



Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

FLAGGING IT UP

A community conversation on Flags and Emblems across Northern Ireland

November 2012



Rural Enabler Programme
Building Peace Locally



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FOREWORD

The title of the conference 'Flagging it Up' could be confusing for many. When the term 'flagging' is used, it conjures up a vision of something on the wane, declining, growing tired or lagging behind. However far from being on the wane or declining, the use of flags and emblems in Northern Ireland is a constant reminder of our divided society within and between communities.

The conference held by Rural Community Network during Community Relations Week 2012 was the first in what is hoped will be a series of such events across rural Northern Ireland. For many at the conference, this was the first time they had been given the opportunity to explore, within a safe space, how flags and emblems are used to mark out territory, to signify celebration and to include or exclude.

What was very evident at the conference was the recognition from a range of community and statutory practitioners of how flags and emblems play an every day part in our ordinary lives in terms of the many decisions we make on where to shop, educate, socialise and, for one participant, *"drive through as quickly as possible"*.

While such patterns of behaviour are understandable as local people strive to live their lives in 'safe' environments, this limits a community's potential to become increasingly diverse, outward looking and welcoming to the stranger. Given such limitations, it is little wonder that displays of flags and emblems that are openly hostile to one community or the other will also place barriers in the way of internal investment – investment which could ensure the sustainability of that area and the people who live there.

A key strength in all our rural communities is our attachment to, and sense of pride in, place. Whilst different communities live in the same space in many rural areas, few, if any, share the space they live in. Our displays of flags and emblems do little to enhance this ideal of space sharing, in fact it becomes counterproductive.

One of the key findings from the conference was that there is an abundance of examples of best practice within Northern Ireland of where local communities have managed and negotiated the flags and emblems issue. However there was a very loud and clear message from the conference that communities could not, and indeed should not, be expected to do this on their own. Leadership from our political representatives at local and Assembly level is needed, in fact it has been demanded. As RCN has been encouraged to hold more of these conversations at local level, such leadership becomes critically more important.

RCN, like many other organisations, currently awaits the Assembly's updated Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy. From the conversations at the conference, the clear message was that the issue of flags and emblems must be an integral part of the new Strategy.

Displays of flags and emblems remain an issue that needs to be addressed if we are to develop a shared and inclusive society and RCN hopes that the conference and subsequent report play a part in such an inclusion.

Michael Hughes
Chief Executive Officer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

RCN would like to formally acknowledge the following organisations for their support and contributions in terms of participating in the conference.

- Queen's University Belfast
- The LINC Centre, Belfast
- Office of First and deputy First Minister
- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
- Rural Enabler Programme, Rural Community Network
- REACT, Armagh
- TIDES Training
- Police Service for Northern Ireland

We would also like to formally acknowledge the Community Relations Council, which funded this event under its Small Grants Programme.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Flags and emblems is one of the seven themes identified by the Rural Community Network and Community Relations Council report – *Sharing over Separation – a rural perspective*. It is also one of the seven themes of the Rural Enabler Programme, which is funded under the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), the Managing Authority for the European Union’s PEACE III programmes.

In the Aid for PEACE framework, flags, emblems and memorials, which all have historical significance of one kind or another, shape the behaviour of one community to another which can, in some instances, be carried out through fear and/or ignorance. This conference sought to establish a rural dialogue around the issue of flags and emblems displayed not only in the local community but further afield. This would empower communities and institutions to work towards the full implementation of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects freedom of expression whilst balancing people’s rights to be free from intimidation and legitimate public order concerns.

Recommendations for next steps following the conference are detailed below:

- RCN to facilitate a series of localised discussions across NI, working at a sub regional and local level, on the issue of flags and emblems (corresponding with new Council Boundaries under RPA) – encouraging communities to have the ‘elephant in the room’ type conversations.
- RCN to explore the development of a programme allowing adults and young people to explore the meaning of flags and emblems in a safe environment.
- OFMdFM should consider the flags protocol as an integral aspect/component of the new CSI strategy.
- RCN to continue to lobby for more funding for rural areas to work on this contentious issue.
- RCN to engage in discussions with local District Council staff and elected representatives on the issue of flags and emblems.
- Consideration should be given to the development of a rural contested spaces forum which provides a safe space for discussions in relation to flags and emblems in rural areas.
- RCN to explore the development of a training/toolkit which could be used by communities as a resource, to share learning and best practice and also to highlight possible frameworks for dialogue.

It was acknowledged at the conference that this type of work is tentative and that for many, this was the first initial discussion on the theme collectively. Through this conference paper, participants have made recommendations but these are not unanimous.

INTRODUCTION

Flags and emblems is one of the seven themes identified through the Rural Community Network and Community Relations Council research report, *Sharing over Separation – a rural perspective*, one of the seven themes of the Rural Enabler Programme. Within this theme, the aim is to establish a rural dialogue on flags and emblems displayed not only in local community areas but further afield. The Sharing over Separation report highlights how “Flags and emblems are used extensively in Northern Ireland and Ireland to celebrate or commemorate contemporary and historical events.”

According to Bryson and McCartney (1994) they “are associated with allegiance, loyalty, territory and authority” and in so doing “can be used to challenge another group, to assert dominance or to seek a confrontation. Consequently, flags (and emblems) can be considered symbolically intimidatory, reflecting deep-rooted community tensions”¹.

CSI Policy and the Flags Protocol

Legislation on flags and emblems in Northern Ireland goes back to the Flags and Emblems Act 1954. This Act related to the display of the Union Flag and stated that “Any person who prevents or threatens to interfere by force with the display of a Union flag (usually known as the Union Jack) by another person on or in any lands or premises lawfully occupied by that other person shall be guilty of an offence against this Act.” The Act also provided for the removal of “provocative emblems” at the discretion of any police officer and made the refusal to remove an emblem deemed provocative an offence.

The NI Executive’s draft over-arching policy on community/good relations, Cohesion, Sharing and Integration was launched for consultation by OFMdfM in July 2010 and closed in October 2010. The CSI strategy identified “cultural identity, including issues around flags and emblems...” as a long term theme for action².

The draft CSI strategy also stated “We continue to be committed to working with people in the community to remove threatening and divisive symbols such as paramilitary flags, racist and sectarian graffiti, paramilitary murals and territorial markers, where these are used in an attempt to intimidate. This will require updating the Flags Protocol, which was established in April 2005 by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in partnership with the PSNI to establish clear working relationships between agencies with responsibilities related to the flying of flags. Within the context of a finalised Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, we will review the Flags Protocol.”

An analysis of the consultation responses carried out by Wallace Consulting on behalf of OFMdfM stated that “Many respondents indicated a desire to tackle the hard issues which infringe on shared space - such as public assembly, parades, protests, costs and disorder and it was thought that issues of flags and territorial marking were not given sufficient coverage in the document.” The consultation analysis also stated that “It was felt that the Flags Protocol and absence of political consensus on what constitutes cultural expression versus territorial marking, was not addressing the issues.”³

1 Sharing over Separation - a rural perspective 2007; Rural Community Network; Community Relations Council; p5

2 Programme for Cohesion; Sharing and Integration Consultation Document; p9

3 Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation Analysis; http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/final_web_version_-_csi_analysis_report_-_pdf_1.12_mb_.pdf

The other significant policy document (already referred to) in this area is the Joint Protocol in Relation to the Display of Flags in Public Areas (or Flags Protocol as it is more widely known). The Flags Protocol is designed to foster closer working between government agencies to deal with displays of flags. The PSNI is the lead agency and other statutory agencies party to the Flags Protocol are the Department for Social Development; the Department for Regional Development – Roads Service; the Department of the Environment – Planning Service; the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Flags Protocol has very specific aims to address the issues associated with flying of flags in Northern Ireland.⁴

At the time of writing, the revised Cohesion, Sharing and Integration programme has yet to be finalised, although the cross party working group is still working to produce an agreed CSI programme. Cross party agreement on the revised CSI programme has remained elusive with the Alliance party withdrawing from the working group on CSI in May 2012 and the Ulster Unionist Party withdrawing from the process in July.⁵

It is within this context that the need for dialogue on this theme, which can be often contentious in nature, was identified. RCN also recognised the need for community based conversations to explore this theme in a rural context and provide the opportunity for discussion, sharing and learning and ‘walking in other people’s shoes’ in terms of developing understanding and approaches that offer workable solutions to issues arising from this theme.

Conference aims and objectives

The aim of the conference was to support stakeholders from all sectors to engage in dialogue on the theme of flags and emblems through the following objectives.

- Raise awareness of the challenges, realism, perceptions, attitudes and issues facing community, voluntary and statutory sectors in relation to this theme.
- Develop understanding of the importance of flags and emblems in relation to community identity, culture and heritage.
- Consult with rural communities in relation to the community and policy context.
- Identify potential next steps for community, voluntary and statutory sectors.
- Showcase best practice examples of approaches and methods employed in addressing issues arising from this theme.
- Explore the need for a similar event with community groups in border county areas.
- Develop a conference report based on the learning and outcomes from the event and present these to relevant policymakers.
- Explore the need for further work required to address issues arising from this theme.

Conference outline

The conference was held at the Community Relations Council office in Dungannon on Thursday 17 May 2012. Over 80 delegates from across a wide range of voluntary/community organisations, statutory bodies and academia attended the event. There was significant interest in this event as it was oversubscribed. There was representation from the Police Service for Northern Ireland, TIDES Training, Equality Commission, PEACE III Officers and Good

4 For further detail on the Flags Protocol see Public Displays of Flags and Emblems in Northern Ireland Survey 2006-2009; Bryan, D. et.al; Institute of Irish Studies; May 2010; <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/symbols/bryan0510.pdf>

5 See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-18186505> for Alliance Party withdrawal from the CSI working group and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-18897236> for UUP withdrawal from the CSI working group.

Relations Officers from District Councils, community group representatives, clergy, elected representatives, Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister Officials, Community Relations Council staff, Institutions representatives and Rural Community Network staff.

Dr Dominic Bryan from Queen's University Belfast gave a presentation entitled 'Displays of Flags: Policy, Practice and Protocols'. The event was chaired and facilitated by Derek Poole from the LINC Centre in Belfast. There were a range of panel speakers providing varied perspectives on the theme namely Eileen Lavery from the Equality Commission; Inspector Noel Rogan, PSNI; Neville Armstrong, Rural Enabler for Co Fermanagh; Sean O'Baoill, Tides Training; and Marion Jamison from REACT in Armagh. A representative from the OFMdFM Community Relations Unit highlighted the role of RCN in assisting them with the consultation process on developing a new flags protocol for Northern Ireland.

Conference Methodology

The purpose of the conference was to create a safe space for an open conversation on the theme of flags and emblems, within a wide range of interest groups. Rural Community Network acknowledged that this can be an emotive and sensitive issue not only for those working in the field but also for rural and urban communities themselves. There can be an emotional attachment to flags within each individual, whether it is positive or negative. It is also a difficult issue to resolve because the actual flying of national flags itself is not an illegal act (just those of proscribed organisations).

To accommodate and support participants in engaging in dialogue, sharing and learning, small group discussions were facilitated. There were presentations from keynote speakers and panel members provided examples of their work in terms of their perspectives. The delegates participated in a question and answer session which focused on approaches and best practice.

KEY FINDINGS

In terms of summarising the conference findings, RCN has identified a number of key messages and themes which developed from the informal café conversations, facilitated workshops and panel discussion around cultural identity, expression of tradition and specific conversations based on 'what next – solution focused' ideas.

(a) Flags – ‘attitudes, beliefs and traditions?’

Derek Poole from the LINC Centre conveyed the message in his opening speech that flags are an existential manifestation of our attitudes, beliefs and traditions here in Northern Ireland. A key question posed was *“Are flags things which people associate with fear or is it a want of belonging, a feeling of insecurity?”* Conference participants discussed the issue of flags being associated with an outward expression of cultural identity versus the marking of territory in a divided society.

The increase in flags associated with dissident republicanism and the PUL community was also highlighted during the conference and, in both cases, questions were asked about how this affects the peace process, in terms of the perception of marking territory and creating a statement of presence.

(b) Every flag tells a story

Participants discussed the fact that behind every flag displayed in Northern Ireland and the Border regions, there is a “story” of how flags originated. Each flag has a richness in terms of its origins, its values and the statement it is making. It was felt that grass roots education is needed in terms of teaching adults and, in particular, young people about the historical roots of flags and their ‘proper’ usage within society. There was an acknowledgment that there is always going to be a “new generation of flag flyers” and it is vital for them to know and learn about the flag they are displaying, the reasons for flying that particular

flag, the communities and nations the flag represents and learning to respect such important artefacts within society.

(c) Respect on an international level

On the theme of respect, Dr Dominic Bryan, QUB, informed the conference that in the USA, their national flag is raised and lowered every day and it is folded in a special way. The flag is not allowed to be flown at night and is not allowed to be flown from lamp posts but mainly on people’s own property. Dr Dominic Bryan pointed out that in American society, their flag is treated with the utmost dignity and respect; they do not burn flags or leave them to fly until they are completely tattered. He posed a question in terms of what NI society can learn from international experiences.

Dr Bryan stated that of all the flags that are flown in Northern Ireland each year, one third of flags remain flying after August. He commented that if the community do not have tattered flags flying from their homes, then why should tattered flags fly from lamp posts? Participants agreed that there needs to be community education in terms of respect for national flags in relation to how and why they are flown. Dr Bryan also gave the analysis that flags are flown for a longer duration of time due to the fact they can be bought very cheaply, for two to three pounds each. He also added that because they are so cheap there is no need to reuse them, that is why they remain on poles for many months.

(d) Flags as a statement of identity

It was tentatively suggested at the conference that there seemed to be a move towards the outward and increased display of flags associated with illegal proscribed organisations, particularly from the loyalist perspective. It was suggested that this was an external manifestation of an internal struggle amongst loyalist organisations.

It was also acknowledged that there has been an increase in the flying of flags associated with dissident republican organisations, particularly in rural NI and that this was something which would not have been observed a couple of years ago.

(f) Ownership

General comments were made at the conference that those who have the energy to put up flags also need to have the energy to take them back down. Responsibility must be given back to the people putting flags up in the first place. It was felt that those responsible for flying flags are not generally aware of the concerns they are causing within communities. Participants encouraged each other to begin active engagement with those within communities putting up flags to ensure they are not isolated from the community development process and that they see themselves being treated as equal members of society.

However it was commented that it is also important for practitioners working on the ground to understand that there are “mavericks” in the community and that no matter what interventions take place, they will follow their own particular stance in relation to the display of flags and emblems.

(h) The funding of flags?

An overall question posed at the conference was “who actually funds these flags?”. There were a range of opinions expressed from those within the business community supporting the funding of flags to people linked to proscribed organisations or members of proscribed organisations. What participants did acknowledge was that the flags issue has many players involved but the use of power is prevalent. If communities are powerless to do anything, then how much power do key stakeholders have to deal with the issue itself?

(i) Representing the silent majority voice

There was overall consensus at the conference that the voice of the silent majority in relation to the flags and emblems issue is not being heard. It was agreed that this majority community need to have their voices heard in a safe space and a recognition that paramilitary groups need to be involved in the process but need to be one player of many.

(j) One size doesn't fit all or does it?

In terms of dealing with the flags issue, there was a general consensus that a local agreement must reflect the needs and interests of all groups living in an area and those responsible for actually erecting the flags. The conference participants clearly communicated that those working on the ground have to be realistic in terms of what they can achieve. There cannot be a predetermination that the only solution will be that no flags are flown at all. Participants felt that there needs to be honest and open discussions with ‘flag flyers’ within communities in terms of them understanding their role and responsibility and how the flags issue is perceived within their own community.

Many of these people are not engaged in any processes or engaged in community development and, therefore, this approach needs to reflect and support the capacity of the participants. These conversations need to take place in a safe space but also include the local knowledge of who to engage with, and how to engage with them being mindful of the sensitivities associated with this theme. Seeking out the real gatekeepers within communities is key to the process (however there was an acknowledgement that gatekeepers tend to be from an older age grouping, can be harder to engage in the process and may have differing agendas). Trust and relationship building is essential and this can be a lengthy process, and something funders need to take into consideration.

(k) Sometimes silence is golden

Over the past ten years, it has been the job of the voluntary and community sector including those working in the statutory good relations and peace building field to support communities to be more open in terms of dialogue on contentious issues like flags and emblems. A key learning point has been that this type of work sometimes needs to be conducted sensitively and not in the public domain. Some practitioners commented at the conference that the effect of the media publicising successful interventions has resulted in damaging this work. There is a sense that people begin to feel that their 'side' has shown a 'weakness' if their flags are not displayed which culminates in significantly increasing the amount of flags flown. Advice given at the conference was to be mindful of the impact of the media publicising intervention work and a more suitable approach is not to publicise but focus on building trust with those who have a local responsibility and influence on the flags issue.

(l) Correlation between deprivation and the flying of flags

A further issue discussed at the conference was that the flying of flags is somewhat correlated with the issue of deprivation i.e. more significant in areas of high unemployment, low educational attainment levels and significant health inequalities. Attendees acknowledged that flag flying can be more prevalent in deprived working class areas however the key question was asked "how do we value people living within these communities?".

A number of participants put forward the view that the Protestant community felt very isolated and when a community feels under threat, isolated or fearful, this manifests itself in the display of flags and emblems. There is also an assumption that flags are flown in social housing estates rather than private housing estates and this theory needs challenged.

(m) Social and economical impacts on communities

The flying of a flag can affect the social and economic prosperity of a village or rural area due to the perception of what it represents and the aesthetics of an area. A village or town covered in flags from one community has a clear message that 'others' are not welcome and therefore local tourism, local businesses and hoteliers can suffer as a result of the message this conveys.

The participants also discussed the urban versus rural disparities in the theme of flags and emblems. It was commented that there seems to be more of a willingness to reach agreement in rural communities and that the Orange Order assumes more responsibility in rural areas than in urban areas. In rural areas, there seems more of a commitment in relation to the erection of flags but also the removal of flags. It was presented that there seems to be a more responsible approach to the issue in rural communities with a general higher tolerance and acceptance level in rural communities. There is much learning from rural communities on this issue which can be transferable to those living in urban settings.

Also in terms of social impacts, Derek Poole posed the question "*where does a multicultural Northern Ireland sit amongst all this?*". There was consideration to the point that flags and emblems in NI mainly symbolise two communities in Northern Ireland, but what about the newcomers? Are their needs being addressed? How does the display of flags and emblems affect their communities, their identity, where they work and where they live? It is important for us to remember that Northern Ireland is increasingly a multi faith and diverse community.

(n) Leadership, accountability and responsibility

This formulated the majority of the discussions at the conference in relation to the current Joint Protocol on Flags and Emblems and who takes responsibility and leadership within a community for flags and emblems. There was a general consensus at the conference that the Flags Protocol developed by OFMdFM has failed to achieve its objectives. Whilst there is a protocol in terms of who should take responsibility, agencies present at the conference felt that there was uncertainty between themselves as organisations in terms of who should be responsible and take action. There is no consistent clear message.

Participants were keen to hear how OFMdFM plans to consult further with communities on this issue. As there are social, legal, environmental and political considerations in all of this, a holistic approach needs to be developed. It was suggested that the flying of flags should be seen in the same light as parading – making it more transparent in terms of responsibility. A suggestion was forwarded that information on websites could be developed around responsibility for putting up flags, where they are to be flown and when they will be taken down.

It was evident through the workshops that local councils have very much placed themselves at the forefront of the issue, however they are not included in the current Flags Protocol. Councillors and political parties in some communities take the lead and have developed local agreements including local community representatives. The conference attendees felt that this omission from the Joint Protocol needs to be revisited and included in any future redraft. The conference attendees also acknowledged that the role of the PSNI, as the law enforcement organisation, has not been without difficulty and that it too has tried to engage with local communities in relation to dialogue.

A key message from the conference was that whilst an overall Flags Protocol to set the strategic direction for this type of work is needed, the consensus is the view that ‘local protocols’ should be developed. Agencies should be working collaboratively to find local solutions to accommodate local needs. A generic legal framework is required to give overall legal direction but should allow enough flexibility to suit local needs. OFMdFM is pushing forward the flags protocol issue, however there needs to be more cross departmental work at an Assembly level. There also needs to be cross organisational endorsement with organisations like the GAA, Orange Lodges and Bands Forums to implement the protocols. The role of churches in terms of what they can do in relation to flags also needs to be considered in order to ensure key stakeholders and decision makers are engaged in the process.

Dr Dominic Bryan then presented the challenge “*what happens when local protocols can’t be agreed, what next?*”.

(o) Models of good practice

There was recognition that we all need to be exploring what other ways we can express culture. One example provided is community banners, created by the communities themselves based on their own history and culture.

Some participants shared their experiences in terms of engaging communities in dialogue in relation to these issues. One example provided was the fact that some community development workers have had to go right back to basics because those flying flags do not acknowledge that there may be issues associated with flag flying and it can be a case of re-educating hearts and minds, building relationships and supporting these communities to arrive at their own conclusions in relation to the impact of their actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the conference, all participants were asked to complete an 'Expression of Interest' form highlighting the next steps required for them following the Flags and Emblems event. The responses follow:

- RCN to facilitate a series of localised discussions across NI, working at a sub regional and local level, on the issue of flags and emblems (corresponding with new Council Boundaries under RPA) – encouraging communities to have the “elephant in the room” type conversations.
- RCN to explore the development of a programme allowing adults and young people to explore the meaning of flags and emblems in a safe environment.
- OFMdFM should consider the flags protocol as an integral aspect /component of the new CSI strategy.
- RCN to continue to lobby for more funding for rural areas for work on this contentious issue.
- RCN to engage in discussions with local District Council staff and elected representatives on the issue of flags and emblems.
- Consideration should be given to the development of a rural contested spaces forum which provides a safe space for discussions in relation to flags and emblems in rural areas.
- RCN to explore the development of a training/toolkit which could be used by communities as a resource – to share learning, and best practice, and also to highlight possible frameworks for dialogue.

CONCLUSION

The theme of flags and emblems is complex and contentious. There are social, legal, environmental, economical and political factors to be considered as part of reaching agreement in addressing issues arising from this theme. Agreements can take a variety of forms and 'a one size fits all strategy' is not applicable. The conference highlighted the need for further dialogue and partnership working across all sectors, promoting sharing and learning from best practice on this theme and as a means of ensuring that the interests of all communities are represented and citizens are supported in engaging in a process of education, capacity building and developing suitable, workable protocols/solutions.

REFERENCES

Public Displays of Flags and Emblems in Northern Ireland Survey; 2006-2009; Bryan, D. et.al; Institute of Irish Studies; May 2010; <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/symbols/bryan0510.pdf>

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