**Summary Record**

**Together: Building a United Community**

**Engagement Forum**

**Thursday, 2nd June 2016**

On 2 June 2016, the Executive Office and over 180 community practitioners, policymakers and academics gathered in the Girdwood Community Hub in north Belfast for the second meeting of the Together: Building a United Community Engagement Forum. The event focused on the T:BUC priority of cultural expressionregarding challenges and opportunities **“***to create a community which promotes mutual respect and understanding, is strengthened by its diversity and where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced.”*

**Mark Browne, Strategic Policy, Equality and Good Relations Director and T:BUC Engagement Forum Chair**

M. Browne welcomed delegates to the second Together: Building a United Community Engagement Forum. He welcomed the two newly appointed Junior Ministers and invited them to the floor.

**Junior Minister Alastair Ross MLA & Junior Minister Megan Fearon MLA**

The Junior Ministers acknowledged the challenges ahead for communities and the Executive and highlighted the importance of working together to build a better Northern Ireland for everyone. They emphasised the important role of the Forum as a vital channel of communication between Executive Ministers and the sector.

They drew attention to the opportunity presented by the draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2016-2021 which sets the direction for government within its 14 strategic outcomes, two of which are directly related to good relations. Delegates were encouraged to respond to the draft PfG (currently out for consultation until mid-July). They stated that pivotal to delivering on the aims of these strategies is building on the work that has already happened to date, maintaining the momentum gathered and keeping the focus on good relations. They also highlighted the additional £60m dedicated via The Fresh Start Agreement towards building a more peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland where everyone can live with respect and dignity. The Junior Ministers reported that TBUC had achieved a lot since its launch three years ago including summer camps, shared housing, planning forshared education campuses and the £1.1m Minority Ethnic Development Fund. In relation to cultural expression, they spoke about the importance of celebrating the diversity of our culture, and the desire to see a society where people are free to express their culture in healthy ways, and in an inclusive society where the rights of women, the LGBT community, minority ethnic communities, those with disabilities and indeed, all sections of society are respected.

**Mark Browne, The Executive Office**

M. Browne informed delegates that a [summary record](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/T-BUC-Engagement-Forum-10.03.16-Summary-Record.docx) from the March meeting is available on the Community Relations Council (CRC) website. An advice paper drawing on what was said at the last Forum is being finalised for submission to TEO for onward dissemination to Ministers. M. Browne provided the following update:

***Funding – The following schemes have been recently awarded -*** CRC’s core funding scheme (£1.2M); District Councils Good Relations Programmes; the Central Good Relations Programme (approximately £1.6m) the North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme (£600K), and the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (£1.1m).

***Our Children and Young People*** – M. Browne updated delegates on the Summer camp programme and the £1m budget for at least another 100 summer camps, as well as the independent evaluation which highlighted 93% of young people feeling more positive in dealing with those from a different community background. Next up was information on Shared educational campuses e.g. the BrookeboroughShared Education Campus and Duneane and Moneynick Partners in Learning, and finally the United Youth Programme.

***Our Shared Community -*** Participants heard about two shared neighbourhood developments at Ballynafoy Close, Ravenhill Road, Belfast and Crossgar Road, Saintfield, and a further three schemes currently under construction and an additional five schemes planned. Each Urban Village has created a strategic framework setting out priorities identified by local communities and the anticipated spend across the urban villages this year is £2.2m on capital projects and £1.6m on revenue projects.

***Our Safe Community -*** Three sets of security gates on Derry/Londonderry’s walls have been removed along with sections of five other structures. Action plans on other interfaces are being developed by the Department of Justice and the International Fund for Ireland.

***Our Cultural Expression*** - M. Browne provided detail on the current work of the Decade of Centenaries, as well as the forthcoming Community Relations and Cultural Awareness Week, due to commence on the 19th September 2016 (co-ordinated by CRC, TEO, Department for Communities and the Arts Council).

***Racial Equality Strategy*** - He advised delegates that nominations for the Racial Equality Subgroup are currently being considered, and work was progressing on the appointment of Racial Equality Champions. He also updated delegates on the resettlement of Syrian Refugees as well as the ongoing work to develop a Refugee Integration Strategy. *M. Browne’s presentation can be found* [*here*](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/?attachment_id=20467)*.*

**Dr Máire Braniff Director of INCORE, Ulster University**

Dr. Braniff explored Northern Ireland’s culture in the context of a post Agreement society. She reflected on symbolic gestures e.g. the Royal handshake and explored various dualities e.g. a place of peace and a place of violence; a place of prosperity and a place of deprivation; a place of remembering and a place of forgetting; a place of celebrating and a place of commemorating; and a place of expressing and silencing cultural expressions. She noted how barometers such as the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILTS) reveal the transformation of national identities, and suggested (using statistics from NILTS) while perceptions have varied with political events, the peace process since 1998 has not created this watershed moment in respect of relations between Catholics and Protestants e.g. in 2014 the survey showed that perceptions of relationships between Catholics and Protestants remained at an all-time low. Dr. Braniff identified another trend whereby cultural expressions have contributed to distance being created between communities in relation to markers of community identity or community cultural expression such as murals, painted flagstones and flags, and parading, which some felt was a legitimate form of cultural celebration whilst others didn’t. Key positive trends revealed 87% consensus among respondents to sharing and integration as a means of building peace in Northern Ireland, and 60%-70% agreeing that sport helps to break down barriers between Protestants and Catholics and better understand other people’s cultural expressions. In relation to young people, it was noted that, in 2013 the majority of Protestants who supported the Union flag being flown every day of the year were aged 18–24 years old; and 84% of young people in the latest Young Life and Times Survey said they could potentially make a contribution to peace-building, however they also said that they didn’t know how to, they didn’t have the avenues to see how their generation could change life in NI. Dr. Braniff reported a growth in the interaction between cultures e.g. Protestant interest in the Irish Language, GAA outreach schemes in state schools, the Fleadh and the City of Culture, Ubuntu Festival, Mela, Pride, Chinese New Year celebrations etc.

Yet despite this positive engagement she said that commemorative related violence does take up a lot of public spending which in turn takes up a lot of the time for CR practitioners to navigate and mitigate the impacts of commemorative related violence. 2014 research by Braniff and UU colleagues examined commemorative related violence 1998 – 2013 and found that 48% of incidents occurred in the top 10% of the most socially and economically deprived electoral wards in Northern Ireland, but that management, relationship activities, network building and community relations interventions make a difference. She concluded with an image of trapeze artists mid-flight and compared it to how we think about building cultural bridges through mutual understanding and respect i.e. a difficult journey between the two trapezes, a dangerous time because systems often don’t work, are often chaotic, but combating this with support, and the establishment of structures that give a sense of control, thereby enabling a creative framework to introduce new things quickly and much more easily. *Dr. Braniff’s presentation can be found* [*here*](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/?attachment_id=20464)*.*

A question and answer session followed Dr. Braniff’s presentation and raised issues such as the role played by minority communities in bringing the two main communities together, the need for less focus on purely community relations and more on wider integration within society around socioeconomic issues, poverty, jobs etc., the importance of finding space for other narratives/perspectives within academia, the need to hear the views of BME residents on cultural and identity issues, and that culture should not promote hate; culture should promote harmony and bring people together.

Next up was a performance art piece delivered and developed between **Prime Cut Productions** and a group of young people. The piece explored cultural expression and identity through the lens of young people who gave their individual perspectives using their own words to express how they saw things relating to the past, the present and the future. They explored issues such as Identity, the Past, the Present, the Future, and concluded that their happiness is  *‘having a voice that we can share. That can be heard and valued’.*

**Derek McCallan, CEO, Northern Ireland Local Government Association, NILGA**

D. McCallan highlighted the importance of community planning and identified Councils as a key link to the community. He spoke about anti-racism and cultural diversity initiatives that help build capacity and develop ownership. He provided examples of good practice across Council areas e.g. Belfast City Council’s Good Relations Unit small grants programme as a mechanism which raises awareness of cultural diversity in the city and provides opportunities for people from all cultural backgrounds to meet each other; Derry City and Strabane City Council’s minority ethnic work and the establishment of the North West Minority Ethnic Strategic Forum, as well as its engagement with the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme ‘From Syria to Sanctuary?’; and Mid Ulster’s MUST (Mid-Ulster Schools Together) Project which involved delivering cross-community good relations projects to schools in Dungannon, NI and across the border.

**Mary Kerr, Policy Officer**, **Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership**

M. Kerr gave an overview of the Strategic Migration Partnership and how it explores policy and practice through the lens of changing demographics. She outlined the development of community profiles for each of the eleven council areas which look at issues such as demographics, languages spoken, economic activity; and levels of hate crime. She highlighted recent trends, as well as the stresses and pressures of inward and outward migration and its relationship to an aging population and depopulation; she considered how we can influence migration flows, as well as looking at the benefits of migration. She went on to explore the impact on communities, good relations and cohesion e.g. patterns of hate crime attacks, integration in a post-conflict society but more importantly she shone a light on the reserves and the determination of local communities to stand up against racism, to mediate between the longer term and the newly arrived residents and to create communities which are strengthened by diversity e.g. Newry, Mourne and Down Council’s Challenge for Change Project and Belfast City Council’s Minority Ethnic Development Fund support for the Belfast Friendship Club.

She concluded by highlighting factors that can impact, enable or undermine community cohesion and good relations work e.g. immigration legislation and regulations and the Right to Rent. The forthcoming EU Referendum has also opened up substantial negative focus on these matters; yet, on the positive side, opportunities are opening up in relation to Councils and their approaches to community planning, as well as the work of PCSP’s i.e. a unique opportunity for supporting and furthering the work of community groups in good relations and in community cohesion. *NILGA presentation can be found* [*here*](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/?attachment_id=20466)*.*

**Mark Deeney**, **Western Area Commander, Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service**

M. Deeney gave an overview of the interagency work he has been leading on in the Bogside and Fountain estates in Derry/Londonderry in relation to high risk bonfire management. He stressed this has been an ongoing process and it is still not without considerable risk. The work involves the Bogside and the Fountain Estate, and focuses on bonfires in August and July. He highlighted the origins of the discussion e.g. health and safety concerns for residents and bonfire supporters in the Bogside (2013/14), and again in the Fountain (2015).

He explained how a multi-agency approach was adapted and developed to include community representatives and other non-statutory partners from within the areas. Derry and Strabane District Council also became involved and the combination of community, statutory and political engagement helped move the initiative forward. He outlined the various issues dealt with e.g. bonfire safety, mediation, public order issues, community surveys, securing derelict buildings etc. He spoke about the importance of building trust, ensuring openness and transparency, developing relationships and, where necessary, holding off site meetings with individuals not at the table. He also explained the importance of gathering information via community surveys to help support future actions e.g. location and building techniques to ensure safety. Commander Deeney reasserted the importance of building trust, engaging the right people, ensuring an inclusive process, as well as the associated risks e.g. stress, length of time – but emphasised the need to consider taking risks and developing solutions against doing nothing. *Commander Deeney’s presentation can be found* [*here.*](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/?attachment_id=20465)

**Workshops**

**CHALLENGES**

Delegates discussed the difficulties of expressing culture in a society emerging from conflict, the damaging effect this has on society and the ongoing tensions affecting communities. Conversations examined ownership of culture, the ability to share culture and how a lack of understanding or capacity to engage on issues relating to cultural identity and expression continued to have a negative impact on peace and reconciliation.

There are various degrees of respect and tolerance regarding cultural identity. Participants highlighted the growing diversity of our society, with many maintaining we remain wedded to the ‘two’ tradition categories. This mindset dominates the landscape; with the effect that the celebration and use of culture in its various forms can at times create tension within and across communities, and at specific periods of the year.

Also, an adherence to ‘two tradition’ perspective of culture can have an isolating effect for new expressions of cultural identity e.g. a sense that new communities are competing for space, some BME delegates expressed a view that they felt uneasy expressing/celebrating their culture as the wider community/society are still in the process of dealing with the legacy of the past.

As a society we display and experience identity within our communities which are largely segregated – one sided versions/narratives, this can result in restrictive and constrained perspectives. A large section of delegates reacted positively to the drama contribution directed by Prime Cut Productions. By highlighting the reluctance of young people to impose categories on themselves, and their frustration with society in trying to impose stereotypes, the drama generated discussion among delegates as to how we enable young people to have their voices heard, the transgenerational impact of the conflict and facing up to the challenges of a segregated schooling system. Other issues emerging included the perceived lack of leadership surrounding cultural expression, with calls for a coherent, concerted and pro-active effort by political, governmental and faith organisations - jointly and individually to promote peace-building. Those in positions of authority need to articulate positive statements that inspire and encourage local communities to acknowledge, understand and appreciate the various cultural identities that enrich our society. There was also a sense that media representation of cultural celebrations was largely negative.

Other views highlighted society’s unease in engaging with the difficult issues of cultural identity and expression; the lack of trust between communities; an acceptance of the current situation and the inability or unwillingness to aspire to more. Others spoke about the ownership of culture and the reluctance to share aspects of culture with others when it was viewed as belonging to a particular section of the community;

Recurring themes included lack of long-term funding to reinforce long-term strategies; the need for multi-agency approaches; the need to think outside the ‘two community’ paradigm; the impact of paramilitaries on communities and its detrimental impact on moving forward and how expressions of culture can impact on engagement and interaction e.g. flags in public spaces that hinder the objective of creating safe and shared spaces. It was also noted that the issue of flags, emblems, murals and parades is included within the T:BUC strategy and should be reported on and discussed fully at the Engagement Forum.

**OPPORTUNITIES**

Again, participants re-iterated how good practice e.g. those using music, sport, language and festivals need to be shared and replicated across the sector and wider society. Many saw technology e.g. twitter as an opportunity to highlight practice especially among elected representatives, locally and regionally.

Co-design was welcomed with many observing it was time to expand this approach and include groups and communities from the outset of the development process e.g. creating safe places for responsible cultural expression.

Young people do not want to be bystanders in the peace process; they want to be active participants. Therefore agencies, representative groups and government should ensure they are actively involved in programme development, delivery and decision making.

Local groups/practitioners have a wealth of knowledge and expertise and many called for increased collaborative working thereby ensuring knowledge transfer.

The Decade of Anniversaries and development of accompanying lectures/debates was highlighted as an intervention that has promoted and encouraged engagement across and between communities, at local and institutional level. It has allowed ‘others’ to explore the past and has brought new levels of understanding and helped create a shared sense of history. There had been difficulties i.e. extending learning was seen as relinquishing ownership e.g. created a sense of ‘losing’ a part of a community’s heritage to others which highlights the competing ‘win’ ‘lose’ scenarios of cultural expression.

Other comments focused on the need to allow single identity work as a pre-cursor to cross-community engagement. The language of ownership needs to change and should be framed within the context of ‘our’, ‘we’ and ‘us’ and reflect inclusive society rather than narrow community interests.

**PROPOSED SOLUTIONS**

***Leadership***

* Political parties need to show leadership; and openly and regularly commit to peace building – especially on a collective basis.
* High level strategic commitments should be reflected in local government business with a continuity of support/commitment to build peace at all levels.
* Those in positions of leadership need to address the difficult issues, challenge negative perceptions of each other and look for the positive.
* Encourage faith leaders to engage in these conversations.
* Give young people a greater sense of hope.
* Message of success should reflect ‘wins’ for everyone – important not to create a loss scenario.
* Provide leadership opportunities for young people and right across our community including emerging and established minority ethnic communities.
* Use the Engagement Forum to report on matters and progress in relation to flags, emblems, murals, parades and paramilitarism.

***Young people***

* Pay attention to young people’s views. Avoid labelling them and get a better sense of who they are and what they want from a post-conflict society. This needs to be examined in the context of how the education system constrains interaction and what is being taught about the past – young people want to discuss the issues.
* Ensure more genuine participation with young people. They should be involved in all consultations and decision making processes.
* Education, Education, Education – schools should ensure children and young people are given opportunities across all educational structures to develop an understanding of multiculturalism and of all religions and none, and experiential learning on diversity, identities and cultures;.
* Schools should embed community relations discussions and activity within and across the curriculum with focused work on the difficult issues.
* Go beyond single community narrative and develop a shared narrative fully inclusive of existing and new communities.

***Supporting Practice***

* A ground up approach is essential in all aspects of peace-building.
* Benefits and impact of local practice should be fully acknowledged and given recognition.
* Stable, long term investment in grassroots community development work which has been proven to be successful.
* Invest in relationship building and community infrastructure to enable difficult conversations. Relationships and connections must be developed at every level. These need to be maintained and nurtured to secure long-term trust and engagement.
* Explore how deprivation and the current economic situation act as barriers to peace-building work, particularly the participation of women.
* Address how support is given to organisations who fail to secure funding in relation to developmental/capacity building work being made available. Partnership working between communities, local and central government is critical.
* The media should be encouraged to pick up on positive practice and buy into the community vision of moving forward. Good news stories should be captured and profiled, especially those relating to good practice on bonfires, flags and emblems.

***Impact***

* Examine measuring impact on what is working and what is not, and revisit tools for measuring change/impact so we can measure better.
* Widespread dissemination of practice i.e. what would/would not work well and what are the challenges.
* Funders need to have greater awareness of the work required to build trust and reconciliation at community level, how this requires time and investment, peace-building does not fit neatly into a tick-box.
* A realisation that timeframes and outcomes are affected by external and internal tensions – these challenges need to be acknowledged and allowed.

***Future Steps***

* Recognise that the ‘two’ communities are both evolving and changing and are diverse within their own communities. Society is now ‘a community of many communities’. This is important for future planning and actions.
* Further develop the co-design process to involve all sections of the community, central and local government, businesses, politicians, community/voluntary sector and funders.
* Research should be carried out on what minority ethnic residents feel about different cultural issues.
* Examine cultural expression in a global multicultural context in order to encourage, challenge and generate new thinking around current trends.
* Develop a ‘*come and celebrate with us’* approach when dealing with issues around bonfires, flags, festivals. Find out why people feel excluded and try to address this reluctance.
* Strategies need to be filtered down so that they empower local communities and ensure relevance.
* Long-term strategy needs to be underpinned by long-term funding.
* Community planning is a mechanism that can support and ensure the contribution of all voices; its process must have integrity and be led by the knowledge and experience of those on the ground. It must have good community leadership and involve those who need to be engaged with;
* Local communities need to feel empowered to create solutions at a local level and to come up with solutions that are vision led rather than funding led.
* Local practice should be tailored.
* Develop an agreed shared narrative that should be taught in schools, in community and society.
* Design programmes that engage with bonfire builders/supporters to increase understanding of history, discuss negative impacts and promote positive interventions/practice.

***Future forum meetings***

* More time for engagement – huge levels of experience, skills, knowledge, understanding in the room which is not being tapped into.
* Would like elected representatives to stay for the whole event.

**Afterword: Dr Mark Browne, OFMDFM**

M. Browne thanked speakers and delegates for their valuable and insightful inputs and encouraged feedback to ensure future Forum meetings are meaningful and make a positive contribution to the development and delivery of T:BUC.

**Date of Next Meeting**

To ensure regional spread of the Together: Building a United Community Engagement Forum, the next event will be held in **The Junction in Dungannon on Tuesday 20th September 2016** during the annual Community Relations and Cultural Awareness Week.

**The Forum meeting concluded.**