**Together: Building a United Community**

**Engagement Forum Summary Record**

**T:BUC and its rural impact**

Tuesday 12th Feb 2019

Killyhevlin hotel, Enniskillen

On 12th February, The Executive Office (TEO) and over 150 community practitioners, policy makers and academics gathered in Killyhevlin Hotel Enniskillen for the eighth meeting of the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) Engagement Forum. The event focused on T:BUC and its rural impact. It placed a strong emphasis on what central government and practitioners are doing to engage with rural communities and explore actions that could enable greater participation in promoting good relations.

**Andy Cole** Strategic Policy, Equality & Good Relations Directorate in the Executive Office.

Andy Cole opened the event highlighting the opportunities for everyone to listen and learn from each other. He informed the delegates The Executive Office had commissioned a mid-term stocktake of the T:BUC strategy, which was being carried out by the NI Assembly research team. He thanked Donna Blaney and wished her well on her move to a new post in the Department of the Economy. He then invited the Fermanagh and Omagh Council Chairman, Councillor Howard Thornton to provide a welcome to delegates. Following Councillor Thornton’s welcome Andy Cole invited Dr Mark Browne to speak.

**Dr Mark Browne** - Strategic Policy, Equality & Good Relations Directorate, The Executive Office (TEO).

Dr Browne welcomed delegates and offered his thanks to Councillor Thornton for his input. He referred to the participants who had previously travelled to Belfast to take part in the Forums and thanked them for their efforts stating it was now the turn of the Engagement Forum to travel further afield to Fermanagh. Dr Browne outlined the purpose of the Forum and its role in the delivery of T:BUC. He described it as a two-way conversation between government and community. He also took time to highlight the new CRC logo and its origins whilst thanking CRC for their work in organising the event. Dr Browne said there have been 10 Forums to date, with the last held in Lisburn, focusing on Children and Young People’s role in the promotion of good relations.

Feedback from previous engagement forums have included the links between rural issues and racial equality and T:BUC. Dr Browne went on to explain that racial equality was an important element of T:BUC, although it had a separate strategy focused on function and process rather than delivery. The next Engagement Forum look at cultural expression and racial equality and welcomed delegates input into the planning of the event.

He advised that whilst Stormont had not sat for over two years the very good work delivered on the ground was of paramount importance and should be continued. He noted communities are often ahead of the politicians and we should celebrate and publicise our work more. The programme on the ground continues to provide positive meaningful opportunities to promote good relations.

He noted a priority in T:BUC was Shared Community and Shared Space. and felt it important we focus on how we can provide open accessible space for all and be able to reduce the chill factor, fear and segregation within and between communities. He commented, while urban areas have very visible barriers to good relations, those barriers still existed in rural areas though not as noticeable but still as real. He noted there are currently a range of programmes being delivered in rural areas and more was being done to enhance this, including the development of capacity training for groups from six areas and working closely with rural network organisations to ensure greater participation. He outlined recent activity and work being delivered, stating it has been mentioned in the T:BUC newsletter. He invited participants to take the opportunity to outline and highlight issues impacting on rural communities.

Dr Mark Browne finished by outlining the agenda for the remainder of the day and invited the first local speaker to deliver their presentation.

**Fiona Crudden** Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

Fiona outlined a range of issues to take into account while planning to engage with the rural sector, such as the distances travelled for groups to get to various parts of the County. She noted that 5 out the 10 most remote wards in Northern Ireland are in Fermanagh. Fiona also pointed out that 3 counties of Ireland border with Fermanagh and that many people naturally travel to towns in the south from Fermanagh as they are physically the closest towns to them. Tourism and agriculture are the mainstay economic drivers in Fermanagh and this has an impact on when it’s best to engage with local communities. For example April to September are the busiest times for local communities. Similarly, local market days and weather have an impact on people’s availability to participate in community activities. Fiona pointed out that the poor road infrastructure has an impact on how far groups are prepared to travel to events and activities. She explained that 20-30mins travel time was a max for most people.

Fiona commented, whilst the population was spread out, many people knew each other as extended families and one must be aware of this while engaging with people. People often attended meetings while informally representing several groups. Fiona pointed out funding schemes should reflect the needs of the local groups who tended to seek funding a short time before the actual delivery date. This, she had found had proved difficult for many groups as the District Council’s funding schemes required applications to be presented at least 6 months before the delivery date.

Fiona highlighted the importance of local community volunteers and the considerable input and contribution they make to the successful delivery of projects and there are many other positive outcomes noted than just those required by T:BUC.

Fiona stressed the importance of good communication between groups using roundtable meetings and conversation circles. This has led to greater participation at events and better scheduling of projects between groups, thus reducing participant numbers being split. She has found groups are now using social media to keep in touch with one another to enable more joined up community activity delivery.

Fiona outlined the differences in approach needed to facilitate the diverse needs of the various groups pointing out that one size / method of approach does not work for every group.

Fiona concluded by saying that the positive outcomes are an increase in community ownership, empowerment and trust, which has led to greater participation and communication within and between communities.

**Charmain Jones** Rural Community Network (RCN)

Charmain outlined her work as a lone worker delivering good relations work on behalf of RCN across Northern Ireland. RCN has 300 members across rural Northern Ireland and good relations is core to the delivery of all of RCN’s practice. Many challenges face Charmain in the delivery of her work and she is often faced with groups and individuals not willing to engage in good relations work as it is often seen as “opening a can of worms” or “there are no good relations issues in the area”. Charmain noted whilst there may be no physical interfaces, there are both historic and deeply personal barriers, experienced by many people within rural areas. She went on to explain that the perception of interfaces was a very personal one within the rural community, with hugely different perceptions of interfaces depending on people’s own personal experiences.

In her experience many policy makers do not take account of the unique needs of rural communities whilst developing policy. Charmain stressed the importance of placing rural issues on a par with urban issues and felt it was an important step for policy makers to ‘rural proof’ their work.

Charmain went on to outline the need to take time when working with rural groups and to be prepared, with a good background knowledge of the community with whom one plans to work. Effective practice includes collaborative work wherever possible, to ensure maximum success, with importance being placed on innovation and creativity when working with groups and individuals. In finishing Charmain also highlighted the need to maintain a high level of communication between all parties using a variety of methods.

Dr Browne responded to Charmain’s presentation and agreed collaboration was vital to delivery and placing rural needs on a par with urban needs was also essential. He acknowledged that sustainability of funding was an important issue and gave a commitment to explore ways in which the current 1-year funding cycle could be extended to multi-year. He invited Warren Abercrombie from the Erne East Partnership to speak.

**Warren Abercrombie** Erne East Partnership

Warren opened by outlining the background and work being delivered by the Erne East Partnership, which is made up of 14 local groups from 6 community wards. This amounted to 156 square miles of area the Partnership covered. The Partnership’s main focus was the running of the Oak Healthy Living Centre in Lisnaskea, which provided a range of support services within the local community. Warren went on to say the Partnership had acknowledged the need for more focused community relations work and to incorporate community relations as a central element of their service delivery. As part of this process, the Lisnaskea Men’s Shed project was developed. This enabled men to engage in shared interest projects whilst building trust and respect for each other. This in turn empowered the group to participate in more challenging conversations in a safe space. Warren demonstrated to delegates the work being delivered by showing a range of images and photographs of their work. Through this, Warren demonstrated the positive impact the Men’s Shed was having on participants. They had now rolled the project out to deliver a mobile Men’s Shed across the local area.

The ethos and values of the project were important elements of Erne East Partnerships work, to ensure everyone respected each other as part of the good relations process.

Warren pointed out the initial targets and outcomes for the project were exceeded by the proactive involvement of the participants.

At this point in the presentation Warren introduced Paddy Reilly to speak about his experience participating in the Men’s Shed. Paddy spoke of the positive experience and the support he has received. He spoke of his personal circumstances, and how the Men’s Shed project contributed positively to his wellbeing and mental health. He also made new friends learned a lot from other participants.

Dr Mark Browne responded to the presentation, highlighting the need for positive engagement and purposeful activity in order to build confidence. This in turn enables people to talk and better communicate with each other on challenging conversations. Mark went on the praise the importance of the values upheld within the project and this positive experience enabled the project to travel in new directions adding richness and value.

Mark thanked all the speakers.

After a short break Paul Killen of CRC outlined the subjects and locations of the workshops.

**Workshop session**

Delegates took part in workshops to discuss the questions below. Dr Browne facilitated the discussion and invited the panellists to respond to the key points highlighted in the workshops.

**Question 1**

**What are the unique issues that impact upon good relations outcomes in rural communities**?

Dr Mark Browne invited Donna Blaney from TEO to respond to the points from question 1.

Donna Blaney noted a couple of main points. Firstly she noted physical differences in infrastructure and difficulties in accessing services with impacting on travel, costs and time. Secondly, communities’ attitudes and perceptions of good relations varied from “we don’t have a problem” to “don’t rock the boat”. It is clear communities seem to be living in a situation where they don’t need to change as they are broadly single identity, with access to services without the need to engage with others. Therefore there wasn’t a push from within communities for change.

Further, the capacity of groups was an important factor funders needed to be aware of, and not to assume that one size fits all. Similarly, funders need to be aware that thresholds of the number of participants or what defines a rural group, is it size of population in an areas or geographical location? Reliance on high-level deprivation indices by funders may not reflect the true nature of a given area. She finished by saying the demographic makeup of rural areas is changing with young people moving away, leaving older communities behind. These communities require interventions and support in making the delivery of good relations a purposeful activity and a normal part of every day life.

**Question 2**

**What additional help and support is required to improve good relations outcomes in rural communities?**

Panellist Jacqueline Irwin, CEO, Community Relations Council reported back on the findings from question 2.

She started by raising the issue of what actually is rural and how is it defined? She noted that it is a matter of scale, for example while the Engagement Forum was in a rural area, we were in fact in Enniskillen, regarded as a large town.

Jacqueline suggested there is a need for the production of a rural dos and don’ts for event delivery and ‘rural proofing’ by policy makers and programme managers needs to be enhanced. Funders working in rural areas need to take rural specific issues into account. She also noted there is a real need to develop local networks and improve communication including broadband and phone networks.

She acknowledged collaboration was very important though difficult to achieve. The sharing of skills would go some way to enable groups to work together in meaningful ways and allow for groups to find common ground. Exploring what can be done together would build trust between groups.

An important issue to come out of the workshops was the need to support and develop local volunteers. They vital in the delivery of local activities. Further, collaboration between funders was also important with space being given for projects to work through a trial and error process to find what worked best in each area.

**Question 3**

**What actions can be taken now to improve rural good relations and who should be involved and how?**

Charmain Jones, RCN to responded to the points from question 3.

Charmain emphasised funding was important but more so the need by funders to be clearly aware of issues that impact on local rural groups.

She illustrated the point by providing the example of organisations receiving funding to deliver work in rural areas without actually engaging with the groups prior to receipt of funding and then not being clear as to the issues impacting on the local groups. Charmain expressed concern over the idea of parachuting in training and development support without providing ongoing follow up support to the groups after the short term project has been completed. Charmain felt this approach actually did more harm than good, leaving local groups left vulnerable and unsupported, also funders needed to be more flexible in their approaches, everything from criteria, timing of grant applications to expectations of results.

The issue of shared space was raised and it was noted that neutral venues and shared space are very limited in rural areas and available venues are very difficult to access. Her final point was collaboration was vitally important in the success of rural good relations work and that much more should be done to highlight and celebrate the successes.

**Closing Remarks**:

Dr Mark Browne thanked the panel and delegates. He updated the conference on the date of next Engagement Forum, 21st May 2019, in the Guildhall, Derry~Londonderry. The Community Relations Council will be providing a summary report for publication on The Executive Office and Community Relations Council websites. Dr Mark Browne extended an invitation to complete the evaluation forms and thanked all for participating. He then invited everyone to view the work of the visual artist and to view the marketplace stalls.