

## Think Piece for Community Relations Council's Annual Policy and Practice Conference, *One Place – Many People*

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*Our children and young people need to be prepared and supported to contribute positively to peace building and reconciliation. Some continue to be on the frontline of community violence, while others opt out of democratic society altogether.*

Twenty one years on from the ceasefires of 1994 and seventeen years after the Peace Agreement, the children and young people in Northern Ireland today have been born and grown up in a time of relative peace and stability. Despite never having lived during the 'conflict' per se, the impact of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland on children and young people is still heavily felt. Segregation and community division continue to be a part of daily life for many children and young people in Northern Ireland and the legacy of the conflict impacts significantly on their lives. Research clearly shows increased levels of child poverty, childhood mental ill-health, educational inequalities and disabilities in the areas which have suffered most as a result of the Northern Ireland conflict. Moving forward to a more peaceful and stable future requires cognisance to be taken of the reality of children's lives and the impact of the legacy of the conflict on must be comprehensively addressed. **Children and young people can never be held responsible for the divisions of the past, yet they continue to pay a heavy price due to the legacy of a conflict that ended before their birth.**

Segregation continues to be a part of daily life for children and young people in Northern Ireland in accessing services with segregated living significantly impacting on how children

and young people in Northern Ireland live their lives.<sup>1</sup> In Belfast, 98% of public housing is segregated into Protestant or Catholic areas.<sup>2</sup> Children are largely educated in separate schools with only 7% of children attending integrated schools.<sup>3</sup> Children and young people from one community tend not to use leisure facilities or other services in areas predominantly inhabited by members of the 'other' community and research has shown that young people are prevented from attending colleges or training courses in particular areas because of their location and perceived identity.<sup>4</sup> Children have little opportunity to mix on a cross community basis and evidence demonstrates that limited exposure to those outside their community and strong beliefs within communities, consolidated negative attitudes about 'the other' that were passed down through the generations have resulted in children and young people expressing loyalty to 'their own', and mistrust and hostility towards 'the other'. As noted by one community representative, and echoed by others across different communities, "...there are first, second, third generation attitudes of not trusting the other side yet".<sup>5</sup> While the 2011 Young Life and Times survey of 16-year-olds across Northern Ireland found an increase in cross-community contact over recent years with cross-community friendship more common in 2011 than in the 2003 survey, 22% of respondents reported they had no friends from the other main religious community.<sup>6</sup> In the 2012 survey, 45% of respondents said there were no facilities in their area where they could meet with people of a different religion.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, friendships in adult life are mainly in-group as are some 90% of marriages.<sup>8</sup>

Many children and young people continue to have direct experience of sectarian abuse and harassment, experiencing sectarianism as part of their daily lives including on their journey to and from school, in town centres and when venturing outside 'their' community

<sup>1</sup> O. Hargie, A. O'Donnell, and C. McMullan Constructions of Social Exclusion Among Young People From Interface Areas of Northern Ireland, Youth Society, (2011).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/10-types\\_of\\_school-nischools\\_pg/16-schools-integratedschools\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/10-types_of_school-nischools_pg/16-schools-integratedschools_pg.htm)

<sup>4</sup> J. Hamilton, U. Hansson, J. Bell, and S. Toucas. (2008). Segregated Lives: Social Divisions, Sectarianism and Everyday Life in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Institute of Conflict Research; McAlister, S., A. Gray, and G. Neill, (2007). Still Waiting: The Stories Behind the Statistics of Young Women Growing Up in Northern Ireland. Belfast: YouthAction Northern Ireland.

<sup>5</sup> S. McAlister, P. Scraton, and D. Haydon, (2009). Childhood in Transition: Experiencing Marginalisation and Conflict in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Queen's University, Save the Children and Prince's Trust.

<sup>6</sup> P. Devine and G. Robinson. 2012. No More 'Us and Them' for 16 Year Olds. ARK Research Update 79 [www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update79.pdf](http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update79.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> P. Devine (2013), "Into the Mix." ARK Research Update 83 [www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update83.pdf](http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update83.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> *Op cit* 1.

boundary.<sup>9</sup> Persistent low level and localised violence continues to occur, particularly in interface areas.<sup>10</sup> While the most severe forms of violence have diminished, many of the children whose past trauma went unrecognised now have families of their own. Children and young people today, “...are more likely to experience small-scale, sporadic acts of political violence rather than large-scale, widespread violent confrontation”<sup>11</sup> and while many will have no direct experience of violence, some do. Reflecting the historical, political and social contexts in Northern Ireland, activities involving violence are generally connected to segregated living and sectarianism.<sup>12</sup> Those living in ‘interface’ areas, in particular, are likely to witness or engage in occasional, opportunist acts of violence targeted at members of the ‘other’ community.<sup>13</sup> A significant number of children living in interface areas define their homes as unsafe places – they have experienced, or fear, sectarian attack due their location close to an interface or a ‘peace wall’.<sup>14</sup> Research carried out with children and young people from six communities heavily affected by the conflict over a three year period found that violence has remained a part of everyday life for children and young people living in communities defined by uncertainty, unease and the continued presence of paramilitaries or dissidents.<sup>15</sup> Many of the young people reported being exposed to sectarian violence, community violence, rioting against the police and paramilitary style threats and punishments.

Paramilitary shootings and attacks on children still occur in modern day Northern Ireland. The recent NGO Alternative Report submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted that 39 children have been shot or attacked by paramilitaries since 2009.<sup>16</sup> These statistics are held by the PSNI and reflect the number of shootings or attacks that have been reported to the PSNI over this time frame. Given that the PSNI do not routinely collate statistics on paramilitary attacks by age and also that such crimes are likely to go unreported both due to the nature of the crime, fear of reporting and a lack of confidence in policing in areas where such attacks take place, this figure is likely to be

<sup>9</sup> S. McAlister, P. Scraton & D. Haydon (2014) Childhood in transition: growing up in ‘post-conflict’ Northern Ireland, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2014.888399>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> M. Leonard (2007) “Trapped in Space? Children’s Accounts of Risky Environments” Children and Society.

<sup>12</sup> R. Roche (2008) “Sectarianisms and Segregation in Urban Northern Ireland: Northern Irish Youth Post-Agreement. A Report on the Facts, Fears and Feelings Project”, Belfast: Queens University Belfast.

<sup>13</sup> U. Hansson (2005) “Troubled Youth? Young People, Violence and Disorder in Northern Ireland”, Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research.

<sup>14</sup> *Op cit.* 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Op cit.* 5.

<sup>16</sup> NI NGO Alternative Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, CLC and Save the Children, June 2015.

much higher. The media has also highlighted the trauma experienced by children who witness paramilitary style attacks.<sup>17</sup> A recent report by The Detail<sup>18</sup> using figures obtained from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) showed that from 2012-2015 there were almost 1,300 cases of paramilitary intimidation which forced people out of their homes. This accounts for 70% of cases of intimidation from public housing over this period. This does not take into account incidents of forced paramilitary intimidation from other types of accommodation including private housing. A spokesperson for NIHE spoke of their concern that in 2015 so many families are still coming to NIHE for help because they feel insecure in their own homes. The indivisible nature of rights raises serious questions about the impact that paramilitary intimidation has on the lives of the children in these families. How can a child in a family suffering such severe paramilitary intimidation which forces the family from their homes be able to participate in all other aspects of their lives?

The impact of the conflict is pervasive in the lives of children and young people, yet ironically children's knowledge of the Northern Ireland conflict and opportunities to discuss and make sense of 'the Troubles' are limited. Research has found that the three main influences on young people's knowledge and understanding of the past are their parents (52%), school (47%) and relatives (25%).<sup>19</sup> While school appears to be an important source of information for learning about the past, unless young people study GCSE History they will learn little specifically about the Troubles in school. The cutoff point many schools use when history is compulsory in the first three years of secondary school appears is the partition of Ireland. Research highlights the views of children that stories passed down in families and communities, through grandparents and parents, or through murals, memorials and commemorations, act as continuous reminders of the past and of the impact of the conflict on "their community". Some felt that these stories, images and events served as reminders of what each "side" had done to "the other" and perpetuates violence within the younger generation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "Teenager shot in legs 'surrendered' to armed attackers when he heard his terrified little sister cry" <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/teenager-shot-in-legs-surrendered-to-armedattackers-when-he-heard-his-terrified-little-sister-cry-31003876.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland Forcing Hundreds from their Homes Each Year, Steven McCaffery, The Detail, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2015, <http://www.thedetail.tv/articles/paramilitaries-in-northern-ireland-forcing-hundreds-from-their-homes-each-year>.

<sup>19</sup> J. Bell, U. Hansson and N. McCaffery, Community Relations Council, (2010), "The Troubles Aren't History Yet" Young People's Understanding of the Past.

<sup>20</sup> S. McAlister, D. Haydon, and P. Scraton (2013). "Violence in the Lives of Children and Youth in 'Post-Conflict' Northern Ireland." <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=chilyoutenvi>.

As the question suggests and I would firmly agree, children and young people do need support to contribute to peace building and reconciliation. As a starting point to the provision of this support we need a comprehensive and honest examination of the reality of the lives of all children and young people in Northern Ireland. Some of the very challenging issues which children and young people face in Northern Ireland today are directly linked to the legacy of the conflict and consequent trans-generational trauma. These issues have not been addressed and children and young people are not getting sufficient support to equip them to play an equal role in society, as is their right. While it is clear that a small minority of children continue to be on the frontline of community violence, questions need to be asked about why this is the case. These questions require robust and meaningful answers from Government in order to begin to support children and young people in dealing with some of the serious issues which they face.

The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister<sup>21</sup> records that 36% of those killed in the conflict in Northern Ireland were children and young people. Almost half (48%) of all deaths of those under 21 during the conflict in Northern Ireland were concentrated in Belfast, North and West Belfast in particular. A further 9% of deaths under 21 were in Derry.<sup>22</sup> The most recent government figures indicate that there are currently 114,000 children living in relative poverty (after housing costs - AHC) in Northern Ireland (26%). Children are more likely to experience poverty if they live in lone parent households (44% AHC), in workless households (62% AHC) or in households where an adult or child has a disability.<sup>23</sup> There is a stark correlation between the areas most impacted upon by the conflict and the most socially deprived with the highest levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland in the West Belfast (32%), Foyle (32%) and North Belfast (29%) constituencies.<sup>24</sup> There is recognition that some areas, particularly in Belfast, have not benefitted from the end of the conflict in the same way as others and is particularly true of those areas which are most economically deprived.<sup>25</sup>

A report, commissioned by the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister in 2014,

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<sup>21</sup> Our Children And Young People – Our Pledge A Ten Year Strategy For Children And Young People In Northern Ireland 2006 – 2016, OFMDFM (2006).

<sup>22</sup> M. Smyth et al, (2004) The Impact of Political Conflict on Children in Northern Ireland Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research.

<sup>23</sup> NI Poverty Bulletin 2013-14.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/why-end-child-poverty/poverty-in-your-area>

<sup>25</sup> B. Murtagh, (2008). "New Spaces and Old in 'Post-conflict' Belfast." Divided Cities/Contested States Working Paper, No. 5. [www.conflictincities.org/PDFs/WorkingPaper5\\_10.9.08.pdf](http://www.conflictincities.org/PDFs/WorkingPaper5_10.9.08.pdf)

provides projections of the likely levels of child poverty in NI by 2020, and makes for worrying reading. Relative child poverty (before housing costs - BHC) is predicted to rise from 20.5% in 2012-13 to 26.0% in 2020-21, compared to 20.9% in UK generally. Absolute child poverty is projected to rise from 22.0% to 29.3% (compared to 24.5% in the UK generally).

In 2010 the UK Government set a number of legally binding targets, through the Child Poverty Act 2010, to reduce child poverty by 2020-21 and required the UK and each devolved government to publish strategies outlining the actions that would be taken to reach the targets, and annual reports on delivery, with the UK-wide strategy relating in the devolved nations to reserved matters. Northern Ireland is the only jurisdiction where there is no current child poverty action plan, despite committing to its publication by March 2014. The delay and the apparent lack of political commitment to progressing with this vital issue are extremely worrying. This has also been compounded by the UK Government's announcement that it is to remove both the statutory duty to publish and implement child poverty strategies as well as the four child poverty targets in the Child Poverty Act 2010. This represents an abdication of the government's commitment to tackling child poverty and will result in a failure by the government to address the impact of poverty on the lives of some of our most vulnerable children and young people in Northern Ireland. It is likely therefore that the future for children and young people living in the most economically deprived areas most impacted upon by the conflict will only remain further defined by poverty and its negative impacts on their lives. Such impacts impinge significantly on the ability of children and young people to have some of their most fundamental rights realised including their right to health and well-being, equal access to educational and employment opportunities and quality accommodation.<sup>26</sup>

It is well recognised and documented that factors associated with the conflict impact severely on child and adolescent mental health in Northern Ireland<sup>27</sup> yet there continues to be minimal recognition of the longer-term consequences of trans-generational trauma or of the impact on children of living in deeply-divided, sectarian communities. Evidence shows that 20% of children in Northern Ireland will develop a significant mental health problem before their eighteenth birthday,<sup>28</sup> however more recent research suggests that this figure

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<sup>26</sup> Save the Children, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> A Vision for a Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service – The Bamford Review November 2005.

<sup>28</sup> DHSSPS and RQIA's Independent Review of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Northern Ireland, Updated 23 February 2011.

may be higher, with 28% of 752 children stating that they have had a concern about their mental health.<sup>29</sup> Research also indicates that 10% of children aged 15 and 16 years have self-harmed.<sup>30</sup> Since the initiation of the Northern Ireland Peace Process there has been an increase in the diagnosis of conflict-related trauma<sup>31</sup> and increasing suicide rates in communities that suffered the highest levels of economic deprivation and violence throughout the conflict.<sup>32</sup> Northern Ireland is estimated as having a 25% higher rate of overall mental illness prevalence than England, possibly due to the legacy of the conflict, and trans-generational trauma.<sup>33</sup> In 2012, the five year average rates of suicide in Northern Ireland were 4 times higher than England and Wales for 15-19 year olds and 17 times more for 10-14 year olds.<sup>34</sup> The Committee on the Rights of the Child in examining the UK Government's compliance with its obligations under the UNCRC in 2008 expressed its concern that in Northern Ireland, due to the legacy of the conflict, the situation of children in this respect is particularly concerning. The Committee recommended that additional resources and improved capacities be employed to meet the needs of children with mental health problems, with particular attention to those at greater risk, including children affected by conflict.<sup>35</sup> Despite this child and adolescent mental health services are severely underfunded in Northern Ireland. In 2013-14 only 7.8% of the total planned mental health expenditure was allocated to child and adolescent mental health services in Northern Ireland.<sup>36</sup> Population-based surveys show that those who experienced most violence have significantly higher rates of depression than those with little or no experience. People whose areas had been heavily affected by violence had very high rates of depression. So the relationship between conflict experience and poor mental health, and between lack of conflict experience and good mental health, is well established.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> CLC and Save the Children, Children's rights survey to inform young person's report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, January 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Northern Ireland Lifestyle and Coping Survey Final Report. Belfast Department of Health Social Services & Public Safety and the Department of Education, R. O'Connor, S. Rasmussen & K. Hawton, (2010).

<sup>31</sup> C. Gilligan (2006). "Traumatized by Peace? A Critique of Five Assumptions in the Theory of Conflict-Related Trauma."

<sup>32</sup> Department of Health, Social Services and Personal Safety (DHSSPS) (2006). "Protect Life. A Shared Vision: the Northern Ireland Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan 2006-2011".

<sup>33</sup> *Op cit.* 27.

<sup>34</sup> Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (2014), Annual Report for the Period 31 March 2014.

<sup>35</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations United Kingdom, CRC/C/GBR/CO/4, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2008, Paras. 56 – 57.

<sup>36</sup> Information received by CLC from the Health and Social Care Board, dated 17<sup>th</sup> February 2015.

<sup>37</sup> M. Tomlinson (2007), School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work Queen's University Belfast, "Suicide and Young People: the case of Northern Ireland".

Recent research has found that of those in Northern Ireland suffering poor mental health, 15% of these are as a direct result of the Northern Ireland conflict.<sup>38</sup> It also revealed the ongoing impact of trans-generational trauma and highlighted that children continue to suffer the consequences of poor mental health associated with conflict trauma and living under the ongoing threat of paramilitaries. It found that traumatic experiences and exposure to violence lead to adverse mental health not only for the person themselves, but also for their children and grandchildren, resulting in a trans-generational cycle which impacts upon the well-being of subsequent generations. As earlier indicated, the areas most impacted upon by the conflict tend to be socially deprived and the research found that social deprivation and poverty serve to exacerbate the mental health impact of the consequences of the conflict.

As highlighted above there is an extremely worrying and rising suicide rate in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland which are the same areas which have suffered worst as a result of the Northern Ireland conflict. A spokesperson for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has highlighted Northern Ireland's difficult challenge to reduce suicide rates, particularly in light of the additional threat posed by the current economic downturn.<sup>39</sup> From January – March 2015, the number of young people who were NEET (not in employment, education or training) in NI was considerably higher (18.1% of 16–24 year olds) than the UK average (12.0%).<sup>40</sup> It was also reported in May 2015 that youth unemployment in Northern Ireland jumped from 17.8% in the last quarter of 2014, to almost 22% for the first three months of this year, which compares with a UK rate of 14.3%.<sup>41</sup> Disillusionment surrounding worklessness has become a critical problem for young people in Northern Ireland. A recent study found that a third of long term unemployed young people had contemplated taking their own lives. Long term unemployed young people were more than twice as likely as their peers to have been prescribed anti-depressants. One in three (32%) had contemplated suicide, while one in four (24%) had self-harmed. The report found 40% of jobless young people had faced

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<sup>38</sup> Prepared for the Commission for Victims and Survivors by Ulster University, (2015), "Towards A Better Future: The Trans-generational Impact of the Troubles on Mental Health".

<sup>39</sup> "Suicide kills as many as the Troubles", The Detail, K. Torney, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

<http://www.thedetail.tv/articles/suicide-kills-as-many-as-the-troubles>

<sup>40</sup> 'Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey' January – March 2015

[http://www.detini.gov.uk/lfs\\_quarterly\\_supplement\\_january\\_-\\_march\\_2015\\_new.pdf?rev=0](http://www.detini.gov.uk/lfs_quarterly_supplement_january_-_march_2015_new.pdf?rev=0)

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/business/news/northern-ireland-unemployment-rises-as-22-of-youth-still-without-work-31220022.html>



symptoms of mental illness, including suicidal thoughts, feelings of self-loathing and panic attacks, as a direct result of unemployment.<sup>42</sup>

Educational attainment is a further related issue which is vital to securing lifetime opportunities. Failing to achieve in education places children at a substantial disadvantage when it comes to accessing further education and employment. The Department of Education has identified groups of children who are at particular risk of underachieving in education, including Traveller children; children from ethnic minorities; children with additional needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>43</sup> A Northern Ireland Audit Office<sup>44</sup> report found that at the end of primary school (year 7), more than one in six pupils does not achieve the expected standard in literacy and numeracy. By Key Stage 3 (year 10), more than one in five pupils does not achieve the expected standard in literacy and numeracy. By GCSE, two in five leave full-time education not having achieved the required standard in literacy and numeracy.<sup>45</sup>

Free School Meals (FSM) entitlement is an indicator of social deprivation and is highly correlated with lower levels of educational attainment. As outlined above, the areas most impacted upon by the conflict are also the most socially deprived. This number of pupils in Northern Ireland who are entitled to free schools meals has increased steadily from 20% in 2010/11 to 29.7% in 2014/15.<sup>46</sup> In 2013/14 the percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs Grades A\* - C including Mathematics and English was 65.2%. In 2013/14 the percentage of school leavers entitled to free school meals achieving at least 5 GCSEs A\* - C including Mathematics and English was 38.7%.<sup>47</sup> Statistics indicate serious concerns about underachievement among working class pupils and in particular working class Protestant boys.<sup>48</sup> In 2001, research commissioned by OFMDFM<sup>49</sup> concluded that the educational non-progressor was most likely to be a Protestant working class male. Despite this, the third Peace Monitoring Report in 2014 reports that 19.7% of Protestant

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<sup>42</sup> 'Macquarie Youth Index', The Prince's Trust, January 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Appendix 1, Priorities for Youth Consultation Document, Department of Education, consultation closed 10<sup>th</sup> December 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools, Northern Ireland Audit Office, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Key Stage 2 Results 2010/11.

<sup>46</sup> Department of Education, School Census 2014/15, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Statistical Bulletin Year 12 and Year 14 Examination Performance at Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland 2013-14, Department of Education, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Free School Meal entitlement is used as a proxy indicator of deprivation as specific data on pupil's class background are not recorded in official Department of Education databases.

<sup>49</sup> OFMDFM (2001) Report on Participation Rates in Further and Higher Education

boys who were entitled to free school meals (FSME) achieved at least 5+ GCSEs A\*-C or higher (or equivalent) compared with 32.4% of Protestant girls (FSME), 33.2% of Roman Catholic boys (FSME) and 43.8% of Roman Catholic Girls (FSME).<sup>50</sup>

Research<sup>51</sup> has found that differentials in educational performance lie, to a degree of 80% or more, outside schools. It found that systemic educational improvement will require comprehensive, long-term responses to inequality. The research highlights the deindustrialisation and the loss of traditional labour markets and skills and illustrates the frustration and increasing alienation of working class Protestant boys who are underachieving in education and have limited or no employment opportunities due to a loss of traditional industries to which this group historically turned to for employment.

26,000 children or 6% have a disability in Northern Ireland. 8% of boys aged 15 and under were found to have a disability, compared with 4% of girls of the same age.<sup>52</sup> There is little research or information available about the needs and circumstances of children and young people with a disability in Northern Ireland. Research<sup>53</sup> indicates high levels of disability and ill-health in Northern Ireland. Some of this is due to physical and mental damage caused by the conflict, but much is related to high levels of poverty, social deprivation and poor diet. Research also shows poor provision of services for families dealing with disability, at least in part due to the high costs of duplicating some services due to the segregated nature of Northern Ireland society.<sup>54</sup> This lack of adequate service provision to meet the needs of those with disabilities coupled with the additional cost to families of raising a child with a disability which is estimated to be three times more<sup>55</sup> and the lack of opportunities for children and young people with disabilities all contribute to a sense of alienation and frustration in communities living with the legacy of the conflict.

There has been a marked increase in the numbers of newcomer children and families in Northern Ireland. Numbers of newcomer children registered in Northern Ireland schools are rising year on year, with a 72% increase recorded between 2007 and 2012.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>50</sup> P. Nolan, (2014), "Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report Number 3".

<sup>51</sup> "A Call to Action Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class", Issued by Dawn Purvis MLA and the Working Group on Educational disadvantage and the Protestant working class, March 2011.

<sup>52</sup> DHSSPS's "Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy 2011 – 2015" Consultation December 2010

<sup>53</sup> G. Horgan, (2005), "The particular circumstances of children in Northern Ireland".

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Contact A Family, (2012) "Counting the Costs".

<sup>56</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) The Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (NINIS), <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk>

Northern Ireland is becoming an increasingly diverse society and research shows that new migrants have joined longstanding communities of people from minority ethnic groups during the last decade, making a positive contribution to the local economy.<sup>57</sup> Racist attacks and racially motivated crimes are being reported in Northern Ireland with increasing frequency. Between 2013 and 2014 there was a 43% increase in racially-motivated offences.<sup>58</sup> According to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), in the 12 months to June 2014 racist incidents rose by 36%, from 830 to 1,132. In the same period, racist crimes increased by 51%, from 525 to 796.<sup>59</sup> NGO's working with children from minority ethnic communities highlight racism as an issue for children which impacts on their right to play.<sup>60</sup> The 2014 Young Life and Times Survey found that 39% of the 16 year olds taking part in the survey had witnessed racist bullying or harassment in school.<sup>61</sup> Difficulties have also been reported in placing newcomer children in Belfast based schools due to a fear of racist attacks when travelling to school.<sup>62</sup> Despite this, the Racial Equality Strategy in Northern Ireland, while it was consulted upon in 2014, is yet to be implemented. OFMDFM's Draft Racial Equality Strategy acknowledges that racism in our society is, to an extent, shaped by sectarianism. It also states that the Northern Ireland conflict has created patterns and attitudes, such as residential segregation and heightened territorial awareness, which now impact upon minority ethnic communities.<sup>63</sup> The draft Strategy acknowledges the link between sectarianism and racism and states that we cannot hope to tackle one without tackling the other.<sup>64</sup> It must be remembered, when considering the impact of the legacy of the conflict on children in Northern Ireland, that we are not only talking about children from the Catholic or Protestant communities. The legacy of the conflict is impacting on the lives of all of our children in damaging and often complex ways. We must respond to the needs of all of our children and young people and embrace diversity in a manner which allows us to move forward as a more inclusive and open

<sup>57</sup> A. Wallace, R. McAreavey and K. Atkin, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2013)

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/poverty-ethnicity-northern-ireland>

<sup>58</sup> Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) (2014) 'Statistical Bulletin: Cases Involving Hate Crime 2013/14. 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014.

[www.ppsni.gov.uk/Branches/PPSNI/PPSNI/Files/Documents/Stats%20and%20Research/Statistical%20Bulletin%20on%20Cases%20Involving%20Hate%20Crime%202013-14.pdf](http://www.ppsni.gov.uk/Branches/PPSNI/PPSNI/Files/Documents/Stats%20and%20Research/Statistical%20Bulletin%20on%20Cases%20Involving%20Hate%20Crime%202013-14.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> The complex rise in Northern Ireland racist hate crime, Helen Grady, BBC Radio 4's The Report <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-29141406>

<sup>60</sup> *Op cit* 16.

<sup>61</sup> 'Young Life and Times Survey 2014' ARK.

<sup>62</sup> 'The integration of newcomer children with interrupted education into Northern Ireland schools – A Belfast based case study,' Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership, September 2014.

<sup>63</sup> A Sense of Belonging: Delivering Social Change through a Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014 – 2024, OFMDFM, Consultation closed 10<sup>th</sup> October 2014.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

society, leaving the historical divisions of the past behind. A continued focus on ‘one’ community or ‘the other’ needs to urgently change to ensure that all children and young people in Northern Ireland are shielded from the devastating impact of the legacy of a conflict and have their rights protected and realised.

There has been and continues to be very little focus in the Northern Ireland peace process on the impact of conflict on children and young people. Children are not mentioned in the Good Friday Agreement and young people are mentioned only once where the Agreement states,

*“The participants particularly recognise that young people from areas affected by the troubles face particular difficulties and will support the development of special community-based initiatives based on international best practice”<sup>65</sup>*

In light of the levels of child poverty, child and adolescent mental ill-health, educational inequality and issues relating to higher levels of disability in those areas most impacted upon by the conflict which the Government has failed to address, it is difficult to see how there has been any genuine attempt to deliver upon this commitment.

In relation to the Government’s, ‘Together Building A United Community’ Strategy,<sup>66</sup> the language of the first shared aim which relates to children and young people is extremely problematic. The Strategy talks of the need to, ‘improve attitudes’ among young people so that they can play a full and active role in building good relations. The implication of the use of such language is that it is the attitudes of young people which prevents them from being able to play an active role in building good relations. There is no recognition of the particular circumstances which children and young people growing up in Northern Ireland today face, particularly those children and young people living in areas which have been most impacted upon by the conflict. **There is no other group singled out under the Strategy in this manner, again suggesting that young people are to blame for the divisions in Northern Ireland when nothing could be further from the truth.** The problems of division, segregation and sectarianism, all of which were deeply ingrained in Northern Ireland before the birth of this generation of young people, require a much more comprehensive solution other than improving the attitudes of young people. While young people certainly have a vital role to play in moving towards a more peaceful and

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<sup>65</sup> The Good Friday Agreement: Agreement reached in multi-party negotiations, April 1998.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Together: Building a United Community’ Strategy, OFMDFM, May 23 2013.

stable future in Northern Ireland, it is adults and the Government who must ensure that they are included and facilitated to play it. Central to this is the need to urgently address the serious disadvantage many young people face on a daily basis as a result of living with the legacy of a conflict which is not of their making but which is extremely pervasive in their lives.

In light of the need for a framework to better protect the rights of children in Northern Ireland it is extremely disappointing that no progress has been made in delivering a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland since the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission advised the UK Government on recommendations for the content of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland in 2008. The Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland formed a key component of the human rights protections provided for in the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement. The Bill of Rights is an integral part of the Northern Ireland peace agreement which should ensure that past abuses of human rights which fuelled and maintained the conflict can never re-occur and that society moves forward on the basis of respect for human rights and equality for all. As outlined above, children and young people are and have been particularly adversely affected by the conflict and violence in our society over recent decades. The guaranteeing of protection and respect for children's rights are essential in securing a better future for all children, something which a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland has significant potential to help achieve. It is vital that there is a renewed focus on the development of a jurisdictionally specific Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland as it represents a unique opportunity to enshrine children's rights at a constitutional level in Northern Ireland.

Children 'opting out' of democratic society altogether is a related but separate issue. The children and young people of Northern Ireland want to be treated and feel like valued members of their community and society as a whole. They all have valid opinions and ideas which should be heard and taken into account in making decisions which impact on their lives and in framing the society in which they live. This is one of their fundamental human rights and the only way to prevent the exclusion of children and young people from their communities and the dangers which accompany it. The most pertinent questions around the engagement of young people in democratic society are, in my view, ultimately for adults.

- How do we ensure that children and young people are fully included in decision making and influencing the society in which they live?

- What are the structures and strategies in place which ensure that children and young people are proactively facilitated to play a central role in their communities?
- Do children and young people feel that they are valued members of society, their contribution is sought, taken into account and given effect to, ultimately having an impact on their community and the world around them?

To answer these questions we must first examine the role of children and young people in community decision making. There is a general recognition that young people should be, “better connected to community life”.<sup>67</sup> Research with children in six communities found that few formal efforts are made to attain this objective. The research found that there were no Resident or Community Forums which included children or youth representatives nor, in the views of children and young people, were they included in community-based decision-making.<sup>68</sup> This compounded the belief that their views and experiences were of no significance to the wider community. Young people stated that adults weren’t interested in what they want or think, young people were not asked for their views and that their views were not respected by adults in their community. In particular, children and young people expressed their annoyance about their exclusion from community meetings where, ironically, they were regularly the focus of attention. Exclusion from community decision-making processes demonstrates to young people that their views are inconsequential, that adults are unwilling to listen and that they are not valued as community members often reminding them of their powerlessness.<sup>69</sup>

This is not an isolated experience for children and young people. Children and young people are significantly underrepresented in decision making structures in most aspects of their lives, including in their communities. They are not routinely consulted with in decisions which impact on their lives, despite the Government being under a statutory obligation<sup>70</sup> to ensure that they are. Research carried out by NICCY found that no Department undertook engagement with children and young people systematically.<sup>71</sup> It also found that very few Departments were able to provide evidence that engagement between departments and children and young people had an impact on the development of policies, strategies, legislation and services. Furthermore, there has been no adequately

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<sup>67</sup> *Op cit.* 9.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

<sup>71</sup> P. Keenan, Commissioned by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, (2014) “Participation in Government: Walking or Talking Participation”.

funded, systematic mechanism for supporting the involvement of children in decision making at either community or Government level since the withdrawal of funding for Participation Network in December 2012.

NICCY has been advising Government and the new councils on community planning in recognition of the lack of representation in formal decision making structures to ensure sufficient regional engagement with children and young people. The Northern Ireland Network for Youth and the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly have yet to be developed and concerns have been expressed that Government appears to have made the establishment of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly a low priority and that ongoing austerity measures make the prospect of a such an Assembly even less likely in the foreseeable future.<sup>72</sup> Children and young people were not directly engaged with in the Haass / O’Sullivan talks, despite the importance of the need for such engagement being emphasised by both NICCY and children’s sector representatives in a meeting with Dr O’Sullivan in October 2013.

In light of the serious deficit of opportunities for children and young people to meaningfully engage in decision making and to have their voices heard and taken into account in democratic society, I would suggest that it is the job of adults and Government to facilitate them to, ‘opt in’.

It is vital to remember that Northern Ireland is a society in transition and that issues relating to violence and sectarianism still exist in communities and children and young people still live under this threat. Given the “conflict profile” of children in Northern Ireland it is essential that there is increased investment in addressing the very serious issues which children and young people face as a result of living with the legacy of the conflict. As well as robustly addressing the reality of the lives of children who experience violence and sectarianism, it is vital that children and young people are prepared and supported to make their contribution towards a more peaceful and stable future in a number of ways. Central to this is ensuring that children are facilitated to have their say and adults and Government are prepared to listen and act. Also fundamental are increased investment in child and adolescent mental health services, child poverty, educational inequalities, the

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<sup>72</sup> Our Lives In Our Words - Northern Ireland Young People’s Report To The United Nations Committee On The Rights Of The Child on behalf of all children and young people living in Northern Ireland, Youth@CLC, CLC and Save the Children, June 2015.

provision of training and employment opportunities for children and young people and youth focused services in the communities most impacted upon by the conflict.