



## Shared and safe? An update on Good Relations policy and public attitudes



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The *Together: Building a United Community* (or *United Communities*) Strategy was published by the Northern Ireland Executive in May 2013, and reflects a commitment to improving community relations and strategies for so doing (OFMDFM, 2013). Four key priorities are highlighted: shared community, safe community, cultural expression, and children and young people. For each of these priorities, there is a shared aim which is to be implemented across a range of government departments, statutory agencies and community partners. This Research Update reports on public attitudes as they relate to the first two of the *United Communities* key priorities: a shared community and a safe community. In particular, it draws on data from the **Northern Ireland Life and Times** (NILT) survey, which, since 1998, has been recording public attitudes to key social issues.

### Broad trends over time

Since 2005, NILT has included a number of questions that monitor progress towards certain government targets and two statements that respondents were asked to assess are relevant here:

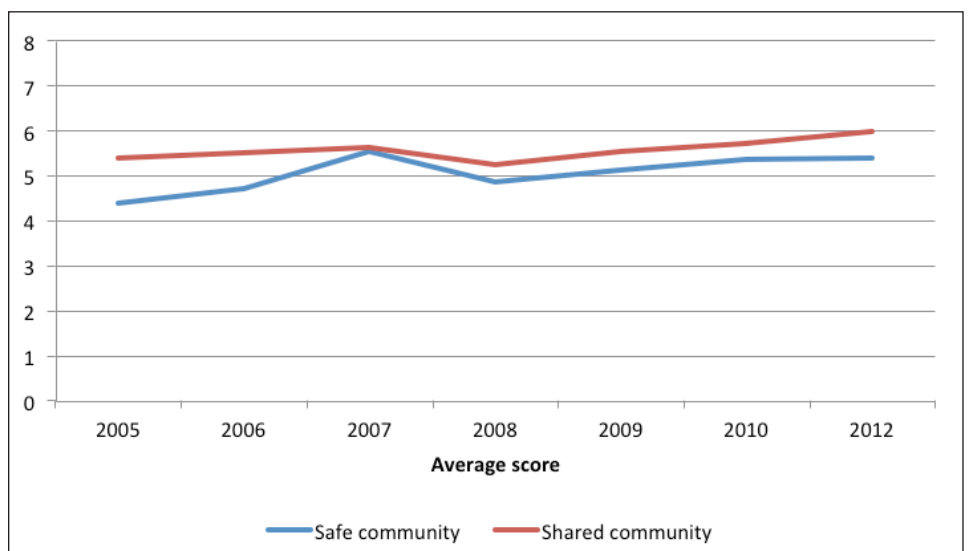
- *Towns and city centres in Northern Ireland are safe and welcoming places for people of all walks of life* (relevant to 'our safe community')

- *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 statements respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 whether they thought that the target had been achieved (regardless of whether they themselves agreed 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 average score of all respondents is the easiest way to identify patterns over time.

For the 'safe community' target, Figure 1 shows that there has been a slight rise in average scores over the years (from 4.40 in 2005 to 5.41 in 2012), meaning that people have perceived some movement towards this target. A similar upward pattern is evident in relation to the target pertinent to 'a shared community', although the increase over the years is smaller. 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. It is clear that 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

Figure 1: Average score for 'Safe' and 'Shared' communities over time



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

community' target relates solely to towns and city centres. This is also emphasised within the United Communities document (3.10, p.55), 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.

## Our Shared Community

The aim of this United Communities 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 United Communities and other policies is the inclusion of stated measurable objectives which will 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. 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% or more from one community) decreasing from 55 per cent in 2001 to 37 per cent in 2011 (Nolan, 2013). Thus, shared communities, at least in terms of residential segregation, are becoming more widespread. But do people feel that their own communities are 'shared' or 'divided'?

The 2012 NILT survey asked respondents this question directly:

*In some areas the communities are divided and Protestants and Catholics tend to go to different local shops or use different GP surgeries and other services. Thinking about*

*this area, would you say that this happens a lot, a little or not at all?*

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 respondents did *not* think that their community was divided and only one in ten thought that their community was divided 'a lot'.

Table 1: Perception of own community as 'divided'

	Catholic	Protestant	All
A lot	14	12	12
A little	22	21	21
Not at all	55	60	57
Don't know	9	8	9

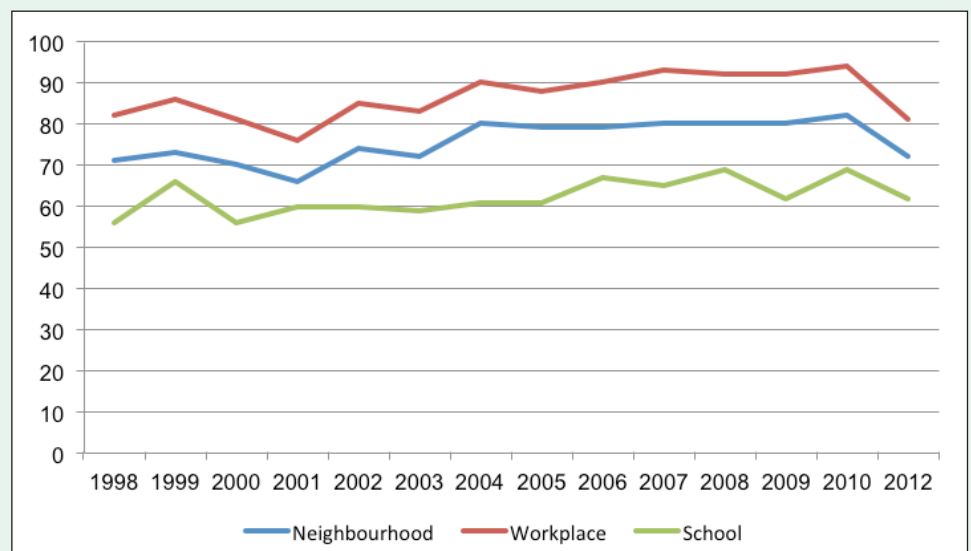
Respondents were then asked if four specific local facilities were 'shared and open' to both Protestants and Catholics. While the majority thought that leisure centres (84%), parks (85%) and libraries (90%) were, a much smaller proportion thought this in relation to pubs (55%), perhaps reflecting public ownership and use of the first three facilities.

Looking at NILT results over time it has always been the case that most people

will express a preference for living in mixed religion neighbourhoods (and the United Communities document cites NILT data from 2010, showing that 82% of respondents stated that they would prefer to live in a mixed neighbourhood). This is in contrast with only 16 per cent of respondents who identified 'it's a mixed' area as being one of the reasons why they had decided to live in their neighbourhood. Figure 2 illustrates an overall upward trend in the preference for mixed neighbourhoods over time

but also shows that this figure fell quite sharply to 72 per cent in 2012. The United Communities 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 (3.10, p.55). Figure 2 also shows that since the survey began, respondents have been most supportive of mixed-religion workplaces, and least supportive of

Figure 2: Support for mixed-religion settings (% saying 'mixed-religion')



mixed-religion schools. However the chart also shows 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 mixing.

## Our Safe Community

The aim stated within United Communities is to create a community where everyone feels safe in moving around and where life choices are not inhibited by fears around safety. The 2012 NILT survey asked respondents why they had chosen to live in their neighbourhood and why they chose the school that their children attended. Nearly two out of five respondents (39%) said that the reason why they lived in their neighbourhood was because 'it's a safe area'. This contrasts with only 16 per cent who 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 or a 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.

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.

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 per cent 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 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

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

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

## Discussion

This Research Update 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 would say 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. The most recent Census data suggest that residential segregation has decreased since 2001, with the proportion of single-identity wards falling from 55 per cent in 2001 to 37 per cent in 2011 (Nolan, 2013). 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 per cent to 52 per cent, 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 previously. While 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 per cent in 2012. It is within this more pessimistic context, then, that driving forward the United Communities consultation and agenda will face many challenges.

## References

Nolan, Paul (2013) *The Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report. Number two*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (2013) *Together: Building a United Community*. Available online at: [www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/together\\_building\\_a\\_united\\_community.pdf](http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/together_building_a_united_community.pdf).

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## Key points

- Public perceptions that the government is reaching its targets of safe and shared communities have increased modestly between 2005 and 2012.
- Approximately 6 in 10 respondents did not feel that their community was 'divided'.
- A strong majority of respondents continue to express a preference for living in mixed-religion neighbourhood over the years, though this dropped to 72% in 2012.
- Only 16% of respondents identified 'it's a mixed area' as being one of the reasons why they had decided to live in their neighbourhood.
- Nearly two out of five respondents (39%) said that the reason why they lived in their neighbourhood was because 'it's a safe area'.
- Just under one half of Catholic respondents would feel safe going to an event in a nearby town that was to be held in an Orange Hall, and a similar proportion of Protestant respondents said that they would feel safe in a GAA club.
- If they were applying for a job, 24% of Catholics would avoid workplaces situated in a mainly Protestant area and 21% of Protestants would avoid workplaces situated in a mainly Catholic area.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** (NILT) is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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