

## ***Transcending a Divisive Past in Northern Ireland***

Seventeenth-century walls surround Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland's second-largest city, where the Irish civil rights movement and, some say, "the troubles" began. On Sunday, January 30, 1972, a civil rights protest turned violent and ignited nearly three decades of conflict between Catholic and Protestant communities. In 1998 the Good Friday Peace Agreement enabled local citizens to believe that an economic turnaround and a brighter future for their children were possible.

One government initiative was Ilex, a company set up to promote the area's physical, economic, and social regeneration. "In June 2008, Sir Roy McNulty, recently appointed chair of Ilex, reported to the government that the city lacked leadership and had no agreed-upon structure for creating the city's future," said Gerard McCleave, director of regeneration. "We began asking ourselves how a city divided symbolically and physically by its river could get all of its key stakeholders to agree on a regeneration road map."

Future Search was suggested by Aideen McGinley, permanent secretary of employment and learning, who sponsored her first FS as chief executive of County Fermanagh in 1999. Later, as permanent secretary of a new Department of Culture, Arts, and Leisure in the Northern Ireland government, she sponsored Future Searches to create the first arts strategy, followed by a national soccer strategy, geographic information systems, a library and archives policy, and a vision/action agenda for the Ulster-Scots language and culture (see her comments in Chapter 14).

“We all recognized,” recalled Sir Roy, “that running such an event was a real challenge given the city’s history, the high levels of deprivation, the failure of past initiatives, and the cynicism that engendered.” Nonetheless, 120 people agreed to meet in February 2009 for an experience unprecedented in Derry-Londonderry. They called the conference “Changing Patterns—Changing Outcomes.” Despite the area’s divisive history, people found common ground in unlikely places. Their biggest surprise was how political controversy, even over the city’s name (Derry to some, Londonderry others) receded into the background. After acknowledging the painful past, people came together on key priorities: education, skills training, infrastructure, enterprise, jobs, eliminating poverty, and a making the city a welcoming place for citizens and visitors alike. For the first time, key influencers from across the political spectrum found common ground.

They agreed on lifelong learning for all, regional integration, sustainable employment, and leveraging a cultural heritage of arts, sports, and tourism. They imagined the Foyle River and connecting roads, footpaths, and rail lines as an integrated transport system. Their overarching value, however, was to ensure that equality and the needs of the most deprived people were addressed in every action plan. “Some call it Derry, some call it Londonderry,” said Northern Ireland’s deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, “but we all call it home.”

The Future Search spawned 12 sectorial working groups. Ilex adopted the meeting’s output as the basis of its regeneration plan. Within months 450 people were meeting regularly. Within 18 months their number had swelled to involve more than a thousand. People were collaborating to identify the needs, inequalities, and future initiatives

required to realize their common-ground vision. "The work during the past year and the results we saw at the review meeting have stood up remarkably well to this extreme challenge," noted Sir Roy. "We are driving a plan forward on the enthusiasm and commitment that our Future Search helped generate."