

# Achieving greater integration in Northern Ireland: young people's voices



PIVOTAL

PUBLIC POLICY  
FORUM NI

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# Executive summary

This report focuses on the perspectives of young people regarding integration in both schools and their local communities, across the traditional community divide in Northern Ireland.

The findings from this report are based on five focus groups held between September and November 2024, involving 48 young people aged 15 to 25 from across a wide range of communities in Northern Ireland.

This report follows on from Pivotal's recent [Achieving greater integration in education and housing publication](#), which was based upon a policy and literature review and interviews with experts. The first report noted the progress made in sharing and mixing across some aspects of life in Northern Ireland, but detailed the stubbornly high levels of division remaining within a majority of schools and communities. Also noted was the dynamic relationship between residential segregation and divisions in schools. This first report argued for realism about what is possible, but also highlighted the possible pathways towards more integration and mixing in schools and communities. It called for leadership and a new vision of what a more integrated society in Northern Ireland could look like and how it could be achieved.

This follow-up report asks how young people aged 18-25 years-old, who have grown-up in this changing but still divided NI, experience and interpret these issues.

This report maintains a focus on schools and education, but also examines young people's experiences and perceptions of where they live - considering community integration more broadly, rather than housing. This approach reflects the fact

that young people typically have little control over their housing situation, but their integration within the community plays a crucial role in their sense of belonging, safety and connection with others.

Most young people in this study had no experience of integrated education, instead viewing schools as divided spaces. Opinions on the benefits of integrated education were mixed, with some seeing it as a step towards greater understanding, while others questioned its value in genuinely breaking down barriers.

Young people also considered integration more broadly, recognising the need to include children from different racial groups. There was also recognition, particularly following the 'race riots' in summer 2024, that integration also involves people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Many had friends from ethnic minority backgrounds and acknowledged challenges they could face, such as language barriers and acceptance within the school community. They emphasised the crucial role of schools in addressing both sectarianism and racism to build a more inclusive society.

All groups recognised integration in the community as the mixing of Protestants and Catholics. However, 'integration' was largely viewed by young people as an abstract concept with little bearing on their everyday lives. Rather than a permanent state, integration was seen as a temporary

experience, occurring through cross-community initiatives, shared education projects or one-off events. Participants engaged in these activities during school, youth clubs or summer schemes, but ultimately they returned to their own communities which remained divided along sectarian lines. This reflects the data highlighted in Pivotal's ['Achieving greater integration in education and housing' report](#), which shows that the majority of Northern Ireland's population resides in areas that are either 80% Catholic or 80% Protestant.

Fear was the most common emotion expressed by young people in relation to their perception of their wider area as a whole. Many reported feeling unsafe, including concerns for their physical safety, in certain areas. Young people highlighted the lack of communal spaces outside of commercial venues like shops or cinemas, which limited the public areas where they felt safe. Those living in rural areas also emphasised the lack of good public transport as a further

barrier to socialising or working outside of their community. It is positive, however, that young people could identify key activities in their communities which promoted integration. These included:

- Youth clubs
- Sports
- Online spaces
- Community events

Young people felt that more opportunities to socialise across different backgrounds would foster lasting integration. They called for more cross-community events, such as festivals and fun days, to encourage natural interactions in a positive setting. Additionally, they advocated for Culture Days celebrating diversity, where different traditions, languages and customs could be shared to promote inclusion and understanding.

## If achieving greater integration is truly to be a policy priority, our first report found that Northern Ireland needs the following:

- Political and community leadership offering a vision of what an integrated future could look like and achieve.
- Greater supply of places in integrated schools and a greater mixing of pupils in all types of schools.
- Increased supply of affordable housing.
- Expansion of Housing For All Projects.
- Realism about what schools on their own can achieve and the other pressures on public spending.
- Residential segregation and divisions in education to be considered together.
- Integration and sharing to be at the heart of policymaking for all planning and infrastructure decisions to encourage the expansion of shared spaces.

# Introduction & methodology

This report is the second in a series from Pivotal exploring barriers to integration in Northern Ireland. It specifically focuses on the perspectives of young people about integration in both schools and their local communities.

Five focus groups were held between September and November 2024, involving 48 young people aged 15 to 25 from both rural and urban areas across Northern Ireland.

While the [previous report](#) looked at education and housing, this report maintains a focus on schools and education, but also examines young people's experiences and perceptions of where they live - considering community integration more broadly, rather than housing. This approach reflects the fact that young people typically have little control over their housing situation, but their integration within the community plays a crucial role in their sense of belonging, safety and connection with others.

The first key area explored in the report is integration in education. As indicated in Pivotal's '[Achieving greater integration in education and housing](#)' report, there is strong public support for integrated education in Northern Ireland, with [new polling from Lucid Talk](#) placing public support at 65% - broadly in line with recent years. Despite this, only 8% of children attend integrated schools, highlighting a gap between demand and provision.

As the [first report](#) detailed, if the widely shared aspiration of greater integration and mixing in schools is to be achieved then the integrated sector will need to grow substantially, and all types of schools will need to further diversify their enrolments. This report will reveal how young people from across much of

Northern Ireland consider how education can contribute to greater integration, as well as the barriers and challenges they see to achieving this objective.

The first report also detailed the dynamic relationship between residential segregation and divisions in education. Central to housing questions is a comfort, security and positive identification with where you live. This report details young people's perceptions of their community, of community divisions, and their appraisal of hopes for a more integrated future.

Together this report takes many of the theoretical approaches to integration in education and the community and applies them to the lived experiences of groups of young people – part of the generation shaping the future of Northern Ireland. This is a Northern Ireland with familiar patterns of division, but also a changing, diverse, society. What does this new generation think about questions of integration and division?

## Methodology

This study employed focus groups to explore young people's perspectives on integration in Northern Ireland. Five focus groups were held during September – November 2024. A total of 48 young people aged 15 to 25 took part, with an average age of 17. The sample included 36 males and 12 females. See [Table 01](#) for a breakdown of the focus group participants by their area.

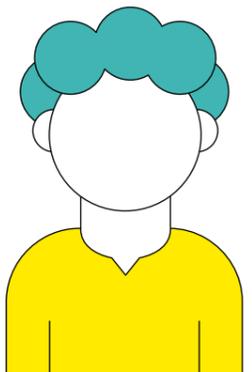
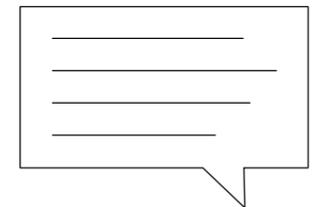
All focus groups were conducted in community youth organisations. Sessions lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours and were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Each focus group was subsequently transcribed and thematically analysed using qualitative analysis software.

To engage young people in discussions about integration, the sessions incorporated a community mapping exercise. Participants identified and mapped the places where they spent time and highlighted areas they perceived as either divided or integrated. This interactive activity encouraged both group and individual participation, serving as a catalyst for discussion on how different spaces either supported or hindered integration.

At the end of each session, participants were asked to reflect on possible solutions by responding in writing to the question **"If you could change one thing to help young people integrate more, what would it be?"**. They provided separate suggestions for (i) schools and (ii) the wider community, offering insights into practical changes they believed could improve integration.

Table 01 Focus group participants by area

Focus group area	Participants
Ardoyne, Belfast	8
Derry-Londonderry	11
Enniskillen	3
Greater Shankill, Belfast	12
South Armagh	14
<b>Total number of participants</b>	<b>48</b>



# Results

Here is what the young participants had to say during the focus group discussions, the community mapping exercise and when asked for possible solutions to help young people further integrate.

## How would you describe your community?

Young people in each group were asked to describe the community they lived in. The majority of young people reported living in single identity communities. Participants reported that the thing they liked most about the community they lived in was the people. Young people from both rural and urban areas felt a strong sense of belonging towards the community they lived in:

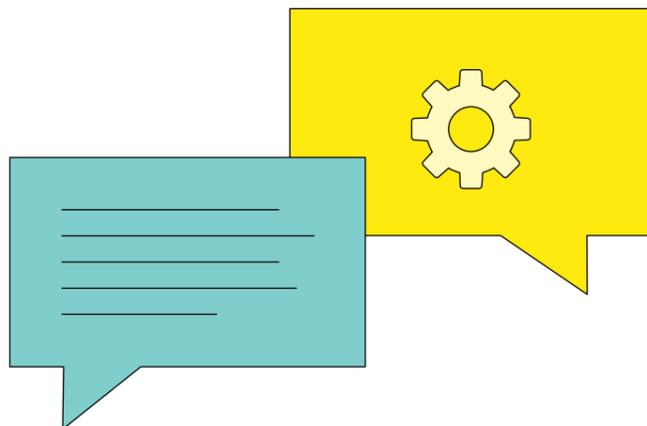
*"Everyone knows each other and everyone's so friendly."*  
Female, 20, Derry/Londonderry

*"Everyone's just nice like, walking down the street, people always shout out to you."*  
Male, 16, Ardoyne

*"Growing up as a child you definitely can make lifelong friends in a small town as well like. It is a really good town just depending on where you are."*  
Female, 15, South Armagh

This sense of community was strengthened through regular activities such as sports teams, youth clubs and annual events like Halloween and Christmas, fundraising activities and summer parades. However, young people were also able to identify things they would like to change about their

local communities. Young people described their area as being run down or left behind with very few facilities or activities for them. This was seen as a factor in encouraging anti-social behaviours such as under-age drinking, fighting and rioting. Fear was the predominant theme related to the negative perceptions young people had about their wider local areas.



## What does 'integration' mean to you in Northern Ireland?

Young people in each group were asked how they understood the term 'integration'. This was recognised in terms of both community integration and integrated education. All groups acknowledged integration in the context of Northern Ireland's historical conflict, focusing on divisions related to nationality, religion and political identity — namely British/Irish, Catholic/Protestant and Nationalist/Unionist. A smaller number of young people predominately associated integration in terms of race or ethnic minorities. Participants recognised that integration related to people from separate communities coming together to mix. Young people tended to describe integration as an action. It was seen as a temporary experience they engaged in during school, at youth clubs or summer schemes, before returning to the background they came from. There were mixed views about the overall benefit of these types of activities used to promote 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

For some of the older participants, they felt integration was more than just bringing together people from different backgrounds or cultures but that it was about creating something new:

*"It's combining separate things into a whole thing. You come from wherever you want to come from, you join in. When it comes to people, there's people that come from different backgrounds, different communities. They come in and they join into a new community. It's for them to join in and get along with everyone like."*  
Male, 18, Derry/Londonderry

*"Instead of being two separate groups, it's just one big group combined instead of the two separates."*  
Male, 17, Enniskillen

*"When someone or group of people join into another group, and they become a whole group themselves they become a whole new group."*  
Female, 18, Derry/Londonderry

The following sections of the report will explore young people's views about greater integration in terms of both education and community.



## Section one: Education

Through the community mapping exercise, schools were mainly identified as a space that could feel divided as young people from different backgrounds were generally educated separately. Young people felt that the role of religion in the education system of Northern Ireland could be divisive.

A common theme for young people was that the segregated nature of the school system reinforced religious or cultural stereotypes which perpetually contributed to division in society more broadly.

*"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

*"If you want to teach kids religion teach them outside school, bring them to church and stuff. School is for education not for pushing religious narratives."*  
Male, 17, Enniskillen

Young people identified the influence of religion in schools in different ways, from school assemblies to taking part in religious practices during the school day. Specifically, the mandatory curriculum requirement to teach Religious Education (RE) in schools in Northern Ireland was highlighted as problematic, particularly for those pupils whose school made it compulsory to do Religious Studies as a GCSE:

*"Religion should not be taught to people until they are old enough to make up their own decisions on what they want to believe in."*  
Male, 19, Derry/Londonderry

*"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

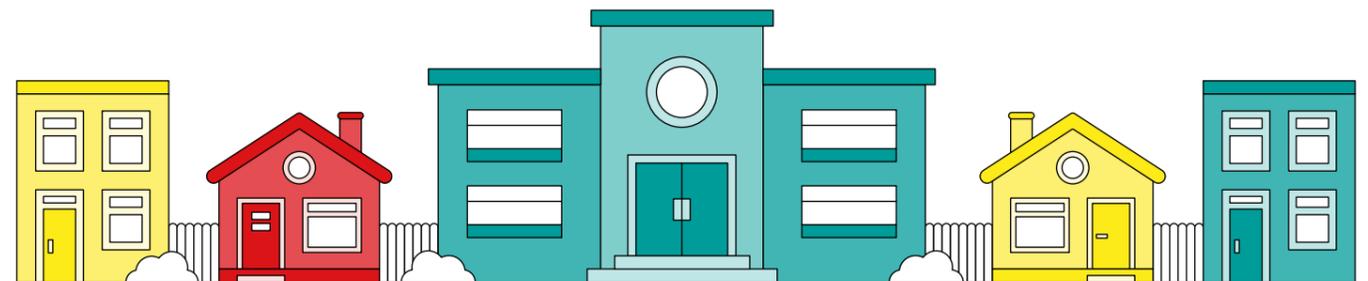
*"In my opinion I think it's completely useless for people who aren't Christians because in year one you do study of the gospel of Mark and you know only Christians would be reading the Bible but I had to do it and even Christian ethics. I think that there should be an option you know."*  
Female, 17, Enniskillen

While young people recognised issues with the current segregated education system, there were mixed views on the benefits of integrated education. Some saw integration as a step towards greater understanding, while others raised concerns about its effectiveness in fostering real unity. Those who supported integrated education believed exposure to different backgrounds from a young age would help break down divisions in later life. Many suggested that integration would be particularly beneficial for younger primary school pupils:

*"I just think if they're brought up with being in a mixed community, then when they're older they won't really mind when they go to secondary school. When they are grown up, they will just naturally mix."*  
Male, 15, Greater Shankill

*"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

**// Increasingly, young people viewed integration as more than just overcoming religious differences in Northern Ireland. //**



Young people also highlighted an integrated education system could provide more opportunity to learn about different cultures and religions in school, suggesting that more structured discussions on diversity could improve mutual understanding. Despite these potential benefits, young people did not automatically view expanding integrated education as a solution to reducing segregation. Some young people questioned how effective an integrated education system would be in bringing people together, expressing concerns that divisions might persist regardless of the school setting and could even exacerbate conflict:

*"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

Concerns raised in these focus groups about integrated education mirror those found in [Pivotal's previous work](#) around sectarian bullying and contention around subjects such as history and physical education.

For some, the religious background of a post primary school was less important than practical considerations such as subject choice or facilities. Young people shared first hand examples of attending or sharing space at a school from a different background from them. This was mainly motivated by the subjects available at GCSE or A Level. A participant from a Muslim background attended a Catholic school and pupils from a Catholic school regularly took classes in the local controlled secondary school due to better facilities for sports, art and drama.

A key theme that young people raised in four out of the five focus groups was the integration of children who came from different racial groups. Many participants had friends from an ethnic minority background and recognised the challenges they faced in being accepted into the school community. Young people highlighted the barriers of language and communication. They also highlighted that they had seen people being bullied because their appearance or skin colour or food they ate. They felt the religious nature of our education system could act as a barrier for young people of different religious and cultural background to feel like they belonged:

*"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

Increasingly, young people viewed integration as more than just overcoming religious differences in Northern Ireland. They recognised the need for better support for newcomer pupils and felt that bringing together people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds might require a different approach than integrating communities that, despite religious differences, share a similar culture. They also highlighted the need to tackle both sectarianism and racism within schools to create a more inclusive society.

# Section two: Community

During the mapping exercise, most described the communities they lived in as divided along sectarian lines. In rural areas this typically meant living somewhere with a predominantly single religious background.

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:

*"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

*"A lot of people would have in the back of their head 'oh this is a Catholic area' or whatever and you can tell when it, and you can tell when it is a British area because there's about like a hundred different flags up so there is. And then the only real way you can tell if it's an Irish area is if they have a Palestine flag up because you're not allowed a Tricolour."*  
Male, 17, Enniskillen

*"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

*"Down my street there are a bunch of Catholic people. See my street it has all like Union Jacks on it but when you get to the bottom of the street like I know a lot of Catholics"*  
Male, 15, Greater Shankill

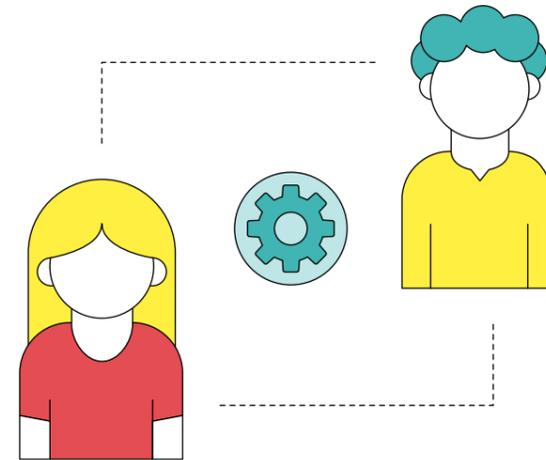
The residential division reinforces segregation from an early age and has been described as shaping how young people live in a number of ways:



**Fear:** As discussed in Pivotal's previous research, fear was the most common emotion young people expressed in how they perceived

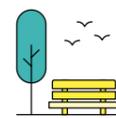
the wider community generally. Young people reported feeling unsafe in some areas and expressed concern for their physical safety. In Belfast, young people who lived at interface areas identified the peace walls as a clear symbol of segregation.

However, there were mixed views about whether these should be removed. Young people felt the walls were still needed for safety reasons, with the general consensus that it would be more beneficial if the gates stayed open for longer, rather than removing the peace walls entirely. Both groups from Belfast particularly highlighted the danger of walking outside of their local area. Participants, particularly males, reported taking longer routes to avoid certain areas and consideration was given to the clothes they wore and to flags and symbols marking different areas:



*"I think it is dangerous. That's the one thing. I worry about getting my head kicked in, that's what you're worried about."*  
Male, 16, Ardoyne

*"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



**Limited neutral public spaces:** The mapping exercise highlighted a number of areas that were perceived as neutral spaces, such as leisure facilities, shops, takeaways, arcades, bowling alleys and cinemas. However, young people noted that many outdoor spaces in local areas such as parks, sports grounds, bus stops and alleyways were not truly shared. Instead, these spaces often reflected the sectarian division of housing and

reinforced the separation between communities. Typically, these public spaces were unsupervised by adults and could be associated with anti-social behaviour and sectarian violence. In some cases, young people described parks or streets as places where groups from different backgrounds would come into conflict rather than mix in a positive way.

*"People go to play football then you see the kids chasing each other and cops and all. It's not a good thing for the area like. It's not a good thing for the community."*  
Male, 16, Ardoyne

In some areas, segregation was not only along religious lines but also affected ethnic minority groups, who were sometimes seen as separate from both Catholic and Protestant communities:

*"There's like different ethnicities down there and they don't really mix with the rest of the town. That's like their place, that's like their part of town and you only really ever drive past there, obviously you get the odd person walking past or anything, but they don't really congregate well with the rest of the town because they're all just down there."*  
Female, 15, South Armagh

The lack of communal spaces for young people outside of commercial venues like shops or cinemas placed limits on public areas where young people felt they were safe to go. Young people living in rural areas also highlighted that the lack of good public transport was a further barrier in being able to take opportunities for socialising or working outside of their community.

However, a key finding from the mapping exercise was the types of spaces and activities that young people felt were shared areas which will be discussed in the following section.

## Community spaces promoting integration

Young people identified these four types of places as promoting shared spaces in the community:

- Youth clubs
- Sports
- Online spaces
- Community events



**Youth clubs:** While acknowledging that the sample for the focus groups were largely drawn from community youth organisations, youth clubs or centres were universally seen as a shared space for young people. For some, this was the first or only place they had the opportunity to socialise with people from a different background. Youth clubs were described as a safe and welcoming spaces in which staff and volunteers treated all young people with respect.

Youth clubs also offered a variety of ways to participate in a range of programmes and activities incorporating sports, drop-ins, group work, social events, residentials and cross-community opportunities. Both the inclusive environment and the diverse activities were identified as crucial factors in being able to build relationships with others from a different background in a natural way.

*"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

*"It's a shared experience in here even though everyone comes from different upbringings and whatever else, so being able to bounce off one another and learn from one another it's massive."*  
Male, 22, South Armagh

*"This youth club which is where obviously where everyone here meets, we figure out who we are, where we come from*

*and what we like. It's kind of where we all meet each other for the first time and we figure out everyone's background and kind of who they are as a person and as a whole and then they integrate themselves into the group."*  
Male, 19, Derry/Londonderry



**Sports:** Young people identified sport as a positive way to bring people from different religious and cultural backgrounds together. Similar to youth clubs, being a member of a sports team provided a sense of belonging and way to build friendships with peers from a range of backgrounds. An example of a rowing club was given to showcase how sports can be inclusive by bringing young people from different schools together for training and competitions. A staff member highlighted how the practice of young people swapping their football, Gaelic football or hurling tops was an informal way that encouraged integration. Some young people felt there was more to do to promote sport as an inclusive activity and remove the religious aspects or local rivalry which could be associated with some sports:

*"I feel sport wise as well it would be pretty cool if there was like more, if you know they offered more. It shouldn't be based on like religions what sports they offer cos it would be alien but it would still be very inclusive if like [school] did like a Gaelic team or a hurling team as well as a soccer team and stuff because there's nothing stopping them doing it."*  
Male, 18, Enniskillen



**Online spaces:** Virtual spaces where young people interacted were also recognised as playing a role in reducing sectarian divisions by providing a platform for young people to connect and build relationships beyond their immediate communities. Social media and online communication made it easier to meet new friends and stay in touch, which had the potential to support cross-community interaction. Online gaming was also highlighted as a way young people could interact with people from a different background. However, young people also noted that online

## // Young people were highly aware of these divisions, often identifying areas by religious or cultural markers such as flags and murals. //

platforms could be used to abuse others or organise planned fights or riots, particularly at certain times of the year. Further work is needed to maximise the opportunities online spaces could offer for social integration while addressing the risks that can reinforce division and conflict.



**Community events:** Across all the focus groups, social events held in the community were seen as a positive way to bring people together. Young people highlighted a range of events they thought were beneficial for integration in the local community such as fundraising events, local band nights, community choirs and celebration events. There was also enthusiasm for bigger events such as Halloween activities, festivals, concerts or fun fairs as a way for young people to meet their peers outside of their own areas.

*"That's one of the ways you can make friends is going by funfairs and you get to know them as well, that's how you meet new people and all."*  
Female, 15, South Armagh

Discussions focused on key annual events such as St Patrick's Day and the Twelfth of July. While many young people attended both events, to participate or simply to observe and socialise, opinions were mixed on how inclusive these events are. Some saw these events as opportunities to learn about different traditions, while others noted that divisions remained.

*"It gets you like knowledge of what their culture is and what our culture is. Catholics go to the Twelfth of July nowadays."*  
Male, 16, Ardoyne

*"St Patrick's Day is seen as a cross-community event so it's that kind of thing there where everyone is saying they're getting along but then if they really did get along people would just be allowed to show off their own culture and heritage. I don't really like get involved at all but I know there's a few people who still take it very seriously."*  
Male, 17, Enniskillen

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. They also recognised the need for greater efforts to challenge sectarian attitudes and ensure all events feel inclusive and welcoming to everyone.

## Section three:

# Integration in the future

### Young people had mixed feelings about how hopeful they were that integration between Catholics and Protestants would improve in the future.

Some young people reasoned that their peers had less involvement in religion than previous generations and were less likely to have experienced sectarian violence first hand.

*"I think we've definitely moved on from that whole segregation thing that happened with Catholics and Protestants. Cos, it's still a thing it still happens from time to time but not as often as you think. I think we should all be together."*

Male, 16, Ardoyne

*"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

*"It's dying off like I don't believe whenever my kids are growing up that there'll be this whole, it'll be as big of a thing and I think the majority of schools will be integrated. In my opinion they should all be integrated anyways."*

Male, 17, Enniskillen

Other young people were more pessimistic about the likelihood of greater integration in the future. Of this group, many found it

difficult to articulate why they felt hopeless about change. They did however highlight that they felt that the influence of older generations and some political representatives contributed to the persistence of sectarianism, making integration more difficult for them overall. They felt that it was unlikely that the necessary changes would happen while some were unsure how this would impact on their life either way.

*"Just don't have much hope for it. I don't feel there would be enough changes for it to change."*

Male, 17, Greater Shankill

*"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 also observed a shift away from solely focusing on divisions between Catholics and Protestants, highlighting race as an additional challenge to integration in Northern Ireland. This concern was influenced by recent events, including 'race riots' over the summer and a series of racist attacks on businesses owned by ethnic minorities.

*"I think race is more of an issue now than religion"*

Female, 18, Derry/Londonderry

*"I'd like to say it would be [very hopeful] but honestly probably about a one or two [out of 10] just based on the last previous months people's opinions. There is riots going on in bigger cities, not so much around here but bigger city conflicts and stuff over immigration."*

Female, 15, South Armagh

### Reflections on solutions

To conclude the focus group, participants were invited to reflect on potential solutions for improving integration. They were asked to write down on a post-it note one change they would make to support integration, both in schools and in the wider community. Their responses offered valuable suggestions for improving integration across all groups as outlined below.

### Changes inside school

During the post-it note exercise, young people highlighted three key ways schools could better support integration between communities:



#### Cultural and religious awareness education:

Most young people felt that schools should focus more on raising awareness of different cultures and religions. This should include elements related to anti-bullying and equality. Many felt that this type of learning did not necessarily need to be delivered by teachers or limited

to traditional classroom teaching. Instead, young people believed youth workers or specialist organisations with expertise in these areas would be better suited to lead these discussions and activities.



#### More opportunities for cross-school interaction:

To encourage greater interaction between pupils from different backgrounds, young people recommended more joint activities between schools. They suggested that regular shared experiences, such as trips during the school day, would provide natural opportunities to meet and engage with peers from different communities.



#### Limited support for integrated education:

While improving integration was seen as important during focus group discussions, only two participants specifically mentioned integrated education as a key solution. This suggests that young people may see other approaches, such as those above, as more practical ways to foster integration in their daily lives.



# Focus group conclusions

## Changes outside school

Beyond the school environment, young people emphasised the need for more opportunities to meet and socialise with peers from different backgrounds as an important step to improve integration in their communities:



**Better youth provision:** Young people wanted more youth spaces and programmes that offered social and developmental opportunities to all young people and helped them feel connected and supported within their communities.



**More cross-community events:** Young people highlighted the importance of increasing cross-community events. This included community events, fun days and festivals as opportunities to bring people together in a positive and informal setting. Young people felt cross-community events would allow them to interact naturally with others from different religious and cultural backgrounds.



**Culture days to promote inclusion:** Many young people also expressed interest in Culture Days specifically designed to celebrate diversity and promote integration, particularly with ethnic minority communities. Participants suggest that these events could showcase different traditions, languages and customs to help to build understanding and break down barriers.

Many of the findings detailed in the [first report](#) are echoed in the views of young people. Young people have expressed a strong desire for more shared spaces and experiences, with schools playing a pivotal role in helping these young people engage with other traditions and communities. For many young people, integration was viewed in terms of Northern Ireland's changing demographic landscape to include race relations as well as sectarian division.

Overall, this report highlights that while there is significant support for integration, young people remain sceptical about the possibility of significant change or how this could benefit them. As highlighted in the [first report](#), the type of change that would support long-term integration in Northern Ireland cannot be achieved without clear vision and political leadership to promote and invest in infrastructure and social opportunities, to create a more unified and inclusive society.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

- 1 **Strong sense of belonging:** Young people expressed a strong sense of belonging and positive identification with their communities.
- 2 **Fear:** Many young people reported concerns about safety and conflict in their wider area.
- 3 **Integration not an everyday reality:** Integration was often viewed by young people as a temporary, one-off event, indicating a gap between the ideal of sustained integration and the reality of divided communities. Based on their experiences, they expressed mixed views on whether greater integration is achievable.
- 4 **Challenges and opportunities for integrated education:** While integration at a younger age was seen as vital for building the foundation of cross-community relationships, some young people questioned whether integrated education alone can effectively reduce segregation. Despite its potential benefits, concerns remain that divisions may persist or even worsen, regardless of the school environment.
- 5 **Limit the role of religion in schools:** There was wide support for limiting the role of religion in schools, with many young people feeling that religion should not play a central role in education.
- 6 **Shared building blocks:** Access to neutral spaces in the local community remains a challenge and there is a clear need to expand such spaces that build and encourage integration such as youth clubs, sports and shared community events.

# Project conclusions

Analysing the findings from the focus groups together with our first report, [Achieving greater integration in education and housing](#), we can highlight clear priorities for policymakers seeking to achieve greater integration in education, housing and wider community life. The key conclusions from this project are:

- 1 For many young people integration continues to be something for future generations, not for now. There is a need for political leadership offering ambition and a new vision of how to bring about a more integrated community, presenting what a society with greater integration, sharing and mixing could achieve.
- 2 Measurable progress towards greater mixing, sharing and diversity in all models of school should be central to this vision.
- 3 Meeting existing demand for places in integrated schools should be a priority, along with encouraging the expansion of the sector.
- 4 Integration and sharing should be prioritised when managing the school estate, especially when adapting to falling pupil numbers in an area.
- 5 Shared education activities have made significant positive contributions, but this model was not highlighted as a major influence by young people in this project. This may be due to low awareness of the model, but the future success of shared education will depend on participation rates, supported by appropriate funding, and targeting areas most impacted by community divisions.
- 6 Supplying more affordable housing is one of the key policy challenges of our time, and it is also the foundation for facilitating greater residential mobility and integration.
- 7 Housing For All offers a model of shared housing that should be expanded and learnt from.

- 8 The potential to connect shared housing with integrated education should be further realised, as part of building more shared community spaces, supported by infrastructure that connects rather than divides.
- 9 New diversity means that for many younger people integration relates to newcomer families and ethnic minority communities. Discussion of integration needs to more fully encompass these changes.
- 10 We suggest that the Executive agrees an aim of achieving substantially more integration and sharing in schools and housing by 2040. If we are to see significant improvements by then, progress needs to begin now.
- 11 This vision and ambition should be driven by realism. This means acknowledging the limits of what schools alone can achieve, and a realism about the other pressing concerns facing education, housing and community life.
- 12 Supporting shared youth facilities and groups in the community should be a policy priority. The voices of young people in this project highlight the positive impact these shared experiences can have, suggesting that there is a need for a focus on youth services where young people can meet and mix, alongside promoting more integration in schools.

In conclusion, the housing crisis, creaking infrastructure, demographic change, and pressures on school budgets highlight the need to reimagine and rebuild many aspects of public services and communities.

There is an opportunity to place integration, breaking down old barriers, and connecting people at the heart of this construction. Building and encouraging shared spaces for young people is key.

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