



PUBLIC ASSEMBLIES, PARADES AND PROTESTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Forthspring Inter Community Group Response

Introduction

Forthspring Inter Community Group is committed to working with local people in the Springfield/Woodvale area, promoting good relations within and between these communities. Forthspring is situated on the Falls/Shankill interface and has over 10 years experience of providing services on a cross community basis.

Our vision is of a diverse and peaceful community, where all people are free to live with dignity, hope, respect and understanding.

Forthspring has been successful in providing a much needed safe and welcoming environment where people from both communities can meet and find a different way from the violence and division of the past.

Forthspring brings together Protestants and Catholics to increase tolerance, understanding and trust by supporting people to talk about their religious, cultural and political similarities and differences within a safe space.

Using a community development approach, a range of programmes are delivered that bring together people of all ages to move across the wall and to break down barriers. These include youth provision, work with men and women, mothers and toddlers, after schools and senior citizens. Current projects include a local history project, good relations and planning for your future that engages local people in exploring the potential for social and economic development and the changing planning environment.

Parading

Parading is a major concern for both the communities Forthspring engages with. The annual Whiterock Parade raises tensions in the area and on occasions has given rise to major civil disorder. Any mechanism that offered as a resolution to the parading issues would inevitably benefit community relations locally.

Response to Consultation

In speaking to a range of users of Forthspring a wide range of points were made in relation to the consultation.

1. The consultation document is itself complex, difficult and overly legalistic to the point where it was often necessary to refer to the proposed legislation to make any sense of the explanatory notes.
2. There was no attempt to engage local people, particularly people most affected by the parading issue, in the consultation process. A series of public meetings would have at least signalled a commitment to listening, engagement and dialogue. All principles advocated within the proposals to resolve contentious issues but ignored by the consultation process.
3. It was questioned whether there was benefit in widening the scope of legislation to all forms of public assembly when the contentious issue is parading. Although others have and will express concern on perceived limitations placed on the right to public assembly it was generally not felt that this was as great a threat as imagined in that the proposed legislation does not restrict public assemblies and allows for late notification of assemblies. A greater concern is the unnecessary scope of the legislation and the proposed level of bureaucracy that is involved with the establishment of the laboriously named Office of Public Assemblies, Parades and Protests and Public Assemblies, Parades and Protests Body. There was concern that the new proposals would not necessarily do anything much different from the Parades Commission other than introduce more complexity and cost.
4. In contrast to the view expressed above some thought that the requirement of 37 days notice was placing an unnecessary burden on organisers of parades. Others were keen to stress that any legislation should place very rigorous requirements on organisers particularly in relation to the consumption of alcohol and litter by spectators as well as participants.
5. The absence of a 'Code of Conduct' made it impossible to comment on what was being required of organisers and participants in parades and protests.
6. A major weakness was the absence of a definition of 'sectarian harassment'.

7. There is a welcome commitment in the proposals to be open and transparent at all stages and when agreements are reached or adjudications made to publish these.

CONCLUSION

The general tone of people's responses when discussing parading generally, and the consultation in particular, was that people want a resolution to the issue. Contested parades raise tensions locally, give rise to interface violence and foster distrust and division. The high levels of security at contentious parades cause disruption. Contentious parades are costly. They foster a negative image of the locality they take place in. When things go wrong they give rise to serious violence.

The overwhelming majority of people Forthspring spoke to and listened to subscribe to the view that the way forward on contentious parades is through dialogue and agreement. If this requires new structures to be achieved they would be supported. However there are real concerns that the structures suggested are unnecessarily complex, too broad in their scope and have been presented as a fait accompli in a top down manner. Progress has been made on the parading issue. It has been a divisive issue for well over 150 years. It is unlikely to be resolved without a commitment to listening to and engaging people in an ongoing process of dialogue.