LOYALIST BONFIRE REPORT
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1. Introduction and Context

Twenty one years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, a number of challenges still remain within our society. The 1998 Agreement heralded in a new sense of hope, and over the past 21 years, there have been many moments of unprecedented progress. There have been remarkable political decisions taken, new relationships forged and many ‘historic’ encounters made.

There are so many good milestones to talk about since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed. New political institutions within the islands of Britain and Ireland, were developed to give representation to all, build new relationships and forge a better future. Prisoners were released, weapons were decommissioned and a commitment to exclusively peaceful means was pledged. After Sinn Féin endorsed the new policing structures, they and the Democratic Unionist Party entered government to share power in 2007, with Dr. Ian Paisley becoming First Minister and Martin McGuinness becoming the Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive. This then paved the way for the historic meeting between Dr. Paisley and the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, at Farmleigh House in Dublin, after which they both visited the Battle of the Boyne site in Drogheda. We then had Peter Robinson becoming First Minister with Martin McGuinness, thereafter followed by Arlene Foster.

Queen Elizabeth made a state visit to Ireland in 2011 and laid a wreath at the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin. The President of Ireland, Mary McAleese laid a wreath at Islandbridge War Memorial Gardens. A year later, Martin McGuinness met the Queen and shook her hand. The Irish President, Michael D. Higgins made a reciprocal state visit to the United Kingdom in 2014.

Genuine efforts were made to reach out to the other and actions were taken to seek to engage with the culture and traditions of those who were seen as coming from a different background.

In the midst of all of these historic events, we still had sporadic bombings, shootings and punishment attacks. We had the flags protests, bonfire stand-offs, Camp Twadelle and sit-down protests. We had and continue to have challenges in relation to the place of the Irish Language, perceived cultural alienation and our LGBTQ community. We have the ongoing RHI inquiry and Brexit has polarised public opinion and politics.
In January 2017, our political institutions collapsed and have been in limbo ever since.
The publication in October 2018, of the Good Relations Indicators by the Executive Office at Stormont were a wake-up call that sectarianism, racism, and homophobia are still all too prevalent within our society. There is still a long way to go in building a society in which we can all live well together, with respect for each other.
While the iconic, symbolic and historic moments of the last 21 years will always remain, they have not been enough to sustain positive political relationships and to change hearts and minds as much as our society needed. A closed Stormont is symbolic of the reality that we haven’t yet learned how to truly live well with each other.
Within this context, aspects of cultural identity, and its expression, continue to cause tension and division within and between our communities. In our society, this becomes more challenging due to the relationship between politics and culture, where political identity is expressed through cultural events. In this context, any perceived attack on expressions of cultural identity towards some, or a perceived denial of aspects of identity by others, can damage political relations and push communities apart.

Despite politics having worked relatively well for a significant period over the last 21 years, these competing cultural identity issues have served to prevent us forging a way to build positive relationships within and between our communities. What is clear, 21 years after the Agreement, is that cultural identity and cultural expression are important for communities and this is no more true, than in relation to bonfires, specifically those held in Unionist and Loyalist communities on the 11th of July.

Within these cultural spaces thousands of young people are actively involved in expressing their identity.

For one section of society, Eleventh Night bonfires are a traditional celebration of culture, while for others, bonfires are nothing more than acts of ‘sectarian domination’. In recent years, these two conflicting views on bonfires have been played out in political, agency, community and social media arenas and many young people have been caught up in this.

In the run up to the Eleventh Night the media is dominated about stories relating to bonfires. Over the last few years, interventions through the courts have brought this to a new level and the political and cultural narrative is usually framed through an adults perspective.

Rarely do we hear the voices of young people, thousands of whom are directly involved in these events. This short report is an attempt to explore the issue of bonfires from a young people’s perspective, while seeking to locate these experiences within a wider context. Therefore this report will tell the story of the passion, enthusiasm and beliefs of those young people for whom bonfires are an essential aspect of their cultural identity and tradition. It also seeks to provide some constructive recommendations on how these experiences can be promoted, developed and enhanced for the benefit of young people and wider society.
2. ELEVENTH NIGHT BONFIRES: SOME BACKGROUND

All over the world and throughout history, fire has been an important factor in society. It used for warmth and light, for social activity, and in many faiths, is a symbol of religious and spiritual ritual and a means of celebrating and remembering. Fire is an important aspect of different cultures throughout the world and bonfires are used to mark or commemorate historical events in many countries.

Bonfires have been used as a way of marking events within our communities and have been used to mark the Eleventh of July, the eve of the anniversary of the battle of the Boyne, or on the 8th of August to mark the eve of the introduction of internment. Bonfires have also been used to mark the 15th August to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption, Halloween on the 31st October or Guy Fawkes Night.

Eleventh Night bonfires are of critical importance and significance within the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist community. Every year, bonfires are lit in communities on the evening before the Twelfth, to commemorate King William III and his forces landing at Carrickfergus, in advance of fighting the Jacobite forces, supporters of the exiled Catholic King James II, who was trying to regain the British throne. Eleventh Night bonfires recall the lighting of fires or beacons on the hills of counties Antrim and Down to help Williamite ships navigate through Belfast Lough.

In our society, Eleventh Night bonfires are broadly welcomed and supported by the communities where they occur. However, in the workshops with the young people, it was evident that, while they have strong passion for the practice of bonfires, they found it difficult to articulate what they meant when using terms such as ‘our culture’ and ‘a tradition’. There was very little, if any, reference to aspects of the law around bonfires. Therefore the remainder of this section seeks to provide some language and theory around these issues as a means of supporting young people in gaining a greater understanding of the broad issue that they invest so much of their time and energy in.
2.1 Legal Considerations

There are no specific laws against having a bonfire and there is even official government guidance on the burning of materials outdoors, which mainly relates to garden fires, or small camp fires. However, in 2015, the UK Department for Communities and Local Government issued guidance for communities celebrating events by using bonfires and fireworks:


Although the majority of Eleventh Night bonfires do pass off without any issue and many would adhere to the guidance issued by Government, some bonfires do give rise to complaints from members of the public, and concerns from agencies. The media, too, carries many of these concerns and complaints which generally consist of issues around the height and location of some bonfires and the materials on them which could cause environmental problems, along with the burning of flags and symbols. In a lot of the commentary around concerns and complaints regarding bonfires, young people tend to be unfairly deemed as being the cause of the problem.

While there is, however, no specific law on bonfires per say, there is a range of legislation which, while not directly designed to deal with issues around bonfires, it has relevance to bonfires and activities around them, which would be useful for young people to be aware of. For example, property/land owners, are responsible for what happens on their land and in many cases the main issue with bonfires arises in the materials that are used. When the materials that are gathered and burned on bonfires contravenes waste disposal and environmental/air pollution legislation, this provides challenges for land owners and agencies. The Northern Ireland Environmental Agency, or a local Council could technically prosecute the landowner, or those involved in placing materials at a bonfire, where there are waste disposal and environmental implications.

There are other issues around bonfire sites which also give rise to complaints. Some examples include trespassing on property, theft of materials to be burned, the potential for damage to property when bonfires are built close to buildings, or issues such as youths causing annoyance, under-age drinking or arson. While there is no specific legislation in respect of policing of bonfires, some of the complaints associated with bonfires are dealt with under anti-social legislation.

While there is no laws designed specifically for bonfires, there are provisions within other existing laws which could be applied to deal with issues around them. By and large however, agencies seek to work with bonfire organisers to deal with the potential negative aspects of bonfires that can give rise to complaints and work with communities to ensure that bonfire events are safe and properly managed.
2.2 CULTURAL RIGHTS

Young people often refer to their rights to engage in bonfires as a form of cultural expression. However, in discussions, many were not aware of what these rights were. It is important that young people understand that they do have certain rights and entitlements as citizens when it comes to engaging in cultural activities and it is worth listing them here. Such culturally related rights include:

- freedom of expression,
- the right to lead one's life in accordance with a cultural identity,
- the right to choose freely a cultural identity,
- the right to a religious identity; and
- freedom of association with a cultural purpose. Therefore, people have certain protected rights when engaging in cultural activity.

2.3 BONFIRES AS A TRADITIONS

Young people often refer to bonfires being a tradition within their communities. However, young people find it hard to articulate what they mean when referring to ‘the tradition of bonfires’. A tradition is defined as: “the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way”. The tradition of bonfires goes back over centuries. As a tradition, being passed down through the generations,
claim, with some legitimacy, that they are carrying on a tradition within their neighbourhoods. Being a traditional form of cultural expression offers some additional protection for the practice of bonfires.

2.4 THE MEDIA, CULTURE AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The media plays an important role in how cultural activity is projected to wider society. Many of the young people who participated in the focus groups for this report perceived there to be a negative bias in media reporting around Unionist and Loyalist culture, particularly when it came to bonfires. In particular, participants felt that individuals were being demonized for their involvement in bonfires. There was a sense that Unionist culture, in general, was being denigrated by media reporting.

The role of social media was also discussed by participants, specifically that it can be used to raise tensions in local communities. The role of social media in promoting community tensions and acting as a platform for abusing people from a different culture was also discussed by participants. Facebook and Twitter were highlighted as being used by groups and individuals to engage in sectarian abuse, particularly around times of cultural activity.
3. Young people and Eleventh Night Bonfires

3.1 Aim of the project

The main aim of the project was to provide young people with an opportunity to:

- present their views on bonfires;
- explore their understanding about what they represent and symbolise;
- consider their broader views on identity and culture, and
- reflect on whether/how historical traditions could be celebrated and commemorated in a society that is still very much divided.

This report captures the views of young people from the broad Unionist/Loyalist tradition and provides them with a platform in which they provide a distinct narrative around the history and tradition of 11th July bonfires.
3.2 Methodology

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum engaged with fourteen females and twenty-six males aged 16-21 from the Larne, Carrickfergus, Shankill, Antrim and Ballymena areas. The five focus groups took place in local settings and lasted approximately ninety minutes. They were held between 26th of June and the 9th of July 2018. The sessions were structured around a series of themes to give participants the opportunity to discuss all aspects of the bonfire including:

- The relationship between the bonfire tradition and the community;
- Ownership of the bonfire tradition;
- Culture, identity and tradition;
- The views of the ‘other’ community;
- The future of bonfires.

Each of the sessions were conducted by a facilitator and hand written notes were take along with comments written on flip-chart paper. On certain occasions direct quotes from participants were recorded although no names were attributed.
4. YOUNG PEOPLE SPEAK

The following section draws together the main findings to emerge from the focus groups under a series of themes. Where appropriate, quotes have been used to illustrate the broader views of the participants.

4.1 DESCRIBING THE BONFIRE TRADITION AND EXPERIENCE

The sessions began with the participants being asked to think about how they would describe the 11th of July bonfire. The task set for the participants sought to enable them to focus on those words and phrases that they thought best captured the event.

As can be seen from figure 1 below, the immediate experience of bonfires was overwhelmingly positive for the participants:

When the question was explored deeper, many of the participants were not able to articulate what the bonfire represented within their community. Participants found it difficult to articulate what the cultural significance and tradition of the bonfire was, its meaning and origins, or the significance of bonfires for Unionist and Loyalist communities.

The overwhelming majority of young people talked about the 11th of July in a positive context and suggested that it was one of the ‘highlights’ of their year. The ‘boney’ was ‘something that was guaranteed to take place every year in their community’. Generally, they looked forward to the Eleventh Night and viewed it as an opportunity to meet old friends and participate in a community activity that essentially brought people together.
PARTY-TIME
Some young people felt that the bonfire was an opportunity to come together with friends and have a drink and party in the local area. There was no expressed historical or cultural meaning attached to the date or the event. Instead, it was largely seen by the participants as a social occasion that was about having fun:

- Because it’s an event when all of your mates get together and head to the field
- It just means having a drink with your mates and having a laugh
- People just looking to get blocked

FAMILY AND TRADITION
Several young people talked about their family and the connection the bonfire had with older generations. For example, participants talked about how their parents had brought them to the bonfire and many of them had memories of attending the 11th of July events as children:

- It’s something I always went to with my family
- It’s simply part of who we are and it brings the community together
- My dad took me and I will probably take my kids too

There was also a sense from the participants that the bonfire was very much part of their culture and identity, although they often struggled with words to describe this and what the words culture and identity meant. Several used the phrases ‘it is part of our tradition’ and ‘it’s our culture’. However upon further examination, many were unable to expand on these initial thoughts or articulate deeper as to what this meant to them.

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE
Several young people chose to describe elements of the 11th of July bonfire in a negative context and felt that it was damaging to community relations. Some felt that local paramilitaries were directly involved with the bonfire, while others felt bonfires were used to demonise another culture:

- It’s about bitterness…its sectarian and it drags everyone into hard line thoughts
- It’s all about hatred, especially when the flags get burnt
- It’s about the paramilitaries and having a place in the community

NO UNDERSTANDING
There were also those that indicated that they had no knowledge or understanding about the origins or cultural significance of 11th July bonfires. Most of the participants were unable to articulate what bonfires represented within their culture:

- I haven’t a clue what it’s all about, I just go because everyone else does and it’s my birthday
- To me it means nothing…I just go because my mates are there

SUMMARY
Overall, it was clear that there was no common understanding or a common language to describe the bonfire and some confusion as to what it represented within the context of cultural identity and community identity. However, there was a strong sense that the bonfire was about ‘togetherness’ and ‘community’ and was something that generally people looked forward to and enjoyed. Furthermore, the young people felt a strong sense that the bonfire created a focal point in the local neighbourhood.
4.2 THE BONFIRE

Discussions then moved on to the topic of the bonfire itself with a focus on its construction and management in the community. It was apparent that within the focus groups there were people responsible for the gathering of materials, while others took charge of building the bonfire itself. Others simply attended the lighting of the bonfire on the 11th of July. There were three key themes that formed the content of the discussion: the issues of ownership; construction and gender.

OWNERSHIP

In terms of ownership of the bonfire, there was a suggestion from the participants that it depended very much on location, the type of community, and levels of interaction and engagement between and among residents. For some, it was a question they had never considered, as they just took it for granted that it would appear every year at the start of July, and therefore could not answer:

- I don’t actually know

However, others were of the opinion that it was local paramilitaries that took responsibility for the bonfire, although there was a recognition that it depended very much on the area:

- The paramilitaries run everything in here so of course the bonfire is theirs

- While for others it was the ‘community’ bonfire and no single person or group could lay claim to ownership:

- We all (the community) have some responsibility for the bonfire even if some people are not directly involved; the majority of people collect for it, build it, or come out on the 11th night

CONSTRUCTION AND MATERIALS

The discussions also revealed that responsibility for building the bonfire depended on the community. There was an acknowledgement that in some areas as people moved on or became older; there was less interest in building a bonfire,
while in other areas there always seemed to be a new generation ready to continue the tradition:

- The younger kids collect the wood and the adults build it and actually finish it off
- There is not much to it... people just come and dump the wood and pallets
- Everyone is responsible and does their bit
- All of my family have done it at some stage

However, there were a small number that felt that local paramilitaries both directly and indirectly controlled all aspects of the bonfire, including the materials:

- The paramilitaries pay people to get the materials dumped on the site

Overall there was a view that the construction of the bonfire was usually the responsibility of local young people but that adults played a significant role as the 11th of July approached.

**AGE AND GENDER**

In relation to age and gender, the majority of participants indicated that young males were most likely associated with the gathering of material and the construction of the bonfire:

- I remember being a kid and running about the field with the wood thinking I was class
- I can only remember a few girls collecting, they’d watch more than anything
- I don’t know of any girls that collect or build

**SUMMARY**

There was a sense from many of the participants that the organisation and management of the bonfire was age dependent and that usually young males aged between ten and eighteen were heavily involved. However, as they grew older and their interests widened, they became less actively involved in the bonfire tradition.
4.3 CULTURE, IDENTITY AND TRADITION

As the discussions continued, the emphasis shifted towards the young people’s understanding of the relationship between bonfires and Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist communities. There was a mixed response from participants, but the overall consensus was that they struggled to articulate precisely how they connected:

- It’s difficult trying to say what we mean…the bonfire has always been part of my community and we are told it represents our culture, but trying to tell someone who is not from my community what that means is very hard

Others maintained that the cultural emphasis on bonfires depended on the local community and whether there were individuals or groups that were promoting the historical and cultural aspects of the 11th of July:

- It depends where you live and who is in the community…you know whether they make a big deal about it or not

It was interesting to note that none of the participants talked about Eleventh Night bonfires as being part of wider culture and heritage, or the Twelfth of July celebrations. Nor were connections made with parading and bands. Instead there were diverse views as to what it represented:

- It’s a celebration of us winning the war
- King Billy
- It means who you are
The discussions also considered the ways in which narratives surrounding the bonfire were hosted and facilitated within the community. For a number of participants the family, particularly fathers and grandfathers, were key in terms of recounting stories about the bonfire and its relevance to the community. However, others maintained that it was less sophisticated and was simply a case of ‘it keeps happening, because that’s what happens every year’.

- **Everybody just keeps passing things on**

- **It always happened that’s how I know about it**

**SUMMARY**

The common theme surrounding the discussions on culture, identity and tradition was the participant’s difficulty in defining what they meant. There was a general consensus that the bonfire was a key component of their identity and had traditional significance in relation to their community background, yet they struggled with the language to describe it. Furthermore, the younger participants were less inclined to associate bonfires with local historical events, which lend support to the view that intergenerational narratives are diminishing.
4.4 THE ‘OTHER’ COMMUNITY

The focus then shifted to discussions around how they thought ‘the other community’ perceived the bonfire. A number of interesting points emerged, but one comment in particular highlighted how our society continues to frame culture as a single-identity concept (in both communities):

- They have their things and we have ours

There was a sense that bonfires were very much a Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist tradition and therefore the views of Nationalists and Republicans was irrelevant. However, there were a small number of participants that suggested that the ‘other’ community might be offended or confused by the bonfire tradition:

- Offended

There was a sense among the participants that the burning of Nationalist and Republican symbols and flags at some bonfire sites had the potential to both offend and anger people from that community:

- I am sure there are those that would be offended by what happens on the 11th July

- They must see it as sectarian

- The burning of their symbols must annoy them and also maybe makes them intimidated by it all

There was also a suggestion that people from the ‘other’ community would be intimidated by the bonfires and believe that their presence would not be welcome.

Awareness

It was noted by a large number of participants that the majority of people from the ‘other’ community most likely lacked the knowledge to understand what the bonfire represented and how it was connected to wider Unionist identity. There was a sense that there was a lack of understanding within the broad Nationalist community of their cultural practices:

- They probably haven’t a clue what it’s all about and don’t want to know

- How would they even know about the 11th July and what it means to my community

It was also suggested that people outside of the Unionist community would have little interest in learning more about the 11th of July and the bonfire tradition.

Summary

The general consensus was that bonfires were very much a symbol of Unionism and Loyalism and therefore unique to that community. Furthermore, they were constructed within these communities and therefore the views and opinions of ‘others’ were of little significance.

4.5 THE FUTURE OF BONFIRES

The participants were asked to think about the future of the bonfire tradition and what challenges they thought it faced over the next few decades. The conversations varied; with the majority adamant that bonfires would continue to be constructed in communities and that their culture and tradition would not be diluted in any way. However, there was a sense from the participants that in some areas things would have to change and that there should be a focus
on reducing the perceived negative aspects associated with bonfires, such as the burning of tyres and flags. In addition, participants had a deep desire to increase their understanding of what the bonfires mean in terms of the Unionist and Loyalist community:

**EDUCATION**
There was overwhelming support for the idea that more could be done to educate communities around the historical and cultural significance of the tradition of bonfires within the Unionist and Loyalist community. It was suggested that schools, youth cubs and sports clubs were places which could facilitate workshops, presentations, debates, roundtables and educational programmes on the historical and cultural significance of 11th of July bonfires:

- Be more educated would give you a reason to do it (build them)
- Explain to people the historical significance and link it to other events in our history

**MAKE IT MORE APPEALING**
There was also a suggestion from a smaller number of people that by making the bonfires more appealing and removing some of the negativity associated with them, that they could sustain their presence in communities for the foreseeable future:

- Maybe ban flags
- Aye don’t make it all one sided and everyone can go
- Contribute to legal bonfires
- Reduce the control of paramilitaries

The participants recognised the ‘harm’ produced by some bonfires and felt that by better managing the bonfire, it might mitigate against future criticisms.

**INTER-GENERATIONAL KNOWLEDGE**
There was an agreement from the participants that the memories, experiences and stories associated with the bonfire tradition should be captured and recorded so that they might better inform future generations. Every community has a bespoke personal story around when the first bonfire was built, who was responsible, and who continued with the tradition. Participants felt that these narratives should be protected, as there was recognition that the number of bonfires was decreasing and conversations at the beginning of July often included the sentence ‘oh in my day there were bonfires in every community, now kids just couldn’t be bothered’. Therefore, some participants suggested that:

- We need a mechanism in which stories can be passed down; we need to record what we do and how we do it… that way it has come credibility
- Older ones need to ensure that young people know why they are constructing it and why it gets burnt, especially in your community

**SUMMARY**
The participants were in agreement that bonfires would continue to be a central aspect of Unionist and Loyalist communities in July, but that the numbers would slowly decrease as opposed to increase. It was felt that for the bonfire tradition to remain, local communities had to ensure that their bonfire histories were protected and passed down to younger generations.
5. Conclusion

The focus groups with young people provided an insight into their experiences and perspectives of local bonfires. For many, this was the first opportunity they had to explore these issues in a safe and constructive environment, and have their opinions recorded.

Overall, there were four common themes that best described the relationship between the young people and the bonfire tradition (figure 2).

For the participants, bonfires were an opportunity to ‘come together as a community’ and ‘re-engage with friends and family’. For the majority of young people it was simply a part of their childhood experiences and now a normal annual event that happened, because ‘that’s what always happens’. There is a recognition that it holds both symbolic and cultural significance and in some way contributes to their Unionist/Loyalist identity.
Important aspect of what defines the community

Having fun with friends and family

Struggle with the right language to describe what it means

Lack of historical knowledge and understanding

Figure 2: Relationship between young people and the bonfire tradition
6. RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this study with those who participated in this project, there are several actions that have the potential to address some of the issues that have emerged:

- **There is a clear identified need to support young people in the exploration of the cultural significance of bonfires and the relationship between the bonfire tradition and their own culture and identity.** This could be best achieved through education and positive engagement.

- **Following on from this, it is vitally importantly that young people are trained in how to communicate this to others, and provide them with the language to articulate what bonfires represent.**

- **In line with supporting young people in the positive expression of their cultural heritage, there should be promotion and awareness of the cultural rights that citizens can avail of amongst those involved in bonfires.**

- **Young people should also be aware of the legal position of bonfires, their environmental impact and what should and should not be burned on bonfires.**

- **A safe space should be provided so that young people can consider and reflect how different celebrations of culture and tradition can be conducted in a positive way, that doesn’t damage intra and inter community relations. This is about ensuring that centuries old acts of traditional remembrance and celebration can be undertaken in a way that is safe, and in a manner that those involved can be proud of.**

- **Those involved in cultural activity should consider wider cross community engagement that could lead to the development of a set of underpinning values for cultural expression around bonfires that young people and wider society can buy into.**

- **Young people should be encouraged and supported to debunk negative portrayal of young people in the media during times of cultural events. The Northern Ireland Youth Forum, and others should provide media training for young people and develop relationships with the media in order to highlight the positive work being done by young people on cultural activity.**