



Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Funding: Community Relations Council

21 October 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr George Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Ms Jacqueline Irwin	Community Relations Council
Mr Paul Jordan	Community Relations Council

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I welcome Jacqueline Irwin, the chief executive of the Community Relations Council (CRC), and Paul Jordan, the director of funding at the council. I advise you that the session is being recorded by Hansard and will be published on the Committee's web page. You are both welcome. We appreciate you being here to give us this information. If you are happy, I will pass to you to give us some input, and then we will move to questions from members.

Ms Jacqueline Irwin (Community Relations Council): Thank you. I begin by offering an apology that our chair could not be here. As members may know, Martin suffered a terrible family bereavement and has taken some time off. Therefore, as the focus of our evidence this time is on funding only, as requested by the Committee, as you said, Chair, I am joined by Paul Jordan, our director of funding and development.

I hope that members have received our paper, which provides an update on developments since we last gave evidence to the Committee. From the paper, members will have read that the CRC has completed its accounts for 2019-2020, so we can give you an update beyond the 2018-19 figures that we provided the last time. The audit of the accounts for 2019-2020 has almost been completed, and we are due to receive the audit report in November. We do not anticipate any changes to the figures in our paper to you as a result of the audit, but, if there are any, we will, of course, advise the Committee at that time.

Since we last spoke to you, we have also completed the usual annual review of our funding programmes and have further developed our online evaluation processes, which now reflect more accurately the geographical reach of our funding. CRC continues to work in collaboration with a wide range of organisations, so, as usual during the review period, we met key stakeholders and discussed their plans. We engaged with the councils' good relations programme, colleagues in the Executive

Office and many of the groups that we fund, particularly those like the Rural Community Network, that deliver in rural areas. We did that in order to explore opportunities for new projects and to see how additional engagement might help to identify and address the emerging needs in the different council areas. It was also to encourage a joined-up approach and greater complementarity across all the initiatives.

The paper that you received updates the Committee with information relating to last year, this year and next year. From page 3 onwards, members will find our grant expenditure for last year, which, as I said, is subject to audit. We also included the distribution of our funds across all council areas, with a specific update on the areas that were raised by the Committee during our last evidence session: Derry City and Strabane District Council and Mid Ulster District Council.

The figures for 2019-2020 take account of the improvements in our online evaluation processes that have helped us to reflect in greater detail the geographical reach of our core funded groups as opposed to where their offices are based. As further work is undertaken on our new online system, it is expected that the full impact of the improvements to our evaluation processes will be more evident in next year's assessments.

Turning to the current year, on page 6 of the paper, there is information on how the welcome statements that we put in place for this year are being addressed through our core funding programmes. Obviously, you should bear it in mind that it is not a complete picture as we are only a little more than halfway through this financial year. Welcome statements are only part of the way in which we try to encourage and support applications to our funding schemes. We run many information events and shared learning fora, and we carry lots of information on our website and social media. This year, in addition to all that, the CRC has arranged for each member of staff in our funding and engagement teams to have a specific focus on an individual council area. We hope that that will enable us to have an even better knowledge of the issues in each council and the local agencies and staff working there. From their point of view, it will provide a regular and familiar point of contact with us. We also aim to identify rural champions with whom to work on the issues affecting rural areas. Our chair, when he returns, will be a great help to us with that as he has a strong background in rural issues. We would also be happy to hear from you and your colleagues on any points of contact or issues in your areas.

On page 11 of the paper, we have set out our discussions and work with the Executive Office and district councils this year, including information on the development of our joint evaluation methods.

Moving on to the plans for next year, on page 12 you will see the proposed welcome statements for the 2021-22 financial year. Those will accompany the opening of the next round of our core-fund scheme, which is due shortly.

Lastly, on page 14, you will see our continuing COVID-19 response. All our grant administration procedures are online, which has been very helpful during the pandemic. All our shared learning events and meetings are taking place online using Zoom and other forms of teleconferencing. We have also been supporting others who need help with teleconferencing.

As members may know, in September we ran Good Relations Week entirely online, which, despite the current circumstances, was a great success. We had 292 online listings, including events and digital content, which was a 39% increase on 2019. All the councils organised events as part of that week. We had 97 pieces of print, online, broadcast and social media coverage. I am really pleased to report that we had 547 pieces of social media coverage from third parties. That was other interested groups transmitting or supporting our messages. The Together: Building a United Community engagement forum took place that week; it always attracts a large audience, normally 130 or 150 people. This time, it was even bigger, with 203 people in attendance.

In the paper, we list initiatives that we have supported during the pandemic; Paul can give you more detail now or after this session. We have included an example of one of our statements of encouragement to show our approach to helping groups to feel confident to deliver services to meet community needs during this dreadful time. We would also be happy to hear your suggestions for ways that we could help during COVID-19. Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Jacqueline, thank you very much. I begin by extending our condolences to Martin on that bereavement and where he is at the moment. We hope that things settle for him.

We will move to questions. You highlighted the identification of rural champions as a way forward for working in rural communities, which is great to hear. How do you see the rural champions developing? What do you see as their role? How might they go about it? Can we have your thoughts on that?

Ms Irwin: Yes, of course, Chair. As I mentioned, and as is included in the paper, we work with quite a number of groups based in rural areas. However, the issue that we are not quite clear on is whether there are other things stopping people feeling confident about doing good relations work. Are there other ways in which they can be helped and supported to find their way to our door? That is the conversation that we want to have with people who are steeped in rural work, either because that is part of their day-to-day business or because they have been involved in that work historically.

It is also a confidence-building measure. People are sometimes anxious about approaching a new funder, particularly a funder that they have not worked with before and are not familiar with. If they can approach someone, or know someone, whom we would describe as a rural champion, that person can bring them across to us for further conversations.

They can also provide a challenge function. We think that we do a pretty good job of keeping in contact with our networks and very wide range of organisations. However, you do not know if that is absolutely true until somebody says, "You have missed something here. Here is someone else you should be talking to". That is how we hope rural champions could help us. That puts what we are looking for in a rather grand way. It is simply other people who can be conduits to contacts who work in rural areas, to the issues in those areas, or other things that we could be doing to support work in rural areas.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): The council in my area will send funding officers to sit down with groups and help them to apply for funding. There is no element of trying to disbar people from applying. It is to get as many applications in as possible and to work through it and to provide support.

Is that something that you offer, or do you take a scope of organisations to see other good practice for engaging groups? Is that something that you do? Are you involved in forums that allow you to pick up on other good practice and incorporate it into your own work?

Ms Irwin: Yes, Chair. We do all those things. We run a lot of our own events and are frequently invited to other people's. We are very strongly in favour of doing that. Paul can give you information about the various funding fora that we have been involved in, as we are strong advocates of running those at council level. We, and the TEO, go to their events. It is a much more collaborative exercise. It also means that, in the days before COVID-19 when people went to those events, they would see a lot of funders in one place at one time. It was a better use of their time, precious as it is when they are trying to get on with their work.

Paul will be able to give you information on the supporting groups. One of the things that we always say to people who are interested in doing good relations work is that you do not have to have a fully worked-up idea to talk to us. In fact, we encourage you to come as early as possible, even if you have only a very loose idea of what you want to do. You may not even have an idea of what you want to do; you may simply recognise an issue that needs attention. We have a lot of experience of what is going on with large and small groups across the region. We can often point out examples of things that have been tried elsewhere or put people in contact with someone who is working on a similar issue. In that way, we can help them to develop their thinking. We are not interested in turning down applications; we are interested in supporting applications and making them better and stronger so that we can say yes to them. You are quite right: we are far more interested in hearing from people and talking to them. That is the development side of our work, and we put a lot of time and effort into it.

Mr Beattie: Thank you for that. I did not actually have a question, but something caught my eye. Looking at where the money goes, I see that TIDES Training & Consultancy has something running in the areas that are also part of the Executive action plan for tackling paramilitary activity, criminality, and organised crime, specifically Drumgask and Kilwilkie in Lurgan. The Communities in Transition project is doing the same sort of thing with money coming from its direction. You are doing likewise. Is there repetition here, or are you working hand-in-hand on this?

Ms Irwin: In a moment, I will pass you to Paul to talk specifically about how it works. In the main, however, we core-fund organisations to enable them to deliver projects, small or large, for other funders. That is the principle behind the scheme. TIDES is a core-funded group of ours. However, we do not fund it to do the same thing that it does for the Special EU Programmes Body, for instance. We

supply some of the underpinning resource that enables staff in that organisation to deliver programmes. If I pass to Paul for a moment, he can talk specifically about that example.

Mr Paul Jordan (Community Relations Council): One of the things that we do for our core organisations is make sure that they have a base to work from. Core costs are probably one of the most difficult costs for an organisation to secure, but they are one of the most important if they have staff in place, including admin staff and the running costs with that. That means that Tides Training can take on contracts and work and deliver good relations programmes through other funding sources that it would not have been able to do if it had not had the infrastructure in place. It is where we are looking at across the board. When we do our evaluations, we talk to each partner to see what work is happening and what has been generated from it. It is something that we will look at for the impact that core funding has on enabling groups to maximise the work that they do.

Mr Beattie: Paul, thank you for that. I think that you answered my question at the very end when you said that you were talking to other partners. My concern was that there could be two organisations working in exactly the same spot and delivering exactly the same thing, which would mean a repetition of resources. However, if you say that you are talking and that that is not happening, I am happy enough with that.

Ms Anderson: Thank you both for the information. When we received the previous presentation, Emma and I and, I am sure, others were keen to interrogate it further to get more information about where the funding goes.

I am looking at the work supported in Derry and Strabane and Mid Ulster district council areas, and I see that 30 organisations in Derry City and Strabane and Mid Ulster are being supported with core funding. However, I was surprised to ascertain that only seven of those organisations are in Derry and Strabane, which represents 23%, and only one is in Mid Ulster. I will leave that for Emma to pick up. When I look at the core funding that has been given out, I see that The Junction has received the lion's share of it, followed by the Bands Forum. However, I would like more information on what consideration was given to that meagre list of seven organisations in Derry. I know of the good work being done across the city by, for example, Galliagh Women's Group and others. They do cross-community and outreach work that would be classified as good work on good relations. Jacqueline, I was glad to hear you say that organisations should come to you first so that you can help them to navigate their way to draw down funding. I will make sure that, for instance, the Galliagh Women's Group does that. I assume that it does.

Page 45 shows the organisations that have had their funding withdrawn or rejected in Derry and Strabane. Am I picking that up right? Maybe you could explain it to me. I am trying to understand why, if there are 30 organisations, only seven from Derry and Strabane get core funding. Many of the organisations are from outside the area. I am sure that they do good work, but, when you live in an area, you understand it best. A number of organisations that live and work in the area, particularly in the districts, do not seem to have got through the process. Can you explain that to me?

Ms Irwin: Yes. There were a lot of questions there. I will answer some of them at a general level, and Paul can provide some of the information that you requested. He may not be able to give you all of it, but we would be glad to send it to you afterwards, Martina.

I want to say two things. All the core-funded groups that we work with are in the [*Inaudible*] working with [*Inaudible*] at a local level. That is part of the mechanism that they use. They are often working in [*Inaudible*] networks for delivery. Paul may be able to say something more about that in a moment. The other thing to say that I always say when we talk to anybody [*Inaudible*] do, if you know of someone who does brilliant community relations work but is not receiving funding from [*Inaudible*] in time, send them to our door. We are not interested [*Inaudible*] closing the door on any good work [*Inaudible*] support it, we would be more than glad to do so. I am aware of some of the work that you reference, Martina, going on at local community level. Some of our funded groups are involved in it. If there is more room [*Inaudible*] happen, as I said, we would be glad to help [*Inaudible*] that.

Sadly, we cannot fund everything that we want to fund, particularly on the core-fund side of our business. There are always groups that we would be glad to fund if we had the resource. We keep a reserve list every year when we do the core-fund assessments, and there are always groups left on it that we would fund if we had the money; their work is good enough for it. The list that you see before you is not everything that we would want to do, far from it.

I will pass over to Paul to say something more about some of those groups.

Mr Jordan: We fund a lot of groups through our community relations cultural diversity grant scheme, which is through our small grants. I will give you an example of how we work. The Junction and the Holywell Trust are organising an event next week for 18 smaller organisations, and we have been asked to speak to that group about available funding. We will be only too delighted to join them, as, if anything is going on, we want to connect. I have been meeting good relations officers, and initiatives are coming from them that we will take forward. They mentioned each of the areas that they are working in, and there are some groups and organisations there.

We plan this year to take the information events a step further and say, "Look, are there local issues that people are coming together to work on, and is there something that we could be helpful in to make that happen?". The guys are going to come back to me, as there are initiatives that they want to come together on in their areas. I am only too happy to sit down with those groups. It really is a question of, "Tell us what you want to do, and let's see what we can do in partnership on that". The door is always open. For us, it is about trying to make sure that we get out as much as we can.

Ms Anderson: I hope that you will not regret telling me that the door is always open. I am anxious about the groups and organisations that live and work in the heart of the community and understand it. They stagger from one year to the next trying to source funding. They do sterling work. The Galliagh Women's Group is only one of many. I am sure that other organisations will give out to me when I go home because I did not shout them out, too. We all have fantastic organisations that do good work yet are always struggling to get funding.

Jacqueline and Paul, I will direct those organisations to you. It is concerning that of the 30 organisations delivering for Derry and Strabane and mid-Ulster, only one organisation in mid-Ulster and seven in Derry and Strabane district are getting funding. That is not representative of the community that I come from; I attest to that as someone who lives there. However, I will take you up on your offer, and we will see how it goes.

Ms Irwin: We will be delighted to work with you on that and, hopefully, change that profile.

Ms Anderson: Thank you.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you both for joining us this afternoon and for your presentation. What sparked this was the briefing in May. I brought up the pack last night when I was going through this. The figures seem to have changed, maybe not dramatically but considerably, between 2018-19 and 2019-2020. What alarmed me, as a Mid Ulster MLA, the last time was the fact that Mid Ulster came last and that our funding was significantly lower than other council areas. I know that you have put in a disclaimer that a lot of the groups funded are active in Mid Ulster, even though they are not based there. As Martina pointed out, only one group is based in Mid Ulster. The Rural Community Network, which does brilliant work, has an office in Cookstown. The Junction is in Dungannon, so, technically, it is in the Mid Ulster District Council area but does not fall into our Assembly constituency. It, too, does really good work.

I might bear in mind what you said to Martina about your door being open to working with groups. I think of a genuinely cross-community group in Maghera, at my end of the constituency, that works with young people. A lot of the work that you have referred to is about redressing issues that are a legacy of the past. The conflict had significant impacts on Mid Ulster. I welcome that work. The table of figures looks heartening, but, when you drill down into the actual implications or the reality on the ground, you find that not many of those groups are known in their community as working there. So, I will be following up with you on that. Thanks very much for providing this.

Ms Irwin: I am happy to work with you on that. As I said, if any of the groups that you speak to are not clear on what they want to do, tell them not to worry about that part of it but just have a conversation with us. We can help to develop the idea. They do not have to have something very clear in their mind's eye when they first open up the conversation with us. Hopefully, that is an encouragement to the people who you are speaking to.

Ms Sheerin: Brilliant. Thank you. The group that I am thinking of is working already and survives year to year. It uses the International Fund for Ireland, and there is always a scrambling match at the end of the year to get the funding that it needs. I mention that group because it is based in Maghera and there is reference there to work being done with schoolchildren in Magherafelt, which is a

neighbouring town. That group is doing great work with young people in a mixed town, and it works with everybody. I will follow that up with you. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Pat, do you have any questions that you wish to ask?

Mr Sheehan: No, Chair. I am happy with the questions that have been asked so far. Thank you.

Mr Robinson: *[Inaudible.]* Do you hold meetings with councils? I know that that is not easy at present because of COVID-19. Councillors are on the ground as much as we are. Do you have close associations with them as well as with the community associations? I just wonder how you correspond with them.

Ms Irwin: Thank you. We do not have regular meetings with councillors. From time to time, councillors get in touch with us about particular issues, and we are always glad to work with them when they do. Our most regular contact is with the good relations officers in each council area, and Paul mentioned that earlier. Our staff have regular meetings with them on funding issues. As Paul said, over the summer there is a review of the work being done, where the gaps are and where other work might be done. We do commemoration work with them and so on. The work tends to be themed and tends to be with council staff. However, from time to time, we also attend meetings with a councillor who has looked for that. We always welcome those opportunities and are glad to do that. As you say, councillors have their ear to the ground and have a lot of local knowledge. We are very happy to work with them when they have the time to do that.

Mr Robinson: Thank you very much for your presentation. It is much appreciated.

Ms Irwin: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Trevor Lunn is definitely not with us online at the moment.

Jacqueline and Paul, thank you very much for coming along to the Committee, answering our questions and making the offer for members to contact you about working with local groups. That will hopefully raise both the profile of the work that you are doing and the reach of your funding, which would be appreciated. Thank you for coming along, not least Paul. When people broadcast to the Committee from Downpatrick, it always helps to brighten up the day, so thank you very much for that *[Laughter.]*

Mr Jordan: Thank you. All the best.

Ms Irwin: Thank you very much.