

BEYOND25


A short research paper exploring

**Good Relations Practice beyond 25th Anniversary
of the Good Friday Agreement**

July 2024


springboard

Developing Capacity | Valuing Diversity | Building Peace





Springboard

Established in 1992, Springboard is committed to building a society that develops and strengthens capacity for life and work, values diversity by encouraging mutual respect, and promotes active citizenship.



Roe Valley Residents Association

RVRA have 20+ years' experience of planning, implementing, and delivering a range of good relations initiatives to young people in heavily deprived estates in Limavady and surrounding areas.

Funding

We would like to thank the funders and managing agents for their support in the **Beyond25** programme.



Programme

IFI's Our Peace, Our Future programme celebrates grassroots peacebuilding by civil society over the last 25 years and looks forward to how to further embed peace and reconciliation over the next 25 years.

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Contents

SECTION 1	<u>BACKGROUND</u>	
	1.1	International Fund for Ireland 4
	1.2	Our Peace, Our Future 4
	1.3	Beyond25 4
	1.4	Programme Partners 5
	1.5	Programme Support 5
2	<u>METHODOLOGY</u>	
	2.1	Research Question 6
	2.2	Grounded Theory 6
	2.3	Data Collection 6
	2.4	Analysis 8
	2.5	Limitations 8
3	<u>FINDINGS & ANALYSIS</u>	
	3.1	Impact of Division/Conflict 9
	3.2	Good Relations Journey - Young People 11
	3.3	Study Visits 13
4	<u>IMPLICATIONS FOR GOOD RELATIONS PRACTICE</u>	15
5	<u>CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	18

Section 1

Background

04

1.1 International Fund for Ireland

In 1986 the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) was established as an independent international organization by the British and Irish governments, with contributions from the British and Irish governments, the United States of America, the European Union, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The objectives of IFI are to promote economic and social advance and encourage contact dialogue and reconciliation between Unionists and Nationalists throughout Ireland. Its areas of focus are N Ireland, and the southern border counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo. In 2021 IFI launched its Connecting Communities Strategy 2021-2024, which aims to help tackle some of the most significant remaining challenges to lasting peace. The organization currently has four significant funding strands to embed peace and reconciliation.

- ◆ **Peace Barriers Programme:** involving confidence and relationship building interventions within and across interface communities to help move towards peace barrier removal.
- ◆ **Peace Impact Programme:** building peace and prosperity in areas where groups/communities have not previously or only partially participated in peacebuilding activities.
- ◆ **Personal Youth Development Programme:** supporting young people at risk to develop confidence, foster good relations and build employability.
- ◆ **Communities in Partnership Programme:** building positive cross border relationships and cooperation between groups and organisations. (IFI, 2021)

1.2 Our Peace, Our Future

In 2023, the 25th anniversary year of the Good Friday Agreement, IFI launched a new time-limited initiative, Our Peace, Our Future, for groups currently supported by the funder. The aim was to celebrate grassroots peacebuilding which had brought significant benefits over the past 25 years, but also to look forward on how to further embed peace and reconciliation over the next 25 years. Its strategic objectives included:

- ◆ supporting creative and inclusive approaches to peace building,
- ◆ contributing to peace building and/or promoting greater understanding and/or good relations within and between communities in Northern Ireland, North-South, and East-West,
- ◆ creating space for discussion on the future and/or promotion of peace building work undertaken or yet to be undertaken, and
- ◆ drawing on learning from other contested societies about effective approaches to building peace.

1.3 Beyond25

In response, lead partner Springboard Opportunities Limited (Springboard), in partnership with Roe Valley Residents Association (RVRA) created and delivered the **Beyond25** programme. The programme aimed to explore good relations approaches to further develop/embed peace and reconciliation, through (1) sharing peacebuilding practice between providers within N Ireland and (2) learning about good relations approaches within contested communities in North-South and East-West contexts. It was believed the synergy of sharing good relations practice and exploring new approaches would contribute to creative peacebuilding and greater impacts to *'reinforce how people can live together in peace'* (IFI, 2023).

Beyond25 focused on peacebuilding/good relations approaches for marginalised young people living in disadvantaged areas, impacted by community divides and contested spaces. Both Springboard and RVRA have extensive expertise in reaching and working with 'hard to reach' young people who feel alienated from society. Development of good relations practice through learning visits in Ireland and England also concentrated on areas where young people were living within diverse cultural spaces and/or were facing increasing cohesion challenges.



Beyond25 focused on peacebuilding/good relations approaches for marginalised young people living in disadvantaged areas, impacted by community divides and contested spaces.”

Through consultation, discussion, and exchange, **Beyond25** aimed to build greater understanding and draw out learning of more effective and creative peacebuilding/good relations approaches for the future. The short research paper recognises the good relations/peacebuilding arena is broad and therefore the **Beyond25** partnership agreed to select and explore practice in one of the following areas:

- ◆ the shared principles & practices that support effective good relations work/peacebuilding with marginalised young people,
- ◆ good relations practice to underpin & sustain good relations work/peacebuilding, or
- ◆ key objectives for community cohesion/peacebuilding in N Ireland over the next 25 years.



Beyond25 aimed to build greater understanding and draw out learning of more effective and creative peacebuilding / good relations approaches for the future”

1.4 Programme Partners

Springboard as lead programme partner for **Beyond25**, has 32+ years of experience of working with young people in N Ireland, particularly within Greater Belfast. As an organisation it is committed to contributing to a post-conflict society that values diversity by encouraging mutual understanding and respect, and fosters positive, sustainable relationships across difference. Springboard brings marginalised young people together from different backgrounds living in areas impacted by high levels of economic, social deprivation and affected by sectarianism, division and the conflict.

Young people tend to be affected by multiple disadvantages and have a combination of barriers adversely limiting their potential for growth. Springboard acts as a catalyst for change, providing needs-led and transformative development opportunities. To date the organisation has engaged 14,000+ participants and supported sustainable outcomes of significant attitudinal change, personal growth and increased good relations. Young people value and engage positively with people from diverse backgrounds/circumstance and as role models and agents of change contribute to a more peaceful and cohesive society.

RVRA are the partner organisation with 20+ years' experience of planning, implementing, and delivering a range of good relations initiatives to young people in heavily deprived estates in Limavady (County Derry/Londonderry) and surrounding areas. RVRA have extensive cross-community and community cohesion experience, providing tailored capacity building and community development interventions.

1.5 Programme Support

Belong - The Cohesion & Integration Network are a leading UK organisation on social cohesion and integration. They supported **Beyond25** through facilitation of focus groups, reflective sessions, and liaison on England-based study visit.



Springboard gives you the opportunity to find out who you are and what you really stand for and who others are... Springboard has changed my life completely like a full 360 turnaround from who I was.”

“Coming to RVRA has helped me big time... without RVRA I don't know where I would be today.”

Section 2

Methodology

06

2.1 Research Question

Through facilitated participatory focus groups in both locations (Belfast and Limavady), staff from Springboard and RVRA agreed to explore the following research area.

Good relations practice for youth practitioners to underpin and sustain peacebuilding beyond the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement

The research area was viewed as critically important as without skilled workers, progress in the past 25 years would have been significantly hampered and progress into the next 25 years impeded. Both organisations unanimously agreed optimum good relations practice by youth practitioners was the foundation to positive change.

2.2 Grounded Theory

Research was informed by a qualitative research design using grounded theory analysis, where data was collected in the form of words and observation and where findings may contribute to 'theory generalizability,' (Partington, D., 2002). In line with traditional qualitative research methods, the research employed an interpretivist research paradigm where, as asserted by Wilson 'the focus is upon the subjective reality experienced by social actors'. (Wilson, 2002).

The use of the grounded theory approach recognised two key benefits. Firstly it facilitated an approach based on discovery and one, which grounds theory in reality (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Secondly, it recognised the benefits of findings that could 'serve as a very strong basis for further investigations, as well as being a research finding in its own right' (Bell, 2005).

The approach involved:

- ◆ data collection and analysis as interrelated processes,
- ◆ 'potential indicators of phenomena' (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) were labelled as conceptual units of analysis, through a process of open coding. This enabled data to be broken down in an analytic fashion.
- ◆ conceptual units were integrated into overarching categories to provide the cornerstones of the developing theory, and
- ◆ analysis took into account the macroscopic conditions affecting peacebuilding with young people, eg. environment and societal factors.

In total 88 individuals who comprised of staff and young people were involved in the research. The respondent profile is provided below.

Gender	Female 53%	Male 45%	Transgender 2%
Age	16-24 years 44%	25-30 years 17%	31-60 years 27%
Community Background	CNR 50%	PUL 43%	Other 7%

Staff had extensive experience of working with young people within the peacebuilding/reconciliation arena. All young people were between 18-24 years and either had been or were currently involved in a good relations programme. The research group facilitated the potential representativeness of the sample, reflecting not only those with experience of participation on a good relations programme but also those with knowledge of implementing good relations programmes.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection from October 2023 to May 2024 involved the following.

2.3.1 Joint Focus Groups with Springboard & RVRA

Attendees shared collective and diverse experiences of past peacebuilding interventions, and discussed the differences and similarities of urban and rural peacebuilding within N Ireland.

The prompts and open questions with the staff were designed to open up creative, reflective, and critical thinking and to identify required good relations skills/practice to purposefully bring young people together across difference.

continued:



...without skilled workers, progress in the past 25 years would have been significantly hampered and progress into the next 25 years impeded...”

The questions (below) were designed to understand what is different at Springboard and RVRA, identify what skills and competencies have been needed in the past and might be needed into the future.

- ◆ Explore challenges for organisations within the areas they work.
- ◆ Identify links between issues young people and communities face now and during the Troubles.
- ◆ Identify examples of division that have perhaps become “normalised”.
- ◆ Unpack key competencies of both the organisations and the youth workers working with young people.

2.3.2 Staff Perspective

Separately facilitated by Springboard and RVRA, discussions delved further into peacebuilding approaches and practice. Learning was shared by those working, living, and experiencing life in the community providing a grassroots perspective. Representatives from each organisation facilitated interactive consultation focus groups with staff focusing on questions (see below). Following discussions, questionnaires were completed collaboratively and forwarded online so staff could include any additional points.

- ◆ What impact have the Troubles had on young people?
- ◆ Scenario: if setting up a peacebuilding organisation for young people what are the key factors you need to think of?
- ◆ What makes Springboard/RVRA unique? What will our work look like in the future?
- ◆ What makes peacebuilding work with young people?
- ◆ What skills and approaches are required by youth workers when working in the context of N Ireland?

2.3.3 Young People Perspective

Facilitated by each partner organisation, focus groups were designed to provide a structure for young people’s views and to help understand key peacebuilding questions such as what has changed for the young person, particularly in their attitudes and thinking towards other groups in society. The questions (see below) were the same for young people engaged in the work of Springboard and RVRA, enabling comparison between the two key partners. Participant profile included 21 young people from RVRA and 23 young people from Springboard.

- ◆ What skills do youth workers need to address division?
- ◆ What skills do they have or need to have which other professions do not?
- ◆ What skills do youth workers need in Belfast which are different to dealing with conflict in rural communities?
- ◆ What impact do the ‘Troubles’ have on your life?
- ◆ How are you affected by division in your communities?
- ◆ Had you ever been involved in peacebuilding work previously? How did it impact on you? What did or did not work?
- ◆ What makes Springboard / RVRA unique?
- ◆ What does coming to Springboard / RVRA mean to you?
- ◆ How important is Springboard / RVRA to you? How did they change your life?

2.3.4 Perspectives from Study Visits (Ireland & England)

Two short study visits were undertaken in January and February 2024 with organisations working in diverse cultural spaces or contested spaces, to provide insight, learning and build communities of practice for future collaboration. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances, RVRA were unable to attend study visit to Ireland and had reduced representation on the study visit to England. However, Springboard held meetings on return from each study visit to share learning.

In Ireland, the Beyond25 group visited:

- ◆ the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), a membership-based organisation that represents the shared interests of voluntary youth organisations and uses collective expertise to act on issues that impact on youth people.
- ◆ Irish Network against Racism (INAR), a national network of anti-racism civil society organisations which work collectively to highlight and address issues of racism in Ireland.
- ◆ Hope and Courage Collective, previously the Far-Right Observatory, a national civil organisation who work to ‘support communities and civil society to stay grounded, caring and resilient in the face of far-right hate, bigotry and extremism.’
- ◆ Rialto Youth Project, a Dublin-based youth organisation who approach youthwork from a community development perspective.

In England, the group visited:

- ◆ Together as One, a youth-led project established following gang violence in the mid-1990s between young people from Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities.

The areas explored on the study visits helped understand the respective contexts, approaches and responses, and skills/competencies required in areas with diverse cultural spaces or facing cohesion challenges. Discussions also focused on how might approaches may need to change for the future to achieve positive results. Learning from both visits added a broader perspective to the research and a comparator to the findings from the N Ireland context.

2.3.5 Reflection

After each study visit, a 2-hour reflection session was held to bring together key learning and experiences between the partnership.

2.3.6 Additional: Transforming Hate in Youth Work Settings Training

Five participants of **Beyond25** attended 'Transforming Hate in YouthWork Settings' delivered by NYCI. This provided educational tools and a practice manual outlining approaches and ways in which workers can transform hate in youth work settings.

The training focused on the youth worker, their practice, self-awareness, taking a needs-based approach and building connections with young people through empathetic listening. Learning reflected current good relations practice in N Ireland.

2.4 Analysis

Aligned to grounded theory approach, analysis involved a thorough sorting and sifting through information to identify similar phrases, patterns, themes, and identification of distinct differences between the different partner organisations and young people. It was then possible to isolate patterns, commonalities, and differences, enabling meaningful insights to be generated.

2.5 Limitations

It is recognised research was based on a relatively small sample and carried out over a limited time period. However, it is suggested findings can provide useful insights on good relations practice moving into the future and identify areas for further research.



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Section 3

Findings & Analysis

3.1 Impact of Division/Conflict

3.1.1 Trauma / Mental Ill-Health

In 2020 the Youth Wellbeing NI Survey found one in eight children and young people (12.6%) had an emotional disorder such as anxiety or depression. They further reported more than 50% of adult mental disorders have their onset before the age of 18, with links identified between the wellbeing of young people and parental experiences of mental ill-health, lifestyle and environmental factors including adverse childhood experiences. (Bunting, L., et al 2020)



“We have just inherited the generational trauma and fear past down from our parents and grandparents who lived through the ‘Troubles.’”



“My granny was shot, I can see how this still affects her and my mum today, so, in a sense I have been indirectly impacted. Our mental health is poor because of this in my family.”

Respondents in **Beyond25** reiterated the ‘*Troubles still cast a large shadow over the community*’ with many families affected in some way by the Troubles. Young people underlined the ongoing impact of the Troubles through a multi-generational lens, with for example communication in families ie over-disclosure and/or silence playing an instrumental role in projection/internalisation of trauma from parent to child. (Ancheroff M., et al., 1998 & Danieli, Y., 1998).

Young people reflected openly and emotionally on the impact of the ‘Troubles’ on their families and how it continues to affect their mental health and lives today. Some referred to families suffering from addictions due to tablets prescribed for post-traumatic stress disorder.



“I don’t think the troubles have impacted us directly but through parents who are emotionally and mentally scarred from it. The older people here have experienced hurt and pain and division and they pass that down to us.”



“My family were impacted by the Greysteel shootings, we still talk about it today.”

Staff reaffirmed the increasing vulnerability of young people, particularly those with pre-existing mental health challenges. They highlighted rising cost of living and mental health/trauma vulnerabilities exacerbated by Covid-19, has led to a deepening crisis for young people already facing multiple and complex challenges. The staff considered the combination of these factors

will become overwhelming, particularly as budgetary pressures further reduce available support services for young people. Staff reflected it was vital youth practitioners ensure good relations practice is responsive to need and prevailing circumstances, and as change continues to accelerate, workers were comfortable working amongst disruption and within ambiguity.

3.1.2 ‘Them & Us’

Respondents reflected on the ongoing and pervasive influence of the Troubles in the lives of young people who live in economically and socially deprived communities and are impacted by the legacy of the conflict. A ‘them & us’ mentality is consistent and underscored daily, with division an endemic feature across many spheres of life. They highlighted frustration that despite the Good Friday Agreement, segregation remains an enduring feature of division, exemplified by segregated housing/communities and education. Young people particularly, pointed to peace walls, as physical manifestations of segregation and daily reminders of community division. Feedback also cited politics of division in governance and voting patterns; and while there is a move from political violence, respondents recognised continued overt and covert sectarianism as a ‘form of constant boundary marking’ to underpin ‘difference’ in ongoing culture wars. (Nagle, J., 2022).



Peace walls are what’s left from the impact of the ‘Troubles’ which are both a physical barrier.. but also a psychological barrier – creating a mindset that we shouldn’t cross.”

Young people also pointed to values, beliefs and attitudes and being expected to act or think in certain ways. Hirsch (2001) highlighted the stories and details about shared or collective trauma experienced by relatives or community can become so entwined with cultural identity that these powerful narratives become parts of children/young people and their own identities. In doing so they can also internalise fear, anger, or loss. (Hirsch, M., 2001).

Young people recognised values, beliefs and attitudes are consciously and subconsciously formed and bonded over time, through influences of family, friends, society, and life experiences, affecting how they think, what they do and how they do it. They reflected how there is constant mistrust of one another and a feeling there is an underlying agenda. What was acceptable was determined by their family and community, for example, whether or not they talk to the police or use of fear to limit travelling into certain areas.



“Young people ...take on an identity due to the environment they are in but don’t understand why. They aren’t being allowed to develop their own values, beliefs and thoughts - it’s being put onto them.”



“Segregation / sectarianism... creates an ‘us v them’ mentality.’ Division can be utilized to keep people in certain roles.”

Young people reflected sectarianism persists and is a daily and significant feature of life within N Ireland. With PSNI reporting the number of recorded sectarian incidents in N Ireland were at its highest level since 2016, (PSNI, 2023), a recurrent theme for many young people was a fear of being assaulted or verbally abused and feeling unsafe. The Protocol and ongoing political tensions had also placed additional pressures on young people to become drawn into anti-social behaviour and/or rioting. This echoed views highlighted by Walsh (2021) who found riots arose from tensions from NI Protocol. They also found young people involved felt disconnected, lacked any optimism for themselves or their future. (Walsh, C., 2021).

These views were reflected by young people on ITV report ‘One Month on the Shankill: Inside Belfast’s Loyalist Community’ who felt ‘..they got pushed into it..’ and that the ‘protocol has radicalized young people.. (ITV, 2021).

3.1.3 Barriers

Respondents felt they faced ongoing barriers arising from the Troubles and division. Paramilitaries and influence of gatekeepers continue to be perceived as a significant impediment within communities and to the lives and aspirations of young people. Between 1998 and February 2023 there were 3260 ‘punishment attacks’, with 63.3% carried out by loyalists and 36.7% by republicans and 51.9% aged 25 years and younger. (Pivotal, 2023).

Young people indicated paramilitary influence, violence, or threat of violence towards them was a lesson learned early in childhood. Much of the intimidation and abuse

starts when young people are children, constituting not only an abuse of ‘power’ but also child abuse. (McAlister, S., 2018.) Young people expressed deep frustration paramilitaries still exist and continue to place limits on their ‘potential’ and lives.

Young people and staff also reflected on the significant impact of social and economic deprivation within communities, which they felt was particularly stark for young people living at an interface. Young people faced multiple and acute issues, including social and economic disadvantage, educational under attainment, limited mobility, access to services and poorer levels of mental, physical health and wellbeing. (Bell, J., & McCready, P., 2021). For many young people choices and opportunities can be limited and more difficult to navigate.

They spoke about communities not having access to the same opportunities and services and that there was an absence of positive role models due to limited education and aspiration.



“Paramilitary influence is still very prevalent within working class communities, there is a level of fear... and constant influence over young people.”



“Gatekeepers continue to hold power within the community and stop people from having positive impact within the community, everything goes through them first and has to fit with their agenda.”

“Springboard actually makes you talk about it rather than banning it and that’s the difference with what works”

3.2 Good Relations Journey - Young People

3.2.1 Previous Experiences

Young people discussed their experiences of good relations programmes prior to their participation on Springboard/RVRA provision. Young people highlighted the limitations of ‘contact’ which offered short engagement/interaction with reduced opportunities to build and sustain relationships. A longer duration and meaningful content within programmes were viewed as highly valuable.

They highlighted that self-understanding through ongoing personal development was critical. The group also felt learning should be in depth, include a challenge function, and build mutual relationships, understanding and knowledge. It was felt this helped sustain attitudinal change and development throughout and beyond the programme.

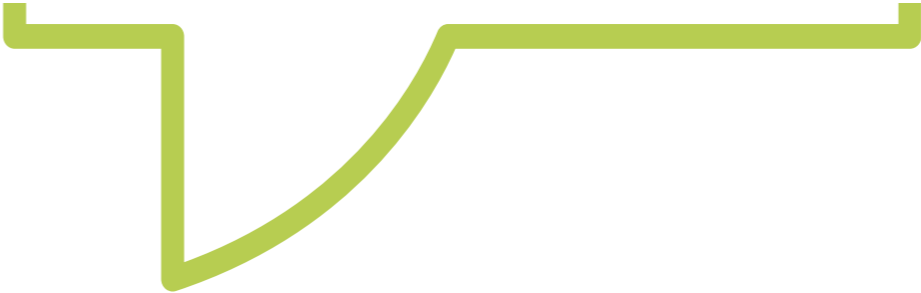
Young people also debated the substantial benefits of exploring beyond cultural confines and building mutual relationships. They discussed how difference was addressed through integrated education, with some young people expressing frustration at the lack, or outright ban, of meaningful dialogue and discussion on community and cultural differences. However, they also highlighted that by going to segregated schools they didn’t meet anyone from ‘the other side’ and that void of knowledge was filled with fear, myths and prejudice.



“Other organisations or peace groups didn’t really help change my perceptions. You could feel it was tokenistic and just for funding. You were kind of thrown together for one day or whatever, but like that doesn’t help you understand other communities.”



“It’s not long enough or like proper contact with each other where you really get to build relationships. You could feel it was for funding and you didn’t really get to know people from another community. Plus, you were still going home to your same single community that was close knit and sectarian, so you didn’t change your views on people from the other community/side.”



“I know I went to an integrated school and still left bitter because we didn’t actually learn anything about each other’s communities, we weren’t even allowed to talk about it or express our cultures to each other. It was banned! Springboard actually makes you talk about it rather than banning it and that’s the difference with what works.”



“I mean I had some Catholic mates in an integrated school I sent to during school hours, but it wasn’t proper cause as soon as I went home to my own community, I never socialized with any of them ...I was still sectarian... in school we never did anything to do with religion or what type of person you are or what you believe in. Anything you learned about difference was from your mates and probably bad.”





“Before Springboard only time I ever seen someone from another community was when we were arranging a riot at the interface / peace wall, and I was 22 [years old] coming here...’

3.2.2 The Difference

On reflecting on positive experiences arising from participation on Springboard and RVRA programmes, young people highlighted key areas of impact.

❖ Personal, Social, Emotional (PSE) Capabilities

Increased confidence levels, having self-understanding and ability to mix and relate to others was overwhelmingly reported as a key change arising from participation on programmes. Young people reflected on personal journeys starting with high levels of anxiety to feeling safe and calm.



“RVRA has changed my life by bringing me out of my comfort zone and allowing me to meet many people in the way of friends and leaders, it helped me find myself more”.

They highlighted increased confidence and agency, as well as improved personal understanding and ability to manage emotions. A further key aspect was an enhanced ability to communicate and build positive relationships. Staff strongly reiterated the fundamental importance of PSE capabilities to the achievement of any other outcome, including good relations. In the Young Foundation Framework of Outcomes for Young People, it underscored the importance of a consistent focus on PSE capabilities during programmes to build empowered, resilient young people. (McNeil, B., et al 2012). This, in turn creates a bedrock to sustain positive change.

❖ Good Relations Capabilities

Young people expressed significant distance travelled in building and increasing good relations capabilities ie capabilities contributing to community relations, to addressing community division, sectarianism, racism and contributing to reconciliation (NI Executive, 2014). Alongside growth in PSE capabilities, research pointed to change in good relations at a number of levels.

Young people reflected there was attitudinal change, where beliefs and attitudes had been challenged, evaluated, and clarified, through myth busting, examining prejudices and understanding difference not from a negative but positive standpoint. They also pointed out how comfort zones were challenged, both mentally and physically, as they ‘widened their horizons.’ Development addressed fears, built confidence, and understanding, which in turn cemented into learning and knowledge for young people. They reflected the programme had ‘taught them’ or they had ‘learnt’ about each other, about the different communities both Catholic and Protestant, and beyond to the ethnic minority community. They realised issues and challenges are faced by everyone, whatever their religion or colour and that everyone shared similar fears, hopes and aspirations.



“It gave me the opportunity to mix with different cultures and religions helping me realise we are not so different.”

Young people highlighted their experience on Springboard or RVRA programmes had positively changed their lives. They reflected on distance travelled beginning with bitterness and sectarian viewpoints to moving to understanding difference, increasing empathy, building mutual relationships, and having an openness to individuals who are different from themselves.



“I grew up in a very sectarian family and Springboard helped me to realise I didn’t have to listen to family members, that I could change the cycle. Because of the training and workshops and building actual real relationships with people from a different community it changed my opinion and thoughts and made me more open and respectful.”

“Relationship building and trusting relationships with staff were cited as key.”

3.2.3 Drivers of Change

Young people reflected on some key drivers of change while on Springboard / RVRA programmes.

- ◆ Relationship building and trusting relationships with staff were cited as key. Young people reflected staff were transparent, open, honest, and genuine and no matter who they met all staff welcomed them, treated them the same way and made them feel important. Feeling valued and not being judged was a recurrent theme. Staff being respectful and having a neutral, inclusive environment was also welcomed. Young people felt they were always at front and centre of programmes and ‘all in it together, [as] a family.’
- ◆ Another key driver of change was ‘feeling safe’ or having a ‘safe space/place.’ This was repeated time and time again by young people as central to their change journey. By creating, protecting, and ‘holding’ a safe space Springboard / RVRA enabled young people to challenge, explore and change without judgement, providing time to clarify thoughts, values, and attitudes. Feeling a ‘sense of belonging’ was a common theme amongst the young people.

Young people on Springboard programmes also reflected how the organisation supported them to gradually expand their safe space / comfort zone, through attending programme venues in different communities.

- ◆ Young people commented on the approach by organisations. They welcomed that the approach was informal and there was space and time to build mutual relationships with staff and other young people. Participation was voluntary and facilitative. Young people also pointed to co-design / delivery as being invaluable in enabling ownership of their learning. They also highlighted and valued good relations being a running theme on all programmes.



“I think the difference with Springboard is that you spend more time with other young people your age from different backgrounds, it’s not just one-off workshops, its more meaningful. You can also walk out the door at any time you want, its voluntary, so you have ownership over your learning rather than being forced.”

“Springboard to me is a safe but also neutral environment where it doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from or your religion or background because you are accepted and respected for who you are.”

The development focus of provision was highly regarded by young people. This was particularly significant, as many young people had believed themselves incapable of development or having potential. For many it was a monumental realisation that they had the ability to achieve and succeed. Building confidence was a key pre-requisite and seen as a stepping stone alongside continual staff support. Young people welcomed structure, routine, and opportunity to visualise a different future for themselves, whether that included education, employment or being able to positively navigate the barriers in their lives.

3.3 Study Visits

Staff and young people visited organisations in Ireland and England to share learning on good relations practice from contested communities in North-South context and diverse cultural spaces in East-West context.

Findings arising from the study visit to Ireland highlighted young people being impacted by growing anti-immigrant sentiment and hate-crime, increased support for anti-conspiracy theories and far right groups, resulting in an accelerated deterioration of community cohesion. Organisations in Ireland pointed to covid and social media as being key enablers fuelling ‘them and us’ narratives. The Rialto Youth Project working with young people in Dublin inner city, an area of high levels of socio-economic deprivation, are addressing needs such as poor housing, generational heroin addiction, gangs and poverty. The project is also situated between two communities with long term hatred against each other due to gangland wars and generations of intercommunity violence.

They have seen a significant rise in racism and anti-discriminatory behaviour amongst young people towards asylum seekers and the Irish Traveller community. Many young people who are feeling let down are increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by the far right and gangs, and being drawn into protests, riots and direct attacks. This perspective was supported by INAR and Hope & Courage Collective.

Key learning from the study visit to Ireland for the staff included availability of NYCI resources and training to support youth workers. NYCI reflected youth workers are already skilled in *'holding the space'* with young people, but required different tools to get young people open up on race hate or cohesion work such as the 'circle of enquiry', the 'tree of needs' and 'transformative practice' as outlined in 'Transforming Hate in Youth Work Setting'. INAR's work to support more inclusive communities involved working in adult education to build confidence, knowledge, and analysis and an understanding of power relations in communities. They encouraged developing strong community networks and creating spaces for more structured conversations to mitigate the influence of far-right groups. Rialto offered shared education and learning to help young people integrate and value difference.

The study visit to England took place in Slough one of the most ethnically diverse towns in the UK, and specifically to Together as One, youth-led project established following gang violence in the 1990s between young people from Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities. The experience of the study visit in England was entirely different to Ireland. Slough boasts a significant breadth of diversity, with community cohesion celebrated and welcomed. Diversity was also reflected in the staffing and young people involved in Together as One, whose focus was promoting community cohesion. The key take-away from the visit was the strategic approach and open communication employed across local policing, Council and voluntary, community, and statutory sectors, to promote diversity and community cohesion; and, as such any far-right activity is rapidly addressed.

Learning from the study visit to Ireland in particular, has comparative learning for the future of good relations work in N Ireland. Ongoing global displacement due to for example, conflict, impacts of climate emergency, changes in ethnic composition of communities and cohesion challenges will continue. Over the last 10 years, 124,000 from outside UK & Ireland and 5,7000 from outside EU joined N Ireland, with school census of 'other' showing increase between 2000/01 at 5.5% & 2020/21 at 18.8% (NI Census, 2021 & P Nolan, 2023). As community and economic resources are stretched, there are correspondingly increasing protests in N Ireland undermining good relations and community cohesion.



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Drawn from findings from consultations and study visits this section highlights some implications for Good Relations practice delivered by youth practitioners in the future.

4.1 Youthwork Approach is Foundational

It is recognised and accepted a youth development approach with associated delivery principles are foundational to the success of inclusive and Good Relations practice. As highlighted by the feedback with young people, on the drivers of change, areas such as co-design, having ownership, being valued, safety, and mutual respect are essential to and intertwined with successful change impacts within good relations work. It is therefore worthwhile to reaffirm the key delivery principles adopted by youth practitioners, which comprise:

- ◆ **Young person centred:** the young person is at the centre of planning and delivery. Engagement starts where they are and is on their terms in relation to their values, views, and principles. Young people are actively engaged, the things that are important to them are taken into account and their 'lived' experience are used to support their learning. Knowledge and meaning are extracted from their experiences and ideas. Taking part is an enjoyable experience which fits into and contributes to the young person's life. The contact with the young person is concerned with how they feel and not just what they know and can do – 'being' is as important as 'doing'
- ◆ **Values & behaviours:** all interactions with young people are characterised by empathy, respect, compassion, outreach, patience, and the belief they can grow and change.

- ◆ **Engagement with young people:** helping young people engage throughout their time on a programme is a task in its own right. Approaches encouraging participation and widening horizons are tailored to individual circumstances. Participation is voluntary and young people will get support they need throughout.

- ◆ **Educational and developmental:** the engagement with the young people is recognised as educational and developmental in its nature, strengths-based and characterised by a well-understood theoretical and practical foundation for building identified capabilities and supported by a range of youthwork methodologies. Assessment of need is robust and informs individual development, programming, content, and methods. Capability development is planned and opportunistic with non-formal learning environment. This is done using a wide range of activities as part of a coherent and well-thought through process and programme, facilitated by suitably skilled staff.

- ◆ **The importance of a central, positive relationship:** the work with each young person is based on a vital, core, critical relationships between them and the person or people supporting their learning and development. This relationships is open and honest, rooted in a youthwork approach, committed to nurturing the young person and will create the conditions to help them flourish. It will provide ongoing opportunity for the young person to discuss their strengths, hopes, needs, issues, views, prejudices, to plan for the future and help them stick with the programme.

- ◆ **Voice:** young people are supported to find and use their voice and to begin to influence their lives and the lives of others, in a positive way. They are actively encouraged and supported to use their voice to help shape their experience in the programme.

- ◆ **Respect for difference:** Respect for difference is key to Good Relations practice. They will tackle sectarianism and racism, and other discriminatory and damaging attitudes and behaviours towards those who are perceived to be 'different.' Young people will be supported to play their part in helping address these issues. Young people will learn from others with different backgrounds and from other experiences from them.

- ◆ **Safe and stimulating environments:** Programmes will provide experiences which motivate young people and enable them to safely explore their hopes and fears in a safe environment and ultimately move beyond their current horizons. A young person will be enabled to design their own journey by setting personal goals and working out steps towards these goals. Approaches to supporting the achievement of outcomes for young people will be exceptionally well thought out and methods are well integrated.

- ◆ **Partnership:** Young people are partners in their learning and development. They are seen as an asset and not a problem and the process is one of working with young people not on them. Other 'partners' who are important to the young person can be involved eg family, peers. Programmes are mindful of, and seek to understand and work with, the wider context which the young person lives their life. (McCready, S & Harland, K, 2013, NI Executive Office, 2014, PEACEPLUS, 2023)

Further areas identified to underpin and sustain good relations work beyond 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement are as follows.

4.2 Trauma Informed Practice

Arising from the legacy of the conflict, deprivation and intensified by the impacts of Covid-19 and cost of living challenges, trauma impacts, and mental ill-health were overwhelmingly identified by young people in the research as a growing concern and significant impediment to self-development. O'Neill, S. et al (2019) affirmed deprivation and high rates of mental and physical illness co-occur in the areas most impacted by the violence. This was reinforced by the NI Youth Wellbeing Survey which indicated a low-income household was one of the strongest predictors for young people suffering from a mood or anxiety disorder. Additionally, evidence has suggested young people with NEET status have a dramatic increase in the likelihood of mental health problems, with young NEET respondents more than twice as likely to have mental health issues (Health & Wellbeing Alliance & Young Peoples' Health Partnership, 2019).

It is recommended workers delivering good relations programmes with young people employ a trauma-informed approach. There are many aspects of trauma-informed care and skilled practice that overlap with principles and practice of youth development, such as a person-centered approach, respect and trusting relationships. Applying trauma informed care builds on and adds to the youth development approach by recognizing

the specific ways in which the experience of trauma can negatively impact on a young persons' experience of care, support, and interventions. By implementing trauma informed skilled practice and care, staff and providers can enhance good relations work in ways that both maximise care and reduce the likelihood of re-traumatisation and associated distress associated with programme delivery. (NHS Education for Scotland, 2017).

Staff consultations highlighted the target profile of young people on good relations programmes tended to be impacted by either by complex trauma or trauma, with significant numbers of participants affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences. For example, during 2023-2024, a significant majority of participants on Springboard programmes were impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences, with 450 ACEs recorded. A trauma informed approach and trauma skilled practice, enables workers to increase understanding of what psychological trauma is and how it impacts, how to support recovery and develop trauma informed relationships that incorporate trust, safety, choice and collaboration, control and empowerment, and how to refer a young person to a trauma specialist intervention.

4.3 Mental Health Practice

It is suggested sustaining good relations practice into the future requires practitioners to focus on and embed mental health practice. This will not only improve the mental health and emotional wellbeing of young people, but also help reduce vulnerability to negative influences and 'at risk' behaviour. In sync with youthwork principles

and practice, mental health practice can support and maximise positive development of young people. Actions would be aligned to recovery-focused support provided with the context of Step 1 and Step 2 of NHS Stepped Care model. The model works according to the principle that individuals should be offered the least intrusive intervention appropriate for their needs first. This would align with personal, social, and emotional development aspects within good relations programmes and offers young people mental health support and strategies to increase personal wellbeing. Mental Health Practice focuses on recovery focused support through talking therapies and cognitive adjustments. Young people are guided to improve emotional health and wellbeing by understanding individual triggers, barriers, tools for self-care and support and, also setting goals and gradually taking responsibility for behaviours, actions and promoting self-help. Activities within programmes are carefully designed to support young people to reduce risk factors to mental ill-health and increase 'protective factors.' These include for example improving self-image and self-talk, increasing social connectedness and a sense of belonging through social action/volunteering. These actions can insulate and protect mental health. A key resource for practitioners includes Take 5 - Steps to Wellbeing Framework (Belfast Strategic Partnership, 2018) ie Connect, Keep Learning, Be Active, Take Notice and Give – which can support at risk young people to achieve behaviour change and make lifestyle changes.

4.4 Cultural Competence Practice

As society becomes increasingly diverse and cohesion challenges increase, the need for youth practitioners and for young people to further build on good relations practice and become culturally competent has increased. On an individual level, cultural competence requires more than practicing tolerance and can be defined as:

“The ability to identify and challenge one’s own cultural assumptions, one’s values and beliefs. It is about developing empathy and connected knowledge, the ability to see the world through another’s eyes, or at the very least, to recognise that others may view the world through different cultural lenses.”

(Fitzgerald, M.H., 2000)

It is important to note, the papers ‘wide’ interpretation of cultural competence refers to difference not only in relation to ethnic groups, but across the spectrum of difference and identities whether religion, race, gender, background, circumstance etc. For workers and young people, cultural competence involves a diminishing of ethnocentric attitudes, to look outward and have more open behaviours, greater flexibility, and non-judgmental perceptions to all difference and all groups within society. It mitigates segmenting diversity into parallel stories and instead accelerates the move from ‘them & us’ to an inclusive ‘new us’ narrative. (Sunder, K., Puddle, J., & Ballinger, S., 2022). Underpinned by youth development principles, good relations practice can advance into cultural competence.

Good relations practice:

- ◆ supports young people to become more aware, exploring personal values and beliefs, the construction of their cultural identity as well as influence on beliefs and practices. This demonstrates awareness of own cultural conditioning, cultural biases, blind spots, and triggers,
- ◆ enables young people to explore the issues and concerns that arise when someone’s values, beliefs and practices differ. Young people begin to understand the value of diversity and respecting difference.

Cultural competence practice:

- ◆ builds on cultural knowledge with meaningful contact with people from different groups enhancing their knowledge around beliefs and behaviours as well as increasing understanding around the problems different groups face,
- ◆ becomes more aware of the barriers faced by groups, understands how they are viewed by others and increases knowledge of language, social and communication cues,
- ◆ investigates the dynamics of difference, recognising successful intercultural communication – knowing what can go wrong in cross cultural interaction and how to respond to these situations,
- ◆ ensures equity and equality in understanding and valuing difference and diversity. This involves trust, appreciation, and respect as well as facilitation and negotiation. If respect and equality is not there, cultural sensitivity is not achieved. Learners will recognise the impact of privilege, inequality, and oppression in daily contexts of cultural groups,
- ◆ the final stage is a synthesis and application of previously gained awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity. The key component is the ability to recognise and challenge discrimination and oppressive practice. This approach facilitates the development of a broader understanding around inequalities, human and citizenship rights, while promoting the development of skills needed to bring about change, leading to shared sense of belonging and sustainable community cohesion.

4.5 Skilled Worker

◆ Being comfortable with disruption and ambiguity

Young peoples’ lives are highly complex, multi-faceted, fluid, contradictory, challenging and frustrating. Set against a backdrop of cascading and accelerated change across the world, these challenges will increase exponentially. Young people are facing unpredictable times due to for example, economic uncertainty, technological change, increasing polarisation, and division. Instability already endemic with the legacy of the Troubles and impacts of deprivation, will intensify as young people continue to wrestle with cost of living and mental ill-health impacts. Amidst disruption and disruptive influences there is a demand on youth practitioners to apply an agile and unendingly responsive approach to current and emerging needs faced by young people and communities. To be bold in supporting young people navigate and overcome difficult circumstances and find their voice and place in times of turbulence.

Equally as conditions become disruptive and chaotic, and there is growing disconnection in communities and concerns about what futures might hold, young people also have opportunities to build youth leadership and challenge the status quo. In 2019 Taft highlighted a rise to youth activism around the globe, with young people engaging as social, political, and economic actors to demonstrate their capacity to call for social change (Taft, J., 2019 cited by McNulty, J., 2019). An ability to work with ambiguity and trust young people to lead as agents of change, where youth-led is an approach rather than an objective in itself, (Nowottny, M., 2021) is an increasingly important skill for workers.

Section 5

Conclusions & Recommendations

18

The short research paper explored Good Relations practice for young people beyond the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

Initially the paper considered the current context by exploring the impacts of division and conflict on young people. Reflections included the prevalence of significantly high levels of trauma and mental ill-health and the impacts of transgenerational trauma on them, as young people, and on their families.

Young people also referred to the pervasive 'them and us' aspects of everyday life, with segregation embedded across many aspects of life such as housing, education and through divided places/spaces.

They highlighted sectarianism and division as an ongoing feature, that is persistently fuelled by instability and community/political tensions. Navigating barriers was additionally an issue, with young people citing paramilitaries and gatekeepers as still a significant impediment within communities. Self-development and progression were viewed as challenging due to social and economic deprivation and limited opportunities.

In reflecting on their experiences of participating on Good Relations Programmes young people highlighted significant distance travelled and pointed to longer, in-depth programmes resulting in greater positive, change impacts. Key 'drivers' of change included trusting relationships, safety and safe spaces, process of exploring, clarifying and reflecting perspectives and the invaluable aspects of co-design/delivery enabling ownership of their journey. They strongly expressed the positive, significant and sustainable difference made to their lives by participating on purposeful good relations programmes.

Moving beyond the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, the paper's findings unsurprisingly reaffirmed that a youthwork development approach remains foundational to successful Good Relations practice.

Research also points to recognised challenges arising from the legacy of the conflict and social and economic deprivation, transforming into a tsunami as societal shifts happening at an unprecedented rate, cumulatively impact the lives of young people.

The paper recommends in conjunction with good relations practice, focus should be placed on trauma-informed and mental health practice, ensuring young people are fully supported. In addition, as illustrated from study visit in Ireland, global displacement combined with reducing resources creates risks for community cohesion.

The paper calls for workers and young people to supplement good relations practice and develop cultural competence to engage with all difference to proactively build a 'new us'.

Lastly, at a time of the biggest changes and challenges facing society, the paper calls for workers to both offer an unendingly responsive approach in times of disruption and also an ability to work in ambiguity, and with agility, as out of chaos comes significant opportunities for emerging young agents of change.



...focus should be placed on trauma-informed and mental health practice...

...supplement good relations practice and develop cultural competence to engage with all difference to proactively build a 'new us'...

...out of chaos comes significant opportunities for emerging young agents of change."

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