

Eleventh Night Bonfires: managing and exploring issues around cultural diversity and good relations

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This paper is the result of an evaluation the Institute for Conflict Research conducted for Belfast City Council (BCC) into their Pilot Bonfire Management Programme during the summer of 2006. The article sets out: the context of Bonfires within Northern Ireland; the rationale employed by BCC in attempting to address the rising environmental concerns and good relations issues associated with bonfires; the role of Groundwork NI (GNI) in delivering a bonfire management programme within Unionist and Loyalist communities; and the main findings from the evaluation along with an assessment on the way forward.

Northern Ireland context

Historically bonfires have been a consistent feature of traditional celebratory life in Northern Ireland.¹ For the most part these fires have been associated with one section of the community either Protestant or Catholic, and subsequently they have been interpreted as sectarian events. Members from Unionist and Loyalist communities associate themselves with Eleventh night bonfires in July, that celebrate the victory of William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. They also recognise the Siege of Derry through bonfire events during the month of December, which results in the burning of an effigy of Lundy. Although all of these events occurred many years ago, the custom of bonfire building and burning is still prominent within their communities today.

In previous years members of the Catholic / Nationalist / Republican communities also used the medium of bonfires to both celebrate and commemorate historical events, the most well known being the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the anniversary of internment,

both of which take place in August. However, in recent years these proceedings have deviated away from using bonfires, and have been transformed into more community festival events.

Considering the significant visual nature of bonfires, along with their continued presence and perceived importance within the Unionist and Loyalist communities, our knowledge surrounding them is somewhat minimalist. This is in direct contrast to other forms of related cultural activity, such as parades, murals, flags and emblems that have been subject to extensive research, documentation, interpretation and analysis.

As previously noted there is limited information pertaining to bonfires, specifically those associated with the Eleventh of July.² It is difficult to determine whether there has been a decline or increase in the number of bonfires at this time of year, as no particular organisation is responsible for collating data on them. However, in the last three years several organisations within the Belfast area have begun to record the number of bonfires. According to BCC and the Department of Regional Development (DRD) there were 111 reported bonfires in 2004; by 2005 this figure had fallen to 71, and by 2006 it was 95 (this figure reflects all types of bonfires – there were approximately 44 large-scale community bonfires).

According to the PSNI there were approximately 375 incidents associated with bonfires between April and July 2006 throughout all of Northern Ireland. The greatest frequency of incidents occurred in July, with over half of all incidents reported within the Greater Belfast area.

Existing approaches to bonfire management

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of the problematic nature of some of the long-established public bonfires. In particular, concern has focused on the environmental and safety impact of bonfires and a perceived lack of effective action being taken by public bodies to control them. As a result, in 2003 the Environmental Heritage Service (EHS) undertook to establish an Interagency Working Group on Bonfires.³ The overall aim was to minimise the environmental, economic, health and social impact of bonfires by the development of guidelines for communities and public bodies on the siting and management of bonfires.

A number of local councils have attempted to address concerns relating to bonfires through various approaches. Within the Down District Council they have established a Bonfire Liaison Committee through the Community Safety Partnership and the council. The central aim is to address the issue of bonfire safety around Halloween and the Eleventh night. They provide accredited marshalling training, safety equipment, competitions and in some cases access to a small grants scheme for complementary activities.

Coleraine Borough Council in 2003 conducted an Equality Impact Assessment on Bonfires.⁴ Following on from the assessment the Council produced a 'Safer Bonfire' code of practice that had a focus of neighbourliness and safety, and also attempted to address any misconceptions that the Council were attempting to discourage the expression of particular cultures and traditions.

Belfast City Council rationale

In 2004 after increased community concern regarding the negative impact of bonfires Belfast City councillors requested some form of initiative from the Council. Subsequently, after internal and external consultation with other statutory organisations, the Council with the support of GNI developed a Pilot Bonfire Management Programme in 2005. Whilst the topic of bonfires was recognised as a complex area, the initiative clearly fitted in with BCC Corporate Strategic Priorities: Improving quality of life for our citizens; Promoting good relations; and Civic leadership.

BCC realises that the only way to develop positive outcomes in relation to bonfire management and transformation is to work collaboratively with their partners in the statutory and voluntary sectors, and most importantly with communities across the city.

Groundwork NI (GNI) rationale

According to GNI the quality of spaces and places that surround communities has a profound effect on the way people think, feel and act. They maintain that changing the context within which people are living will result in the symbolic expressions employed by people changing too. GNI brokers the issue of bonfires in Unionist / Loyalist communities by using the wider framework of regeneration rather than by approaching it as a single issue.

They argue that by putting something into the community and facilitating positive developments, then one can begin to build relationships and start to negotiate on the transformation of places by the removal of the visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism.

Bonfire management project

The 2006 BCC Pilot Bonfire Management Programme was a continuation of a programme that had begun in May 2005. The project aimed: to reduce the adverse health and environmental impacts of bonfires on the city; to progress BCC good relations strategy by supporting communities to develop and celebrate their cultural traditions whilst removing the trappings of sectarianism that had become associated with bonfires; to work and support local communities to bring about improvements in bonfire management; and to work with the statutory sector to ensure that the illegal disposal of waste was tackled.

An interagency forum consisting of the main statutory organisations (Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Environmental Heritage Service (EHS), Department of Regional Development (DRD), Northern Ireland Fire Authority (NIFA), Community Relations Council (CRC), Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and BCC departments) was developed to monitor the progress of the programme on a monthly basis. Similar to the 2005 programme GNI were employed to engage with and deliver the programme to the participating communities.

There were two central aspects to the programme, which were issues relating to health and the environment, and topics surrounding good relations. Each of the participating community groups were asked to enter into an agreement that focused on them adhering to a set of principles that BCC wished to promote. By participating in this aspect of the programme groups would receive a grant of £1500 to go towards a party/event to celebrate the Eleventh of July. The key principles BCC focused on included:

- No gathering of bonfire materials before June 1st;
- No tyres to be collected or burnt;
- Materials restricted only to wood;
- No displays of sectarian or paramilitary trappings such as flags, emblems or effigies;
- No paramilitary shows of strength;
- Encouragement of a greater cultural awareness about bonfires;

- Encouragement of greater community involvement through events; and
- Engagement with local communities.

The second aspect of the programme concerned the promotion of good relations. BCC recognised the need for a more focused and dedicated approach to include issues relating to good relations in the 2006 programme. Subsequently, BCC and GNI incorporated a cultural traditions element into the 2006 bonfires programme. There were two key objectives:

- The recording of stories that related to the bonfire tradition and a reflection of their significance in terms of identity, heritage, and cultural celebration; and
- An exploration and development of the understanding of bonfires and associated celebrations within and between communities.

Under these objectives a number of themes were discussed, including:

- A recorded narrative of events relating to the groups' bonfires;
- An exploration within groups about the origins of the celebration, and what the event meant to the participants;
- An exploration of highlights and challenges of the celebrations for the participants;
- A discussion on the importance of flags (and flag burning), effigies, and paramilitary shows of strength;
- A discussion about how inclusive and/or welcoming the celebrations were, and how participants imagine 'outsiders' such as tourists, ethnic minorities and Nationalists view the celebrations;
- A discussion about how the celebrations impact on good relations, within and between communities; and
- A discussion about the way forward.

This aspect of the programme was delivered by independent facilitators in a workshop setting within the participants' own communities. It was not a compulsory element of the programme, with communities having the opportunity to refrain from participating. The facilitators gathered material consistent with the aforementioned themes through drawings, tape recordings, photography and verbal discussions. As a showcase of the process, a multi-media exhibition using the materials gathered from the cultural traditions workshops was displayed in the City Hall on completion of the project. The exhibition was designed to be both reflective and thought provoking for the participating communities on the importance of bonfires, their cultural significance in terms of identity and heritage, and how other communities would perceive bonfires.

Impact of the programme

The evaluation was conducted throughout the duration of the programme and involved a number of discussions with the participating communities, BCC representatives, elected representatives and GNI. These discussions were centred around three themes including environmental factors, good relations and community development. Following on from these discussions a number of positive environmental and community relations based outcomes emerged, which lent support to the success of the bonfire programme.

Twelve communities participated in the 2006 bonfire programme, consisting of eleven from the Unionist and one from the Nationalist community. This was an increase of four groups from the 2005 bonfire programme and represented approximately a quarter of all large-scale community led bonfires in the city. For many this was the first opportunity they had to work with statutory organisations, and provided them with an opportunity to build relationships and establish partnerships with groups that in the past they had distanced themselves from.

Comparative analysis from the 2005 evaluation⁵ with the 2006 programme revealed that there had been a significant reduction in the number of paramilitary flags positioned in and around the bonfire sites. Through the process of engagement GNI worked closely with the communities in an attempt to limit the erection of paramilitary emblems. It became apparent that by participating in the programme communities were being more represented in discussions relating to the bonfire. No longer was it the responsibility of a few key individuals. Instead it had become more inclusive and community led, thus ownership of the bonfire was becoming less driven by paramilitary influences.

There were distinctive differences in the levels of political and sectarian references on some of the bonfire sites involved in the project, compared to other sites not in the project. A number of bonfires had references to paramilitary organisations, religious symbols and posters commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Hunger Strikers. These were not evident in sites involved in the programme. The fact that the communities were involved in a process and were attempting to adhere to the established principles resulted in them refraining from decorating their bonfires with overt sectarian slogans.

Anecdotal evidence points to the view that the numbers of bonfires in Belfast on the Eleventh night have been diminishing in recent years. There is

a recognition that a lack of available brownfield sites along with the dramatic increase in construction have reduced the number of potential bonfire sites in the city. The 2006 programme created an opportunity for communities to discuss the possibilities of amalgamating bonfire sites in the interests of safety and availability. As a result, two communities synonymous with several bonfire sites decided upon limiting their celebrations to one bonfire within each of their areas.

One of the key components of the bonfire programme was the eradication of the burning of tyres on bonfires. There was a general consensus that for the most part the programme achieved its aim of limiting the use of tyres. There was a growing awareness from within communities of the detrimental health and environmental impacts of burning tyres. By participating in the programme groups had an opportunity to learn about the actual effects of burning tyres, look at alternative suitable materials and develop mechanisms that would limit the use of tyres on their bonfires.

A central success of the 2006 programme was the engagement that was established between the communities, BCC and GNI. For years Unionist and Loyalist communities have viewed bonfires as part of their culture and tradition, and something that is non-negotiable or possible to eliminate. There has been a perception that in the new political climate, attempts would be made by statutory bodies to eradicate bonfires. Subsequently, many Unionist and Loyalist communities have been loath to engage in discussions on an event that has deep meaning and historical significance to them. However, through the medium of the bonfire programme BCC and GNI have begun to have conversations around the topic of bonfires with these communities. Throughout the programme they were conducted in an organised, constructive and meaningful manner. The various view points were allowed to emerge and a realisation set in that this was not about the removal of bonfires, but instead an opportunity to transform them into a more community / festival type event.

Cultural traditions

The second core aspect of the 2006 bonfire programme was the development of a cultural traditions element. As previously noted this was not compulsory, however the majority of groups participated in it. One of the confusions relating to bonfires is who is actually responsible for them within the community. On the Eleventh night, bonfire sites are often packed with large sections of the community, but for the most part the majority have not

been responsible for the building of the bonfire. The cultural traditions element allowed for discussions to take place in the wider community, encompassing young and old people and many who had no previous association with the bonfire. People had an opportunity to 'tell their story' about what the bonfire meant to them, and others had the chance to listen to older generations recount their past experiences of the Eleventh night.

Initially, there was a level of fear and suspicion from some groups when embarking on discussions around the topic of bonfires. It is such an emotive topic that people naturally introduced safeguards and evasive strategies in response to specific questions. However, after initial meetings and a realisation that the discussions were open and confidential, people began to participate in some often thought provoking and illuminating conversations.

It began to transpire that people from within the same community would have very different interpretations, experiences and perspectives of the bonfire. Young people when asked what the bonfire meant to them, often replied that it was their 'culture'. When asked to expand on this many found it difficult. It was something that they had been involved in from a young age. It was a social event, something that galvanised them as a community and provided them with an opportunity to contribute to a sense of pride in their area. In relation to the historical significance of the bonfire, much of the meaning was lost on the young people. From their perspective it was an opportunity to express their own notion of Protestantism, and distinguish themselves from their Catholic neighbours. This was often expressed through the placing of anti IRA slogans and the burning of the Irish Tricolour on the bonfire.

Older generations often had a more romanticised and symbolic perception of the bonfire. They recounted stories of meeting partners and future spouses around their 'bony'. They talked about the community events and festivals that accompanied their bonfires and incorporated large sections of the community. Over the years they had noted changes in the attitudes of people towards the bonfire. Some were apprehensive about attending bonfire sites now, and associated them with paramilitary organisations, anti-social behaviour and the consumption of vast amounts of alcohol. However, there were others who recognised the importance of having a community bonfire on the Eleventh, simply because there had always been one and by not having one they would be ridiculed by neighbouring Unionist and Loyalist communities.

There were also some people from within the community who distanced themselves from the bonfire. There were a number of different reasons, ranging from the environmental factors to a change in their own personal circumstances (they had grown up and started a family). They felt that the meaning behind the bonfire and what it was an expression of had, over the course of the conflict, manifested from a celebration of history and culture into an overtly sectarian event. Several felt that this change was due to fear and concern that bonfires would be dealt with in the same manner as the parading issue, resulting in restrictions and in some cases their ‘banning’. There was also a concern about what neighbouring communities and outsiders perceived the bonfire to be about. They felt that there was a lack of knowledge, understanding or discussion about the cultural significance of bonfires, and that the sectarian symbols on the bonfire projected the wrong image.

Summary

The discussions within the community revealed often diverse and conflicting views on the bonfire, and what it represented. There appeared to be a lack of knowledge or understanding about the cultural significance of the bonfire, especially among young people who for the most part were responsible for building the bonfire. Furthermore, communities in the past have had neither the willingness nor the opportunity to discuss their concerns, thoughts or ideas about the bonfire. This programme created the environment for these conversations to take place and allowed for people to explore different ideas in a safe and transparent manner. Furthermore, the conversations created a catalyst for building relationships within communities. It was acknowledged on a number of occasions that there was a degree of conflict and friction surrounding the bonfire, along with other issues, in the community and this programme brought people together who normally would not interact.

The way forward

The evaluation indicated that the 2006 Bonfire programme had been a success on a number of different levels. There had been clear environmental improvements from those sites that were part of the programme compared to those that were not. More importantly the cultural traditions element of the programme provided a new dimension, one that created an environment where people could begin to explore the cultural significance of bonfires. For only

when we begin to gain an understanding of exactly what a bonfire means to a community, are we then in a position to provide support, guidance and resources into managing that event. In relation to the Bonfire programme BCC have decided upon continuing with it for a further three years with the support of GNI:

'Belfast City Council has backed plans to invest more than £400,000 in extending a pilot bonfire scheme in a bid to address environmental and sectarian problems linked to Eleventh night celebrations'.⁶

There is a realisation that a quick fix will not adequately deal with the issues and concerns that revolve around bonfires. There is a growing awareness that this is a long process that involves firstly building confidence, then partnerships between communities and statutory organisations. By establishing the bonfire programme for a further three years (2007-2009) BCC along with GNI are setting down a marker that they are committed to the process. Hopefully this will be reciprocated by the communities.

Notes

1. Gailey, 1977
2. Byrne, 2006
3. Interagency Working Group, 2004
4. Coleraine Borough Council, 2003
5. Glendinning, 2005
6. Belfast Telegraph, 8.1.2007.

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