

FAO:

Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister:

Inquiry into Building a United Community

The Community of Rathfriland, Co Down welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's Inquiry into Building a United Community.

Rathfriland is a farming town with a population of around 3000, that population has increased 30% in the last 10 years due to its convenient location and great schools. The influx has been mainly Catholics taking the former 70% Protestants /30% catholic demographic to its current 50/50 mix.

Driving through Rathfriland in the summer months you would conclude that it is a staunchly Loyalist town (see attached images). The flags and emblems are in fact unwanted by a huge majority of the residents. A recent survey we conducted illustrated that over 95% of the respondents want a shared environment in the town. The community is taking steps to deal with this at grass roots level. We hope to negotiate a 'town agreement' on flags and emblems and bring the whole community together to re-image the town, promote tourism and attract investment.

Rathfriland Regeneration Group was established in 1994, with the aid of various grants it has delivered the towns recreation centre, integrated pre-school, affordable housing and retail units. But has always remained non political. The group's 28 members are also a 50/50 mix. Though the group have steered clear of political and religious issues they realise that the town would financially prosper if it had a tourist friendly, inclusive appearance.

- We as a community have created a website as a starting point on a re-imaging process www.rathfriland.info
- The Rathfriland Regeneration Group has applied for an Arts Council – Building Peace through the Arts grant. This grant will be used to facilitate workshops with all groups within the community. Using creativity as a way of hearing people's voices. Facilitators will go into the schools, the lodges and the churches and try to listen to everybody in an effort to bring about a town agreement on the flags and emblems.
- The Rathfriland Regeneration group along with local volunteers are building a community Peace garden. An artist will use the community creativity from the workshops as inspiration for a high quality piece of art that will be the focal point of the community garden.
- Rathfriland lies between the A1 and the Mourne coastal route, it has great untapped tourist potential. An unsightly, disused water tower (built in 1977) sits in the remains of a medieval castle. This typifies how it's not utilising its tourist attractions and recognising its potential job opportunities and prosperous future.
- We seek to find ways to utilise the areas rich history in an attractive non hostile way that opens up the visitors market and truly makes Rathfriland 'The Pride of the Hill'. We are twinning the town with 'Armstrong' in British Columbia, Canada -where a Rathfriland woman was the first European to enter BC in 1862. There's a memorial to her in the Armstrong city park. <http://www.vernonmorningstar.com/news/278069981.html>

I personally hope that the community workshops and discussions reveal that most of the residents are happy to live in a mixed community, and that nobody wishes to threaten anybody else's identity or to challenge their religious beliefs.

We have spoken to all of South Down MLAs about our approach and they are watching with interest. Stormont has a responsibility to lead on the issues of the past and flags but communities like ours have to be very proactive and build a 'normal' society street by street. The past cannot be changed, it's time for a lot of forgiveness and enthusiasm for the future. Northern Ireland is not full of Unionists and Republicans pulling in separate directions - a united community is an attainable goal in small towns like ours.

I am writing this as a resident and a trader in Rathfriland, and not as a member of the Rathfriland Regeneration Group as they are a non-political charity.

9th October 2014

