

PEOPLE, PLACE & SPACE

Mapping Insights of South Belfast's New & Diverse Communities

April 2025



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INTRODUCTION

Donegall Pass Community Enterprises (DPCE) was founded in 2017 with the aim of fostering the growth and development of Donegall Pass and its neighbouring areas. Its mission is to **transform lives by creating safe, inclusive, and sustainable urban communities**. Central to DPCE's efforts is the integration of both lived and learned experiences into every aspect of its work. To achieve this, DPCE focuses on engaging with, influencing, and collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders to enhance the physical, social, and economic potential of this inner-city Belfast community.

Fostering good relations is a cornerstone of DPCE's mission. As it prepares to develop a dedicated Good Relations Hub on the former PSNI site at Donegall Pass, the organisation is committed to deepening its understanding of the key factors that build and sustain good relations and social cohesion. This initiative aims to cultivate genuine, trust-based relationships rooted in respect and transparency. Furthermore, the insights gained through this work will shape and enhance future policies, planning, and delivery, ensuring lasting impact for the community.

Since mid-2023, DPCE commissioned a review entitled: ***'Building Communities Together – A review of good relations practice and a policy review of good relations and local development.'*** This report was presented to the organisation in December 2023, in which it focused on the following key good relations themes:

- Newcomers, transient populations and established ethnic minorities.
- Intra and sectarian
- Gentrification

The review also concentrated on identifying and gaining a deeper understanding of three models of good relations practice. The key findings from this review inspired DPCE to pursue additional research aimed at clarifying the concept of community engagement and refining the definition of the term 'community.'

Furthermore, the review identified a need to better understand the needs, issues and impact of asylum seekers, refugees, migrant workers, and ethnic minorities on Donegall Pass and the surrounding area.

Building on this foundation, DPCE initiated an ambitious two-phase research project. The first phase, completed in May 2024 and further developed in January 2025, culminated in the publication of the first report titled *'The Pass - People, Place and Space. A report on the changing nature of communities in South Belfast.'* Serving as a cornerstone for their efforts, the first report laid the groundwork for this current insight report, which represents the second phase of their research journey.

SCOPE

DPCE commissioned this insights research in early January 2025. This research forms phase 2 of a two-phased project which aims to develop a strong local baseline.

- Phase 1 involved conducting a series of focus groups with the indigenous and long-standing residents of Donegall Pass, centred around the theme of community. The resulting report offers valuable insights into the sentiments, perspectives, and priorities of local people regarding the area.
- Phase 2 - (this report) involves conducting a series of focus groups with a range of diverse groups now residing in South Belfast on the same theme of community.

Both phases seek to assist newcomers and long-standing residents of South Belfast, as well as practitioners working in the area, in understanding the diverse perspectives, values, challenges, concerns, and priorities—both shared and unique—of those who call this space home. The key benefits of this work include:

- **Knowledge and Understanding:** Sharing accurate information to dispel misconceptions, foster deeper understanding, and promote acceptance.
- **Relationship Development:** Building trust through genuine listening and authentic communication, paving the way for meaningful engagement.
- **Informed Planning and Delivery:** Identifying areas for development to guide future initiatives and actions effectively.

By undertaking this work, meaningful bridges can be built between new and established communities, supporting relationship development and fostering mutual understanding. This research aims to help support the following long-term outcomes:

- Enabling newcomer communities to gain insight into the dynamics, structures, and essence of the communities they now call home.
- Assisting established communities in understanding the differences, expectations, concerns, and challenges experienced by newcomer families.
- Challenging and addressing common misconceptions held by both new and existing communities.
- Helping practitioners identify shared interests and areas for growth that can be further explored and developed collaboratively.
- Opening channels of communication to establish trust-based relationships, paving the way for continued and deeper engagement.

In reference to phase 2, the key deliverables of the research include:

- Developing and analysing a pre-engagement survey for each ethnic minority group engagement
- Developing and analysing a post-engagement survey for each ethnic minority group engagement
- Conducting two-hour engagement sessions with five ethnic minority (diverse) groups in February 2025.
- Drafting and publication of An Ethnic Minority Insights report to sit alongside phase one's 'Established Community' Report.

Caveats & Assumptions:

Despite the research undertaken for this phase 2 report, it is important to recognise the following caveats and assumptions that relate to all aspects of this report:

1. Clarifying various definitions – during the consultation there were two terms that needed to be defined and then refined further. For clarification, the following was discussed and agreed:

- Good relations: the term "good relations" is not defined in legislation. Due to the challenges associated with defining it, the consultant chose to base all research on the definition provided by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council (NICRC) below, using it as the foundation when engaging with participants.

Good relations challenges sectarianism and racism, promotes equality, develops respect for diversity and raises awareness of the interdependence of the people and institutions within Northern Ireland.

In addition, the NICRC goes further, and acknowledges good relations is a *developmental process and not a prescriptive one* and believe it should run through an organisation's entire corporate identity and become an integral part of its equality system.

- Established community / population: for consistency across the research, the consultant defined the 'established community' or 'established population' as *an established community is the community of people that have been living in the country since birth or for at least 15+ years.*

However, during the focus groups, certain participants suggested that, for the sake of clarity (as many do not define their identity by the length of time they live in a place), ease, and comfort during discussions, the term "established community" should primarily denote individuals who were both born in the country and identified as white. As such, the consultant respected and agreed to adapt this interpretation into the discussions.

2. Limitations to the sample – the methodology offered a thorough understanding of the area, effectively combining qualitative insights with quantitative data. It not only presented information but also allowed for a deeper exploration of emotions and opinions. In addition, the research's strength lies in its mixed-method approach, which enables detailed and comprehensive analysis. However, there are limitations regarding the sample – these include:

- Small budget – limited research and engagement: the scope of the research conducted by DPCE was necessarily defined by budgetary constraints. Due to limited funding and a condensed research timeline, the consultant was only able to facilitate five focus groups over a four-week period, each lasting two hours. To optimise engagement, the consultant implemented a mixed-method approach, incorporating pre- and post-engagement surveys alongside 2-hour focus group sessions. While this approach yielded valuable insights, the discussion duration proved insufficient for conducting more in-depth deliberations. Despite the facilitator's adept management, the limited timeframe restricted the ability to thoroughly explore and analyse participants' perceptions.
- A small sample size - in total 39 people from across various ethnicities participated in the group discussions and surveys. Given figures from the 2021 Census indicate that 6.9% of Belfast's population belonged to minority ethnic groupsⁱ, in an area of 1,000 or so people within Donegall Passⁱⁱ, this sample is still not representative. Furthermore, the sample size indicated that only 4 / 39 participants lived in Donegall Pass which is well under the 10-15% rule.

Given the constraints of the sample, it was recognised that, without a larger sample size and an extended timeframe, this report is limited to providing **preliminary insights and feedback**. To gain a deeper understanding of the issue and to formulate more effective, sustainable solutions that enhance integration and foster social cohesion, **comprehensive and detailed research will be essential**.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher was engaged in mid-January 2025 and for approximately six weeks between late January and mid-March 2025 the following approach was taken forward:

The Approach:

Outlined below is a breakdown of the key steps and tasks taken forward:

Step 1: Project clarification	Met with DPCE lead to discuss scope.
	Defined project scope and research parameters.
Step 2: Defining & refining engagement and research	Identified ethnic minority communities.
	Agreed key engagement partners to facilitate research work.
	Developed and agreed areas for survey.
	Developed and agreed areas for focus group engagement.
Step 3: Engage groups	Connected and agreed research and engagement approach.
	Conducted five pre-engagement surveys.
	Conducted five focus groups sessions.
	Conducted five post-engagement surveys.
Step 4: Further research & Analysis	Compile and analyse individual and collective pre-survey data.
	Analyse individual focus group session feedback.
	Review and identify key individual and collective insights.
	Desk research: • Current ethnicity trends in Northern Ireland • Current Government good relations policy analysis • Key stakeholder associated research.
Step 5: Develop the Insight Report	Initial report drafting.
	Discussions with DPCE regarding key insights and recommendations.
	Publish final Insights Report .

The Research:

Outlined below is a breakdown of the specific research undertaken over the six weeks in early 2025:

1. Widespread **desk research** was conducted focusing on:
 - a. Local and devolved government policy (strategies, frameworks, action plans).
 - b. Latest statistics (population, migration, refugee, hate crime, housing, etc).
 - c. Good relations and community engagement activity.
2. Conducted a brief **statistical analysis** on the 2021 Census population figures, the latest Northern Ireland Refugee statistics (April 2024) and the latest PSNI Hate Crime figures (as of December 2024).

3. Conducted **five focus groups** – broken down as such:

Group	No. of participants
Street Soccer	8 people
Polish Sisterhood	7 people
Belfast Asian Women's Academy (BAWA)	5 people
Bradbury Hub	12 people
Chinese Welfare Association (CWA)	7 people

4. Conducted **five pre-engagement surveys** with participants of the five focus groups (as identified above).
5. Conducted **five post-engagement** surveys with participants of the five focus groups (as identified above).

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Since this research aims to enhance comprehension of the perspectives and experiences of BAME or diverse groups residing in the broader South Belfast area, it is crucial to offer additional background and context to accurately interpret and situate these experiences.

Phase 1 of this report offers a comprehensive overview of Donegall Pass, detailing its history, geographical boundaries, and political context. Building on this foundation, this section focuses on four key areas to provide deeper insight into the experiences of the BAME community in Donegall Pass and across the nation. These areas are outlined as follows:

- **The Pass** – A concise summary of key points and insights gathered from interactions with members from an established community in South Belfast during phase 1 of the research.
- **People** – Essential local statistics, both directly and indirectly related to ethnic minorities and immigration.
- **Perceptions** – Current perspectives on ethnicity and immigration.
- **Policy** – An analysis of relevant local and devolved government policies.

The Pass:

The following key points are taken from the Phase 1 Report (May 2024) entitled '*The Pass – People, Place and Space – A report on the changing nature of Communities in South Belfast*'.

- A community dealing with ongoing change – Donegall Pass has experienced significant change over the last 60+ years. This change has included two thirds decrease in its population, 30 years of ongoing conflict during the 'Troubles' and the significant economic and social transformations. All of which have changed the 'landscape and impacted the essence of a small, tight knit part of inner South Belfast.'ⁱⁱⁱ
- A sense of loss and powerlessness – because of the change, this once vibrant and confident community feels lost and powerless. They feel a loss of identity and connection in an area that they have a deep cultural, social, economic, and historical relationship with.
- A strong bond with the concept of community – 96.2% of respondents in phase 1's research felt it was very important or quite important to be part of a local community, but in contrast, only 67.1% thought that the community spirit was very strong or strong^{iv}.
- The importance of safe and presentable spaces – when asked to outline what is important for the community they indicated:
 - Community activities which bring people together (86%)
 - Safety on the streets (77%)
 - Keeping the area looking nice (76%)
 - Welcoming communal spaces. (68%).^v

Both community safety and the impact of poor presentation of an area was an important theme that was also raised in Phase 1's workshops and focus groups. Please note respondents did recognise the importance of inclusive spaces (65%), but safety and presentability were the most important^{vi}.

- The importance of supporting each other and accessible services – when asked what would you like to see in your area to support the growth and development of your community, the following were prioritised:
 - Supporting one another (82%)
 - Activities which support and engage youth (78%)
 - Reduction in anti - social behaviour (70%)

- Increase in social housing (65%)
 - Increase in the number of businesses and social enterprises (63%)
 - Bringing people together from across the community (58%)
 - Having a say in what happens locally (54%).^{vii}
- Hope to engage – the importance of information – 52% of respondents indicated that they would be happy to collaborate with neighbouring communities on similar themes and areas of concern, however a barrier to working effectively at a local level is the lack of knowledge and information.^{viii}
 - Key components that make up a community – consultation with community groups indicated the following themes that represent the key components to making up the community:
 - A sense of comfort and safety from knowing who the neighbours are
 - Longevity of relationships. Connections that stay
 - Trust
 - Shared history
 - Shared experiences
 - People who care about and invest in their area.^{ix}
 - Key concerns:
 - **Housing** – many local groups have major concerns over housing availability and allocation, with strong feelings that ‘foreign nationals’ were obtaining houses over ‘locals who have ‘roots in the area spanning across generations within Donegall Pass.’ In addition, there were concerns on the increase in ‘new build’ housing – namely concerns over the residents would be and their interactions with the local community.
 - **Safety and anti-social behaviour** – the primary concern highlighted was the growing visibility and presence of drug users, along with discarded needles left behind in areas where children gather and play. This issue was largely attributed to individuals traveling from other parts of the city to use drugs. Additionally, a connection was drawn between the problem and homeless hostels in the area, alongside a noticeable and rising homeless population on the streets. Furthermore, group participants outlined the need to strengthen intergenerational working.
 - **Access to support services** – participants expressed concerns about a lack of coordination and communication among services aimed at assisting people in the local area. This lack of cohesion resulted in barriers to accessing support, missed opportunities and service gaps, and an increased risk of service duplication.
 - **Lack of local amenities** – across all groups, the need for a nearby grocery shop offering local produce was a recurring concern. Many highlighted the contrast between the construction of new housing and the absence of supporting shops. Although there is a Tesco Express on Dublin Road and a Spar in Botanic, safety concerns were consistently raised regarding access to these locations, with references to anti-social behaviour, substance misuse, and the growing issue of homelessness.
 - **Legacy, good relations, and a sense of losing control** – a recurring theme across all group discussions was the evolving and globalised character of areas like Donegall Pass, which has introduced a new dynamic to the community. The arrival of ‘foreign nationals’ has reshaped the social fabric as they integrate into an area where generational ‘locals’ have lived for many years, with families rooted in the community for generations.

Additionally, Donegall Pass takes pride in its Protestant heritage. Recognising, preserving, and celebrating this cultural identity was a significant focus of the discussions, as many participants expressed a desire to ensure it remains intact amidst change. There was little evidence of pronounced tensions between the PUL and CNR communities traditionally divided in Northern Ireland. However, a sentiment of disengagement with the ‘other side’ was noted, with

interactions appearing limited rather than proactive, suggesting a state of ‘negative peace’ rather than a truly ‘positive peace.’

Discussions revealed that concerns about good relations had shifted from the challenges of living between two interfaces - the Catholic community on one side and an opposing loyalist faction on the other - to issues arising from the influx of foreign nationals into the local and surrounding areas. This change brought a sense of losing control over the transformations occurring within the community, alongside a fear of the unfamiliar - stemming from a lack of understanding of different creeds, cultural traditions, and the uncertainty of what to anticipate.

- **Perceptions of the Pass and its culture** – participants conveyed a strong sense of pride and loyalty to the area but felt burdened by negative external perceptions and the associated stigma. This led to a sentiment of being unable to fully express their culture without fear of judgment or misrepresentation. Due to this negative attention, many adult and elderly groups voiced concerns that future generations raised in Donegall Pass might lose their sense of pride in their roots.

Additionally, there is a prevailing sense that the community struggles to celebrate and promote its 'good news stories.' Views on the current state of community spirit within The Pass varied, but there was unanimous agreement on its significance. Community spirit was recognized as a vital aspect of fostering a sense of belonging and maintaining the overall unity and identity of the area.

- **Future aspirations^{xi}** – when asked about what is important for the future, the following themes were identified:
 - Community development - importance of tackling poverty, drug abuse, anti-social behaviour, and litter. In addition, there needs to be a development of trust, especially immediate short-term wins, in which people can start to see something positive is happening.
 - Education, jobs, and opportunities – there is a need for a sustainable culture, which allows for opportunities for residents, especially young people.
 - Reputation – there is a consensus that the community needs to positively promote itself to improve the perception of the area. This will include capturing the positive stories, development and the essence of the area and the local community.

People (the statistics)

Primarily this area focuses on key statistics that concern and impact on Donegall Pass and the surrounding South Belfast environs.

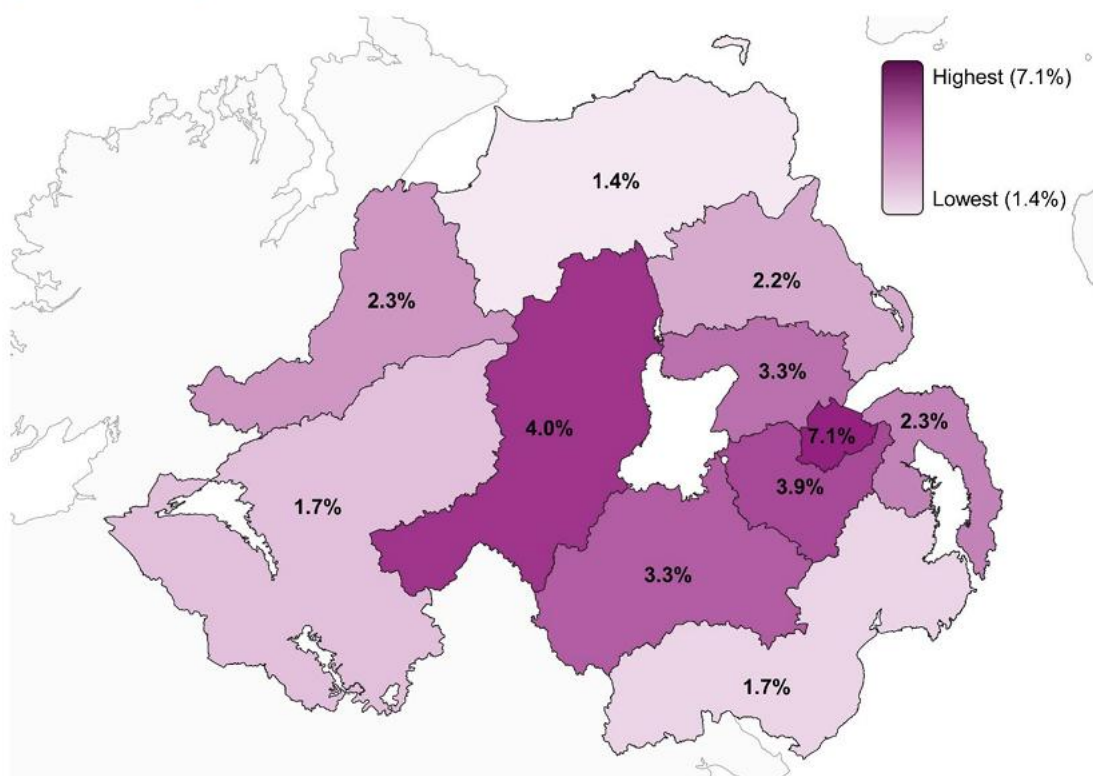
Population diversity in Northern Ireland – the demographics:

The 2021 census data on ethnicity and country of birth were released in September 2022. While Northern Ireland remains the least ethnically diverse region in the UK, the 2021 data showed a marked growth in the numbers of people from different ethnic groups since the previous 2011 Census. In 2021, 3.4% or 65,600 people in Northern Ireland were from an ethnic minority group, compared to 1.8% in the 2011 Census and 0.8% in the 2001 Census. This represents a doubling in the last decade.^{xii}

In terms of further breakdown, people from an Asian heritage make up the largest ethnic minority group, followed by mixed race and Black heritage. The three largest individual groups are Indian, Chinese, and mixed race.^{xiii}

In reference to a breakdown by local government, the map below provides a visual overview:

Figure 4: Percentage of the population with a minority ethnic group by LGD (Census 2021)



To obtain a further breakdown within Belfast, as of 2021, **6.9% of Belfast's population** belonged to minority ethnic groups, with the largest communities being Asian (3.7%), Black (1.3%), and Mixed Ethnicities (1.2%). The table below provides a summary of individual groups:^{xiv}

Description	Statistics
All usual residents	345,419
White	321,053
Irish Traveller	299
Roma	314
Indian	4,361
Chinese	4,738
Filipino	1,637
Pakistani	492
Arab	1,014
Other Asian	1,680
Black African	4,127
Black other	513
Mixed	4,159
Other ethnicities	1,032

As a small inner-city community in Belfast, Donegall Pass is home to approximately 1,350+ residents. This area is part of the Shaftesbury ward, which is among the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland.^{xv} It has been extremely difficult to provide an accurate breakdown by ethnicity for Donegall Pass as the census data sits across various data zones – C1, C3, C4, D1 and D3. Estimates were calculated and published within the Phase 1 report. Based on the analysis, we can estimate the following statistics regarding ethnicity in Donegall Pass:

Characteristics	Donegall Pass (based on C4 & D1 ONLY)	Belfast	Northern Ireland
Country of Birth	70.5% (NI)	84% (NI)	87% (NI)
National Identity	British Only 53% Irish Only 7% Northern Irish 11% British and Irish <1% British and Northern Irish 8% Irish and Northern Irish 1% British, Irish and Northern Irish 1% Other National ID 19%	British Only 27% Irish Only 35% Northern Irish 17% British and Irish <1% British and Northern Irish 7% Irish and Northern Irish 2% British, Irish and Northern Irish 2% Other National ID 10%	British Only 32% Irish Only 29% Northern Irish 20% British and Irish <1% British and Northern Irish 8% Irish and Northern Irish 2% British, Irish and Northern Irish 1% Other National ID 10%
Ethnic Groups	White 73.5% Other ethnic groups 26.5%	White 93% Other ethnic groups 7%	White 97% Other ethnic groups 3%
Year of arrival to live in NI	Born in NI 70.5% Arrived: • Before 2001 – 6% • Between 2001-2010 – 10.5% • Between 2011 – 2021 – 12.5%	Born in NI 84% Arrived: • Before 2001 – 4% • Between 2001-2010 – 4% • Between 2011 – 2021 – 9%	Born in NI 87% Arrived: • Before 2001 – 4% • Between 2001-2010 – 3% • Between 2011 – 2021 – 6%

As such, the Donegall Pass area has seen an increase in diversity, with notable presence of ethnic minority communities, including Chinese and other Asian groups, due to the proximity to the city centre and Queen's University.^{xvi}

The 2021 Census revealed a significant increase in the number of Northern Ireland residents born outside the UK and Ireland. Among the population, 3.5% or 71,200 people were born in EU countries such as Poland, Lithuania, and Romania, reflecting an almost 50% rise since 2011. Additionally, 3% or 53,100 of the population were born in non-EU countries. Combined, this means that 6.5% of Northern Ireland's population in 2021 were born outside the UK and Ireland, up from 4.5% in 2011.^{xvii}

A recent research report from the Northern Ireland Assembly was able to show a comparison between Northern Ireland as a whole, and the Botanic District Electoral Area (DEA). While 6.3% of the Northern Ireland population were born outside the UK and Ireland, this figure rises to almost a quarter (23.4%) in Botanic DEA. The table below provides clarity on this comparison figures:

Table 2.3 Country of Birth, Northern Ireland – v – Botanic DEA, Census 2021

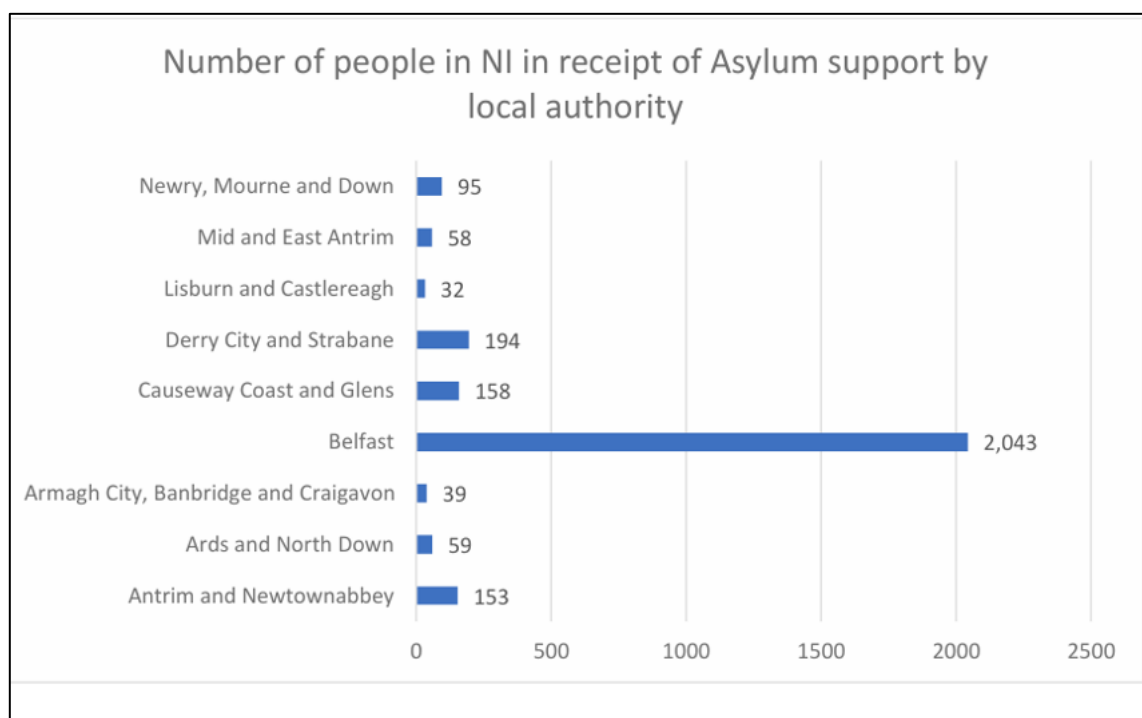
Country of Birth	Northern Ireland		Botanic DEA	
	Count	%	Count	%
Northern Ireland	1,646,300	86.5%	32,672	65.7%
England, Scotland and Wales	92,300	4.8%	3,709	7.55%
Ireland	40,400	2.1%	1,738	3.5%
Europe	71,200	3.5%	3,416	6.9%
Rest of World	53,100	2.8%	8,192	16.5%
Total	1,646,300	100.0%	49,727	100.0%

Source: NISRA (2023) Flexible Table Builder, Country of Birth

Please note, Botanic DEA was selected in the Assembly report due to having the second-highest proportion of residents born outside the UK, surpassed only by Dungannon DEA (26.2%). It was also identified as the focal point for much of the racially motivated violence in August 2024, including incidents on Donegall Road, Shaftesbury Square, Botanic Avenue, University Avenue, and Ormeau Road. Given that Donegall Pass is situated at the centre of this area, it is reasonable to infer a strong connection to its diverse demographic profile.^{xviii}

In terms of asylum seekers and refugees, Northern Ireland has seen a significant increase in numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in recent years. Home Office data say that as of December 2023, of the 111,132 people receiving asylum support, 2,831 people or 2.55% were living in Northern Ireland.^{xix}

The table below breaks down areas where asylum seekers are living in Northern Ireland as of December 2023:^{xx}



In short, Belfast has seen a significant increase in asylum seekers, primarily living in short term accommodation, until they are properly resettled.

Please note – throughout this research it is clear there is a continued lack of disaggregated equality data in Northern Ireland for minority ethnic people, Given the importance of diversity and building a more inclusive society, the Executive Office and relevant Northern Ireland departments should be collecting and publishing disaggregated equality data, including minority ethnic people in Northern Ireland. If we are to better understand the issues and identify what is accurate and what is perception or dis or misinformation, we need to collect and analyse the data.

Through the Research and Information Service, the Northern Ireland Assembly published a report in February 2025 entitled: ‘*International Migration in Northern Ireland: An Update.*’ The following key points relating to impact were identified^{xxi}:

- The number of **newcomer pupils** (for whom English is a second language) has more than doubled in the past twelve years, from 8,674 in 2011 to 20,987 in 2023, and now accounts for 5.9 per cent of all school enrolments.
- **Births to mothers born outside the UK** and Ireland have risen from 589 in 2000 to 2,402 in 2022.
- During the period January 2010 – December 2020, Poland was the top country of origin for international migrants coming to live in Northern Ireland. Since Brexit, however, inward migration from Europe has fallen sharply, and medical card registrations (2023) show that **India, Ireland, and Nigeria are now the top countries of origin.**
- Most **migrants are young**, with around 87% under the age of 35 years. Just over half (51%) are male.
- Hate crime is more prevalent in Northern Ireland than realised, with the number of racist incidents and crimes regularly exceeding the number of sectarian crimes.
- Population projections suggest that **international migration is likely to become the dominant factor in population change in Northern Ireland.** This is because present trends show that, while birth rates continue to fall, death rates are rising sharply, and by 2035, the number of deaths is expected to exceed the number of births.
- With an ageing population, and a growing shortage of young people moving into the labour market, a regular flow of young, **international migrants will be essential to maintain public services and the economy** in general.

Hate Crime & Incidents:

As indicated in various reports race related hate crime has been increasing. At the outset, it is important to note that hate crime is notoriously under-reported in Northern Ireland with the PSNI noting that hate crimes in 2019 could be ‘five times worse’ than official statistics^{xxii}.

The table below outlines the trends in race incidents and crimes recorded by the police since 2004/5:^{xxiii}

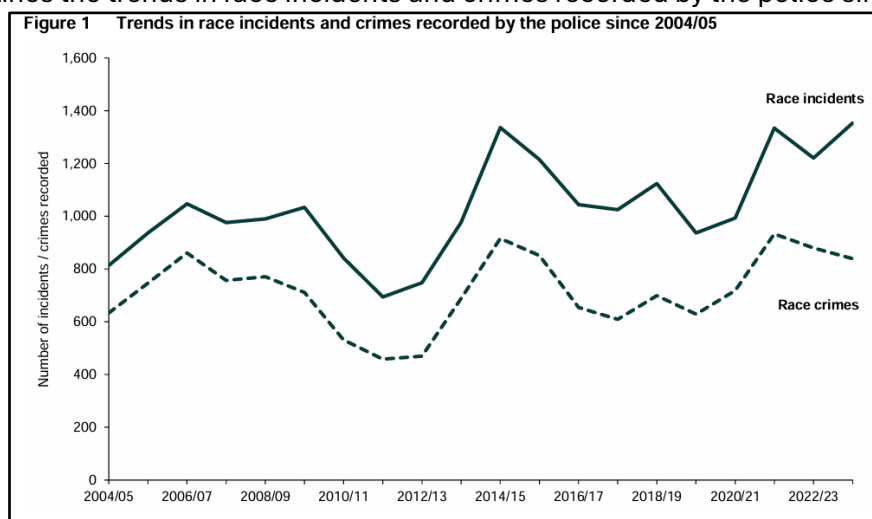
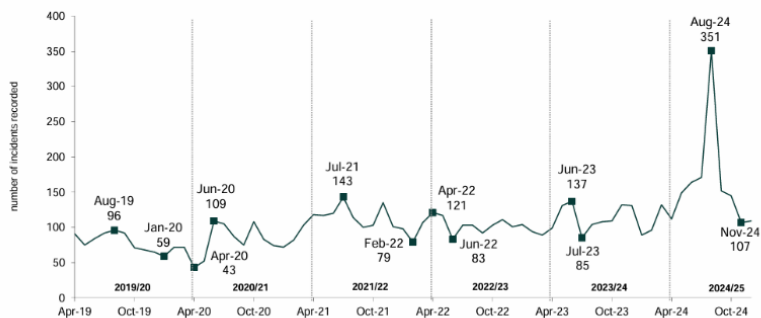


Figure 2 Police recorded race incidents each month April 2019 to December 2024, showing highest and lowest levels in each financial year



Furthermore, statistics in this graph on the left show a huge spike in monthly incidents because of the August 2024 tensions.

In August 2024 there were 351 incidents took place. ^{xxiv}

When this is compared to the previous year it is clear how significant the increase in race related incidents was in August 2024.

^{xxv}

Figure 3 Race incidents recorded by the police, January 2023 to December 2024

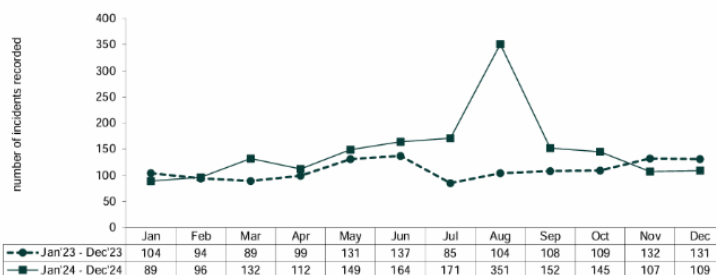
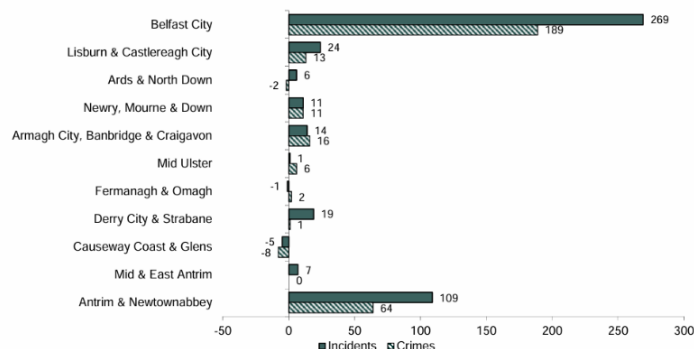


Figure 6 Change in police recorded race incidents and crimes by policing district, 12 months to December 2024 compared with the previous 12 months

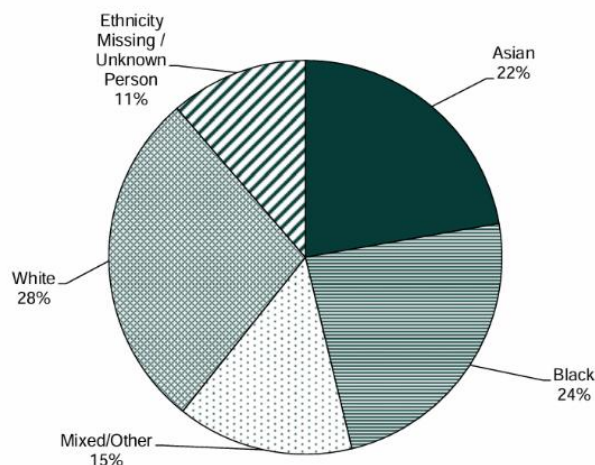


In terms of where the incidents occurred, this table to the left provides a breakdown by policing district and by hate incidents and hate crimes over two years. ^{xxvi}

Belfast City was a key area of concern.

The PSNI figures also include a breakdown by ethnicity in the last calendar year – as indicated in the chart to the right. ^{xxvii}

Figure 7 Ethnicity of victims of race crimes, January 2024 to December 2024



The urgency of addressing race-related hate crimes cannot be overstated, as they have surpassed sectarian hate crimes in prevalence. Between January and December 2024 alone, there were 1,777 reported incidents of race-related hate crime, nearly doubling the 922 sectarian incidents recorded during the same period.

This stark disparity highlights a pressing and growing issue that demands focused attention and action^{xxviii}.

Perceptions

Several surveys exist on social attitudes in Northern Ireland including the latest Equality Commission of Northern Ireland's Report: '*Public Opinion Survey of Equality in Northern Ireland*,' published in May 2023. This survey explores various aspects such as awareness and understanding of equality, individual experiences of discrimination, and perceptions of inclusivity in workplaces and public spaces.

The 2023 survey gathered insights from over 1,000 participants, revealing that 79% agreed on the necessity of equality and anti-discrimination laws, while 62% felt workplaces in Northern Ireland were welcoming and inclusive.^{xxix}

In addition, those with a disability (16%), those who describe their ethnicity as non-white British or Irish (16%), and those describing their religion as other /none (25%) were more likely to have experienced a situation where they were not treated with dignity and respect in their workplace, the area where they live or when receiving health and social care services. Furthermore, race (29%) was the most common reason others were not being treated with dignity and respect in their workplace.^{xxx}

Recent discussions and research between 2021 and 2025 highlight evolving perceptions of immigration and ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland. While the region has historically been the least ethnically diverse in the UK, recent census data suggests increasing diversity^{xxxi}. However, challenges persist, including fluctuating social attitudes, instances of racial hate crimes, and barriers to accessing services^{xxxii}.

The impact of Brexit has also shaped perceptions, with concerns about immigration policies, rights, and entitlements for ethnic minorities and migrants. Despite these challenges, there is growing recognition of the need for inclusive policies and better support systems to foster integration and social cohesion.

In late February 2025, the Executive Office published the '*Young People's Attitudes to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland 2024*' report. The report analysed data from the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey and examined attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers among 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland. The key findings from the report are outlined below:

- There was a **significant decrease** in respondents who agreed that '**it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country**.' Figures fell from 63% in 2023 to 55% of respondents agreeing in 2024. Please note this is the first time it has decreased since the start of the time series.
- However, the proportion of **respondents who agreed** that Northern Ireland is a society that **welcomes refugees escaping persecution** in their home country increased significantly between 2017, the first year of the time series, and 2024 (from 25% to 43%).
- In 2024, **63% of respondents agreed** that people's perceptions of **refugees and asylum seekers are negatively affected by the media**.
- Over one-third (36%) of respondents in 2024 agreed that they would like **more opportunities to get to know asylum seekers or refugees**. This was a **significant decrease from 2023** (44%), the first year in the time series.
- In 2024, just over **one-half (51%) of respondents agreed that asylum seekers should have the same access to employment** as the rest of the Northern Ireland population.^{xxxiii}

Policy:

Programme for Government – 2024-2027:

A key component in any research is understanding the current policy priorities of local and central government. In Northern Ireland, the key document is the published 2024-2027 Programme for Government – ‘*Our Plan – Doing what matters.*’

As with much of the criticism directed at this document, it lacks substantial detail on how the government plans to implement the priorities it has outlined. However, on page 87, within the Peace section, the Executive emphasizes that “equality of opportunity and good relations are central to this goal (Peace), supporting our commitment to Safer Communities.” The Executive has pledged to revitalize its Good Relations Programme, Communities in Transition (T:BUC), and to adopt a strategic approach to racial equality, although no publicly disclosed timeframe has been provided for these initiatives. For more information visit: [Programme for Government 2024-2027 ‘Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most’ | The Northern Ireland Executive](#)

In addition to the above future commitment the Northern Ireland Executive has implemented several policies to promote good relations and racial equality, including:

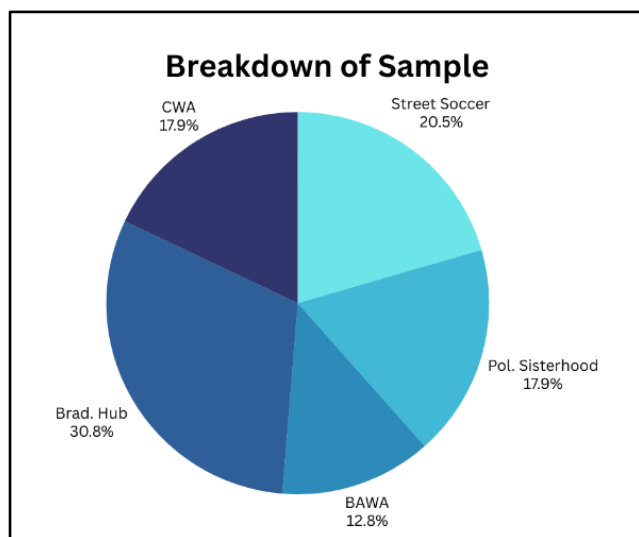
- **Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025** – This strategy provides a framework for tackling racial inequalities, eradicating racism and hate crime, and fostering good race relations and social cohesion. It emphasizes equality in service provision, combating prejudice, and increasing participation and representation of minority ethnic groups. For more information visit: [Racial Equality | The Executive Office](#)
- **Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC)** – This policy focuses on improving community relations and creating a shared and cohesive society. It includes initiatives to address sectarianism, racism, and other forms of intolerance. For more information visit: [Racial Equality | The Executive Office](#)
- **Good Relations Duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998** – This statutory duty requires public authorities to promote good relations between people of different religious beliefs, political opinions, and racial groups. It encourages proactive measures to foster respect, equity, and trust. For more information visit: [Good Relations Summary:Layout 1](#)

SURVEY FINDINGS

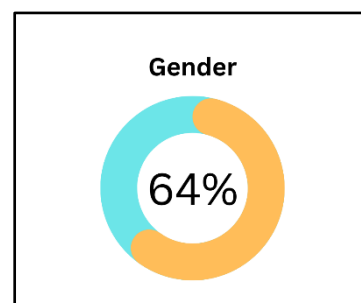
Survey respondent demographics:

Outlined below is a summary of the five pre-engagement surveys that were conducted with each of the following group engagement sessions:

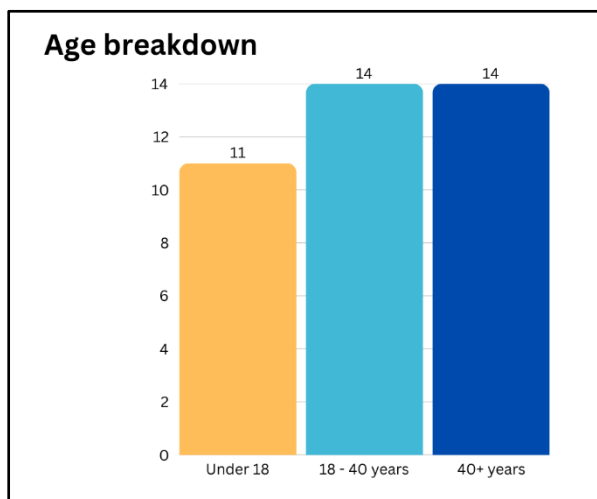
1. Street Soccer NI
2. Polish Sisterhood
3. Belfast Asian Women's Academy (BAWA)
4. Bradbury Hub
5. Chinese Welfare Association (CWA)



- In total: 39 people took part.
- The sample was balanced across most of the five groups, ranging from 5 to 12 participants in any sample group.

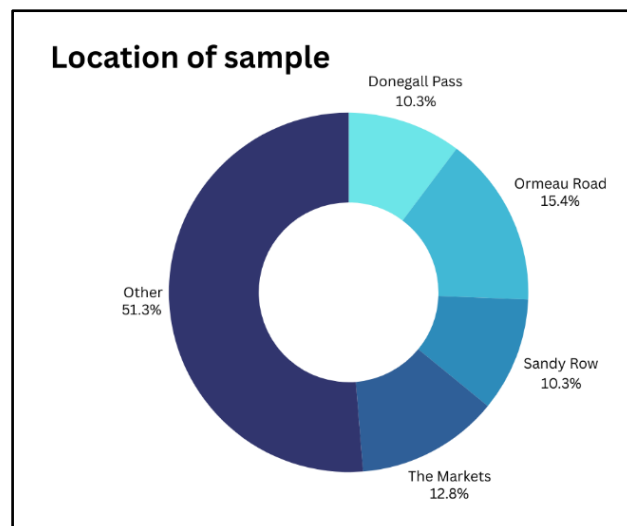


- Nearly 2/3 respondents were female.

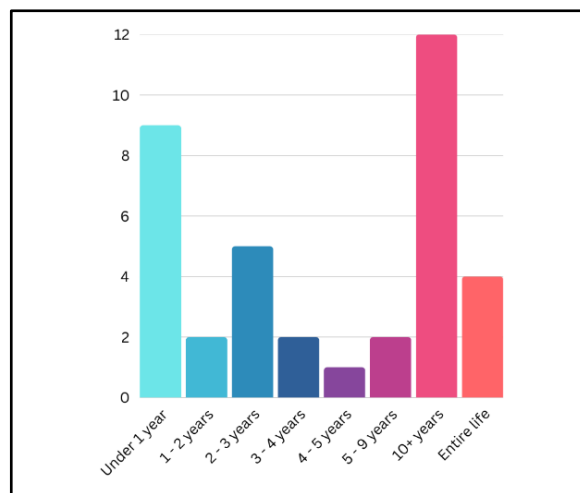


- The sample was evenly split between young people, young to middle aged adults and older people.
- The sample did not break down into specific age categories as feedback indicated many did not want to provide specific information regarding their age and this was evident in some responses such as stating they were 50+ years of age.

- Given the difficulty of timeframes and the specific demographic challenges in identifying groups based in and operating from specifically Donegall Pass, the consultation was based in and across South Belfast. 4 of the 39 participants lived in Donegall Pass.
- However, the sample was evenly split between participants living within the inner-South Belfast area and the greater South Belfast area. In short, providing a strong perspective on living in South Belfast.

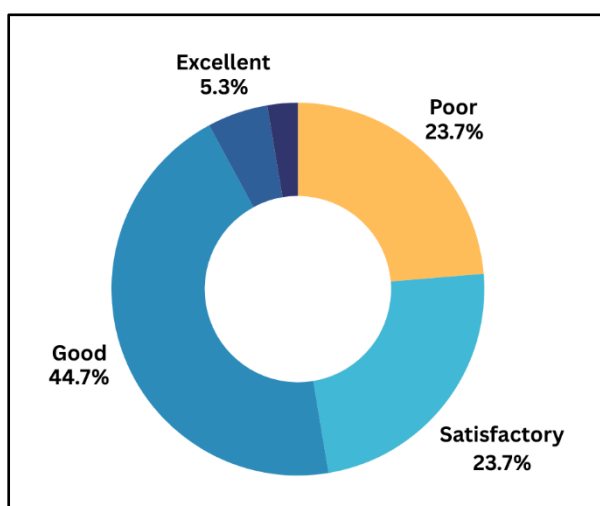


- In terms of how long someone has lived in Northern Ireland, the sample size varied between people who had just arrived and those who had settled over 10+ years – providing a strong perspective on various key stages of their ‘journey’.
- This was more apparent when observing the feedback and insights gathered from each focus group.



Survey insights:

When asked about the level of understanding of the established white local communities within South Belfast, the following data was captured across all five groups:

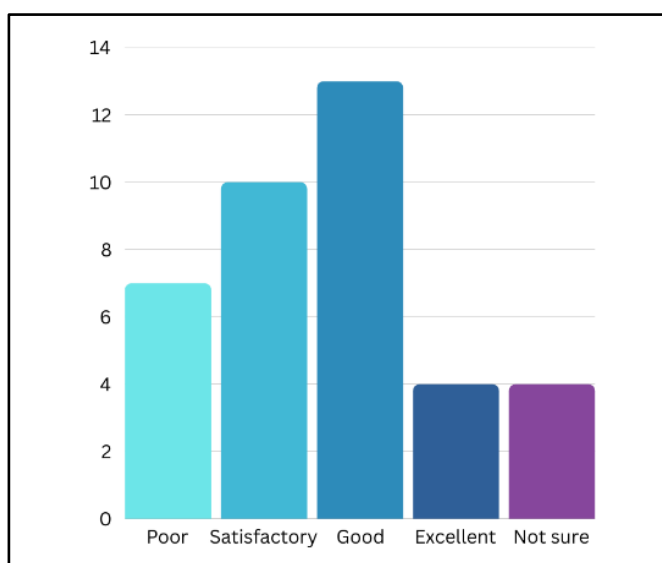


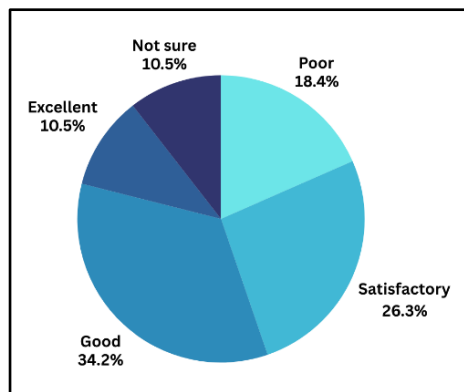
- Several unusual findings were identified once the surveys were broken down further – namely:
 - Those respondents that were residing in Northern Ireland for under a year stated they were more confident in understanding the local South Belfast Community.
 - Just over half of the participants from the Chinese community stated that despite living over 5 years in Northern Ireland were less confident in understanding the local community.

When asked about their knowledge of local culture and community tradition, the following feedback was provided from 38 respondents across all five groups:

- Of the six respondents who stated they had poor knowledge of local culture and community tradition identified as from the Chinese community and had lived here for many years.

In terms of respondents understanding of expectations within the local established white community of newcomer families to the area the following information was gathered from 38 respondents across the five groups:





- 1 in 5 respondents believed they had a poor understanding of how the established white community felt regarding newcomer families to the area and a further 10% stated they were unsure.
- When analysed further most respondents came from the Chinese community.

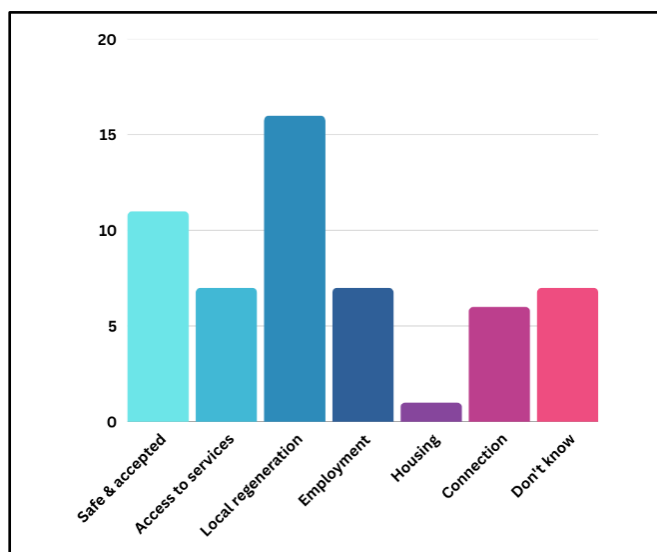
When asked to choose words to best describe individual feelings regarding living in the established community settings in South Belfast, most of the feedback was positive with:

- 20 / 37 or 54% of respondents felt comfortable.
- 18 / 37 or 49% felt happy.
- 14 / 37 or 38% felt accepted.



However, 14 / 37 or 38% also felt confused and 13 / 37 or 35% felt anxious.

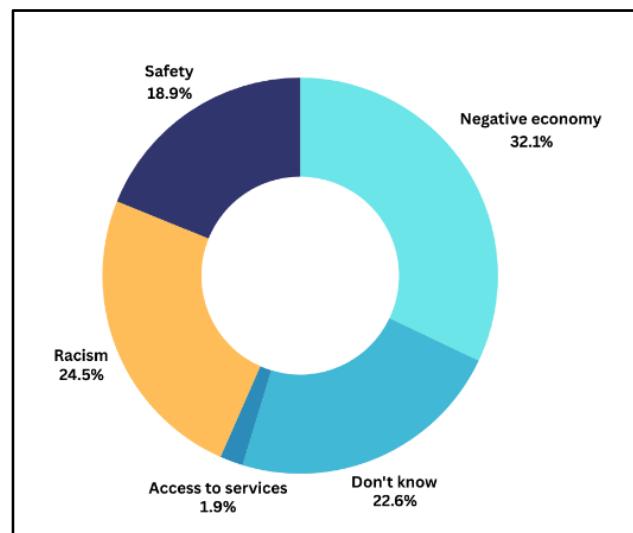
Through an open and unprompted inquiry aimed at understanding the respondents' needs in South Belfast:



- Employment was a significant concern for participants who had been residing in Northern Ireland for less than a year, all of whom held refugee or asylum-seeking status. This was particularly troubling for respondents unable to work due to their legal status, as they faced substantial challenges and negative repercussions as a result. These issues are explored further in the key insights section.
- The issues of safety and acceptance was raised by one or more respondents from within each group.
- The concept of connection referred to the need to meet other people and engage and build connections. There was no distinction made as to whether they would engage with people of similar backgrounds. There seemed to be a consensus that they wanted to engage with people in general.

In terms of future challenges, the following unprompted information was gathered across all five groups:

- Collectively the biggest fear for 43.4% of respondents concerns community safety and racism.
- The single biggest fear is economic in nature concerning cost of living and employment, with one third of respondents citing this as the most important future challenge.
- In terms of a further breakdown, both participants from Street Soccer and the Chinese Welfare Association identified economic issues relating to cost of living and employment as the biggest challenge.



In terms of **hopes and aspirations** for the future, when unprompted, the top 3 areas across all five groups are:

1. **Being accepted**
2. Economic – improved cost of living and having access to employment.
3. Connecting with groups and the community.

Key survey observations:

- **What matters can get ‘lost in translation’** - the survey is not an effective tool for groups that do not have English as a first language - this was specifically apparent when engaging with the Street Soccer NI group of refugees and asylum seekers or displaced persons. Despite having the survey translated into Arabic, respondents in this group struggled to understand the distinction between the terms ‘nationality’ and ‘ethnicity.’

Furthermore, as the survey was undertaken at the start of the engagement, many respondents were not clear about what the engagement was, and it was only after the group discussion did respondents state that they believed they may have been unsure that they had answered the pre-survey correctly. This was apparent in questions relating to confidence in understanding the local community’s culture and traditions, as they stated their knowledge was satisfactory or good, despite no access to English and needing additional support in areas such as accessing services.

- **Gaps in local understanding and knowledge** – irrespective of whether a respondent lived in Northern Ireland less than 12 months or for over 30 years, many respondents indicated they had gaps in their understanding of local culture and community traditions. Furthermore, they had limited understanding of more current expectations of how established white communities felt about newcomers and an increase in immigration. This was further explored in the group discussions, as there seemed to be more diversity but less inclusion and integration.

- The **critical role of language in fostering understanding** cannot be overstated. For recent arrivals to Northern Ireland, limited English proficiency posed a significant challenge, creating barriers to integration and participation. Similarly, discussions with representatives from the Chinese community revealed that, despite many having lived in Northern Ireland for decades, a lack of understanding of local culture and traditions persisted due to language barriers. This highlights a pressing need to strengthen connections with the Chinese community, a group that has been a vital part of Northern Ireland's cultural fabric for over 50 years. By addressing these barriers, there is an opportunity to deepen relationships and build a more inclusive society.
- Both newly arrived and long-established diverse groups often **perceive little distinction between Christian denominations** - this perspective was evident in both the survey results and the discussions, where most respondents chose to identify simply as Christians, rather than aligning with either Protestant or Catholic labels. When elaborated upon during discussions, respondents explained that they viewed themselves as Christians above all else. Additionally, some expressed discomfort with being associated with 'one side of the community' or 'the other,' as they did not consider themselves part of the historical conflict. This matter will be explored further in the insights section of the report.
- **Ambiguity around the concept of nationality** – Ambiguity surrounding the concept of nationality emerged as a key theme in the survey findings, revealing widespread confusion across all groups regarding the distinction between nationality and ethnicity. Many respondents defined their nationality in terms of their ethnic background. This was particularly evident among established diverse respondents who had lived, worked, and fully participated as citizens in Northern Ireland for a significant period, yet did not identify as British or Irish. The Chinese community was the only group that recognized the distinction, with one respondent highlighting their connection to UK culture stemming from their time in Hong Kong. This suggests a pre-existing association with being British. However, further research would be required to better understand the complexity and uncertainty surrounding the concept of nationality in this context.
- **Economic stability** emerged as a top priority across all groups when discussing future challenges. Ensuring a stable and secure economy was seen as vital. For respondents from the dispersed community, the ability to work was deemed critical, as legal restrictions prevented them from contributing to and benefiting from the economy. Other groups highlighted the escalating cost of living as a significant concern, threatening their quality of life. Additionally, respondents emphasized two key aspects of safety: general community safety, including issues of anti-social behaviour and crime, and the rise in racism. Together, these safety concerns accounted for 43.4% of the challenges identified, underscoring the urgent **need for comprehensive action to address both economic and social vulnerabilities**.
- **Positive but anxious** – most respondents remained extremely positive regarding living in Northern Ireland, however highlighted that they are also anxious and as they identified, safety and economic stability are critical to addressing this anxiety. Furthermore, their top hope and aspiration focused on being accepted. There is a desire to engage and be part of the rich fabric that makes up Northern Ireland.

GROUP INSIGHTS

About each group:

Five focus groups were facilitated during February 2025. Each session included:

- Conducting a pre-engagement survey
- 2 hr group discussion
- Conducting a post-engagement survey

Outlined below is a brief overview of each group who participated in this research:

The Street Soccer Focus Group:

- 8 participants took part in the engagement session and 7 participated in the pre and post survey on 29 January 2025.
- The group consisted of refugees and one translator.
- All participants were male between the age of 26 and 37 years.
- In terms of breakdown in nationality:
 - 3 are from Yemen.
 - 2 are from Syria.
 - 1 is from Jordan.
 - 1 is from Somalia.
 - 1 is from Lebanon.
- No participant lived in Donegall Pass, with majority of participants stating they lived on Ormeau Road and the remaining participants coming from across inner-city South Belfast.
- Of the 7 who participated in the survey,
 - 6 identified as Muslim and 1 as Orthodox Christian.
 - 6 had resided in Northern Ireland for under one year and the translator had resided in Northern Ireland over five years.



The Polish Sisterhood Focus Group:



- There were 8 participants that took part in the engagement session, however, only 7 participants took part in the pre and post surveys on 01 February 2025.
- The group consisted of 6 women and 2 men.
- A translator was present to support several participants.
- Participants were between the age of 39 and 68.
- In terms of nationality, 5 / 6 defined themselves as Polish and 1 stated Polish/British.
- In terms of ethnicity all identified as white.
- No participant lived in Donegall Pass, with 2 participants stating they lived in Sandy Row and 1 in the Markets, whilst the rest resident in areas across South Belfast
- Of the 7 who participated in the survey:
 - In terms of religion, 4 / 7 identified as Christian – Catholic and 1 identified as Christian – Protestant. 2 cited they had no religion.
 - 2 / 7 resided in Northern Ireland between 5 and 9 years and the remaining 5 / 7 stated they resided in Northern Ireland for over 10 years.

The Belfast Asian Women's Academy (BAWA) Focus Group:

- 5 participants took part in the first engagement session and 4 took part in the second session. (Please note to support access to this group, two sessions took place, one face to face on 15 February 2025 and the second session via online the 25 February 2025.)
- No translator was required.
- All participants were female and between the age of 28 and 48 years.
- In terms of breakdown in nationality:
 - 4 stated they are Indian.
 - 1 is from Malaysia.
- No participant lived in Donegall Pass, with 2/ 5 participants stating they lived in Sandy Row and the remaining 3 residing on Ormeau Road.
- Of the 5 who participated in the pre-survey,
 - 2 identified as Christian – Catholic and 3 identified as Hindu.
 - 2 / 5 resided in Northern Ireland between 2 and 3 years and the remaining 3 / 5 stated they resided in Northern Ireland for over 10 years.



The Bradbury Hub Focus Group:



- There were 12 participants that took part in the engagement session and both the pre and post surveys on 21 February 2025.
- The group consisted of young people of secondary school age from across Belfast.
- No translators were needed.
- 8 identified as female and 4 identified as male.
- Participants were between the age of 13 and 20.

- In terms of nationality:
 - 3 / 12 stated they are British
 - 7 / 12 stated they are Nigerian
 - 1 / 12 stated they are Italian.
- In terms of ethnicity, 11 people responded. Please note, there was confusion between what is ethnicity, nationality, and religion, as such 4 stated they were black and 4 stated were African.
- Two participants lived in Donegall Pass with the majority living outside of the area in locations across Belfast.
- Of the 12 who participated in the pre-survey,
 - 3 identified as Protestant and 8 identified as other referring to themselves as Christians and not wishing to define themselves either as Catholic or Protestant
 - In terms of length of residency in Northern Ireland, the group was evenly spread with:
 - 2 residing in Northern Ireland under 1 year.
 - 2 residing in Northern Ireland between 1 and 2 years.
 - 1 residing in Northern Ireland between 2 and 3 years.
 - 2 residing in Northern Ireland between 3 and 4 years.
 - 1 residing in Northern Ireland between 4 and 5 years.
 - 1 residing in Northern Ireland between 5 and 9 years.
 - 3 residing in Northern Ireland for 10+ years.

The Chinese Welfare Association Focus Group:

- 7 participants took part in the engagement session and both the pre and post surveys on 28 February 2025.
- A translator was required to support several participants.
- 6 / 7 participants were female and between the age of 43 and 74 years.
- In terms of breakdown in nationality:
 - 5 / 7 stated they are British
 - 2 stated they are Chinese.
- In terms of ethnicity, all participants stated they were Chinese.
- 2 / 7 participants lived in Donegall Pass, 2 / 7 lived on Ormeau Road and the remaining stated they are based in the greater South Belfast area.
- Of the 7 who participated in the pre-survey,
 - 1 identified as Protestant and 4 stated they are Christian.
 - In terms of length of residency in Northern Ireland, the group was evenly spread with:
 - 2 residing in Northern Ireland between 2 and 3 years.
 - 4 residing in Northern Ireland for 10+ years
 - 1 residing in Northern Ireland all their life.



The key insights:

Each of the five focus groups engaged in open and in-depth discussions. Numerous insights emerged, many of which were commonly shared across the groups. This section aims to highlight these key insights while offering deeper analysis and clarity on their significance.

The following insights have been identified as important from most, if not all the five focus groups:

1. Community is more than a location.
2. Individual immigration circumstances shape experience, participation, and priorities.
3. Community is more diverse than green versus orange.
4. There is a need to balance integration and diversity and create safe pathways toward inclusion.
5. Leadership at all levels is important.
6. Learning the language is critical to connection.
7. Fear and change are pivotal drivers of behaviour and must not be underestimated.
8. Things have gotten worse in recent years.
9. Young people can be the problem and the solution.
10. We need better awareness, engagement, and education.
11. Shatter myths and let's celebrate the positive impact of immigration.
12. We can learn a lot from local history.
13. A Good Relations Hub should be more than a shared space.
14. See me as me.

Based on the list provided above, the following insights are explored and elaborated upon below:

Insight 1: Community is more than a location.

The concept of community varied significantly among the five newcomer and established diverse focus groups. Many participants emphasised that community could not be strictly defined by a geographical location. While they may have lived in a particular place for years, it was commonalities with certain people or having shared activities, interests, values, priorities, and experiences that truly fostered their sense of belonging, rather than

the physical structures or historical background of the area. That said, a geographical connection often became more meaningful for some respondents when tied to a positive (or even a negative) personal memory associated with the location. For example, the local school where their children attended or a place where they met someone and fell in love.

Participants highlighted that community is about having something in common with others, whether as individuals or groups. It goes beyond shared history or language and can encompass shared interests. Additionally, they noted that people often belong to multiple communities simultaneously, emphasizing communities of interest. For instance, being part of a women's group or a church holds just as much significance in defining their sense of community as sharing a similar cultural background.

Although the groups differed in various aspects, they unanimously highlighted the need to remove barriers to engagement and participation. They recognized that such obstacles were clear signs that individuals did not feel integrated into the community. **Respect** and **safety** emerged as two essential pillars of inclusion.



The quote to the left was shared by a participant from the Street Soccer NI focus group in which they captured the importance of respect. Good relations and strong community cohesion comes when people respect one another, even when there are differences in religion, culture, language, ethnicity, and interests.

Where there is respect, trust can grow, but it is difficult to create respect if there are barriers to engagement such as language and personal prejudices.

The quote to the right was shared by a participant from the Bradbury Hub focus group in which a young person talked about the importance of feeling safe when referring to being part of a community.

The concept of feeling safe was mentioned by every focus group and many respondents indicated this was important to them. If someone does not feel safe, they will find it hard to build trust, respect, and meaningful connections.



Throughout the discussions, participants across various focus groups identified both advantages and challenges in defining community and safety based on people rather than geographical locations. They observed that the concept of 'land' or physical space often carries implications of ownership, and when individuals outside a specific community move into an area, it can create a perception of land being lost or taken. This issue is further intensified by the legacy of the 'Troubles,' during which many people sacrificed their lives defending streets, roads, or local communities.

Newcomer and diverse groups, on the other hand, tend to form communities centred around people and shared interests rather than physical or historical ties. As a result, changes to the physical landscape may not resonate with them as deeply as they do with established communities. However, this lack of connection can heighten concerns that newcomer and diverse groups may not engage with the broader 'Political' discourse in Northern Ireland.

Insight 2: Individual immigration circumstances shape experience and priorities

This research provided an opportunity to engage with various diverse groups, who came to settle in Northern Ireland for different reasons and it is these different circumstances that impact on an individual's engagement and experience as well as their priorities. This was especially clear when engaging with displaced participants from the Street Soccer NI focus group.

Participants from the Street Soccer NI group consisted primarily of people who had refugee or asylum-seeking status. As such, their needs and experience were different to other groups who came to Northern Ireland as economic migrants five or more years ago.

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.

Participants who identified as displaced shared their experience in which many stated they had fled their home country due to trauma or conflict, fleeing to seek safety and to build a new life. Their movement was neither planned nor voluntary and may have been traumatic in nature. Due to their legal status, they are unable to work and are required to live in temporary accommodation until they are dispersed and provided with housing which could be located anywhere across the country. During this period, they face significant challenges, including the inability to make more permanent connections (as they could be moved to anywhere in Northern Ireland), secure employment and find it difficult to access English language courses.

In terms of engagement, the group of displaced people were initially hesitant to engage in the focus group primarily unsure as to what the purpose of the engagement was, but it can be assumed that the language barrier was also not helpful. However, the group became engaged and openly participated, and it immediately became clear that their experience and motivation for coming to Northern Ireland impacted on their needs, expectations, and priorities. In short, as many were at the start of 'their journey towards resettlement' their needs were more focused on 'surviving' other than 'thriving.'

The group struggled to focus on future planning or integration due to pressing survival concerns like housing, employment, legal residency, and learning English. Temporary accommodations and the inability to work fuelled negative stereotypes about them – stereotypes such as being "lazy" or only seeking "free benefits and housing."

Displaced participants were eager to engage in the research discussion but due to facing more urgent challenges such as accessing healthcare and enrolling in English classes, immediate needs were more important to express. For example, they were deeply frustrated by restrictions on legal employment, which hindered their ability to participate in society and affected their self-esteem.

In stark contrast, the experience, and priorities of the other participants from diverse groups who came here primarily as economic migrants many years ago is completely different. As economic migrants many stated they voluntarily left their home country or region in search of better economic opportunities – often moving to find employment, improve their standard of living, or support their families. In short, their motivation to migrate to Northern Ireland was more planned and wanted.

Furthermore, participants indicated that when they arrived in Northern Ireland years ago, many stated they were positively welcomed as it was at a time when there were not many people from diverse backgrounds living in the country and those that arrived tended to become employed in areas that had skills shortage. In addition, many arrived when the economy was stronger and there were more employment opportunities.

I arrived in Portaferry in 2001 and they were so friendly as they had never seen a 'brown' person in their village. The community were so friendly then.

When engaging with more settled diverse group participants, it was clear that in their 'journey' they were more settled and their thoughts regarding community or good relations focused more so on better understanding both the local and diverse cultures to further strengthen social cohesion. These thoughts are further discussed in specific insights outlined in this section.

To summarise, newcomers and more established diverse groups have differing experiences, needs, and priorities, which should be acknowledged) and considered independently both at a system level as well as part of the public debate.

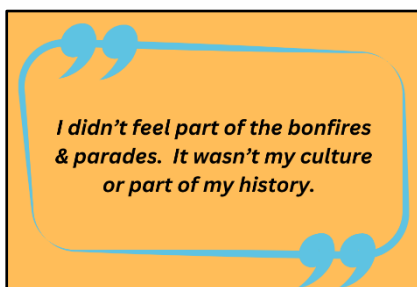
Insight 3: Community is more diverse than green verses orange.

Many participants indicated during focus group discussions that the concept of community locally tends to be defined by the concept of 'green' and 'orange.' However, as diverse group participants indicated, to them this is 'strange and outdated' and believed it was important that going forward we needed to look at the community as more diverse and not in just as 'two camps.' Collectively, participants identified three key points:

1. The local established community seeks to determine 'friend or foe'– many groups reporting that regardless of whether someone is Protestant, Unionist Loyalist (PUL), or Catholic, Nationalist Republican (CNR), there is a tendency of the established community to seek to identify the diverse groups political allegiances concerning Northern Ireland. For instance, the Polish community shared instances where they were presumed to be Catholic and pro-united Ireland due to a former Pope's Catholic faith. Similarly, a participant of African descent recounted how a school friend's mother instructed her child to stop interacting with the participant because her name sounded "Catholic."

When these issues were explored further, participants expressed discomfort and frustration with the established community's inclination to assess their alignment with local political beliefs, often assuming their religion dictated their stance on Northern Ireland's political landscape. Most participants emphasized that they were uninterested in the historical or political connections between communities and had no desire to "take a position." Instead, their focus as part of the community was on building connections through shared interests and striving for survival and growth.

2. Culture within the community can serve as a bridge or barrier to engagement and integration – many participants from across the diverse focus groups stated that as the 'orange' and 'green' culture was an important community component, they viewed this as potentially a barrier. Some cited that the presence of large murals and flags marking territory could feel intimidating. Others remarked on the culture of parades and bonfires, stating that they did not have the same connection as it was not part of their history.

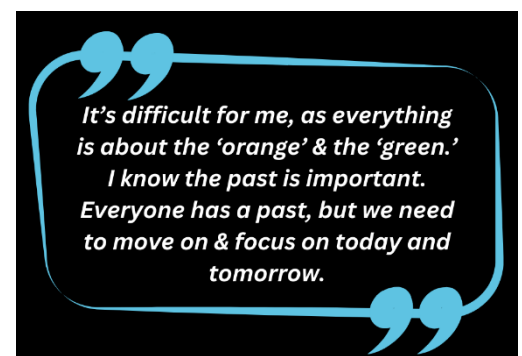


Further discussions revealed a strong interest in learning about local history and culture. However, some participants felt hesitant to engage, perceiving themselves as 'outsiders,' yet expressed enthusiasm to attend and explore more if invited to take part in the local cultural experience.

To summarise, sharing and celebrating culture could be a bridge to better engagement and integration across different communities.

3. The past is important, but we're focused more on the present and the future – when discussing the concept of community as well as providing feedback on the perceptions and experiences of the established community within Donegall Pass, many participants across the diverse focus groups indicated that they recognised that the history of each community was a critical factor however, they believed that as important as the past is, it should not define what our present and future should be.

Participants acknowledge that in their home countries they too recognised the importance of the past, however they stated that we can't change what happened, but we can learn from it so we don't repeat past mistakes as well as look at how we can make improvements for those living today and tomorrow.



There was a brief discussion concerning linkage of the past to culture, in which some participants highlighted that culture is a strength when it has limited connection to politics or religion and stressed that any engagement should utilise culture but NOT religion as it will tend to be more divisive and disengaging.

Insight 4: There is a need to balance integration and diversity to create safe pathways towards inclusion.

It can be a logical assumption that time can establish integration, however discussions with several participants from various diverse groups who had lived in Northern Ireland for decades indicated that they had still little understanding of the local views, cultures, and traditions. When further discussed, it was clear that there was no intentional approach from either the established community or the diverse community to not share or integrate. Instead, some participants from the diverse community stated the importance of balancing diversity and integration.

The spoke of diversity, citing the importance of safety in our own group – participants indicated that when they arrived in Northern Ireland, they gravitated towards people who had a similar cultural, language or ethnic background as it was a great way to share information as well as not feel as isolated. This also created a sense of community, with one participant from the Chinese community referring to it as a form of a “community noticeboard.”

Unfortunately, there have been no processes or pathways in place to look at how diverse groups can integrate more with the established community or with each other. In fact, as some participants indicated, there is more discussion on ensuring the culture of new and diverse groups is not lost, but less discussion on how to find ways of integrating the cultures appropriately so there is cohesion, without anyone losing their identity or feeling threatened. One participant mentioned that ‘it would be great if we could develop a set of shared values that we all believe in live by. Values that would not threaten our cultural, political, or personal beliefs.’

Many felt that the complexity of what makes community and good relations cannot reside on a ‘wait and see’ approach. Instead, more must be done in this area to ensure all communities can safely flourish.

Insight 5: Leadership at all levels is needed.

Building on the above insight, many participants emphasised that a stable and cohesive community tends to not emerge naturally over time. Instead, it demands an intentional effort and a proactive approach. As focus group discussions unfolded, it became evident that both established and diverse communities, preoccupied with survival, cannot achieve this on their own at a local community level. What’s required is robust, inclusive leadership at all levels—leaders who are actively engaged in driving meaningful change and creating sustainable solutions. Only through such collective and strategic action can communities truly thrive.

Additionally, a brief discussion touched on recent approaches to addressing hate crimes. All participants acknowledged a rise in hate crimes and hate incidents but emphasised that solutions should be less about implementing new legislation and more about understanding the underlying issues and actively working to address them.



*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!*

One participant's quote encapsulated a shared sentiment: restricting online speech was not seen as the answer, as such actions often led to greater anger within societal groups. Participants argued that, whether accurate or not, individuals' perspectives are shaped by their lived experiences, and suppressing those views could amplify hatred rather than diminish it. They advocated for increased engagement and open dialogue, believing that only through meaningful conversations and a deeper understanding of one another's perspectives could true resolutions be achieved.

To summarise, many participants felt there needed to be investment in areas such as local infrastructure, leadership development (both at political and community levels), time to build relations and funding to create opportunity to impact change. Failure to invest in this work may tend to be more 'expensive' in the future.

Insight 6: Learning the local language is critical to connection.

A core component to community is the importance of language. Speaking the same language brings a range of benefits that can significantly enhance good relations, benefits such as:

- Improved communication - will limit barriers and enable clear and effective discussions that reduce misunderstandings and foster collaboration.
- Stronger connection - sharing a language helps people feel a sense of belonging and mutual understanding, which strengthens trust and relationships within a community.
- Conflict resolution - common language allows individuals or groups to address disagreements constructively and collaboratively, paving the way for peaceful resolutions.
- Shared culture - language often carries cultural significance. Speaking the same language can create shared experiences and appreciation of cultural values, bridging differences.
- Inclusivity - it promotes inclusiveness by allowing everyone to participate in discussions, decision-making, and community activities, empowering diverse voices.
- Opportunities for collaboration - common language facilitates teamwork across different sectors, whether in workplaces, education, or local initiatives, fostering innovation and cooperation.

Feedback from all groups highlighted the vital importance of speaking English and emphasised many of the benefits mentioned in the list of bullet points above. However, newcomers face significant challenges in accessing English language courses. The demand is overwhelming, with hundreds of applicants competing for a limited number of spots. While some community and voluntary organisations offer language classes, these are often less effective as they are held only once a week and primarily cater to beginners, leaving those with prior knowledge without adequate support to progress further.



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

The lack of access to learning English is a serious barrier and many participants stated that they 'desperately wanted to learn English so they could better connect, engage, and understand. They want to work so they can build a life and become independent and being able to speak the same language as the local population is important to achieving this.

Furthermore, some participants noted that a lack of English proficiency often strained local interactions, as certain established communities became frustrated or upset when individuals had not "*made the effort to learn the local language.*"

Identifying commonalities is crucial, and sharing a common language serves as a powerful tool to bridge divides, foster understanding, and celebrate differences. It lays the foundation for meaningful social connections, promotes empathy across cultures, and strengthens the fabric of a united and resilient community. By speaking the same language, individuals not only connect but also create opportunities to build lasting relationships and a shared sense of belonging.

Insight 7: Fear and change are pivotal drivers of behaviour and must not be underestimated.

When discussing the concept of community, many discussions across the focus groups turned to the issue of fear and change as factors that can positively and negatively drive impact on community cohesion.

Firstly, most participants acknowledged that local communities across Northern Ireland have been experiencing profound changes. In addition to navigating the ongoing transition from conflict to peace from 30 years of the Troubles, these communities are also contending with the wide-ranging societal impacts of a global pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis, severe housing shortages, and challenges in accessing essential local services - all amid a substantial and unanticipated growth in ethnic minority populations within the region.

Participants felt these dramatic changes cannot and should not be ignored as the fear is real and if not acknowledged and addressed could change the dynamics, relationship, and overall wellbeing of a community. For example, it could lead to a breakdown in trust and heighten tensions as fear tends to conflicts escalating. All in all, this can lead to a reduction in social cohesion and increase mental health challenges.

Secondly, newcomer and diverse groups often demonstrate greater adaptability to change within the community. Upon further discussion, participants explained that having already experienced profound change by leaving their homeland and relocating to Northern Ireland, they have gained insight into both the advantages and challenges of embracing or resisting change. This experience has fostered a resilience that enables newcomers to navigate change more effectively.

Additionally, some participants expressed that their adaptability to change is sometimes viewed negatively by some in the established community. Some participants expressed that they felt certain local individuals appeared envious of their success. Rather than reflecting on their own achievements, these individuals perceived the diverse community as receiving more opportunities or achieving greater success than the established community. This perception contributed to tension and adversely impacted good relations.

Insight 8: Things have got worse in recent years!

One of the most significant insights gathered from across diverse groups who had been living in Northern Ireland for over 10 years was the impression that good relations had worsen in the past five or so years. When asked to elaborate further as to what they believed was the reason for this, the following was highlighted:

1. 'Too much change and too many people of colour in a short timeframe' – building on the earlier insights, the substantial rise in immigration over the past few years has brought rapid and overwhelming changes, making it challenging to foster and manage connections across communities.



This shift coincided with a period of immense change and uncertainty - beginning in 2016, Northern Ireland has grappled with the repercussions of Brexit, a global pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis, and the looming threat of war, all while experiencing unprecedented, unplanned increases in immigration.

The complexities of the situation are exacerbated by the lack of additional resources to support the pressure on local infrastructure. Consequently, many displaced individuals are being dispersed and housed in neighbourhoods that are already struggling socially and economically.

At the same time, many local residents who have endured hardship in recent years are now witnessing significant population changes themselves. They are, rightly or wrongly, drawing connections between

these challenges and the shifts in demographics around them. As the quote above from one of the focus groups summarises it well - we tend to be cautious or fearful of what is new or different.

In addition, this is compounded by the limited understanding and awareness as diverse groups communicated a perception that some people in local established white communities in Northern Ireland cannot distinguish between someone who has been living legally in Northern Ireland for years and someone who has just arrived a month ago.

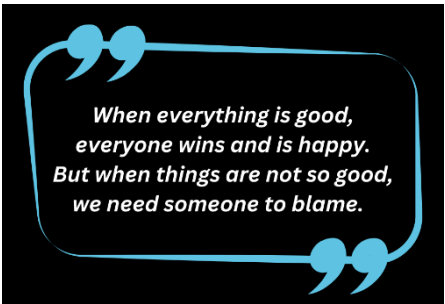
The quote to the right summarises well this issue as this participant mentioned how they were warmly welcomed when they arrived over 15 years ago as many people had not seen someone like them living in their village. However, the participant stated that ‘there were a few women of Bangladeshi descent who were recently attacked in 2024. These women had been living and working in Northern Ireland for years.’



I've lived here for years & contributed, but people can't tell this. They just see the colour of my skin & assume I arrived here illegally & am taking valuable resources.

Several participants strongly believed that many of the challenges could have been avoided or significantly reduced if immigration numbers had been more effectively managed, services better prepared, and resources appropriately allocated. They also emphasised the critical importance of society engaging in an open, honest, and constructive dialogue to address these issues proactively.

2. The economic factor – as highlighted earlier, the economic factor is significant and cannot be overlooked. Respondents emphasised that it is overly simplistic for some in society to claim that individuals in socially deprived areas of Northern Ireland harbour anger towards ethnic minorities solely because they are racist. Many participants argued that not everyone concerned about immigration or involved in the riots during the summer of 2024 holds racist views. They believed that if widespread racism were truly prevalent, it would have resulted in more violent manifestations over the past 5, 10, or even 20 years.



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

Many participants believed that the decline in good relations was primarily linked to economic challenges. This perspective was encapsulated effectively in the accompanying quote. When individuals are unable to make ends meet and feel they are struggling despite their best efforts, they often search for someone to hold accountable. In the absence of a clear culprit, they tend to turn to their local community, and, as a facet of human nature, are more likely to place blame on those who are new or different.

3. Inability to have ‘honest conversations’ especially on complex issues such as immigration – this concept was explored in a few focus groups as some participants felt that as a society, we did not have honest conversations about immigration, instead oversimplifying what is a very complex issue and blaming ‘each other’. This discussion focused on two aspects – namely a ‘macro’ conversation and ‘micro’ conversations.

In terms of the ‘macro’ conversation, this is the big societal conversation about immigration, what makes a multi-cultural society work well and how do we create good relations. Instead of debating the cause and effective solutions, the debate on immigrations has become ‘politically charged’ and in many ways ‘toxic’ as to have a conversation about finding a solution can lead to labels such as ‘traitor’ or ‘racist.’ As such, society is not able to have ‘honest and open’ conversations and this lack of courage, clarity and conversation ensures the issues will not be resolved and more lives will be ‘ruined and destroyed.’

In terms of ‘micro’ conversations, these are conversations at individual level about individuals or specific individual actions. Whilst society fails to have the larger honest conversation, participants also indicated there are ‘micro’ conversations that are not being addressed, and these can be equally negative and destructive.

An example of a ‘micro’ conversation is captured well in the quote to the right. This participant came to the UK to work legally and stated that many people like her are driven and very focused. The participant believes that this drive and focus can sometime be misinterpreted as intimidating, and local people can feel threatened by it and even jealous. As a result, this can lead to phrases like ‘they’re taking our jobs.’

We come here to work & thrive & are focused. When they see us getting jobs, local people may feel threatened, believing we’re ‘taking their jobs!’

Unfortunately, the lack of engagement, awareness, and proactive efforts toward integration and community building has been highlighted as a critical factor fuelling misconceptions and myths about newcomer and diverse communities. These issues have been further intensified by economic decline, rising immigration figures, and the far-reaching impacts of Brexit and the pandemic, creating a perfect storm that magnifies division and misunderstanding.

4. An increase in isolation and distrust – the impact of the pandemic is mentioned across several insights. Some participants stated that as a society, we’ve changed since the pandemic. Unfortunately, due to limited capacity in this research, we were unable to fully explore this area. However, some participants felt that communities feel more isolated, and the issue of trust has become exacerbated, especially between govt and local people and the media and local communities.

Insight 9: Young people can be the problem and the solution!

Across most of the focus group the theme of young people was mentioned as being part of the problem, but also part of the solution. In terms of being part of the problem, participants who had lived for many years in Northern Ireland stated that many of the issues they faced tended to be less direct racist in nature, and more due to young people displaying anti-social behaviours. This manifested itself in many ways. Such as:

- Young people participating in larger riots (like what happened last August (2024))
- General anti-social behaviour in local communities as young people have little facilities and are ‘bored.’
- The impact of peer pressure and role modelled behaviour wherein diverse communities are perceived as negative and as such, they see them as ‘the enemy’ or someone that shouldn’t be there. As such, they ‘single out’ someone that is different and act accordingly.
- Young people in school bullying people who are different and being a person of colour and not from the same community tends to make the person ‘stand out!’

Some of these perceptions are expanded on in the quotes below:

“Living in Belfast for four years has been a great experience until last summer. One day, I was travelling and young people started to throw stones. The kids don’t know what’s going on, but they listen and learn from their parents. And this will create more problems down the line.”

“When I came here 19 years ago, I had bad communication skills and hid away, but I had bad experience from the local kids who would bang on doors and make loud noise. It made me feel the neighbourhood was not friendly. Dealing with anti-social behaviour is a big driver in strengthening good relations.”

“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.”

"We love our home in Northern Ireland and most of the time we lived well. The only issue is the anti-social behaviour of young people in the area, especially when we go out for a walk. We don't always feel safe."

Despite the negative statements regarding anti-social behaviour of some young people, participants stated that young people are the solution, citing that they already witness changes in perceptions and behaviours towards people from diverse communities and believe that could improve with more awareness, engagement, and education of young people.

Insight 10: We need better awareness, engagement & education.

As highlighted in many of the above insights, there is a need for more effective awareness, engagement, and education as there are many misconceptions and myths that need to be addressed. Unfortunately, failure to effectively address this in the past is partially fuelling the current issues relating to race relations and good relations in Northern Ireland.

As highlighted earlier, young people have a crucial role to play, and many groups emphasise the importance of youth development and improved education. However, this education should avoid negativity, such as making young white individuals feel guilty or blamed. Instead, it should inspire all young people to look beyond differences in colour, aspire to achieve their fullest potential, and not be limited by barriers like community or class.

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.

A participant from the Bradbury Hub encapsulated this sentiment, noting that local youth need purpose and inspiration. Education should aim to encourage them to dream bigger and strive further. One participant suggested embracing the spirit of economic immigrants - fostering a mindset of focus, determination, and courage.

It is vital that education remains a positive and uplifting experience for everyone. Framing it in a way that implies individuals are "broken" and need to be "fixed" risks creating hostility and resistance rather than fostering growth and understanding.

The concept of awareness and engagement is intertwined, and both concepts were raised as potential solutions across all focus groups. Participants believe we need to understand and better connect. To begin this 'journey' we need to better understand one another.

Outlined in the table below are various quotes taken from across the focus groups that captures the importance of awareness and engagement.

"As newcomers, we feel it isn't our place to reach out first. It is more helpful and effective if contact is established by the local people – if they make the first connection, it encourages us to engage."

"Awareness and engagement will help the understanding of the Polish community better and decrease the opportunity to fall into stereotypes and characterisations."

"There is a need for more collaboration, but it must not be tokenistic. In the past it has not been genuine or as an equal partnership. We're normally an add on to box tick."

"We need to be talking to each other and gaining a better understanding. For example, we don't understand the Protestant Unionist and Loyalist community and we have many misconceptions about them. I believe their culture may not be as scary as I think it is. I would like to learn more."

“ We need to showcase different communities, but it also needs to be safe for people to integrate and engage. This should also include encouraging older people as well as young people to participate. We cannot wait for the next generation. We need to better engage now.”

“Legislation will not improve things. You don’t stop hate speech with less speech. You stop it with more speech. Positive speech. We do this through talking and engaging with one another. We need to promote the positive and what we have in common.”

The quotes above capture the following key points:

- **We need to be genuine in our engagement and discussions.**
- **There is a significant role for the local established community to lead on this engagement.**
- **Awareness and engagement should be accessible, safe, and fun for all generations not just the young.**
- **We do not improve engagement through legislating and shouting down discussion even if we don’t like it or view it as negative. People need outlets for their frustration, and we need to have proper conversations to learn better about each other and to solve problems safely.**

All focus groups believe that any solution must include increased awareness, effective engagement, and positive education for all.

Insight 11: Shatter myths & let’s celebrate the positive impact of immigration.

As Insight 10 highlights, there is a need to focus on awareness, engagement, and education, while participants highlighted the importance of maintaining a positive outlook, avoiding the search for a 'villain' or assigning blame.

Participants believe that fostering enduring positive relationships among diverse communities requires a foundation of trust and respect. To achieve this, communities must work towards a deeper understanding of each other, which will facilitate a greater recognition of shared values and an appreciation of diversity.

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.

Various myths and misconceptions were identified during the discussion. Participants mentioned the following myths and misconceptions:

- ‘Taking our houses and benefits’ - in which it is believed that asylum seekers receive handouts and council housing before British/Irish citizens.
- We are overrun with asylum seekers – in which it is believed that the UK is taking in too many people, and more than other countries, which fuels further rumours that this is deliberate and ‘they’re here to take us over’ concept.
- International students are draining the UK economy - given how Queen’s University, Belfast is located near Donegall Pass, this myth has been mentioned.
- ‘Taking our jobs’ – in which it is believed that immigrants take away jobs for local established population.
- Immigration leads to increased crime – given the importance of safety, this was a big issue that was mentioned by many, stating they had heard this regularly and feared that as people tended not to be able to distinguish between someone who has been living in Northern Ireland for years and someone who arrived 4 months ago, they fear they will be blamed and targeted.

In addition to addressing myths and misconceptions, several participants also highlighted the more nuanced misconceptions that often emerge as assumptions. These assumptions are frequently discussed without awareness of their negative impact, and participants referred to them as **microaggressions**. Participants provided numerous examples such as:

- Questioning someone's British / Irish identity – with comments such as *'where are you really from?'* In which there is an assumption that the person of colour cannot have been born in the UK or Ireland and cannot be British or Irish.
- Assumptions about language skills – with comments such *'your English is very good'* can be viewed as offensive as the person is surprised that someone of colour can speak English fluently.
- Ignoring cultural names – some participants mentioned how local people had asked did they have a nickname because their name was *'too hard to say.'*
- Assuming people from Africa are all poor, starving or not as intelligent – one participant provided a situation in which a Physics teacher was speaking in a Belfast secondary school and was discussing how easy something was *'so easy that people in a village in Africa would even understand it!'*

Various solutions were suggested to the issues raised above. These included:

- **Make it about culture, not politics or religion:** many participants believe sharing cultural experiences is a great way to bond. For example, it would be beneficial and fun to share on food, music, and dance. Given the strong commonalities of a love of food, music, and dance there is opportunities to better understand one another and build common bonds.

One group stated how so many cultural beliefs can be relatable. For example, Diwali, the Chinese New Year, Eid, Christmas, etc. We could use these big events across the years to showcase and raise awareness about diversity. However, they stated to effectively to this it must focus on culture and NOT religion or politics.

Participants highlighted that they respect everyone's religion, but believe religion is personal and between that person and their God. People can still celebrate their faith, but community events should be more about the spirit, values, and culture than about the religion.

- **Make it engaging for all ages:** despite the importance of youth engagement, participants stated that there needed to be awareness and education for all ages, but it needs to be fun and interactive. Someone stated, *'it should be less about lecturing at a lectern and more about learning through participation.'*

The Polish Sisterhood mentioned their summer solstice event that takes place in Belvoir, in which they celebrate Polish culture, music and food. This might be a great way to further actively engage and share cultural understanding as well as dispel myths and weaken stereotypes.

Furthermore, several groups also highlighted the importance of groups being comfortable to share and emphasised the need to engage diverse groups and ask what their fears are, and would they have any issues or barriers to celebrating and sharing their culture?

- **Don't be afraid to reach out and share your culture:** several participants across the various focus groups mentioned their interest in learning more about the local culture, and about the PUL culture. However, in the past they felt that it was not their place to attend or participate and some even felt intimidated. As such, they would be keen to find out more but feel that the invitation should come from the local established community. In addition, an invitation from the local community would also allay any fears regarding safety diverse groups might have.

Insight 12: We can learn a lot from local history.

As alluded to insight 5 entitled: *‘Leadership at all levels is important’* - many participants feel there is a need for leadership and investment of time and funding now ‘otherwise delaying this work may tend to be more expensive in the future.’

Some participants noted that they could not help but draw parallels to the pre-Trouble’s era, when leadership underestimated the depth of frustration and anger within various communities surrounding limited access to housing and the failure to address their public concerns. In addition, the situation was further fuelled by the media downplaying, misrepresenting or ignored them entirely.

Participants acknowledge that drawing comparisons between the challenges of good relations and immigration today and the concerns of Catholic and Protestant communities in 1960s Northern Ireland may not be entirely realistic or fair. However, during times of significant societal change, when established communities feel vulnerable, it is crucial to address concerns thoughtfully rather than dismiss or misrepresent them, as doing so could lead to more severe and disruptive consequences.



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.

In addition to talking about learning lessons from the past at macro level, representatives from the Street Soccer NI focus group remarked on the importance of learning the lessons from the past at a more local or micro level.

When hearing about the perceptions and experiences of the people of Donegall Pass, one participant remarked that the lack of trust of change today is due to a failure of decision makers in the past to honour any agreement and keep their word.

Insight 13: A Good Relations Hub should be more than a shared space.

When exploring the concept of community, participants passionately highlighted the vital role of shared spaces in fostering connection and engagement. They underscored the significance of designing a welcoming and interactive spatial layout, pointing to green spaces as transformative areas that not only enhance the enjoyment of local surroundings but also serve as dynamic hubs for building relationships and encouraging meaningful interactions among community members.

However, participants stated that buildings are just buildings, just as spaces are just spaces. It is the people, and the strength of relationships built on trust and respect that will make any shared space effective. As such, conversations then focused on what needs to happen in shared spaces such as a Good Relations Hub and the following was captured:

“The hub could be used to support cultural events, but it is important that there are equally events and activities that directly benefit the local area. It can’t just be about good relations, or the people of Donegall Pass will feel they’ve lost something else.”

“The hub should be a place to showcase different cultures, not religions. Food, culture, and history as a focus to inform, inspire, and involve.”

“This hub must not just be about showing we must get people involved. We are different but at the heart of this we are all human beings and all feel, love and need to live.”

“The hub needs to be a safe place to share and meet. It needs to be accessible and open to all cultures. Make it about culture and not religion.”

Based on the comments above, discussions indicated how **shared spaces** or **spaces to share** could help bring individuals from diverse backgrounds together to interact and build mutual understanding. These included:

- **Breaking down barriers:** Shared spaces can provide opportunities for people from different communities to meet and interact in a natural and relaxed setting. This can help break down stereotypes, reduce prejudice, and build trust over time.
- **Encouraging collaboration:** building on the first point, spaces designed for community activities — such as hub - can encourage collaboration on shared projects or events. These joint efforts foster a sense of belonging and unity.
- **Celebrating diversity:** the hub or shared spaces can host cultural festivals, exhibitions, and events that celebrate the unique traditions and histories of different communities. This helps people appreciate and embrace diversity while finding common ground.
- **Neutral ground for dialogue:** the hub could facilitate discussions about shared concerns and help communities work toward shared goals.
- **Creating a sense of ownership:** Well-designed shared spaces can instil pride in a community. When everyone feels a sense of ownership and responsibility, it strengthens ties and discourages division.
- **Promoting positive interactions:** Casual activities, like walking in green spaces or attending local events, encourage everyday positive interactions that build goodwill and reinforce connections between neighbours.

Investing in shared spaces that are inclusive, accessible, and welcoming can go a long way in promoting understanding, trust, and collaboration across all communities in Northern Ireland. However, the hub needs the people to be confident and comfortable to engage. As a participant from one of the focus groups stated, *“it is important that you must have confidence in yourself and your community, before you can love and embrace other communities.”*

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

Insight 14: See me as me.

Of all the insights shared within this report, this insight is one of the most important to all the participants that took part. It is the issues of being authentic and genuine when engaging on good relations. Participants did not want to be treated as something special or have special treatment, they wanted to be accepted as part of the community and to participate safely in community life.

‘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.

Several participants observed two distinct approaches towards differences in individuals. On one hand, some exhibited outright hostility and racist behaviour. On the other, there were those who went to great lengths to demonstrate anti-racist attitudes, sometimes to the point of being overly accommodating or intrusive. While the latter approach was often appreciated, many participants expressed a desire for others to look beyond differences entirely and treat them simply as equals.

Several examples were shared to illustrate the above perspective. Participants noted that some individuals made assumptions or comments suggesting that diverse groups could not or would not make positive contributions to the community. Conversely, others would intentionally single out diverse groups to showcase inclusivity, which, at times, felt insincere. Ultimately, many participants reflected on Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic quote as a guiding principle for how they wished to be treated—with fairness, respect, and equality.

RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS

To Summarise:

Outlined below are a series of recommendations that the research has identified as important to consider. They are based on the analysis of the workshop and survey data as well as some of the insights collected in the first report, titled: *'The Pass - People, Place and Space. A report on the changing nature of communities in South Belfast.'* They are designed to support the work of the Good Relations Community Hub as well as develop good relations in local communities in South Belfast and beyond.

The recommendations have been listed under the three key areas below:



1. Influencing and Informing Systemic Change.

This section proposes fostering collaboration and building cross-sector partnerships across South Belfast to drive the implementation of key recommendations. By adopting an **intentional** and **coordinated approach**, it aims to inspire and influence transformative systemic change.

- I. Pilot a comprehensive data collection and monitoring system collecting, analysing, and reporting data across South Belfast to effectively monitor good relations and race relations which will inform policy, procedure and decisions and drive meaningful improvements.
- II. Conduct a Community Impact Assessment and Roadmap on all government policies which inform and impact on good relations and community cohesion.
- III. Advocate for the creation of a comprehensive Integrated Good Relations Framework for Northern Ireland. This framework would unify the Good Relations Strategy and Racial Equality Strategy while encompassing all Section 75 categories, including disability, learning disabilities,

and neurodiversity. Its aim is to foster inclusion, promote meaningful collaboration, and ensure greater clarity and accountability for all.

- IV. Map, disseminate, and develop the range of available ESOL provision in and across South Belfast to aid and support better connection with and integration into local communities.
- V. Identify and disseminate learning from areas who have developed effective models of good relations good practice and implement pilots accordingly to suit a local context.
- VI. Forge a dynamic partnership among stakeholders - including communities, organisations, and political leaders - in South Belfast to create a powerful vision for a united and inclusive future. This vision, built on a shared set of core values, should resonate with and bring together all communities across the area, emphasising what unites us. It will aim to serve as a guiding principle for how people collaborate, thrive, learn, and connect, fostering an environment where everyone feels valued, empowered, and inspired.
- VII. Develop and pilot a South Belfast Change Model in consultation and collaboration with political leaders, council, statutory services, communities, and organisations to support the changing nature of communities and develop better and more sustainable community relations. The Model should be informed by an agreed shared vision and values and should incorporate areas such as:
 - Preparation for, management and dispersal of newcomer families in and across South Belfast
 - Policy and legislation
 - Local Leadership
 - Physical and social infrastructure
 - Economic opportunity and stability
 - Information and education
 - Culture and heritage
 - Shared spaces
 - Sharing experiences, building commonalities
 - The next generation.

2. Increasing Awareness and Understanding

- I. Further invest in research and reports sharing information learnt on the nature, composition, needs, and priorities of communities living in South Belfast.
- II. Create opportunities for facilitated conversations to share information, learning, experiences, needs, and priorities with groups of individuals from a range of communities living in and across South Belfast.
- III. Further invest in research and dialogue to try to better understand the underlying issues of hate crime to support effective and workable solutions.
- IV. Develop public campaigns across South Belfast promoting commonalities, challenging stereotypes, and highlighting the positive.
- V. Build on existing cross-community programs to further create dynamic and engaging opportunities for young people to actively participate in initiatives promoting diversity and inclusion. This should include:

- a. Encouraging leadership roles and peer-led projects that allow youth to take ownership of these activities, fostering a sense of responsibility and empowerment.
- b. Integrate education on cultural awareness, mutual respect, and collaboration into these programs, equipping young people with the tools to challenge stereotypes and bridge divides.
- c. Further develop initiatives to combat anti-social behaviour activities for young people such as on-street youth work, sports and recreation programmes, community volunteering, creative arts workshops and safe spaces and drop-in centres.

3. Collective Steps Towards Social Connections

- I. Co-design safe, shared spaces in and across South Belfast where people from different backgrounds and communities can connect, learn and do things together.
- II. Create opportunities in communities and across South Belfast for people from both new and established communities to share their stories, their culture, and their heritage through participation and active engagement.
- III. Consistently organise events and activities in communities and across South Belfast that bring people from diverse backgrounds together, fostering mutual understanding and respect. Examples could include cultural festivals, shared meals, musical festivals, and storytelling sessions.
- IV. Dedicate time to uncover shared assets and commonalities among the communities of South Belfast. Work collaboratively to strengthen these shared assets and tackle common challenges, fostering unity and progress across all communities in the area to make the place and space better.

Moving Forward:

In addition to the recommendations above, this section concludes with participants' reflections on the purpose and potential impact of the proposed Good Relations Hub and Shared Spaces. It also highlights key themes emerging from the first report's discussions with an established community in The Pass and this second report's engagement with newcomers to the area, offering valuable insights for further exploration.

The Good Relations Hub. Shared Spaces.

‘It is the people, and strength of relationships built on trust and respect which will make shared spaces effective.’

The Hub should be a space which celebrates culture and diversity. A welcoming, interactive spatial layout is important. It should:

- Provide a varied programme of activities supporting diversity.
- Educate on culture and diversity.
- Be a place to safely share activities, interests, and experiences.
- Inform, Inspire, and Involve.
- Be a safe place to share and meet.
- Be accessible and open to all cultures, established and new.
- Be a neutral ground for dialogue.
- Be a place to develop good will and build connections.

Building on the Shared Findings of Both Reports to Shape the Future:

Outlined below are the key common areas that both the established and newcomer communities identified in their discussions within Reports 1 and 2.

1. Tackling fear and promoting safety.
2. Addressing economic and social vulnerabilities.
3. Expanding pathways to training and employment.
4. Honouring culture and heritage to build stronger connections.
5. Fostering connections and building relationships.
6. Shifting the focus: Highlighting positivity and progress.
7. Deepening understanding to build acceptance.

In conclusion:

DPCE looks forward to working in partnership with communities across South Belfast to build connections and communities, supporting safer places and spaces for all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all those who contributed to the successful completion of this Insights Report.

Firstly, we extend our appreciation to the community members from across five focus groups who shared their insights, experiences, and perspectives. Your openness and willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue were vital to this report. We hope we have captured both the words and the spirit of what you wished to share.

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We are deeply grateful to DPCE and specifically to Lisa McCloy for the support and collaboration throughout this process. Your dedication to fostering understanding and promoting inclusivity has been truly inspiring and we have no doubt that your passion will be pivotal in making a new hub a success.

In conclusion, this insights report is a collective effort, and it is our hope that it will serve as a stepping stone toward greater unity and shared understanding. The development of the Good Relations Hub offers an amazing opportunity to inform, involve and inspire everyone that calls Donegall Pass and South Belfast their home and it is with honour that we submit this report to key stakeholders to discuss and we hope it helps establish the strong foundations for the Good Relations hub on Donegall Pass.

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- ⁱ 2021 Census figures - [Census 2021 Main statistics for Northern Ireland - Statistical bulletin - Ethnic group](#)
- ⁱⁱ Sourced from: [Donegall Pass | Poverty and Social Exclusion](#)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sourced from DPCE's Phase 1 report: '*The Pass – People, Place and Space – A report on the changing nature of Communities in South Belfast*'
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} Ibid.
- ^x Ibid.
- ^{xi} Ibid.
- ^{xii} Source: [Census 2021 Main statistics for Northern Ireland - Statistical bulletin - Ethnic group](#)
- ^{xiii} Ibid.
- ^{xiv} Ibid.
- ^{xv} Sourced from estimates developed and published within DPCE's Phase 1 report: '*The Pass – People, Place and Space – A report on the changing nature of Communities in South Belfast*'
- ^{xvi} Source: [Demographics of Belfast - Wikipedia](#)
- ^{xvii} Source: 2022 Equality Commission of Northern Ireland report: [Impact of Brexit on minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland](#)
- ^{xviii} Source: [Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper: Northern Ireland Economy and the Budget: initial considerations for 2025/26](#)
- ^{xix} Source: Law Centre of Northern Ireland - [LCNI-briefing-refugee-statistics-April-2024_FINAL.pdf](#)
- ^{xx} Taken from Home Office Immigration system statistics data table – located in [LCNI-briefing-refugee-statistics-April-2024_FINAL.pdf](#)
- ^{xxi} Source: [Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper: Northern Ireland Economy and the Budget: initial considerations for 2025/26](#)
- ^{xxii} Source: [Impact of Brexit on minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland](#)
- ^{xxiii} Source: [Incidents and Crimes with a Hate Motivation Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland Update to 31st December 2024](#)
- ^{xxiv} Ibid.
- ^{xxv} Ibid.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid.
- ^{xxvii} Ibid.
- ^{xxviii} Ibid.
- ^{xxix} Source: [Public Opinion Survey of Equality in Northern Ireland](#) Spring 2023
- ^{xxx} Ibid.
- ^{xxxi} Sourced: [The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland - Northern Ireland Affairs Committee](#)
- ^{xxxii} Position identified from 2022 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland report entitled: 'Impact of Brexit on Minority Ethnic and Migrant People in NI. Sourced: [Impact of Brexit on minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland](#)
- ^{xxxiii} All statistics in this subsection can be located in the 'Young People's Attitudes to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland 2024 report' which is part of the NI Life and Times and Young Life and Times survey – located at: [Refugees and Asylum Seekers | The Executive Office](#)

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