel safe going out with friends in your community?

If no, what effect does this have on you?

To begin the discussion within this theme, all participants were asked firstly to answer the following question. 'Do you feel safe socialising in Newtownhamilton?' Overwhelmingly, none of the participants said they would feel safe socialising in Newtownhamilton. This alarming statistic may be the result of a number of reasons, one of which may be because of the lack of social facilities, another because of inadequate public transport or the final reason, because Newtownhamilton is perceived to be an area with a large Republican stronghold.

In trying to analyse why all the participants felt unsafe even going into Newtownhamilton, a large majority identified clothing as playing a major role in feelings of community safety. School uniforms were one example, as were football tops, which identified you as Protestant or Roman Catholic, for example, a Gaelic shirt automatically identifies you as Roman Catholic while a Rangers shirt automatically identifies you as Protestant. Some of the participants went as far as saying that they would never go into Newtownhamilton wearing their band uniform, while others summed it up by saying you wouldn't wear 'anything that would identify you as a Protestant.'

Also heightening the sense of fear and alienation that many of the participants felt was the issue of policing, in particular the lack of visible police officers, 'on the beat' and the closure of the local police station. In order to reduce this sense of fear, the young people expressed a desire to see more police patrols in the area, for personal safety classes, (possibly run by the Police) to be introduced and personal attack alarms to be offered to everyone.

**Theme Four: What does culture mean to you?
What does identity mean to you?**

How do you think your culture and identity shapes you as a person?

Unlike the previous focus group when much in the way of culture, identity and its meaning to young people was offered, both facilitators had to explain what was meant by the question. It was only after much probing that the participants identified the Protestant culture with bands, band parades, or bonfires, these in effect are the traditional 'identity markers' of the Protestant community as understood by 'others' especially the Nationalist community. Some participants also identified religion and flags as a means of promoting Protestant Culture.

The young people were not sure how they felt their culture and identity shaped them as a person because they did not have any real understanding of Protestant history, culture or identity to begin from. In recognising this, the young people felt that culture and identity, in particular the Protestant culture and Ulster Scots heritage should be addressed and taught in schools and youth clubs for example. There was also a desire that as a group, they receive training to gain more knowledge and understanding of the Protestant culture and identity.

Like the previous focus group, the participants raised what they believed was an imbalance in funding and facilities between the two main communities- they evidenced this by highlighting the number of GAA facilities within a ten mile radius of the Orange Hall. They felt that in order to address this imbalance, more funding needed to be directed into 'Protestant Communities' but were not specific as to who should provide any resources.

The imbalance in funding, particularly in relation to EU funding, is an area of concern for many funding bodies. In areas of weak infrastructure, which is often

the case with isolated and alienated Protestant communities, like Tullyvallen, 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.

Finally, whilst not explicitly stated, there was a fear among the participants that the Protestant culture is being repressed by Roman Catholics and Government, indeed this area and in particular the Orange Hall where the focus group was conducted has, like many parts of mid and south Armagh, experienced its fair share of conflict related violence, the legacy of which still lives on today. Unfortunately, the perception, or as some may argue the reality, that the Protestant culture and identity is being repressed, reinforces the feeling that Protestant cultural identity and cultural symbols are both declining and being unprotected. Feelings of decreasing cultural identity often enhance the importance of minor markers of identity such as symbols and rituals, the 'attacks' on cultural traditions only underscores feelings of estrangement and isolation that the young people feel in other areas of their lives.

Theme Five: What other issues do you think affect young people from Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities?

Discussion within this theme seemed to prompt very emotive responses on a variety of issues and to a large extent recaptured some of the previous discussions, however, the lack of facilities and imbalance in the allocation of resources once again ‘topped the agenda.’

From the discussions it was quite clear the impact the lack of facilities and premises or more importantly a ‘central hub’ has on the development of an organisation and the community it seeks to represent and in particular in this instance with its young people. Being unable to provide social facilities for young people coupled with inadequate public transport to allow young people to access social facilities in neighbouring towns all contribute to a reduced level of identification with an area, in this case, with Newtownhamilton and Mid and South Armagh in general. These factors combined, will make it easier for the younger generation of Protestants to leave the Newtownhamilton area altogether.

Finally and unlike the previous focus group where issues concerning policing, decommissioning, factionalism, politics and the peace process were all discussed within this theme, they were not raised by the participants. There are a variety of reasons to explain this, not least is the very clear and obvious difference which exists in attitudes and experiences between one rural area and another.

Theme 6 - 'Recommendations for a Convention'

The final theme of the evening summarised the main issues under each of the 5 previous themes and dealt with the recommendations that participants wanted to be brought before a wider Convention. For clarity, each theme and the recommendations made will be dealt with in turn.

Theme One - Lack of Facilities

1. Accessible facilities for the P/U/L community
2. More funding for youth facilities and youth development workers
3. A community hub

Theme Two - Transport

1. An improved and enhanced public transport system
2. Reduced, if not free, bus passes for students irrespective of the distance you live from school
3. A more youth friendly bus service
4. Weekend and late night bus services to increase mobility and inclusion

Theme Three - Community Safety

1. Increased police patrols
2. Personal safety classes
3. Personal attack alarms

Theme Four - Culture and Identity

1. Increased funding for Orange Halls to further develop their use as community facilities
2. Culture and single identity training for young people about Protestantism and Protestant culture

3. Acknowledgement, understanding and respect from others of the Protestant culture
4. Greater acknowledgement, teaching and understanding of Protestant culture and Ulster Scots in schools

Theme Five - Other Issues

1. Policing, in particular, the closure of the local police station- 'local' station is now Tandragee
2. Alleviate the feelings of isolation and alienation by improving rural transport and youth facilities, teaching about culture and cultural differences

Conclusion

The themes discussed throughout the focus group promoted some very emotive responses, both positive and negative by the participants. It was clear from the discussions that there is a need not only for a community hub in the area, but for specific single identity programmes to be delivered in the community, especially among the young people. Accessibility and the frequency of public transport are also a major issue and one which has been raised across the focus groups carried out in mid and south Armagh.

Despite this, the focus group and the issues raised by the participants, offers an opportunity for more detailed work to be carried out by the council, statutory, government agencies, voluntary and community organisations to improve services and facilities currently available to people, both young and old living in this area. Stability at a Government level, the continuation of the peace process and by working in partnership to improve, public transport, create a safe and welcoming space to socialise, would mean Tullyvallen and the surrounding area could become a more vibrant and inviting place for the P/U/L community located within it, especially its young people.