



# Research Update

## A sense of belonging

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A key objective of the *Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) Strategy* (published in 2013) is to build a united and shared society. The onus to achieve this objective is not just put on the Northern Ireland Executive which published this Strategy, but also on 'individuals, groups and agencies at a local level' (p. 11). This is based on the concept of participative democracy and the assumption that local people have a vested interest in contributing to their community, that they trust the decisions at a local level and can feed into, and influence debates at a wider political level.

The 2013 **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)** and **Young Life and Times (YLT)** surveys both included questions exploring respondents' sense of belonging to their neighbourhoods and to Northern Ireland, and their self-perceived influence on decision-making. In their analysis of these surveys, Hayward, Dowds and Shaw (2014) found that there was indeed a strong sense of belonging, especially at local level; however, the level of perceived influence in decision-making at both the local and Northern Ireland level was low. Alienation and pessimism were particularly widespread among the younger age groups.

This Research Update will revisit these questions, using the 2017 NILT and YLT survey datasets. We will particularly focus on how respondents' sense of belonging and influence differs by age and identity (religious, national and ethnic background). Attention is also given to where people live, as attitudes and behaviours are often related to this. Fieldwork for both surveys was conducted in the final quarter of 2017: 1,203 adults aged 18 years or over

completed the NILT survey, while 1,198 16 year olds took part in YLT.

### Who belongs?

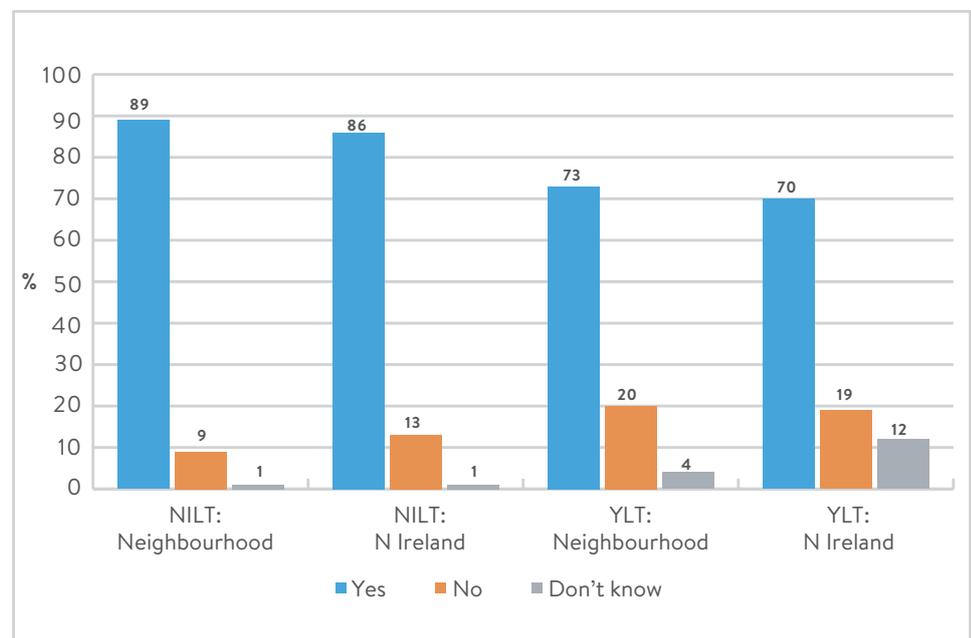
Respondents were asked whether or not they felt a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland and to the immediate neighbourhood in which they lived. For the analysis in this Update, we have combined the 'Yes, definitely', and 'Yes, probably' responses, and have also combined the 'Probably not' and 'Definitely not' responses. **Figure 1** shows nearly all NILT respondents expressed a sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood (89%), and a slightly lower proportion felt this in relation to Northern Ireland (86%). While a high proportion of YLT respondents also expressed a sense of belonging to their local neighbourhoods (73%) and to Northern Ireland (70%), this was noticeably lower than among adults

responding to NILT. One in five YLT respondents said that they did not feel that they belonged in their local neighbourhood (20%), and a similar proportion thought that they did not feel that they belonged to Northern Ireland (19%). Notably, 12 per cent of YLT respondents said they did not know if they felt a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland.

### Belonging among adults

Among NILT respondents, **Table 1** indicates that the groups who are less likely than others to feel that they belong to their long neighbourhood include people who consider themselves to be a member of a minority ethnic group (64%), those who did not self-identity as British, Irish, or Northern Irish (65%), people with no religious affiliation (78%), and 25-34 years olds (79%). Nevertheless, at least two thirds of these groups did feel that they belonged in their local neighbourhood. This broadly matches the pattern in the 2013 NILT survey (Hayward, Dowds and Shaw, 2014).

Figure 1: Sense of belonging (NILT and YLT)



**Table 1: Sense of belonging to neighbourhood and to Northern Ireland (NILT)**

	Neighbourhood %	Northern Ireland %	Difference
<b>Age</b>			
18-24	82	87	-5
25-34	79	80	-1
35-44	88	83	5
45-54	89	86	3
55-64	93	90	3
65+	96	89	7
<b>Religion</b>			
Catholic	91	82	9
Protestant	93	93	0
No religion	78	81	-3
<b>National identity</b>			
British	93	91	2
Irish	90	82	8
Northern Irish	91	92	-1
Other	65	59	6
<b>Minority ethnic group</b>			
Yes	64	59	5
No	91	88	3
<b>Religious mix area</b>			
Mainly Catholic	92	82	10
Mainly Protestant	88	90	-2
Mixed	91	88	3
<b>Urban/rural</b>			
Urban	88	85	3
Rural	92	89	3

NILT responses did not vary according to the religious mix of the area, or whether the respondent lived in an urban or rural location.

Turning now to the wider context, members of minority ethnic groups were less likely than others to feel that they belonged to Northern Ireland (59% and 88% respectively). There were statistically different responses according to religious affiliation: Protestant respondents (93%) were more likely to feel that they belonged to Northern Ireland than did Catholic respondents (82%) or those with no religion (81%). This sense of belonging to Northern Ireland was also higher among those identifying as British (91%) or Northern Irish (92%) than among those identifying as Irish (82%).

Differences according to where people lived or among different age groups were small.

**Table 1** shows that a higher proportion of respondents in most categories of age, religious affiliation or national identity said they felt a sense of belonging to their local neighbourhood than to Northern Ireland. This gap was highest among Catholic respondents (9 percentage points), those living in mainly Catholic areas (10 percentage points) and Irish respondents (8 percentage points). Conversely, the data suggest that respondents aged 18-24 years, and those with no religious affiliation felt more affinity with Northern Ireland than with their local neighbourhood, although these differences are small.

## Belonging among 16 year olds

**Table 2** highlights the sense of belonging among YLT respondents, and the pattern of responses is similar to the one among adults in NILT. A feeling of neighbourhood belonging was greater among Catholics (82%) than those with no religious affiliation (58%), those self-identifying as Irish (77%) compared with those with other identities (62%), and respondents living in Catholic areas (79%) compared to those in mainly Protestant areas (69%). These patterns were previously identified in the 2014 YLT data (Schubotz, 2015). The highest proportions expressing a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland were among those identifying as Protestants (84%), British (83%) and those living in mainly Protestant areas (78%).

In comparison to NILT, two striking points arise from the YLT data. First, unlike NILT respondents, YLT respondents describing themselves as Northern Irish were not the most likely to say that they belong to Northern Ireland; instead those identifying as British were (75% and 83%, respectively). Secondly, the difference between belonging to neighbourhood and Northern Ireland is more pronounced: Catholics (14 percentage points), Irish (18 percentage points), and living in a mainly Catholic area (18 percentage points). However, responses to these questions did not vary significantly between those attending grammar, secondary or integrated schools.

## Influence on decision making

While the overall sense of belonging to their neighbourhood and to Northern Ireland was quite strong amongst adults and 16 year olds, the same cannot be said about their sense of influence on decision making. Around one in four adults responding to the NILT survey felt that they had influence when it came to local decisions made in their immediate neighbourhood (26%) or to decisions made about what happens in Northern Ireland (24%). The sense

of having any influence on decision making was lower among 16 year olds. Only one in ten YLT respondents felt that they had any influence on local decision making, and an even smaller proportion (7%) felt this in relation to decisions made on what happens in Northern Ireland (**Figure 2**).

NILT respondents who said they did not belong to any religion and those who did not self-identify as British, Irish or Northern Irish were significantly less likely than their counterparts to express a sense of influence on decision making at neighbourhood level and Northern Ireland level respectively. The difference between a sense of influence in local decisions and a sense of influence at decisions made about Northern Ireland was largest among adults living in rural areas, where 33 per cent felt that they could influence local decisions, but only 22 per cent felt that they could influence Northern Ireland-level decisions.

Among YLT respondents, the sense of influence was generally very weak, as **Figure 2** shows, and there was very little variation among different groups of respondents. The only statistically significant variation related to influence in local decisions, where those who did not consider themselves to be members of a minority ethnic community were twice as likely to feel that they had local influence, compared with those who did consider themselves to be part of a minority ethnic community (18% and 9% respectively).

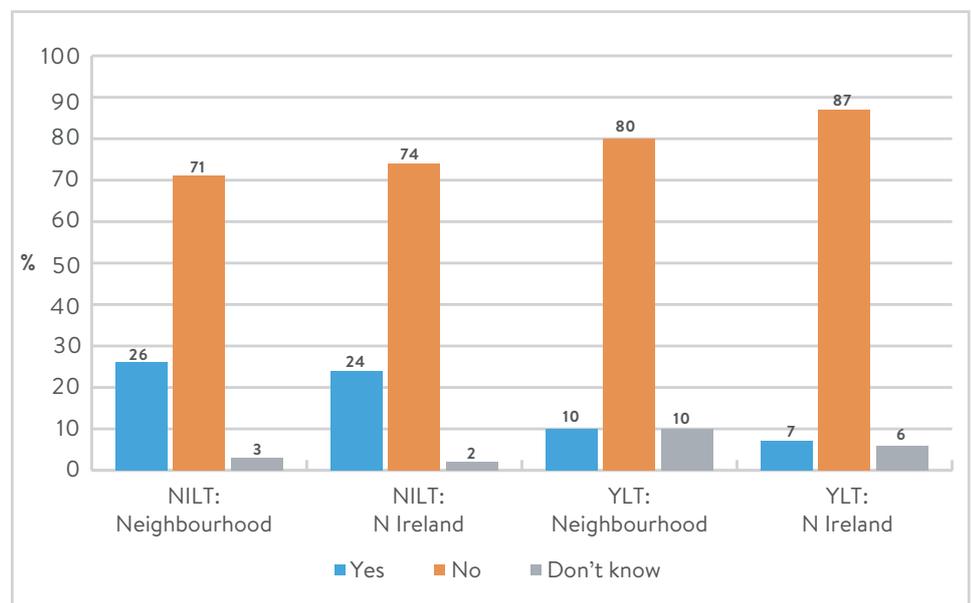
## Relationship between belonging and influence

As might be expected, a sense of influence in decision making is closely related to the sense of belonging. Among YLT respondents, 89 per cent of those who expressed a sense of influence in local decisions said they felt a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood compared to 70 per cent of those who felt no sense of influence. At Northern Ireland level these figures were similar with 81 per cent of those saying they felt that had some say on decision making

**Table 2: Sense of belonging to neighbourhood and to Northern Ireland (YLT)**

	Neighbourhood %	Northern Ireland %	Difference
<b>Religion</b>			
Catholic	82	65	14
Protestant	76	84	-8
No religion	58	63	-5
<b>National identity</b>			
British	75	83	-8
Irish	77	59	18
Northern Irish	71	75	-4
Other	62	62	0
<b>School type</b>			
Planned integrated	72	71	1
Grammar	71	68	3
Secondary	79	72	7
<b>Minority ethnic group</b>			
Yes	71	67	4
No	74	70	4
<b>Religious mix area</b>			
Mainly Catholic	79	61	18
Mainly Protestant	69	78	-9
Mixed	75	70	5
<b>Urban/rural</b>			
Urban	72	71	1
Rural	77	68	9

**Figure 2: Sense of influence (NILT and YLT)**



in Northern Ireland saying they felt a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland. Only 68 per cent of those who had no sense of influence on decision making in Northern Ireland said they felt a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland.

For NILT respondents the results were similar. Ninety-eight per cent of those expressing a sense of influence on decisions in their neighbourhood also felt a sense of belonging, compared to 86 per cent of those who said they felt no sense of influence. Again, this pattern is repeated at Northern Ireland level, where 96 per cent of those who felt a sense of influence also felt a sense of belonging, compared to 83 per cent of those who did not feel they had any influence on decision making.

## Discussion

The 2017 NILT and YLT data confirm results from previous surveys that both adults and 16 year olds in Northern Ireland felt a strong sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhoods and to Northern Ireland. The sense of belonging to Northern Ireland has increased among NILT respondents from 79 per cent in 2013 to 86 per cent in 2017, and from 85 per cent to 89 per cent in relation to belonging to local neighbourhood. In the case of YLT respondents however, attitudes in 2017 are similar to those in 2013.

Our survey data show that Protestants and those identifying as British retain a stronger sense of belonging to Northern Ireland than their Catholic or Irish counterparts. Those who do not belong to either of the main two

communities in Northern Ireland, such as those with no religious background, those who do not identify as Irish, British or Northern Irish and those saying they belong to minority ethnic groups have the weakest sense of belonging and influence at both neighbourhood and Northern Ireland level.

While the sense of belonging among both NILT and YLT respondents is quite strong, the sense of influence is weak, in particular among 16 year olds. Perhaps this could have been expected as 16 year olds do not have the right to vote or stand for election. However, the fact that only about one in ten 16 year olds feels any sense of influence on decision making suggests that the vast majority of young people do not think that their opinions are taken into consideration when decisions are being made that affect their lives. This is clearly a breach of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which gives children and young people the right to be heard in these decisions. Perhaps this sense of being excluded from decision making explains why young people, including the younger age groups in NILT expressed the least sense of belonging to both their neighbourhood and to Northern Ireland.

Having said that, only one in four NILT respondents felt that they had some say in decision making processes, by no means a level to be proud of. There is a clear link between feelings of belonging and influence on decision making. If we want to build a united community in which all people, regardless of age, gender, nationality,

religious or ethnic background and political opinion can have a sense that they belong, we need to find more ways to involve people at both local and Northern Ireland levels in decisions that affect their lives.

## References

Hayward, Katy, Dowds, Lizanne and Shaw, Colin (2014) *Belonging and Alienation in the new Northern Ireland*, ARK Research Update 93

Schubotz, Dirk (2015) *Young people's rights and their sense of belonging*, ARK Research Update 102

The questions on belonging and influence were funded by The Executive Office.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) and Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys are carried out annually and document public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT and YLT are joint projects of the two Northern Ireland universities and provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey websites at [www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) and [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)

## Key points

- 89% of adults taking part in NILT and 73% of 16 year olds taking part in YLT felt that they belong to their neighbourhood.
- 86% of adults and 70% of 16 year olds felt that they belong to Northern Ireland.
- A higher proportion of Protestant or British respondents felt that they belong to Northern Ireland than they do to their local neighbourhood.
- Only one in four NILT respondents felt that they have influence in decisions at the neighbourhood or Northern Ireland level.
- Less than one in ten 16 year olds taking part in YLT felt that they have influence at decisions, either locally, or in Northern Ireland.

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