

Magic Mix for Change: Some reflections on keeping good relations alert to a changing environment

Peter Osborne

Northern Ireland has changed almost beyond recognition in the last ten years. Whether agreeing or disagreeing with the political dispensation it would be difficult to have imagined in the 1990's the political, social and economic progress that has been made since. Equally, that progress is likely to precede even more spectacular change in the next ten years.

In Northern Ireland the Review of Public Administration has stimulated change within the public sector over the last six years especially in health, education and policing. Over the next six years further change will be far reaching for local government and other public bodies, agencies and sectors. The period of change is occurring at a time of ongoing political fluidity and uncertainty and will still be buffeted by the divisions and continuing consequences of divisions within our society.

Anyone involved in local government, or who has a genuine interest in it, understands that if local government works properly it tends to reflect a society that is working properly. In the darkest days of the conflict, local government did not always shine a light but it did help keep democratic accountability alive. The Review of Public Administration for local government provides a real opportunity to strengthen Councils and make them representative, vibrant channels for local development.

This article draws on experience of two projects that Rubicon Consulting have been involved with over the least year - exploring change within local government and how policing is engaging with communities. We have sought to identify issues, needs, concerns and reasons for optimism about how public

bodies are responding to the challenge of change in a difficult environment where inclusion, equality and good relations are to the forefront of thinking.

Rubicon Consulting produced a report in association with St Columb's Park House called "*Leading from the Grassroots*" (funded by the CRC through Peace II Extension).¹ It is based on three well supported surveys and 75 personal interviews of elected members and social partners in eight Council areas – Ards, Castlereagh, Derry, Down, Limavady, Magherafelt, North Down and Strabane. The report makes suggestions about how local government will work effectively and inclusively to best meet the needs of local communities from all backgrounds, and provide good practice in democratic accountability and civic leadership. Given the changes that have taken place here in recent years we believe Northern Ireland has an opportunity to be an international world leader in local government and local development.

We received terrific support from elected representatives and social partners who contributed to the research and hope as a robust advocacy document the report will help to influence change for the better in local government.

The Problem Solving Initiative with District Policing Partnerships (managed by the Policing Board for Northern Ireland and funded by the International Fund for Ireland) is led by Mediation Northern Ireland. It aims to help facilitate further public engagement between communities, DPP's and Police in four pilot areas – Ards, Derry/Londonderry, Dungannon and South Belfast. It is seeking to use pilot models of engagement to strengthen understandings and relationships between the three core participant sectors. The first baseline report for its evaluation has been drafted which provides some interesting initial comparators utilising interviews and a survey of four DPP's.

Policing is a critically important part of the fabric of any society, not least in Northern Ireland given the recent past. As the Patten recommendations continue to be implemented in a sense policing is moving from a service that was associated and supported more by one side of the community (pre Patten) to a service where neither side of the community felt full association or loyalty, towards a service that associates with and is supported by all sides of the community.

The building of consensus over policing, and the engagement of all communities in policing, is at the core of peace building. Those people and organisations such as the Policing Board and DPP's who are trying to make a

difference on-the-ground, as well as community representatives and Police officers themselves, are managing the bread and butter of peace building. When policing by consensus and works, it reflects a broader community consensus about the future.

Thoughts on change in Councils, community planning and RPA, and on policing, are interwoven in the text of the article.

As such this article reflects on some underlying issues for change within this environment that embraces inclusion, equality and good relations.

We have, for the purpose of the article called the principles a MAGIC MIX that seem essential in this society that we will be continuing to build for years to come:

- M - Main thing is to keep the main thing as the main thing
- A - Avoid avoidance
- G - Good practice
- I - Integrate delivery
- C - Capacity development

- M - Match culture with purpose
- I - Invest in relationships between policy and delivery bodies
- X - X-ray reviews.

Main Thing as the Main Thing – it is important that the delivery of change identifies measurable targets based upon the outcomes anticipated from the service being delivered. Local agendas and the interplay of personalities can be distracting in politics, community and policy work.

However, to reinforce the delivery of change requires leadership and in local government it is one thing to promote civic leadership but another to expect community and elected representatives to deliver it. Indeed, civic leadership often requires elected representatives to do things that run contrary to a representative's electoral interest in a political environment that still values politicians putting the interests of sectoral interests above the general and intra community good. The *main thing* may look very differently to people from different backgrounds especially when seeking re-election from constituents who want to see strong and single minded leadership.

If change in civic society and in what is expected of public bodies is to be made permanent the process of change needs to reward genuine civic leadership that takes risks, personally and professionally, for the civic good. In our survey of elected members and social partners from eight Council areas, 72% of social partners were concerned that post-RPA groups in the majority in new Councils would have too much control, while 31% of elected members did not believe their Council showed sufficient leadership on good relations. As the new Councils gain enhanced responsibilities on local development, regeneration, good relations, the power of well-being and community planning, there needs to be clarity from policy makers on the direction, aims and measurable targets of these Councils and encouragement provided for those who display genuine civic leadership to keep the *main thing* central to delivery.

Indeed, the same can be said of changes in policing with communities. In a survey of four DPP's in Northern Ireland participating in the pilot Problem Solving Initiative, the members clearly view their most important role as monitoring (or holding to account as DPP's often term it) Police performance, ranking it as the function that they perform best out of eight functions identified. Ranking less highly is their perception of public confidence in the interaction between the DPP, Police and community and their perception of public confidence in the interaction between community and DPP.

However, one of the more important purposes of the DPP's – one of the *main things* - is to enhance public engagement on policing matters, and with Police and other stakeholders. In doing that, public perceptions of policing will change and public involvement in preventing crime and disorder will presumably increase.

Avoid Avoidance – very often difficult or contentious issues are avoided, even in developing policy and strategy, to prevent disagreement, and maintain harmony. There may be avoidance in anticipation of disagreement to proposed activities from various levels and sources within the overall policy planning framework. Managing contentious issues inappropriately may be counterproductive but avoiding contentious issues may also inhibit the development of significant overall strategic programmes.

In Councils there appears to be recognition of difficult issues, and many elected members are at the coalface in being able to influence and improve community relationships. Few people are more sensitive to the art of the possible in moving communities; knowing how far and how hard to push.

However, our survey of elected representatives revealed that 41% thought that sometimes grants in their Councils were distributed according to part political or community background reasons rather than on merit. This crossed community background, political party and geographic area.

In addition, 44% thought their Council's preparation for the *A Shared Future* policy (and its successor) had been poor/very poor, while 40% thought that preparation for community planning to date had been poor/very poor. There is still not as comprehensive a commitment to the values, principles and consequences of sharing over separation, and to what that means on-the-ground.

In policing perhaps the most obvious example of avoidance is in recognising the desire people have for equitable and accessible policing. Policing may be operationally different in communities due to historical factors or/and political attitudes, with all stakeholders bringing some baggage to the table. Real security threats, and the fact that Police officers themselves have human rights and health and safety concerns, and the existence of particular issues and conditions, mean policing is different still in areas within both Protestant and Catholic communities.

Of course policing is changing, and people's attitudes to policing is changing. Policing, however, is not just a matter for the Police. Communities can help improve the policing environment, and also need to be a part of policy making and target setting.

That goes beyond those who are members of DPP's to mean the delivery of real community engagement facilitated through whatever body is appropriate to ensure Police and community can really act in partnership to effect change in a local setting.

It will be a huge step forward when it is possible to have difficult conversations in all areas and communities, across the divide, without the sensitivities, concerns and fears that exist currently. There will be less avoidance and more genuine problem solving.

There is a difference between recognising hard and challenging issues and actually dealing with them. Obviously throughout the whole process of challenging sectarian or racist behaviour and activities there is a skill in taking communities forward often in baby steps. Equally avoidance can take place in the absence of knowing that people can be asked to do more than is anticipated.

Good Practice – where good practice exists locally and further afield, we must utilise those experiences. Good practice visits, reasonably and cost effectively, can be very beneficial for those participating in developing skills and knowledge, and building relations. However, very often we neglect the existing good practice that we have modelled here in Northern Ireland and that is often more advanced than in other areas.

While community planning processes in Scotland provide good benchmarking we shouldn't ignore the very significant consultation and planning processes that have been piloted and delivered here, under some very challenging circumstances, for many years.

Local Strategy Partnerships are just one example of overarching planning involving all sectors, public bodies and the community as a whole. The Peace III Programme at Council level, after the gremlins have been sorted out, will deliver as integrated a strategic plan for promoting reconciliation as has been the case to date. This, hand in hand with post-RPA Council framework, provides huge opportunity.

Let us be bolder – let us promote our own good practice from hard lessons learnt and successes achieved and let people from other parts of these islands come here to learn how to do consultation and planning with communities.

Integrating Delivery – in all Council areas there are a large number of public agencies and community support organisations providing a range of support and development services to communities. While having similar aims the number and range of support bodies inevitably leads to some duplication and competition in the services they deliver. The outworking of RPA, as in the intention ultimately for community planning, should aim to achieve an integrated and overarching buy-in toward the overall goals and means of delivery.

In policing as in other areas, there are a large number of partnerships, area-based and issue-based forums, working groups and network deliverers. In the medium term the roles of, and integration of, bodies such as District Policing Partnerships, Community Safety Partnerships, Community Police Liaison Committees, Partners and Community Together, all need to be clarified and integrated.

The survey work undertaken with elected members and social partners in the eight Council areas supported the perception decision-makers at that local level have, that there are too many partnerships duplicating, or potentially

duplicating, and causing some confusion within the voluntary and community sector, and within the organisations serving on the partnerships as well.

That said it is undoubtedly true, reinforced by social partners interviewed, that partnerships, including District Policing Partnerships and Local Strategy Partnerships, have raised standards as far as engaging policy and decision-makers with communities and in improving the decision-making processes. The concern that social partners often raised – that the inclusive nature of partnerships would be lost after RPA has enhanced Council responsibilities – was echoed by some of the findings from the elected members' survey. Overall 86% of elected members replying believed there should be an appeals process for grant making and 68% were open to involving participants from outside the Council on an appeals panel.

Capacity Raising – critical to the delivery of successful planning and delivery of community development work is the capacity of those involved at all levels to deliver their input. This includes elected representatives and officers of Councils, support officers from other public agencies and umbrella bodies, and the community organisations delivering on-the-ground.

Many elected members surveyed identified significant training requirements, with 77% not believing they were properly prepared for the enhanced responsibilities that at the time of the survey were just 1,000 days away. Overall 95% believed they should receive induction training while 86% believed they should be paid for receiving that training.

Some of the main training needs identified by members themselves were:

- Two thirds (64%) thought they needed training on powers and statutes;
- 61% required training on laws and procedures;
- 47% wanted training on decision-making;
- 54% identified training need for financial regulation;
- 45% needed training on capital and revenue spending;
- 43% needed training on internal audit;
- 49% identified a need for training on stress management;

And more than half (52%) believed they needed training on central government initiatives.

The culture and ethos of what community planning means is something everyone involved in the work is seeking to define and make practical, beyond the existing consultation and planning processes. Real public sector

integration of delivery is essential, as is Councils understanding their enabling role regarding the voluntary and community sector. Skills and knowledge are important for elected members in coming to terms with their fit to that framework, but are equally essential for the voluntary and community sector itself.

If Councils are to promote community development rather than just provide community services – typically and probably unfairly represented by Council employed community workers managing community centres and allocating some limited community grants to dependent local community organisations – they need to be willing to let go, engage with community organisations as equals and with respect as service deliverers.

Community based organisations need to rise to that challenge, as many are already, to provide services in a professional fashion, understand the need to raise revenue and the need to be invulnerable to personality clashes and management committee crises; and to be genuinely, openly and critically engaged with the local community.

For both sectors that is about matching their understanding of their role and how they practice their work with the outcome anticipated.

Match Culture with Purpose – the culture of policy and delivery organisations needs to be appropriate to what purpose is expected of them. Linked to capacity issues some work will continue to be needed in helping Councils and other public bodies be more open to empowering communities and all that means for relationships between the sectors. There will be needs in matching the culture of other public bodies to what is required of them in the community planning process. Equally umbrella support organisations will need prepared for the expectations and requirements expected of them. Community-based organisations will be asked to make genuine and lasting change to their way of doing business.

On policing it is ambitious but appropriate for organisations such as District Policing Partnerships to lead the way in public engagement with policing in their Council areas. They are managing at a local level many of the outworking of bread and butter peace building, managing in a changing environment and an environment that is sensitive to local politics and street pressures.

In that scenario it is possibly easier for DPP's to copy the Policing Board role of monitoring and "holding to account" the local Police than to engage

communities in policing matters and pro-actively engage in problem solving. That is accentuated by the limited numbers of DPP staff and traditional delegation of actions to officers, as is the nature of Councils. And elected members may be perceived as political, and have political restrictions on what they may do or say on policing and Patten. Local Councillors also have limited time given other commitments and the demands of the job.

Some of the way forward goes back to capacity in terms of guidance and training; not the sort of training that comes from seminars and PowerPoint presentations, but developmental training where doing is part of the learning, and mistakes are a bigger part of the learning still.

However, whether it is a Local Strategy Partnership, a DPP or a community safety partnership, it simply doesn't work as well when a culture is imported that applies to another organisation such as a Council. Partnerships require more than that because by the nature of partnership working, of public engagement and managing conflict, a unique ethos and culture is needed.

Investing in Relationship Building Between Strategy and Delivery Bodies – when capacity and cultural issues are being addressed, the delivery bodies need to have confidence in those making the strategic decisions within which they will deliver (and be part of the strategic planning), and strategic planning bodies (especially Councils) need to be cognisant of, and ready to enable, the developmental work and resourcing required of delivery organisations within communities. Equally community delivery organisations need to be aware of, and willing to address, the need for strategic, policy and funding bodies to have comfort in the capacity of organisations to deliver on-the-ground.

The relationship between the policy, strategic and funding body (sometimes a government department) and delivery organisations is critical to achieving a constructive and mutually supportive delivery of policy goals.

The elected members during the consultation for the RPA report were clearly unhappy that during the Direct Rule period there had been so little engagement with Councils and elected members about the nature and content of the RPA proposals for local government. That has flavoured relationships since, although trust appears to be breaking out.

The starting point all over needs to be the creation and sharing of a common vision – that main thing - which should drive forward the policy-

makers, strategists and deliverers in a common purpose with all eyes on the horizon. Of course, developing that vision in partnership, being genuinely inclusive of all opinions and synergising different outlooks is a huge task in itself but not impossible for most strands of public policy, and essential if there is to be major strides forward in achieving public goals.

X-Ray Review – any development process needs continual review but that review needs to be transparent for all partners and stakeholders, and be thorough enough to identify and manage any part of the planning process that is not working appropriately.

The transparency requires a constructive honesty to identify where there are “breaks” in policy and relationships, and where the “dislocations” may hide future trouble. The agency leading that process, presumably a local authority, needs to have the trust of the other stakeholders and part of building that trust is about all stakeholders respecting and engaging with each other, seriously in a way that values the contribution all can and will make.

Conclusions

These are some of the reasons why we have made a total of 23 core recommendations in the “*Leading from the Grassroots*” report. They are focussed on local government post-RPA but are also applicable to relationship building between all sectors.

Recommendations include:

- Adequate recognition of the role and responsibilities of Councillors reflected in the time they are expected to commit and recompense for the work they put in;
- Raising of standards in local government through compulsory training, and recognition through that of the leadership provided by Councillors in communities;
- Enhancement of the role elected members play in planning strategically for their communities;
- Recognition of the symbolic and actual importance of sharing within local government;
- Provision of adequate protection for minorities in local government;
- Protection for good relations and community support functions, budgets and staffing levels within new Council arrangements as amalgamations take place and Councils are tempted to seek rationalisation of services.

- Consistency of decision-making processes, especially regarding funding, throughout the new Council areas.

Specific recommendations include the establishment of a Standards Board for local government, index linking Councillor salaries to an appropriate civil service grade, compulsory training at induction and throughout their term, and compulsory rotation of high profile posts.

The community planning process needs to provide guidance to Councils about their role as civic lead body, co-ordinators and strategists; and maybe most importantly as enablers of delivery locally.

But all of that preparation needs to start soon given that the new Councils are due to begin operations officially in about 1,000 days.

Of course, the review of public administration has already impacted upon policing and will again as the Council boundaries change and other agencies and services respond to that. Structures will change and hopefully the number, nature and co-terminosity of various partnerships will be rationalised. Personnel will change. The nature of government, local and central, and of community development is that it is cyclical and in need of constant refreshment. That means opportunity is always present to review and improve current arrangements, better match culture with delivery, and build capacity and relationships.

As Northern Ireland enters a new phase of governance structures it has a brighter perspective than it has probably ever had, especially when we think back only recently to the darker days of the conflict. But we have a new challenge – less to manage conflict than to manage the delivery of change.

Notes

1. St Columb's Park House and Rubicon Consulting (2008), *Leading from the Grassroots: recommendations for growing strong, vibrant and inclusive local government in Northern Ireland*.