



Research Update

Taking Stock. Attitudes to community relations and a shared future among the first post-conflict generation in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

When the Belfast Good Friday Agreement was signed in April 1998, there was a sense of a new dawn for Northern Ireland. Indeed, the cover page of the printed Agreement shows a family of four - two adults with two young children - looking into the twilight. This appears to symbolise a new beginning. Whilst the enthusiasm to build a better, peaceful and shared society was great, the expectation has always been that this transformation will take time and will not be easy. Nevertheless Government is interested in and reliant on measuring tangible progress in the peace process in order to design and to amend programmes for government. This is often done by identifying policy indicators that can be repeatedly and reliably measured over time, such as the level of contact people from different communities have with each other and the attitudes they hold towards each other.

It is of particular interest to compare the attitudes of those who have grown up in peaceful times with those who personally experienced the conflict. As Northern Irish society continues to move out of conflict, the first generation of young people who have grown up with an expectation of peace rather than conflict has now reached adulthood. This is an opportune point in time to review how young people's attitudes to community relations and sharing have changed during this period. This Research Update will therefore take stock of young people's perceptions, before the second post-conflict generation is born. In order to do this this Update will mainly use data from the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey which is run by ARK. YLT has monitored the attitudes of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland since 2003. Some of the questions asked of 16-year olds area also asked of adults in the Northern Ireland Life and

Times (NILT) survey, which allows for comparisons to be made between young people's views and those of the adult population in Northern Ireland. Each year approximately 1,200 respondents complete each of the two surveys. As both surveys use a randomised sampling procedure, the results are representative for the populations of 16-year olds and adults in Northern Ireland (see www.ark.ac.uk/ylt and www.ark.ac.uk/nilt for specific technical details on the survey methodologies).

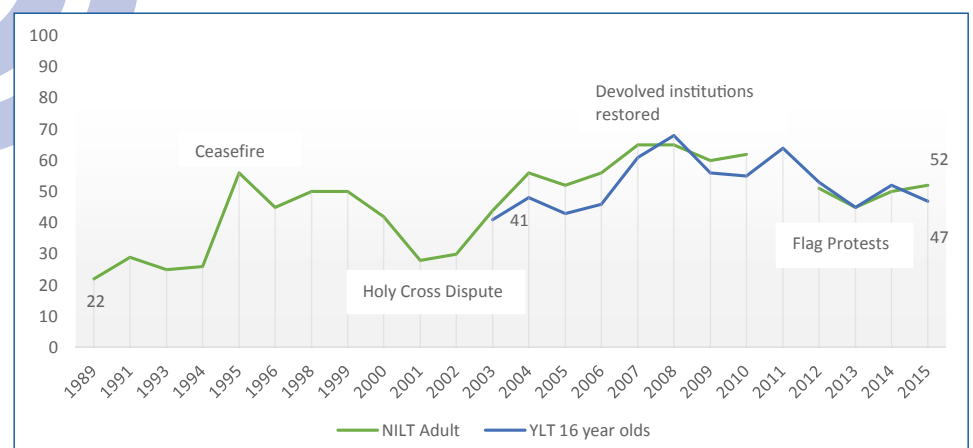
Monitoring perception of attitudes over time

Academics who set up ARK in 2000 have been involved in the collection of views and attitudes to community relations since the inception of the very first Northern Ireland Social Attitude Survey (NISAS) that was conducted in 1989. In that year 22 percent of adults thought

community relations were better than they were 5 years ago and 26 percent thought relations would be better in 5 years' time¹. In 2013, Morrow, Robinson and Dowds produced an extensive report analysing the time series data on social attitudes for Northern Ireland's adult population.

Data collection among 16-year olds started in 2003. Figure 1 tracks the attitudes of 16-year olds and adults since 1989 showing how the proportion of those who thought relations were better than 5 years ago has changed over time. The Figure shows that significant political events such as the cease fire (1995), the suspension of the power-sharing institutions and the Holy Cross dispute (2001) and the Belfast flag protests (2012/13) coincide with significant improvements or deteriorations in the perceptions of relations, suggesting that these events influence the perception of relations

Figure 1: Proportions of adults (NISAS, NILT) and 16 year olds (YLT) believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago (%)

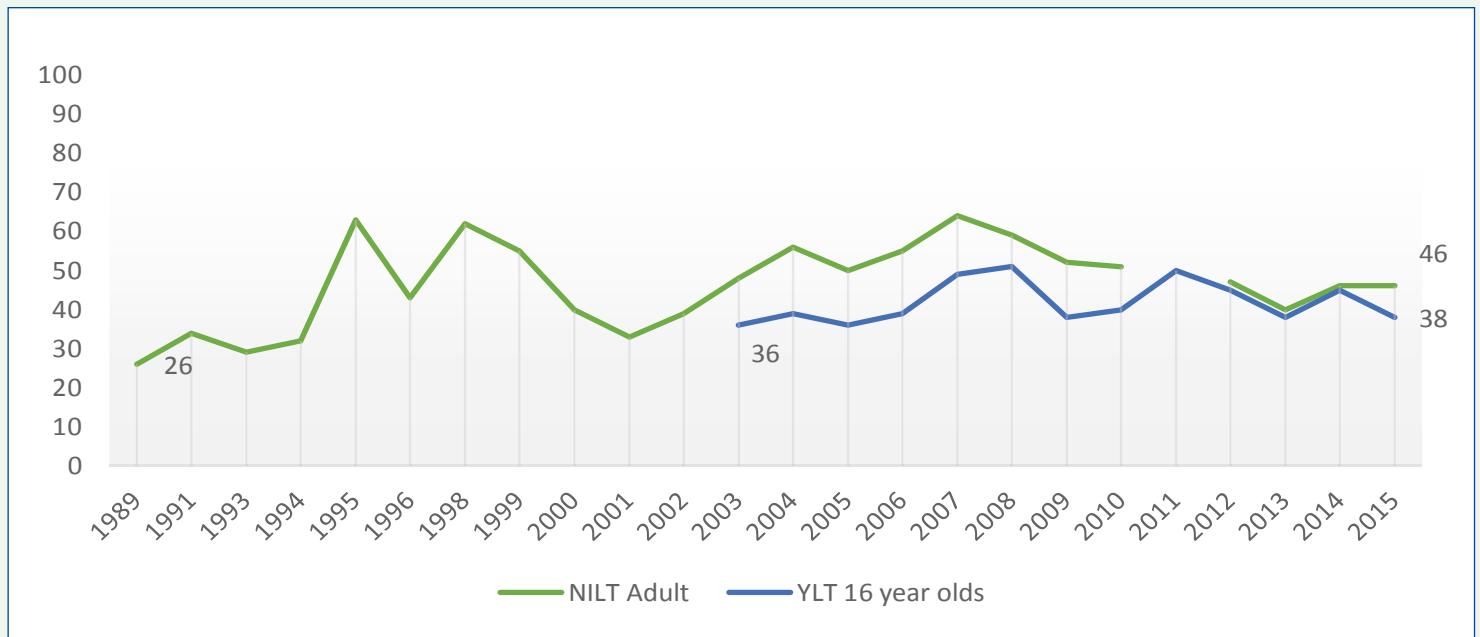


Sources: NISAS (1989-2000); NILT (2001-2015); YLT (2003-2015)

Note on missing data: In 2011 NILT was not conducted due to lack of funding

1 www.ark.ac.uk/sol/surveys/community_relations/time_series/CRencyperceptions.htm

Figure 2: Proportions of adults (NISAS, NILT) and 16 year olds (YLT) believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics will be BETTER in 5 years' time (%)



Sources: NISAS (1989-2000); NILT (2001-2015); YLT (2003-2015)

Note on missing data: In 2011 NILT was not conducted due to lack of funding

Figure 2 shows the time series data of perceptions that adults and 16 year olds had about the future of community relations. Both figures are very similar to each other which suggests that anticipation of future relations is a good indication for what current relations are like.

Yearly changes are sensitive to political events occurring during the time survey fieldwork is being carried out. However, continuously monitoring attitudes also reveals the progress made in a long-term political process, as substantial incidents and events lose their significance over time and general trends become more visible. This is where the Life and Times data comes into its own and has its real value.

Figures 1 and 2 show that over time optimism about community relations has significantly increased among adults. Whilst only 22 percent of adults in 1989 thought that community relations were better than 5 years ago, this proportion was more than twice that (52%) in 2015. Although this represents a decrease from the high point in 2007 (64%), adults are now much more optimistic about community

relations than they were in the late 1980s before the peace process started. However, if we were to draw a trend line in Figure 1 from 1998, the year when the Belfast Good Friday Agreement was signed, to 2015, this line would be almost perfectly horizontal, as the proportion of respondents who felt relations are better now than 5 years ago are virtually the same in 2015 as they were in 1998. This suggests that whilst the level of optimism with regard to community relations has gone up and down throughout the peace process, the long-term trend since the process started is stability rather than change.

Unsurprisingly, attitudes to future relations were also most positive when the first cease fire was declared and when the Belfast Good Friday Agreement was signed, as Figure 2 shows. Again, optimism about future relations was at a low point in 2001 when the devolved institutions collapsed. Time series analysis shows a significant increase in optimism about future community relations since 1989, however, taking 1998 as a starting point, when 62 percent of adults felt relations would be better in 5 years' time, the trend is actually downwards with the current endpoint of

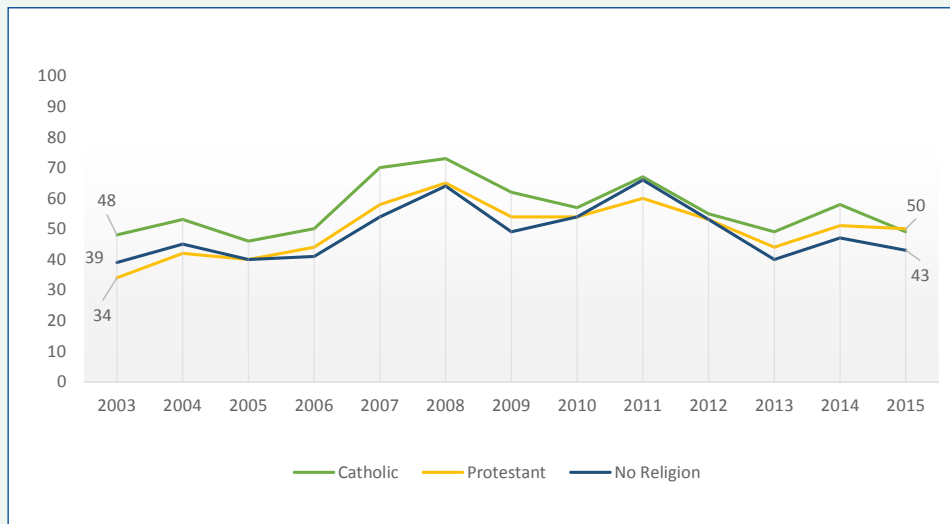
just 46 percent of adults in 2015 saying that they think community relations will be better in 5 years' time.

Young people's attitudes

Plotting the attitudes of 16 year olds against those of the adults makes for some interesting reading. In almost all years since 2003 when YLT started to collect the views of 16-year olds, young people's attitudes to community relations were more negative than those of their adult counterparts. Figures 1 and 2 show that 16-year olds' perceptions were markedly less positive than those of adults with regard to perceptions about future relations. In some years (2005, 2006 and 2009), there was a 14 percentage point gap between adults and 16-year olds in relation to their optimism about better community relations in the next five years. However, Figures 1 and 2 also show that in the last three years, attitudes have become more similar, and from 2012 to 2014 the level of optimism among adults and 16 year olds was basically the same.

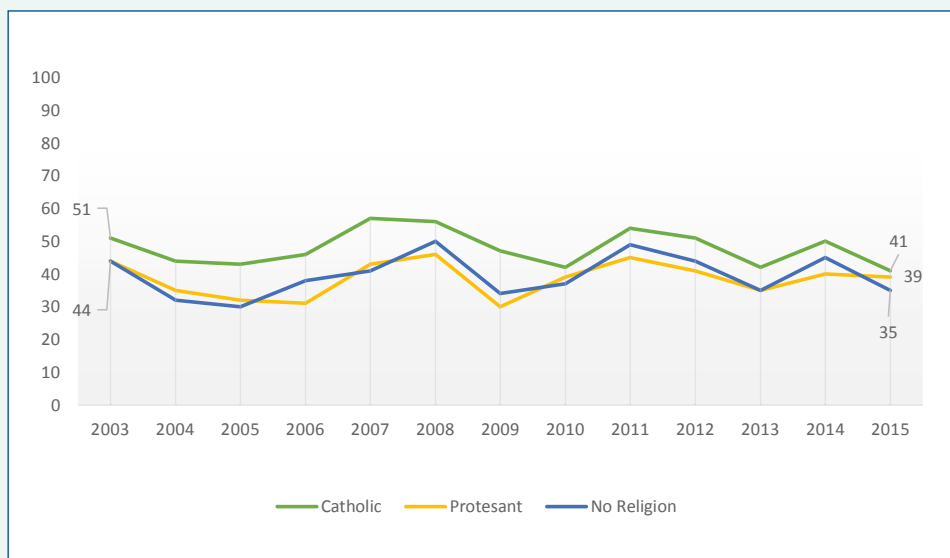
Figures 3 and 4 compare the attitudes to community relations among 16-year olds over time in relation to respondents'

Figure 3: YLT respondents saying relations between Protestants and Catholics are BETTER now than five years ago by religious background (%)



Source: YLT (2003-2015)

Figure 4: YLT respondents saying that relationships between Protestants and Catholics will be BETTER in five years' times. By religious background (%)



Source: YLT (2003-2015)

religious backgrounds. The figures evidence that when the time series started, 16-year olds from Protestant backgrounds were statistically significantly less likely than their Catholic counterparts to say that community relations are better now than 5 years ago and will be better again in 5 years' time. There is extensive academic discussion surrounding the reasons for this which will not be repeated here, however it is suffice to say that there is general agreement that many members of the Protestant community felt that too many concessions were given to Catholics

during the Peace Process (see for example Evans and O'Leary, 2000; Hayes and McAllister, 2001; Mac Ginty and Du Toit 2007; Patterson, 2012; Southern, 2007), especially prior to the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, namely IRA weapons.

Figures 3 and 4 show that the views of Catholic and Protestant 16-year olds have become more similar over time. Whereas the proportion of 16-year old Catholics who felt that relations were better now than 5 years ago were basically identical

in 2003 and 2015, their Protestant counterparts were much more likely in 2015 (50%) than in 2003 (34%) to say that relations were better than 5 years ago.

Perhaps it is more important to note that the proportion of 16-year olds who felt that community relations are worse now, or will be worse in 5 years' time, has decreased as Figure 5 shows. In 2015 only about one in ten respondents (9%) thought that relations were worse than they were 5 years ago, and an even smaller proportion (6%) felt that relations would be better in five years' time. This was much reduced from the 17 percent and 15 percent respectively who gave these responses in 2003. Again, Figure 5 shows the impact of notable political events and incidents on the opinions and perceptions of young people, as the higher level of scepticism around the times of the flag protests in 2013 demonstrates.

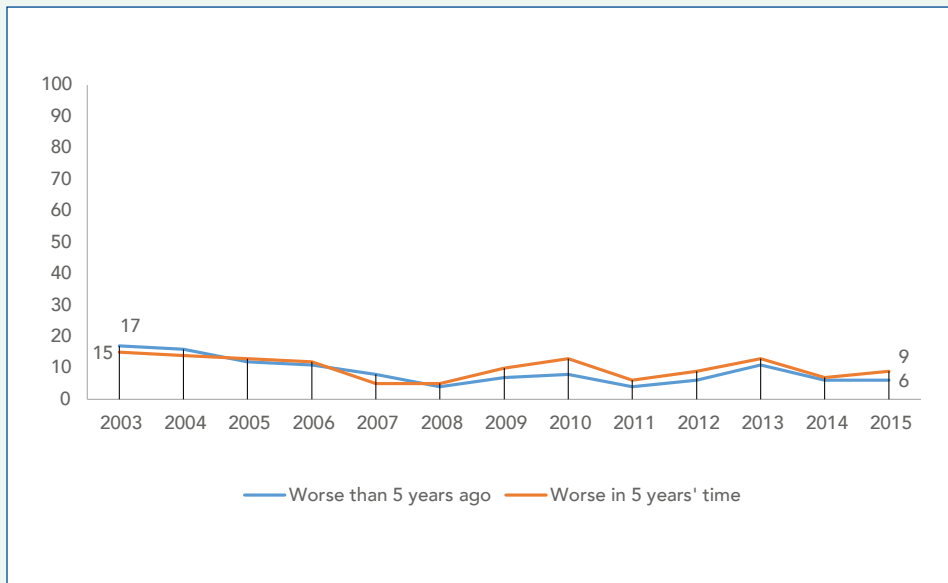
Over time, the proportion of 16-year olds who think that religion will always make a difference to how people in Northern Ireland think about each other has also decreased (Figure 6), but this decrease is modest and it has more or less stalled since 2006. Thus over three quarters of young people (78%) believe that religion will affect people's attitudes to each other for years to come.

Despite this perception of the continued relevance of religion for community relations in Northern Ireland, young people feel they have a role to play in bringing the two communities together. Half of 16-year olds agreed or strongly agreed that they are already making a positive contribution to bringing the two communities together whilst 84 percent felt they potentially can make a contribution.

Preferences for mixing and integration

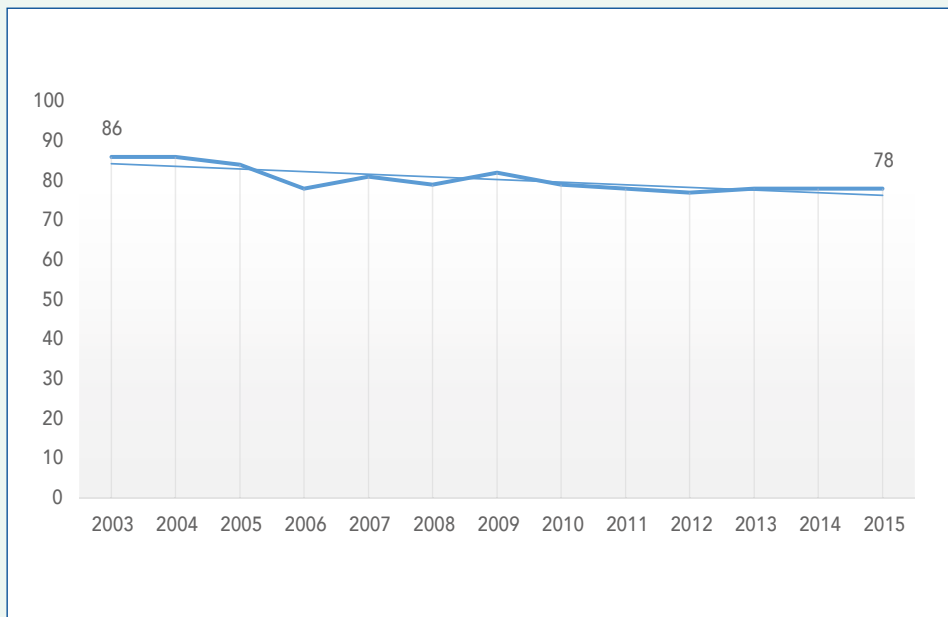
Preferences for mixed religion environments are another important aspect of ARK's time series research. There is an ongoing debate amongst academics, policy-makers, and the public as to whether mixed religion environments are conducive to a society coming out of conflict or whether there

Figure 5: YLT respondents saying that relationships between Protestants and Catholics are WORSE now or will be WORSE in five years' times (%)



Source: YLT (2003-2015)

Figure 6: Respondents saying religion will always make a difference to how people feel about each other in Northern Ireland (%)



Source: YLT (2003-2015)

is room for single-identity environments, and if so, what impact these have on the relationships between communities. However, duplication of public services and spaces is financially unsustainable, so it is important to make sure that public spaces, such as schools, parks, leisure centres and libraries are run and experienced as shared spaces that people

from different backgrounds feel happy and safe to use.

As Figure 8 shows, the proportion of adults and young people who think that neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools should be mixed religion has generally remained stable since data collection began in 2003. We can see that across all

three domains, 16-year olds tend to be slightly less in favour of religious mixing than adults. However, we can also see that whilst adults' views have hardly changed over time, 16-year olds in 2015 were slightly more favourable towards religious mixing in neighbourhoods and schools (62% and 54% expressing this preference) than their counterparts in 2003 (53% and 48% respectively). In fact, in relation to schools, in 2015, YLT respondents were for the first time just as favourably disposed to religious mixing as adults, whilst in the other two domains adults remain more in favour of mixing than 16-year olds although the gap in attitudes has been narrowing.

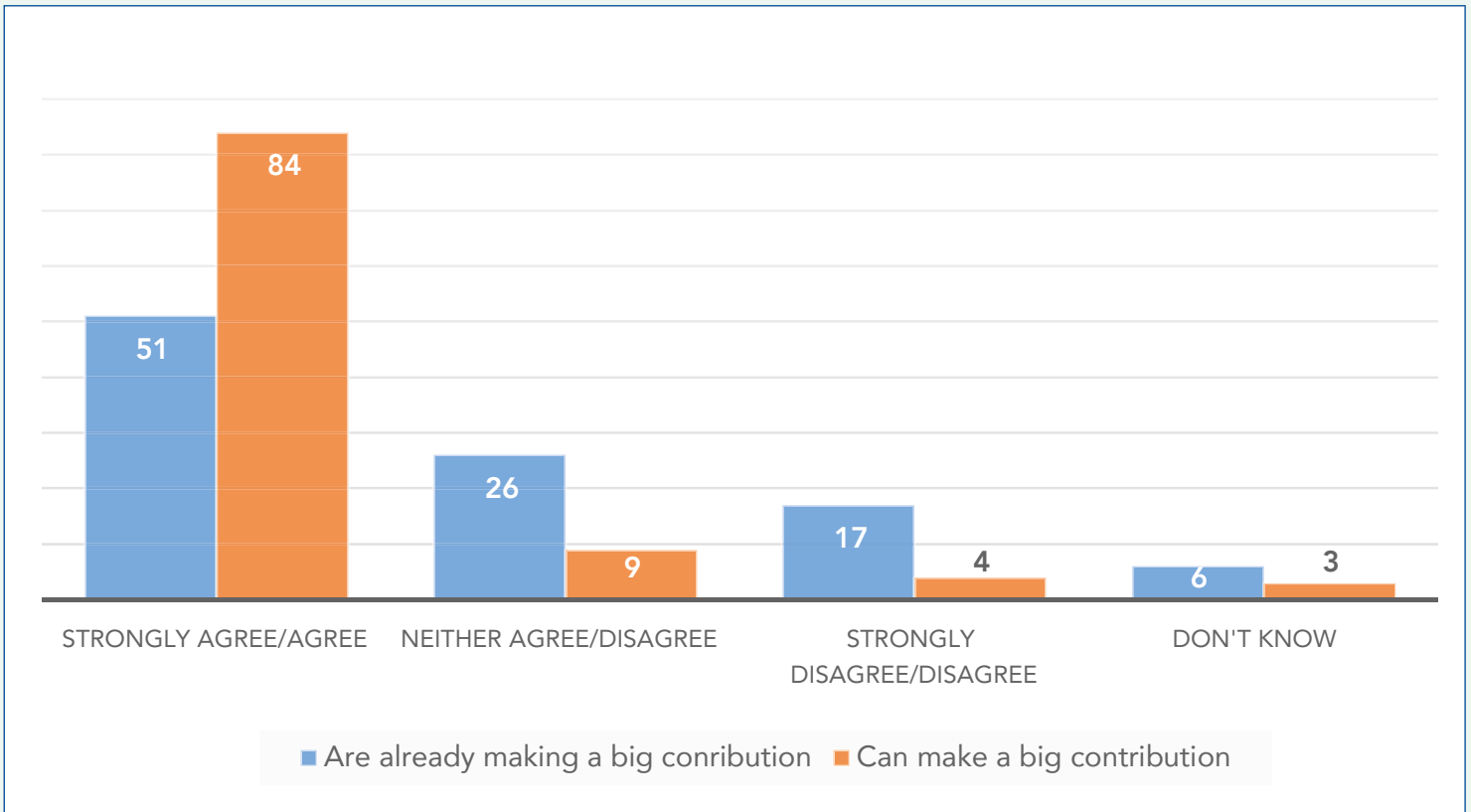
However the main message from the attitude data here is in particular in relation to schooling and neighbourhoods, that much larger proportions of adults and young people prefer religiously mixed settings than experience these in their lives. Over nine in ten respondents continue to live largely segregated neighbourhoods and attend largely segregated schools whilst seven in ten adults and six in ten 16-year olds would prefer religiously mixed neighbourhoods, and over half of adults and 16-year olds prefer mixed religion schools.

Shared spaces

Table 1 shows that the majority of adults and young people regard many public places in their neighbourhoods as definitely shared and open. If we combine those respondents who felt these spaces were 'definitely' shared and open with those who said that this was 'probably' the case, around nine in ten respondents agree with this view. The only notable difference between adults and 16-year olds is that 91 percent of adults, but only 84 percent of young people regard local parks as definitely or probably shared and open spaces.

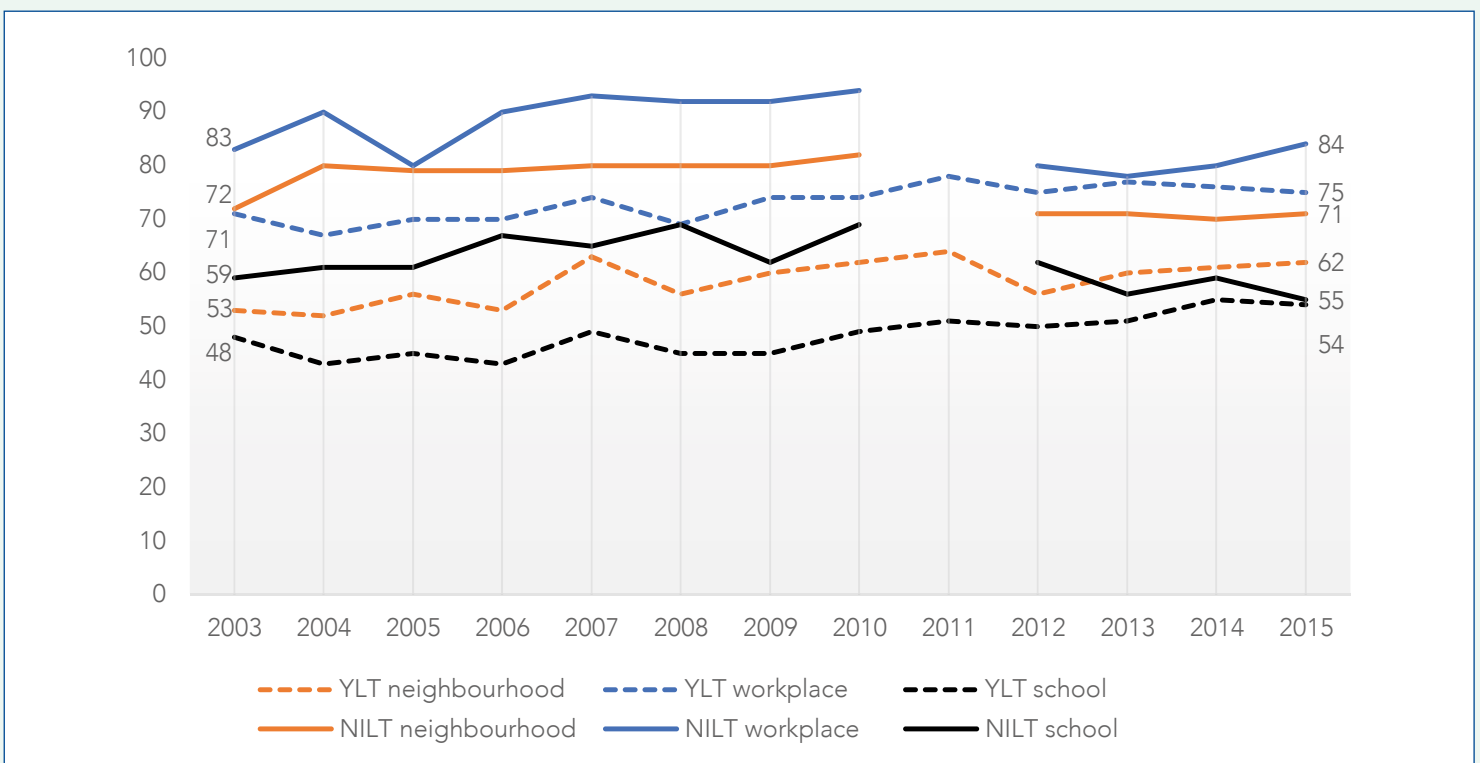
Protestant 16-year olds were generally more likely than their Catholic counterparts to say that these places in their neighbourhoods were definitely shared and open, and these differences were statistically significant for parks, leisure centres and libraries. Further detailed analysis shows that it is Catholic 16-year

Figure 7: Perceived current and potential contribution of young people to bringing the two main communities together (%)



Source: 2015 YLT survey

Figure 8: Proportion of adults and 16-year olds who express a preference for mixed-religious environments



Sources: NILT (2003-2015); YLT (2003-2015)

Note on missing data: In 2011 NILT was not conducted due to lack of funding

Table 1: Proportion of respondents who regard the following spaces as shared and open between Catholics and Protestants

	%			
	NILT		YLT	
	Definitely	Probably	Definitely	Probably
Leisure Centres	69	20	70	20
Parks	69	22	61	23
Libraries	73	20	70	20
Shops	76	19	71	23

Sources: 2015 NILT and YLT surveys

Table 2: Level of contact with people from different religious and ethnic communities

	%		
	2003	2006	2015
No friends from the other religious community	69	20	20
Never socialises with people from other religious communities	73	20	20
All friends from same ethnic community	76	19	23

Sources: 2015 NILT and YLT surveys

olds in mainly Catholic residential areas which are least likely to say that public places are definitely shared and open in their neighbourhoods. (In 2015, about half of Catholics (52%) and Protestants (54%) said they lived in areas with people of mainly their own religion.) 56 percent of Catholic YLT respondents who live in mainly Catholic neighbourhoods said that parks in their neighbourhood were definitely shared and open compared to 69 percent of Catholics who lived in mainly Protestant areas. For leisure centres these figures were 61 percent and 75 percent respectively. The reason for the differences in perceptions among young Catholics and Protestants may be due to self-reflection of those Catholics living in single identity areas that the facilities in their own areas, especially parks and leisure centres are probably not shared with Protestants. Nolan (2013: 119) had reported an increasing self-desegregation in residential areas, but he

said that this was almost exclusively self-desegregation in one direction, namely an increasing proportion of Catholics living in predominantly Protestant residential areas. The YLT data suggests that these Catholics experience the facilities in these areas as largely shared.

Contact and Mixing and Community Relations

Sharing facilities and spaces, and higher levels of contact and mixing are regarded to be crucial factors for improved community relations. A previous analysis of YLT data (Schubotz and Robinson, 2006) showed that integrated education and participation in cross-community projects are indeed related to more positive attitudes to community relations and a more favourable disposition towards further mixing. Since then Shared Education was initiated and the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) was

passed recently in 2016. The Executive Office has also committed significant financial resources to the Together: Building a United Community Initiative (T:BUC), which includes resources for cross-community summer schemes.

ARK has monitored attitudes and experiences to shared education and religious mixing among young people since 2012, and this section analyses how experiences of integrated and shared education as well as religious mixing are related to attitudes to preferences of mixing and optimism in relation to community relations.

Table 2 details the level of contact between young people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. The Table shows that the proportion of 16-year olds who said they have no friend from the other religious community has decreased by about two thirds, and the proportion of those who never socialise with someone from the other religious community has halved since 2003. Furthermore, in 2003 around half of YLT respondents said all of their friends were from the same ethnic background as them. This figure had decreased to one quarter in 2015, so there can be no doubt that inter-religious and inter-ethnic contact has increased.

But how does increased contact relate to attitudes?

Table 3 indicates that the attitudes of Protestant 16-year olds are disproportionately affected by experiences of mixing and formal integration in schools. For example 61 percent of Protestant 16-year olds who had participated in Shared Education projects felt favourable towards Catholics compared to just 48 percent of Protestants who had not participated in these projects. The attendance of formally integrated schools specifically, or schools which had generally a mixed religious intake, also had a significantly positive effect on the attitudes of young Protestants to young Catholics. These positive effects of mixing and integration on attitudes towards people of different religious backgrounds are still discernible for young Catholics, as Table 3 shows, though these effects are significantly weaker. This suggests

Table 3: Feelings towards other main religious community by participation in Shared Education projects and religious mixing in school.

	%		
	Feelings towards other religious community		
	Favourable	Neither favourable nor unfavourable	Unfavourable
Catholics			
Took part in Shared Education project	52	41	4
Did not take part in Shared Education project	49	43	6
Attended formally integrated school	54	36	11
Did not attend formally integrated school	50	43	4
Did attend religiously mixed school	58	34	5
Did attend single identity school	50	42	5
Protestants			
Took part in Shared Education project	61	29	5
Did not take part in Shared Education project	48	41	8
Did attend formally integrated school	62	28	7
Did not attend formally integrated school	53	37	6
Did attend religiously mixed school	66	27	2
Did attend single identity school	48	37	10

Source: 2015 YLT survey

that Catholic 16-year olds are likely to hold positive views towards Protestants regardless of their educational setting, whereas the attitudes of 16-year old Protestants towards Catholics are significantly improved if they experience formal integration and religious mixing. Our previous Research Update (Schubotz and Robinson, 2006) had reported similar findings.

Conclusions

Recent discussions about attitudes to community relations and sharing have increasingly raised concerns about the views of young people. Although some young people express very strongly the opinion that it is the older generations' responsibility and duty to adopt and pass on less sectarian messages, which apparently were alien to the younger generation and their ambitions, the Life and Times data had consistently shown

that it is in fact the 16-year olds who harbour more negative views. There are different explanations for this. One reason which has been put forward is that young people growing up in post-conflict Northern Ireland have a different baseline from which they assess community relations. Although elements of the conflict, including a level of paramilitary control, still exist, in particular in those working class areas which have been affected most by sectarian violence, most 16-year olds have grown up without the experience of violent and sectarian conflict. So perhaps it is understandable that the adults are more sensitive to positive change in community relations than young people are. However, the gap between the views of adults and young people has been decreasing which perhaps is an indication for a reasonably stable peace process that is increasingly experienced similarly by adults and young people.

The majority of both adults and young people express positive attitudes towards mixing and integration, and again the gap in attitudes between adults and young people appears to be closing slowly over time. With a further stabilisation of the Peace Process, it can be expected that the changes in attitudes will be more difficult to measure. Predictably an increasing proportion of respondents among adults and young people will say that relations are about the same. Perhaps it is therefore more useful to monitor the proportion of people who think relations are getting worse, as this could be best indicator for increasing or decreasing dissatisfaction.

The data presented in the second part of this Update show very clearly that there is very little evidence to suggest that efforts to continue with programmes that encourage formal mixing or integration should be compromised. Increasing contact is strongly related to

more positive attitudes towards each other. This is particularly the case for young Protestants, and perhaps it is this increasing level of contact and integration which has led to the more positive views about community relations that particularly young Protestants hold now compared to 2003 when we started with our data collection. There is an increase of the number of Catholics who now live in what used to be traditionally Protestant residential areas. Our data show that they largely experience spaces as shared in these neighbourhoods. The flip-side of

the demographic shift in Northern Ireland is that increasingly it is only Catholics who experience segregated living and segregated schooling. The number of Catholics attending *de-facto* Protestant state-controlled schools has increased over the last two decades, whereas, with a few exceptions, the majority of Catholic Maintained schools are still attended almost exclusively by Catholic pupils.

This highlights the importance of integrated and shared education initiatives, as for many Catholic young

people who live in predominantly Catholic areas and attend Catholic schools, these initiatives provide valuable opportunities to mix and form friendships with their counter parts from Protestant, other or no religious backgrounds.

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Key points

- Two decades after the peace process began, over three quarters of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland continue to believe that religion will always affect people's attitudes towards each other.
- Adults (NILT respondents) have more positive views towards community relations than 16-year olds (YL respondents) although this gap has been slowly closing over time.
- Most adults and 16-year olds regard many public spaces (such as libraries, shops and parks) as definitely shared and open between Catholics and Protestants.
- The proportion of 16-year olds socialising with people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds has significantly increased since the first YLT survey took place in 2003.
- 16-year olds' attitudes to members of the other main religious community are positively related to experiences of religious mixing and formal integration in schools.
- Over eight in ten 16-year olds believe that young people can make a big contribution to bringing the two communities together.

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