

# Shared Space

*A research journal on peace, conflict and community  
relations in Northern Ireland*

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Northern Ireland Community Relations Council

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Any views expressed in *Shared Space* are those of the authors of the articles and do not necessarily represent those of the Community Relations Council.



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## Notes on Contributors

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# Introduction

The establishment of a local power-sharing government at Stormont in May 2007, led by the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein, is a radical departure from the past, breaking new political ground. Shared governance offers the real prospect of the supportive political environment in which to pursue the task of leading a divided society to a shared future.

Of course, the problems to be solved along the way cannot be wished away and identifying and understanding the problems and mapping out approaches that take us away from segregation, hatred and division need to be at the top of the agenda of policy makers. In this issue of *Shared Space* we look at a number of recent research projects which help us to do this. The first article, by Pauline Donnan, summarizes research conducted by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in establishing indicators for measuring success in building good relations in Northern Ireland. This will be an essential tool for government in monitoring the progress of the Shared Future strategy and will assist departments in developing their action plans. The research also gives us a realistic good relations health check and shows the scale of the problems we have to deal with. There is both good news and bad news here. There has been a dramatic decline in paramilitary violence and around half the population believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were five years ago. On the other hand there remains a high level of residential segregation and most people think that racial prejudice has increased over the last five years.

The good relations indicators baseline research is acknowledged to be incomplete and will in any case need to be constantly revised and updated. However, it provides a valuable starting point for the measurement of current and future efforts at good relations work and gives a clearer picture of what success should look like.

Our second article, by Nick Acheson and Arthur Williamson at the University of Ulster, looks at the voluntary and community sector. The best community relations practice in Northern Ireland developed within the community and voluntary sector throughout the Troubles and challenged the sectarian divisions of the wider society. But this has not been typical of the sector as a whole. As the research shows, many voluntary and community organisations try to ignore the issue of communal difference despite the fact that most of them are embedded wholly or largely within communities that are either Protestant or Catholic. Major public investment in the sector since the early 1990s in an attempt to support the development of civil society pursued the path of least resistance, in the view of some, by failing to challenge separate community development.

The research has been conducted with the support of EU Peace Programme funding through the Community Relations Council and in partnership with NICVA, the community and voluntary sector network. It raises uncomfortable questions for voluntary and community workers although there is evidence that the leadership potential exists within the majority of organisations to develop in a cross-community direction if given the right encouragement. As the researchers indicate in their recommendations both public policy makers and voluntary and community organisations themselves have a responsibility to take forward the task of reconciliation.

Our third article, by Jonny Byrne and Caroline Wilson, reports on an evaluation of an initiative by Belfast City Council to address the issue of Eleventh Night bonfires. Bonfires, lit on the eve of the 12th July to celebrate the Orange victory of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, have been a long-established part of Unionist tradition but have caused concern both on environmental and social grounds, and not least for their contribution to sectarian tensions. In response to community concerns Belfast City Council

initiated a pilot programme in an attempt to better manage the bonfires and encourage local communities to reduce their negative impact.

The evaluation, carried out by the Institute for Conflict Research, indicates that the pilot programme apart from leading to a reduction in environmental pollution has enabled dialogue within and between communities that would otherwise not have taken place. This is a long-term project and the pilot programme will continue for a further three years.

The right of people to express their cultural identity can quickly lead to a demarcation of territory. Apart from bonfires one of the best illustrations of this is the display of flags, bunting and other political emblems, particularly on arterial routes. Two surveys were undertaken in 2006, commissioned by OFMDFM, to monitor the nature of these displays and the length of time they remained after the anniversaries they were intended to celebrate (Battle of the Somme, Battle of the Boyne and the 25th anniversary of the Republican Hunger Strikes) had passed. The surveys were carried out by Dominic Bryan, Clifford Stevenson and Gordon Gillespie from Queen's University's Institute of Irish Studies.

Their survey report, on which their article for *Shared Space* is based, covered a particularly intensive period of anniversaries but the researchers note that many of the flags remained displayed for several months after the anniversary. This was less the case where the flags and emblems had been officially erected by organisations or individuals rather than anonymously. Perhaps significantly, there was less evidence of the painting of kerbstones at main roads. This research continues, with further surveys being conducted this year, and will be an important measure of any progress on the regulation of flags and emblems.

Finally, we publish research highlighting the scale and nature of racist harassment and abuse experienced by health care professionals in Northern Ireland. Commissioned by the NI Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the research confirms that the health service in Northern Ireland suffers from the same patterns of racism as the health service in the rest of the UK. As many as 2,000 minority ethnic health care staff work in Northern

Ireland, providing a vital service across the public and private sector. Alarming, almost half of those surveyed reported racist harassment at work with other work colleagues most likely to be the source of the harassment.

In her article Jennifer Hamilton from the Institute for Conflict Research, together with Seamus Camplisson from the DHSSPS, analyse the nature and source of the racism experienced and explain how it is being addressed.

Evidence of segregation, sectarianism and racism is a sharp reminder to those tasked with transforming Northern Ireland to a shared society of the challenge ahead. But, as the research indicates, there is a willingness to explore ways and means to get there.

**Ray Mullan**

*Editor*

May 2007