



Ballynateigh

Living in a Mixed Community

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Foreword

This booklet is part of a series of publications from the Community Relations Council on the theme of Community Relations and Planning. The Council has already produced publications on the issues of sectarianism and anti-sectarianism and on the concept of neutral venues as places which are open and accessible to people from all traditions. Sectarianism in Northern Ireland can have many faces and, while the degree can vary from area to area, the Council believes that it is present almost everywhere. Sectarianism, consciously or unconsciously, plays a part in the decisions we all make about where we live, where we work, with whom we develop friendships and relationships, where and with whom we socialise, and which schools our children attend.

Acknowledging the issue of sectarianism, however, causes difficulties for some agencies responsible for planning and delivering services to the public. A common argument is that the agency cannot take sectarian or ethnic issues into account in decision-making for fear of laying itself open to the charge that it is acting partially in favour of one community or another, in defiance of anti-discrimination and equal opportunities laws. Yet, if decisions are to be informed and to have equal impact across communities they need to take into account the divided nature of our society.

The Community Relations Council recognises that people have a right to wish to live and socialise and send their children to

schools where there are people from what they would consider as their tradition. The Council does not see integration as the only policy which should be pursued. Instead, it looks for a variety of policies to meet the needs of the diverse nature of this society. People need to be given choice. The danger is that if the issue is not considered and discussed in an open and frank manner then an informed choice will not be available.

We hope that these reports and the debates which the Council is having with Government authorities, planning bodies and others will help produce a society where that choice is available. The Council's goal in this regard is to help people in Northern Ireland from various traditions, religious, cultural and political backgrounds to live together in peace.

Will Glendinning

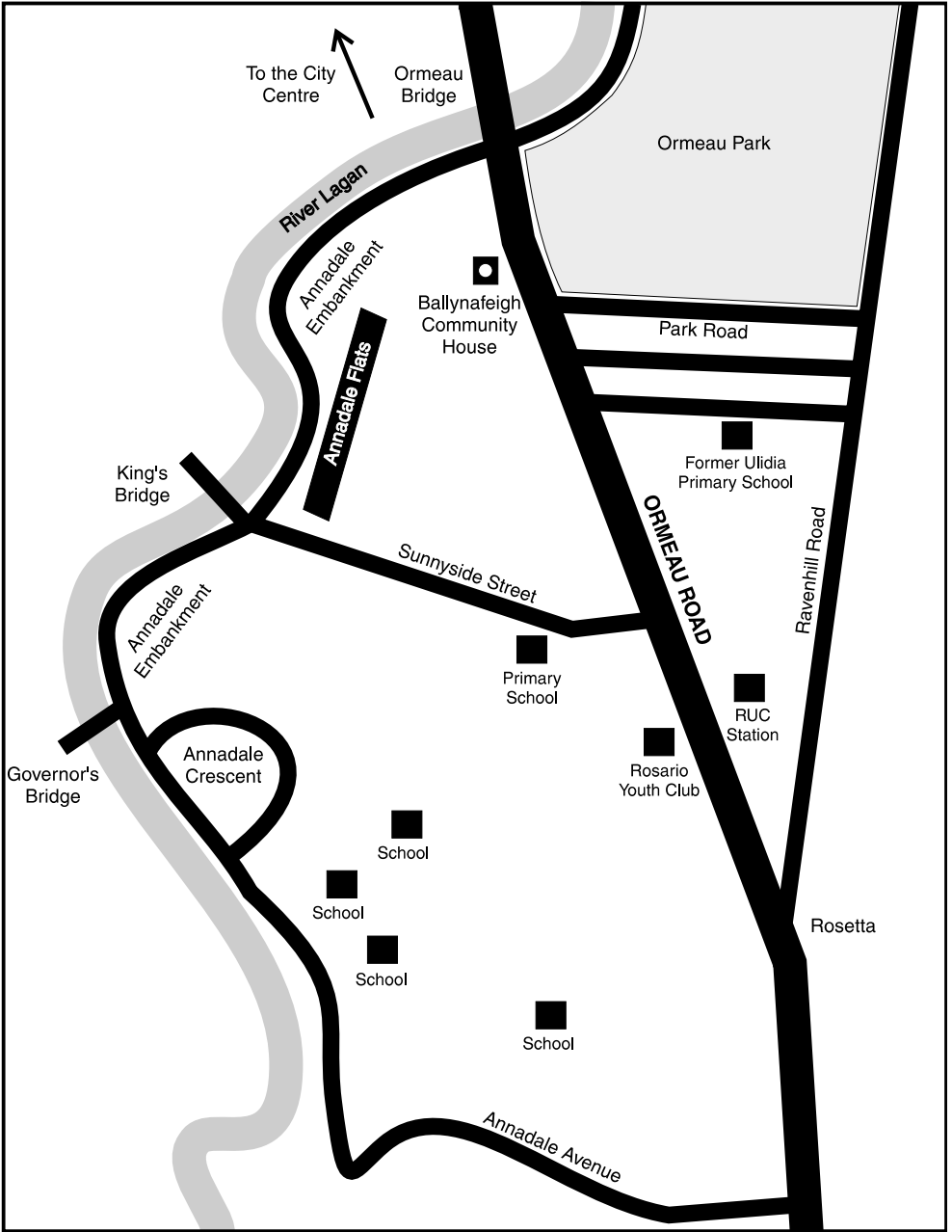
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Ballynafeigh



1/2 mile

Introduction

Ballynafeigh is a district of South Belfast, straddling the middle section of the Ormeau Road as it radiates outwards from the city from the Ormeau Bridge over the River Lagan. Remarkably for Belfast the district contains a very mixed community both in terms of religious affiliation and social class. One resident in the area gave the following description:

“Because it’s near the town there are young professional people buying and renting houses, students because it’s near the University, people on the dole, older residents who’ve been here for years, young families, mixed families, working and middle classes, rich and poor, Protestants and Catholics, Loyalist hardliners and people who couldn’t care less, Unionist, SDLP and Alliance supporters, crusties and all sorts of daft characters. There’s small terraced housing, blocks of flats and big fancy houses; yet it’s still a definite place, not anonymous like Botanic or somewhere like that. I don’t really know where else you would get it all together like this.”

During the early years of the Troubles when most areas of Belfast experienced a huge population shift towards religious segregation Ballynafeigh remained mixed, despite enduring

severe sectarian attacks, and significant efforts were made by a number of local people to maintain good community relations. Ballynafeigh Community Development Association (BCDA) was formed at that time.

With much of Belfast, and indeed Northern Ireland, now segregated into areas that are perceived as either predominantly Protestant or predominantly Catholic, a study of Ballynafeigh promises to help identify what are the stresses and strains on a mixed community which can threaten to push it towards segregation and how these pressures might be dealt with.

In 1992 a research project was undertaken by the **Ballynafeigh Community Development Association** to analyse the dynamics of this particular mixed community and draw lessons that would inform the wider policy debate about how to encourage and protect desegregated community life. The research report, written by **Katie Hanlon** of BCDA, was completed in June 1994 and what follows is broadly based on that report. The research was funded by Community Relations Council and the International Fund for Ireland.

Conducting the Research

The Ballynafeigh Community Development Association had been aware of increased internal tension and conflict within the district in recent years and was anxious to discover the reasons for this and what could be done to preserve Ballynafeigh as a mixed district. The research therefore set out to assess the impact of changes that were taking place in the area and to suggest a community relations strategy sensitive to local needs.

In conducting the research both BCDA and CRC were conscious of the need to act sensitively in order to encourage

people to speak freely. Gaining the trust of those taking part was essential, as was the need to respect confidentiality and anonymity. This was particularly so, since the research was conducted against the grim and grisly background of sectarian murder, both loyalist and republican, in Belfast in the late summer of 1993.

Throughout, the research remained very much a local community initiative. The committee which managed the research consisted of three representatives of BCDA, three other local residents, and a CRC staff member. This enabled effective liaison to take place with the local community and ensured maximum local participation.

The research was conducted by two researchers and a number of project workers employed to carry out survey interviews. Methods consisted of semi-structured interviews arranged in advance with key local people (local MP and councillors, police, clergy, headteachers, youth and community workers), a group questionnaire conducted with selected local groups, and a survey questionnaire carried out on a selected sample of 240 residents in their own homes. The street survey covered 10% of the households in the area and consisted of every tenth address in the electoral register, thus ensuring that every street was included.

The household survey attracted a 58% response rate. Protestants were more reticent about participating with the result that 58% of respondents described themselves as Catholics compared to only 36% as Protestants. But since Protestant and Catholic responses were being recorded separately for comparison, the greater non-response among Protestants did not affect the results. 74% of respondents were women, but all age groups were represented, the majority of

both Protestants (52%) and Catholics (78%) were owner occupiers. Protestants in the survey were more likely to have lived longer in the area (average 16 years) than Catholic respondents (7 years).

Research findings

The research confirmed that Ballynafeigh is currently perceived as a mixed area but many, especially Protestants, felt that this reflected the increasing numbers of Catholics now living in the area than previously. Most respondents thought the area would remain mixed in the future but a significant minority of Protestants felt that the Catholic increase would continue.

Although it was felt that Ballynafeigh had been affected by the Troubles less than other parts of Northern Ireland, most respondents, Protestant and Catholic, believed during the period of the survey (1993) that sectarian tension in Ballynafeigh was on the increase and many were afraid to open their front door at night. One local councillor said he believed that sectarianism in Ballynafeigh resulted from “a few hardened individuals rather than a sense of community anger” but the study did detect a general pessimism surrounding people’s responses to questions about sectarianism.

The majority of both Protestants and Catholics considered that tension in the area increased around the Twelfth of July, with most Catholics quoting fear of intimidation and sectarian attack. Most of the people in the survey ignored the Twelfth celebrations with over half the Catholics and 20% of Protestants going on holiday or away for the day. Only a third of local Protestants watched the parades, confirming the view that local support for the Twelfth parades had waned. Some of the Protestants interviewed had withdrawn their support because

they were “put off by hooligans”. One Protestant resident said, “It used to be a family day but it’s become a drinking session”. But although there are fewer flags flying on the Twelfth than there used to be, the view was expressed that the sectarian graffiti is more intense, the bonfires bigger and the kerbstones had been painted once more- a practice which had almost disappeared from the area. One local Protestant saw this as a response to the perceived shift in Protestant power in the area.

In spite of the insecurity and increase in sectarian attacks, the study also indicated that the overwhelming majority of both Protestants and Catholics liked living in a mixed area, and indeed preferred to live together with their friends and neighbours of the opposite religion rather than in a segregated neighbourhood. Many had chosen to live in the area because it was mixed. Cross-community contact takes place and the Clergy Fellowship, a grouping of Protestant and Catholic local clergy, were praised for the example they set the whole community. People of both religions do meet and mix socially within the area and there was a relatively high level of mixed relationships among respondents, higher than the Northern Ireland average. There was also considerable support for integrated education (a majority of both Protestants and Catholics) and over half of both Protestants and Catholics felt strongly that government should do more to create integrated housing.

Although Catholics were less impressed than Protestants about the level of good community relations in the area, and some commented that “people stop talking over the Twelfth”, over the past five years most people, Protestants and Catholics, felt that community relations had either improved or stayed the same. Catholics were generally more optimistic that community relations would improve in the future.

Although there is social mixing across the sectarian divide in Ballynafeigh this is not apparent among young people (11-18 year olds). In the main they are segregated at school and on the street and have developed separate lives. The study interviewed two groups of young people from the area, one predominantly Protestant, the other predominantly Catholic. The Protestant group felt sandwiched between two Catholic areas, the Lower Ormeau across the bridge and the area around Rosario Youth Club, while the Catholic young people felt caught between the young Protestants in the middle part of Ballynafeigh and Annadale and the other Protestant young people from outside the area, from East Belfast and Cregagh, who come into the district, particularly during the summer months. Each group exercised peer pressure on its members to keep them apart. One local youth worker commented that, at best, Protestant and Catholic youth in the area tolerate each other.

In practice, government policies do not appear to pay much attention to the mixed character of Ballynafeigh. The decision of the Belfast Education and Library Board in 1988 to close Ulidia, the local controlled (Protestant) primary school, against the wishes of the entire local community is a case in point. The Ulidia Parents Action Group stated in 1987 that the closure of the school would “cause the Protestant people to feel isolated and subsequently under pressure to move from the area”. The BCDA research confirmed the feeling that the school closure had de-stabilised the community, exacerbating Protestant feelings of loss and insecurity. For the first time there was no school within Ballynafeigh which local Protestant children could attend. Repercussions of the decision were still affecting Protestant families as soon as their children were old enough to go to school. One respondent described the BELB decision as a “disastrous and short-sighted mistake, one which the area still hasn’t recovered from.”

Concern over the long-term effects of this decision on the mixed character of the area was part of the motivation behind the establishment of the Ormeau Integrated School Group. This group wanted to set up an integrated primary school, one that all local children could attend. It received overwhelming support from all sections of the community, echoed by the positive support given for integrated education in the survey. However, the group's request to establish a school was turned down, again by BELB, in April 1994. The sense of frustration was summed up by one interviewee:

“In spite of so-called community relations policies, when there is a chance of effecting real change, government fails to respond. Whole departments are stuck in the mud, never mind communities. They don't have the will, never mind the resources to do anything.”

Recommendations

Local people want to retain the mixed character of their community and believe that this aim should be a priority for local and central government. Ballynafeigh Community Development Association therefore recommend:

- ❑ A pro-active community relations programme for Ballynafeigh, sensitively conducted in consultation with local people and given the resources and expertise required;
- ❑ A programme for children and young people within Ballynafeigh which is innovative and challenging and that will help them establish lasting cross-community relationships over time;
- ❑ Research into other mixed communities to provide useful lessons for the development of the wider Northern Ireland society;
- ❑ All government policy and planning decisions affecting Ballynafeigh and other mixed areas should take into consideration their possible consequences for community relations;
- ❑ Government agencies, in making decisions that could affect community relations, should consult local communities and communicate and co-operate with each other.

Ballynafeigh is already ahead of much of Northern Ireland in demonstrating that a level of co-existence is possible. However, there is the potential to create a vibrant community where people do not merely co-exist, but exercise the understanding and co-operation so tragically absent from the wider Northern Ireland society. Perhaps Ballynafeigh could become an example for other areas. For this reason it is essential that it receives the necessary resources to grow and develop.