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Northern Ireland's young people want to break down community barriers, but do not expect it to happen

Northern Ireland's young people remain keenly aware of the divisions in local society and, while they want to see greater integration, many believe it is something for future generations rather than themselves. New research from think tank Pivotal indicates that investing in youth services that allow young people to mix regularly should be a focus for those seeking change, and be part of a new vision for what an integrated future, with the right leadership, could achieve

Efforts towards greater integration between Northern Ireland's young people often feel like isolated events with little permanent impact, according to young people themselves.

Instead of lasting progress, many grander initiatives both within and outside schools that aim to bring together young people from different backgrounds are too irregular to make a difference. In contrast, young people believe more regular activities like youth clubs and other ongoing services provide better and more sustained opportunities for mixing.

These are some of the findings from ***Achieving greater integration in Northern Ireland: young people's voices***, a new report published today [Thursday, 15 May] by Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland. This research, based on extensive focus group conversations with young people from different parts of Northern Ireland, follows on from a previous Pivotal paper published in March that examined segregation in both schools and housing, and the relationship between the two.

Both reports highlighted the extent of division still experienced in schools and communities, as well as the need for realism about what can be achieved when there are so many other competing priorities facing the Executive and communities themselves. Leadership is required if young people are to believe integration can be a genuine aspiration for their generation.

Overall, participants in this study believe that Northern Ireland's segregated schools system helps perpetuate division, with the mandatory teaching of religious education a particular concern for many of the young people. However,

while there was significant support for integrated education, this was not universal – and it was not seen as a cure all for current social division.

The young people also said that integration is about more than the traditional green/orange divide. The challenges faced by children of different ethnicities were also highlighted. Many participants had friends from other racial groups, and several had witnessed first hand bullying that took place based on skin colour or cultural differences. The religious nature of the education system was brought up as a barrier for young people from non-Christian backgrounds.

One common theme among all the young people was a strong sense of belonging about where they live. However, most also said they live in segregated communities. In rural areas, this typically means villages or towns with where the vast majority of people come from one religious background.

Pivotal's report states: "In Belfast, while people of different religious backgrounds lived in closer proximity, they did not necessarily share spaces in an integrated way. Young people were highly aware of these divisions, often identifying areas by religious or cultural markers such as flags and murals. These symbols were widely understood as a way to define territory and could be perceived as intimidating to those from outside the area."

Young people's most common response to the idea of travelling outside of their own area or into other neighbourhoods was an expression of fear. In Belfast, those in interface areas said peace walls are a clear symbol of segregation but had mixed feelings about whether they should be brought down, instead suggesting that gates should be kept open for longer rather than removing the barriers entirely.

Participants said there is a shortfall of truly neutral spaces and, for those in rural areas, a scarcity of public transport can make cinemas and leisure centres hard to access.

A significant number of the young people said they attend events on both St Patrick's Day and the Twelfth of July although there were mixed feelings on how inclusive those days actually are.

Pivotal's report states: "Young people expressed a strong desire for more investment in community events to create regular opportunities to actively promote integration rather than just events where different groups are present."

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “This research shows that Northern Ireland’s young people have a keen sense of our divided society and how that has shaped their own experiences.

“There is a clear consensus in favour of more integration and building understanding between different communities. This goes beyond the traditional sectarian divisions within local society, with young people very aware of the challenges facing ethnic minorities and newcomer families.

“However, there is a lack of confidence that significant changes will happen soon. The young people we spoke to feel that integration will ultimately be something for future generations.

Much of what the young people had to say echo the findings of our first report. This project highlights needs for leadership and a fresh vision of how a more integration society could be achieved and what more integration, mixing and sharing of resources could offer socially, economically and culturally.

“In terms of schooling, while there was quite broad support for integrated education, this was not the young people’s top priority for change. Instead, they would like to see more investment in raising awareness of different cultures and religions, with a focus on learning together about the differences between communities.

“In the wider community, while many young people say they have taken part in cross-community events, including through schools, they were sceptical about whether these had any real legacy of change. Instead, they feel that more regular, local opportunities for mixing are what really break down barriers – spending sustained time with people from a different background and building friendships.

“This suggests that greater investment in local youth services as well as the creation of more truly shared spaces – and, in the case of many rural areas, better public transport to access those spaces – could be the best way to make a difference right now.”

Pivotal’s report was based on conversations with 48 young people aged 15-25 within five focus groups that took place between September and November 2024. These conversations took place in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Enniskillen and South Armagh and covered several topics.

Personal sense of community

In general all the young people expressed a strong sense of belonging to the place where they live, whether that was in a city, smaller town or a more rural area.

This community spirit was strengthened through regular activities like sports, youth clubs and seasonal events such as Halloween and Christmas celebrations – although many young people also said that dilapidation was a factor driving more anti-social behaviours such as underage drinking and rioting.

When participants expressed some negative perceptions about their own area, this was predominantly because of fear.

The meaning of integration

All the groups understood integration in the context of Northern Ireland's historical conflict, and the related divisions along lines of nationality, religion and political identity – although some of the younger participants thought about it first along racial or ethnic lines.

However, young people tended to describe their experiences of integration as an action, rather than a state of being. It is seen as temporary efforts that they engaged in before returning to the background they came from – and there were mixed views about the overall benefit of these activities in promoting sustained integration.

“Do you remember the episode in Derry Girls where they were like right we’ve twenty Protestants here, twenty Catholics there? It’s just unnatural you know and you’re forcing questions that maybe some people aren’t comfortable in answering.” - Male, 22, South Armagh

Greater integration in education

Schools were broadly seen as divisive because young people from different backgrounds are often educated separated. Participants felt that the segregated system reinforces social fractures.

“There shouldn’t be kids having to think, ‘Oh, the school I’m going to is a Protestant school. The school you’re going to is a Catholic school. It should be just, ‘Oh, I’m going to a school.’” - Male, 17, Enniskillen

The mandatory requirement to teach Religious Education (RE) in schools in Northern Ireland was highlighted as a problem, particularly in schools that make it compulsory to GCSEs.

“Religion is a very important part of history of faith for people in general, but you shouldn’t, in my opinion, it shouldn’t be mandatory at

GCSEs, it should be the same as every other subject where if I want to do history I can do history, if I want to do RE I can do RE.” - Male, 17, Enniskillen

However, while there was broad agreement on the problems with segregation in education, there were mixed views on the benefits of more integration – while some saw it as a positive step towards mutual understanding, others worried it might provide more opportunities for conflict.

“In primary school that’s where you make friends easier, that’s where you first meet people. That’s where you become friends with different people from different cultures and religions easier than you would in high school. It’s cos like you’re young and once you get to know them like nothing really matters. You don’t really care about their religion or anything you just are like friends.” - Female, 15, South Armagh

“In a way I think it would be two separate groups no matter what school you went to and there would be more fighting in school and there would be more fear.” - Male, 15, Greater Shankill

In four of the five focus groups, one key theme was the integration of children from different racial groups. Many participants had friends from a minority ethnic background and recognised they faced challenges with being accepted in the school community, with several saying they had witnessed bullying based on skin colour or the food someone ate.

“Our school was strict, so I can’t imagine, cos there was like Muslims, there was Jewish people there was everyone there, I can’t imagine what it was like for them having to be like be pressured into a different religion than what they are. I never really heard about ethnicity or anything and I mean you could be white Muslim or you could be black and Jewish, you know what I mean? It’s more just it’s harder when you go to like a specific religious school and you’re a different religion.” - Female, 17, Derry/Londonderry

The young people said more support was needed for newcomer pupils and that bringing people together from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds might require a different approach than integrating communities that, despite religious differences, share a similar culture.

Integrating across communities

Most of the young people said the communities they live in were divided along sectarian lines. In rural areas, this typically meant living in villages or towns with a predominantly single-identity background.

In Belfast, while people of different backgrounds live physically closer together, the participants said they did not necessarily share spaces in an integrated way – and were highly aware of these divisions, often with areas identified by cultural markers such as flags and murals which they said can be perceived as intimidating.

“I see all the Union Jacks going up on the road and that is very off-putting for me. I’m sure other people find it the same when they see all the Tricolour up.” - Female, 16, Ardoyne

“Where I live now is a strongly Catholic area, so it is not mixed at all. I don’t really like it. Where I’m originally from it was very mixed so whenever I came over here it was very different going from a mixed background to an all Catholic background.” - Female, 20, Derry/Londonderry

When it comes to travelling outside their own neighbourhood, and perceptions of the wider community around them, young people’s main emotion is fear.

“In this area, it’s not very safe, like you’re always when you’re walking through a certain area, you’re always checking your back to make sure no-one’s running at you or whatever but like you have to take a detour round them places instead of walking through.” - Male, 17, Greater Shankill

Neutral spaces

Leisure centres, shops, takeaways, arcades and cinemas were all broadly seen as neutral spaces – but the young people felt differently about outdoor areas such as parks, sports grounds and bus stops. They said these often reflect the segregation of the surrounding area and were typically associated with division, anti-social behaviour and sectarian violence.

Young people in more rural areas also said that a lack of access to public transport limits their options to visit truly shared spaces.

Positive experiences

Participants in the focus groups was largely drawn from community youth organisations, but nevertheless **youth clubs** were universally seen and valued as a shared space for young people – some of whom said this was the first or only place they had the opportunity to socialise with people from a different background.

“You are building up these different experiences with these people who nine times out of ten aren’t that different to you. They’re the exact same person as you.” - Male, 23, Greater Shankill

Sports was also seen as a place where young people can foster a sense of belonging and also meet people from different backgrounds, although some participants highlighted that divisions can sometimes lead to conflict there too.

Similarly, **the internet** – via social media and online gaming – was brought up as a place that can help create and maintain friendships with people from outside your neighbourhood, but also provide a platform for abuse.

Community events such as fundraisers, band nights, and seasonal celebrations like Halloween activities were all seen as positive way to bring people together.

Annual events like **St Patrick’s Day and the Twelfth of July** were also discussed and, while many young people said they attend both events, views were mixed on how inclusive they are.

Overall there was a strong desire for more investment in community events to provide positive opportunities to mix with those from different backgrounds on a more regular basis.

The future of integration

Young people have very different levels of confidence about how much integration is likely to improve in the foreseeable future.

Some believe that younger generations are less and less interested in religion and that this will inevitably lead to better integration, while others were more pessimistic – citing the continuing influence of older generations and the nature of local politics as brakes on progress.

“In my all honest opinion I genuinely believe most of the people in around our age genuinely could not care less about religion. It makes me believe in the next fifty odd years religion won’t be of any relevance, I genuinely believe it will not matter.” - Male, 18, Londonderry/Derry

“I’m saying it because all you see is like the Sinn Féin and DUP constantly fighting with each other, and arguing with each other. You know it’s not a good message to be sending out to young people if you want them to unite with each other. People at the top need to take a leaf out of the young people.” - Male, 15, Ardoyne

Young people’s recommendations

At the end of each session, participants were asked if they could change one thing to help young people integrated more, what would that be – with answers provided separately for the schools system and the wider community.

On schools, despite there being plenty of support for **integrated education** during the discussions, only two participants identified this as the single change they would make if they could.

Instead, most young people felt schools should focus more on **raising awareness of different cultures and religions** – including input from youth workers or specialist organisations in these areas.

Greater and more regular integration and sharing between schools of different backgrounds also had some support.

In the wider community, there was a greater spread in what individual participants chose as their one change, with plenty of support for **better youth provision** with social opportunities for young people of all backgrounds, **more cross-community events** such as fun days and festivals, and **specific cultural days** to celebrate diversity and promote integration.

Conclusions

This pair of reports from Pivotal found that Northern Ireland's community divisions, both in terms of traditional sectarian frictions and related to ethnic minorities and inward migrants, remain substantial.

Despite young people being largely open to integration and keen to learn about different cultures and communities, this division is still part of their everyday lives.

Addressing these issues will require a sustained effort on multiple fronts, including a significant increase in social mixing, preferably on a regular basis, that will likely require the creation of many more neutral spaces.

Proper leadership is also required to help build the belief that real change is possible, especially given that even young people are sceptical about whether integration can happen for their generation.

The previous report, based on wider research into segregation in housing and schools, found there is not one-size-fits-all solution to this issue. It recommended investment in both integrated education and shared education, more affordable housing, and ambitious leadership with positive goals that reflect an increasingly diverse Northern Ireland.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

Ann Watt is available for media interviews.

For further information or to schedule an interview, contact Ryan Miller on 07789 552 340 or ryan@millercomms.co.uk

1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland
2. Pivotal's published reports are available [here](#)
3. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are David Gavaghan (Chair); Sarah Creighton; Judith Gillespie; Jarlath Kearney; Sinéad McSweeney; Rosalind Skillen; Andrew McCormick; Seamus McAleavey; Alan Whysall
4. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 25 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
5. Pivotal has received funding and in-kind support from Belfast Harbour Commissioners, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, NICVA, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University
6. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
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