

# Shankill Mirror

Northern Ireland's leading community newspaper

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## Information

Circulation: 32,000  
Publication: every 2-3 weeks  
Employees: 4 f/t, 4 p/t

The Shankill Mirror is a popular community newspaper and a successful social economy business. First published in June 1999, it is currently (in 2006) approaching its seventh anniversary and its 100th edition.

The paper is now published every two or three weeks with a circulation of 32,000, and it is distributed free-of-charge throughout the greater Shankill area and in north Belfast. Many individuals take or post copies to friends and relatives in other parts of the province and around the world.

The Shankill Mirror is unique among newspapers in Northern Ireland in that it is not controlled by 'big business' or private individuals, nor inclined towards the policies of any political party.

**Humble beginnings** The Shankill Mirror originated from discussions within the Greater Shankill Community Council in early 1999 about the desire to start a community newspaper in the Shankill area, a part of Belfast that has witnessed some of the worst sectarian violence throughout the present troubles. According to Andy Tyrie, one of the founding members, the aim of the newspaper was to 'improve communication and awareness within the area and to provide a vehicle which would convey the news, views and activities of the greater Shankill community'.

The idea was to provide news for the people by the people, as a true reflection of a community that had been misrepresented and demonised on a regular basis over the years – often by media prone to carry stories concerning the Shankill area that are sensationalist or in other ways misrepresentative.

During early discussions it was recognised that the absence of a local newspaper in the area provided the opportunity for a potential social economy business – a local economic initiative that would create much needed training and employment opportunities in one of the most disadvantaged areas of Belfast. The lack of a local newspaper had undoubtedly disadvantaged the greater Shankill community including its dealings with neighbouring communities on a cross-community basis.

A new group, Shankill Community Media Productions, was set up to take this project forward as a community business, with a committee of interested individuals drawn from local community groups.

One of the most important decisions the group made was to ensure that from the outset, a free newspaper would be delivered through every door in the greater Shankill area, with an initial print-run of 20,000. It would be funded by advertising revenue plus any grant aid available. Community groups in each area were asked to help with door-to-door delivery as well as providing story leads.

An application for funding to the Belfast Regeneration Office resulted in a small grant of £5,000 to cover the printing costs of two editions – which is as long as some might have believed it would last!

Advertising space was also sold to cover all associated costs, including the services of a professional design company which prepared the layout of the 24 pages on computer and outputted these for the printing company. Articles were prepared and the first edition of the Shankill Mirror was printed and distributed in the first week of June 1999. It was instantly a big hit with local people and other areas of Belfast where it was passed on from friends or relations on the

Shankill.

When the subject of a name for the newspaper had come up for discussion, the committee had considered various titles, including Shankill News, Shankill Gazette, and so forth, but it quickly settled on the name Shankill Mirror as this conveyed its central purpose, reflecting the views of the greater Shankill community. Shortly after the first edition, however, the newspaper committee was shocked to receive a letter from Mirror Group Newspaper's legal department stating that it had sole copyright of the Mirror title (actionable by law). The Shankill Mirror was asked to change its name, and was accused by the legal eagles of trying to pass the Shankill publication off as a publication of the Mirror Group.

After a few phone calls, though, the Mirror Group agreed that the title could be kept, provided that the design of the masthead was changed to make it distinctive from the Daily Mirror's by changing to a blue background and using capitals instead of lower case. Ironically, a few years later the Daily Mirror changed its masthead to a blue background which didn't go down well with the voluntary committee of the Shankill Mirror. As managing editor, Brian Kingston, said: "We should have written to complain that they were trying to pass it off as a publication of the Shankill Mirror!" After successfully resolving the legal dispute with The Mirror Group, the next edition was distributed in the first week of August and the ever growing popular publication continued once a month up to Christmas.

The area of distribution covered the entire greater Shankill area – Shankill, Woodvale, Ballygomartin, Upper Ardoyne and Ballysillan – delivered by a network of delivery boys, girls and adults. Additional copies were also distributed through local shops and other outlets resulting in a growing circulation to a wider readership.

#### Development funding

During millennium year 2000, ten editions were printed. At this stage articles and advertising were compiled on a purely voluntary basis by committee members and community workers as the project had no directly employed staff. An application to LEDU's Community Business Start-Up Programme, managed by Venture International, resulted in grant aid to support the employment of a manager for one year and part time salary for a salesperson. Following advertisement these posts were filled in November 2000.

At this period in the life of the newspaper, the group made another important decision, to become a company limited by guarantee: Shankill Community Media Limited. The articles and memorandum of association ensured that, as a community business, the board of directors could not receive payment or a dividend. Any profits generated would be reinvested in the business or donated to local community and charitable work. Publication once per month continued during 2001 and 2002, with advertising income supporting the two salaries, plus design, printing and distribution costs.

The next step forward was the employment of a designer in 2003, increasing the staff numbers to three. This was achieved as plans to increase the frequency of the publication made this more economically viable. An application to Belfast Regeneration Office resulted in grant aid to support the creation of the new post and the purchase of necessary IT equipment. A successful application to Belfast Local Strategy Partnership (Measure 3.1 Social Economies) then secured support for further expansion in terms of area of distribution and frequency of publication. To enable this expansion, support was provided for two additional posts: a full-time journalist/photographer and a full-time finance and sales officer. Both new posts were filled by September 2003. Two temporary staff, engaged through the Worktrack programme were also retained in part time employment.

The frequency of publication was increased from once issue per month to twice a month whenever possible, allowing for holiday periods. The annual number of publications increased from 12 in 2003, to 17 in 2004, 19 in 2005 and 20 in 2006. The area of door-to-door distribution was expanded into the lower north Belfast area, along the York Road and Shore Road, from Tigers Bay to White City. Articles and advertising were also carried from this area, making the Shankill Mirror essentially the voicepiece for the unionist community in north and west Belfast.

The Shankill Mirror is an undoubted success in that, during its relatively short lifespan, the frequency of publication has doubled, from 10 to 20 per year, and the print run has increased by 60%, from 20,000 to 32,000 per edition. The number of pages per edition is now generally 32 or 36, compared to 24 at the start. The number of staff employed has increased from two to eight (four full time and four part time) most of whom live in the local area.

As well as providing employment, this thriving social economy business provides a direct benefit to the entire local community through the provision of a free newspaper delivered through every door. The newspaper has become a popular 'export', albeit a free one, and a promotional product for the area. This also promotes local advertisers to a wider potential market. The entire contents of each edition are also made available on the internet website: [www.shankillmirror.com](http://www.shankillmirror.com).

Advertising income has increased steadily over the years and the rates have increased with inflation on an annual basis. With a high degree of repeat advertising, the advertisers often comment that they receive a good return on an advertisement in the Shankill Mirror compared to other newspapers. As a result of increased turnover, the company had

to register for VAT in 2003.

One particular growth section in the paper has been the highly lucrative, personal classified greetings &ndash; birthdays, congratulations, in memoriam, birthday memories and other insertions &ndash; which now fill between five and eight pages per edition. As well as providing a welcome source of income to sustain the newspaper, this is also a popular section with readers and indicates a high degree of affinity with the newspaper.

## Content

Jimmy Creighton, the well known Shankill community activist and one of the driving forces behind the venture, is keen to point out the importance of the newspaper to the whole community: &ldquo;Without doubt, the Shankill Mirror has sought to reflect a broad cross-section of news, views and activities within the Protestant, unionist and loyalist community in north and west Belfast. We have sought to avoid becoming associated with any particular political party and endeavour to be an authentic voice of the people.&rdquo;

Each edition is eagerly anticipated by the local community. Several individuals take bundles of papers to other areas where they are distributed from local shops &ndash; including Bangor, Donaghadee, Newtownabbey, east Belfast, Donegall Road and as far afield as Scotland!

The vast majority of the content is original material that has been obtained firsthand, as opposed to relying on press releases being sent in. Much of this content has not been carried by any other newspaper, a feat that is appreciated by the many groups in the area that receive little or no other media coverage for their concerns and activities.

In particular, many local success stories are highlighted and the rich community and cultural life within the greater Shankill and north Belfast area can be celebrated, including local achievements in sport where there is a huge interest.

Story leads come from many sources, including individual residents, community groups, local politicians, schools, churches, statutory bodies and agencies working within the area. These include issues around the regeneration of this traditionally working class area that has undergone huge social and economic change over the past 40 years through loss of traditional employment and depopulation through redevelopment, and that has suffered greatly from the long years of the troubles. Common themes are housing, education, health provision, anti-social behaviour, policing and economic regeneration. The newspaper regularly covers cross-community and cross-border work which groups are engaged in, seeking to increase its confidence and willingness to engage with other groups and communities. It has covered many innovative and ground-breaking projects and campaigns by groups and publicised these to the wider community, in particular highlighting efforts to encourage dialogue and co-operation among local groups. Examples of this important role which the newspaper plays within the greater Shankill area include the creation and meetings of the Greater Shankill Community Convention and the North and West Belfast Parades and Cultural Forum. And among the &lsquo;hard news&rsquo; stories featured have been sectarian attacks at interface areas, loyalist paramilitary feuds and issues around opposition to Orange Order parades.

Apart from the many local issues that have been addressed, the newspaper has also carried local views on the wider Northern Ireland political scene, including opinion polls on political developments, some of which have been quoted in Sunday newspapers. In 2004 it ran an anti-drugs campaign, following the death of a local teenager through the taking of &lsquo;recreational&rsquo; drugs. A strongly worded petition in the newspaper called on drug dealers to stop peddling in death or get out of the area. This was signed and returned by over 2,000 local people, 120 community groups and local paramilitary groups.

In early July 2005, with the assistance of grant aid, a special edition was published commemorating the 60th anniversary of Victory in Europe and Japan, featuring original stories, photographs and memorabilia from the war years provided by local people.

## Challenges for the future

Conscious of the importance of long term sustainability, the newspaper has been operating solely from its own income without any grant aid since June 2005. Like any other social economy business, its main financial challenge is to sustain and further develop the operation, to attract sufficient advertising income and control costs to ensure that the newspaper operates within budget.

The staff have recently moved out of the Greater Shankill Community Council premises, which are being renovated and expanded. Shankill Mirror staff are now based at two locations: at the Spectrum Centre Information Point, Shankill Road, and at Glencairn Community Projects in Forthriver Crescent. The company is exploring the potential for developing these Glencairn offices as a longer-term &lsquo;back office&rsquo; location.

Without question, the Shankill Mirror is a blossoming community business benefiting tens of thousands of people, having identified a social need and business opportunity that other media groups were not addressing.

Now firmly established as an essential fixture in local community and economic life, it has grown steadily over the years, having increasing the number of editions, widening the area of distribution, generating income, raising the turnover of the company and creating local employment. However it is the community-basis and community development approach of Shankill Community Media Limited which has enabled it to create an operation that is not just a viable community business but also a major instrument of community development in the greater Shankill and north Belfast area &ndash; a remarkable success story and quite an achievement for community activists from the &lsquo;old heel&rsquo;n&rsquo;ankle!&rsquo;