



Investing in Trust Building
and
'Good Relations'
in a
Public Sector Organisation

SUMMARY REPORT



INTERNATIONAL FUND
FOR IRELAND

The Future Ways Programme
University of Ulster
in association with
Counteract



counteract



**Investing in Trust Building
and
'Good Relations'
in a
Public Sector Organisation**

**The Relationships in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence
(REDI)**

**The REDI Process with
Newry and Mourne District Council
Comhairle an Iúir agus Mhúrn
(1998 – onwards)**

SUMMARY REPORT



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¹ Joe Law and Stevie Nolan are now with Trademark organisation



INTERNATIONAL FUND
FOR IRELAND

This **publication** has been made possible with financial support from the International Fund for Ireland (Community Bridges Programme)

The Community Bridges Programme of the International Fund for Ireland aims to support groups and organisations which promote greater dialogue and understanding and tackle issues of division between people from different cultural and religious traditions within Ireland. The Programme, which is dedicated to supporting specific strategic and innovative community relations and cross border practice on the island of Ireland, is proactive in bringing forward projects which address the needs and gaps in provision not catered for by the statutory bodies.

Under the Programme priority is given to four different areas:-

- Community based initiatives seeking to address issues of conflict and division, particularly in interface areas;
- Intermediary groups and non governmental organisations whose main task is to develop the capacity of communities or organisations to address issues of conflict;
- Networks which may combine to cover particular geographic locations or concentrate on specific social policy themes;
- And finally developing appropriate community relations dimension and policies within institutions or across entire sectors of society.

ISBN 1 - 85923 - 167 - 5



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to acknowledge the Community Bridges Programme of the International Fund for Ireland in their generous support of this strategic institutional change project within the Public Sector.

We thank Mr Joe Hinds and his staff for their accessibility and advice.

We also wish to thank the Community Relations Unit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for supporting this project to mainstream community relations within the work of a public organisation.

We thank the Councillors, the Chief Executive and the Staff of Newry and Mourne District Council for their welcome and openness to our work and for their honesty and preparedness to learn with us.

We thank Birmingham City Council, West Midlands Police, West Midlands Black Police Association, Ian Grosvenor and Ranjit Sondhi from the University of Birmingham, Chinese Community Association, Birmingham Partnership Against Racial Harassment, Wyrley Birch Development Group, Housing Association (Connaught Gardens), Joe Cocker and the various community groups for their time and input which made the Study Trip to Birmingham in October 1999 such a success.



AIM OF REDI²

To grow the capacity of Newry and Mourne District Council to learn to make a meaningful and practical contribution to the development of more fair, stable and open communities on an ongoing basis.

² REDI stands for “Relationships in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence”. This evolved from the report by Future Ways in 1997 on the three principles of Equity, Diversity and Interdependence.



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'Why Good Relations?'

For more than thirty years, public life in Northern Ireland has been assailed by conflict and lack of trust forming the backdrop against which everything else in political, social and economic life is measured. People have easily become reduced to mono-cultural identities within the logic of the conflict. These so-called single-identities have limited our capacity to form meaningful relationships and networks which cross into 'enemy' territory.

The logic of segregation has become the accepted 'common sense', implicitly underpinning many approaches to providing facilities and services or funding local organisations. This 'common sense' has been evidenced in both formal procedures and programmes underpinning a 'logic of the ghetto' or in informal ways of working that replicate and strengthen the 'logic of silence'.

Thus while workplaces have remained formally mixed, they have been regulated by the imposition of the 'neutral working environment' which automatically precludes all meaningful interaction on areas of conflict in the name of containing the worst possibilities of conflict. Some residential areas have remained statistically mixed, but usually on the basis of silence and polite interaction.

Without doubt, there have been significant social and economic costs. Most importantly for the future, the possibilities for learning together have diminished and this has a long-term impact on resources, employment, knowledge, information and ultimately on this society's capacity for innovation and the exploitation of new opportunities.

Over the years, there have been many initiatives aimed at alleviating this situation. The Agreement of 10 April 1998 was the culmination of efforts by many people and groups in political life and civil society. In this Agreement and the subsequent Programme for Government, the development of a culture of equality and the building of trust are recognised as central strands in generating a sustainable society.

Our vision – as set out in the Agreement – is of a peaceful, cohesive, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society, firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and the protection and vindication of human rights for all. (Programme for Government, Northern Ireland Executive, 2001)

Yet aside from words, there is a yawning absence of any operational core to trust building in Northern Ireland. For many people and institutions in Northern Ireland, the only way to cope with the tensions and dangers of politics was and is to ruthlessly eliminate all trace of them in any inter-community setting.

Debates about identity and diversity have been overwhelmingly shaped as parallel claims for self-assertion while debates on equality focused on narrowly quantitative measures which took no account of the costs of social apartheid. Measures aimed at fostering social relationships that were both desirable and sustainable in Northern Ireland have often run at cross-purposes to one another.

In 1997, Future Ways identified a need to refocus community relations work on its underlying intentions within the framework of liberal democracy; equity, diversity and interdependence. This implied a desire to articulate the principles which community relations work sought to embody. In theory at least, the articulation of first principles could then release community relations work from the caricature of perceived practice and challenge all elements of society to consider their contribution to real common goals.

Since then, the Northern Ireland Act, which translated into United Kingdom law the core elements of the Belfast Agreement, has formally begun to recognise the interconnection between equality and trust-building. Under section 75 of the Act, which established a new single Equality Commission, all public bodies have a duty to provide services paying due regard to the need to promote equality under nine different categories and having regard to the need to promote good relations among people of differing religious or racial background and among those of different political beliefs.



In theory at least, the introduction of the good relations dimension into legislation, with regards to political and religious divisions, extended the focus of trust-building beyond traditional community relations work to the core of Northern Ireland society. It did so within a context where the persistent policy preference for addressing community relations at its most visible points of failure – urban ghettos, victims work, work with paramilitaries – or among constituencies accepted as important for the future – children and young people – had ensnared community relations work within a centre-periphery paradigm. Such limited approaches mistakenly presumed a broadly healthy core of society with marginal manifestations of sectarian violence. Such a paradigm suggests that the politically weakest groups in Northern Ireland should be the focus of policy concern. Mistrust and violence were not seen as proper areas of active concern in many areas of Northern Irish society. Indeed, the very 'bracketing off' of large areas of activity is held up as success, and has become habitual. Outside the points of greatest stress, tensions are largely contained by silence and legislative exclusion from the public domain.

Really paying regard to the need to promote good relations means reversing the core adaptive pattern of learning in Northern Ireland; denial and avoidance. This strategy has been most successful where it has been least visible; in the protected central core of socio-economic life. In spite of thirty years of violence there is a distinct lack of any culture of open-ended innovation in the area of trust-building within the public sector, private sector and even vast areas of the voluntary sector. If good relations are to be taken seriously, however, there must be a move away from the centre-periphery paradigm towards a model which expects change to be led by those with the greatest capacity to model change – i.e. those at the heart of political, social and economic life. While the immediate needs of areas and groups which have suffered disproportionately must continue to receive the lion's share of public **financial support**, the possibilities for real change depend at least as much on the active **engagement and learning** of core public, voluntary and private activity across the whole of Northern Irish society.

While the recognition of the need to promote good relations at the core of public life is to be welcomed, it also generates a difficult paradox; real change depends on new commitments rather than legislative coercion. While legislation provides an essential floor, below which rights to equitable treatment and recognition of difference cannot slip without damage to civilisation itself, the long-run sustainability of this society depends on the real commitment of people to the principles underlying the legislation.

Trying to enforce something called 'Good Relations' may therefore result in worse relations unless it stems from an ongoing dialogue within the community and between the public services and their stakeholders. The lack of any developed mechanisms to work out these issues, means that the commitment to good relations has remained largely theoretical, while employers have focused their attention on avoiding the financial penalties of failing to meet with the requirements of equality-proofing. For organisations to commit to change, they need to be shown that improved relationships have a direct bearing on an improved quality of life and their own capacity to achieve key organisational goals.

The result is a yawning gap between the expressed wish in many organisations to contribute to better relationships and the absence of any practical programmes to address this aspiration. Very little progress has been made in devising appropriate models of engagement for a wide range of organisations and sub-cultures across Northern Ireland, leaving legislators in the invidious position of imposing regard for an aspiration (good relations) which nobody has the slightest idea how to translate into practice. Before we proceed with further legislation, which enforces conformity with pre-ordained but practically non-existent outcomes, we need measures which support the development of a culture of learning, and developments which encourages innovation and commitment in pursuit of an agreed vision and values.

The notion of community relations or good relations 'training' is thus entirely inadequate to the task facing organisations in Northern Ireland. Instruction is inappropriate when exploring open-ended questions and issues. Instead of looking to 'training' to deliver good relations in Northern Ireland,



PREAMBLE

the focus must shift to cultures which encourage learning and allow capacity to grow. In a context where there are no fixed models of practice, an invitation to explore the hard, practical implications of equity, diversity and interdependence in an organisation is an invitation on to unmapped territory. Capacity building will require dialogue, open inquiry, problem solving, design, implementation and reflection. The key measure of success in such policy will be the growth of really new capacity across public life in Northern Ireland to deal with difficult, but real, problems. It must not be the instant promotion of surface harmony, which leaves underlying issues untouched.

The REDI project in Newry and Mourne District Council grew out of precisely these considerations. While the development of a practical model of evolving good relations was not an expressed goal of the project, it was clear from the publication of the Northern Ireland Act that this was indeed what the project was about. Starting with an empty page, the task of the project was not to address specific issues but to develop a space in which all issues causing conflict and tension in the Council could be acknowledged and shaped into practical ways forward. Among the most important issues was the piloting of a new culture of learning in which the Council sought to move from a perceived partisan culture, a culture which polices neutrality, to one which fosters and protects diversity. The protection and promotion of these questions requires the active participation of many people holding leadership positions with the experiences and concern of others who have a stake in their groups or organisations.

As we discovered, generating contexts where people can be at ease rather than patrolled is an extremely delicate and difficult process in Northern Ireland, involving organisations learning to do what they have little or no previous experience of doing and therefore often have every inclination to avoid.

The claim of this project is therefore not to have provided a finished model, but to have grasped a very poisonous nettle, drawn its sting a little and found that life together here, with all its discomforting properties, can be imagined and promoted. This project, and others like it, has begun to map out the territory of the question behind good relations in Northern Ireland; how is this to be achieved?

Duncan Morrow
Karin Eyben
Derick Wilson

14 January 2003



The Relationships in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (REDI) process was a three year pilot project, between Newry and Mourne District Council and two external partners – Counteract and Future Ways, to ‘mainstream’ community relations. The project was funded by the Community Bridges Programme of the International Fund for Ireland and the Community Relations Unit of the OFMDFM.

It is a story of a local Council wishing to value the diversity of its staff, improve the quality of life of all its citizens, address local distrust between the different political traditions and seek to promote an interdependent community locally.

The process began prior to the introduction of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) and the obligations now facing public sector organisations to ‘promote good relations’. As such, this report offers one story of how a public sector organisation attempted to **commit** itself to ‘good relations’ with regards to political and religious relationships before facing the legal obligation to pay ‘regard to good relations’.

This summary report condenses the story of the REDI process and key learnings set out in a larger reflections report³. This summary details the background to the process, key points in the process and the key learnings to emerge. We would encourage readers interested in an in-depth understanding of how an organisation engaged with ‘good relations’ to read the full report.

‘Mainstreaming’ and ‘Community Relations’

The understanding of Future Ways and Counteract is that ‘mainstreaming’ is about growing the personal and organisational capacity to think, see, hear and learn in new ways, generating creative ways of working and engaging with both old and emerging issues.

Our understanding of ‘community relations’ is about supporting people acknowledge and move beyond the dynamics of fear, silence and avoidance that have shaped majority-minority relations in Northern Ireland, infecting both public and private life

We believe that there is a central civic leadership task for the public sector to act as a contrast, modelling more open and inclusive relationships, both internally and in their relationships with local communities. The REDI process emerged out a commitment by Newry and Mourne District Council to act as this contrast through seeking innovative ways of challenging sectarianism and building a sense of shared community.

The make up, histories and experiences of the Counteract/Future Ways partnership are intimately interwoven through this story. REDI has been an important learning experience for us during these last four years, as it has been for Newry and Mourne District Council.

We thank the Community Bridges Programme of the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and the, then, Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU)⁴ for funding REDI; it was an important signal of both their commitment to institutional change and learning about how trust building could be mainstreamed in organisational practice in this transition period in Northern Ireland.

We also thank the elected representatives, Chief Executive and staff of Birmingham City Council for hosting the REDI Development Group on a study trip in October 1999.

REDI was made possible by the openness and patience of Newry and Mourne District Council. This was particularly important during times when all was not clear or evident with regards to where the process was going and why. Without the persistence of the staff and elected representatives, this process would have remained a good idea lying on some dusty shelf.

³ The full report of the REDI process is available from the Future Ways Programme, University of Ulster.

⁴ Now the Community Relations Unit (CRU) located within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFM and DFM)



BACKGROUND

There are no agreed texts or templates about how trust can be built in a society moving out of conflict. The funders, councillors and staff of Newry and Mourne District Council have enabled some of the contours of such a process to be mapped out and some new paths to a more inclusive future to be trodden. Through a process such as REDI it becomes clear that despite 'good relations' legally being less of a priority than 'equality', in practice a failure to address relationships will undermine all attempts to achieve true equality of opportunity.



The story of the REDI process is broken down into **seven steps** beginning with the 'Invitation' stage, which sets the scene and outlines how Counteract and Future Ways became involved.

STEP 1 INVITATION (June 1996 – March 1998)

REDI emerged out of a number of strands of work carried out by Counteract and Future Ways members. This meant that we had a limited credibility and a relationship base with Newry and Mourne District Council that facilitated preliminary negotiations.

- Billy Robinson and Joe Law (Counteract) carried out some anti-sectarian training for councillors and staff in Hilltown in 1996, following a Fair Employment Tribunal case. The Council then requested that the training programme be delivered to the whole organisation. However, local government elections (1997) interrupted negotiations and the process stalled.
- Duncan Morrow (Future Ways) facilitated a session with local politicians in 1997 organised by the Community Relations Officer (CRO), Aisling Rennick, and Carmel Heaney, the then Community Relations Training Support Officer in the Community Relations Council (CRC). This was the beginning of a conversation with local politicians regarding the tension between party political and civic leadership roles.
- Karin Eyben, Duncan Morrow and Derick Wilson (Future Ways) had published a research text⁵ that introduced a new framework for locating community relations practice. This highlighted the need for public bodies and voluntary agencies to re-examine their understanding of community relations in a changing political and social context.

In 1997, Newry and Mourne District Council became increasingly concerned about relationships with the minority Protestant and Unionist communities in the Borough. Of particular concern was the low numbers of Protestants employed within the council. Following a series of discussions with the Fair Employment Commission⁶ regarding this issue, the Council began seeking ways of addressing the problem.

With active encouragement from Joe Hinds (Community Bridges Programme, International Fund for Ireland) who was keen to build up an institutional change aspect to his funding programme, Counteract's early anti-sectarian training package⁷ was transformed into REDI in partnership with the Future Ways Programme. Joe Hinds and Billy Robinson carried out the preliminary negotiations with the Council. They attended a number of meetings with councillors and senior staff towards eventually persuading the Council to adopt the REDI initiative.

In reality, the Council did not need a great deal of urging. 'Community relations' was primarily understood as the engagement between Catholics and Protestants, which did not pose a significant threat to mainstream nationalism - the dominant power base within the Council. Republicanism had more fears around the 'perceived middle class agenda of community relations seeking to make Northern Ireland's boundaries more comfortable and thereby permanent.'

Unionist politicians tended to be quiet, adopting a wait and see approach. The costs for them were potentially higher than for their nationalist and republican counterparts. However, overall, REDI was perceived at that time as a 'good thing to do' without much likelihood of upsetting existing relationships.

The origins of REDI confirm that change can never be completely planned nor the results foreseeable. The various *ad hoc* interventions that both Future Ways and Counteract initiated some years prior to REDI were brought together under Joe Hinds' institutional change programme within the IFI's Community Bridges Programme.

⁵ Eyben, Morrow and Wilson, *A Worthwhile Venture? Practically Investing in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence in Northern Ireland*, University of Ulster, 1997.

⁶ Now a directorate within the new Equality Commission

⁷ Section on Harassment in the Workplace, *'The Inside Stories'* – A Trainer's Resource Pack (Video), Counteract, November 1995.



STEP 1

INVITATION

(June 1996 – March 1998)

Joe Hinds and Billy Robinson saw the possibility of turning a traditional anti-sectarian training programme into something more holistic. Within the Council, a number of staff, Trade Unions and elected representatives carried memories of the Counteract training session in Hilltown. They were particularly struck by the impact of majority complacency on minorities and became ready advocates to push REDI through their respective constituencies. This history of past relationships proved invaluable in persuading the Council to become a partner: Counteract had a proven track record with the staff and Future Ways carried credibility with the councillors.

What happened?

The early days were taken up with gaining an initial commitment to the process by negotiating with different key stakeholders in the Council. This included separate meetings with different political parties, Trade Unions and senior staff over a period of eight months.

We began with elected representatives as the policy makers within the Council. Once the consent of all the parties had been secured at the monthly Council meeting, we began meeting with staff and Trade Unions.

The purpose of these meetings was to:

- Introduce ourselves and establish our credibility.
- Explain the aims of REDI and outline the first steps.
- Examine the distinct roles and contributions needed from each group.
- Seek commitment to the process.
- Ask each of these groups to nominate representatives for the REDI Development Group.
(See STEP 2)

These difficult negotiations entailed striking a balance between appealing to people's self interests whilst simultaneously introducing the notion that REDI was not primarily about products but about examining and changing core relationships. Finding arguments that were relevant to different constituencies was key. There was no single argument; each has to be tailored to the needs and interests of particular groups of people.

Councillors on the whole were open to the argument that community relations had been left up to young people and to the vulnerable; that it was time for community relations to enter mainstream bodies as a 'hard-nosed' issue. Nationalist councillors were also keen for Newry and Mourne District Council to be seen as the first and the best. Unionist councillors were swung by the argument that 'fair' and 'inclusive' councils were more likely to take on powers previously held by quangos. As the only party in the Council which was represented across all the wards, the SDLP were particularly aware of the need to be sensitive to diverse communities: for example, their policy on the Irish language in South Down would have to be very different to their approach in South Armagh.

Trade Unions were convinced that issues of fairness and intimidation had to be addressed as a core Council task. They were also interested in the possibilities of engaging with managers in a new manner in light of a series of new initiatives being landed on local government such as Single Status and Best Value.

The **Senior Management team** was initially the most sceptical. This was partly due to the stresses being placed on the team with the imminent departure of the Chief Executive and a turnover in a number of positions. In addition, as managers in a public authority, they felt snowed under with change initiatives sent out by government. There might also have been resistance to a theme such as community relations suddenly moving from the periphery to centre stage, implicitly threatening



existing structures and power relations. Taking into account all the other demands being placed on them, it was understandable that some managers thought there was little point to the whole exercise, although this changed later once a new team was appointed.

There were restrictions to how inclusive REDI was in those early days. We limited our engagements to councillors, senior managers and Trade Unions – representative figures. Our failure to meet 'local line leaders' – supervisors, middle management, and front-line staff - haunted us over the years, particularly at the stage of implementation. This is one important learning for future programmes.

Probably, it would have been impossible to meet everyone and gain whole Council assent to move with REDI. Nevertheless, the lack of involvement and understanding of local line leaders and the wider staff body at the beginning of such a process could have led to, at best, a lack of interest and, at worst, active resistance. We were very fortunate that this was not the experience in Newry and Mourne.

STEP 1 – Outcomes

- The REDI Programme was agreed by all political parties.
- Trade Unions, management and councillors nominated representatives to the Development Group.
- Funding was agreed by the IFI and CCRU.
- Initial concerns, ideas and issues were raised by the different groups.
- Counteract's and Future Ways' credentials were outlined and reputations established.

STEP 1 – Recognised Challenges

- The partnership between Future Ways and Counteract was initially based on past relationships and friendships rather than formal agreements and designated roles and responsibilities.
- Because REDI was the first programme of its kind, there was a lack of stories and examples to help people understand what REDI was about.
- Communication across the Council with regards to REDI should have been better structured.



STEP 2

ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING A PARTNERSHIP BASED ON CRITICAL DIALOGUE (April 1998 – present)

This step had two main purposes:

- 1 To begin growing a learning culture within the **formal leadership** group (Senior Management team and elected representatives) while clarifying their roles and responsibilities in this process;
- 2 To legitimise **informal leadership** through the establishment of a Development Group (a group composed of different grades, responsibilities, identities and voices within the Council).

The quality and sustainability of the dialogue between the formal leadership and the Development Group was critical for the success of the project.

What happened? – Establishing the Development Group

Following the introductory meetings described in Step 1, the Senior Management team, the elected representatives and the Trade Unions nominated representatives for the Development Group. Other staff members were also invited to participate either in terms of their known interest in the issues or to ensure a diversity of geography and perceived identities.

In theory, the breakdown of membership was as follows:

- Each of the political parties nominated one representative. The group of independent members were also asked to nominate one representative. (5)
- The Trade Union Sub-Committee nominated three representatives. (3)
- The Senior Management team nominated two managers, excluding the Chief Executive. (2)
- The Community Relations Officer and Chief Executive were present as two standing members. (2)
- The Personnel Department nominated two people. (2)

(Total = 14 members)

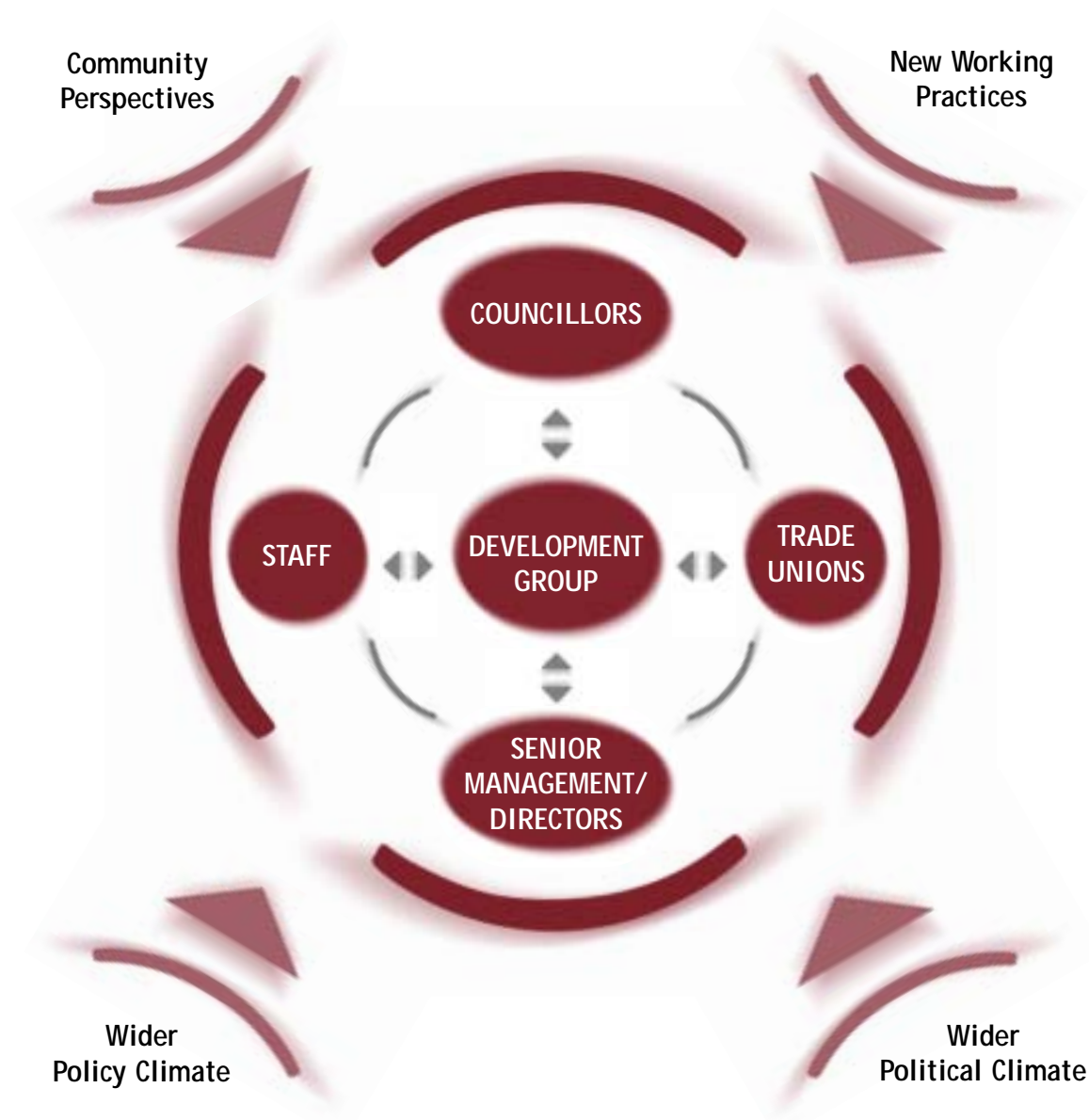
Members were also asked to nominate shadows to cover periods of absence; this was particularly important to maintain a councillor presence. In practice, what happened was that members often turned up with their shadows, which immediately doubled the size of the group.

On the one hand we wanted to encourage interest and participation, avoiding the perception that the Development Group was a closed group with membership limited to the chosen few. On the other hand, membership needed to be consistent and manageable for the group to function properly.

Membership criteria were loosely based on ensuring that Protestants/Unionists and women made up a third of the group. It would be fair to say that we achieved the latter but not the former. This was partly due to:

- The low numbers of Protestants employees within the staff body;
- The unwillingness of those from the political 'minority' community to be seen and heard.

More importantly, the low numbers of Protestants on the Development Group was due to our own uncertainties in the initial stages of this process. We were not clear or strong enough with the Council in insisting on the necessary 'one-third' balance. In subsequent programmes of work we have insisted on such balances being secured for the relevant minorities.

DIAGRAM 1 The Development Group⁸ Model

The Development Group

The Development Group was established:

- To create **space** for people from different constituencies in the council to be together in a new manner.
- To offer an **opportunity** for people to meet together as people living and working locally as democratically elected representatives as well as directors, staff and Trade Unions.
- To legitimise spending **time** reflecting on the Council's civic responsibility in assisting cohesion and trust-building within the council as well as within the wider community.

⁸ The term Development Group was first used in this work by Brendan McAllister, Director of Mediation Northern Ireland when developing a partnership project with Future Ways in 1998.



STEP 2

ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING A PARTNERSHIP BASED ON CRITICAL DIALOGUE (April 1998 – present)

The creation of the REDI Development Group was a significant step in challenging the concept of leadership in local government.

Traditionally, in almost all councils, the people at the top set the direction and control those below them, demanding performance against set targets. Instead, the Development Group brought together a group of people from different levels of the organisation, different functions, backgrounds and experiences to learn together about how to think 'outside the sectarian box' and outside the rigid grade system of the public service. It took time for the group to move away from their hierarchical and representative responsibilities and for the membership to consist of those who wished to be there rather than those who were told to be there.

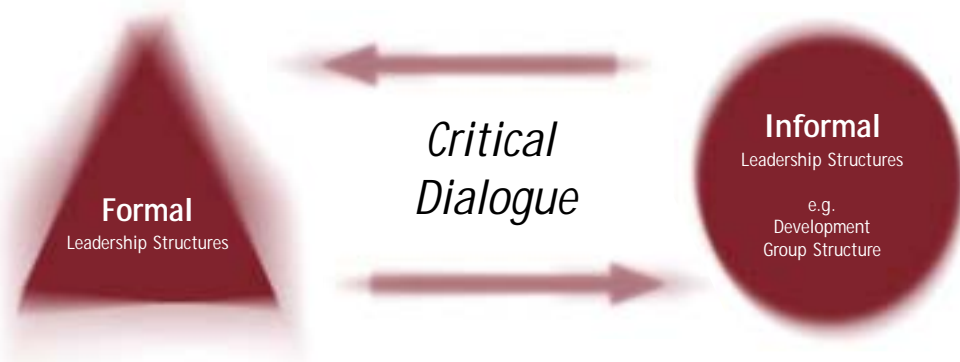
Striking the right balance between those who were critical or sceptical about REDI and our wish to invite people with the capacity and will to engage with the issues was a constant dilemma. Over time, those who did not want to be there naturally disappeared to be replaced by others who came out of either curiosity or concern. Membership began to find a more natural balance and due to the Council's commitment to REDI, and the commitment of the acting Chief Executive at that time, anyone who expressed an interest was automatically invited to participate.

With hindsight, it is clear that REDI was not only challenging the culture of silence and avoidance regarding community relations but also the public sector order of hierarchy and function. The latter consequence being one for which REDI had no express mandate. However, finding ways of relating outside of hierarchy was critical if the Development Group was to become a 'learning group'.

One of the greatest losses for organisations is when people lower down the hierarchy can only 'say the right things' to those above them. Reflection requires spaces where people are free to express their perspectives and understandings without fear of subsequent retribution.

At this step the greatest weakness, however, was the initial absence of a 'formal' senior management structure to relate to the 'informal' Development Group structure. Coupled with the lack of links to the party structures in the councillors' group, this resulted in the Development Group never really becoming tied to formal policy processes and decision-making structures. This lack of 'earthing' meant that issues arising within the Development Group often rarely fed into the formal Council processes.

DIAGRAM 2 Critical Dialogue



**STEP 2 - Outcomes**

- Establishment of a Development Group and Trade Union Working Group.
- Beginning to name the culture of silence and avoidance that surrounds majority – minority relations
- Members of the Development Group beginning to learn about one another as human beings.
- The Working Group beginning to learn about the reality of Council culture.

STEP 2 – Recognised Challenges

- Our lack of relationships with the Development Group, coupled with our own insecurities, forced us to rely on formal agenda approaches, which were often undermined by both the informal and tacit cultures of the Council.
- The focus on 'getting the business done' acted sometimes to the detriment of 'relationship building and meeting'.



STEP 3

GROWING LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT AND UNDERSTANDING ABOUT EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE ⁹ (1999 onwards)

STEP 3 was about engaging with the leadership in the organisation and growing their understanding of the issues at stake in building trust and addressing the challenge of 'good relations'. It unpacked the tacit assumptions and culture that shaped relationships both within the organisation and in the wider community. It also explored the possibilities of meaningful change and what that would look like for the organisation's core business.

What happened?

We worked with three different kinds of leadership identified by Peter Senge¹⁰ as internal networkers, local line leaders and executive leaders.

- **'Internal networkers'**
Internal networkers come from all areas and grades of an organisation. Their strength is their ability to move around the organisation, to cross departmental and hierarchical lines. They link into the informal networks and relationships that shape organisations. Their role is to participate in and grow trust across all areas and grades of the organisation and to help 'executive' and 'local line' leaders implement change. They are the 'seed carriers' of new ideas and practices. They carry ideas, support and stories through the organisation.
- **Local line leaders**
These are the front-line managers who are responsible for getting the work done. These people are vital because only they and their colleagues have the authority and experience to test out the practical impact of new ideas and approaches. Winning them over is key.
- **Executive leaders**
They establish the overall direction and give permission to others to move. They help create an environment where people can learn and grow. They must give up a feeling that they have all the answers and start listening. Through their vulnerability, they give strength for others to say 'we don't know'.

REDI attempted to grow and sustain all three kinds of leadership; 'internal networkers', local line leaders and executive leaders. We sought to generate new capacity across the three different types of leadership through a series of workshops designed to deepen understanding of the community context and the challenges and possibilities for a new kind of leadership.

Overall, the work with the Councillors (executive leaders) and the Leadership Group (networking leaders) was the most successful. The work with the Senior Managers (executive leaders) was affected by staff turnover and then, local elections, whilst engagement with local line leaders was never on the cards due to our own lack of awareness at this time.

In early 2001 we brought the Senior Management team and the Leadership Group together in an attempt to establish a critical dialogue between the 'formal' and 'informal' structures. This was a powerful experience for both 'sides'; unfortunately local government elections halted the process and some of the original impetus was lost.

Executive Leaders - Senior Management

Due to the personnel and structural changes taking place within the Senior Management team, the team only became fully involved in REDI at the end of 2000 – two years after REDI had begun. This undermined the implementation of new ideas and working practices generated by the Development Group members. Executive leaders have responsibility to take and support decisions, giving permission to experiment and risk. Without this permission, people quickly rely on established habits.

We held two introductory half-day workshops with the Senior Management team in the summer of 1999. The general themes were: 'the dynamics of harassment', 'intimidation' and 'mainstreaming equity, diversity and interdependence'. The purpose was to legitimise discussion regarding the quality of relationships within the workforce and in the wider community. This demanded a

⁹ These themes emerge from earlier research by the Future Ways Team. See footnote 5.

¹⁰ Adapted from Senge, P., *et al*, *The Dance of Change*, Doubleday Publishing, pp., 16-18, 1999.



qualitatively different kind of dialogue within the management team. An unspoken culture of Catholic, middle class Nationalism pervaded the group. They were working in the absence of any agreed vision regarding the Council's mission. We therefore decided to hold off on any more work until the post of Chief Executive had been decided and the other posts filled.

A year and a half on, the training with the senior managers was resumed with the new team committing to five days over a five-month period including a residential course. As a new team, with a new Chief Executive seeking to build stronger relationships across departmental responsibilities, there was a commitment, which had been previously absent. New appointments had led to two people from Protestant backgrounds being included in the team, although there were still no women.

The workshop programme focused on their management role as both leaders of departments and as supporting the elected representatives in meeting the Council's civic responsibilities. The workshops offered the space to have difficult conversations and deepen the existing understanding of leadership. Building understanding and commitment in this group was essential and something that REDI really needed from the beginning.

Executive Leadership – Elected Representatives

In parallel to the REDI process with staff and the Community Forum, Duncan Morrow and Aisling Rennick were responsible for developing a programme of political workshops for the councillors. Almost by accident, and for historical reasons, these became structurally and conceptually distinct from REDI. In retrospect, this is regarded as a mistake.

Following a series of workshops with councillors from four political parties (Ulster Unionist (UU), Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin (SF) and Independent) it became clear that community relations had not emerged as a serious, overt theme of the councillors, although they dealt with issues which touched on community relations in many ways. The first workshop (in Kilkeel) took the form of a general exploration of experiences of difference and exclusion. It was clear that all councillors had some experience of the impact of sectarianism on the Council. At a second session (in Warrenpoint) it became obvious that councillors had little sense of ownership of community relations policy for Newry and Mourne, regarding it as synonymous with the programme administered by the Community Relations Officer. In general terms, there was no history of policy-making in this area among Councillors.

At a third session (in Newry) councillors agreed to a programme of three sessions designed to help Councillors learn about community relations issues in general and to talk with each other about important themes.

Part of the interest of councillors in this theme was triggered by widespread irritation at the general absence of any support training in any area for local elected representatives. Community Relations workshops therefore pioneered the idea of support for local councillors. Perhaps more importantly, the councillors identified the need to engage with one another away from the press. The presence of the local press turns councillors from people who learn from one another's experience and constituencies and give civic leadership to all into people who have to assert and prove their mettle against one another and are measured by the extent to which they resist the views of their political opponents. This model of representation, applied in a context of civil fragility, subordinates all notions of civic community to ethnic supremacy. The importance of the Councillor's workshops was the discovery of the need for a private space, which was neither public nor secret.

The workshop model, which developed, involved inviting an outside speaker in for the first hour and a half and then spending the next hour with two councillors talking about their own areas and emerging issues and concerns. The idea was to extend the knowledge of wider issues and to acknowledge the depth of understanding they have of their own areas, sharing this with other councillors. The overall aim was to support councillors gain a deeper sense of each other and begin listening to different positions, hurts and histories, thus developing their role as civic leaders in the Newry and Mourne District Council area.



STEP 3

GROWING LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT AND UNDERSTANDING ABOUT EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE ⁹ (1999 onwards)

A qualitative evaluation of the workshop series was undertaken in December 2000. In general, Councillors were appreciative of the workshops and were now looking for ways to deepen their engagement on core issues. Councillors from all parties were supportive of the process and suggested a series of topics for further debate:

- Irish Language;
- keeping in touch with your own constituency while leading change;
- the economic costs of division;
- secrets;
- what can and cannot be said;
- giving offence;
- policing;
- community work and community relations;
- racism and race;
- education and community relations;
- religion and attitudes to Catholicism;
- chill factors in Newry and Mourne District Council;
- the varieties of Nationalist cultures;
- Unionism and Irish culture.

These workshops opened up the contradictions and ambiguities held by politicians regarding their civic or 'common purpose' role and their party political responsibilities. By deepening understanding among them, the 'common purpose' space was expanded a little for different councillors, with each aware of the pressures and difficulties of being seen to move away from partisan positions. Conversations created a framework within which they could think about their roles and responsibilities and the inherent contradictions of any ideological position within a civic leadership function.

Executive Leadership - Trade Union Working Group

The purpose of a Trade Union Working Group was to give a clear voice to the unions and provide a meeting space outside of their regular union/work business. It had the further purpose of legitimising their distinctive voice and supporting them in acting as an effective channel between the workforce and the REDI Development Group. This was to ensure that the Development Group remained rooted within the realities of the workforce.

Conversations within the group focused on 'equity' in terms of equal respect irrespective of background or job, 'diversity' in terms of the range of abilities, jobs, experiences and locations they worked in, 'interdependence' in terms of the quality of relationships between different unions, with their members and with management.

The main difficulty was separating industrial relations from community relations. There is an obvious overlap between REDI issues and broader issues of equity, such as single status. In addition, people who feel unfairly treated in terms of 'bread and butter' issues will probably not be willing to take a risk and engage with issues of difference and community relations. 'Bread and butter' issues are more immediate and tangible and in many ways easier to resolve.

We wanted the Trade Union Working Group to reflect the partnership culture, which underpinned REDI, and not to develop along the traditional union/management confrontations. Within Newry and Mourne District Council, there have traditionally been good relationships with the unions, with a number of managers having emerged from within the unions. The REDI Trade Union Working Group both affirmed this history and took it one step further. If Trade Unions could engage with managers on issues of sectarianism and community relations then this could only enhance the quality of engagements on industrial relations issues. The trust developed within REDI extended into other areas of union-management negotiations.

Local Line Leaders

REDI failed to engage with local line leaders. These people are probably the least visible and are at the front-line of service delivery. They represent a group of people who have to carry the burden



of externally driven change initiatives – the filling in the sandwich between those at the top and those at the bottom. This might explain why most never volunteered to become involved in REDI.

‘Networking Leaders’ – Leadership Group

Two years into REDI, a core group of staff members from the Development Group agreed to participate in a six-day workshop programme in 2000 facilitated by Future Ways and Counteract.

The objectives were:

- To support personal development.
- To link family, community and work lives and experiences of difference and discrimination.
- To deepen understanding of the possibilities for change at an individual, organisational and societal level within Northern Ireland.
- To equip people with the confidence and understanding to carry REDI principles into their workplace and wider community.

The overall purpose was to support the group to become advocates for REDI, challenging silence and fears around particularly issues of sectarianism and gender. The programme was about building the skills, knowledge and relationships necessary to ‘sense the environment’, identifying issues before they became problems and thinking creatively regarding solutions.

This group developed a sense of solidarity and understanding that crossed departments and roles and responsibilities. Their relationships provided a firm point of reference for REDI and the Development Group.

The following quotes reflect people’s thoughts upon completion of the programme in October 2000.

“I am more conscious of things – it’s been slow but I am beginning to pull things together more. I have learnt a lot by telling others about the course and this group.”

“Things have paled into insignificance through all of this. It gave me a perspective on stuff. Things no longer seem insurmountable; they are more easily dealt with. I am more likely to feel capable of dealing with problems – particularly political issues. I left things to others before but now I talk more, to politicians for example. I don’t rely on newspapers to form my judgement.”

“The community aspect so often blows everything out of the water – the emotions get in the way and stop people solving the problem. Now I can step back, analyse and take responsibility for the problem. Before I saw myself deeply involved but not now.”

“I know that if I want to challenge prejudices, I have to speak out and challenge people through my own behaviour.”

“For me, as a far flung officer, I have got a sense of togetherness through this course.”

“I have met people through this course that I don’t normally engage with – developing a common purpose and understanding.”

“Before this programme I felt isolated but now feel supported by a group of people.”

“We now listen to each other. ‘If you run it well, it will always run with you.’

Our listening qualities have developed and our confidence has grown because we know other people are listening to us.”

“I realised that REDI does not mean a dilution of identity. It does not mean leaving one’s background at the front door – my normal experience in this Council.”



STEP 3

GROWING LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT AND UNDERSTANDING ABOUT EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE ⁹ (1999 onwards)

Naming discrimination and breaking silence is often a lonely task. The relationships built during the course strengthened each person, providing a network of support within the Council to continue their work. They learnt about each other's practice and vision, breaking down the departmental and functional barriers that isolate people from one another. Through their participation in the course they developed a common vision for REDI, strengthening their commitment to becoming **seed carriers of new ideas and practices**.

Leadership Group – Senior Management Team Engagement

In early 2001, following work with both the Leadership Group and the Senior Management team, the two groups met for a half a day workshop to share experiences and insights gained so far through the REDI process. This meeting was seen as crucial in beginning to move REDI beyond the Leadership 'pilot' Group into the formal structures and working practices of the Council.

This meeting was preceded by different attempts by senior managers to engage with REDI within their departments. This followed a residential with the Senior Management team in November 2000 where Future Ways and Counteract had suggested that managers use members of the Leadership Group within their respective departments to help them think through different possibilities.

A number of the Senior Managers felt that their commitment to REDI had been enhanced following the residential course but when they approached the Leadership Group members to facilitate manager/staff discussions they had been met with a certain amount of caution from them. There were feelings of being 'spurned' and 'rebuffed'!

This was a useful learning for Counteract and Future Ways. When we spoke about successes with the Leadership Group we meant a growth in personal confidence yet the Managers heard 'a growth in group facilitation skills'; we had misrepresented the process of the course. The Leadership Group programme was not about skills training but about growing understanding around community relations, surfacing some of the fears and histories carried by people. The course was aimed at giving space to thinking about what are very difficult issues and supporting people move from compliance to commitment.

A useful learning for the Senior Managers was that by approaching staff 'to have a conversation' they were proposing an immense cultural leap. Many staff carry with them a history of past relationships shaped by the 'old' Council where such approaches would have been unheard of. A number of them carried memories of going to managers with issues and proposals and nothing happening. It was not simply a matter of 'having a conversation' but about changing deep assumptions, prejudices and histories. Senior Managers approached the staff to have a 'rational discussion'. However, the emotions, histories and power structures carried by staff got in the way.



STEP 3 - Outcomes

- Engagement with councillors from all parties on a sustained basis regarding the dilemmas between their civic and party political roles with a new quality of conversation and listening taking place between them.
- Growing the capacity and relationships of twelve staff members, from different grades and responsibility areas, to think in a new way about issues of fairness, difference and trust-building.
- Engaging with the Senior Management team and beginning to challenge assumptions about the place of Protestants and Unionists and the role of women.
- Moving beyond the hierarchical order through bringing together the Leadership Group and Senior Management team.
- The Trade Union leadership acknowledging the importance of addressing issues of sectarianism and community relations in the workplace.

STEP 3 – Recognised Challenges

- The late involvement of Senior Managers and the lack of involvement from local line leaders, middle and front-line managers hindered the process at the beginning.
- An initial difficulty was around sharing 'learnings' or diffusion with a wider group of people within the Council who had not been part of the process.



STEP 4

IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES (September 1998)

STEP 4 consisted of a Scoping Study mapping out issues, questions, areas of good practice and areas for further development. The design and implementation of the scoping study was carried out in partnership with the Development Group.

What happened?

Key issues in the Council were identified through the Scoping Study process carried out by Future Ways and Counteract in September 1998. It was unlike a traditional audit in that the process was as important as the results; it became an opportunity to stimulate new discussions and raise awareness about majority/minority relationships by placing distinct and often deeply divided voices together in one Scoping Study report.

Aim:

To capture, document and communicate the Council's equity, diversity and interdependence 'learning history'.

Objectives:

- To begin identifying the needs, concerns and perceptions of staff, elected representatives and Trade Unions towards developing a realistic programme of work for the next year.
- To stimulate new conversations across lines of difference.
- To broaden the ownership of REDI by inviting people to participate in a discussion group or personal interviews.
- To develop a base-line enabling the Council to assess its own performance.

The study consisted of:

- Seven staff discussion groups held both within and across departments, engaging about 60% of Council staff.
- Three community discussion groups held in Kilkeel, South Armagh and Newry.
- Forty interviews or reflective conversations with elected representatives, Senior Management, officers, Trade Union officials and shop stewards.
- A short survey distributed to all staff members with a return rate of 47%.¹¹

The Development Group and the Trade Union Working Group were involved in designing the questions and screening the language of the survey. Members also attended the staff discussion group and community group sessions facilitated by Future Ways and Counteract.

The Scoping Study Interviews

The Scoping Study interviews were carried out by Future Ways.

The first draft of the Scoping Study Report was written by Future Ways and presented to the Development Group at a residential course in October 1998. This residential course became a highly significant milestone in the REDI process.

'I believe this is where we nearly all bonded. The workload was immense; we were at it from morning to night. The discussion groups, the workshops, the one to one, the bin man and the councillor, the clerical assistant and the head of department, the Trade Unionist and the personnel manager. It was really all amazing – never before had I been in a situation like this being accepted for what I am and accepted as one of the gang. It was as if I had been a mate of these people for years. (Development Group member)

As the acting Chief Executive concluded at the end of the weekend:

¹¹ See Scoping Study Report held by Newry and Mourne District Council.



'The can of worms was opened. The worms are out and they are better out than in. If we are afraid then we need to stop now. However, as long as we trust each other then these relationships can carry these fears. But be warned, it's not all going to be as easy as today or tomorrow.'

The group was transformed by an emotional energy, which hitherto had been absent. Each of the representative groups – Councillors, Trade Unions, Managers and Staff – were challenged with new perspectives. This was summed up in one councillor's musings, *'we have been taking decisions about a world and things we know nothing about'*. REDI became a little bit more real for people because of the hard issues raised during the scoping study process. REDI became a little less about nice big words and a little more about the possibilities for people's lives and relationships.

Themes raised within the scoping study were grouped under key headings with action points forming the basis of a work programme for REDI. These key headings were:

- 1 Leadership and Wider Community Dynamics.
- 2 Policy and Strategy.
- 3 Service Delivery.
- 4 Community Relations Programme.
- 5 Culture.

STEP 4 – Outcomes

The key achievement was to have successfully carried out and completed a process, which named issues and highlighted different perspectives regarding issues of equity, diversity and relationships within Newry and Mourne District Council. Using the Scoping Study objectives, specific achievements included:

- To begin identifying the needs, concerns and perceptions of staff, elected representatives and Trade Unions towards developing a realistic programme of work for the next year.
- The needs, concerns and perceptions of a percentage of Councillors, Staff and Community Groups were laid down in detail through the process.
- To begin new conversations across lines of difference.
- Both through the interviews and staff discussion groups, people began to talk and listen to issues never broached in mixed company in the workplace.
- To broaden the ownership of REDI through inviting people to participate in a series of discussion groups and individual interviews.
- Awareness rather than ownership was achieved during the scoping study. Ownership developed with the process as people became practically involved in activities.
- To develop a base-line to enable the Council to regularly assess its own performance.

This was achieved. The new Equality Unit will be assessing the Council's performance in terms of the principles of 'fairness, diversity and the quality of relationships' both internally and externally.

STEP 4 – Recognised Challenges

- Creating unrealistic expectations within the Development Group regarding what could be achieved, particularly without executive leadership 'buy in'.
- The primary focus of the Development Group was to challenge a culture of 'scape-goating' and blame, with people beginning to take responsibility for change. This proved to be difficult at this stage.



STEP 5

GROWING COMMITMENT AND UNDERSTANDING ACROSS THE WIDER ORGANISATION (1999 – 2000)

Until now, members of the Development Group had been informally talking to their peers and colleagues about REDI, testing out ideas and identifying issues of concern. This form of diffusion is probably the most powerful way of spreading new ideas as it takes place within existing networks and 'communities of practice'.

The establishment of the Leadership Group emerged from an awareness that growing commitment and understanding across the Council must start with investing time and energy in a small group of networking leaders who could cross departmental lines of responsibility and move the practice into the different functional areas of the Council's work.

*Ultimately, meeting the challenge of diffusion effectively depends on developing organisational cultures that continually encourage people to cross 'walls and stovepipes' (functional boundaries), not just to tell each other the news, but to enquire and come to greater levels of mutual understanding. Increasingly, this challenge involves bringing together diverse people.*¹²

This step was about cementing the informal diffusion taking place through formally extending the process into the wider Council.

As such, there were two initiatives to engage the wider organisation:

- 1 Staff training on prejudice and harassment.
- 2 The launch of REDI.

What happened?

Staff Training on Prejudice and Harassment

The training took place in 1999 and consisted of half-day sessions with groups of up to 20 staff. Counteract delivered all the training and covered approximately 90% of the staff. The training package sought to integrate Counteract's traditional programme with the results of the Scoping Study. Members of the Development Group were present at most of the training sessions, signalling wider staff ownership of this process and the links with REDI.

The training consisted of a 'taster' session to raise awareness on issues of prejudice and stimulate interest for further training. The training also served to alleviate some of the concerns emanating from the Personnel Department who were under pressure to meet Fair Employment demands. The completion of the training delivered a quick win for the REDI process.

Reactions to the training ranged from resentment and grudging acceptance to open appreciation. The ground had been prepared to a certain extent by Counteract's successful day, two years earlier, attended by a group of staff and councillors.

A number of participants were pleased that issues were finally being acknowledged. Issues of contention included the Irish language and the fear from some Nationalists and Republicans that this process was about 'diluting identities'- "*the conspiracy of middle-class do-gooders to assimilate them into an amorphous 'Northern Irish – Unionist' identity through the back door.*" This fear was mirrored by Unionists that "*equality was a cover for a Nationalist agenda dragging them into a united Ireland.*"

The lack of engagement across the different political agendas means that words are no longer forms of communication but ways of justifying separation and reasons why issues should be avoided. In such a void, the strength of separate identities is dependent on the distance between the communities. In such a void the challenge of making new relationships upsets the balance of separation and silence.

¹² Senge, P., et al, *The Dance of Change*, Doubleday Publishing, p. 420, 1999.



The Protestant voice was hardly heard during these sessions. When they did speak, it was about their isolation both in the workplace and the wider community. It took a great deal of courage for some staff to speak, identifying themselves for the first time as Protestants, having hidden under the pretence of Catholic identity.

As a result of this training, the need for 'harassment advisors' emerged, coupled with an overhaul of the Council's harassment policy. The 'harassment advisors' are now in place, supported by a revised harassment policy. Training for Trade Union shop stewards and line managers was also highlighted as a gap. This was delivered in early 2000 by Counteract in partnership with Mediation Network.

The Launch of REDI

The story of the launch of REDI most clearly reflects the roller-coaster ride of the political and peace processes over the last three years. This launch was planned for Autumn 1998 but finally happened in early 2000. The delays surrounded the need to invite prominent politicians to the launch, but each time they became caught up in the latest crisis in Stormont.

The Council eventually decided to forego any 'national' politicians and went ahead, focusing on an internal event, attended by the International Fund for Ireland, celebrating the achievements of the Development Group and staff. All in all it was a successful, if lower-key, launch which publicly committed the Council to the REDI process.

STEP 5 – Outcomes

- REDI slowly took life with the publication of the Scoping Study report and conversations around it.
- The Development Group gained a sense of purpose through planning and participating in the launch and the training.
- Newry and Mourne established a Civic Leadership benchmark for other Councils by publicly naming the sectarian issue and committing itself to building a workplace and civic culture that is fair and open to 'difference'.
- REDI allowed a number of staff members on the Development Group to think and act as 'leaders' rather than 'lowly' workers.

STEP 5 – Recognised Challenges

- REDI was very complex to plan and there needed to be stronger linkages with the policy and development processes of the Council.
- The Scoping Study was underused as a legitimising document with sceptics.



STEP 6

EXPERIMENTING AND MODELLING NEW WORKING PRACTICES (1999 – 2001)

STEP 6 focused on 'trying out new things' through pilots, developing new working practices, experimenting with new policies, structures and support mechanisms. This entailed fostering a new culture of learning where differing opinions were articulated, criticisms acknowledged and the emotional and intellectual challenges of change were heard.

What happened?

As a 'learning-driven' process, REDI tried to create the space for staff and councillors from the Development Group to experiment with new ways of working and new structures for meeting together. This was difficult primarily because of the lack of a 'learning culture' within local government generally – there are few rewards for being innovative. This staff culture may be influenced by frequent political contests between councillors in all councils. Staff understandably 'keep their heads down.'

However, some interesting experiments did take place. They either focused primarily on community relations or on organisational change and they were:

- 1 The Development of the 'Declaration of Principles'
- 2 The Birmingham Study Trip.
- 3 The 'Equity, Diversity and Interdependence' Proofing Questions.
- 4 The 'Policy – Practice Analysis'.
- 5 The Satellite Groups.

In themselves, they were important statements about what is possible if staff, councillors and community are 'allowed' to work in new ways. Unfortunately their potential as experiments to affect mainstream business was limited as they were not all structurally linked to the policy and decision making structures of the Council, a structural deficiency the Development Group analysed and clarified.

1 The Development of the 'Declaration of Principles'¹³

The Declaration of Principles was developed by the Development Group as a Council commitment to the principles of REDI. The initial draft was developed by the Development Group at its first residential in September 1998.

The key outcome was the development of draft statements about the contributions made by Trade Unions, elected representatives and management. Members agreed to consult with those they represented regarding the draft statements. Following consultation, the draft Declaration of Principles was taken to the full Council for discussion and then approval.

Councillors Meeting on Declaration of Principles

A special Council meeting was held in March 1999 to brief elected representatives on the Declaration of Principles and to gain their commitment to both the letter and the spirit of the Principles. By this stage, both the Senior Management team and the Trade Unions had commented on the draft emerging from the Development Group residential.

Around fifteen councillors attended the meeting on a cross party basis.

Following a brief introduction, councillors were invited to raise issues of concern or interest. Attention was focused on Declarations Numbers 2, 3 and 6 of the Declaration of Principles.

Declaration No 2

We accept that everyone has the right to work and live free from any form of intimidation due to their religious, political, cultural or national difference, their gender, family status, age, sexual orientation or disability and we commit ourselves to ensuring freedom for all those who work for the Council from any form of discrimination by word or actions.

Declaration No 3

Representation and promotion of our own identities should be achieved in a manner that shows respect for each other, promotes diversity and can lead to creating mutual respect and understanding.

Declaration No 6

Councillors will endeavour to use language and conduct themselves in a manner that makes no other Councillor, the community or members of staff feel belittled or degraded. They will endeavour to engage in respectful politics and avoid behaviour that could cause greater divisions within the wider Council area.

¹³ Declaration of Principles – see Appendix A



The tension between the 'cut and thrust' of politics and the principles of 'equity, diversity and interdependence' was clearly evident. Until building relationships of trust and mutuality become acceptable in the public arena, politicians will continue to behave in ways that maintain or increase sectarianism. Until they believe that playing the sectarian card will lose them votes, 'playing to the gallery' will involve tugging at those deep fears and mistrust carried by most people in Northern Ireland. Many politicians only show up what people politely avoid in mixed company. As one person put it, Councillors "*couldn't conduct day-to-day politics with these principles*" because it could lose them votes. Public opinion is not yet ready, or at least councillors do not believe it is.

People elect politicians to express their fears and to defend them, not to find common ground.

There was evidently concern that the REDI Principles were constructed out of 'politically correct' concerns to regulate councillors' behaviour. There were lessons for us in how to present such principles – we cannot remove hard issues from the Chamber but there remains a question about how Councillors might design processes that allow them to handle hard issues without destroying necessary relationships.

The health of a political system is measured by its capacity to engage in robust debate. It is also measured by its capacity to allow debate without costing lives or creating fear. Where these things do not converge, as is sometimes the case in Northern Ireland, this creates a dilemma, whereby politicians are asked to refigure their understanding of how interests are pursued.

"These principles have been drafted by well meaning old ladies. They are alright for an afternoon tea-party but not for the type of boys around here. You're living in dream land – this is Northern Ireland. I can't understand why anyone would choose to take offence with both languages up on signs whether it is in Kilkeel or Newry. That seems fair to me. When the debate begins in this chamber, people sometimes lose their emotions. But what about Belfast City Council? We couldn't conduct day-to-day politics with these principles. They could perhaps be used in England." (Elected Representative)

Furthermore, when is something offensive and exclusionary, and when is it 'simply' about being different? Does speaking Irish 'give offence' and on what grounds could someone 'take offence'? Why does marching down Newry Town as an Orangeman give offence to nationalists?

Exclusion is not a 'fixed reality' but a shifting term that reflects changes in the quality of relationships. Only trust turns exclusion into 'appreciation of difference'. Without trust, we are left with a society where difference is about maintaining exclusive boundaries in some dispiriting 'tit for tat' cycle.

"There is a culture of polite silence in Northern Ireland – more so with people who are not involved in politics. We wouldn't be having this debate if the press were here. This initiative gives us a unique opportunity to confront each other and ourselves as community leaders. We could usefully look at the leadership model set in many community groups. I would like to see, one day, both flags flying from these buildings. I am interested in symbols and how they belong differently to different communities. I would also like to say that I am concerned with a minority in whatever context. In this Council it is Unionists. But what about Nationalists in such places as Ballymoney or Antrim or Carrick. I don't want people to have to walk with their heads down in any part of Northern Ireland." (Elected Representative)

Two crucial interventions from Joe Law (Counteract) and a Development Group member steered the conversation away from partisan politics to a wider sense of political responsibilities

"I would like to say that this issue is not about getting votes. I have been frightened here tonight to see elected representatives behaving like this. I will be reporting back to my members and I will have to say that there was not a favourable atmosphere here tonight. I feel hatred and bigotry in this Chamber. At the end of the day, we are all in it together in delivering quality services and serving the community." (Development Group member)



STEP 6

EXPERIMENTING AND MODELLING NEW WORKING PRACTICES (1999 – 2001)

By bringing the consequences of **not** agreeing the principles into the chamber, the atmosphere changed and the principles were passed. We cannot mistake this, however, for a real change in the understanding of the nature of politics in divided societies. Nonetheless, it was a brave intervention from a Council employee who had never set foot in the Council chamber. A year on, this Development Group member reflected on what he had done.

"It was not intended or rehearsed. If it had been, I don't think I would have said what I did. It just came out when I heard the opinions of the Council on Declaration No 6. After I had stopped speaking, a councillor stood up and I thought, 'What's going to happen, they'll sack me for sure'. No, instead this councillor from a party I would never think of voting for came up to me and congratulated me and thanked me for what I had said."

(Development Group member)

2 The Birmingham Study Trip – October 1999

To help stimulate the Development Group think 'outside the box', a study trip was planned to visit Birmingham in partnership with Birmingham City Council.

The Birmingham trip was conceived as an opportunity for the Development Group to locate and develop their experiences of building and managing inclusion within a very different local governance context. It was planned as a key learning space for the group.

We chose Birmingham because of its history as a city of immigration and the changing role of the Council there in seeking to address racism and intolerance – mainly due to pressure from anti-racist groups, ethnic minority communities and some councillors. The presence of a significant Irish community was another factor in giving the group a point of reference. In terms of size and functions there is no comparison between Birmingham and Newry and Mourne District Council, with the scale overwhelming many in the group. The experience of the group clearly highlighted their lack of familiarity with regards to issues of race and in dealing with the multiplicity of differences faced by Birmingham City Council.

Nineteen members of the group went to Birmingham, accompanied by members of the Counteract/Future Ways team and the funder from the International Fund for Ireland. The presence of the funder was critical for his own learning about a process such as REDI. He gained an insight into the practicalities of the REDI Programme and witnessed the creative tension that is so central to this work; being patient with the realities people face while holding out a vision of civic leadership.

Moving from the relatively homogenous culture of Newry to a multicultural city was a huge transition for many group members. Initially, many participants were silent in front of the various presentations, workshops and speakers. We had underestimated people's lack of confidence in speaking in larger group sessions and feeling intimidated by our hosts and different speakers. We had been trying to invite 'significant' individuals to engage with our group, but this was done without reference to the confidence and ability of members of the Development Group. The participants needed time back home to reflect and realise the learning that had taken place.

What did we achieve from Birmingham?

i. To have introduced people to the complexity and seriousness of the issues.

The trip was successful in bringing group members into worlds they had never imagined or experienced. There was recognition that the issues that Birmingham City Council was struggling with were more complex and fluid than issues of sectarianism. As one group member commented, "here are hundreds of different nationalities, languages, cultures moving in and through one another in this city – we only think we have two." (Development Group Member)

The trip expanded people's horizons about what is possible.



“My impression was there were a lot of similarities in Birmingham with those facing us in Northern Ireland. Ours is religion, theirs is race – in other words, ours is green and orange, theirs is straightforward black and white.

In the inner city, I was amazed. Look! How they mix in the pubs, clubs and restaurants – each ethnic group allowed to carry out their own cultures, traditions and identities. And those people not involved just glance and go about their daily normal life. Could this ever be the case in Northern Ireland?” (Development Group Member)

ii. To have actively participated in discussions with Birmingham hosts.

This was less successful. Some of the sessions were so far from people's own worlds that nothing could be said until people had the time and space to reflect back home. At other times, people's lack of confidence and nervousness inhibited participation.

On the other hand, although people might have been silent, they were deeply aware, observing and comparing with Newry.

“It is now one week since we returned from Birmingham and I have to say the event which sticks in my mind is the visit to a local Development Association and our meeting in the High School. It still amazes me that this meeting took place without one member of the Black community present, although several weak excuses were made as to why there were no black people present. It was quite obvious that these people were not invited to this meeting and were indeed not wanted there. I feel this is something that should not happen in Newry and Mourne District Council. We should never exclude anyone from the minority groups.” (Development Group Member)

*“I was impressed by the up-front accounts given by the black minority groups we spoke with, and specifically how they related ‘without fear’ their experiences, concerns and hopes. I do **not** believe we in Newry and Mourne District Council, and in Northern Ireland in general, could be as open and honest with our comments to our colleagues of different religions in the workplace. I think there would be more embarrassment, reluctance, ‘fear’ to openly flag up to a colleague of a different religion matters of direct conflict. I do not think there would be the same ‘listening’ ability and acceptance of opinions and concerns, indeed I believe that there would be strong reaction to such open and ‘in your face’ discussion.*

I believe that this is our first real challenge – to get the individuals to accept and admit the flaws, which exist within themselves and how they project their ‘religious beliefs’. If we can succeed in getting the workforce to be genuinely self-critical, we can then seriously begin to address the problems, which are causing the divisions.” (Development Group Member)

iii. To have engaged in new discussions within the group and developed a sense of group identity and equal partnership.

New conversations were taking place amongst the group as people began thinking about their ‘majority/minority’ positions at home in relation those they were experiencing in Birmingham. The distance from Newry created more space to move away from formal positions – situations where members met difficulties or sensitive issues turned into ‘team bonding’ events.

“I found the meeting with the West Midlands Police very interesting– the Black Police Officer’s Association representatives were particularly inspiring. They highlighted their own personal difficulties, their relationships with the black community (often they were hardest on people from their own background) and spoke of institutionalised racism. I realized that, regardless of the Patten recommendations, the enormous task that lies ahead in Northern Ireland to establish a police service acceptable to all and the role which the Council will have to play as a civic body in this.” (Development Group Member)



STEP 6

EXPERIMENTING AND MODELLING NEW WORKING PRACTICES (1999 – 2001)

iv. To have energized the group in the REDI process and begin identifying possibilities for the future.

The trip served to affirm and support those who were committed to REDI. A core group of people emerged invigorated by the experience. These became the 'Leadership Group', engaging in the six-day programme over 2000 to become the guardians, as well as the innovators, of REDI within the wider Development Group.

"There is nothing more powerful than a good example. I believe that the onus is on me first and foremost as an individual to promote the ideas of REDI. I hope this attitude will reflect on the Council firstly and secondly the wider community in Newry and Mourne."

(Development Group Member)

v. To have begun shifting the balance of ownership from the external partners to the Council.

After the trip, the group developed their own analysis and action plan for REDI, evidence of the balance shifting away from the external partners to the Council.

"It was a somewhat sobering thought to hear of the expectations of the future development of the project and how it was now being 'handed over' to the Council to carry on. As an employee and member of the Sub-Committee, it brought a new focus on the whole project."

(Development Group Member)

The trip entered into the mythology of the Council with stories regularly trotted out by Development Group members to the entertainment of all. As a myth, it serves to bind a group of people together by re-enacting a communally shared experience.

3. The 'Equity, Diversity and Interdependence' Proofing Questions

Following intensive discussions within the Leadership Group about how to 'make EDI' real, members decided to draw up a number of questions based on the Declaration of Principles. These could then be used to inform policy and grant aiding processes.

These were submitted in draft form to the Senior Management team and to the whole Development Group to explore how they could inform Council practice; in particular, how they could enhance the Council's commitment to 'good relations' emerging from Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998).

The REDI Proofing Questions

- 1 Please demonstrate which section of the Declaration of Principles this policy or decision is most closely associated with.
- 2 Is this policy or decision intended to address a recognised need?
- 3 What areas of mistrust, unequal treatment or access will be addressed?
- 4 How have these been identified and by whom?
- 5 What effect do you expect the proposal to have on relationships between people, groups and the traditions in the Council area?
- 6 What awareness of majority – minority relations is evidenced in this proposal?
- 7 What have you learned or will you learn about the principles of 'equity, diversity and interdependence' in developing this policy or making this decision?



4. The Policy – Practice Analysis

We have worked with a large number of local councils and have often had staff speak with us about the large number of central government demands and organisational initiatives that have landed on their desks resulting in an “initiative fatigue”. In such a climate many new projects end up ‘parked’ in the corners of different departments and the structures of sub-committees. Senior management and full council meetings often do not oversee them.

The ‘policy-practice’ analysis was an attempt to visualise the difficulties of changing Council practice at a structural level. This clarified some of the difficulties the Leadership Group were experiencing themselves in taking REDI forward.

This analysis was presented to the Development Group and the Senior Management team by Leadership Group members – not without some trepidation as they were once again challenging hierarchical relations. The analysis highlighted how a number of initiatives, while central to the mission of the Council, were structurally not linked to important decisions making processes. This insight was well received by Councillors and Directors.

5. The Satellite Groups

Satellite groups were devised to provide spaces to explore difficult issues outside normal structures, generate possible solutions, develop a programme of work if relevant and feed developments back into Council structures. The purpose was to bring together members of the Development Group, other staff and councillors to work together on a project related to REDI. Three possible ‘satellite groups’ were imagined:

- Sport Development.
- Linguistics.
- Communications.

The Communications Group became the most successful in that it produced a Council newsletter – a first for the Council. Generally these groups did not work, principally because they lacked senior management involvement and drive. This was prior to the establishment of the new Senior Management team and the Equality Unit.

Establishing groups without reference to existing structures and decision-making processes merely leads to their isolation.

STEP 6 – Outcomes

- Opening up the difficulties of learning and taking risks within a public sector environment that is accountable to the ratepayer.
- Through the Birmingham trip a core group of staff and councillors emerged who were committed to the process.
- A matrix for proofing council grants and decision-making processes against ‘equity, diversity and interdependence’ criteria was developed.
- Staff identifying an important structural gap that highlighted how many Council initiatives made little impact on existing policy and practice. This understanding strengthened the REDI process because it surfaced the difficulties the process was facing in initiating change.



STEP 6

EXPERIMENTING AND MODELLING NEW WORKING PRACTICES (1999 – 2001)

STEP 6 – Recognised Challenges

- Due to the delays in senior staff appointments, there was a lack of clear guidance and encouragement from the Senior Management team initially leaving people uncertain regarding the extent of approved involvement in REDI. This was later corrected.
- There were difficulties around translating learnings into core activities and changes within the Council. This was identified as an internal structural limitation.
- Balancing the 'need for being safe' – for example, Unionist councillors being less open when Sinn Fein councillors were present – with 'learning about difference' which can only take place in groups made up of diverse individuals.
- Facilitators understanding the routines of public bureaucracy. Facilitators being patient as staff and councillors take, what for them, are huge and important steps.



This step is about sustainability and maintaining a critical tension between current realities and the organizational vision of what could be. This is about recognizing that engaging with 'good relations' is not a one-off initiative but about mainstreaming the capacity of the organization and its staff to learn and innovate in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

What happened?

"At the beginning of REDI, I couldn't understand why I had been invited. I felt it was only because I was a woman.

I now realise that everyone has a responsibility to contribute to REDI - through the Scoping Study I recognised the 'wider picture' and that all of us shape and can shape the situation. If people are working in the Council and get a salary then they have a responsibility.

It was a struggle over the year to get to grips with what REDI was about - but after Birmingham it all came together for me. There are diverse groups within the Council and in the wider community and the question is how to acknowledge and value the differences that exist, ensuring that we don't discriminate against people. I experienced so much diversity in Birmingham and suddenly realised how much Newry is losing out. There was an energy in Birmingham which is absent here."

(Development Group Member)

The key structural innovation in 'mainstreaming' REDI is the Equality Unit. This highlights the undoubted commitment and understanding of the formal leadership of the Council through the Chief Executive and a number of key councillors. Informal leadership has been built up through the years through the Leadership Group and the Development Group. At this stage, the role of Future Ways and Counteract had substantially diminished, formalised through the completion of three-year funding from the International Fund for Ireland and the Community Relations Unit.

There are now four key challenges facing Newry and Mourne District Council in sustaining the process:

- 1 To sustain the wider vision of REDI regarding the Council's civic leadership role in the community – it is **not** an internal industrial relations process.
- 2 To maintain the momentum and commitment of both the informal and formal leadership in the Council in challenging prejudice and building inclusive relationships both internally and externally.
- 3 To ensure that growing a relational understanding of their place and purpose does not become diminished through legislative priorities.
- 4 To maintain the distinctiveness of REDI principles whilst locating them at the centre of Council policy and practice.

There are a number of structures and processes that could support Newry and Mourne address these challenges. Due to the diminished role of Future Ways and Counteract, this last step is set out a little differently, highlighting themes for which Newry and Mourne have sole responsibility.

The Equality Unit

An Equality Unit has been created, locating equality and community relations at the heart of Council structures. This unit brings together the Equality Officer, the Community Relations Officer, the Communications/Public Relations and Best Value functions of the Council. This structure clearly links issues of 'equity' and 'trust building' with 'Best Value' towards improving council performance.

With the restructuring of the Chief Executive's office and the appointment of a new and experienced Assistant Director to head the Equality Unit, the underlying purposes of REDI are moving into the centre of Council practice.



STEP 7

IMPLEMENTING NEW MODELS OF PRACTICE INTO MAINSTREAM STRUCTURES AND RELATIONSHIPS *(2001 onwards)*

The REDI Development Group

The REDI Development Group has become an institutionalised space within the Council. It remains the only place where councillors, staff and managers informally connect beyond normal communication and hierarchical structures. Outside of a core group of committed staff and councillors, Development Group meetings are attended by a range of different individuals who come with specific issues to raise and discuss. Attendance numbers are on average thirty plus people.

The Development Group faces a number of key challenges:

- To ensure that the primary focus of the group is to imagine, grow and sustain the trust-building function of a local Council.
- To locate learning in this group at the centre of Council policy and practice.
- To ensure that each representative group has a voice and is given its place.
- To ensure that minorities are heard.
- To ensure that the Development Group is rooted in the realities that staff, elected representatives and the wider community are facing whilst working towards a common vision of what could be possible.
- To maintain a balance between 'business' and 'reflection'.
- To continually affirm this space, ensuring its legitimacy by the attendance of sufficiently senior members of political parties and staff who have the authority to chair such a diverse group of people.
- To support the staff member or elected representative as chair, giving them the freedom to chair such a diverse group and give voice to sensitive or contentious issues without prejudice to their job or career.

The Leadership Group

The concept of an 'informal leadership' group has been recognised by the Senior Management team. This is a vital step in ensuring that a process such as REDI goes beyond formal processes and surfaces the 'tacit' or underlying culture, which can both impede and support processes of change. Informal leaders are often more aware of 'tacit culture' and their credibility has the potential for widening support and commitment across the Council.

Harassment Advisors

The advisors have been identified and have undergone training. They will offer a crucial resource not only in supporting those who have experienced harassment but also in identifying emerging issues long before they might land at a tribunal or destroy working relationships. A formal structure now supports this process.

Symbolism

'REDI' has entered the language of the Council, even if its implications and meaning are not yet fully understood. A number of members of the Development Group have talked about how discriminatory language has ceased when they arrive with the comment, 'be careful she's/he's in REDI'. The dangers of this are that REDI is associated with 'politically correct' behaviour. At its best, however, 'REDI' carries a series of implications that remind people of what is appropriate behaviour and language in the workplace.

Consultation Practice

The Equality Unit has engaged in both an internal and external consultation process as part of the Council's Section 75 Equality Scheme. Although not directly linked to REDI's aims and objectives, REDI created a climate whereby the importance of meeting people and creating safe spaces for dialogue underpinned the consultations.



STEP 7 – Outcomes

- Beginning to link work and issues developed within 'REDI spaces' to actual Council practice and politics.
- Development of a common understanding between a small group of staff from different levels and departments to act as stewards to the REDI process.
- The evolution of an Equality Unit within the Chief Executive's Department.

STEP 7 – Recognised Challenges

- Linking fears and issues with regards to the political / religious dimension to a broader agenda without diminishing the original REDI objectives.
- The complacency of middle class Nationalism working against any sense of interdependency with the minority Unionist and Protestant population.
- The need for Republican, Nationalist and Unionist representatives to acknowledge how their own traditions treated the other political traditions in the past.
- The need for the different political traditions to begin conversations about how each wishes to treat the other in the future.



PROCESS TIME-LINE (Recognised Challenges and Some Outcomes)

RECOGNISED CHALLENGES

1. The partnership between Future Ways and Counteract was initially based on past relationships and friendships rather than formal agreements and designated roles and responsibilities.
2. Due to REDI being the first programme of its kind, there was a lack of stories and examples to help people understand what REDI was about
3. Communication across the Council with regards to REDI could have been better structured.

RECOGNISED CHALLENGES

1. Our lack of relationships with the Development Group coupled with our own insecurities forced us to rely on formal agenda approaches which were often undermined by both the informal and tacit cultures of the Council.
2. A focus on getting the business done was sometimes to the detriment of relationship building and meeting.

RECOGNISED CHALLENGES

1. Late involvement of Senior Managers and the lack of involvement from local line leaders / middle and front-line managers hindered the process initially.
2. An initial difficulty was around sharing 'learnings' or diffusion with a wider group of people within the Council who have not been part of the process.

RECOGNISED CHALLENGES

1. The needs, concerns and perceptions of a percentage of councillors, staff and community groups were laid down in detail through the process.
2. Both through the interviews and staff discussion groups, people began to talk and listen to issues never broached in mixed company in the workplace.
3. Awareness rather than ownership was achieved during the scoping study. Ownership developed with the process as people became practically involved in activities.
4. To have developed a base-line to enable the Council to regularly assess its own performance.

1.

**Invitation
(June 1996 –
March 1998)**

2.

**Establishing and
Sustaining A
Critical Dialogue
(April 1998 onwards)**

3.

**Growing leadership
understanding and
commitment of EDI
(1999 onwards)**

4.

**Identifying Issues
(September 1998)**

SOME OUTCOMES

1. The REDI Programme was agreed by all political parties.
2. Trade Unions, management, and councillors nominated representatives to the Development Group.
3. Initial concerns, ideas and issues were raised by the different groups.
4. The credentials of Future Ways and Counteract were outlined and reputations established.
5. Funding was agreed by the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU).

SOME OUTCOMES

1. Establishment of a Development Group and Trade Union Working Group.
2. Beginning to name the culture of silence and avoidance that surrounds majority – minority relations.
3. Members of the Development Group beginning to learn about one another as human beings.
4. The Working Group beginning to learn about the reality of Council culture.

SOME OUTCOMES

1. Engagement with councillors from all parties on a sustained basis regarding the dilemmas between their civic and party political roles with a new quality of conversation and listening taking place between them.
2. Growing the capacity and relationships of twelve staff members, from different grades and responsibility areas, to think in a new way about issues of fairness, difference and trust-building.
3. Engaging with the Senior Management team and beginning to challenge assumptions about the place of Protestants and Unionists and the role of women.
4. Moving beyond the hierarchical order through bringing together the Leadership Group and Senior Management team.
5. The Trade Union leadership acknowledging the importance of addressing issues of sectarianism and community relations in the workplace.

SOME OUTCOMES

1. The needs, concerns and perceptions of a percentage of councillors, staff and community groups were laid down in detail through the process.
2. Both through the interviews and staff discussion groups, people began to talk and listen to issues never broached in mixed company in the workplace.
3. Awareness of REDI issues rather than ownership was achieved during the scoping study. Ownership developed with the process as people became practically involved in activities.
4. A baseline was identified to measure progress.



RECOGNISED CHALLENGES

1. REDI was very complex to plan and there needed to be stronger linkages with the policy and development processes of the Council.
2. The Scoping Study was underused as a legitimising document with sceptics.

RECOGNISED CHALLENGES

1. Due to the delays in senior staff appointments, there was a lack of clear guidance and encouragement from the senior management group initially leaving people uncertain regarding the extent of approved involvement in REDI. This was later corrected.
2. There were difficulties around translating learnings into core activities and changes within the Council.
3. Balancing the 'need for being safe' – for example, unionist councillors being less open when Sinn Fein councillors were present – with 'learning about difference' which can only take place in groups made up of diverse individuals.
4. Facilitators being patient as staff and councillors, steeped in the routine of public bureaucracy, take what for them are huge and important steps.

RECOGNISED CHALLENGES

1. Linking fears and issues with regards to the political / religious dimension to a broader equity agenda without diminishing the original REDI objectives.
2. The complacency of middle class nationalism working against any sense of interdependency with the minority unionist and Protestant population.
3. The need for Republican, Nationalist and Unionist representatives to acknowledge how their own tradition has treated other political traditions in the past.
4. The need for different political traditions to begin conversations about how each wishes to treat the other in the future.

5.

Growing commitment and understanding across wider organisation (1999-2000)

6.

Experimenting and Modelling New Working Practices (1999-2001)

7.

Implementing New Models of Practice Into Mainstream Relationships and Structures (2001 onwards)

SOME OUTCOMES

1. REDI slowly took life with the publication of the Scoping Study report and conversations around it.
2. The Development Group gained a sense of purpose through planning and participating in the launch and the training.
3. Newry and Mourne established a Civic Leadership benchmark for other Councils by publicly naming the sectarian issue and committing itself to building a workplace and civic culture that is fair and open to difference.
4. REDI allowed a number of staff members on the Development Group to think and act as 'leaders' rather than 'lowly' workers.

SOME OUTCOMES

1. Opening up the difficulties of learning and taking risks within a public sector environment that is accountable to the rate-payer.
2. Through the Birmingham trip a core group of staff and councillors emerged who were committed to the process.
3. A matrix for proofing council grants and decision-making processes against 'equity, diversity and interdependence' criteria was developed.
4. Staff identifying an important structural gap that highlighted how many Council initiatives made little impact on existing policy and practice. This understanding strengthened the REDI process because it surfaced the difficulties the process was facing in initiating change.

SOME OUTCOMES

1. Beginning to link work and issues developed within 'REDI spaces' to actual Council practice and politics.
2. Development of a common understanding between a small group of staff from different levels and departments to act as stewards to the REDI process.
3. The evolution of an Equality Unit within the Chief Executive's Department.



1. MAINSTREAMING

1.1 Changing the 'main stream'

The term 'mainstreaming' brings forth images of water and currents, implying in particular that there is a central flow of water, which the 'community relations' tributary must join. 'Mainstreaming' does not imply that this central current will change direction in any manner, rather that it will be enhanced and strengthened through the contribution of different tributaries.

This raises a key question within community relations practice:

Is community relations work about facilitating the 'marginal' and 'peripheral' to join the 'mainstream' or is it about changing the direction of the 'main stream'?

1.2 Centre – Periphery Thinking

The REDI process was about subverting accepted notions of mainstreaming. REDI focussed on how the centre, in this case a Council, needs to learn and develop new ways of thinking and acting. Community relations must focus on encouraging every level of Northern Ireland society to own their contribution to its dysfunctional relationships and promote initiatives which engage people in their public and private relationships at all levels.

In practical terms, this means an extension of our understanding of community relations so that it includes the culture, practice and self-understanding of the middle classes and the core institutions of society including the public services, the voluntary sector and business.

1.3 Shared learning

'Mainstreaming' ensures that knowledge acquired through new relationships is institutionally available to, and drawn on, by all rather than belonging to particular individuals or departments in an organisation.

Learning moves from the private to the communal, from the edge to the centre and back again.

1.4 Resources and time required

This project was largely externally funded, allowing Newry and Mourne to participate without taking all the risks. However, our underestimation of the level of 'hand-holding' and support required became a key factor in our partnership with Newry and Mourne.

Changing the ways in which organisations think and behave with regards to trust-building and 'good relations' is highly resource and time intensive, requiring long term planning and consistent effort.

2. THE RATIONAL, POLITICAL AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSION TO MAINSTREAMING

2.1 Rational, political and emotional

To meet someone who is different from us is a journey of emotion, rationality and politics.

- Emotionally it is about acknowledging the histories, fears and stories we have been told about the 'other'.
- Rationally, we recognize that excluding groups of people in terms of their identity, religion, social background and sex is not a sustainable option.
- Politically, it requires us to renegotiate power relationships.

It is a holistic experience that challenges us at every level of experience.

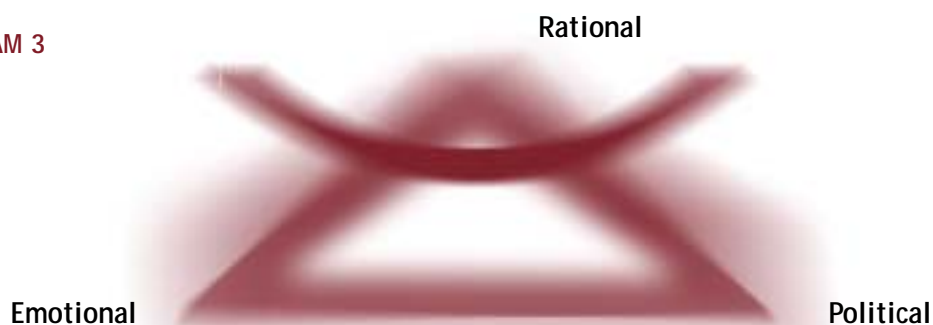


However, the temptation is to go with the purely rational in the belief that the political and emotional can be held at bay. In this we learn to ignore the whole and deal purely with the technical and rational domains.

2.2 Negotiating three axes

'Mainstreaming' always involves negotiating these three different tensions. In most change processes, the tendency is to go with purely the rational dimensions, leaving the power structures and deep emotions untouched.

DIAGRAM 3



- REDI challenged the **political/power** structures through the Development Group model where all were equal irrespective of grade, gender or politics.
- **Emotionally**, REDI provided spaces where people felt safe talking about the pain and fears they carry with them.
- Both these dimension provided a different base to **rationally** devise new working practices and procedures that support trust-building as a core activity.

3. MOVING BETWEEN 'SECRET', 'PRIVATE' AND 'PUBLIC' SPACES.

3.1 Keeping it quiet

A great deal of community relations work has only been possible in secret and private settings where the relationships built and learnings generated have been kept from public knowledge.

3.2 A secret space

The Community Relationships Forum¹⁴ was initially a 'secret' space with Council staff encouraged not to talk about its existence.

3.3 Moving from a secret to a private space

There was a certain point where this 'secrecy' was no longer viable. Wider knowledge of the Community Relationships Forum's existence had grown to such an extent that although formally, knowledge was denied, informally there was talk. At that point it became a 'private' space whereby its existence was publicly acknowledged but the conversations and issues raised were kept confidential.

Within this private space, people met as individuals, listening and sharing at a greater depth than the public space often allows. There is no 'implementation' requirement in such a space other than people leave carrying a little more knowledge about the 'other'. The focus is primarily on relationships in the room.

¹⁴ This Forum was a council sponsored initiative with local community and cultural groups in the town of Newry, facilitated by Brendan McAllister, Mediation Northern Ireland.



3.4 Moving from a private to a public space

A core challenge for many community relations processes is moving from the 'private' to 'public' space with people openly challenging habits and patterns based on separation and fear. In such a public space, people become accountable to wider sets of relationships and are vulnerable to events beyond their control. Moving into this space is particularly difficult for public representatives such as local politicians who wish to control the public space rather than support a culture of public learning. This is where civic leadership encounters traditional party political leadership.

3.5 Costs of avoidance

In Northern Ireland, public issues, such as violence, politics, religion and threat are treated as 'private' in mixed workplaces. This allows them to be ruthlessly expunged from workplace consideration, as if they are of no relevance to productivity or capacity. Such practices may act as a dyke against a threatening flood but the costs and potential for catastrophe remain. The costs of treating these issues as private may be unquantifiable, but they include the so-called 'chill factor', which stealthily, and without obvious evidence, creates single-identity workplaces out of a mixed recruitment pool.

4. COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND THE POLITICAL SPACE

4.1 The double bind for politicians

Politicians engaging with community relations at some meaningful level are to a certain degree like 'turkeys voting for Christmas'. The necessary outcome of community relations work is the transformation of the sectarian political system. There are, therefore, real dilemmas for politicians engaging with this work caught between protecting the familiar system that has shaped them and knowing at some level that this system is not a viable long-term option.

4.2 Politics as exclusion of 'others'

Community Relations makes an uncomfortable partner for politics in Northern Ireland, because of the implicit assertion that the quality of our relationship matters as much as reaching preordained political goals. Politics is about controlling the public space in order to define who assimilates whom. In Northern Ireland, all sides are willing to be reconciled if the others are prepared to be assimilated into 'our' structure. The key is to control the place of legitimate violence (the state), which alone can force the others to concede. The fact that everyone in Northern Ireland pays a heavy price for this contest (because it has proved unwinnable within the framework of democratic values) raises the question of 'what price is too high to demand or pay for political success?'

4.3 Preconditions

All political traditions are focused on first asserting minimum pre-conditions for tolerating their neighbours. If these conditions are not met, they are then prepared to sacrifice their neighbours, and risk themselves, in pursuit of the (ideologically) necessary political outcome. As a result, most political commitments to community relations are conditional on 'the others' doing what they are told.

Putting equitable and diverse relationships before other political outcomes for which the politician believes he/she has a mandate is counter-intuitive and for many seen as conceding a compromise position.

4.4 Dilemmas of taking political responsibility

All politicians support good community relations for as long as they remain (a) harmless and (b) the province of somebody else's decision-making. When asked to take them into account in their politics, politicians react as if they have been neutered – 'politics devised by old ladies'¹⁵ – or subject to some absurd principle of correctness which constantly judges them as falling short of the ideal. Tacitly, no politician can do anything for community relations if it runs contrary to his political goal. In practice, politicians and their voters are not for good community relations at all, except those relations that can be established once 'we' are in power.

¹⁵ This was a term used by some politicians to denigrate the work of community relations.



5. REPRESENTATION VERSUS ABILITY

5.1 The double bind of inclusion

An increasingly important theme in 'making Northern Ireland work' is the tension between representation and ability. There is pressure to ensure that all sections of the population are represented and heard in new or transformed institutions, supported by Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). This desire for inclusion however can work against people being recognised for their talents and ability, with different 'hats' perceived as more important than the content of the head underneath. This can have a detrimental impact on the person concerned as well as freezing identity lines.

5.2 Individual versus group recognition

This issue came up in the formation of the REDI Development Group. There was a need to have a gender and religious balance which in reality meant ensuring that there was at least a third women and a third Protestants. Some of those women present as well as the Protestants felt initially that they were principally there to make up the numbers rather than who they were as individuals – a right that the majority can hold but rarely given to minorities.

How do we argue for representation of 'minorities' without reducing them to how others perceive them?

5.3 Beyond a culture of compliance

Northern Ireland swings between recognition that all groups need to be represented in important discussions and resentment at tokenism. Until now, this so-called diversity problem has been dealt with by refusing to recognise it (colour-blindness) or as a question of numbers and attendance as of right (equality legislation).

There is now a need to emphasise the effectiveness argument for multi-group representation. Instead of seeing an emphasis on wide attendance as a question of filling seats (compliance), we wish to argue that the presence of people with important different perspectives is not a chore but an opportunity to learn more and to perform better (commitment). Having the right people in the right atmosphere is a necessity if we are to have the conversations we need to have.

Core opening questions for all learning groups are:

- Are all the perspectives we need to hear present?
- Who could we find who might bring us new perspectives?

The answers to these questions do not primarily depend on the numerical strength of the group but on the value which such perspectives add to the whole group.

5.4 Beyond a culture of compliance to a culture based on a commitment to a 'mixing' future

We are more than the beliefs and identities given to us. In a conflict, people readily reduce others to those lines of distinctiveness that separate them. However, as human beings, we are shaped by the many different experiences that have shaped us since birth. We have the experiences of being children, sons or daughters, or being grandchildren. Some of us have experiences of bereavement, caring responsibilities, illness, success, talent and achievement. Each of us is much more than a specific political or religious identity. When we are reduced to 'representational' identities our abilities to contribute to a wider community are lost.



6. 'CAN OF WORMS'

6.1 Pandora's Box

An approach to community relations, which names the experiences of the past whilst working towards a more sustainable future in Northern Ireland, is akin to opening up Pandora's box. Immediate common sense warns us 'not to touch it'. The sides of the box represent well-used rituals and silences that have protected people in mixed or uncertain company through containing what could tear people apart.

6.2 Looking through lenses of injury

The fact that Newry and Mourne District Council workforce did not represent the religious breakdown of the Council area generated a variety of perceptions and rumours within both communities. This reality created a lens or fault line through which a whole range of issues were understood and communicated – some of which had nothing to do with sectarianism.

The consequences of not opening 'Pandora's Box' are that all other issues have the potential of becoming 'magnetized to the box'. Issues such as health, economic development and education are disabled because they have been sucked into this magnetic field.

6.3 Inciting complaint

There was a concern expressed that REDI could lead to a rise in complaints, some of which could be manipulated for political reasons. Counteract's experience and response was that in such processes there was often a period where complaint numbers did rise but that was to be welcomed as a signal that there were issues that needed dealt with. Over time, these levels decrease as people begin to feel more secure with one another and more confident in using available complaint processes.

6.4 Defensiveness

There was a degree of protectiveness and a concern that REDI was criticizing Council performance. The tendency of community relations practitioners to talk about 'worst case scenarios' and 'difficult places' can scare people into thinking that a programme such as REDI will be introducing confrontations more commonly associated with interface areas. Community Relations is something that people wish would go away and never have to deal with. The problem is that many people and institutions in this society do not spend enough time thinking about relationships, but when they do – often in a crisis or challenge - a great deal of energy and resources are expended.

6.5 'Flying the plane whilst mending it'¹⁶

Community relations questions in Northern Ireland are hugely threatening to organisations. The potential for disaster, and the fear of it, is so great that organisations fear that failure will have unsustainable consequences for their capacity to continue with their core business. The costs, therefore, will outweigh any thinkable benefits. Organisations are caught between the need to engage all parts of the organisation in consideration of these events and the need for some kind of insurance system.

The easiest response has been to generate a policed neutral working environment that rigorously seeks to 'cleanse' the public space of anything deemed threatening. The only alternative is controlled experimentation in which a small group takes risks on behalf of the whole organisation. The Development Group model, which aimed to bring 'the whole system' into one room with a view to letting people understand how patterns of relationships and interactions create systems that often resist change, was our response to this dilemma.

¹⁶ Phrase taken from Dave Brubaker's text at the "Organisational Change" Seminar, Belfast, May 2000.



7. MAJORITY – MINORITY RELATIONS

7.1 The 'problem' of minorities

Minorities tend to be seen by majorities as a problem to be solved rather than an asset. They are a problem because they are not assimilated and are perceived as an irritant to majority thinking and practice. Protestants in Newry and Mourne are 'a problem' when they do not join in and through their absence show up Nationalism and Republicanism. This can then become a useful political strategy on the part of the minority group.

'Careful politeness' signals that, at a political level, the wider Republican and Nationalist families recognize they are dependent on Unionism. Nevertheless, this 'careful politeness' often masks a deep resistance to accommodating 'the other' without assimilation. A majority culture tied to an informal culture of politeness and a tacit culture of 'it's time they know their place' finds it difficult to accept the other as being different and entitled to their place. This situation is reversed in areas where Protestants are a majority.

7.2 Majorities assume, minorities negotiate

Minorities are less free to be themselves, becoming reduced to single identities in relationships with majorities who are shaped by the fear of the law and charges of discrimination. The majority community behaves in exactly the same way at work as they would at home and freely talk about what they did at the weekend in terms of sports, culture and religion. Uncertainties and fears of talking about sectarianism allow both majorities and minorities to manipulate the issue for other purposes.

7.3 Changing relations

REDI demanded of majorities 'that they listen' and minorities 'that they speak up'. Moving to a relational structure where people learn to meet in new ways is fundamental.

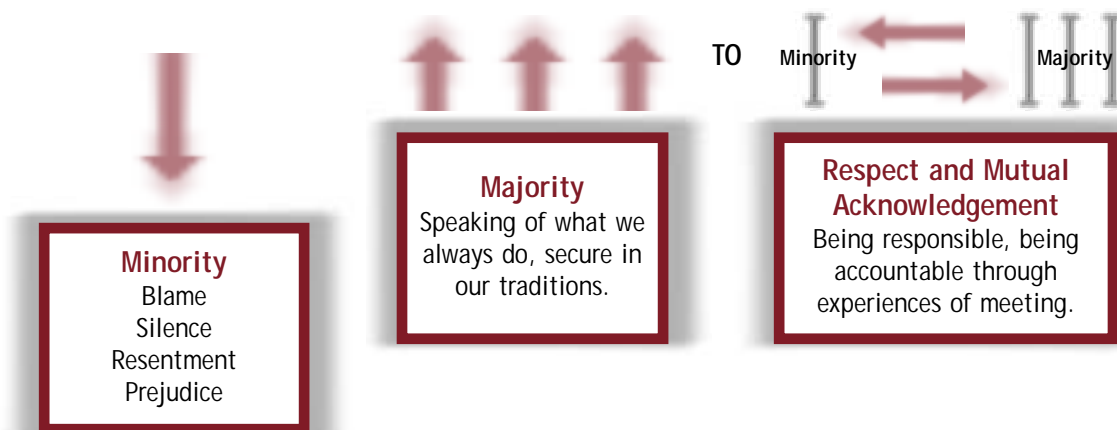


DIAGRAM 4 Moving from a 'majority win' culture to mutual acknowledgement

Majorities have 'all of themselves' or 'as much of themselves as they choose to use' whereas minorities have to leave so much outside, resorting to politeness, denial and silence. Neutrality is preferable to open negotiation around differences. However, change can only happen when issues become visible.

7.4 Different understandings of the REDI process

The levels of complacency arising from a large nationalist majority and small unionist minority potentially presented the most serious obstacle to REDI taking root. Changing relationships is based on a minority challenging majority blindness. A problem in many parts of Newry and Mourne including the Council is that the Unionists / Protestants are too small in number to really make an



impact. Without a sense of looming crisis, people will always avoid paying the costs today. In this situation, a process like REDI is dependent on the constant vigilance and sustained imagination and commitment of individuals.

- For Nationalists / Republicans / Irish / Catholics, REDI was not primarily about political / religious fears and identities but about other issues such as staff – management relations, communication, terms and conditions, gender, disability.
- REDI for British / Unionists / Loyalists / Protestants has been about their divisions and identity – their place within the borough of Newry and Mourne.

With such a small Protestant and Unionist minority, REDI increasingly focused on the **organisational change** dimension challenging hierarchy, improving communication and highlighting poor working practices. This was a result of ‘majorities assuming and minorities negotiating’.

8. EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE

8.1 Social Inclusion and Reconciliation

Understanding community relations through an ‘equity, diversity and interdependence’ framework was undertaken knowing that there were contradictions with regards to targeting the long term unemployed and levels of disadvantage (which are higher in Catholic communities) and the need to increase Protestant participation. This debate highlights the complex relationship between social inclusion processes and reconciliation.¹⁷ The roots of fear and political division cannot be directly linked to levels of deprivation; targeting social need measures in Newry and Mourne (equity) can only have indirect impact on Protestant feelings of exclusion and alienation from mainstream life (interdependence). The terms ‘equity, diversity and interdependence’ created space to move beyond simple polarities to naming complex and interlinked dilemmas.

8.2 Making the principles real

We know that ‘equity, diversity and interdependence’ can help people reflect on and locate their experiences and work practices within a community context. The danger is that people are allowed to elevate them to high-sounding concepts, devoid of a practical and relational reality. As such, the three principles turn into three obstacles, mystifying rather than clarifying existing realities. When this occurs, they are treated as products that need rolled out across the organisation. This has limited, if any, value.

8.3 Beyond sectarianism?

Maintaining a balance between the original objectives of REDI and the wider equity agenda was difficult with many staff challenging what they saw as an implicit assumption within REDI that political/religious relationships were ‘more important’ than the other identities we carry. A number of Trade Union representatives felt that REDI should take a holistic approach to discrimination and equity, also focusing on, for example, gender and the Travelling community.

8.4 Issues that bind the centre and issues that separate

At some level, issues regarding the relationships between women and men, and between the Travelling and non-Travelling communities were more apparent than relationships between the political and national communities. However, gender or the situation of the Travelling community does not divide the centre in the same way as political and religious identities. Gender binds men together, in dominant numbers in the centre. Relationships with the Travelling community bind almost everyone together to a greater or lesser extent, with feelings ranging from ‘it is a difficulty’ to outright racism.

¹⁷ Morrow, Wilson, Eyben, *Reconciliation and Social Inclusion in Rural Areas*, Rural Community Network, Cookstown, 2000.



In political majoritarian cultures, it is often easier and more desirable to identify the 'special' issues that the majority can readily deal with than the issues, which ask them to consider their place and position. Discussions on 'equity, diversity and interdependence' automatically raise issues beyond political and religious faultlines. These issues have to be given their place according to their actual weight and importance within different contexts without diminishing or diluting the need to engage with political and religious divisions.

8.5 Difference between sectarianism and other issues

The difference between political and religious identities and our other identities shaped by, for example, gender, physical abilities, age, race, class, sexual orientation is that in Northern Ireland, the former divides the macro-political and social core of this society while others do not. Because it is imbedded at this level of structuring, sectarianism can reproduce itself in separated communities while other issues isolate people in smaller, more individual units. This is a statement of fact rather than value. If people with learning disabilities affected the centre to the extent that politics does then apparently 'closed institutions' would never have been imagined or tolerated at one time for housing people with learning disabilities.

9. MEASURING COMMUNITY RELATIONS

9.1 The measurement of community relations work remains a contentious area as it seeks to quantify what often seems unquantifiable.

The desire of policy makers and many funders to reduce relationships to 'hard' figures is understandable and often necessary in a culture increasingly dominated by the technical and the legal where relationships are either assumed or mistrusted. The peripheral nature of Community Relations work also creates a yearning amongst those involved for recognition by the centre. Measurement of Community Relations can then become associated with access to the centre rather than challenging the centre to acknowledge its human dimension.

9.2 Core to measurement of Community Relations is the acknowledgement of unspoken tacit realities and the ability to communicate and use this knowledge with others.

This requires taking a risk with existing relationships and being prepared for a period of disorder and possibly pain. The Scoping Study process legitimised a number of individuals who were prepared to take that risk, experiencing new possibilities through qualitatively different relationships. The challenge over the next few years is how this knowledge becomes institutionally accessible rather than the knowledge belonging to select individuals or groups. This will depend on the Council recognizing at some deep level the value of this work and changing its systems of measurement and assessment to acknowledge what was previously tacit.

9.3 Measuring in a majority – minority context

Difficult issues cannot be dismissed on the basis that they have 'only been raised by one or two people'. In a majority / minority situation, the issues that are critical for the organisation will tend to be raised by a small number. This has implications for any mapping exercise or scoping study, which seeks 'evidence' of issues. Using a purely quantitative or numerical approach to analysing data will automatically dismiss the views of a minority.



10. THE DESIRABILITY OF PROJECTS IMPEDING REAL LEARNING

10.1 Desirability

There was a time when REDI was publicly promoted as a desirable project tempting both local government and community relations practitioners to participate in the 'mainstreaming' game. This was driven by a field and a funding climate where Community Relations issues were continually being misunderstood and undervalued.

10.2 The impediment of the pedestal

REDI became a 'desirable' project and this 'sexiness' impeded real learning taking place – both within Future Ways and Counteract and the wider community. REDI became feted by some within the community relations field, placed on a pedestal with neither those doing the selling nor those listening having any real understanding of the project itself. This was partly due to REDI being 'the first' of its kind.

We found it difficult to tell the truth about REDI once it had been placed on this pedestal.

"Would we get more funding if we were truthful? Would policy makers listen to us if we told them about the sweat and the toil? Would as many doors have been opened if REDI was not sold as a success?" (Working Group)

In a society that is still unwilling to embrace the task of trust-building, many people aren't interested in hearing about the difficulties and the real story. A pedestal story strokes everyone's ego and can allow all to feel good. Finding ways of talking honestly about learning without people thinking the project is rubbish is a key dilemma.

10.3 The difficulties of having a voice

The independence of organisations is a central theme. The value led voluntary sector tradition of critical engagement with the state and funders needs maintained. Yet, even if programmes such as ours felt under some pressure to stay low and say nothing in the face of such 'pedestal promotion', there may be a crushing of the critical debate that civil society and politics need to have.

The future of quality community relations practice depends on both the commitment of political leadership and the potential for civic dissent.

10.4 Moving beyond the public myth

A significant breakthrough occurred when the funder accompanied us to Birmingham and saw at first hand the progress or lack of progress that had been made. He shared in the difficulties of organisational change; he talked to people and heard their stories; he saw our frustrations and the amount of work it takes to move a tiny step forward. At first he might have wondered why he had funded this project whose reality was so very different from the public myth. He then, like us, came to understand that these difficulties in a small way represented the challenges faced by Northern Irish society.

No one person or group knows how to do it and at least REDI was trying to find some answers in a process that often involved two steps forward and one step back.

How funders learn from the projects they fund is critical to how Community Relations work is understood and supported. Without this 'learning function', funders can become primarily obsessed with pre-set targets and outputs to the detriment of the actual process and issues emerging.



11. GENDER AND SECTARIANISM

11.1 The most intimate difference

Gender is one of the most fundamental ways in which societies order and organize relationships and institutions. In most societies, men and women occupy different roles and this social understanding of what is suitable or acceptable for women and men to be and do is the process of 'gendering'. Often the roles socially assigned to men are given more public value than those attributed to women.

The basic peculiarity of men and women as conflict groups is that they live more intimately within each other than other groups in conflict. There exist high levels of interdependency that do not exist with regards to other divisions such as ethnicity, religion, politics or race.

11.2 The link with other issues

Other social divisions feed into gender divisions such as race, ethnicity, age, sectarianism, sexual orientation, and disability. The link between sectarianism and gender is clear but the community relations and women's movement have rarely articulated these links with the debate often mirroring gender divisions; there has tended to be a male dominated community relations field and a female dominated women's movement.

Political and religious divisions affect the public and organisational core of Northern Irish society. Relationships between men and women do not. This is not a value judgment but a statement of fact; the political/policy core is dominated by men therefore relationships between men and women are not seen as a central political issue. An example of this is the behaviour of local politicians in a Council chamber. Without the media, they can indulge in sexist but not sectarian behaviour. With the media, the sexism disappears but sectarianism can return. Relationships between men and women are played out in private but not in public.

11.3 Differential costs in changing the status quo

The difference between gender and sectarianism shapes the different level of risk in challenging the status quo. Challenging sectarianism is a public act and carries the potential for retributive violence directed against the individual as a member of a group. Challenging sexism tends to carry consequences for the individual per se, with the penalties less visible in the public sphere.

Questions for community relations practitioners include:

- Does Community Relations work reproduce or transform relationships between men and women?
- Is Community Relations work gender blind?
- How is the inclusion and exclusion of women and men in the new institutions gendered?
- How is the participation of women in the conflict gendered?

These are key questions in a context where fragile new public institutions are being built. Will men once again dominate them or will gender become a political priority and does that depend on the importance placed on the new institution?

11.4 Differential roles

The reality is that men and women have played different roles in both sustaining and moving beyond the dynamics of fear and conflict in Northern Ireland. Community relations practice therefore requires a gender sensitive response. The answers do not lie in giving priority either to 'gender' or 'community relations' but negotiating both simultaneously. This we failed to do in Newry and Mourne where 'community relations' was given priority, thereby marginalizing a number of the women who felt that their status as females, within a male dominated council, was as important as their status as Protestants or Catholics.



12. IMAGES OF ORGANISATIONS

12.1 Organisations as machines

The Organisational Development field was 'born' in the 1930/40s with Frederick Taylor, recognised as the founder of organisational development theory. He understood organisations and their people to be like machines. The state bureaucracy and the factory represented the administrative and productive machines which were either the cogs of the state or engines of capitalism. If we have learnt anything from REDI it is that organisations are about people and relationships and that change cannot be controlled, predicted or driven like some machine.

Change does not take place in some abstract space but is based in the realities of people's lives and priorities, their histories, their belief in new possibilities and their intense desire to protect what they know.

13. ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

*'One of the ways subtle discrimination plays out is in the denial of opportunities for learning, unequal opportunities for learning and unequal support of different kinds of learning.'*¹⁸

13.1 Innovation

There is a direct link between levels of creativity and the breadth and depth of our relationships. In a society where common sense says 'stay with your own', levels of innovation are inevitably low – there are few opportunities to engage with world views, stories, and experiences that challenge 'our normality'.

13.2 Within the public sector

The public sector is not renowned for 'teaching its people to think' and in Northern Ireland this culture is reinforced by wider political uncertainties and community fears.

We continually met people within Newry and Mourne District Council who were content with the tasks within their departments and who did not relish any additional responsibilities. In many cases, this seemed to lead to a 'silo' culture where people concentrated on meeting the targets within their specialist area without connecting to some wider Council vision.

This can lead to a lack of innovation and freedom to think and learn. People are understandably unwilling to venture beyond the strict remit of their jobs in case any 'mistakes' are used for political gain: 'cover your back' would be the reasonable mantra adopted by many Council staff across Northern Ireland.

The lack of space for reflection and thinking ensures that a system never changes. People described aspects of Newry Council culture as 'trivial' with no one thinking 'big' or with a vision. The absence of a vision can mean that everyone is reduced to protecting his or her little corner. Where staff work under elected politicians who more readily follow partisan positions than a civic vision, staff understandably shrink back into their old, safe ways

REDI was as much about learning in new ways as unlearning the old. Within a devolved political system, there is a need for local government to give priority to creating such organisational learning cultures.

¹⁸ Bentley, T., *Learning Beyond the Classroom*, Routledge, 1998.



14. MEASURING ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

14.1 Difficulties of measurement

A significant struggle has been challenging the 'measurement culture' that exists in organisations that reflects a mechanical understanding of relationships with people seen as pawns to be pushed into certain strategic positions. At its worst, this culture can be broken down into a number of characteristics:

- The reduction of complexity to 'make things easier for people' rather than creating a level of engagement and understanding where people can 'hear' complexity.
- The introduction of objects and tools that treat people as isolated and distinct figures, divorced from their relationships and contexts.
- About control rather than participation and learning.
- The maintenance of existing power relationships.

The 'Equity, Diversity and Interdependence' Proofing Questions (see STEP 6 (3)) developed by the REDI Development Group were an attempt to begin introducing a different form of measurement that acknowledges the importance of relationships.

15. MAINTAINING A COMMUNITY FOCUS

Another factor that challenged a technical planning process was the loss of a community focus as REDI became a predominantly 'workers' not 'consumer' or 'community' based process. This highlights the inherent weaknesses of many organisational learning processes, which can so easily become hostage to dynamics that are about justifying the organisation's existence in terms of staff interests rather than the organisation's primary purpose.

16. HIERARCHY

16.1 Organisational hierarchy

Organisational hierarchy is necessary in terms of clarifying roles, responsibilities and accountability lines. The shadow side of hierarchy is that it can lead to a culture of inequity and silence with those at the 'bottom' considered less of a human being than those at the 'top'. Hierarchies can diminish people affecting the quality of relationships, communication and ultimately the effectiveness of the organisation. Separating the necessary function of hierarchy from its shadow side was an essential part of REDI if all were to have a voice.

16.2 Learning how to learn

Learning how to learn about issues which have previously been left unspoken, and which diminish an organisation, requires changing a cultural mind-set established at school where *'we learnt how to please the teacher, in the same way as we would later learn how to please the boss'*.¹⁹ 'Learning how to learn' is challenging to traditional power structures as people lower down the hierarchy have the space to examine assumptions and express their opinions, irrespective of grade.

¹⁹ Senge, P., et al, *Schools that Learn*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, p.412., 2000.



17. PLANNING

17.1 Learning how to plan

Future Ways and Counteract developed the first REDI action plan before the project even began. With hindsight, this was totally unrealistic, on our part and that of the funder, to assume we could develop a three-year plan in advance of the process even beginning.

Each step along the process had to be negotiated in light of the last experience rather than according to some fixed external framework. Although the broad principles remained constant, detailed plans changed on a monthly basis. Six-monthly plans might have been agreed but each time they became irrelevant as the process took an unexpected twist, or the Council became immersed in other priorities.

- External planning frameworks can set up model obstacles, which sometimes created a sense of lack of achievement from both the partners and the funder. They were ideals, contrasting sharply with the real successes that were achieved. Priorities have to emerge from the process;
- Real progress is only made once tacit culture or what is taken to be 'normal' is challenged. Indulging in a series of planning activities merely pleases the formal Council culture of meetings but does nothing to change how relationships are structured.

17.2 Planning versus Learning

Planning can often become a substitute for reflection, camouflaging problems that will necessarily emerge further downstream. It requires a significant culture shift to not react to a problem through increased activity. Local government is very good at 'planning' and will resort to another series of activities when faced with a problem rather than take time out to probe a little deeper.

The dilemmas over planning exposed the limitations of the external partner's role. We should not have taken on an 'action planning' role in response to the lack of organisation and commitment we sometimes perceived within the Development Group. Our role was to provide a space for people to reflect on the realities of their context and develop a common vision of what could be. Also, we have no doubt that staff in their own time and context did so.

Planning responsibilities should have been left to the Council since they were the ones ultimately responsible for implementation. Instead of reacting to the perceived lack of movement we should have explored why nothing was happening.

We often 'plan' when faced with uncertainty. 'Not knowing' is not an acceptable option, particularly in public sector culture.

18. ACCOUNTABILITY

18.1 Difficulties

The ability and capacity of those involved in the early days of REDI to report back to their 'stakeholders' and members about the process was limited. The first problem was that REDI was not an object or product which could easily be 'sold'. Conviction came from being involved not being told. Trade Unions were more systematic in terms of communicating with their members, but again there was a significant reluctance to overtly 'sell' REDI until the benefits had been felt. Why risk current relationships when common sense tells you that a process like REDI could blow everything apart?

18.2 Communication

The problem of communication between the different pilot groups and the wider Council increasingly became an issue.



- For example, the politicians who were involved in the political workshops did not generally share their learnings with their parties. Competition with many other more pressing agenda items would be one factor. In addition, party structures and working practices might not be sufficiently open learning environments where people are free to raise difficult issues. In itself, REDI is deeply challenging to traditional party political practices and would not be an easy issue to raise. Nevertheless, the lack of reporting back meant that REDI has remained within a 'private' space. Consequently, issues raised were rarely connected back to wider party political structures and political working practices.
- There was a similar situation with members of the Leadership Group and the Trade Union Working Group. The 'equity, diversity and interdependence' framework represents a radically different way of understanding the dilemmas inherent in relationships within Northern Ireland. Finding ways of keeping those not directly involved in the process on board is difficult, particularly with regards to a process that is less about products than about relationships.
- Nevertheless, it is important that the communication channels are working. Otherwise, a break down of communication occurs where those in the 'inside' find it increasingly difficult to connect and communicate with the wider organisation, whilst those on the 'outside' become increasingly cynical and suspicious of their colleagues rushing off to meetings with no obvious outcomes. The isolation of 'heretics' is a common response of a system protecting itself against change.

19. FORMAL AND INFORMAL STRUCTURES

19.1 Building a new architecture

REDI required an extensive architecture to support fragile new conversations and meetings. The dilemma is that such an infrastructure requires a great deal of time to manage and maintain. This can detract from the process itself with the 'bureaucracy creep' tendency of public sector organisations justifying the existence of the new structures without reference to the purpose of the process.

19.2 Creating an alternative learning space

The creation of the *REDI Development Group* was a significant step in challenging the concept of leadership in local government. Traditionally, in almost all councils, the people at the top set the direction and control those below them, demanding performance against set targets.

Instead the Development Group brought together a group of people from different levels of the organisation, different functions, backgrounds and experiences to learn together about how to think 'outside the sectarian box' and outside the rigid grade system of the public service.

Striking the right balance between those who were critical or sceptical about REDI and our wish to invite people with the capacity and the will to engage with the issues was a constant dilemma. Over time, those who did not want to be there naturally disappeared to be replaced by others who came out of either curiosity or concern. Membership began to find a more natural balance due to the Council's commitment to REDI. The commitment of the acting Chief Executive at that time, Tom McCall, meant that anyone who expressed an interest was automatically invited to participate.

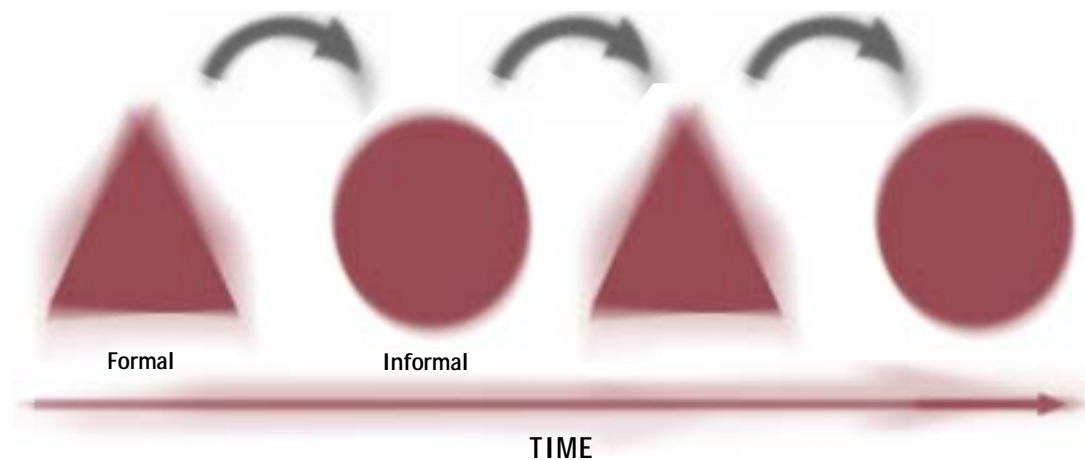
The greatest weakness, however, was the absence of a 'formal' senior management structure to relate to the 'informal' Development Group structure. Coupled with the lack of links with the Councillors' group, this meant that the Development Group was never tied fully to the formal policy processes and decision-making structures. This lack of 'earthing' meant that issues arising within the Development Group were often left outside formal Council processes. Nevertheless, the warm response of the Councillors to the political workshops and the tolerance of the Senior Management team in allowing staff to disappear to 'REDI events' they knew little about, alleviated the worst effects.



19.3 Translating learning generated within the informal Development Group space to the formal organisational space.

Maintaining an appropriate relationship between the formal and informal spaces requires constant negotiation. The informal space is space to reflect, learn and engage in a deeper conversation about difficult issues across lines of hierarchy and identity. It is a space to generate new answers rather than adapt to the old. The 'translation' of what is relevant and appropriate from the informal space into formal planning and implementation processes is key to the relationship between the two spaces. The informal has to inform and nourish the formal otherwise it will become an irrelevant talking shop. On the other hand, the formal cannot eclipse and control the informal.

DIAGRAM 5



20. THE ROLE OF THE EXTERNAL PARTNER

20.1 The balance between professional competency and acting as a contrast to bureaucratic thinking

Maintaining the balance between 'acting big'²⁰, on the one hand, while challenging models of contract-driven consultancy that offer ready-made products, on the other, was difficult. The success of REDI was dependent on Future Ways and Counteract 'learning' to become administratively efficient and 'unlearning' the need to always have an answer. Newry and Mourne District Council was not 'buying' professional authority but rather our willingness to journey with them.

20.2 The citizenship role of the external partner

One of the roles of an external partner working with public bodies is to become a critical citizen demanding as a rate payer or taxpayer a better quality service in building trust and greater interdependence across the community. This role was difficult to fill in Newry and Mourne District Council as none of the Working Group lived in the Council area. This is in contrast to, for example, working with the Civil Service or the police in that as regional bodies they are accountable to all taxpayers. The weakness of our citizenship function, and corresponding lack of local knowledge, diminished our own political edge in the process.

²⁰ Quote from Brendan McAllister, Mediation Northern Ireland



21. LEADERSHIP

21.1 Support and drive from the top.

A crucial factor in the 'pre-beginning' days was the role of Tom McCall – at that time Director of Administration and now Chief Executive of the Council. He was, and continues to be, totally committed to the principles of REDI. He holds the vision of the civic leadership role of the Council, recognizing that silences and sectarianism is a significant obstacle in the development of the Council area. He saw the potential for Newry and Mourne to set a new and different path within Northern Ireland in growing relationships. **Such sustained commitment from the Chief Executive is invaluable; without it a process like REDI quickly becomes relegated to the margins.**

21.2 'Authority-driven' process and a 'learning-driven'

There is a dilemma between an 'authority-driven' process and a 'learning-driven'²¹ process. The style of leadership of the Chief Executive was primarily 'learning-driven' in that the commitment and energy for REDI must come from people's genuine interest and desire to learn. This was at odds with a more traditional style of leadership across Councils that depends on political power for survival. In the short term, the 'authority-driven' process is more efficient, organized and can produce immediate results. In the long-term, such change processes fail to penetrate the life-blood of the organisation.

21.3 Different models of leadership

Moving from a hierarchical concept of leadership to one of partnership was and remains difficult. The 'heroic' model of leadership, in which 'the boss' is saviour of everything, is deeply part of our culture, supporting forms of leadership that are 'relationally blind', rewarding independence rather than interdependence. People in top positions often become caught in 'internecine quarrels' whose purpose is the preservation of hero status rather than the good of the whole. Those at the 'bottom' scapegoat the 'top' with little understanding of how they implicitly support such quarrels through their own behaviour. Those in the 'middle' often feel caught, trying to mediate between the 'top' and the 'bottom', becoming overwhelmed with opposing demands and ending up protecting themselves and keeping low.²²

22. THE PUBLIC SECTOR ORDER AND THE ORDER OF SILENCE AROUND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

22.1 Challenging two cultures

With hindsight, it is clear that REDI was not only challenging the culture of silence and avoidance regarding community relations but also the public sector order of hierarchy and function. The latter objective being one for which REDI had no express mandate. However, working beyond public sector culture was fundamental if the Development Group was to become a 'learning group'. One of the greatest losses for organisations is when people lower down the hierarchy can only 'say the right things' to those above them. Reflection requires space where people are free to express their perspectives and understandings in more open relationships without fear of subsequent retribution.

²¹ Adapted from Senge, P., *Dance of Change*, p.41, Doubleday Publishing, 1999.

²² Adapted from Senge, P., *Dance of Change*, Doubleday Publishing, 1999.



23. MOVING BEYOND THE PILOT STAGE

23.1 The challenges of multiplication

The Achilles heel of many learning processes is how to multiply the learnings beyond the protected pilot stage into the wider organisation. The main problem is the sudden increase in the number of people involved, which can generate mechanical metaphors such as 'rolling out' the process as if people were widgets on some assembly line. The REDI working group at times succumbed to the mechanical, feeling under pressure in the second year to 'roll the process out' and push people on.

This was due to a number of factors:

- The feeling that we were in our second year of REDI without any significant changes taking place.
- Our sense of frustration that it was 'all taking so long and requiring so much energy and time'.
- The slow realization regarding local government culture which does not reward risk-taking and learning.
- A funder understandably needing to see results.

23.2 Dealing with resistance

During times when nothing seemed to be happening we tried to provide answers, moving into an interventionist role. This tended not to work as the more we pushed, the more the system resisted our attempts to move it where we wanted to go, not where the organisation felt like going. Instead of exploring some of the reasons why the 'system was pushing back', we jumped in to get things going again. We are now much more alert to the organic nature of organisations. We are more open to the resistances and blockages, not as judgments or mischief making, but as dynamics to be expected and moved within creatively.

24. TIME

24.1 Time as a resource

Managing time is a critical aspect of organisational change and learning processes. We had to learn how to manage our own time as external partners, learn about how time is understood in Newry and Mourne and become intuitive regarding how 'time-delays' can cause mistrust and apathy.

- Of critical importance was the need to understand that control over one's time is dependent on hierarchy. The Development Group was made up of people who had different levels of flexibility regarding their use of time within the Council. Having control over one's time is an essential element of freedom.
- Newry and Mourne places value on time spent socializing and chatting over a cup of tea before a meeting begins. These build the informal networks that make things happen within the Council. Instead of being frustrated that meetings did not start on time, we had to learn to value this informal space.
- Christmas and summer holidays proved to be big blocks of time where nothing could happen.
- Significant time gaps between workshops and sessions often meant that the learnings generated in one session had been forgotten by the next. We learnt that, for example, the six day workshop with the Leadership Group required a day every two or three weeks to support people engaging with the issues.
- Valuing unstructured time²³ which places importance on thinking without the pressure of

²³ Senge, P., *The Dance of Change*, p., 70 , Doubleday Publishing, 1999.



producing is foreign to local government culture but critical in a process such as REDI. People have to experience that time spent unpacking issues and engaging with a wider diversity of views and experiences can eventually lead to better decisions.

- The 'time-delay' between input and results must be understood by all those involved in such a process. REDI was about challenging deeply ingrained cultures that are considered 'normal'. Change will not happen overnight but people's need for quick results can undermine confidence and trust in the process. Balancing 'quick wins' with long term outcomes was important.

25. FORMAL, INFORMAL AND TACIT ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES ²⁴

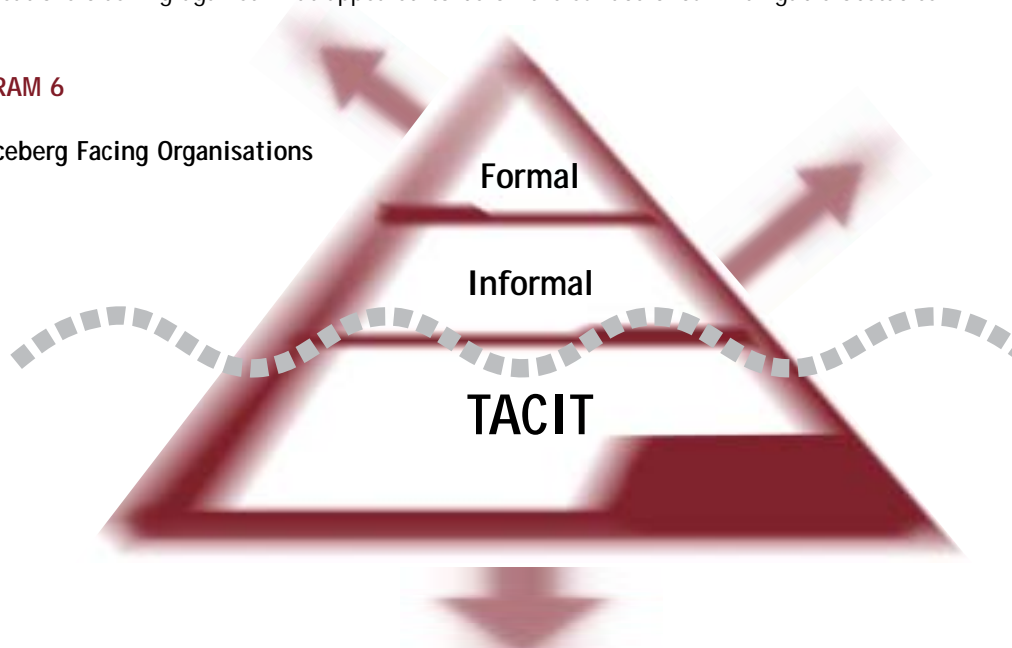
25.1 Naming the tacit

Negotiating issues of fair treatment, different needs and open relationships is difficult for most organisations. Often this is because of 'underlying culture'.

Most organisations have a **formal** culture of rules and procedures, an **informal** culture of how to really behave and work, and a **tacit**, or normal culture that only becomes visible when individuals run against it or break the rules. The quiet reminder, the nervous laughter, the 'tut-tut' or the 'we never do things like that' are visible elements of tacit culture. A failure to acknowledge tacit culture can lead to organisations crashing against what appeared to be on the surface circum navigable obstacles.

DIAGRAM 6

The Iceberg Facing Organisations



The lack of alignment between the three cultures leads to organisational policies (the formal) remaining glossy productions and corporate documents without ever affecting any change because the informal arrangements and underlying culture actively erodes their coherence and drive.

REDI sought a new alignment between the:

- **Formal** culture shaped; for example, by equal opportunities policies and processes and the Council's corporate strategy;
- **Informal** culture in terms of how people really work on a day to day basis;
- Previously **tacit** culture in terms of what people take for granted and consider to be normal.

²⁴ Adapted from D. Brubaker. Also included in the EDI Framework Document (Future Ways and Counteract 2001)



26. THE ADMINISTRATIVE SPACE AND THE POLITICAL SPACE.

26.1 Taking responsibility

The Council staff who were involved in the Community Relationships Forum found it a much more exciting and dynamic space than the REDI Development Group. For staff the Forum was an easier place to be, observing with fascination debates and conversations that touched core issues that are normally left encased in silence.

The Development Group space, on the other hand, invited staff to move from being observers to examining their own responsibility for issues that the bureaucratic/administrative culture has distanced itself from over the last thirty-five years. This necessarily surfaced the tension between the political and bureaucratic spaces exposing ways of working and thinking that have allowed the bureaucracy to run this place in the midst of political chaos.

26.2 The double bind of community relations

Violence in Northern Ireland has led to considerable unclarity about where responsibilities lie. Community Relations is technically a function of the whole council, but has not impacted directly on the policy-making of councillors. Instead it has tended to be buried within the administration, overwhelmingly dependent on the interest and capacity of the chief executive.

The double bind experienced by the District Council Community Relations Programme is that the only possibility for community relations in local Councils was through the administration and yet by locating community relations at an administrative level it allowed local politicians to deny their own responsibilities.

27. COUNCIL CULTURE

27.1 The strengths and weaknesses of informality

Newry and Mourne District Council culture tended to be quite relaxed and informal with a level of intimacy generated by small, tightly bound communities. The downside of this cosiness is a certain parochialism with informal lines of exclusion based on class, gender, educational background and, of course, political / community identities.

27.2 Learning about council culture

As a 'learning-driven' process, REDI created space for staff and councillors from the Development Group to experiment with new ways of working and new structures.

With hindsight we can identify weaknesses in our process

- We had much to learn about public service culture. People below a certain grade are not meant to change anything - that is what publicly accountable bureaucracy is about. Orders emanate from the top and those below implement them. Nothing moves unless there is a mandate from someone above you.
- We did not insist on a third representation of Protestants/Unionist and there was a distinct lack of openly Protestant / Unionist voices on the Development Group. People were not challenged with the new experiences and stories which can prompt innovation.
- The Trade Union members were overworked, with all their energies being sapped up by the trend towards partnership within local government. There seemed to be 'hundreds of committees' and structures which they had to attend. REDI was often a poor sister in terms of priorities – there were greater pressures and risks in not completing 'normal' union business than doing REDI business.



27.3 The informal space cannot make decisions

REDI demanded a certain level of risk-taking, innovation and creativity - people taking ownership of their decisions and deciding things outside a hierarchy. With hindsight, this is virtually impossible for most people in a local Council context. This could explain the decrease in energy levels during REDI planning sessions – the Development Group was being encouraged to make its own decisions outside normal management structures.

28. THE WIDER PUBLIC

28.1 Councils and the voters

Council relationships with the wider community were, not surprisingly, more of a concern with councillors than senior managers or Trade Unions. The ‘fear’ of backlash from voters, particularly those in vulnerable seats, caused some unease amongst councillors. Councillors warned that REDI would have to be sensitive to the vulnerabilities they faced, particularly the progressive ones across all the parties. There was a danger of highlighting those who were on board with REDI, to such an extent, that they would lose credibility with their own community.

28.2 Community Relations as ‘best value’?

A key question was raised regarding whether the wider community would really be interested in REDI. The role of the Council is to deliver quality services. But what happens if communities reject the Council's new approach to community relations – would the Council still be delivering the best quality services?

Where is the balance between reacting to community needs and issues and leading them? Quality management tools such as continuous improvement, total quality management and ‘best value’ are based on responding to the needs of customers but not about shaping new needs. Inherent in this dilemma is the challenge for political representatives in terms of how they negotiate their party political function (responsive) and their civic leadership role (creative).

29. FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT

29.1 Going beyond legislative necessity

Many Council officers understandably limit themselves to the legislative minimum, becoming nervous when asked to deal with feelings and emotions. It was hinted that going beyond the safety of legislation could be risky as it could leave staff open to the political vagaries of the Council chamber. REDI was perceived by some as breaching the defences created by staff to limit ‘politics’ to the politicians whilst letting the civil servants ‘get on with the real job’.

29.2 The limitations to ‘fixing’ political behaviour

Working with politicians on the basis of ‘coercion’ and imposed rules is ineffective. The principles of ‘equity, diversity and interdependence’ cannot be used to fix the behaviour of politicians through a compliance model. There might at times be an understandable wish from Council staff to ‘regulate’ the behaviour of councillors but the control of political space is not the goal of a democratic system. The principles need to be a point of measurement along a process that is about giving politicians the space to engage with real issues, in relationship with one another.



30. THE LIMITATIONS TO PERSONAL FRIENDSHIPS

30.1 Personal friendship can disguise the need for hard practical negotiations in working partnerships.

Future Ways and Counteract went into the partnership more on the basis of trust and past friendship rather than on any formal agreements. 'Memorandums of Understanding', 'A Process for Resolving Conflicts', and 'Agreed Responsibilities' were developed but never signed off nor ever used. The failure to spend time at the beginning formally agreeing on the nature and structure of the partnership, believing that past friendships would be strong enough has been a key lesson.

31. 'HIGH MAINTENANCE' PARTNERSHIPS

31.1 Partnerships are not 'one thing', but organic relationships.

Each partnership generates its own needs which have to be negotiated and learned. This means that a partnership involves time, effort and commitment, especially where there is no previous practical history of working together. Future Ways and Counteract had similar purposes, but very different approaches. Acknowledging presuppositions became a critical part of the partnership only months after the work together had actually begun.

31.2 This nature of the work required a close partnership between the organisations involved.

This took time to recognise. One year into REDI the REDI Working Group realised that an occasional business type meeting coupled with a few informal evening meetings was insufficient. Each had entered the partnership with assumptions and prejudices regarding the other organisation with roles and responsibilities allocated against these assumptions. Initially, we covered up these tensions with effusive praise.

31.3 Technical and learning functions

It is important not only to get the technical aspects of a partnership right – clear roles and responsibilities and financial management – but also to establish the understanding and learning base of the group. There is a need to factor in the time and resources needed for learning, reflection and decision-making in long-term intensive programmes like this one.

32. RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENT ORGANISATIONS

32.1 Partnerships are not without risks for parent organisations.

It is important to establish clear communication lines, not only to share learnings and issues arising, but also to prevent the partnership becoming a rival to existing understandings within each organisation. In the REDI partnership those deeply involved learnt much about ways of working that worked in a public service culture and ways that did not. These outcomes were important for both parent organisations to learn from, especially as the work undertaken by both organisations was, and is, about developing new approaches to community relations work.

33. A LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

33.1. The Working Group had no thorough analysis of tacit culture.

We had to experience it first before developing an analysis, tools and stories. As a result, we only began to explicitly explore the 'taken for grantedness' within Newry and Mourne District Council two years into the process. We failed to explore people's general attitude to change, who were the 'real' leaders and people of influence, who were the blocks, how was information really communicated, the rituals that are played and the roles people assume.

Our lack of understanding of the dynamics of the organisation probably meant that we were not political enough in those early days. We had to learn how to read different signals and become politically astute.



33.2 The nature of a relationship between an organisation and its external partners is not static.

Our job changed as the process developed and as the Council and we began learning. Finding the 'right' levels of intervention was a key challenge. Too much interference and the Council became passive, relying on us to find the answers. Too great a distance and the critical questions were never asked. We developed a critical dialogue framework to begin to help us understand our relationship.

34. VOLUNTARY GROUP – PUBLIC SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

34.1 Managing different cultures

REDI came out of an understanding that there were a number of practices and experiences in the community and voluntary sectors which could be useful for a local Council attempting to define its role in a society emerging from conflict. A learning-practice partnership developed to share different experiences.

A number of learnings have emerged out of this partnership:

- The style of small, primarily voluntary, organisations tends to be more informal and process centred than the culture of a large organisation with its emphasis on presentation and meeting targets. Unless the voluntary partners are clear about their values, understandings and ways of working it is easy for them to collude with the public organisation, unable to challenge it by working in a contrasting manner.
- On the other hand, the small non-governmental organisation (NGO) has to be capable of engaging with the bureaucracy and the detail demanded, at least initially, by large partners. Our credibility is established by being one step ahead in the efficiency stakes. Keeping one step ahead in their culture whilst simultaneously acting as a contrast is challenging.
- These organisational change processes are long term, with partnerships such as REDI extending for three years. A degree of familiarity grows between partners and friendships are struck. The benefits are the development of trust and openness that encourages risk-taking. The downside can be a level of familiarity that enticingly brings the external partner into the organisation's tacit culture.

34.2 The critical dialogue approach

We developed a critical dialogue model, framing our relationship with Newry and Mourne District Council and clarifying our distinctive contribution as 'changing agents' to the REDI process.

The approach consisted of a number of elements:

- Of crucial importance was our financial independence from our partners, giving us a freedom to challenge and be their 'equals' rather than their 'paid employees'. This was due to the insight and foresight of the funder. In a post settlement society where organisations have to readjust to a new climate, it was important that we did not act as clients. This allowed us to raise a critical discussion and keep a critical edge in that discussion, over and against the need of securing the next job.
- We were not experts and did not come with the answers. What we shared were levels of experience and knowledge developed over the years, whilst acknowledging the depth of experience held by the Council. Our role was to ask questions and design spaces where people could explore issues that were and are relevant for the business of the organisation.
- The critical dialogue model holds the tension between current realities and a sense of hope and vision. In some organisations, that tension has disappeared as current realities oppress any space for envisioning the future and any visions are reduced to cynical public relations exercises. Our role as external partners was to reintroduce that tension and support people negotiate the move between both poles. The comment, 'this is all very well but what does it mean in practice at 9.00 on Monday morning' was the cue for us not to reach for an answer but to support that person find his or her own.



A FINAL WORD

'There is no culture of being confused in a Council. REDI allowed that to happen.'
(REDI Development Group member)

REDI was about a Council creating space:

- To explore its understanding of community relations;
- To define its responsibility for improving relationships within the council area;
- To work out different responses appropriate for different contexts;
- To grow its internal capacity to challenge discrimination and build trust as a central service.

REDI was about small steps and small acts emerging from new conversations between people.

REDI was not about imposing change but about exploring possibilities for change in a shifting community and political context. It was about growing new habits amongst and between staff and elected representatives to support parallel fragile initiatives within the wider community.

In such a majority Council area, REDI did not immediately pose any immediate challenges to the Council culture. For many people, REDI was about management processes and organisational structures rather than issues of majority-minority relations.

It is fair to say that REDI tended to focus more on the 'organisational change' dimension with issues of communication, hierarchy, cross-departmental working and internal relationships of greater import than community relationships. This is inevitable in such a majority context.

Over time we know that a significant number of councillors, senior managers, trade union members and staff have chosen to develop new relationships and practices that promote a more interdependent organisation. People exercising such choices build trust and promote good relations. That these choices are exercised within a significant public body builds a new base line for others to start from.

The test for Newry and Mourne District Council, as a civic leader, is how it treats those who feel marginalized and excluded from the centre of public life, internally and in the community the council serves. Time will tell whether the REDI process contributed to this task.



This declaration is supported and endorsed by the staff, Elected Representatives Trade Unions and Management within Newry and Mourne District Council.

- 1 The Elected Representatives, Staff, Management and Trade Unions within Newry and Mourne District Council fully commit themselves to the principles of Equity, respect for Differences and Relationship-Building across sectarian divisions.
- 2 We accept that everyone has the right to work and live free from any form of intimidation due to religious, political, cultural or national differences and commit ourselves to ensuring freedom for all those who work for the Council from any form of discrimination by word or actions.
- 3 Representation and promotion of our own cultural, political and religious identities should be achieved in a manner that shows respect for each other, promotes diversity and can lead to creating mutual respect and understanding.
- 4 Any attempt to prevent the employment, continued employment or career development of any individual within the Council due to religious, political, cultural or national differences, will be vigorously opposed. Anyone involved in such activity will be subject to disciplinary procedures.
- 5 All staff are committed to ensuring that their behaviour can in no way make any other staff member feel uncomfortable or victimised because of their religious, political, cultural, or national identity.
- 6 Councillors will endeavour to use language and conduct themselves in a manner that makes no other Councillor, the community or members of staff feel belittled or degraded. They will endeavour to engage in respectful politics and avoid behaviour that could cause greater divisions within the wider Council area.
- 7 The Council will endeavour to ensure all Council premises shall be environments where anything that identifies a particular community allegiance, that could give offence or cause discomfort to individuals, groups or the community, would have to be acceptable to both 'majority' and 'minority' communities.
- 8 The Council will proof the delivery of all services and fundraising against agreed 'Community Relations' principles.
- 9 The REDI Development Group will regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of this Declaration and all associated structures, procedures and training. It will engage with Elected Representatives, Management, Trade Unions and Staff on any changes which may be required in the future to ensure continuous improvement.



THE FUTURE WAYS PROGRAMME

The Future Ways Programme is a mainly charitably funded initiative based in the University of Ulster that seeks to bridge the gap between the long history of conflict handling work in the community and voluntary sectors and the absence of any practical developments within a large number of institutions and organisations in Northern Ireland. Currently its work includes:

- Developing and delivering learning and training courses on issues of diversity, trust building and equity;
- Helping to define and implement appropriate community relations policies and practice within a number of different institutions in the public, voluntary and private sectors;
- Publishing materials and texts arising from the practical programme of work developing a local governance 'Civic Leadership' Programme, West of the Bann, with the Western Routes Initiative.

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	Derick Wilson	028 70 32 4550

COUNTERACT

Counteract, an anti-intimidation unit, was formed in 1990 with the sponsorship and support of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Its purpose is to develop actions, policies and strategies that alleviate the incidence of sectarianism and intimidation in the workplace and the wider community. It also undertakes research into workplace intimidation and trade union and employer responses to it.

Since its inception, Counteract has provided a very effective 'fire-fighting service' for a large number of organisations across the public, private and community/voluntary sectors. However, while this facility provided an immediate response to the short term needs of these organisations, it did not offer a longer-term solution to their problems. Counteract has recognised the need to facilitate the embedding of an internal capacity within organisations to develop and sustain an anti-discriminatory / anti-intimidation ethos and move towards the promotion of equity and the acceptance of diversity.

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