

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ADJOURNMENT STRATEGY ADOPTED BY UNIONIST CONTROLLED COUNCILS IN NORTHERN IRELAND FOR VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

1.0 Background

- 1.1 In September 1985 Craigavon Borough Council adjourned its monthly meeting in protest against the presence of Sinn Fein Councillors in the Chamber; by the end of 1985 the adjournment tactic had spread to 18 local councils in Northern Ireland, but now in protest against the Anglo-Irish Agreement signed in November 1985.
- 1.2 Since the time most of the Councils concerned have undertaken little or no business, necessitating Government intervention on a number of occasions to set the rate and to ensure the continuation of a variety of contracts and services and to award grant aid to a number of voluntary and community groups. A "quasi-Commissioner" has visited Belfast City Council on at least three occasions, in April 1986 (to continue contracts and essential services and to award grant-aid to voluntary groups), in August 1986 (to complete arrangements for the closure of the gas industry) and in October 1986 (to award grant aid to voluntary and community groups). A quasi-Commissioner has also undertaken business to Castlereagh Borough Council.
- 1.3 The adjournment strategy being adopted by the Councils has been under consideration in the past few months, partly as a result of legal action and changing political circumstances; nevertheless it still seems likely that little or no business will be undertaken by most of the Councils in the foreseeable future. It therefore looks as if Government intervention will again be required in March or April 1987.

2.0 Objectives of this Paper

- 2.1 To define, as far as possible, the impact of the adjournments and the Government interventions on the voluntary and community sector (3.0 - 4.4)
- 2.2 To alert Government to the increasing problems in the voluntary sector which are not being addressed by the current methods of intervention being adopted by Government (5.0 - 5.1)
- 2.3 To suggest some possible solutions for the above (6.0).

3.0 What's happened in Belfast

- 3.1 Belfast City Council has historically paid grant aid in respect of voluntary organisations in a number of different ways; block grants to organisations employing staff on an annual basis, miscellaneous grants to small organisations for one-off items of expenditure, summer scheme grants, capital grants to voluntary community centres, special programmes (eg Belfast Urban Programme, Belfast Areas of Need etc), emergency festival and transport grants under specific Council schemes.

3.2 The position in relation to each of the above has passed through three phases:

(i) November '85 to February '86 when the Town Clerk undertook payment of some items until legal action rendered this ultra vires.

(ii) April 1986, when Commissioner 1 authorised payments in some categories and

(iii) October 1986 when Commissioner 11 authorised a slightly different range of awards.

3.3 Larger organisations with block grants for salary and premises' costs have received their grant aid on each occasion through the intervention of the Commissioner, but after the expiry of their previous award. The first Commissioner did not make decisions until 15 April 1986 and the second until 8 October 1986, in each case the grant aid having expired at the end of the previous month. Summer schemes have been relatively unaffected with Commissioner 1 awarding £31,000 for the summer of 1986 as part of the Council's overall budget for the full year. Capital grant to voluntary community centres has been awarded by each Commissioner, but on a six monthly basis rather than the normal monthly procedure; this has led to the growth of a backlog and significant delays with subsequential on-costs. The special programmes have ground to a halt with the expiry of the 3-year funding for the Belfast Areas of Need programme at 31.3.86 and the failure of either Commissioner to consider subsequent grant aid to any of the voluntary groups affected. Emergency festival and transport grants have been relatively unaffected since they exist under schemes of delegation already approved by the Council and confirmed by the Commissioners.

3.4 A major and unresolved problem has been in relation to miscellaneous grants, awarded to smaller groups in respect of one-off items of spending such as "administration and petty expenses", phone and fuel bills, conference fees, repairs and replacement of equipment etc. A full list is given in Appendix 1.

Table 1 shows the number and amount of miscellaneous grants awarded by the Council during financial year 1984/85:

BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

DETAILS OF MISCELLANEOUS GRANTS 84/85

Month	No of Groups	£'s
April 1984	11	4,148
May 1984	8	1,896
June 1984	11	4,798
August 1984	24	5,784
September 1984	6	1,174
October 1984	18	10,932
November 1984	16	6,539
December 1984	3	3,908
January 1985	4	1,765
February 1985	15	6,312
March 1985	13	6,661
TOTAL 84/85	134	£53,917
Average Grant		£402.36

3.5 It is not possible to give a completely accurate picture for financial year 85/86 because of the absence of any figures on public record indicating either what decisions the Town Clerk made between November 1985 and February 1986 or what decisions Commissioner 1 made in April 1986. However, it has been possible to prepare Table 11 on the basis of certain estimates:

TABLE 11

BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

DETAILS OF MISCELLANEOUS GRANTS 85/86

Month	No of Groups	£'s
April 1985	7	2,630
May 1985	13	4,318
June 1985	19	8,153
August 1985	19	4,458
September 1985	9	4,847
October 1985	15	11,462
Sub Total	82	£36,068
Average Grant		£439.85
Town Clerk (1)	c.30	£13,195 (est)
Commissioner 1 (2)	c.30	£13,195 (est)
Estimated 85/86 Total	c.142	£62,458 (est)

Note to Table 11:

- (1) It is estimated (from information available to NICVA) that the Town Clerk authorised about 30 grants between November '85 and February '86 which, if they accorded with the average for the previous section of the financial year would total £13,195.
- (2) It is known that Commissioner 1 also authorised about 30 miscellaneous grants as part of the April 86 package; again, if they accorded with the average of 85/86 the total of £13,195 would not be unrealistic.
- (3) It is known that Commissioner 11, in addition to awarding the second 6 month payment of block grants also made a number of "small" grants in the range of £500 to several thousand pounds. However, since the decisions of Commissioner 11 are nowhere on public record, and since NICVA has heard of no local group receiving a miscellaneous grant as a result of the intervention of Commissioner 11, it is assumed that no such grants were made in respect of financial year 1986/87.

- 3.6 If the estimates made in Table 11 are correct, 142 grants, totalling £62,458, were made for 1985/86. This accords with the known 84/85 figures and with extrapolations from the known figures for the last twelve months of the Council's operations (from November 84 to October 85).
- 3.7 It can therefore be presumed, if the assumption that no miscellaneous grants were made by the Council, by the Town Clerk or by the Commissioner is correct, that voluntary and community groups in Belfast have missed out on c. £65,000 (allowing for inflation) in 1985/86.
- 4.0 What's happened outside Belfast?
- 4.1 The crisis in Belfast has been top of the agenda, both because of its centrality to the Northern Ireland scene and the volume of voluntary sector grants made by the City Council. However, the problems outside Belfast, although of a less numerous nature, have also been serious for a large number of groups and have been exacerbated over time.
- 4.2 For example, in Craigavon Borough Council where the adjournment strategy began in September 1985, it was the practice of the Council to make very few voluntary sector grants, estimated at circa £13,000 to only 24 groups in 1984/85. Additional problems were created by the early adjournment of Craigavon Council, having not ratified certain decisions of the Recreation Committee before going into adjournment. As a result some groups have received no grant aid since the summer of 1984. Ironically, for a council with a reputation for "sticking to its guns", partly derived from its early adjournment in September '85 against the presence of Sinn Fein Councillors in the chamber, the first crack in the armour came in Craigavon Borough when the Lord Mayor authorised an interim grant of £500 to Portadown Citizens Advice Bureau, but to no other group!
- 4.3 Table 111 indicates the position as known to the Northern Ireland Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, reflecting different approaches in a variety of Council areas.

TABLE 111

CAB	Council Grant 85/86	Council Grant 86/87
Antrim	2,100	--
Ards	5,500	5,500
Armagh	2,000	--
Ballymena	6,000	6,500
Bangor (North Down)	4,700	2,700
Belfast (x 8) 1	64,957	71,027
Carrickfergus	4,631	5,765
Coleraine	1,800	2,000
Cookstown	1,000	--
Dungannon	4,000	4,000
Glengormley (Newtownabbey)	4,000	--
Holywood (North Down)	2,500	1,800
Larne	2,500	2,500
Lisburn	5,000	--
Lurgan (Craigavon)	--	--
Portadown (") 2	500	--

Notes to Table 111

1 86/87 awards by Commissioners 1 & 11

2 Interim award by Mayor post-adjournment.

4.4 It is clear that less money, less jobs, and consequently less services, are at stake in non-Belfast Councils but, as a proportion of voluntary sector income, Council funding is still significant and the problem is still having a serious impact. It seems logical and inequitable for a Commissioner to be despatched to Belfast, as in October 1986, to deal with voluntary sector grant aid but for similar treatment to be applied to no other Council.

5.0 The Problems

5.1 Amongst the serious problems facing the voluntary sector are the following:

5.1.1 Miscellaneous Grants

If the figures outlined in 3.5 to 3.7 are accurate, the cumulative effect on the voluntary sector in Belfast alone is not inconsiderable; a range of activities which would otherwise have taken place have either not taken place or have gone ahead with reduced resources or have necessitated independent fund-raising with all its attendant problems of time, effort and "opportunity costs".

5.1.2 Block Grants

Although each Belfast Commissioner has awarded a continuation of block grants to resource centres, CAB and other larger bodies, their six month duration leads to insecurity, financial' legal and technical problems and a serious reduction in staff morale. Questions relating to salary increases, increments and other inflationary increases have still to be resolved. Overall, the lack of certainty about the future has lead to an inability to plan services and other initiatives or to develop existing projects. Staff turnover, resignations and extended sickness have all increased significantly over the past twelve months. In summation, a sterility has overtaken the mainstream Belfast voluntary sector.

5.1.3 BAN Groups

In financial year 84/85 £131,142 was paid under the Belfast Areas of Need Scheme and in 85/86 £95,533 was paid before November 1985 with a further £35,000 being thought to have been paid by either the Town Clerk or Commissioner 1 to complete the 3 year plan payments. However, no consideration by either Town Clerk, Council or Commissioner has been given to the applications made by the then BAN groups for continued funding, which the Council may have approved. As a result, the Association of Local Advice Centres has closed, with a loss of two permanent and two ACE jobs, the Play Resource Warehouse has had to curtail much of its work, the North Belfast Community Resource Centre has had to terminate activities and the Workers Education Association's 60+ project and the Alliance/Ardoyne Play Scheme have had to look elsewhere for funding and reduce their activities. Although no-one can estimate the amount that may have been awarded by the City Council, it can be assumed that some payments might have been made whether from existing or additionally allocated resources. Outside Belfast some new grant awards would presumably have been made.

5.1.4 New Work

Not only has the new work piloted by the BAN groups been truncated, but new work by existing block grant groups and completely new groups has been frustrated. In the normal run of voluntary sector activity new projects and initiatives develop fairly quickly and a responsive funding system by local and central Government supports many such initiatives. With no possibilities arising in Belfast the sterility mentioned above (5.1.2) is solidified.

5.1.5 Integration of services

The imminent Regional Strategic Plan (1987-92) for the Health and Personal Social Services gives an opportunity to the voluntary sector to play its full part in the welcome thrust

towards Community Care; unfortunately Belfast groups, beset by crisis, are ill-equipped to enter this debate and stake their important claim. Some of the affected groups are possibly amongst the best at crossing boundaries and breaking down barriers between departments, agencies and communities.

5.1.6 Reconciliation

The Belfast voluntary sector has a creditable record at standing above community conflict, offering neutral meeting places and opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas and peoples. Low morale, constant financial insecurity and political pressure has weakened their ability to contribute to community reconciliation in times of stress.

6.0 Possible Solutions

6.1 It is no part of the remit of this paper to propose solutions to the political problems of local Government in Northern Ireland during the continuing fall-out from the protests against the Anglo-Irish Agreement. However, the problems, as demonstrated above, are not inconsiderable and deserve urgent attention.

6.2 There are a number of possible solutions, upon which we place no qualifications or recommendations at this stage. They are as follows:

- (i) That grant-aid is paid directly from the appropriate Government department, under existing powers.
- (ii) That Commissioners are allocated to each of the Councils with full powers to make decisions, including discretionary decisions. The discrepancy between the actions of Commissioners 1 and 11 in Belfast requires to be resolved.
- (iii) That resources are channelled, whether from local Councils or directly from Government, through an intermediary agency with decision making powers as to distribution.
- (iv) That additional resources are allocated to similar programmes already operating in the voluntary sector to assist indirectly with the maintenance of community advice, education, development and information functions in the community.