

Talking about our past and present: the impacts of conflict legacy



Authors: Siobhán McAlister, Mary-Louise Corr, Clare Dwyer and Orla Drummond in collaboration with Young People's Advisory Group members: Jessica, Kasey, Katie, Olivia and Roisin and Youth Workers: Jonny Ewan (Youth Initiatives) and Leanne Harte (Include Youth)

A project supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body

include
YOUTH



Developed in partnership with:

ISBN - 978-1-9996856-5-2

Talking about our past and present: the impacts of conflict legacy

Authors: Siobhán McAlister, Mary-Louise Corr, Clare Dwyer and Orla Drummond in collaboration with Young People's Advisory Group members: Jessica, Kasey, Katie, Olivia and Roisin and Youth Workers: Jonny Ewan (Youth Initiatives) and Leanne Harte (Include Youth)

A project supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body

Glossary of terms

These terms are used throughout this report. When you see a word in **red** you can find the definition here.

Articles – (of the UNCRC): a list of promises made by the government to children and young people.

Children's rights – Things children are entitled to and which parents, guardians and governments should ensure they have access to.

Conflict legacy – What has been left behind from the Troubles/ Conflict, the aftermath. How the past impacts on the present. Reliving the past.

Culture – Your background, beliefs and traditions. It can be your way of life, things that you have in common with others.

Government – People who are voted to make decisions that affect your life.

Historical investigation – Investigations into deaths or events during the Troubles where it is not known, or agreed, what happened.

Nationalist – People who would like Northern Ireland to unite/ join with the Republic of Ireland/ Southern Ireland.

Paramilitaries – Groups who unlawfully take justice/ punishment/law into their own hands.

Sectarianism – Negative attitudes, beliefs or prejudice towards Catholics or Protestants. Conflict between two religious groups which can sometimes result in violence.

The 'other' community – Schools and communities in Northern Ireland are often divided as being Catholic or Protestant. This has led people to talk about those living in communities different to them as the 'other' community.

The Troubles/ Conflict – A time of political conflict in Northern Ireland between 1969-1998.

Transgenerational – How experiences can carry through the generations, from older to younger people. For example, how parents' experiences can impact children.

Transgenerational trauma – How the effects of something bad that has happened to one person can impact someone else (e.g. children of parents who have experienced **trauma** or grandparents' **trauma** affecting what they can do and then affecting others in the family).

Trauma – Something bad that has happened that leaves a lasting impact. It can impact on what people are able to do.

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the document which lists the rights of children and young people).

Unionist – People who would like Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom/Britain.



00.

Introduction

What the research is about

All children and young people have 'rights'. These consider what is the best for children and young people, what they should have or be able to do. Rights protect children from harm. Everyone under 18 years old has these rights and they can be found in a document called the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (**UNCRC**). These rights relate to children's education, family life, beliefs, health, protections from harm and the right to give opinions on decisions affecting your life.

Many studies tell us that the **Troubles/Conflict** continues to impact children and young people, this means it negatively affects **children's rights** today. Some of these are highlighted in this report.

Many young people experience **sectarianism**, division and feeling unsafe in certain areas. This can limit how they express themselves, where they go and even what they wear (i.e. school uniforms). Some young people experience sectarian/**paramilitary** violence and harm. The **Troubles/Conflict** continues to impact on health and well-being, family life, education and opportunities in life. It is important that children and young people understand how and why the **Troubles/Conflict** can impact them and their communities. In addressing

conflict legacy issues it is important that the voices of children and young people are heard and that they have a role and participate in building a safer and peaceful future (**Article 12**).

Who took part

This report is based on the views of 104 children and young people aged 14-24 years in areas across Northern Ireland and the border regions of the Republic of Ireland. The views of 13 parents, 45 people whose work relates to the lives of children and young people (e.g. youth workers, health workers, people in **government** etc.) and 28 professionals and decision-makers were also collected.

Two groups of young people, one living in Derry/Londonderry and one living in Donegal helped design the research, analyse the findings and produce this report. The aim of the research was to examine the impacts and legacies of the **Troubles/Conflict** across generations – those who lived through the worst of the violence, and those who were born after the Peace Agreement (1998). It examines what has changed for young people today but also what is left behind and how

the past continues to impact on the present – in families, communities and on young people's lives, opportunities and rights.

This report

The report is broken into seven sections. Each was a theme discussed with those who took part in the research. At the end of the report are some discussion questions that youth workers and young people helped design. There is also a list of useful contact points if you feel you might need some support with any of the issues raised in the report.

A big thank you

Thanks to the 195 people who took part in the research, and to all of the young advisors – Aaron, Conal, Darragh, Kasey, Katie, Keelan, Kirsty, Jessica, Jessica, Matthew, Niamh, Olivia, Owen, Roisin, Shakira, Shane, Shania, Tammy, Thomas, Zara-Lee.

Thanks also to staff at Include Youth and Youth Initiatives who worked on this report and supported the young advisors.

01.

Learning the past

Summary of Findings



AIMS OF
EDUCATION

Article 29: children's education should teach them to understand their own rights, and to respect other people's rights, **cultures** and differences. It should help them to live peacefully.

Young people knew quite a lot about the **Troubles** and were able to talk about sensitive and challenging issues. They learned from a range of sources but school and family were talked about the most.

Some young people said their families did not really talk to them about the past whilst others heard detailed stories from older generations. Children and young people had very different experiences of learning, depending on their school, subject choices, teachers' views and teachers' ability to talk to young people about sensitive topics. Some felt that learning in school was incomplete or that it didn't happen at all.

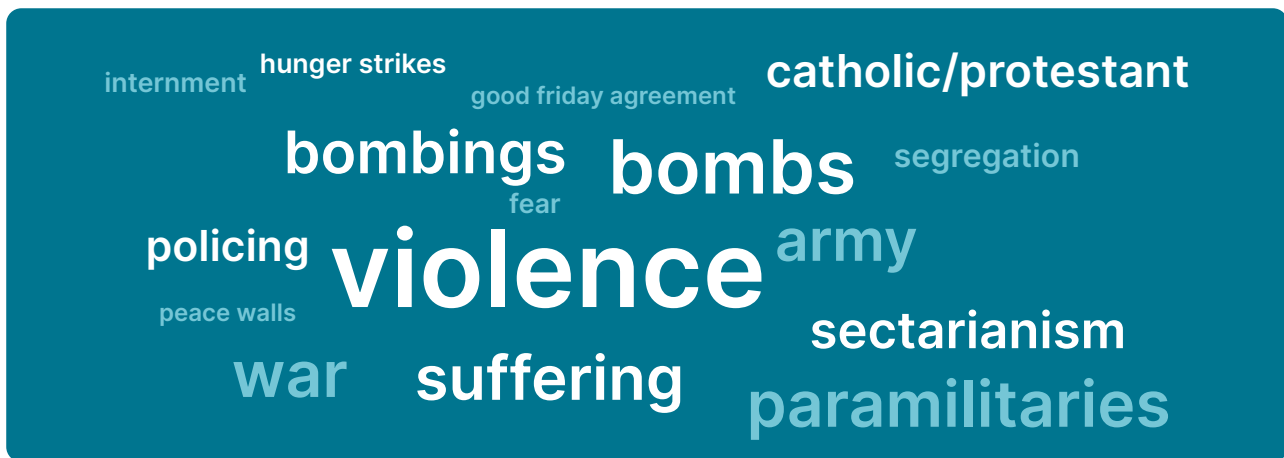
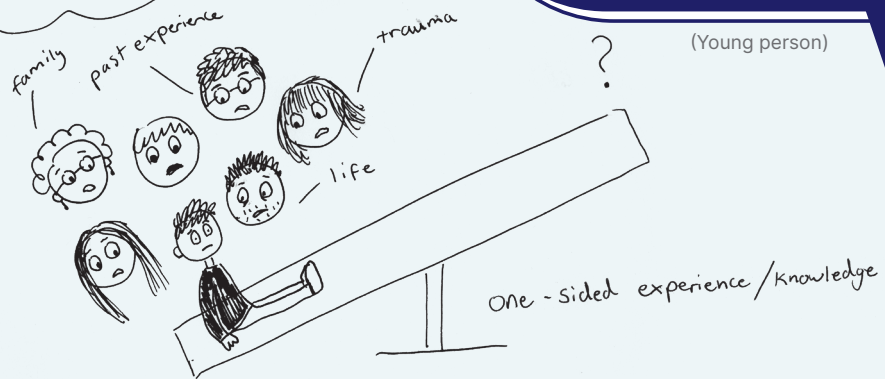
There was a concern that many of the accounts young people hear about the past (from family, in the community or on social media) were one-sided. Some young people felt that these could glorify the past, whilst others felt that those that don't include both sides could encourage sectarian views. While some felt that learning about the past could be negative, others thought that it was important to understand what happened, how it impacts on the present and to learn from it for the future. Young people recognised this may not be easy as there were few safe spaces to speak openly about the past and express different views.

I think schools are so scared of young people having an opinion because they don't know how to deal with that opinion. So they don't want to tell you too much so you ... can't be angry, you can't be upset, they don't want to cause emotion about it, but I feel like you need to, they need trained to control that environment because they're teaching about something we need to know about.

(Young person)

See it's one of them things, like there's good comes out of it because it makes the younger generation realise what they'd been through, at the same time it's not good because it continues on the hate a wee bit.

(Young person)



Words young people in the research associated with the Troubles

02.

Learning culture and identity

Summary of Findings

Young people recognised the importance of identity within their communities, although some thought it was more important for older individuals. Young people said they do not like it when people assume their identity (e.g. by looking at their uniform) or force them to identify with a particular community background. They were aware that flags, murals and different cultural events were visual symbols of identity. Some viewed these as positive, helping young people and their communities to express **culture** and identity, feel connected across generations and belonging to a community where they feel safe. But many also talked about expressions of identity causing fear of the **'other' community**. They described how this can increase division between communities and make individuals feel different from one another. Some thought this could also encourage **sectarian** attitudes.

13



SHARING
THOUGHTS FREELY

Article 13: children have the right to find out things and say what they think, through making art, speaking and writing, unless it breaks the rights of others

People who took part in the research thought that young people learned **sectarian** attitudes mainly from older people in their family. This could lead them to see others as different or to feel fear and/or hatred towards the **'other' community**. But some young people also spoke of hearing positive attitudes from older generations and others noted they could resist attitudes they were exposed to. This suggests that when children and young people have a safe space to voice their views, they could break negative attitudes that are passed down generations.

some of the kids have been poisoned from they've been born. If the parents would be really sectarian, the kids are copying... and they probably don't even know the full history

(Young person)

Ewan and Joanne's Story

This is based on the stories of a father and daughter who took part in the research. Ewan and Joanne are not their real names.

Ewan's father was killed in the **Troubles** when Ewan was 12 years old. Ewan's father was 'an Orangeman... a bandsman' and Ewan himself joined the Orange Order when he was 16 - keen to follow in his 'father's footsteps'. His **culture** became 'extremely important' to him as it helps him remember his father and to connect with his community. It was also important to Ewan to pass on his love of **unionist culture** to his two daughters.

For Joanne, Ewan's daughter, being in the band was 'a big family thing' for her and helped her establish a connection to her grandfather who she never met.

'I felt so proud knowing that this was where my grandfather walked too and my dad... It's always just something that made me feel really close to him and that's why I continue to march.'

It was important for both Ewan and Joanne to 'have friends from both sides of the community' but also 'to remain proud of what we are'.

03.

Divided space

Summary of Findings

Young people's lives in Northern Ireland remain divided. Divided housing and schools mean that they mix very little with young people from the 'other' community. For some young people and adults, this helped them feel safe, especially if they had heard stories about their family's experiences of the past. Some of them, for example, wanted peace walls to stay and were concerned about violence if they were removed.

Other young people and community members did not want divided communities. They thought that peace walls and warnings from older generations not to mix increased the division in the community. It stops young people from going into certain areas to access leisure activities. It can also make young people more fearful of the 'other' community, rather than safer, and make them think they are more different than they actually are. Young adults did visit the 'other' community, but often were careful about the way they dressed, the way they spoke and who they were with. Many wanted more shared spaces to allow young people across the communities to socialise safely together.

Young people enjoyed taking part in cross-community programmes and, unlike schools,



Article 31: Every child has the right to rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities.

thought they were safe spaces where they could discuss issues and have their voice heard. Some young people talked about making friends with

those from the **'other' community** but others said that it was difficult to keep these friendships because of attitudes in their families and communities.



Drawing by Kasey Campbell

04.

Health and well-being

Summary of Findings

Many parents today grew up during the **Troubles**. Some had experienced or saw violence or loss as children and this still impacts their health and well-being today. Some parents still feel fearful, anxious, worried about possible dangers and that their safety may be under threat. Pain and memories had often been 'locked away' and were only appearing now. This was often a result of **Troubles**-related news stories, TV programmes and **historical investigations**. Some parents saw their own parents deal with fear, violence and pain through not talking about it or using prescription drugs or alcohol to 'numb' or 'soothe' the pain. Some parents themselves had learned these as methods of coping.

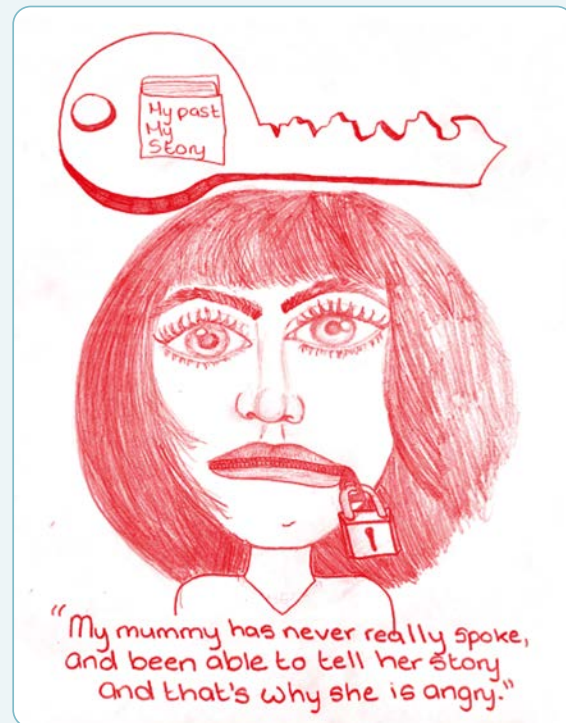
24 **Article 24:** Children have the right to the best health care possible, and to information about how to stay safe and healthy.



**HEALTH,
WATER, FOOD,
ENVIRONMENT**



Young people spoke a lot about poor mental health among young people in their communities, and often of the link with drug/alcohol misuse and a lack of opportunities. Many talked about a lack of appropriate mental health services for children and young people. Part of this is related to the continued impacts of the Troubles, including: the presence of paramilitaries; Troubles-related trauma among parents and the impacts on children and families; learned ways of coping in families and communities; lack of opportunities and not enough funding in (mental) health services.



Drawing by Katie Curran Moss

... when the Conflict was on, I don't think there was half the mental health issues at the time. ... Maybe we're only recognising these things now because we can focus on something else other than who's been killed that day.

(Parent)

05.

Parenting, relationships and family life

Some families had very **traumatic** experiences of the **Troubles**. Many parents and community workers spoke about their personal experiences in detail and it was clear that all members of a family are affected by violence, fear, loss or pain when one family member is affected.

Despite some of these experiences many told us that during the **Troubles** families just got on with things, burying or hiding pain because it was too difficult to face, or because they did not want it to affect children. Silence or not talking, however, often caused confusion for children who could sense something was wrong.

Some talked about the 'ripple effect' of the **Troubles** - how negative experiences from the past could filter down through generations. This might be because pains or injustices were still felt or to keep memories alive. Some also talked about '**transgenerational trauma**'. This means that children and young people today, who did not grow up during the **Troubles**, can still be affected because of their parents or grandparents experiences. This might be because their parent's health and well-being has been affected and they find it difficult to cope, and this affects parenting and family experiences.



Article 18: Children have the right to be brought up by their parents, and parents should be provided with necessary support to look after children.

Other ways that parents' experiences continue to be 'transmitted across generations' is in passing on

fears or being overly protective of children.

Mollie's Story

This story is based on the experiences of a young woman who took part in the research. Mollie is not her real name.

Mollie is 18. Her mum recently told her about some of the things that happened to her when she was growing up during the **Troubles**. This was the first time Mollie's mum had talked about these things, but Mollie had felt from a young age that her mum was struggling with something. She now understood that her mum had been 'held hostage ... with a gun ...' when she was a child.

Mollie knew that her mum tried to protect her when she was younger by not talking about what happened and trying not to show how it still impacted her. But from the age of seven

onwards Mollie knew her mum would sometimes get depressed and have panic attacks. Mollie herself would start to feel down seeing this, and she knew that this just made her mum feel worse. Mollie did not want her mum to know that this affected her as she did not want her mum to feel bad. Mollie said: 'I do think, in a way too, some of her mental health problems have brushed off on me, and I think she knows that, which makes her worse, because she gets upset about it, but it's not her fault.'

Message to parents from the young people's advisory group after reading Mollie's story.

Speak to your children and tell them about the past and about your experiences. It will show them how things have changed and that they do not need to be frightened.

06.

Paramilitaries and policing

Summary of Findings

There are still **paramilitary**-style groups in many of the communities where children and young people grow up. Many young people have experienced violence against themselves, their families or their friends – when one person is affected, it affects others. Some said that knowing these groups are in their areas causes fear and 'paranoia'. Others said it was 'normal', just part of their lives and that they just get on with things and keep out of their way. These were ways of coping with violence or the threat of violence during the **Troubles**, and this is continuing in the current generation of young people.

Most of those who took part in the research felt there wasn't much support for these groups today. Some said they were criminals and drug dealers and just made their areas worse. Others talked about how they control children and young people because of drug debts, or by making them feel like they care for them and then having them do things for them. But some young people also felt that some of these groups keep their areas safe, dealing with behaviours that the police do not deal with. Many felt that the police were unable to do anything about these groups. This was because people were too scared to report them to the police, or because they did not trust the police or think they would do anything about it.



Article 19 – Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation.

I think it's because we're used to it, it doesn't really bother us or nothing. Probably you know like people who were from out of the area and they moved in here, they'd be like "what do you mean there's people in this community?"; they'd probably think it's mad like but see us, we're used to it.

(Young person)

They do do girls too ... they go after us girls too, they do ... just as bad as the boys ... if you're there you get threatened like a wee boy

(Young person)



*Don't let
young kids live
and grow up in
fear.*

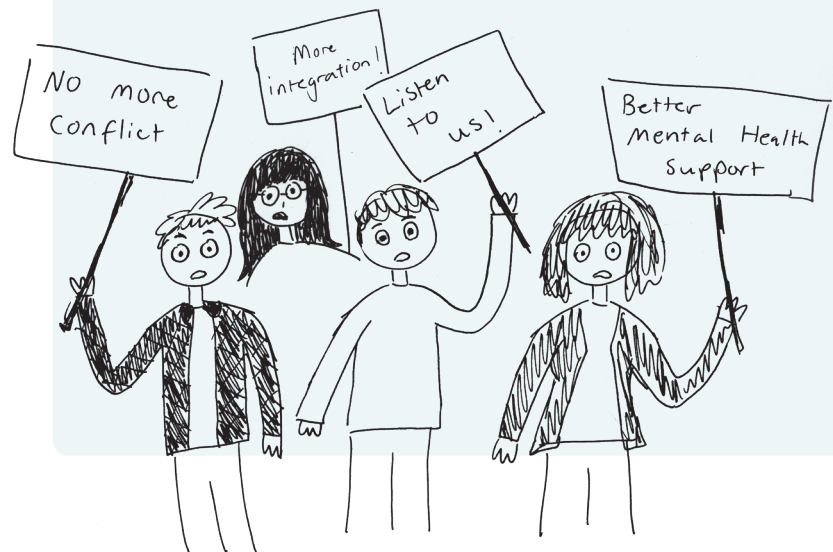
07.


Giving voice to future hopes

Summary of Findings



An important part of the research was to provide space for children and young people to tell us their hopes and fears for the future. Young people set out a number of key messages they wish to send to **government**. Although some young people spoke negatively about the **government** and questioned if their opinions are ever taken seriously, many spoke of the importance of 'being heard'. Young people had concerns around the lack of youth focused services. Many spoke a lot about the hope for **government** to fund more mental health services, including building awareness of the causes and impact of mental health on children and young people. Many also shared concerns about the lack youth centres/youth





In the future
I hope school
is able to learn
both side's of
the catholic's
and protestants
culture's.

groups and highlighted the impact of this on young people and their community. It was important to many of the young people that **government** also understand the difficulties they face around employment opportunities, the impact of poor transport, climate change and the impact of Brexit. Many young people expressed a hope to leave the past behind, for a safer non-violent society, with communities living together in peace. A clear message to **government** is the need for them to protect children and young people from the violent legacy of the **Troubles** and to build a more united and understanding society.

To accept what
has happened
but try to move
on with catholic
protestant relations

Keeping the conversation going: discussion prompts for workers

Based on some of the research findings, the following tasks and discussion prompts might be carried out with children and young people in schools or youth and community groups.

Understanding Culture and Identity

Using Ewan and Joanne's story on page 11, you could follow up with some discussion questions (see examples below). The aim of the questions is for young people to identify traditions and **cultures** in their own families (e.g. the whole family coming together for Christmas dinner; going somewhere every year; an annual shopping trip), and to reflect on why these are important, and why others' traditions may be meaningful to them. Then to move on to consider this in the context of particular traditions related to different cultural groups in N. Ireland. In other words, to consider why these may be important, and hence to contextualise and understand them not as 'other' – we all have traditions that are important, that bind us, that make us feel connected to others, that are about us and not about others.



Some discussion questions might be:

- Are there traditions in your family that are important to you?
 - Why do you do these things?
 - Why are they important?
 - How do they make you feel?
 - Are family traditions/ **culture** important to pass on? Why?



Now, thinking about Joanne and Ewan's story:

- Why is Joanne involved in the band?
- Why is Joanne's **culture** important to her?
- What might other people think of these ways of expressing **culture**?
- How might we better understand the traditions associated with different **cultures**?

Conflict Legacy and Transgenerational Impacts

Begin with two flip chart pages on a wall. The first entitled 'Then' with 'The Troubles/ Conflict' and the dates 1969-1998. The second entitled 'Now' with a start date covering the earliest year of birth of your youth group, and the current year.



Invite the group to consider:

- How did the **Troubles** impact on communities and people your parents and grandparents age?
- What sorts of things were going on?

In the report on page 9 you will see a word cloud produced from the responses of the young people who took part in the research. You can compare some of the responses of your group with these.



Then ask them to consider:

- What has been left behind?
- How are communities still affected?
- How might those who lived through the **Troubles** still be affected?
- How are young people today still affected?

You can draw on some of the findings presented earlier in the report regarding divided space; fear; **paramilitaries**; delayed **trauma** for parents; **transgenerational trauma**.



Follow this up by sharing/reading 'Mollie's story' (see page 17). You might use the following discussion prompts:

- How do you think Mollie felt as a child?
- Do you think the experiences of Mollie's mum had an impact on Mollie growing up?
- Do you think understanding why her mum was having difficulties has helped Mollie?
- What do you think is meant by the term '**transgenerational trauma**'?
 - Can you identify this in Mollie's story?
 - Can you think of other examples of **transgenerational trauma**?
- Where might Mollie get some support?
 - For herself
 - For her mum

Dealing with Hurt, Pain and Sadness

The research suggests that children and young people have learned methods of dealing with hurt, pain and sadness. Some of these are passed on, unknowingly, through families and in our communities, and were traditional ways of coping during the **Troubles/Conflict**. These include: avoidance and not talking about things; minimising the impact of our experiences and feelings; acting out through harmful behaviours; numbing pain through drugs or alcohol. You can share some of these findings with the group.

Then ask them to reflect on ways in which they and other people their age deal with hurt, pain or sadness. They can write this privately or share these with the group and they can be added to flip chart.

Invite them to take a page and divide it into two sides – healthy and unhealthy. Then to decide which of the things they have listed is a healthy way to deal with pain, and which is unhealthy. Alternatively they can discuss this as a group and the words on the flipchart can be underlined in different colours.



Invite the group to consider:

- Where might you/young people have learned these responses/coping mechanisms?
[The aim here is to move away from a focus on individuals e.g. notions of low resilience or poor coping skills, to talking about the environments within which we live and which impact on what we learn, what issues impact on us, what services are and are not available]
- How do people cope in times of crisis or tragedy? For example, following disasters like 9/11, Grenfell Tower, the attack at Manchester Arena (Ariana Grande concert), or during the recent lockdowns.
- Identify other positive ways young people might deal with hurt, pain or sadness and add these to the list.
- Identify some people or places young people might go to for support.

Helps and supports

The Troubles

Wave Trauma Centre

(support for people affected by the Troubles)
02890 779922

Victims and Survivors Service

(links to local services and supports for people affected by the Troubles)
02890 279100
<https://www.victimsservice.org/home/>

Mental health and well-being

Lifeline

0808 808 800

Childline

0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk

Samaritans

116 123 (free from mobiles)

Mind Your Head

www.mindingyourhead.info

ChatHealth (online confidential chat with a health professional)

<https://chathealth.nhs.uk/>

Children's Rights

NICCY

www.niccy.org
info@niccy.org
028 9031 1616

Ombudsman for Children

www.oco.ie
oco@oci.ie
01-865-6800

General

www.helplinesni.com

(A list of over 30 local help and text lines in NI that can support you with a range of issues)

<https://about.rte.ie/contact/helplines/>

(A list of local helplines and websites in ROI that can support you with a range of issues)

I would like a 24 hour service with people whom we trust. I would like to be able to talk when I need to.

Housing Crisis to be fixed

A youth club open 24 hours a day for teenagers who don't feel comfortable going home.

Do not judge people by race/religion/gender, sexuality e.t.c.

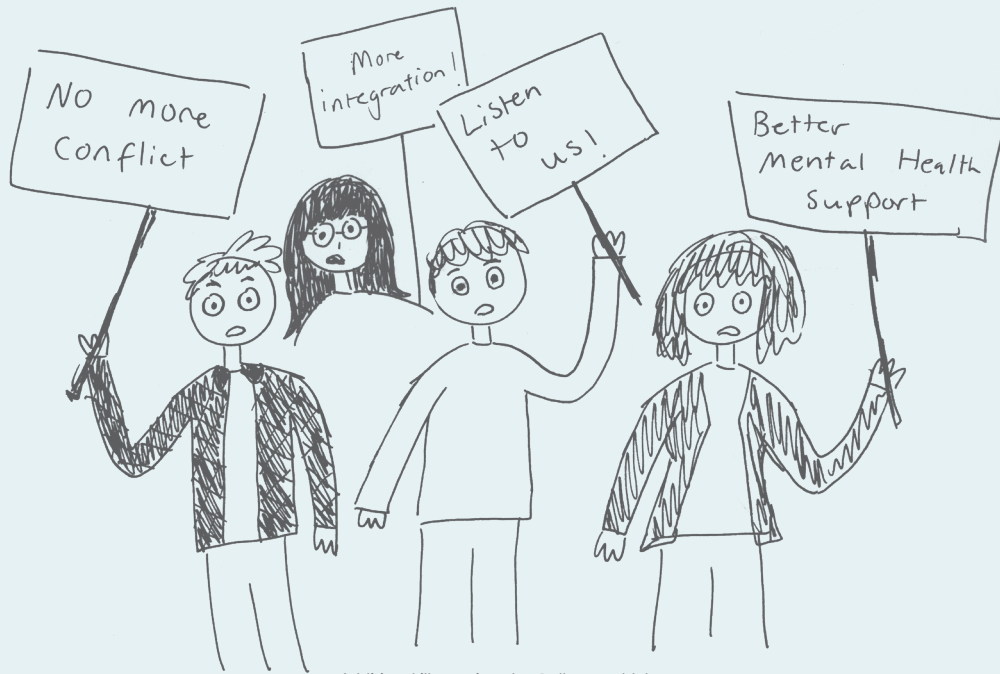
→ more facilities for youths
→ less pressure on schools
→ less societal pressure

To accept what has happened but try to move on with Catholic Protestant relations

Just a safer and positive place

Speak up about people's mental health.

More help in the community so people don't have to be shy and can speak up about anything at anytime to anyone.



Additional illustrations by @ellen_maddalena

include
YOUTH



Commission for Victims and Survivors
w: www.cvsni.org
e: commission@cvsni.org



@nivictimscm



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST

CENTRE FOR
CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS

Centre for Children's Rights
Queen's University, Belfast
w: www.qub.ac.uk
e: ssesw@qub.ac.uk



@ChildRightsQUB

© Queen's University Belfast, Commission for Victims and Survivors Northern Ireland

ISBN: 978-1-9996856-4-5