# Shared and safe?
# Good relations policy and attitudes

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For many, the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998 is seen as the end of the conflict, although the Peace Process comprises a much longer and complex  series of political and policy developments.  However, as we have seen over the past 15 years, community - or good - relations policy development in Northern Ireland has had a sporadic history.  The 2005 *A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland*[1] framework made it clear that improving relationships between, and within, communities in Northern Ireland is a long term goal for Government[2].  However, political debate and wrangling meant that this framework was never endorsed.

Following on from the restoration of devolution in 2007, and after much delay, the new policy framework *A Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*[3] was released for public consultation. Again, this sparked considerable debate and discussion at both political and community levels.[4] At the end of these, however, there was widespread rejection of this consultation paper, with one major criticism being that it was seen as reinforcing the *status quo* of a divided society.

Since then, we have seen the formulation of another working group and policy.  The *Together: Building a United Community* (TBUC) Strategy was published in May 2013, and reflects the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to improving community relations.[5]  Four key priorities are highlighted within this strategy: shared community, safe community, cultural expression, and children and young people.  For each of these priorities, there is a shared aim which will be implemented across a range of government departments, statutory agencies and community partners.  However, despite being designed to facilitate a more united and shared society, one of the commitments within the 'cultural expression' priority is to contract out the more

controversial issues. Thus, an All Party Group with an independent chair, will be the mechanism used to consider and make recommendations on matters including parades and protests; flags; symbols, emblems and related matters; and the past.

But whilst the direct rule and devolved governments have been developing these frameworks, programmes and/or strategies, what has the public been thinking about relations between the different groups living in Northern Ireland? Actions can often speak louder than words, and community relations in Northern Ireland have been fluctuating, to say the least. Depending on your political opinion, a recent high point was the historic handshake between Martin McGuinness and Queen Elizabeth II in June 2012, whilst low points may include the street disorders following the decision of Belfast City Council in December 2012 to restrict the flying of the Union flag above Belfast City Hall to 18 designated days per year. Thus, if nothing else, the events of the past twelve months in Northern Ireland have shown us the consequences of policy-making being out of step with (some) public opinion.

Using survey data, this article will explore public attitudes to community relations within the framework of two of the TBUC key priorities: a shared community and a safe community. In particular, it will draw upon data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey, which, since 1998, has been recording the attitudes of the public every year to key social issues.[6] In particular, community relations has been an ongoing theme within the survey, enabling us to track how or if the attitudes of the public have changed over time. Indeed, many of the questions have explicitly or implicitly addressed the concepts of shared and safe communities and space.

**Assessment of government targets**

Since 2005, NILT has included a set of questions that attempt to monitor progress towards certain government targets, two of which are relevant to this article:
  • Towns and city centres in Northern Ireland are safe and welcoming places for people of all walks of life (relevant to 'our safe community')
  • The government is actively encouraging shared communities where people of all backgrounds can live, work, learn and play together (relevant to 'our shared community')

For each of these targets, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 whether the target has been achieved, regardless of whether they agreed or not with the aim of the target. A score of 1 means that the respondent thinks

that the target has definitely not been achieved, and a score of 10 means that respondent thinks that the target definitely has been achieved. The mean score is perhaps the easiest way to identify patterns over time, and to compare public perceptions of how each target has been achieved.

Firstly, looking at the 'safe community' target, Table 1 shows that there has been a rise in mean scores over the years (from 4.40 in 2005 to 5.41 in 2012). This indicates that the public feels that the government is becoming more successful in achieving the target of shared communities. A similar upward pattern is also evident in relation to the target pertinent to 'a shared community', although the increase over the years is smaller (0.59, compared to 1.1 for 'safe community'). These figures are positive in relative terms, although in absolute terms, the mean scores do not suggest particularly high levels of success, given that the scale runs from 0 to 10. Nevertheless, a higher proportion of respondents think that the target in relation to 'shared community' is being met, than think this in relation to 'safe community'. Of course, we must recognise that this 'safe community' target relates solely to towns and city centres. This is also emphasised within the TBUC document[7], which stresses the need to take a wider view and enhance the concept of shared spaces in terms of schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods and leisure facilities.

In 2012, Catholics respondents to NILT were more likely than Protestant respondents or those with no religion to say that the targets have been achieved, although the gap between these groups was larger in relation to safe communities than shared communities.

**Table 1: Rating of target achievement (mean scores)**

|            | Safe community | Shared community |
|------------|----------------|------------------|
| Mean 2005  | 4.40           | 5.38             |
| Mean 2006  | 4.72           | 5.51             |
| Mean 2007  | 5.22           | 5.63             |
| Mean 2008  | 4.86           | 5.23             |
| Mean 2009  | 5.15           | 5.54             |
| Mean 2010  | 5.36           | 5.70             |
| Mean 2012  | 5.41           | 5.97             |

*\* the 'don't know' responses have been excluded from this table, in order to calculate mean scores*

**Our Shared Community**

The aim of this TBUC priority is 'to create a community where division does not restrict the life opportunities of individuals and where all areas are open and accessible to everyone'. Indeed, the concept of shared communities has been integral in some shape or form to fair employment legislation and community relations policy over the past 40 years. However, one difference between TBUC and other policies is the inclusion of stated measurable objectives, the advantage of which is to make it easier to evaluate empirically the level of achievement in the future. As well as the creation of four Urban Villages and ten new Shared Neighbourhood Developments, these named objectives include undertaking an overarching review of housing to bring forward recommendations on how to enhance shared neighbourhoods.

Looking first at the experience of respondents, around two thirds of NILT participants (67%) thought that there was a very or fairly strong sense of community among the people living within half a mile of them. This was lower for those with no religion (58%) than for Catholic (71%) or Protestant (69%) respondents. Most respondents (71%) felt a sense of belonging to that community, and again, this was lowest for those with no religion (60%), than for Catholic (73%) or Protestant (75%) respondents. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those living in an area with a strong sense of community were more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the community. But are these communities shared?

The survey asked respondents to identify some of the reasons why they decided to live in their area. As might be expected, people chose where they live for a myriad of reasons, and more than half of respondents identified at least three options. Being 'near family and friends' was important for one half of respondents, closely followed by having 'always lived in that area' (47%), and 'safety' (39%). The religious make up of the neighbourhood was a factor for a small proportion of respondents, with 'a mixed area' being identified by only 16 per cent. Nevertheless, this was higher than those identifying single-religion areas (5% for Catholic area, and 4% for Protestant area). Responses of Catholic and Protestant respondents were fairly similar, although being near family and friends, and good quality or affordable housing was identified by a higher proportion of Protestants. Those with no religion were least tied to family and friends, and least likely to have always lived around their area.

The NILT data indicate that a slight majority of respondents currently live within some sort of shared community. Based on the examples of Protestants and Catholics going to different shops or using different GP surgeries or other services, around three in five (58%) respondents did not think that their

community was divided.  These figures were highest for those for Protestant respondents (62%) and least for Catholics (55%).  In contrast, 12% thought that their area was divided 'a lot', and a further 21% said 'a little'.  Of note is that one in ten respondents, regardless of their religious background, gave a 'don't know' response.  Respondents were then asked if four specific local facilities were 'shared and open' to both Protestants and Catholics.  Whilst the majority thought that leisure centres (84%), parks (85%) and libraries (90%) were, a much smaller proportion thought this in relation to pubs (55%).  This perhaps reflects the public ownership and use of the first three facilities.

Moving now to attitudes to shared communities, the TBUC document cites NILT data from 2010, showing that 82 per cent of respondents stated that they would prefer to live in a mixed neighbourhood.  However, Figure 1 shows that this figure fell to 72 per cent in 2012, which is close to the 1998 figure of 71 per cent.  The TBUC strategy outlines how such a shared community will be achieved by the promotion not only of shared housing, but also of shared workplaces and shared spaces where people can come together to socialise and interact.[8]  Figure 1 shows that since the survey began, respondents have been most supportive of mixed-religion workplaces, and least supportive of mixed-religion schools.  NILT data also show that, as for neighbourhoods, support for working in a mixed-religion workplaces or sending children to a mixed-religion school also fell between 2010 and 2012.  At this stage we cannot say whether this is a short-term 'blip' perhaps influenced by rioting during the summer of 2012, or the start of a longer-term downward trend in support for integrated neighbourhoods.

**Figure 1: Support for mixed-religion settings (% saying 'mixed-religion')**
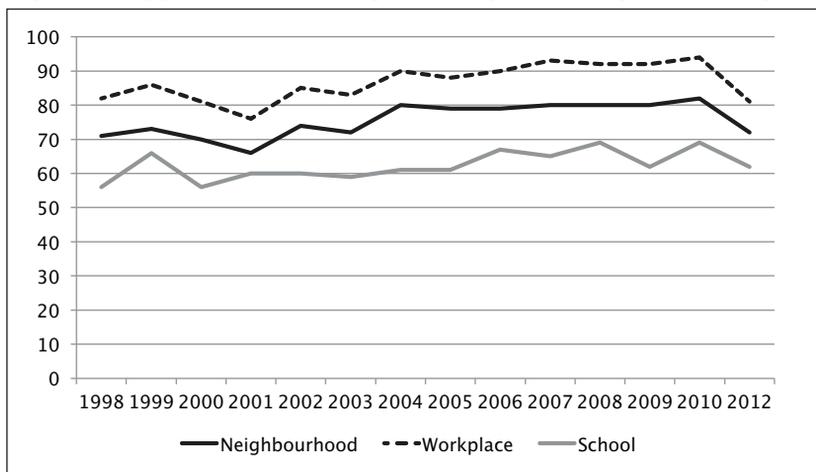
Nevertheless, 83 per cent of NILT respondents in 2012 said that they are in favour of much more, or a bit more, mixing in places where people live, and this figure has not changed much over the past seven years.  Similar levels of support are also seen in relation to mixing in primary schools (82%), secondary or grammar schools (84%), where people work (87%), and leisure or sports activities (87%).  A smaller proportion - although still the majority of respondents (72%) - thought that there should be more mixing in marriages, which is an increase from the figure of 64 per cent in 2010.

Over the past few years, the concept of Shared Education has come to the fore.  In particular, the publication of the report of the Ministerial Advisory Group on the Advancement of Shared Education[9] in February 2013 brought this topic to public attention and debate.  Shared Education is also an explicit objective within TBUC, and so it will be interesting over the next few years to see how public attitudes to Shared Education fare in comparison to integrated education.

**Our Safe Community**

Of course, being a shared community needs to go hand-in-hand with being a safe community, and thus the aim stated within TBUC is to create a community where everyone feels safe in moving around and where life choices are not inhibited by fears around safety.  The NILT data suggest that this reflects the concerns of the general public: as we have highlighted above, nearly two out of five respondents (39%) said that the reason why they lived in their neighbourhood was because 'it's a safe area'.  As noted above, only 16 per cent chose their area because it was mixed.  Furthermore, when asked which reasons helped them decide which school their children attended, one half of respondents with school-age children said that it was because the school was in a safe area.

Safety was addressed in several other ways within the NILT survey.  For example, the vast majority of respondents said that they would be happy to change to a GP in either a Catholic of Protestant area.  As the figures in Table 2 indicate, Catholic respondents were slightly less willing to move to a surgery in a Protestant area, and vice versa.

**Table 2: Willingness to move to GP surgery in another area, by religion**

| % who would not mind moving to ... | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Catholic | Protestant | No religion | All |
| GP surgery in mainly Catholic area | 93 | 77 | 84 | 84 |
| GP surgery in mainly Protestant area | 81 | 92 | 89 | 86 |

Respondents were then asked to think about an event that they wanted to go to in a nearby town, and consider how they would feel if it was to be held in four different premises. Overall, each location was deemed to be very or quite safe by the majority of respondents, with secondary schools being seen as particularly safe: eight out of ten respondents said they would feel safe in a Catholic secondary school, with a similar proportion saying this in relation to a Protestant secondary school. There were, however, differences according to the religion of the respondents (see Table 3). Thus, less than one half of Catholic respondents would feel safe in an Orange Hall, and a similar proportion of Protestant respondents said that they would feel safe in a GAA club. For three out of the four locations, the proportion of respondents with no religion feeling safe was between that for Catholics and for Protestants. The exception is a Protestant secondary school, where this group was the most likely to feel safe.

**Table 3: Feeling of safety in locations in nearby town, by religion**

| % feeling very or quite safe | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Catholic | Protestant | No religion | All |
| A GAA club (Gaelic Sports club) | 89 | 49 | 59 | 67 |
| An Orange hall | 46 | 79 | 67 | 62 |
| A Catholic secondary school | 92 | 72 | 77 | 81 |
| A Protestant secondary school | 78 | 84 | 88 | 82 |

Related to feelings of security, the NILT data suggest that most people do not feel restricted in their activities or their movements, due to their religion. The vast majority of respondents (94%) said that they had not been put off going to an event because they felt that people of their religion might not be welcome

there, and this was the case for both Catholic and Protestant respondents. Similarly, 94% of respondents said that they have not avoided using public transport to get somewhere because it would take them through an area where people of their religion might not be welcome.

The issue of travelling through particular areas is very relevant to where people work. Taking this further, when asked about workplaces in particular areas, 15 per cent said that they would definitely or probably avoid workplaces in a mainly Protestant area, and 13 per cent would avoid them in a mainly Catholic area. Table 4 indicates that the pattern among Catholic and Protestant respondents is as might be expected.

**Table 4: If applying for a job, would avoid workplaces situated in a ...**

| % saying 'definitely' or 'probably' | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Catholic | Protestant | No religion | All |
| Mainly Protestant area | 24 | 8 | 10 | 15 |
| Mainly Catholic area | 7 | 21 | 11 | 13 |

However, the first-listed commitment within TBUC relating to a safer community is the creation of a 10-year Programme to reduce, and remove by 2023, all interface barriers. Attitudes to such barriers, including Peace Walls, have not been covered within NILT, reinforcing a general dearth of quantitative research into public awareness and attitudes towards peace walls in Northern Ireland.[10] More recently, though, research on this topic has been carried out, for example, Bell (2013), Byrne, Gormley-Heenan and Robinson (2012) and Leonard and McKnight (2011). One general pattern emerging is that attitudes towards the impact and future of peace walls are mixed, especially when the views of the general public are compared with those living in interface areas.

**Flags**

Despite not being dealt with as part of the general TBUC strategy, flags remain as contentious and emotive a topic as ever – as the past 12 months have shown us. As might be expected, questions on flags are ever present within NILT. Before exploring the 2012 survey data, it must be noted that the majority of the 2012 NILT fieldwork was completed by the start of December of that year, when the decision by Belfast City Council was made. Thus, whilst NILT figures are unlikely to have been affected by the 'flags protests', the possible impact of unrest during July should be borne in mind.

Overall, a sizeable minority of respondents thought that the amount of murals and flags had not changed compared with five years previously, and this was similar for republican and loyalist emblems compared with loyalist. Less than one in five thought that there were more of these, although the proportion who did not know was relatively large (see Table 5). Since 2008, there has been a fall in the proportion of respondents saying that there are less flags, and this has been matched by an increase saying that they did not know. Of note is that more Protestants than Catholics think there are more republican displays, while the reverse is true in relation to loyalist emblems.

**Table 5: Perception of amount of flags compared to five years ago**

|  | Republican murals and flags | Loyalist murals and flags |
|---|---|---|
| More | 13% | 18% |
| Less | 32% | 28% |
| About the same | 42% | 45% |
| Don't know | 12% | 9% |

But does the flying of flags necessarily evoke a negative response? Table 6 shows that around one in ten respondents reported feeling intimidated by republican murals, kerb paintings and flags in the previous year, with little difference depending on the religious background of the respondent. These figures have remained fairly constant since 2007. Whilst fairly low proportions report feeling intimidated, a higher proportion - around one quarter of respondents - said that they felt annoyed about these. Feelings of intimidation and of annoyance were higher across the board in relation to loyalist murals and flags, but especially by Catholic respondents.

**Table 6: Feelings of intimidation and annoyance by murals, kerb paintings and flags**

| % | Catholic | Protestant | No religion | All |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intimidated by republican murals, kerb paintings, or flags | 11 | 15 | 12 | 12 |
| Annoyed by republican murals, kerb paintings, or flags | 19 | 27 | 23 | 23 |
| Intimidated by loyalist murals, kerb paintings, or flags | 24 | 10 | 14 | 17 |
| Annoyed by loyalist murals, kerb paintings, or flags | 34 | 23 | 29 | 28 |

## Discussion

This article explored public attitudes to community, or good, relations in Northern Ireland through the framework of a shared community and a safe community – two of the priorities of the recently-published Together: Building a United Community.

The NILT data suggest that there is some degree of living within a shared community within Northern Ireland: 58 per cent say that within their local area, Protestants and Catholics do not go to different shops or use different services. Seven out of ten respondents said that they would prefer to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood, although only 16 per cent identified 'a mixed area' as being a priority when deciding where to live. Nevertheless, analysis of the 2011 Census of Population suggests that residential segregation has decreased over the previous decade, with the proportion of single-identity wards (that is, with 80% of more from one community) decreasing from 55% in 2001 to 37% in 2011.[11] Thus, shared communities, at least in terms of residential segregation, are becoming more widespread.

Safety appears to be a bigger priority for respondents, with 39 per cent taking this into account when deciding on which area to move to. At one level, respondents do not appear to be restricted in their movements in and across areas of different religious make-up. Nevertheless, whilst not explored within the Life and Times Survey, Peace Walls and other barriers play a large role within public feelings of safety, especially for people living in interface areas. Also to be addressed are the issues of flags, which continue to cause annoyance for around one quarter of the population. These issues cut across both priorities of shared and safe communities.

Reflecting a difficult year, the proportion of NILT respondents who believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than five years ago has fallen from 62% to 52%, which was the level in 2005. This pattern was particularly evident among Catholic respondents. Thinking about the next five years, respondents are less optimistic about community relations than in previously. Whilst nearly two thirds of respondents in 2007 (64%) felt that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in five years time, this figure fell to 48% in 2012. It is within this more pessimistic context, then, that driving forward the TBUC consultation and agenda will face many challenges.

**Notes**

1   OFMDFM, 2005.

2   Donnan, 2007.

3   OFMDFM, 2010.

4   Devine, Kelly and Robinson, 2011.

5   OFMDFM, 2013.

6   The one exception was 2011, when the survey did not take place due to logistical issues.

7   TBUC, 3.10, p.55.

8   Ibid.

9   Connolly, Purvis and O'Grady, 2013.

10  Byrne, Gormley-Heenan and Robinson, 2012.

11  Nolan, 2013.

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