

20 years of good relations policy and attitudes

Paula Devine and Gillian Robinson

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey** was set up in response to the new political landscape of Northern Ireland after the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998. Over the years, NILT has provided a record of what people think about key issues affecting their lives during periods of conflict, peace-building, devolution and political stalemate. A particular focus has been the monitoring of public attitudes to equality issues and relations between the two main religious communities. Since it began, NILT has included nearly 300 questions focusing on community relations. By asking some of the same questions in every survey year, we have a very important time series of attitudes over 20 years. (NILT did not run in 2011, due to difficulties in getting the funding in place in time to run the survey). However, surveys and public attitudes do not happen in a vacuum, and they are influenced by, and reflect, government policies.

Since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, numerous strategies to promote and embed good community relations have been introduced. Whilst initially targeting the Protestant and Catholic communities, these strategies have become more inclusive as Northern Irish society has become more diverse. Indeed, 'community relations' is now more regularly referred to as 'good relations', reflecting the increased diversity of the population and associated policy change. This Research Update explores NILT data on community and good relations in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years, within the context of contemporary government policy.

The Agreement

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement focused on equality, reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust. Between 2001 and 2016, NILT respondents were presented with a list of groups, and asked

to identify which they felt were generally treated unfairly when compared with others. Table 1 presents data from a selection of survey years, and shows how perceptions of inequality, and the groups affected by it, have changed over time. In 2001, for example, the data suggest that there was little awareness of groups were treated unfairly in Northern Ireland – the maximum figure was 23 per cent, relating to people with disabilities. However, by 2004, there had been a rise in the perception of unfair treatment, especially in relation to lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people (from 18% to 36%), and those from other ethnic minorities (from 10% to 45%). This is likely to reflect contemporary events, such as the debates leading to the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act, and immigration into Northern Ireland following the expansion of the European Union, both of which happened in 2004. The list of groups presented to respondents has been expanded twice: 'children' was

Table 1: Groups of people perceived to be treated unfairly compared with others

	%					
	2001	2004	2008	2012	2016	Change 2001 to 2016
Catholic	8	8	5	9	10	+2
Protestant	11	9	5	9	9	-2
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual	18	36	33	40	50	+32
Disabled	23	35	28	27	36	+13
Older people	21	32	25	24	31	+10
Travellers	22	33	36	35	45	+23
Other ethnic minorities	10	45	34	25	38	+28
Women	4	5	5	7	11	+7
Men	1	3	2	4	5	+4
Children	-	-	4	5	9	+5
Transgender	-	-	-	34	48	+14

added in 2005, and ‘transgender’ in 2012. In 2016, three groups were identified by nearly one half of respondents as being treated unfairly: LGB people, transgender people, and Travellers. Only a minority of respondents each year identified Catholics or Protestants, except in 2013 (14% in relation to Catholics and 15% in relation to Protestants). This spike may have been affected by disputes about the flying of the union flag over Belfast City Hall.

Shared Future

The policy plan *A Shared Future: Improving Relations in Northern Ireland* was published in 2005. This policy framework, which was initiated by the direct-rule government, emphasised the goal of improving relationships between and within communities in Northern Ireland. Two questions have been asked since 1998; one asks if respondents feel that community relations have improved, or not, in the preceding five years, while the other asks respondents if they feel community relations are likely to improve, or not, in the future five years. These questions have become key indicators in monitoring and evaluating government policy.

In 1998, one half of NILT respondents (50%) felt that relations between Protestants and Catholics were better than in the preceding five years, and a similar proportion thought this in 2017 (49%). In 1998, a narrow majority of respondents (62%) were positive about community relations in the next five years, although this had fallen to 43 per cent by 2017.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in a society transitioning from over 30 years of conflict, the development of positive relationships has been neither steady nor consistent. As Figure 1 shows, there are peaks and troughs reflecting the impact, positive and negative, of contemporary events. While the positivity associated with the restoration of devolution in 2007 is clearly evident, so too is the influence of more negative events on respondents’ perceptions. In 2001, relations between

the two communities were very strained during the Holy Cross School dispute where sectarian protests, which were often violent, prevented children walking to school; in 2012 and 2013 significant civil unrest and rioting occurred in response to restrictions on the flying of the Union Flag from Belfast City Hall; and in January 2017, devolved government in Northern Ireland collapsed and, at the time of writing, has not been restored.

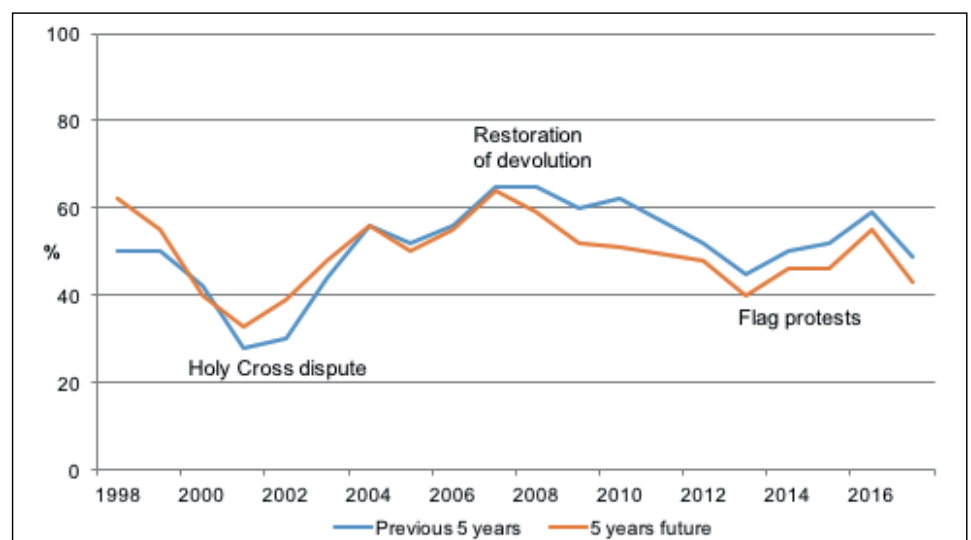
It is important to highlight that each year only a small proportion of respondents feel that community relations are worse when compared to five years before: no more than 12 per cent each year think this, while at least 30 per cent think there has been no change. One notable exception, however, was in 2002, when nearly one quarter of respondents (23%) thought that community relations had deteriorated over the previous five years. It is very likely that the long running nature of the Holy Cross dispute and the publicity it gained in national and local media contributed to this increased negativity. Similarly, 12 per cent of respondents in that year thought that community relations would be worse in five years’ time, which is the highest figure over the 20 years that the survey has been running.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

Political stalemate meant that the Shared Future framework was never endorsed. After the restoration of devolution in May 2007, the Northern Ireland Executive made a public commitment to develop a new strategy for community relations in Northern Ireland. However, it took until July 2010 for the policy framework *A Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* to be released for public consultation. This new strategy sparked considerable discussion and criticism at both political and community levels (Devine, Kelly and Robinson, 2011). One key objection was that it lacked a sense of urgency or priority and reinforced the *status quo* of a divided society.

The NILT data presented in Figure 2 clearly suggest that over the past 20 years there has been majority support for mixed-religion environments. In particular, respondents have been most supportive of mixed-religion workplaces, and least supportive of mixed-religion schools. Figure 2 shows a slight increase since 1998 in the proportion expressing a preference for these mixed environments

Figure 1: Proportions of respondents believing that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better now than 5 years ago, and in five years’ time



(Note: the survey did not run in 2011)

(7 percentage points in relation to neighbourhood, 8 percentage points for workplace, and 12 percentage points for school). Nevertheless, despite the overall positive trend, there was a drop in 2012 and 2013, perhaps reflecting the tensions around the flag protests.

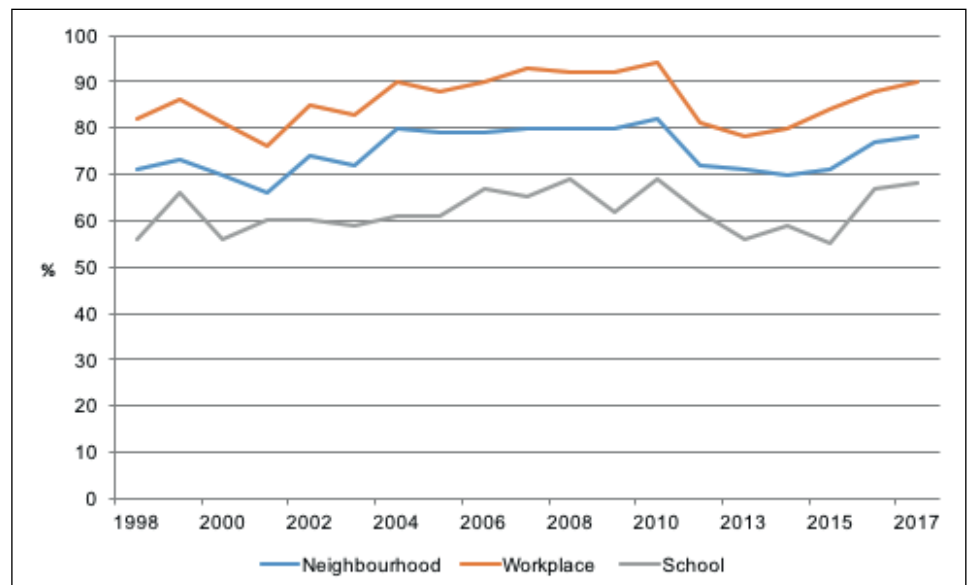
Notwithstanding the NILT data indicating a preference for mixed-religion schools, only 7 per cent of children currently attend an integrated school in Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2017). Perhaps there is a chicken and egg situation at play here; data from the 1999 NILT survey suggests that the key reason that parents did not send their children to an integrated school was that there were no integrated schools nearby (Gallagher and Smith, 2002).

Together: Building a United Community

2013 saw the publication of the *Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC)* strategy, which highlighted four key priorities: shared community, safe community, cultural expression, and children and young people. Each of these priorities has a shared aim to be implemented across a range of government departments, statutory agencies and community partners.

Since 2012, NILT respondents have been 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: GAA club (Gaelic Sports club), Orange Hall, Catholic Secondary School, and Protestant Secondary School. As evident from Table 2, each location was deemed to be very or quite safe by the majority of respondents, with secondary schools being seen as particularly safe. In 2012, respondents were most apprehensive about attending an event in an Orange Hall, with 15 per cent saying that they would feel unsafe there. By 2017, feelings of safety had risen in relation to all locations. Across all survey years there were differences according to the religion

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



(Note: the survey did not run in 2011)

of the respondents. For example, in 2017, just over one half of Catholic respondents (57%) compared with 88 per cent of Protestant respondents would feel safe in an Orange Hall. The reverse pattern is evident in relation to a GAA club (91% and 62% respectively).

Flags

While T:BUC was designed to facilitate a more united and shared society, it omits explicitly the controversial issues of flags, marches, the Parades Commission, and dealing with the past. There are separate mechanisms to deal with these issues, including The Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) which was appointed in 2016.

Table 2: Feeling of safety in locations in nearby town

	% saying 'very' or 'quite' safe	
	2012	2017
GAA club	67	74
Orange Hall	62	72
Catholic Secondary School	81	92
Protestant Secondary School	82	91

Murals, kerb paintings and flags are often seen as markers of identity which are positively supported by individuals and communities. At the same time, these markers can provoke negative feelings. The NILT data indicate that flags are controversial in Northern Ireland (Robinson and Devine, 2017). Figure 3 suggests that while most respondents have not felt intimidated by republican and loyalist murals, kerb painting or flags in the previous year, these markers of identity were more likely to have caused annoyance. There is an overall downward trend in the levels of intimidation and annoyance since 1998. Nevertheless, Figure 3 indicates a spike in feelings of intimidation and annoyance with loyalist markers in 2013, and a rise in the levels of annoyance for both loyalist and republican markers since 2015.

Conclusion

This Update builds on previous time-series analysis, such as that by Morrow, Robinson and Dowds (2013), and Hughes, Donnelly, Robinson and Dowds (2003). Analysis of 20 years of NILT data shows increased support for mixed-religion neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools. At the same time, however, there has been a drop in the proportion of respondents thinking that relations

between Protestants and Catholics will improve in five years' time. Importantly, these changes are not consistent, and are greatly affected by contemporary events (both positive and negative). The survey provides an important barometer of social attitudes, as well as a marker of which issues are significant at particular times. Some concerns are as prominent now as they were when the survey began in 1998, whilst others, such as bonfires, or rights for transgender people, have come to public prominence in recent years. To date, the NILT survey data have provided vital evidence of public attitudes over an important phase of Northern Ireland's history, and will continue to do so.

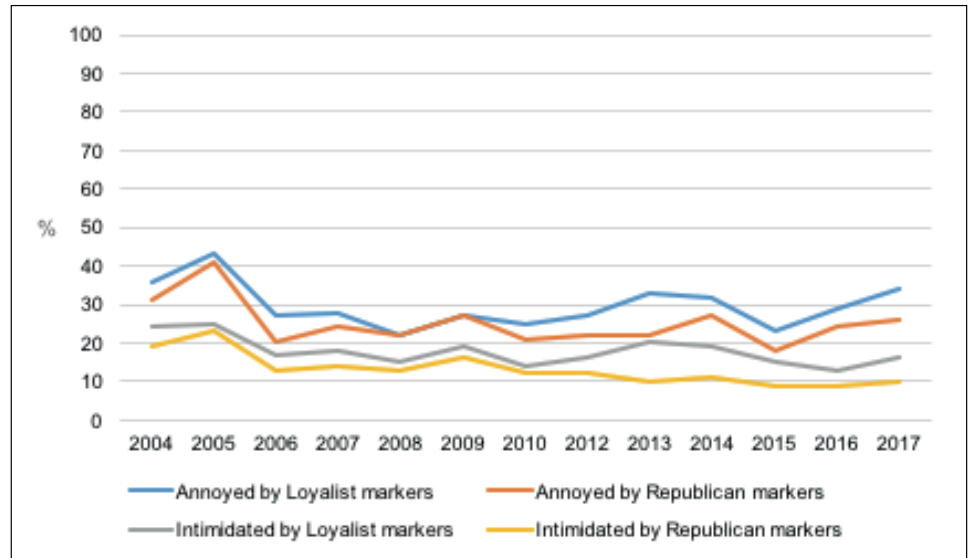
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Figure 3: Reaction to markers in previous year, 2004-2017



(Note: the survey did not run in 2011)

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Paula Devine is Co-director of ARK, and coordinates the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. She is based in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

Gillian Robinson is Research Director of ARK and Professor of Social Research in the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences at Ulster University.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey 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 provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt

Key points

- Around 1 in 10 respondents in 1998 and 2016 believed that Catholics and Protestants are treated unfairly compared with others.
- Whilst 18% of NILT respondents in 2001 thought that lesbian, gay or bisexual people were treated unfairly, this rose to 50% in 2016.
- Half of respondents in 1998 and 2017 thought that relations between Catholics and Protestants were better than the previous 5 years.
- In 1998, 62% were optimistic that community relations would improve in the next 5 years; only 43% thought this in 2017.
- There has been an increase in the proportion of NILT respondents expressing a preference for mixed-religion neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools – in 2017, these figures were 78%, 90% and 68% respectively.
- Feelings of being intimidated by loyalist or republican murals, flags and kerb paintings has decreased since 2004, although a higher proportion of respondents feel annoyed by these.
- Attitudes and perceptions reflect contemporary events.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Jordanstown campus, Ulster University
Shore Road, Newtownabbey BT37 0QB
Tel: 028 9036 6339 E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 9097 3034 E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk