Shared space, shared problem

Local civic fora and intercommunal relations

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Contents

1. Preface

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The preliminary findings of this project were presented at a round-table discussion in January 2003 and the presentations and discussions have informed the final version of this report. We are very appreciative of the valuable input of all those who attended and hope that this final document reflects some of the diversity of opinion expressed on the day. Responsibility for the contents, however, ultimately rests with the author alone.

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2. Executive summary

Over the past six years in Northern Ireland, despite a peace agreement endorsed by a majority in 1998, neighbourhoods, villages and towns have remained highly segregated and local intercommunal disputes have far from diminished. Indeed, tensions have escalated in some areas, triggered by disputes over parades, flag-flying, access to amenities, shifting power balances, changing patterns of housing and so on.

A variety of initiatives have been adopted to address these disputes or prevent escalation. Many have been criticised for merely managing the presenting problem, rather than resolving the underlying causes in a holistic or far-reaching manner. Attempts, however, to do just that have been initiated and these more participatory approaches are the focus of this report.

In recent years, geographically defined, civic-based fora have been instigated in various areas of Northern Ireland. The underlying concept is that disputes may be more effectively addressed through broad and inclusive representation of the actors directly or indirectly involved or affected. It is suggested that a more conducive atmosphere can thereby be created, which will assist in building communication, establishing trust and, ultimately, finding solutions to enduring problems.

Calls or proposals for 'community fora' have been documented by the media and in reports for some years, in different areas and of diverse origins. The term 'community forum' may not be the most appropriate in this context: a more appropriate term for such structures is 'local civic forum'.

For the purposes of this research of the following criteria were applied when choosing appropriate case studies for further exploration:
▪ the forum had links with the relevant local authority;
▪ the forum was based in a geographically defined area—a city or town, a district or village, even a neighbourhood—from which its members were drawn or within which they worked;
▪ this area had experienced tensions, disputes or even violence, stemming at least in part from its political and religious make-up; and
▪ the forum involved a range of people from different sectors and backgrounds.

The case studies allowed the identification of key questions to consider before embarking on a local civic forum. What groundwork and consultation should be undertaken from the outset? What is the main purpose of the forum and how is that articulated within and without? Who should be involved in the forum and how should that involvement be managed? Who administers, convenes and finances the forum and how is discussion

facilitated? Where and when should the forum meet? And what structures or plans are put into place for the forum's evolution?

If well-designed and realised, local civic fora can have significant benefits in dispute-resolution and relationship-building. They can encourage local problem-solving and develop, or re-awaken, civic pride and responsibility. They can promote inclusive modes of dialogue and assist in the building of new or previously damaged relationships. They are an opportunity to begin new conversations, share information and contest myths and, as they work outside formal structures, they can create spaces in which to address wider or more complex issues. Perhaps most importantly, with the instigation of new conversations and the tackling of both presenting and underlying difficulties, they may serve both preventative and reconciliatory functions in local settings.

But local fora should not be viewed as the structure through which all difficulties can be addressed and relationships rebuilt. Power relationships in communities may be unavoidable within the forum. The challenge is to create a structure in which these differences between members are acknowledged without being replicated. Bringing together a range of people, some with a history of opposition or even conflict, is an unpredictable exercise. If due attention is not paid, a local civic forum may provide the opportunity for willing parties to sustain or inflame tensions. Getting people to engage in new processes requires a degree of trust and legitimacy, yet in areas that have experienced intercommunal tensions trust is likely to be in short supply, resulting in a struggle to gain legitimacy in an apprehensive and sceptical environment.

A forum will only be viewed as being a valuable use of time if the participants can identify benefits they and their communities will glean. Yet any forum runs the risk of settling into a comfortable groove, which is neither progressive nor challenging—becoming a 'talking shop', with little real movement taking place. In addition, if it appears that important issues are being discussed and dealt with elsewhere, a local civic forum may be perceived as irrelevant and as overlapping with other structures. Yet if the forum is seen as effective, the contrary possibility exists that some may see it as a threat to their power bases, leading to the risk of attack from within and without.

Based on the case studies the following recommendations have been extracted. These should be considered if local civic fora are to be developed in the future in Northern Ireland, or indeed elsewhere.

Do the ground work
Before embarking on any local process, there is a need to identify and analyse the underlying social and political interests inhibiting resolution of difficult issues and the development of positive relationships.

Establish clarity of purpose
Local fora should not be viewed as a panacea for all ills or a 'dumping ground' for difficult issues, and clearly defined short- and long-term goals should be defined from the outset.

Identify community stakeholders
Any credible local forum must endeavour to involve as many as possible, if not all, individuals, communities and sectors with a vested interest in creating change within the area and establish the relationships between all local stakeholders.

Address capacity issues
Prior processes should be considered if capacity within communities or sectors has been identified as an obstacle to a well-functioning and constructive forum.

Secure commitment
Potential participants should be fully informed of the process which they are being asked to embark upon and given an opportunity to contribute to the design phase of the forum.

Map the area
With a plethora of locally-based structures having been established in recent years—including district policing partnerships, community-safety initiatives and local visioning exercises—care should be taken to ensure that any new forum structures complement, rather than complicate, discussions and decisions elsewhere.

Address issues and relationships
By their nature, local fora will have to address both issues and relationships. At different moments, one may be prioritised, but both will have to be acknowledged within the forum setting.

Document the learning
Convening bodies, facilitating organisations or engaged participants should document the learning of fora as they are established and developed. Only in doing so can valuable lessons be captured, disseminated and absorbed by other potential practitioners and sponsors.

3. Introduction

Over the past six years in Northern Ireland, despite a peace agreement endorsed by a majority in 1998, neighbourhoods, villages and towns have remained highly segregated and local intercommunal disputes have far from diminished. Indeed, tensions have escalated in some areas, triggered by disputes over parades, flag-flying, access to amenities, shifting power balances, changing patterns of housing and so on.

A variety of initiatives have been adopted to address these disputes or prevent escalation. These have ranged from separation of the parties (temporarily by the police and army, more permanently *via* 'peace walls') to the use of legal powers (such as those at the disposal of the Parades Commission). Many have been criticised for merely managing the presenting problem, rather than resolving the underlying causes in a holistic or far-reaching manner. Attempts, however, to do just that have been initiated and these more participatory approaches are the focus of this report.

In recent years, geographically defined, civic-based fora have been instigated in various areas of Northern Ireland. The underlying concept is that disputes may be more effectively addressed through broad and inclusive representation of the actors directly or indirectly involved or affected. It is suggested that a more conducive atmosphere can thereby be created, which will assist in building communication, establishing trust and, ultimately, finding solutions to enduring problems.

This project was motivated by the experience of the Shared City Forum in Derry in 1998-99, which brought together a range of local individuals and groups to discuss contentious parades in the city, given their potential for unrest and disruption (Kelly, 1998). The council-led forum created a space in which those not directly involved could express their views—often otherwise unheard—and become party to efforts at a resolution.

While the forum lost momentum over time, arguably it changed the dynamic of the dispute by shifting the emphasis from the usual cycle of sectarian recrimination and highlighting the wider negative impact on the local economy, particularly the retail trade. The forum provided a creative vehicle to approach problematic issues in the city, and became one of a number of examples of civic participation in problem-solving and cross-sectoral relationship-building.

Growing calls elsewhere for 'community fora' or 'local civic fora' indicated that others had begun to recognise the benefits of involving broader local representation in discussing contentious issues. But no clear understanding of these terms or the roles these bodies might serve exists. This study has thus five objectives:

- to explore the concepts 'community forum' and 'local civic forum' as they relate to peace-building in Northern Ireland;
- to examine what purposes such structures serve;
- to identify the main opportunities arising and challenges posed, drawing together lessons learned;
- to contribute to the growing literature and debate on appropriate practice in community-relations work; and
- to provide recommendations and points for further exploration.

The project had distinct phases, the first being identification of relevant fora through literature searches, media trails and discussions with key informants. Although, at first glance, these fora may have adopted different approaches and structures, they betray commonalities which demonstrate a particular approach to community-based problem-solving.

Case studies were identified and semi-structured interviews conducted with key individuals. These included district-council chief executives and community-relations officers, facilitators involved in designing and implementing aspects of the fora, and a range of participants—drawn from the political sphere, business, the voluntary sector, 'loyal orders' and residents' groups—and relevant funders. The interviews explored the rationale for the particular forum, its make-up and functioning, its relationship to other local structures, its effectiveness in problem-solving and the long-term future of such initiatives.

In some cases, we also had access to files and minutes of meetings held by the local authority and others, which proved helpful in building a picture of the forum's work. (Not all fora have records of discussions and the Chatham House Rule limited what people could divulge.) Given the private nature—with an eye to trust- and relationship-building—of some of the fora, meetings were not attended by the researcher and care was taken to ensure confidentiality and discretion in conducting the interviews and in writing up this report.

In the spring of 2003, the initial findings were presented at a round table in Belfast, organised by Democratic Dialogue, again under the Chatham House Rule. In addition, participants heard first-hand from practitioners involved in the establishment of fora, and from two key academics who reflected on the changing nature of community-relations practice and policy in Northern Ireland. The presentations and discussions that followed provided many new perspectives, which have been incorporated into this final report.

The report begins by placing locally-based civic fora in the context of Northern Ireland and examines why such structures have warranted increasing attention. It goes on to explore examples of fora which, although diverse in approach, have common elements that may signal a new approach to peace-building and community relations. Lessons that

have emerged in the course of the research follow, detailing the positive aspects as well as possible challenges to the establishment and, more importantly, maintenance of such fora. The report ends with recommendations for those exploring using forum structures within their own areas and reflects on the place local civic fora occupy in dispute resolution.

4. A new approach?

Although, in recent years, the flashpoint 'interface' areas of Belfast have attracted most media interest, tensions have been perceptible across Northern Ireland, from small rural villages to provincial towns. Contentious parades have comprised perhaps the most symbolic and well-documented issue, souring local relations and embedding sectarian division. But they have been by no means the only spark of inflamed sentiments. Flag-flying, kerbstone painting, access to schools and community amenities, sectarian attacks on persons and homes, perceived partiality towards one 'community' and paramilitary activity have all stimulated intercommunal conflict at one time or another.

These are manifestations of the antagonism played out on the larger political stage. The phrase 'microcosm of the conflict' became common parlance in the late 90s to describe many a local dispute. Of course, the reverse is also true: such intercommunal disputes can have a hugely detrimental effect on macro-level politics and serious implications for community relations across Northern Ireland. The debate therefore continues as to whether an accepted political accommodation will, in time, trickle down to local level, resulting in improved relations, or whether there should be a focus on disputes as they emerge in local settings.

A multi-pronged approach is needed: the *A Shared Future* consultation paper on improving community relations highlighted the need to support local action. It asserted (CRU, 2003: 11) that 'local communities must be supported and assisted to find local solutions and local accommodations'. And it said: 'To achieve this, communities need the capacity and the confidence to work in partnership with other communities and agencies.'

The notion of communities working in partnership to achieve particular goals is not new to Northern Ireland and, over the past decade, many examples of successful relationships have been documented. The establishment of district partnerships in the mid-90s, for instance, illustrated a shift from centralised decision-making and a recognition that communities of place encompass many diverse sectors and interests. Established as a result of the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (introduced to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation), these partnerships played a vital role in opening up opportunities for relationships between communities and sectors. Comprising district councillors, voluntary-sector representatives, businesspeople, trade unionists and statutory officials, the partnerships represented an innovative approach to local decision-making, which continued through their successor local strategy partnerships, providing communities with the opportunity to participate in decision-making on issues on their own doorsteps.

Other arenas have witnessed a shift in attitude towards more decentralised, locally-based community involvement. The recent district policing partnerships, set up under the post-Patten-review Police Act of 2000, and community-safety initiatives (NIO, 2002), recommended as part of the post-agreement Criminal Justice Review, are but two examples. According to the Northern Ireland Office consultation document on community safety, the objective is local devolution of responsibility for tackling local problems. International IDEA (2002: 21) sees in such initiatives a global trend towards decentralisation of decision-making to the lowest possible level, as central government disperses power.

These models of partnership have, naturally, champions and detractors alike. Some argue that partnerships represent the only true form of participative democracy, where communities representing diverse opinions and perspectives can take an active part in organising their lives and participating in debate on relevant issues. Others view partnerships as a convenient form of 'passing the buck' and 'spreading the blame' away from the traditional (often quite justified) target of central government.

In Northern Ireland citizens often inhabit quite separate worlds, associated with religious affiliation and political orientation, and these differences result in mutually exclusive patterns of behaviour. And community-relations work has been dominated by the 'contact hypothesis'—that under certain conditions conflict can be reduced by bringing together individuals from opposing groups. This is based on the assumption that conflict arises from inadequate information about the 'other' and that enhanced opportunities for interaction will foster more positive attitudes towards the out-group.

Allport (1954) initially suggested what the conditions for this might be. First, there should be equal status among the groups or individuals who meet. Secondly, the situation should require co-operation between groups or offer common goals. Thirdly, social competition among the groups should be avoided. Lastly, the contact should be legitimised through institutional support.

This hypothesis has been developed in the past decades to explore issues such as the quality and quantity of contact, how the individual's social identity may be 'switched on' or 'switched off' in certain settings and the extent to which an individual's contact with members of the opposing group can be generalised to the group as a whole. The extent to which local civic fora follow the theoretical position argued by Allport and others since (Niens *et al*, 2003) may provide a useful insight into the role local fora play in community-relations work in Northern Ireland.

With positive examples of what can be achieved by bringing together a range of actors to address common concerns, it is not surprising that the possibilities inherent in such an approach for dispute resolution or peace-building more generally have been recognised.

Calls or proposals for community fora have been documented by the media and in reports for some years, in different areas and of diverse origins.

In July 1998, following the deaths of three children in Ballymoney, a result of raised sectarian tensions arising from the annual July 'Drumcree stand-off' over a disputed Orange Order parade in Co Armagh, it was reported that face-to-face discussions between representatives of the order and the Catholic residents of the Garvaghy Road in Portadown—abutting the contested parade route—might be possible. The *Irish Times* (July 27th 1998) reported: 'If [the grand master] Mr Saulters succeeds in his proposal to the Grand Lodge meeting this Saturday, the order might be prepared to join a community forum for the entire community in Portadown. In this forum, similar to the one already established in Derry in connection with the once highly controversial Apprentice Boys march, the Orangemen and residents can work out a compromise.'

While nothing was done at the time, in July 2001 a 'community forum' was again mooted. Writing in the *Irish News*, the Church of Ireland primate, Most Rev Robin Eames, called for a broadening of the debate beyond the Orange Order and the Catholic residents' group. He suggested (*Irish News*, July 10th 2001) that 'by placing all the issues of relationships across that community into a context in which we would see their inter-relationship we might, just might, move towards solving particular questions such as Orange marches'. And he went on: 'It is too simplistic to think of the Drumcree walk in isolation. Far too much has contributed to the problem. There is a total lack of trust between the local communities.'

In north Belfast, where intercommunal unrest has, at times, become almost ritualised, a community forum was again suggested. An editorial in the *Belfast Telegraph* (September 29th 2001) bemoaned the continuing violence there and declared: 'A suggestion has been made for a community forum, where all the warring factions could get together to air their grievances rather than act them out on the street. If possible, the politicians should arrange it, but it would have to tackle home truths—the basic problem of communities that have a mutual fear of each other and refuse all compromise, especially on territory which they regard as their own.'

In January 2002, the North Belfast MP, Nigel Dodds, intervened to say (BBC Radio Ulster, January 11th 2002): 'I think it would be a very good idea for people to meet directly, I think that there have been contacts … There have been a number of initiatives taken but clearly none of these things in themselves will solve the problem but we need all on a security front, community level, political level, all of us to send out a very clear message that the vast majority of decent people on both sides do not want to see this trouble on our streets.'

The particular difficulties of the Glenbryn/Ardoyne interface in the area prompted the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to request in June 2002 that the

relevant 'community representatives' commit themselves to 'Building Trust and Confidence Principles'. These included (OFMDFM press release, June 7th 2002) 'the establishment of a community forum which we believe will provide the mechanism through which difficult issues can be resolved and both communities can work together in partnership for their mutual advantage'.

That September, it was reported that more than 50 families had been intimidated from their homes in the Antrim area over two months, according to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. In response, a councillor for the area 'called for a local civic forum to be set up to deal with the issue' (*Irish News*, August 21st 2002).

Further afield, community fora were also being suggested to deal with intercommunal unrest. The ethnic violence of Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in the north of England prompted the Home Office to commission a report exploring the causes of the conflict and proposing recommendations. The Cantle (2001) report on 'community cohesion' suggested that local cross-community fora be set up 'involving representatives of sections of the community and charged with developing new approaches to fostering understanding and collaboration'.

While the term 'community forum' has predominated, it may not be the most appropriate label for these emerging structures. In the following chapter we suggest that 'local civic fora' may be a more fitting description of the cases we will present.

5. Community or civic?

The term 'community forum' is commonly used in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, to describe organisations and projects that are community-focused, community-based and/or community-led. These exist in many permutations and function in a variety of ways, and no single model is likely to emerge. Indeed, in the early stages of this research it became clear that the term was not necessarily the most appropriate for our purposes.

At the most basic level, community fora provide local citizens with a place where they can voice their opinions, concerns, reservations or support on a range of issues. But this is greatly influenced by the manner of their construction. We have identified three main categories of community fora, based on how they were conceived and established.

First, local and regional government and other statutory agencies have generally created 'top-down' community fora, as a mechanism for consultation over proposed policy initiatives. These may have a limited life and be considered practical—or, to the cynical, cosmetic—means by which the views of non-elected community representatives can be coherently ascertained or individuals elected to boards of regeneration programmes or local strategy partnerships. In recent years, a myriad of such fora have mushroomed across the UK and the republic, with the impetus—and often financial support—coming from departments or other statutory sources.

Bottom-up initiatives which take on the mantle of a 'community forum' are also commonplace—structures initiated and run by communities themselves, without government input. These may exist as fully constituted organisations, with non-profit status, tasked with carrying out community-focused work. Alternatively, they may be informal networks which act as a focus and resource for organisations within a particular area and play a lobbying role.

In Northern Ireland alone, we have identified dozens of area-based organisations with 'community forum' in their title, prefixed by the name of the area served. A postal survey of 34, which asked 'How would you define a community forum?', found that the vast majority described their organisation as having emerged from the 'bottom up' or 'grassroots', in response to a need to strengthen lines of local communication and information. While some included representation from statutory agencies, trade unions, churches and others, many had solely community- and voluntary-sector membership and lacked direct statutory support.

The third, and more ill-defined, grouping manifest features of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' fora. These take one of two forms. Many originate as local initiatives but are recognised by government agencies as an appropriate conduit into the community, a

means of improving participation in local decision-making. Others have been instigated by statutory bodies but have persisted within community settings, as the resource is recognised to have been useful in a neighbourhood or district. These 'combination-type' fora have developed partnerships between the voluntary sector, statutory services, churches, business and elected representatives, and have proven beneficial for service delivery and circulation of information.

For many, 'community' conjures up images of commonality, cohesiveness and even homogeneity, and in a society as fractious as Northern Ireland it is difficult to identify any local settings in which this could really be said to hold true. Most community fora are drawn from one side of the religious divide, but the focus of this project is on those that seek specifically to be not only cross-community but also cross-sectoral. Using the term 'community forum' to describe such initiatives, which encompass a range of individuals coming from diverse backgrounds and sectors, may thus cause confusion.

In addition to our reservations, we experienced some resistance from those involved in such fora to using the term 'community forum'. This may be based on a concern that 'community' implies some notion of representativeness which they do not feel is appropriate, or that the term is used so loosely that it does not define their project in any real sense.

We have concluded, therefore, that a more appropriate term for the type of body on which we are focusing would be 'local civic forum'. The word 'civic', deriving from the Latin *civis,* meaning citizen, reflects more clearly the notion of a person being a resident of a defined area or region, or representing a particular sector or interest group. Northern Ireland has become more accustomed to the concept of civic fora with the establishment of the Northern Ireland Civic Forum (albeit in suspension) as a result of the Belfast agreement, highlighting the diversity of sectors that make up 'civil society' in the broadest sense. By adding 'local' to the title, it implies a geographically-based remit, without having to define too strictly what that area might involve. Civic forum is the term which Mediation Northern Ireland, who have been at the forefront of designing and developing fora (usually in partnership with local government) have also chosen to use.

To minimise any ambiguity as to what constitutes this new approach to local dispute-resolution, we established criteria for the cases we would explore. The first was that the forum should have links with the relevant local authority. This is not to imply that all fora have to involve district councils; indeed, one could imagine many that would not. But there are interesting examples which do involve direct participation. According to International IDEA (2002: 2),

> [T]here is a growing awareness that elected local authorities and professional municipal administrators cannot tackle social problems and economic imperatives without an extensive, structured role for non-governmental actors in civil society.

Civil society groups—business and unions, professional associations—now work more closely than ever with governments in on-going, collaborative relationships and partnerships in virtually every part of the world. New emphasis is being placed on the broader concept of governance—involving citizens and the many organisations of civil society in the pursuit of the public good, not just on the official processes of government.

Given the nature of Northern Ireland's political structures, it seems unlikely a local initiative such as a forum would be undertaken without some input from local councillors, members of the assembly or MPs. The involvement of locally-elected representatives in addressing social problems through partnership has become an internationally recognised trend. The increasingly prominent role local strategy partnerships play in Northern Ireland underlies the view that local authorities must work in an inclusive manner with civil society to tackle social and economic challenges.

Secondly, to fall within this study, a forum would have to be within a geographically defined area—a city or town, a district or village, even a neighbourhood—from which its members were drawn or within which they worked. Thirdly, the area would have had to have experienced tensions, disputes or even violence, stemming at least in part from its political and religious make-up.

Finally, the forum should involve a range of people from different sectors as well as backgrounds. This would clearly differentiate it from more homogeneous fora, involving (for example) the voluntary sector or business only. The essence of such local civic fora lies in bringing together a diversity of people, ideas and perspectives.

6. Case studies

Given the various types and purposes of local fora identified, it is unsurprising that no one template has emerged for their composition. The characteristics of different fora will depend on the objectives of the initiative and the structures through which these are to be achieved. This chapter presents an overview of examples chosen using the parameters set out above. Broadly speaking, these have been selected to represent a diversity of approaches—in terms of rationale, establishment, membership, structure and functioning—to provide food for thought on the role of local civic fora in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

6.1 Derry Shared City Forum

Arguably the most prominent and well recognised civic forum set up to deal with local intercommunal disputes, the Shared City Forum (later called the Shared City and District Forum) in Derry, met between May 1998 and June 1999, after which it appears to have lost momentum and relevance and faded away. Initiated by the then SDLP mayor of Derry City Council, the forum was established in response to the unrest in the city during previous marching 'seasons' and stemmed in particular from the desire to reach agreement on the main Apprentice Boys' parade, held annually in August.

The proposal to bring together a range of individuals and organisations to discuss parades in the city had been floated for some time. Angered by the damage to their property, loss of revenue and potential investment, local businesspeople and retail traders had suggested an avenue be opened through which their views could be heard. This was echoed by church leaders (*Derry Journal*, December 16th 1997). Through the mayoral office, initial meetings were held with various sectors and organisations to gauge support for such a forum.

Having previously been involved in assisting mediation efforts between the two main protagonists, the Bogside Residents' Group and the Apprentice Boys, the mayor appeared to have developed credibility as an 'honest broker' despite his party affiliations. He decided to 'devise a plan of action that would address the issue of parades and prevent continuous destruction of the city' and received the backing of the city council in January 1998 (Derry City Council minutes, January 27th 1998).

The decision taken was to create an invitation-only forum with the aim of 'discuss[ing] the upcoming [Apprentice Boys'] parade and as an opportunity for people to articulate their views and concerns on the issue'. The invitation list, drawn up by council staff, included all locally-elected representatives, members of the main churches,

businesspeople and traders, the tourism industry and the voluntary sector. It spanned the (mainly-Catholic) 'cityside' and (mainly-Protestant) 'waterside' areas as well as outlying villages. No attempt was made artificially to 'balance' Catholic and Protestant representation and the list appears to have been drawn up by identifying relevant groups and individuals throughout the city. The invitations requested that only one person be sent to represent each organisation and the list of invitees was circulated to all. Included in the letter of invitation was a set of ground rules:

> Anyone wishing to speak shall do so through the Chair. Each speaker identifies himself or herself. No one speaker will be allowed to dominate the discussion. Each speaker is treated with respect and listened to carefully. This means: no personal abuse, no interruptions, no heckling. No media present during the discussions.

The format of the meetings was formal, with an appointed chair (the mayor) and minute taker (a council official). Detailed minutes were taken at each gathering and subsequently circulated to all on the invitation list.

The first forum meeting was held in May 1998 in the Guildhall and was attended by around 60 people, including prominent local political and church leaders. It did not, however, get off to a good start in terms of diversity of community representation. An amendment to the text of the city council statement on parades, aimed at broadening the focus of the forum to address other issues of concern to Protestants in the city, was rejected. This led to one Democratic Unionist Party councillor saying that 'no self-respecting unionist will be there' *(Londonderry Sentinel*, March 29th 1998).

Although some Protestant citizens did attend the first meeting, the 'loyal orders' and unionist politicians did not. This was at least partly resolved by an agreement to widen the forum's focus on parades issues to address, in tandem, Protestant alienation from the city as a whole. As a result, unionists and members of the loyal orders did join later meetings, although some scepticism remained. One unionist councillor said *(Londonderry Sentinel*, May 6th 1998): 'I hope this is a genuine effort to address Protestant alienation in this city, and not just an underhand move to lure unionists in to discuss parades. If it is, it won't work.'

The forum met for the second time at the end of July 1998, while outside public discussions and private negotiations on the upcoming parading season continued. Arguing that they too were affected by the issues under discussion, additional groups and organisations contacted the council requesting to be included on the invitation list. The membership of the forum subsequently doubled. In addition, it appears that all organisations were not adhering to the 'one organisation, one representative' rule.

Divergent views were emerging within the city of the forum's role. Some viewed it as a place for negotiations (and therefore wished that it be convened often during that summer

to deal with parade-related issues); others (including the mayor) envisaged it as a space for people to air their grievances and opinions, and to dispel some myths and rumours, while leaving the actual negotiations to be carried out elsewhere. There were calls for the forum to convene before the Apprentice Boys' parade in August (*Irish Times*, July 30th 1998), but the organisers deemed this impossible at such short notice. It was felt that tensions in the city were running too high for a meeting to be productive.

In the event, the Apprentice Boys' parade passed off relatively peacefully and saw the staging of the first 'Maiden City Festival', aimed at turning the annual commemoration into a community event and tourist attraction. The forum continued to meet through the autumn and winter (rotating its venue to alternate between cityside and waterside locations), although the attendance never returned to its peak. Indeed, the forum failed to receive any significant media coverage, local or regional, beyond the first few meetings.

Two forum members had been tasked with drawing up a document on the 'Structure and Working Arrangements of the Forum'. Over the following months, this went through 14 drafts as changes were suggested and debated at forum meetings, dominating much of the discussion. To address the two previously identified issues—'public expressions of culture' and 'community alienation'—two sub-groups were set up to stimulate discussion and bring potential work forward. But little progress was made in addressing either issue in any depth, leading to speculation that the forum was running into the sand.

Outside, discussions were not going well either. Despite the success of negotiations over the August parade, talks broke down between the Apprentice Boys and the Bogside Residents' Group before the 'closing of the gates' ceremony (symbolically re-enacting the onset of the 17th-century siege of the city) in December 1998 and the Parades Commission redirected part of the parade. The latter did not pass off without incident, causing a member of the Town Centre Management Group of businesspeople to comment (*Derry Journal*, December 15th 1998) that 'we can create a powerful, peaceful, attractive and thriving city centre that will bring in more jobs and prosperity to this community or we can drive away jobs and investment by creating the kind of hell we saw on Saturday'.

With no real explanation, the forum did not meet again until March 1999 and, on its resumption, the main issue under discussion was, again, the *modus operandi*—seemingly highlighting the desire of many to place the forum on a more formal footing before any substantive work could proceed. The final 'Shared City and District Forum Structure and Working Arrangements' were circulated at the end of April 1999. The agreed objective of the forum was:

> … to bring together interest groups, organisations and members to facilitate the development of a shared city and district through the consideration of difference. To that end the Forum is a platform for understanding and listening, and where

appropriate, action. We seek to use the Forum as an interface which may help avoid disruption in the future social and economic life of our city and district.

Despite members finally signing off on the working arrangements, it appears to have been too late to recover the loss of the forum's momentum. Many explanations have been cited to explain the lack of progress: differing perceptions of the role of the forum, 'hard-liners' dominating discussions, lack of participation by Protestants, perceived lack of organisation and resources, failure to hear evidence of community 'alienation' and weak civic responsibility.

A poorly-attended forum met one last time in June 1999. Yet again, the role and functioning of the forum was discussed. It was clear, however, that interest had waned and no further meetings were arranged by the mayor's office.

6.2 Newry Good Relations Forum

Newry has a predominantly Catholic population, albeit with a significant rural Protestant hinterland. During the mid-to-late 90s the city experienced heightened intercommunal tensions, in part due to disputes over loyal-order parades. In the summer of 1998, following third-party mediation by Mediation Northern Ireland, an accommodation was reached over a disputed parade. But it was clear that a more long-term solution was required to obviate such 11th-hour interventions.

The Newry and Mourne Forum on Community Relationships, later renamed the Newry Good Relations Forum, is an initiative of Newry and Mourne District Council, assisted by a Belfast-based voluntary organisation, Mediation Northern Ireland. In the winter of 1998, Mediation Northern Ireland proposed that a structure be set up in which issues of community division and cohesion could be explored.

From the outset, an agreement was made that the forum would *not* be a venue for negotiating on contentious issues but a space in which diverse opinions could be articulated and heard. Given that face-to-face negotiations between protest groups and the local Orange Order were not possible, due to resolutions passed by the latter's Grand Lodge, it was not surprising that new and more creative channels of engaging the wider community in exploring the issue were being investigated.

The following spring, Mediation Northern Ireland and the council began consulting locally on the possibility of a civic-based forum. It emerged that loyal-order parades were by no means the only issue of concern in the town and there was a general willingness to engage in a forum which would address parades in a wider context.

After design work by Mediation Northern Ireland, the forum was initiated, with the council chair as 'president' and the chief executive as 'convenor'. It was envisaged that three categories of people would attend: relevant council officials (which would include the community-relations officer), public representatives and 'citizens'. The role of the citizens was defined in forum documents thus:

> The citizens shall participate in the Forum as individuals. They shall not be deemed to act in a representative capacity. Their intention is to respect the Forum as a meeting place for citizens from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds and from unionist, nationalist and republican traditions within the local community.

The description of the forum, as set out in the invitation letters, read:

> The forum functions as a quiet space in which people can engage with each other without worry about public scrutiny or exposure. Therefore, Chatham House rules shall apply at all times. There will be three dimensions to the dialogue: Personal reflection, consideration of the locality of Newry and consideration of wider society.

It was envisaged that the forum would not aim for proportionality in terms of the religious make-up of the town; rather, it should encompass a broad range of views with no one perspective dominating.

Relevant members of the 'unionist', 'nationalist' and 'republican' 'communities' (as well as others not wishing to be so categorised) were approached by the organisers to propose potential forum participants. There was a deliberate attempt to ensure specific sectors—such as business and the churches—were represented, to promote a diversity of views.

To address the day-to-day operation of the forum, an *ad hoc* steering group was formed, which included Mediation Northern Ireland, council staff and some participants. A Mediation Northern Ireland document setting out concepts, functions and ground rules was drawn up, to make the process as clear to attendees as possible. Three functions of the forum were set out:

> Reconciliation: To promote reconciliation across the community in Newry
> Consultation: To facilitate informal consultation between the Council and citizens
> Social Outreach: To consider practical outcomes emanating from the Forum's discussions.

The forum meetings were designed to follow a number of 'phases', each with its own aim and objectives and issues to address. This was not rigid but, according to one of the organisers, it was deemed important to set some objectives so that the forum would not be distracted by outside events from its overall goal of relationship-building and

reconciliation. At the end of each phase, an evaluation would take place and plans would be made for the next one.

In June 1999, the forum met for its first phase of meetings, with the participants exploring positive and negative aspects of the city and identifying issues of concern. As with all the meetings, the forum was opened by the council chair, facilitated by Mediation Northern Ireland staff and closed by the convenor.

The meetings took time to explore participants' own formation and upbringing in the city, before addressing the present day. Concerns were highlighted with regard to graffiti and flag-flying, poor civic pride, the dwindling Protestant population and Newry's bad media image. Positive aspects identified included a strong voluntary sector, recent growth in the local economy, and enterprise and sports facilities.

Although the meetings were well attended, those from a republican background declined to take part. Renewed efforts and additional consultation were undertaken to ensure their subsequent presence.

As the forum did not meet during the summer months, a 'contact group' was set up to allow for informal meetings and to ensure lines of communication were kept open, with an eye to potential tensions. These meetings were organised by the council, were not facilitated and were open to all forum members. According to the Parades Commission, during the summer of 1999 no parades in the city resulted in complaints or opposition and only minimal intervention was required, with restrictions on two loyal-order band parades due to 'the potential adverse effects on community relationships' (Parades Commission, 2000: 27).

As anticipated, the forum reconvened in September to complete phase one, begun in June of that year. Phase two followed, during which a number of republicans joined.

The forum continues to meet in structured phases, each containing around six scheduled meetings. Issues under discussion have included policing, religion, the parading 'tradition', ethnic diversity / racism and prisons. With the emphasis on improving relationships in the district, understandings have developed which have enabled people to approach difficult issues, such as parades, with more insight. When appropriate to the issue under discussion, guest speakers are invited to provide background or give an opinion.

Each phase is preceded by a planning stage involving the steering group, and followed by an evaluation involving forum members and facilitators. Each summer, contact group meetings are set for the period in which the forum is not in session.

The membership of the forum—how many participants and what 'type'—has been reviewed a number of times. The steering group agreed to open it up to a wider range of citizens (albeit still invitation-only), with an emphasis on involving more young people,

while remaining mindful of the religious and political balance. The facilitated space of the forum provides the opportunity for new participants to be integrated into a well-established group.

In early 2002, the forum steering group (which includes Mediation Northern Ireland staff) met to consider future design. Issues discussed included revisiting the aims and objectives, the strategy for future work, the format of the phases and the possibility of widening the catchment area. The number of participants was to be raised to 50, including the outreach towards youth. New members were also recruited by current participants from within their communities, joining the forum in September 2002.

The council has made a long-term financial commitment to the forum, which continues to meet monthly from September to June. The aims have been expanded: 'to contribute to good relations in Newry between people of different religious beliefs, political opinions and ethnic backgrounds and to improve understandings between Newry and other parts of the district'. A review of the forum will take place in June 2004, when participants will have an opportunity to explore the future and agree longer-term aims.

6.3 Moyle Community Forum

Moyle District Council is the smallest in Northern Ireland, encompassing the Co Antrim coastal town of Ballycastle and surrounding villages. Of the case studies, only here is the title 'community forum' used.

The decision to set up a forum arose from a community audit, undertaken by the council in 1999, which highlighted the need for a more 'joined-up' approach to community relations in the district. It was suggested that a community forum be formed, bringing together various sectors and statutory bodies to address sectarianism and anti-social behaviour. This proposal was inserted into the council-ratified 2000-01 community-relations plan for the area.

In December 2000, the Moyle Community Relations Forum was instigated by the council, with a mission statement to 'facilitate and empower the development of a community where every citizen and group can live harmoniously in a peaceful and tolerant society, free from fear, intimidation, inequality, social exclusion—in a way which fosters a spirit of co-operation, support and community well-being'.

The stated role of the forum is to provide a space for networking and sharing of information, and a vehicle through which action and events can be brought forward on identified issues. The agreed functions are to: identify new and existing projects to meet aims; represent the community at local and regional level; host conferences and events

aimed at strengthening community relations in Moyle; and listen to the views and concerns of individuals and groups on community issues.

The council's community-relations officer was heavily involved in setting up the forum and acts as the key contact. Relevant organisations in the locality were identified and approached to join. These included statutory agencies (such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Causeway Hospital Trust and the North Eastern Education and Library Board), voluntary organisations, the police, churches and local schools. Businesses organisations were also invited, although their involvement has been minimal. The three electoral wards which make up the Moyle district were represented by at least one councillor from each and, recognising the importance of developing synergies, the local strategy partnership was also represented.

In 2002 the forum agreed to take on the functions of the community-safety partnership for the area. In light of this new responsibility, it was agreed to change the name to the Moyle Community Forum. Further organisations were thus identified as requiring representation, and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, Victim Support and Women's Aid later joined.

While members were recruited by invitation, the forum does not have a closed-door policy and individuals or organisations who expressed an interest were free to join. This policy did lead to some loss of pace during early meetings, as new members had to be integrated and brought up to speed. Over the life of the forum, however, the membership has stabilised and those involved appear to have a commitment to the principles under which it was established.

The Moyle Community Forum is funded and administered by the council through its community-relations programme. Funding for specific projects is sought from partner organisations with an interest in, or statutory responsibility for, the particular activities. Unlike other fora, Moyle had an official launch and raised its profile through publishing leaflets describing its role.

From the outset, four issues have been identified as priorities: community relations, youth, the environment and community safety. The forum has undertaken a range of activities under these headings, including a youth conference, a subsidised transport scheme, a volunteer award ceremony and awareness-raising on vandalism in schools. The forum has also been contacted by outside bodies, such as the Parades Commission, the Independent Orange Order and the Scouts, to discuss particular concerns. Requests to speak to the forum are made by contacting the co-ordinator and the talk becomes a future agenda item.

The forum meets monthly, using a formal structure, with minutes taken and circulated, including to those outside the forum who may be interested. The meeting-place is rotated

to include venues in Ballycastle, Bushmills, Armoy and Cushendall, highlighting its district-wide nature.

6.4 Larne Forum for Social Development

The borough of Larne, particularly Larne town, is predominantly Protestant, but there is a sizeable Catholic population in the town and the surrounding villages. According to the council community-relations officer, Larne would be viewed by many from outside as having been relatively unaffected by the conflict and having had relatively good community relations in the past. But intercommunal tensions have become increasingly visible, with a rise in reported sectarian attacks on individuals and homes, and growing signs of territoriality, as indicated by flags, kerbstone-painting, graffiti and murals.

In March 2001, the Larne District Partnership Board (local funding body for the first EU 'peace' programme), aware of the need to address the apparent deterioration in community relations, hosted briefing sessions with a range of relevant bodies. These included the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (now the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland), the community-relations unit in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Mediation Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, council staff and local community representatives. During this time, a letter was sent by the six assembly members for the East Antrim constituency to the OFMDFM, asking what the office intended to do about the problems in Larne, manifested in petrol- and pipe-bomb attacks.

Mediation Northern Ireland was engaged by the partnership board to undertake an initial assessment, consider possible ways to address tensions and bring forward a programme of work. Individuals representing a cross-section of interests were approached, including local politicians, youth and community workers, clergy, businesspeople, police, residents' association representatives and public-sector managers. All comments offered were to be non-attributable: people were encouraged to speak openly about what they perceived to be the difficulties in Larne and their root causes, and to suggest ways forward.

A range of issues were identified as contributing to increasing tensions in the area; there was no one dispute that could be tackled (for example) by mediation. It was thus proposed that Larne Borough Council sponsor a 'Forum for Social Development', to 'provide the opportunity for the citizens of Larne to develop understandings which would strengthen the social fabric of the local community'.

It was envisaged that the forum would be made up of Larne citizens from various sectors and the agenda would be the various themes of civic life: education and youth, business and commerce, culture and representative politics. It was proposed that Mediation

Northern Ireland staff act as facilitators, with a steering group to guide the forum, which would operate under agreed ground rules.

To set the forum in train an eight-strong contact group was established, roughly balanced by religion, age, gender and sectoral interest. This met a number of times over the summer, to discuss the role and functioning of the forum, decide on the best form of recruitment and pursue funding avenues. All meetings were assisted by Mediation Northern Ireland staff. According to one group member, this gave those involved an opportunity to experience a facilitated space to which many were not accustomed, and provided them with an insight into what the forum meeting itself might look like.

After the summer, the contact group elaborated a selection process to ensure a broad range of perspectives at the forum. With the aim of a membership of 30, participants were to be drawn, broadly speaking, from politics (to include assembly members and councillors), the voluntary sector, commerce, the churches, education and youth. Balance in terms of gender, religion, age and urban/rural composition was acknowledged, with the aspiration that the membership would *reflect* rather than *represent* the community.

Personal qualities required of potential members included an ability to listen and articulate, to be committed, to be locally based with a 'finger on the pulse', and to be prepared to attend as a private citizen rather than a group representative. This last point is crucial. The organisers hoped that participants would speak openly and express their own opinions, rather than feeling under any obligation to speak for a group or check back with a 'constituency'.

With potential members identified and contacted, the forum began to meet in the autumn of 2001, again facilitated by Mediation Northern Ireland. And, again, in planning the forum it was agreed that the work would be undertaken in distinct phases, with space for reflection and evaluation at the end of each.

The first phase had as its objective 'to improve understandings across the community in Larne'. Three meetings were envisaged, covering experiences, perceptions and relationships. On the first night, those present agreed to ground rules before discussion—including a commitment to listen well, ensuring that no views expressed were attributably quoted outside the forum, and accepting that such opinions were personal and not representative.

It was clearly stated that the forum was not a place for negotiation. According to the main facilitator, 'the important thing is that these rules free people up to talk'. A range of methodologies were adopted, including small-group work and plenary sessions. Evaluating phase one after its completion, participants felt it had been valuable. But attendance had not been as good as anticipated and many (including the initial contact

group) felt the numbers were not sufficient for meaningful dialogue and that sufficient momentum had not been established.

It was agreed by forum members to widen participation to include more people from business, church, youth, education and voluntary-sector backgrounds, in addition to encouraging district councillors, members of the local strategy partnership and assembly members from the area to attend. Over the summer months, informal meetings of participants maintained contact. The steering group agreed an agenda for the next phase of meetings; the forum began to meet again during the autumn.

That phase was successful in continuing useful interactions. The forum still struggled, however, to engage broad enough participation. Since then, Larne Borough Council has begun reconstructing its community strategies and has been considering taking a more formal ownership of the forum process.

7. Key issues

Establishing any new structure or way of working inevitably involves learning, as glitches and unforeseen events cause setbacks. In the case of local civic fora, the judgment and experience of forum instigators, honed by local consultation, will be vital in designing the most appropriate model for the given situation and context.
While the need for local flexibility will militate against a general template, reinvention of the wheel is not to be encouraged. A number of examples are now available, allowing key areas to be defined as requiring particular consideration before embarking on such initiatives.

7.1 Groundwork and consultation

When a proposal has been made to set up a local civic forum, a number of questions arise. Why has it been suggested or recommended? What are the issues which the forum may choose to address, and how can they be identified? Is this the most appropriate means of tackling sensitive issues? What structure will the forum take? And who will be involved?

Calls for a forum may be strong, but it is essential to do the groundwork before going ahead. This preparation may take different forms, from informal discussions with key players in the locality to a formal community audit undertaken by an outside body. The issues in need of attention should never be taken for granted and it is only by consulting fully with the appropriate parties that a rounded perspective can be gleaned and a suitable structure designed.

In Larne, for example, consultation took the form of an 'initial assessment', in which identified individuals were questioned on their views and experiences of living in the area; after this fieldwork a decision was made to proceed with a forum as a useful means of addressing the many emergent issues. Prior to the Shared City Forum in Derry, the mayor undertook a series of meetings with key individuals, in which he floated the idea of a forum as a way forward and assessed interest. The Moyle Community Forum emerged from a more formal, council-led, community audit, which highlighted the need for a joined-up approach to community relations; the forum was seen as a logical response.

Preparing the ground thus is also helpful in avoiding unnecessary, even damaging, overlap with other initiatives. The forum should, ideally, have a complementary or synergistic relationship with other local bodies.

Given many of those involved in local fora will also be active in other community-based initiatives, their time constraints will need to be considered. Unless the forum is seen to add value to existing structures, it is unlikely such individuals will be willing or able to commit their energy. Yet without the involvement of these key players, the forum may be stillborn.

7.2 Clarity of purpose

Establishing clarity as to the role and purpose of a forum is vital, if the potential for misunderstanding, confusion, frustration, disappointment or even anger—within or without the forum—is to be avoided. Whether the forum acts primarily as a space where local citizens can vent their opinions on certain issues, is a long-term initiative aimed at building trust and understanding between long-segregated communities or is an action oriented initiative aimed at specifically identified concerns, its rationale must be clearly articulated from the start. Without these objectives being conveyed, how can one later measure if the forum is really satisfying anyone's expectations?

Reflecting on the now defunct Shared City Forum in Derry, a number of participants highlighted the lack of such clarity as a recurrent obstacle to progress. One of the instigators admitted that it 'was never really set up with any specific targets, objectives or expectations'. While one participant from the business sector commented that 'The forum was trying to satisfy everyone, whereas you can't do that if you really want to achieve objectives', another argued that it had not had the ambition to meet anybody's needs:

> The forum primarily failed to achieve anything, because in my opinion it was never designed to achieve anything. Some people thought that if you got everybody into a room, then they would solve all the problems. That was nonsense. You don't solve problems by bringing dozens of people into a room who all potentially have different opinions on how to resolve the problem.

The research has also highlighted the need for transparency in articulating the purpose of the forum to those outside. In a number of cases concerns were raised that the wrong impression was being formed, and other initiatives were being jeopardised as a result.

In one instance, some unionists expressed concern about engaging in forum meetings including alleged republican paramilitaries, and how this might be perceived by their co-religionists as engagement in face-to-face 'negotiations'. From a republican perspective, on the other hand, concern was expressed that the forum would provide 'some sort of cover' for loyal-order members to be able to say 'well, look what we did'—and blame everyone else if it didn't work out.

In contrast, as the case studies have documented, other fora have sought to delineate their aims and rules of engagement, and to regularly revisit these to ensure they are still appropriate.

7.3 Membership

The questions of *who* should be involved in the forum and *how* they should be approached are two of the most challenging, yet undoubtedly most crucial, issues to address from the outset. How participants are selected is not just a practical issue of procedure, but one of democracy and inclusivity that will greatly affect how the forum is perceived.

Having an open-door policy will, of course, answer this question in itself: the membership will consist of those who choose to turn up. While this fluidity may have benefits, it brings unpredictability, with the possibility of meetings being 'hijacked' or of unstructured and diffuse discussions. Such an approach, were it to be adopted, would require a clear rationale. If, however, some consistency is more attractive, membership will have to be regulated in some way and a more sophisticated recruitment process developed.

As indicated, successful recruitment of members depends on a clear articulation of the role and functioning of the forum. Given the relative novelty of this approach and the contentious nature of the subject matter, suspicion of what forum meetings may entail—and scepticism as to what they might achieve—will be key obstacles.

A number of interviewees involved in the logistics confided that recruiting the right members had been the most challenging task. The identification of the most appropriate participants requires 'insider' knowledge—or, at least, the time to acquire it. This embraces not only the demographics of the area and the types of organisations that are active, but also particular historical details and local power balances.

As the case studies have shown, a number of approaches have been adopted to engaging participants. The Moyle Community Forum has a nominally open membership, in that anyone who is interested in community relations in the district is free to join. But in practice it has not attracted large numbers and the most obvious sectors and organisations have been approached to send representatives.

The Shared City Forum relied on the local knowledge of council officials to identify organisations and individuals whom they felt should be involved. This was, however, later supplemented when other organisations requested that an invitation be extended. The Newry and Larne fora relied on the identification of key informants or gatekeepers

within relevant communities and sectors, who in turn proposed other individuals whom they felt could make a contribution.

Having established the milieux from which participants should be drawn, the issue of 'representativeness' must be addressed and a clear message sent out. A forum may take the position that membership is directly linked to an organisation, community or sector, in which case participants should represent the positions of those groupings. Or it may be deemed beneficial that members attend as *individual citizens* of an area, without the added responsibility of articulating the putative views of others.

A number of questions underlie this choice. If individuals have been asked to represent the views of others, how do they receive their mandate? What process (if any) might be set up to ascertain the views of their 'community' or organisation, and to feed that into the forum? In what way do individuals feed the information *from* the forum back into their own community or organisation? In practical terms, if sectors rather than individuals are being represented, the degree of flexibility allowed for sector members to be alternated or replaced should be considered. This is not only a procedural issue: constant introduction of new members can raise difficulties in maintaining continuity and in building trust and confidence.

In areas beset by intercommunal tensions, it may seem obvious that those most directly involved in identifiable disputes should participate in the forum. But for various reasons this may not always be possible. Live issues for two fora examined included resistance on the part of some members to the involvement of local members of paramilitary groups and resistance by loyal-order members to participating in a forum with republican ex-prisoners.

Forum convenors must be mindful that if one party is involved another may opt out. If individuals or groups are excluded, or exclude themselves from attendance, consideration must then be given as to how their views or positions may be introduced.

Each forum has taken different stances on the number of members, linked to the degree of control of recruitment, the geographical remit and the number and types of sectors involved. It is difficult to place a figure on what an ideal size for a forum would be, but there is a balance betweeen managing a coherent conversation with very large numbers and ensuring adequate diversity of views if numbers are small.

Many of those interviewed about the Shared City Forum commented that it had become too large to be effective and that this had inhibited the less vocal. Some viewed the growth from an initial 66 invitees to around 130 as damaging. One claimed this had 'signed the death knell of the forum', while another reflected that 'there were too many people, all talking with no action, and no outputs and a lot of waffle'. Another disagreed, however, arguing: 'It got too big, yes. It got cumbersome. It got weighty. It got waffly at

the end. But the fact was that for a long time it had a real head of steam and nobody really wanted to miss it.'

If a forum has been created to address intercommunal tensions, regard must be paid to the proportions of people from different religious or political backgrounds. The convenors may wish to achieve an ethno-political balance or they may hope to reflect proportionally the population of the area. Whichever the case, the position should be clearly articulated, and any major deviations should be noted and, if necessary, rectified. As significant, the gender balance, age range and geographical spread should also be given regard, to ensure that communities are reflected in all their diversity.

7.4 Convening and facilitating the forum

The role convenors and facilitators play in the success, or failure, of a local civic forum cannot be overstated. This research has focused on fora instigated by district councils; however, the lessons extracted can be applied to other models.

The convenor's functions may involve: articulation of the forum rationale, selection of participants, setting of agendas, implementation of action points and oversight of administration (see below). Symbolically, the convenor is vital in providing the forum with legitimacy and status. Given the sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland, there are particular difficulties in relation to impartiality and neutrality. This issue can, at least partly, be addressed by having dual or multiple convenors or by entire organisations (such as a government department) taking the lead.

Closely related is facilitation and the two functions may overlap. It is not enough to get people—especially individuals from a range of settings, backgrounds, experiences, motivations and political opinions—into a room together: what they do there is the key to success. The expertise needed to manage this will be proportionate to the ambition and complexity of the forum.

Some fora may take on a traditional town-hall-meeting style, with members requested to speak through the chair and minutes taken. Others may assume a more participatory approach, adopting a variety of creative techniques to encourage engagement by, and interaction among, the diverse participants.

The town-hall approach adopted by the Shared City Forum recreated some of the worst aspects of council meetings and benefited those most comfortable and confident in that environment. One participant criticised the way in which the meeting appeared too focused on the chair's table. This, she felt 'crushed the democracy of the forum'. But not all agreed with this assessment. One said that the forum represented 'a safe place' where

people can stand up and say 'this is my view—it may contradict yours, but this is how I feel'.

When issues such as legitimacy and discretion are fundamental to a forum's functions, experienced facilitators can bring valuable skills and approaches. The localised nature of such fora ensures that many of those participating will have had previous—and not necessarily positive—experiences of one another, undoubtedly adding to the dynamic of the discussions. An atmosphere of safety does not develop overnight and a third party may provide beneficial input. Literature on facilitation of dialogue highlights the importance of continuity in the building of trust and confidence and, while long-term facilitation may not be necessary, it can provide a model of behaviour for the participants to follow.

All forum participants interviewed spoke of the usefulness of third-party facilitation, particularly when discussing sensitive issues. Professional facilitators bring a wealth of experience in similar, dialogue-focused situations, as well as some critical distance from the issues. The presence of 'outsiders' may allow for new perspectives to emerge on longstanding topics, allowing for possible shifts in the habits of thought. On the negative side, facilitators may be viewed as 'blow-ins', meddling in local issues the complexities of which they may not fully comprehend.

7.5 Administration and communication

Effective administration and good lines of communication are equally vital to a forum's success. Poor administrative support may result in frustration due to lack of information, confusion as to roles and responsibilities of convenors and facilitators and poor attendance. Administration involves many mundane but vital tasks, such as identifying appropriate venues, dealing with funding issues, informing participants of meeting times, and circulating minutes (if appropriate) or other documents emerging.

In the case of council-led fora, logic would suggest that council staff be assigned and this is so in all cases explored. But with the range of council departments and, in some instances, the involvement of outside facilitators, the potential for breakdowns in communication is significant.

The research uncovered both effective and ineffective administration, and the resultant impact on confidence was reflected by participants. One case highlighted the frustration caused by poor or unclear delegation of administrative tasks: little notice was given of meetings, the quality of minutes varied and certain progress reports were not forthcoming.

This concern could be addressed (as a number of fora have done) by convening a steering, management or general-purposes group, involving all those tasked with aspects of the forum's functioning. Such a group may undertake to develop the structure and working arrangements, which could then be agreed by forum participants. This would allow for maximum time to be allocated during meetings to the core issues to be addressed.

7.6 Timing and venue

In the introduction, we presented examples of proposals for the establishment of local fora, in various parts of Northern Ireland, to deal with local difficulties. Later, we provided instances of fora which had come to fruition. Why a forum emerges in some areas but not in others is at least partly a matter of the difficult-to-define issue of timeliness.

Assessing whether a situation is ripe for instigating a forum is a challenge which must be clearly assessed during the groundwork and consultation. Reflecting on the establishment of the Newry Good Relations Forum, one of the main facilitators admitted: 'We couldn't hurry this process. We could only go one step at a time.' Initial resistance may not necessarily be a persuasive reason not to proceed, but it should inform any decision as to whether a forum is the most useful mechanism at that time.

Once established, other issues of timing come into play, such as how often the forum should meet, how long meetings should last and how far in advance agendas should be planned. Decisions should also be taken as to whether meetings are suspended at any particular time, such as the Northern Ireland summer hiatus, or during elections. These issues are closely related to those of consistency, commitment and maintaining momentum.

During the lifetime of the Shared City Forum, there was an unintended four-month break, blamed variously on tensions following a loyal-order parade, councillors' busy schedules, decreasing attendance and lack of interest. One of the forum instigators commented;

> When it was set up at the start, it was prior to parades, so everyone was interested. It was very topical, and there was an urgency about it. Once the marching season's over, people tend to sit back. It tends to go on the back burner. So, it always ends up almost in a sense of crisis management the last two or three months prior to parades. I think that that really is one of the main problems.

Choosing the right venue (or venues) for meetings can be a challenge, particularly since issues of territoriality and accessibility are often at the heart of intercommunal disputes. While forum initiators should have an acute awareness of which venues would be

deemed problematic, the neutrality of any venue cannot be assumed, given the changing dynamics of local relations. In north Belfast, for example, neutral venues for forum meetings would be hard to identify in the patchwork quilt which makes up this highly segregated area, and it might even be necessary for meetings to take place elsewhere.

In Newry, a city-centre hotel was used as the venue at the outset, as it was perceived as accessible to all communities and was a relaxed space in which to meet. As the forum widened its geographical focus, meetings were convened in outlying villages, highlighting the rural dimensions to community relations. The Shared City Forum in Derry intentionally rotated venues, reflecting the segregated nature of the city and the difficulty of finding a truly neutral space where members of the two main religious communities felt comfortable and secure.

7.7 Funding

The development of good relations within deeply divided communities is notoriously difficult to measure, in terms of 'value for money', and success or failure can not be evaluated on a crude economic basis. Given that participants engage in the fora voluntarily and without monetary gain, the most significant financial support necessary is to meet the costs of experienced facilitators and administration.

As indicated, professional facilitators may be an outlay worthy of consideration, but this will have a significant impact on the budget. Taking this expense out of the equation, however, the convening of a forum is not necessarily costly and most of the budget will be spent adequately administering the forum and providing a suitable venue and refreshments. Administration may be provided 'in kind' by staff members in the convening organisation or body—in our cases, the district council.

Participants are not, and arguably should not be, paid for their time, although covering travel and childcare expenses might be worth considering. Given that these are *local* civic fora, however, such expenses should not be major.

7.8 Continuation and evolution

The hard work of a forum may be in its initial stages, during which the establishment of interest and momentum preoccupies the energies of convenors and/or facilitators. But it is vital to have regard to the long-term objectives of the forum and the structures put in place should allow it to evolve. Depending on the forum's direction, it may be necessary to place it on a more formal footing as an organisation in its own right. Additionally or

alternatively, it may identify discrete issues which warrant increasing focus and it may wish to split itself up into working groups, depending on areas of interest.

How the forum is to continue or change will best be discovered by evaluation. This should be built into the working of the forum and be of sufficient depth and breadth to capture not only the opinions of those involved but also the changing context. Questions to consider include: has the forum met its initial goals or objectives? has it developed new areas of focus? and is the forum structure still the most effective for dealing with these issues and the most efficient use of people's time?

In the case of the Shared City Forum, it was clear that it had lost momentum and ultimately collapsed as a result of poor attendance and lack of perceptible progress. But many would argue that it was by no means a wasted exercise. The forum played a significant role in (unintentionally) laying the groundwork for negotiations in the more pragmatic Town Centre Management Group, which focused on the parades issue with a much smaller and more manageable set of actors.

As one interviewee put it, 'the Shared City Forum clearly established the intent of everyone to try and get it resolved, and the importance of getting it resolved, and that probably was the most useful output of the initiative'. Although the forum was not the venue for negotiations, it did provide an opportunity for the broadening of the debate on the issues of parades away from the narrow discussions (or lack thereof) between the loyal orders and residents' groups, to encompass other sectors who had an interest in the resolution of the dispute or were affected by it.

One issue that may arise during the course of the forum is the integration of additional members, if deemed necessary. New members may be required due to the departure of others, a gap in representation or knowledge having been identified or new issues coming to the fore which require additional input. Ideally, contingency plans should be set in place from the outset, such as how (and when) new members are integrated and old members replaced.

8. Potential benefits

The case studies which were chosen to form the basis of this research are at various stages in their development. No single example provides a blueprint which can be transposed, without modification, to any setting. The benefits reaped and (as the next chapter explores) the challenges faced will largely depend on the initial aims and objectives, and so not everything aired below will apply in all circumstances.

8.1 Local problem-solving

There has been a trend in recent times towards greater participation by a broad range of stakeholders in local decision-making. The proliferation of community audits and consultations certainly gives the impression of local people being sounded out and being highly involved in their districts and neighbourhoods.

Local civic fora can provide the opportunity for concerned individuals and groups to come together to express their opinions on issues of contention and to hear contrary views, thus enhancing the possibility of finding acceptable solutions through more broadly-based dialogue. Problem-solving involving local actors increases the likelihood that consensus-based decisions will be not only supported but sustained, given the personal investment of time and energy by those involved.

8.2 Inclusive modes of dialogue

A key characteristic of local fora is the involvement of a range of individuals and/or groups who hold divergent opinions. This offers the possibility of engaging more than the 'usual suspects' and reframing debates to reflect local opinion more realistically.

The forum can provide the space in which new styles of discussion are assumed and more complex analysis of issues undertaken—contrary to the typical point-scoring style of Northern Ireland politics, which often reduces matters to the lowest common denominator. Traditional opponents have the opportunity to hear the views of others in a less combative environment, tempered by their presence and by the format of the forum.

8.3 Civic pride and responsibility

The sectarian nature of society in Northern Ireland has resulted in the politicisation of, and polarisation of views on, seemingly innocuous issues. In areas where community

relations are fraught, local fora may provide the opportunity for citizens to regain a sense of civic pride and civic responsibility. Such fora firmly place the onus on local people to take responsibility for decisions made on their behalf, remind participants of their shared commitments to their locality and hold out the possibility of a shared vision of the future.

8.4 Building relationships

Local civic fora may help build or repair relationships—not only between antagonists, but more broadly among people from a range of sectors and backgrounds, different generations and genders. The interactions that evolve through dialogue hold possibilities for collaboration, and for respectful disagreement, which may previously have been unthinkable.

Such relationships, while advantageous to the internal work of the forum, prove their real worth when challenged outside. Lines of communication between individuals and communities, previously damaged by conflict, will be strengthened by relationships of trust and mutual respect, and these in turn can withstand emergent disputes.

8.5 Contesting myths

Fora established with strong foundations and appropriate structures can provide a safe space in which myths and misunderstandings can be exposed, analysed, challenged and dispelled. In their place, new and more realistic positions can be formed, based on fact rather than perception. By countering the tendency to repeat habitual, unproductive modes of relating to perceived adversaries, opportunities to develop more nuanced understandings can be greatly enhanced.

For one forum participant, the value of the meetings was very clear:

> I think it has broken down a lot of barriers and allows people to see that things are not as scary when you sit down and discuss them. I have found that the forum is useful in terms of confronting prejudices and opening up dialogue which allows people the freedom to discuss issues in a safe environment. It allows you to articulate your own thoughts and theories safely and hear people. You find very quickly that you have more in common than difference.

8.6 Information sharing

Even within small areas, opportunities for intersectoral and intercommual networking are often limited by time, resources and interest. Many outsiders might be surprised to learn the extent to which organisations work in isolation. Local fora provide a vital opportunity for informal contact and more formal information sharing, enhancing the possibility of new relationships and community dynamics.

8.7 Moving on

While it is not always possible to achieve all of the original aims and objectives, a forum may provide a springboard for other processes to be conceived. Through discussions and networking opportunities, gaps in community activity or provision may be identified and the impetus generated through which these can be tackled by appropriate actors.

So there may be offshoots from the forum, the latter may evolve into some new structure with new objectives, or it may simply conclude that its work is done. A demise is not necessarily a negative outcome, as the forum may have reached its natural end and its transformation into another initiative may prove the most expedient way forward.
The forum may also generate consequences which are entirely inadvert yet significant to the individuals or communities concerned. A female participant highlighted one example:

> The forum, I think, is a good introduction for women into politics. Women are often put off running for local council because of the inability of councillors to be civil to one another. I think the forum could be a very useful stepping stone for many women to have a sense of relationship building and working with a diverse group of people, many of whom would not have the same views as you do.

8.8 Informal avenues

Civic fora benefit from the autonomy afforded by the informal or detached status they may enjoy within a locality. Without the usual pressure to reach targets or achieve verifiable impact, they have relative freedom to develop at their own speed, experiment with alternative modes of working and explore issues not on conventional agendas.

Dealing with issues of community diversity and conflict may not be best served through an emphasis on traditional lines of power and authority. The opportunity for local fora to create new structures and methodologies enhances the possibility of more nuanced, complex and personal perspectives emerging.

8.9 Addressing the wider context

Some have argued that presenting problems in local areas should be dealt with as they arise and have criticised the approach of fora which 'do not provide immediate answers to pressing problems'. But a counter-argument suggests that it is only by broadening the context in which tensions have emerged that the underlying causes can be comprehensively addressed.

Divisions do not emerge in a vacuum and disputes cannot be addressed in isolation. Conflicts are systemic and their roots can often be traced back decades, if not generations. The challenge local fora face is to place the existing relationships—or lack of them—in a context in which their origins and explanations are acknowledged and which forms part of the manner in which they are reconciled.

8.10 Prevention

While local civic fora may have a discrete lifespan, a recurring theme in discussions with those involved is nevertheless a desire that they become long-term and relationship-forming, serving preventative as well as reconciliatory functions. A local forum may help to prevent conflict arising, by providing an outlet for grievances to be expressed and by creating opportunities for collaborative problem-solving. A structure in which all groups feel they have a voice, through dialogue and debate, helps prevent feelings of alienation and frustration that may spill over into more destructive physical manifestations.

One interviewee described the forum of which she was a member as a 'great safety-valve' during particularly tense periods. A well-conceived forum, in which close cross-community and cross-sectoral communication is facilitated, may also create systems of monitoring and early warning that can alert relevant actors to the possibility of disputes emerging or escalating.

9. Challenges

9.1 Power imbalances

While the intention of a local civic forum may be to create a space in which all participants possess equal status and are given equal voice, different communities and sectors have differing capacities and resources. Power relations within the locality may thus be unavoidable in the forum.

The challenge is to create a structure in which these differences between members are acknowledged without being replicated. While criticism has been levied at the emphasis on 'single-identity work' in Northern Ireland, some communities do require support to reach a position in which they can clearly and confidently articulate views in wider arenas. Unless adequate capacity exists within a community, a local forum may not be an appropriate way to proceed and may lead to further divisions.

A particular challenge is presented by fora in which locally-elected representatives and others who may colloquially be described as 'community leaders' participate. The latter often work in voluntary organisations, have a high profile in their community, have a reputation of getting things done and may be afforded the responsibility of representing particular communities or interest groups.

Their status may be identifiable, but their legitimacy can prove more contentious. Locally-elected representatives, on the other hand, can point to a mandate provided by their election success. While the interaction of political and community actors is clearly advantageous to any forum, it also provides scope for tension, as the traditional brokerage role played by politicians is undermined (in their eyes) by non-elected persons.

Yet, these are by no means the only disparities in authority and influence in Northern Ireland, where much power rests with those involved with, or closely linked to, paramilitary groups. The decision as to whether to involve those associated with paramilitarism is a difficult one for forum organisers.

In some sense, the forum is dependent on the need to balance all viewpoints and positions within an area, but it runs the risk of alienating or excluding other sections as a result of the participation of paramilitary associates. If some groups refuse to join the forum, do not participate fully or cease to attend, it may allow others to gain influence or even control, and to use the forum to claim—however erroneously—to represent the views of an entire locality.

9.2 Opposition and buck-passing

Bringing together a range of people, some with a history of opposition or even conflict, is an unpredictable exercise. If due attention is not paid, a local civic forum may provide the opportunity for willing parties to sustain or inflame tensions. The forum may not become a space in which relationships are built and problems solved, but merely another venue for opposing views to be expressed and conflictual relationships to harden.

Even the most experienced facilitator will admit that, when introducing contentious topics into a discussion, they are not sure what issues will be raised and what the effect will be. One interviewee, whose opinions may have been shaped by their negative experiences in such a forum, explained:

> I am strongly of the view … and I know I've heard talk of forums to deal with interface issues and things like that … but in my opinion, they do not work. They will either end up in shouting matches, where people are shouting at one another, and you end up with a bad situation being made worse, or you end up with a situation where key people who have either influence on the ground—or who can actually make thing happen—will decide, 'right, this is a load of nonsense, let's get rid of this forum and let's get down to the nitty-gritty'.

The contrary challenge a forum may face is that too *much* is invested in its supposed capacity to resolve problems. The forum may then be used by those outside to pass the buck on difficult issues. While the ability of the forum to make positive changes should be recognised, undue pressure to resolve difficulties may be counter-productive in the long term.

9.3 Gaining and maintaining legitimacy

The concept of a local civic forum is not easy to grasp. Getting people to come and, more importantly, stay on board requires a degree of trust and legitimacy that can be difficult to achieve and sustain. Yet in areas that have experienced intercommunal tensions, trust is likely to be in short supply, resulting in a struggle to gain legitimacy in an apprehensive and sceptical environment.

Some local fora have been criticised by some as 'undemocratic' and 'unrepresentative', as lacking a mandate to speak for, or initiate actions on behalf of, the locality as a whole. Such difficulties can arise whatever means of recruitment is adopted. If self-appointment is chosen, balances can easily be swayed. If selection processes are followed, issues of accountability and authority have to be addressed.

The case studies have one common theme: all have had the support of the district council. But not all councils enjoy the respect of all local residents. Indeed, the behaviour of the council may be an issue in the forum itself.

The question remains: from where does a local civic forum derive its legitimacy? Is it more or less legitimate if it is seen to be independent of political structures? And will it be accorded full legitimacy by its participants? This research has highlighted that participants will only 'let go' if they feel they are embarking on a process which will not compromise their position within their own sector or community.

9.4 Unnecessary complexity

Collective approaches to problem-solving are purported to be constructive, practical and ultimately preferable. But they can also be unwieldy, time-consuming, difficult and prone to complications. While the strength of a local forum may rest in its diversity, without careful management this can ultimately lead to its demise.

The concept of a unified community within any area is misleading: the representativeness and accountability of community leaders is limited by social divisions. On any given issue, a forum may contain as many opinions as there are people in the room.

Different sectors are accustomed to working in different ways. Politicians are well versed in the art of adversarial debate, where points are often scored by denigrating the opposition. They are also accustomed to making decisions based on majority rule. The voluntary sector may be more familiar with consensus-building and 'workshopping' a problem until a solution is reached. The business community may, stereotypically, be more interested in measurable facts and figures.

So bringing diverse groups together in a space in which the priority may be relationship-building and collective problem-solving, rather than 'decision-making' in a more formal sense, may pose another challenge.

9.5 Avoiding stagnation

A forum will only be viewed as being a valuable use of time if the participants can identify benefits they and their communities will glean. In its initial phase, enthusiasm, curiosity, a desire to try a new approach or to contribute to change may lead to high attendance. This may persist if the issues are relevant, the debate is useful and progress outside detectable.

But the forum runs the risk of settling into a comfortable groove, which is neither progressive nor challenging—becoming a 'talking shop', with little real movement taking place. If a forum does not appear to be progressing or having any impact, frustration may give way to apathy and an unwillingness to give up the time to participate. The forum risks losing interest if it is not mindful of its initial objectives and cannot point to progress towards them.

9.6 Complementing other initiatives

Devolution of decision-making to regional and local levels has become a feature of government thinking in recent years. Each district-council area in Northern Ireland encompasses a plethora of initiatives, and communities are increasingly encouraged to take responsibility for addressing presenting issues and participate in identifying the most appropriate government strategy. Locally-elected representatives and community-based organisations are required to take part in many partnerships and attend countless meetings on local concerns.

If it appears that important issues are being discussed and dealt with elsewhere, a local civic forum may be perceived as irrelevant and as overlapping other structures. Yet if the forum is seen as effective, the contrary possibility exists that some may see it as a threat to their power bases, leading to the risk of attack from within and without.

The challenge, therefore, for a local civic forum is to create a space complementary to those that already exist, with features which make it uniquely valuable. Duplicating other structures is unnecessary and an inefficient use of participants' limited time. If structures do overlap, there is a danger of competition, to the detriment of all.

10. Recommendations

Community-relations practice has been on a steep learning curve over the past decade and increasingly sophisticated and effective programmes aimed at addressing interpersonal and inter-group relations have been developed and documented. But there remains much room for innovation and diversity of methodology, as community relations moves from being viewed as a peripheral concern, and the responsibility of a few, to a mainstream issue to be woven into the very fabric of society in Northern Ireland. Local civic fora represent a new approach to peace-building worthy of consideration, albeit adapted to the needs of a given context.

The diversity of approaches which can be adopted militates against any definitive recommendations on how local fora could (or should) be developed. But the key issues identified previously form the basis of the recommendations which follow, if establishment of a local civic forum is under consideration.

Do the ground work
Before embarking on any local process, there is a need to identify and analyse the underlying social and political interests inhibiting resolution of difficult issues and the development of positive relationships.

Establish clarity of purpose
Local fora should not be viewed as a panacea for all ills or a 'dumping ground' for difficult issues, and clearly defined short- and long-term goals should be defined from the outset.

Identify community stakeholders
Any credible local forum must endeavour to involve as many as possible, if not all, individuals, communities and sectors with a vested interest in creating change within the area and establish the relationships between all local stakeholders.

Address capacity issues
Prior processes should be considered if capacity within communities or sectors has been identified as an obstacle to a well-functioning and constructive forum.

Secure commitment
Potential participants should be fully informed of the process which they are being asked to embark upon and given an opportunity to contribute to the design phase of the forum.

Map the area
With a plethora of locally-based structures having been established in recent years—including district policing partnerships, community-safety initiatives and local visioning exercises—care should be taken to ensure that any new forum structures complement, rather than complicate, discussions and decisions elsewhere.

Address issues and relationships
By their nature, local fora will have to address both issues and relationships. At different moments, one may be prioritised, but both will have to be acknowledged within the forum setting.

Document the learning
Convening bodies, facilitating organisations or engaged participants should document the learning of fora as they are established and developed. Only in doing so can valuable lessons be captured, disseminated and absorbed by other potential practitioners and sponsors.

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