



Rural Enabler Programme

Building Peace Locally

Introduction

Rural Community Network (RCN) is the leading regional, voluntary organisation for rural communities in Northern Ireland. It is a membership organisation and its vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland.

The Rural Enabler Programme (REP) was established in 2010 'to address issues of sectarianism, racism, social exclusion and all other forms of rural inequality through challenging the status-quo, assisting, supporting and creating the space for local communities and rural institutions to identify the fears of reconciliation and anti-racism work'. The REP, funded through the PEACE III Programme, involves a unique cross border partnership between Rural Community Network (RCN) as the Lead Partner, Irish Rural Link (IRL), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG) in the Republic of Ireland.

The Programme is implemented by a team of Rural Enablers working in each of the six

counties north and south of the border and one Rural Enabler working directly with institutions which play a key role in rural communities including the Orange Order, the GAA, the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster and the various churches.

Each county has established a Sub-regional Advisory Group (SAG) comprising those with a statutory remit for social inclusion and good relations including PEACE III Workers, Good Relations Officers, the PSNI and An Garda Síochána. The SAG supports the work of the Programme through the sharing of key local information, resources and collaborative working - it also provides the opportunity to influence local policy. It is anticipated that the membership of these groups will act as influencers for change and sustainability, within their own individual contexts, beyond the life of the Rural Enabler Programme.

Thematic Approach

The Rural Enabler Programme was developed as a response to research conducted by RCN and the Community Relations Council, "Sharing over Separation – A Rural Perspective". This research identified and examined the barriers to building peace and positive relations in rural communities along the following themes:

- **Young People** - To address the current limitations of engagement between youth in communities through the creation of new shared spaces for dialogue and interaction.
- **Flags and Emblems** - To create a rural dialogue around all the flags and emblems displayed locally and further afield. This will contribute towards implementing Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.
- **Housing** - To support communities in recognising the value of mixed housing and the benefits of social and residential integration.
- **Interfaces** - To identify rural interfaces identified by local people and to help locals take actions to combat tensions within this interface area.
- **Racism** - To facilitate a united community approach to race relations. This should enable the indigenous population to recognise the diversity that exists in their community.
- **Community Development and Community Relations** - To embed the practice of excellence in community development work as a means of addressing issues of community/good relations within rural areas.
- **Rural Institutions** - To develop and explore the responsibility of rural institutions in their community.

Programme Approach

The approach adopted by the programme was responsive to the needs of the individual communities who sought support and assistance. This included a baseline identifying other initiatives or opportunities and resulted in a bespoke Action Plan for the area. Many of those who we worked with were very aware of the issues in their area but were lacking the skills, confidence and experience to address. The Enablers brought these attributes, together with the availability of financial support, if required, and enabled the groups to begin the process of building peace. This approach was integral and fundamental to the success of the programme in achieving its aims and objectives in local rural communities.

Programme Objectives

Working within a community development approach (which promotes the key values of equality and anti-discrimination; social justice; collective action; community empowerment; and working and learning together) three Programme Objectives were identified as follows:

- To increase awareness and understanding of issues relating to sectarianism and racism within a rural context through dialogue.
- To increase the capacity and skills of groups and individuals in rural society to address sectarianism, racism and polarisation.
- To increase the potential of sharing of residential, social, environmental spaces and services for the benefit of all in rural society.

Practice to Policy Papers

The practice to policy approach identified the key learning under a number of headings which encompasses the original seven programme themes and the three core objectives of the Programme:

- Young People Building Peace
- Breaking the Silence
- Sharing Space
- Leaders and Leadership

These Practice to Policy papers have been developed for each of the above themes and cover all seven of the thematic issues addressed through the Programme. The purpose of these papers is to provide a concise distillation of the learning arising from the work of the Programme for policy at local and regional levels.