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FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION

In March 2014 Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) were successfully awarded a grant from the Northern Ireland Youth Council, to explore the attitudes and experiences of young band members from the Catholic, Nationalist, Republican community. This was the second piece of research into band culture conducted by the NIYF. The first considered the views of young people from a Unionist, Protestant and Loyalist background and was referred to as the 'Sons of Ulster' project. In light of the first report NIYF were keen to conduct a comparative study with young people who self-identified as Catholic, Irish and Republican and were associated with a band.

Given the political unrest and the public interest in Republican parades and commemorations, it seemed appropriate to engage with young people from within these communities to ascertain their views and opinions on culture, expressions of identity, traditions, and symbols. The NIYF believe that engaging with young people, affords them a voice, with the hope that they may be empowered to publicise exactly how they feel, leading to a fairer representation of their culture and heritage within the media and general society.

This study has been managed and delivered in a similar manner to the previous 'Sons of Ulster' project. It is anticipated that both reports will provide readers with an opportunity to compare and contrast the views of young people from different community backgrounds across a range of similar themes. Furthermore, it is hoped that the two reports will provide the catalyst for a more comprehensive study involving all of the young people. Possibly leading to a renewed focus on learning and exploring the relevance of culture, tradition and commemorations in each community evidenced through their participation in bands.

PROJECT AIMS

The central aim of the action research was to allow young people to explore, debate and articulate their views and opinions in relation to how they express their culture and commemorate their heritage through the band.

Furthermore, the project aimed to:

- Bring together young people from different bands to discuss methods of expressing culture and identity;
- Support young people in developing new methods of articulating the importance of band culture;
- Create opportunities for band members to share their experiences with individuals and organisations from across the political, voluntary and statutory sectors;
- Produce a written report, which captures young people's views, opinions and understanding about 'life in the band'.

In summary, it is anticipated that through this project, NIYF we will work to develop an understanding of Republican and Nationalist culture and how it manifests itself, as well as examining how culture, heritage and identity are expressed through bands, the community, music and other associations.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted over a five month period from May 2014 and involved a number of distinct elements:

a. The establishment of a working group to confirm collective and individual roles and responsibilities;

b. Recruitment of young people responsible for leading the action research within each of the selected bands – confirmation of actions, expectations and tasks;

c. Delivery of a series of interviews, focus groups and personal testimonies with bands members;

d. Dissemination of findings.

Working Group

From the outset of the research the NIYF recognised the importance of establishing a working group consisting of young people, youth leaders, and bandleaders from various geographical areas. The group were asked to consider the remit of the research, the themes used to guide the conversations, and issues around accessing particular bands and disseminating the findings.

Conducting the fieldwork

The NIYF identified young band members who were willing to collaborate with the organisation to facilitate focus groups and informal interviews. These young people were involved in six different bands across a range of areas (see 2.4). The NIYF liaised closely with these individuals in terms of outlining the rationale for particular research methodologies, any ethical considerations, and health and safety issues.

Thematic areas of discussion

In terms of exploring the participants knowledge, understanding and experiences of 'band life' a series of questions were developed under particular themes:

Rationale surrounding band membership and association
- Family influences
- Friend influences
- Influences of the media/historical stories
- Expression of identity

Positives around band membership
- Band activities

Impact of band membership on ones personal life
- Levels of commitment
- Potential personal skills
- Potential financial cost
- Negatives of band membership

Celebration of culture and identity
- Interpretation
- Relevance and importance

Relevance with wider community
- Levels of outside engagement
- Role of the band in the community
- Opportunities for the band

Unionist perceptions of bands
- Influences and interpretations
- Role of the media
- Impact on bands

These themes were used in both focus groups and interviews to guide conversations. Researchers collected written notes from the discussions.

At this point it is also important to note the challenges faced by the researchers in trying to engage with Republican bands. Firstly, there are only a limited number of bands, when compared to Loyalist bands. Secondly, a number of bands were reluctant to participate in the research because they had no previous experience of participating in this type of project. Thirdly, it was obvious from the outset that there was a significant level of diversity across all of the bands in terms of the emphasis placed on politics, culture, identity and commemorations. It became apparent that the bands at a local level were reflective of the community attitudes towards Republicanism.

Numbers and location of participants

In total 61 young people aged between 13 to 21 years of age participated in the research. These young people are associated with 6 different bands from a range of geographical locations. These bands are detailed in Figure 1, whilst Figure 2 shows how the young people participated in the data collection methods.

Figure 1: Participating bands

John Brady Memorial Flute Band
Henry Joy McCracken Flute Band
O'Neill Allsopp Flute Band
United Irishmen – 1798 Flute Band
James Connolly Memorial Flute Band
Spirit of Freedom Flute Band

Figure 2: Total number of focus group and interviewed participants

Methodology	Numbers
5 Focus Groups	53 individuals
Interviews	4 individuals
Personal testimonies	4 individual
Total	61 participants

Aside from the interviews and focus groups the participants were provided with an opportunity to write down in two paragraphs a personal memory that related to their life in the band – three band members contributed to this element of the research. The remainder of this report sets out the main findings from the conversations with participants under a number of themes. The report concludes with a series of observations on young people's views, experiences and understanding about how they express their culture through membership in flute bands.

FINDINGS

It became apparent from a review of the main findings that there were several themes which best-captured young people's views and experiences of life in the band. These ranged from their rationale for joining; the benefits and impacts of membership; the challenges around celebrating one's culture and identity; the relationship between the band and the wider community, and a reflection on Unionist perceptions of bands. The remainder of this chapter explores in detail the young people's personal views on the bands. Aside from the themes discussed, personal stories from participants have also been included. These accounts allow the reader to share in their experiences and develop a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a member of a band.

Reasons for joining the band

In terms of understanding why young people joined bands, the discussions revealed several interlinking themes. These ranged from the influence of family members and friends, to a keen interest in music, to wanting to remember the 'past' in a meaningful and 'safe' way.

Family influences
It became apparent that in relation to the influence of the family, there were two defining characteristics that appeared to shape the young people's participation in the bands. Firstly, participants recounted how from an early age they remembered their brothers and/or sisters getting ready to go to band practice. Therefore is was considered normal behaviour to take an interest in the band:

> *It was just people from the local band coming in and out of my house as I was growing up…naturally I wanted to be part of that*

The second factor related to the perception of the family environment being one in which issues around historical events, community identity and culture were discussed, debated and promoted. Several participants indicated that these conversations sparked an interest in their own identities and the band became a mechanism in which they could reaffirm their commitment to their community background:

> *When I was young I used to get together with the family in my gran's house and I started to take an interest in Irish culture, history and identity. Some of them were involved in the bands, so I just joined*

Commemorations and culture
For several young people band membership became an opportunity for them to both celebrate and promote their cultural identity. In fact many explained that from an early age they had struggled to find a forum in which they could explore their 'irishness' and the band and related activities became the vehicle in which they could publically show their pride in past historical events:

> *I felt that it was important to remember key historical events, volunteers and commemorations*

The collective and common spirit that existed in and around the band was highlighted as another catalyst for joining and remaining. Several participants acknowledged that taking part in activities within the band meant that they felt they were actively celebrating in a meaningful way their culture and identity:

> *I wanted to celebrate events and our culture and did not feel like I was doing that by just watching. The band is a place were you can in a fun and united way celebrate your culture*

Friends
A further reason attributed to becoming involved with the band was because their friends were members, and as such, for many 'it was an obvious path to take'. For a lot of young people, friendship was a key determining factor, and wanting to participate in an activity that made them feel they were part of something:

> *All my mates were in the band from a young age, and I wanted to be with them and feel that we had a common bond*

For others it was simply positive peer pressure in that they didn't have 'much of a choice' as their friend's were already heavily involved in a band:

> *Very simply because my mates tortured me to be in*

Music
A small number of participants talked about their relationship and fondness with music. Therefore, for many the band was simply viewed as a forum in which they could learn to play musical instruments and engage in an activity, which they were passionate about:

> *I just love the music of bands. People think I am mad. But I watch Loyalist bands and admire what they so and how they do it…for me it's all about the music*

Alternatively, a combination of family influences and an eagerness to play a musical instrument was a factor in young people's participation in the band:

> *My brother was in the band. I had an interest in music so it was a natural fit*

Politics
An interesting discussion took place between participants around the relationship between political engagement and band membership. For some the band was an opportunity to engage with people on issues pertaining to Republicanism and politics:

> *I am Republican…I wanted to engage with like-minded people*

The discussions also revealed that several young people seen the band as a chance to exercise their rights to promote their political beliefs and articulate their views around political issues:

> *I was politically minded anyway and remember my gran being really upset about travesties in Ireland*

It was also interesting to note that a significant number of participants were reluctant to draw an association between being in the band and being politically active. They did not align political beliefs with membership; rather their association with bands rests with their culture and commemoration.

Personal
Finally, there were those that found it difficult to articulate any specific reason for joining the band. They could not attribute their membership to a particular event or family influence. Instead, they simply decided to join a local band:

> *I had no family influences or political motivations. I just loved the sound of the drumbeat…it really was that simple*

Although those that were unable to identify a catalyst for associating with the band were in the minority, it was interesting to note that it was not considered unusual or out of the ordinary for them to be in a band.

Support for the families of volunteers
In a small number of cases it was apparent that individuals had joined bands because it was an opportunity to both celebrate and support those from a Republican background that had died during the conflict. There were limited opportunities in the community to recognise these families and individuals and therefore the band was viewed as a vehicle in which their stories could be remembered:

> *We shouldn't forget what they did for this community…the band allows me to show that I care and will never forget*

Summary
The exploration around why young people joined local bands revealed a multitude of responses. It was apparent that family influences were a considerable factor for a number of young people. Furthermore, the role attached to celebrating ones identity and commemorating historical events and people from a wide spectrum that included volunteers to political figures was a crucial factor. The most likely scenario for young people was a combination of factors within their environment, which led them to joining their local band

Benefits of being in the band

Discussions then progressed, in order to ascertain from the young people's perspective, what they considered to be positive aspects of being a member of a band. A range of views was articulated, including: friendship, the building of personal skills and an opportunity to remember and celebrate the endeavours of 'others'.

Social aspect
From the outset, the participants were in agreement that the band was a forum in which they forged new friendships and had opportunities to participate in activities that normally they would have missed:

> *There is some craic at practice. You get the chance to catch up with people you might not normally see and the banter among the lads is something special*

Whether it was practice, or attending parades or events associated with the band the young people continued to reference the sense of camaraderie among members. Being in the band was an opportunity to experience different things, and build relationships with people that might not necessarily have become friends:

> *Without the band I wouldn't have so many friends. I wouldn't go out as much or have something that keeps me active and doing something instead of just sitting at home all week*

Excursions
It was clear from the conversations that the band was a vehicle in which young people could 'get out of their local area' and see other parts of Ireland, North and South. Several recounted stories of travelling long distances to participate in commemorative events:

> *Being associated with some of those events means we get to travel to places that we wouldn't normally go to.*

Developing skills
It quickly became apparent that several young people held the belief that by participating in the band they were developing new life and educational skills. They talked about their improvements in playing musical instruments and their ability to read music:

> *Knowing that when people finish a nights practice that they have improved their knowledge and skills around music*

> *I write music, listen to music, change the scale, and rhythm. Work with the drummers and work out the best and different ways to play tunes. I developed these skills over time…I never studied music in school*

It was also interesting to note that for a significant number of young people the positives extended beyond the musical benefits. For them the band represented so much more and was instead an opportunity to both develop and enhance personal skills. The participants also explained that the bands were formal in nature, which meant that they adhered to rules and regulation, which for many, was viewed as a positive aspect of their involvement. For example, one participant explained how the band has essentially brought order to their life:

> *For me this is all about both teaching and learning discipline and manners and providing leadership*

Sense of belonging
A series of discussions also focused on the idea that being in the band instilled young people with a sense of confidence and collective pride. This was articulated in two very different ways. Firstly, a number of young people noted how the band had addressed some of their personal issues in terms of feeling isolated and very alone:

> *I was having big troubles and worries in my own life and the band gave me an opportunity to overcome these and move on*

Secondly, a large number of participants talked about their sense of pride in being part of larger community expression of their culture and identity. They felt they had a purpose and role in their local community and this became evident when their band participated in key events within the local area:

> *For me this is all about being part of a very special community of people, and really working for each other towards a common goal*

> *Easter Sunday is a whole day and even prior to it, its all about the preparation… getting uniforms ready, and then after the event going for dinner…I get such a buzz walking up the Falls and seeing the different cummans who participate*

Summary
The young people clearly articulated the benefits to being in the band, with a general consensus that it was primarily an opportunity to develop and sustain positive friendships. However, it was also evident that for a large number of participants this was an opportunity for them to actively contribute in acts that commemorated historical events and reinforced the importance of culture within their community.

The impact of band membership

The focus then shifted towards capturing the impact of band membership on the lives of the young people. There was a general consensus that the positives outweighed the negatives, with the majority referring to the impact on their lives as being the easiest to quantify:

Improved quality of life
Several respondents acknowledged that joining the band had been a turning point in their lives. The band had become an escape from family pressures and negative distractions within their communities. As one participant articulated:

> *Growing up in the Creggan, it was hard to get through life without being led astray or getting involved in things you should not have. The band was an escape from all of this…it gave me a sense of purpose*

It was interesting to note that the young people identified the band as a safe space, one in which they felt comfortable and among people that understood the issues they faced:

> *Some of us have had hard and challenging upbringings and the band has been a great place to just relax and be with good people*

Finally, several participants were quick to acknowledge the impact of the band in terms of it being responsible for supporting their needs. For many the band was about instilling confidence and leadership and giving them the chance to take these skills and use them in their daily lives outside of the band environment:

> *The band teaches members discipline and they carry these qualities forward in areas of their own lives*

Personal commitment
There was a significant amount of personal time and commitment given by the young people to the band. For some, this was a challenge as they got older, married and had families of their own. A great deal of time was spent practising and fundraising for the band and then planning and attending ceremonies and parades:

> *It is a big part of my life. I try my best to balance it with work and life. I have a baby now so it is a real challenge…but I always get it done*

For other participants the senior members of the band had become role models and people that assisted them in managing the balance between the band and family life:

> *I have learnt how to give guidance to other members and help them along, especially around some very challenging issues you face growing up in places like this*

There was a general consensus that the personal cost in relation to time, resources and commitment was a sacrifice worth making and the overall benefits outweighed the costs.

Financial cost
Several young people also mentioned the financial implications of being in the band. They referred to the costs of instruments, uniforms and transport to the parades:

> *We started off with a set of drumsticks and a flute…now I tell the band I am here to teach and others are here to the fundraising…looking for different skins, getting about the country and buying supplies*

A large number of participants also talked about the differences between Loyalist and Republican bands. They felt that the former were better funded and resourced through government grants and awards, and the latter were ignored and received minimal or no resources:

> *Loyalist bands are light years ahead of Republican bands in terms of funding*

Finally, participants talked about the challenges they faced in terms of encouraging members of their community to contribute financially to the band. There was a consensus that people were reluctant to provide donations and that band members were constantly trying to think of innovate methods of increasing financial resources.

Summary
Primarily the discussions revealed that the band had a positive impact on the lives of the young people. It provided them with opportunities to experience different activities that they would not necessarily have had the chance to participate in. Furthermore, the band improved their self-confidence and provided a number of young people with the chance to develop leadership skills.

Celebrating culture and identity

A series of questions were put to the young people about the relationship between celebrating their culture and being a member of the band. For the majority the relationship was 'real' but complex and has been explored in more detail below. However, it is worth noting that there were a small minority of participants that did not identify the celebration of culture and identity with being in the band. For them it was not about historical events and commemorations, but instead an opportunity to forge a new identity around music.

Raising awareness
Several young people talked about the band being a mechanism in which they could publically raise awareness about Irish and Republican culture and identity. In essence, being in the band allowed them to parade on the streets and show the wider public that their particular culture was very much alive and present:

> *I have always celebrated my culture, but the band is a more visible, energetic and vibrant way to celebrate*

Similarly, young people were of the opinion that being in the band meant that they were contributing the their wider communities agenda around raising the profile of their culture:

> *The band is our culture, so by being part of it, and taking part in parades and commemorations publically then we are living our culture*

Overall the consensus was that the band served a dual purpose in terms of culture and identity. It was seen as a key forum in which young people with limited resources could promote their culture to the wider community, but also provided them with a sense of accomplishment in that they were part of a larger movement.

Rights and responsibilities
It was interesting to note from a small number of young people that they believed they had limited opportunities to celebrate their culture within their communities. Therefore the band was a chance for them to legally exercise their rights around expressions of culture and identity:

> *If it was not for the band then we would not be able to walk down the street displaying our flags, playing our music and celebrating historical events*

Although there was limited discussion on this point, it was a different perspective on the role of the band. A number of young people would contest this position, and point to festivals, sports, murals, music and storytelling as evidence that culture was being openly celebrated. However, for some, expressing and promoting what they called 'mainstream Republicanism' was becoming more challenging and in some cases controversial. They felt that in some quarters it had become demonised and associated with 'dissident Republicanism' and therefore violence.

Remembering
The most common area of discussion with young people centred on the importance of 'remembering' and its place within the context of being in the band. The themes of culture and identity, remembering, and commemorating were all wrapped up in conversations about why the young people enjoyed being in the band:

> *You commemorate the (name of place) volunteers…these are events in history and its about trying to keep them alive*

For the majority of young people it was remembering the names and deeds of Republicans. This was an opportunity to reinforce their legacy and ensure that their place(s) in history was never forgotten. Therefore, the band became the mechanism, through marching, music and song, in which they could actively support this cause:

> *We get the chance to learn and remember about the past…we learn about the history of this city and the role of Republicans that make up the history*

> *It enables us to be educated about volunteers and commemorate their lives and their sacrifice*

However, it should be noted that for some the act of 'remembering' through participation in the band was about more than celebrating the actions of Republican volunteers and the 'patriot dead'. For them it was about an Irish identity, celebrated through the words and lyrics of the music they played.

Summary
There was no doubt that the celebration of culture and identity played a significant role in the lives of the young people in the bands. For the most part, this was about recognising the actions and roles of Republicans in the history of Ireland, both North and South. However, it is worth recognising that a small minority look beyond this and consider the band a vehicle for the broader promotion of an Irish culture and identity. Overall, the interesting observation was how band members differentiated between culture, identity and politics and often placed more emphasis on one more than the others.

Relationship between band and community

Within the discussions, the research looked to ascertain how the young people perceived the relationship between the band and the local community. They were asked about levels of support and involvement and to consider whether the band was an integral part of the community.

Challenge to recruit
From the outset the participants talked about the difficulties they faced in trying to encourage people from the local community to join the band. Several noted the numerous activities and events the band was competing against, and acknowledged that it really only appealed to specific young people:

> *We try our best to do things in our local communities and get as many young people involved…but sometimes this is really tough*

It was also suggested in some quarters that certain people in the community would not be particularly supportive of the Republican bands. They were referring to those that associated the bands as reflecting a hard line Republican position and not supporting Sinn Fein and mainstream Republicanism:

> *Other people see you in the band and make up their mind about what type of person you are*

It was clear that there was not the same sense of community ownership or identity with the band as was evident within Loyalist communities. One respondent articulated this:

> *It's different in Republican areas in terms of the flute bands…people just get on with their lives. On the Loyalist side its different, they are much more part of the community*

Some of the young people recognised the differences between Loyalist bands and their own, with a belief that their band was less accepted within the community, and subsequently had to work harder to access support and resources.

Creating our own identity
Following on from the discussions about the relationship between the band and community it became apparent that the young people did not necessarily identify with people from their immediate neighbourhoods. Several of the bands consisted of people from a number of different areas:

> *We meet in the city centre, but we are made up of people from all over Belfast. So it feels like we are a community in our own right*

However, it was also interesting to note that the young people felt that the lack of numbers associated with Republican bands meant they had to draw support from a multitude of areas. This also meant there wasn't the same level of competition and existing bands had a relatively high profile within the overall area.

Summary
It was interesting to note from the conversations how the young people compared Republican bands with how Loyalist bands were accepted within their own communities. There was recognition that they were more popular as reflected in membership and were more integrated within the general fabric of the community. The challenge for Republican bands was encouraging young people from across several areas to join, but to also maintain some form of attachment to the local area.

Perceptions: Unionist interpretations of the band

In drawing the conversation to a close, the focus then shifted to how the young people felt the Unionist and Loyalist community perceived them. The majority of participants maintained that this section of the community did not understand the 'context of Republican bands' or even wanted to learn about the bands. A significant number also believed that the public associated the bands with holding a 'dissident agenda', which the young people explained, was not the case. For some young people, their experiences of the 'other' were largely negative. One participant for example explained that they have been subject to abuse:

> *Fenian bastards…Catholic bastards…dirty Taigs…IRA murdering scumbag. I've had all this in my face*

Interestingly a large number of participants were not concerned about how they were viewed within Unionist circles. They maintained that people were misinformed about what Republican bands represented, and were often influenced by negative media stories. There was a general acceptance that it would be difficult to change these predetermined views and therefore ignoring the aggressive criticisms seemed the most appropriate approach

> *I really don't care what people think about us…maybe they see us as a controversial band*

Aside from the perspective that the media often demonised the bands and that many of the Unionist views on band behaviour were unfounded, several young people discussed how they had attempted to address 'real' concerns.

We met with the local bands forum and one of the things we discussed was our uniform, which was viewed as quiet militaristic…they felt the general public would form clear negative opinions of us. As a result we softened our appearance

Summary

The young people were adamant that for the most part, members of the Unionist and Loyalist community viewed them in a negative light. In their opinion, a lot of these preconceptions came from negative media stories (especially through social media) and a belief that there was a relationship between dissidents and the bands. However, the young people were clear that no such relationship existed, and that the bands were simply an opportunity for them to express their wider culture and identity.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

The final element of the discussions centred on potential future challenges facing the bands. There were a number of insightful conversations with the young people pertaining to both real and perceived difficulties they faced. The general consensus was in relation to increasing and sustaining current levels of membership, and resourcing the band.

Finances
In terms of the financial challenges the participants articulated in a clear and concise manner the difficulties the band faced in relation to equipment, transport and facilities to practice in:

> *Young people have no money and the last thing they want to do is give it to the band…fundraising is needed, but even this is becoming more competitive*

However, it was obvious that the young people were resilient and focused on overcoming these financial hurdles through fundraising and strong internal management structures.

There are some financial difficulties when it comes to instruments, uniforms and transport, but we try to keep this to a minimum as much as possible for our members

It was also suggested that the financial constraints faced by Republican bands was not unique and that Loyalist bands were in a similar situation. However, there was a perception that Loyalist bands had more opportunities to avail of government grants and funding.

Membership
There was an agreement that aside from the resourcing issue, the other significant challenge was around membership of the bands. It was becoming more difficult to encourage young people to get engaged and participate in the band and related activities:

> *Increasing the membership is our biggest challenge. Younger people are now obsessed with technology and it is even a struggle to get them out of their houses. The band is a place were we want younger people to sit around and have meaningful conversations*

This was a similar situation across all of the bands. Sport and leisure activities and other 'distractions' meant that joining a band was not a priority for most young people in Republican communities. A significant number of participants had family members or close friends that were already members prior to their decision to join.

One final observation centred on the participants views on the diversity of band membership. It was felt that prior to 1998 those that joined band did so out of a sense of duty and seen it as a very public way to support the single Republican cause. However, in the last decade, several participants felt that membership was drawn from a across the different shades of Republicanism. This was now evident by the different positions bands took in relation to political Republicanism since the onset of the peace processes.

Policing and politics
It was also worth noting that several young people talked about the role of the PSNI and NI Parades Commission in relation to future parades. Although there was not the same consensus that existed around other challenges to the band, several participants did indicate that the policing of their parades could have negative implications:

> *They are now overly policed parades…more militarised approach compared to the past, just look for the helicopters*

In essence, many of the young people felt that their parades and the role of the bands were becoming tied up with the political discussions around flags, parades and dealing with the past. As one respondent noted:

> *Marching is being used as a political football*

However, other participants were more positive about the policing and monitoring of parades. They noted that it wasn't really an issue for them and that they had developed internal practices and processes, which meant their parades, had no negative implications:

> *There is no hassle from the police. Maybe in the past but we don't march places that we are not welcome. It's changed days. In the past it was mad but now our own people are looking after our own affairs. Our commemorations are always very respectful and organised with military precision*

Summary
In relation to the challenges faced by the bands it was obvious that resources and membership dominated the discussions. Evidently the young people feel that they have to compete with numerous outside interests, and combined with limited community support has meant that they will find it increasingly difficult to recruit. However, they also articulated their approach to these challenges and they have a number of plans in place to address these concerns.

Conclusion

The research has revealed a series of interesting and complex observations about the relationship between culture, identity and commemorations and Republican bands. From the outset the defining reasons young people attributed to joining bands were either as a result of family influences or a keenness to publically express their culture. It is the latter which has proved the most intriguing in terms of how the young people recognise and define their sense of identity and culture.

A large number of young people viewed the band as both a forum and vehicle in which they could remember Republican volunteers and historical events, which represented a significant aspect of their culture and identity. However, there were other young people that agreed with the idea that the band was an opportunity to express their culture, but did not share the same view on it being defined by the acts of Republican volunteers. For them, it was more about a broader Irish history and a celebration of what they called 'Irishness'. These differing positions on what the band represents shows the complex nature of the behaviour and makes it hard for outsiders to label the band in a particular way. Interestingly, the young people did agree that the media and wider sections of society have been quick to associate Republican bands with the promotion of a Dissident Republican agenda. Yet this is not the case, and it is important that people begin to recognise the differences that exist within Republican bands.

In terms of why young people joined bands, it was clear that the influence of the family and friends were the most significant factors. A large number had been brought up in an environment were the band was an integral feature; therefore becoming a member was a normal behaviour. The discussions also revealed that once they became members the band consumed significant elements of their life through practice and attending parade and other related events. One young band member in the following statement articulated the impact of this:

A Day In the Life

A day in the life of the band starts with me, awakening at the earliest hour imaginable for work. Before breakfast or coffee comes into question I think of new ways and techniques that can make tonight's band practice better and more exciting than last weeks. While juggling this and details of my next job in my mind I'm heading out the door with the phone to my ear making sure everyone's aware of practice tonight and arrangements to get there.

While I'm digging through my tools to find the appropriate one for the job I'm subconsciously thinking what «tools» can make us more efficient more appealing and attractive to people to join our community. By lunchtime I'm climbing out of the van and into a bakery to fill the gap of hunger from all that brainstorming. Sending text messages and making calls to our committee to organise the practice hall and transport seems to take over lunchtime more often.

As 5:30pm slowly approaches the excitement of band practice starts to take hold with each band member eagerly confirming the time and location of tonight's practice by text message each with their own sense of excitement.

The car journey to each area to pick up each band member is the highlight, it's where many of the constructive conversations happen and the excitement shows. It's 7pm and the idol clatter of drums is heard as the equipment is being carried up to the hall where the music happens.

It was also interesting to note the views of the young people towards Loyalist bands. There was a real sense that these bands were better resourced through government funding and had higher rates of membership because they were more closely aligned with their local communities. In comparison Republican bands appeared to draw their support from a wide range of Nationalist and Republican neighbourhoods, so therefore were more detached from local communities because the members were less likely to come from that locality.

Furthermore, there was a sense from a number of participants that marching and parading in the band was not as important in terms of expressing one's culture and identity now as it had been several years ago. It was also suggested that membership of bands had decreased since the beginning of the peace and political processes, along with the relevance of the band within some Republican communities.

In drawing the analysis to a conclusion a number of final observations can be made about the views of young people associated with Republican bands:

They maintain that there is a large amount of ignorance around what the bands represents and the rationale for their participation in parade and commemorative events

There is a degree of demonisation about Republican bands that is propagated through social media

For some young people the band is an opportunity to simply learn and play music and is not about commemorating historical events

For a large number of young people the band is about the act of 'remembrance' and an opportunity to publically acknowledge the roles of 'others' in Republican history

There is a perception that there is more of an acceptance of Loyalist bands than Republican bands evidenced through funding opportunities

In terms of future challenges the young people have identified membership and resources as crucial to maintaining Republican bands