

PEOPLE, PLACE & SPACE

Mapping Insights of South Belfast's New & Diverse Communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: April 2025



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INTRODUCTION

South Belfast is undergoing dramatic and rapid transformation, reshaping the very fabric of community life. *People, Place & Space: Mapping Insights of South Belfast's New & Diverse Communities* presents a nuanced and in-depth exploration of the evolving demographics and socio-cultural dynamics in Donegall Pass and South Belfast. Commissioned by Donegall Pass Community Enterprises (DPCE) and led by Jayne Murray PR Ltd, this report marks the second phase of a comprehensive research initiative designed to establish a local baseline for fostering strong good relations and social cohesion among diverse communities.

Building upon the foundational analysis of *The Pass – People, Place & Space* report, which spotlighted the experiences of long-established residents, this phase shifts focus to the fresh voices and experiences of ethnic minority groups now calling South Belfast home. Through a robust methodology that includes pre- and post-survey assessments, dynamic focus groups, and extensive desk research, the study provides critical insights into the lived experiences, challenges, and perceptions of these communities.

KEY INSIGHTS

The report vividly illustrates that community identity extends far beyond the physical boundaries of a location. Participants emphasise that true belonging is forged through shared experiences, mutual respect, and meaningful engagement. The research identified **14 key insights**, including:

- 1. Community Identity Beyond Location:** Belonging is shaped by shared values, interactions, and the quality of relationships rather than mere physical proximity.

Community is about feeling safe & accepted. We tend to feel unsafe when we don't know people.

Back home we had good jobs and careers but had to flee due to a bad situation and then we arrive here and we're not allowed to work.

- 2. Individual Immigration Circumstances Shape Experience and Priorities:** Diverse legal, economic, and personal circumstances influence migrant participation, expectations, and priorities.

- 3. Beyond Sectarian Divisions:** Traditional "green versus orange" narratives fail to capture the complexity of today's community structures, with many eager to move past historical sectarian frameworks.

It's difficult for me, as everything is about the 'orange' & the 'green.' I know the past is important. Everyone has a past, but we need to move on & focus on today and tomorrow.

There's safety in a group that speaks our language and has similar traditions.

4. Balancing Diversity and Integration: Preserving cultural distinctiveness while implementing proactive integration strategies is essential for fostering genuine unity.

5. Leadership at All Levels: Building trust and inclusivity requires strategic leadership from political, community, and institutional figures.

We've been here for years! Building trust takes time & we need more open conversations & not more legislation. We stop bad speech with more speech, not less!

Access to English classes is difficult. There are so few places & they book up very quickly. There could be 100s applying for 10 spaces!

6. Language as a Critical Tool: Barriers to English language access exacerbate isolation and miscommunication, underscoring the need for accessible language support.

7. Fear, Change, and Social Tension: Rapid demographic shifts, economic uncertainty, and misinformation have led to heightened fear and resistance, challenging the core of social cohesion.

Dramatic changes cannot and should not be ignored as the fear is real

When everything is good, everyone wins and is happy. But when things are not so good, we need someone to blame.

8. Declining Social Cohesion: Long-standing residents report a deterioration in community relations, impacted by economic challenges, shifting immigration narratives, and interpersonal misunderstandings.

9. The Role of Young People: Youth can both contribute to tensions through anti-social behaviour and serve as key drivers for positive change via education and engagement.

We never had any problems on 'The Row' except relating to young people misbehaving. Other than that, it was one of the safest and friendliest places to live.

10. Raising Awareness and Education: Limited access to accurate information fuels misperceptions, making structured awareness campaigns and inclusive dialogue imperative.

We fix this with education. We need better education for all children & to talk and engage parents as this impacts from one generation to the next. We need to inspire the next generation to want more.

There is little understanding & awareness & this fuels distrust. This is not helped by too much focus on the negative. We need to focus on the benefits & good news.

11. Countering Myths and Celebrating Positive Impacts: It is critical to address damaging myths - such as stereotypes about economic dependency or crime - and to highlight the beneficial contributions of immigrant communities.

12. Learning from Local History: Drawing upon Northern Ireland's past can provide valuable lessons for managing current demographic transitions with sensitivity and foresight.

We recognise it is important that government does not break it's promises to local people as it builds distrust and lays the seeds for new problems.

It is important that you must have confidence in yourself and in your own community, before you can 'love and embrace' other communities.

13. The Need for a Good Relations Hub: Shared spaces must serve as vibrant, dynamic centres for dialogue, cultural exchange, and community engagement.

14. Recognition of Individual Identity: At the heart of all discussions is the need for everyone to be seen as unique individuals, respected beyond labels such as ethnicity or immigration status.

'I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.'

Martin Luther King, Jr.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To confront these challenges and capitalise on emerging opportunities, the report outlines a bold roadmap of action organised around three strategic areas:



1. Influencing & Informing Systemic Change

- Develop a data-driven framework for guiding local policies and decision-making.
- Improve access to essential services such as ESOL classes.
- Pilot innovative integration models and foster cross-sector collaboration to ensure that community support mechanisms are responsive and inclusive.

2. Increasing Awareness & Understanding

- Launch public campaigns and facilitate open conversations to dismantle harmful stereotypes.
- Promote narratives that celebrate the positive contributions of new residents.
- Strengthen educational initiatives to empower all generations to understand and embrace diversity.

3. Collective Steps Towards Social Cohesion

- Invest in vibrant, accessible community centres - such as the proposed *Good Relations Hub* in Donegall Pass - that serve as neutral grounds for cultural exchange and collaborative projects.
- Create opportunities for people to share their stories, experiences, and cultural heritage, thereby forging lasting bonds and reinforcing a unified community identity.

CONCLUSION

This report is a call to action for all who live in and work with South Belfast. By embracing change together and implementing these recommendations, we have the power to transform challenges into opportunities and build an inclusive, resilient community where every individual is valued and empowered. The vision presented here is one of a future where every culture is celebrated, every voice is heard, and all residents play an active role in weaving together a truly united South Belfast.

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