

Young People on the Interface

Belfast Interface Project

Published April 1998 by Belfast Interface Project
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The Belfast Interface Project would like to thank the following:

Richard Allen
Lily Brush
Damien Grant
Paul McCrory
Roisin McGlone
B J McKeivitt
Philip McKinley
Stephen Moore
Deirdre Murphy
Philip Whyte

and, of course, all the young people who took part

Report compiled by Michael Hall, Island Publications

Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

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Preface

Throughout the past twenty-seven years of violence in Northern Ireland children and young people have suffered as much as other sections of the population. The catalogue of tragedies is endless: a 15-month-old boy died in his mother's arms after a bomb blast; a 4-year-old girl died in her father's booby-trapped car; a 7-year-old boy was killed by a landmine as he tended a herd of cows; an 11-year-old girl was killed by a plastic bullet while going for milk; a 14-year-old girl was shot in the head as she peeped through her curtains . . . This horrendous list has been added to without respite throughout the long communal nightmare we in Northern Ireland euphemistically label 'The Troubles'.

And for all the children and young people who have lost their lives, there are countless others left crippled, orphaned, bereaved, and traumatised.

Just as difficult to accept is the fact that not only have young people frequently been the victims of violence, they have often been its perpetrators, whether as young children participating in street disturbances or teenagers getting caught up in more serious acts of violence.

The vast majority of young people in Northern Ireland, however, more often than not find themselves ignored, except on those occasions when they are misused by organisations with political agendas or they find themselves castigated by the media. Rarely are they listened to or accorded the respect they deserve. In a society dominated by party political 'sound-bites' and 'vox pop' our young people do not appear to have a voice. Yet they *do* have a voice, and it is important that we begin to listen to it, and to listen with serious intent.

This document contains one small-scale attempt to do just that. Arising from the work of the Belfast Interface Project – in collaboration with a team of youth and community workers – it takes as its focus the views of one specific section of our youth: those who live at the territorial boundaries which separate Protestant and Catholic working-class communities in Belfast – the 'interface'.

The potential for violence at the interface is ever-present and yet it is not a phenomenon somehow divorced from everything else which happens in our society. The interface is, quite literally, where our communities meet. In this sense stability, and the lack of it, at the interface, provides a 'barometer' of the health of our whole society. This document, providing an insight into the experiences of young people in interface areas of Belfast, should reinforce the view that, in order to break into the cycle of inter-communal mistrust, division and violence, it is necessary to recognise and address the needs of those who have been profoundly affected by, and socialised into, that cycle.

The Belfast Interface Project

Northern Ireland is characterised by segregation; the two dominant traditions, Protestant and Catholic, usually attend separate schools, often work in separate workplaces, worship at separate churches, socialise mainly within their respective communities and generally live in separate residential areas. The common boundary between two neighbouring segregated areas is the *interface*.

The interface may be a solid brick wall 30 feet high, or a steel fence, even a road. On the other hand, it may not be noticeable at all to outsiders even though local people will know exactly where it is. It may be traversed simply by crossing a street, passing a landmark, or turning a corner. Belfast has many such interfaces.

The best-known interfaces, however, are the large steel and concrete walls and fences which mark the boundary lines between many Protestant and Catholic working-class communities in Belfast. These are often referred to in the media as ‘peacelines’, as many were originally erected to help ‘keep the peace’ – in the form of crude barricades designed to prevent hostile incursions from the ‘other’ community. Within many of these areas, however, the term ‘peaceline’ is used with contempt, precisely because these structures often do not perform this purpose effectively, serving instead only to highlight the presence of the ‘other’ community on each side.

Background

In May 1994 the Centre for Policy Research published a report entitled *Ethnic Space and the Challenge to Land Use Planning: A Study of Belfast’s Peace Lines*. The report contained details of new research which had been carried out in a number of interface areas in Belfast. This research showed that many communities living in interface areas experienced:

- high levels of social and economic disadvantage;
- high levels of ongoing violence and intimidation;
- restricted access to facilities and services which were perceived as being located within the ‘other’ community.

Some statistics taken from that research:

<i>Interface Areas (averages)</i>		<i>NI average</i>
69%	of the community earned less than £5,000 pa	45%
31%	were unemployed	14%
41%	received Income Support	21%
5%	received Family Credit	2%

2%	had 'A' level as highest qualification	12%
1%	had a university degree	12%
25%	wanted to leave the area within the next 3 years	
55%	experienced stone-throwing as a problem	
41%	experienced shootings and bombings as a problem	
34%	experienced rioting as a problem	
15.5%	experienced petrol bombing	

Soon after the publication of this report, a number of people and agencies with an involvement or interest in working with communities in interface areas initiated a series of meetings to discuss practical ways of addressing the pressing issues facing interface communities in Belfast.

The group coalesced into the Belfast Interface Group and fund-raised in order to set up the Belfast Interface Project. The Project is funded for 3 years from August 1995 (partly by the International Fund for Ireland and partly by Making Belfast Work), and employs a full-time Interface Project Worker and a part-time Administrative Officer.

Aims of the Project

1. To collate, record and disseminate examples of work, structures, methods and resources commonly focused on interface areas.
2. To engage in an educative process, in association with others, to raise awareness of the uniqueness of interface areas and to develop a collaborative strategy to ensure their recognition.
3. To challenge government and political parties, statutory and voluntary agencies to formulate, implement and resource appropriate policies in relation to interface areas.
4. To promote a range of approaches to development work and to initiate a sign-posting and referral role in relation to less developed work.

Projects and activities

1. Identifying issues of concern to interface communities and to the statutory agencies in relation to interface areas.
2. Encouraging and facilitating debate regarding these issues, within and between the community and statutory/funding sectors.
3. Identifying and proactively promoting positive steps that can be taken in addressing them.

The 'scoping' exercise

The first phase of the Project entailed building up a profile of those issues of most concern to interface communities. In this respect, the Project gathered the necessary information through:

- Structured interviews with significant community groups in a number of interface areas across the city, including community forum ‘umbrella’ groups, tenants’ associations and women’s groups. These interviews covered three main areas: local concerns; concerns regarding the interface; concerns regarding the ‘other’ community.
- Contact with statutory agencies for their views on: community needs in interface areas which lie within their remit; the strengths of their approach in addressing those needs; the challenges ahead for them in addressing those needs.

As a result of this information-gathering, a clearer picture emerged of the concerns shared by interface communities in different parts of Belfast. Community groups in interface areas commonly report inadequate provision of support services and facilities across a broad range of ages and interest groups within their communities. Given the material disadvantage which exists in these areas and the vulnerability of these communities in terms of inter-community violence, it is important that these inadequacies be addressed. However, whilst *all* the identified issues cause concern, there is broad agreement amongst interface community groups that there is particular concern for children and young people in interface areas:

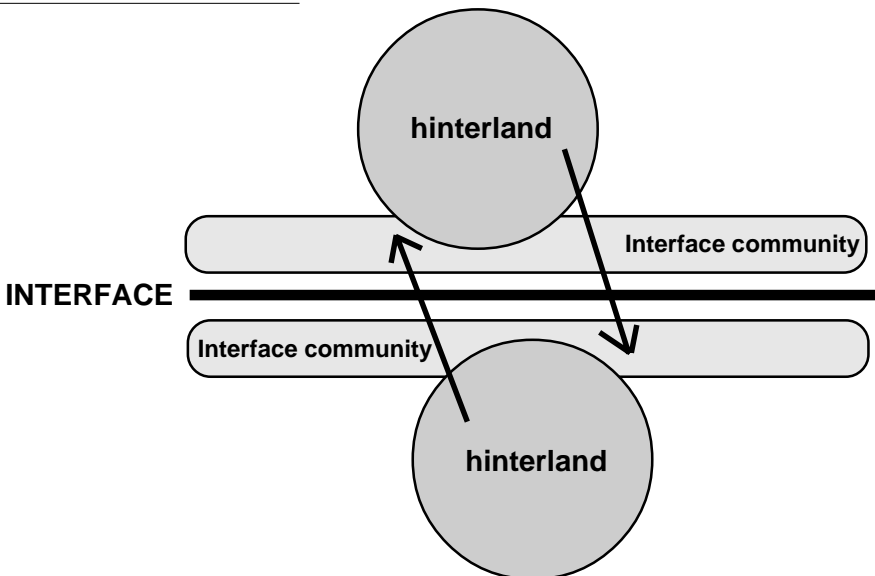
- (i) Firstly, there is a concern about the *effects* of violence upon children and young people in interface areas, coupled with the effects of the multiple disadvantage and restricted access which characterise many interface areas. Children and young people in interface areas are particularly vulnerable to sectarian violence, intimidation and harassment. They are often exposed to such dangers on their way to school, going to the shops, or playing near the interface. Additionally, and particularly in enclave areas, children’s lives are often severely restricted by their difficulty in travelling out of their area or bringing friends into the area. Children and young people in interface areas have often witnessed extremes of sectarian violence. Interface community groups commonly report that, to them, the future appears bleak for many of their young people in terms of avoiding violence, gaining employment, or accessing facilities and services commonly available elsewhere.
- (ii) Secondly, there is a concern about the *role* of children and young people in inter-community violence. In many parts of the city children and young people are attracted to the interface (including those who do not live close by) as an area with, commonly, fewer adult checks and balances upon their behaviour. Whilst at the interface, children and young people often become involved in inter-community violence which then ‘rebounds’ on interface communities and feeds the process further. Whilst it is important to stress that it is not only young people who have been involved in inter-community

violence across the interface, and that young people should not be scapegoated for their behaviour in this respect, nevertheless many interface community groups commonly report that the behaviour of young people at the interface is a key element in the cycle of inter-community violence which, particularly during the summer of 1996, caused so much fear and pain amongst all our communities.

It is important in this respect to note that interface communities, generally, are the victims of violence to a greater extent than they are its perpetrators – violence is largely perpetuated from each interface’s ‘hinterland’ community, while the interface community serves as a ‘human shield’ and front line of defence for that hinterland; i.e. interface communities are the site, rather than the sole source, of inter-community violence (see diagram).

Hence, as interface communities are amongst the most disadvantaged in our society, and concern for their young people is the major concern of community groups in interface areas, we feel it is imperative that we seriously address those issues which the community identifies. It is in *everyone’s* interest to begin to understand and address the cycle of inter-community violence and the ways in which many young people are both affected by, and socialised into, violence at the interface.

INTERFACE CONFLICT



The Interviews

To advance the Project's knowledge of the needs of young people – as articulated by young people themselves – a working group composed of youth workers and others was set up for the purpose of carrying out a number of interviews with groups of young people, some of whom were known to have been involved in interface violence in various parts of the city. The findings from even this small-scale exercise revealed that these young people were not the stereotypical 'thugs' as portrayed in the media, but ordinary, likeable young people growing up with an unusual combination of factors impacting upon their lives. Their responses revealed the extent to which the interface restricted their lives, a restriction apparent in children as young as ten years of age.

By letting young people in interface areas 'tell their story' – in terms of the influence which the interface has had upon their lives – the Project hopes:

- to provide a better understanding of the major concerns and issues articulated by young people in interface areas;
- to provide a better understanding of the relationship between young people and inter-community violence in these areas;
- to provide information which would better inform the policy and practice of the statutory agencies in addressing the needs of these young people;
- to encourage debate between the various agencies and highlight the importance of interface area issues as they relate to the needs of young people;
- to see if, as a follow-up, opportunities could be made for information exchange, debate and dialogue between groups of young people in interface areas, on issues arising from the research.

The youth groups interviewed – ten in all – were located in interface areas on both sides of the communal divide in North, South, West and East Belfast, and were made up of young people of both sexes whose ages ranged between 14 and 17 years, though one group contained a few males slightly older. In size the groups contained between 5 and 12 in number. The groups specifically targeted were those groups of 'unattached' young people who used formal local youth provision the least, if at all, and spent most of their free time 'on the streets', generally locating themselves in the proximity of the interface.

These groups were identified by local youth workers and other community activists. Subsequent to the groups giving their permission to be interviewed, a series of loosely structured interviews (one per group) was held, addressing such questions as:

- what the young people felt about their own area, and what was good and bad about it;
- how they felt the interface/peaceline affected their lives;
- what restrictions, territorial and otherwise, it imposed upon them;
- exactly ‘where’ along the interface they normally ‘hung out’, and when, and why;
- what they got up to while they were together;
- how their community felt about the way they spent their time;
- what youth provision existed in their area, and whether they used it – and if not, why not;
- whether they had ever been involved in violence at the interface, and if so, how it normally occurred;
- why this violence took place;
- what contact they had with the ‘other side’;
- and what, if anything, they saw as being possible solutions to sectarianism and a divided society?

Finally, they were asked whether they would be interested in hearing how the other groups of young people being interviewed answered the same questions. And, of course, whether there were other questions the interviewers *should* have asked. [The interviews took place around April/May 1997.]

What the Young People said

It was agreed from the outset that confidentiality would be maintained regarding the identity of all the young people interviewed. However, certain geographical areas of Belfast have been mentioned where particular territorial issues made this necessary, but it has been done in isolation from comments made by young people from those areas regarding other issues.

This was necessary *not* because the young people were concerned that their peers on the ‘other’ side of the communal divide might hear what was being said, but because they did not want people in their *own* communities hearing their comments on drugs, drinking, riotous activities, etc, and being able to identify individuals. Furthermore, a few were prepared to express non-sectarian opinions in the presence of their friends but did not want such views to be picked up by ‘hard-liners’ within their own community.

Note on format: Rather than give a ‘line by line’ account of how each group responded to a similar set of questions, it seemed more appropriate to amalgamate responses under ‘themes’. Hence, the quotes which follow are drawn freely from the entire series of interviews. Likewise, each separate quote represents a different young person ‘talking’, even where quotes follow one another without any intervening editorial comment.

It was also felt unnecessary to specify when a ‘Protestant’ young person was talking, or when a ‘Catholic’ young person was talking – though often this is clear from their actual comments – because the impression gained when putting the interviews together was that religious affiliation made little difference when it came down to how young people identified the issues which concerned them in their everyday lives.

Friendship and boredom

Young people are visibly more sociable than other sections of society; they certainly have more time and motivation to congregate together, and far fewer distracting responsibilities. While their sociability requires no justification, some young people did indicate what motivated them to seek out the company of their friends each evening. Of the two most prominently-given reasons, one was positive, the other negative: being with friends and escaping from boredom.

Just being with your mates . . . carrying on with one another.

Even if we still feel bored, we usually enjoy a bit of craic together.

Sometimes things are quiet, other times it can be a bit frightening, but that adds a bit of excitement.

There's nothing to do around here – it's boring. We hang around here just to be with our mates.

When asked why they 'hung around' on the streets, rather than meet in clubs and other venues, their answers indicated either a scarcity of such venues, or dissatisfaction with much of what was 'on offer'. For many, local 'youth' activities seemed geared more to younger children, and they felt their own needs were not catered for. Indeed, at some youth centres, whenever junior activities were in session, older ones were not permitted in. Some young people said they wouldn't go to a Saturday youth club held in the local church because they weren't allowed to smoke.

We have nothing around here and in the summer it's worse. We do have our bonfire and stuff like that but when it's over we have fuck all to do.

There's not much for us girls [at the local activity centre], but I suppose it gets you out of the rain.

There's nothing in it that we like doing. Not for our age group anyway.

There's no girls our age for us to chat up.

We need more facilities: swimming pool, leisure centre.

Admittedly some of the activities on offer *did* appeal to certain individuals, and, as long as there were no 'strings' attached, males in particular generally availed themselves of activities such as football and sports training. Nevertheless, those with responsibility for the provision of youth provision have an unenviable task in trying to please everyone – one group, even when local youth facilities were on offer four nights per week, felt this was still insufficient!

There's nothing to do on *Thursdays* except steal shopping trolleys [from the local supermarket].

Activities

Some of the activities enjoyed by the young people would obviously not be catered for in any youth club:

We mostly sit around drinking – we get carry-outs.

Take drugs, some Es or some 'blow' – that's the most popular drug for us.

We like slagging people, or watching the band parades.

Others indulged in more socially acceptable activities, such as going to the cinema, or to places like the Games Zone, and a few readily admitted to having

either no interest in the more questionable activities, or a fear of the consequences which might follow.

I wouldn't like joy-riding and drugs; it's not for me.

There are some drugs around, but it's not really the problem people say it is.

There are no drugs here; we'd get our heads kicked in by the UDA.

The paramilitaries carry out punishment beatings for breaking into houses and things like that.

People would do you in for taking Acid and Ecstasy, yet some people who are protected by the paramilitaries sell drugs.

At odds with their community

Most of the young people admitted that when they did gather together their own community frequently saw them as a nuisance.

Our community hate us gathering and making a noise – but where else can we go?

It's mostly neighbours and residents who get angry with us. They once threatened to get the IRA on to us.

They gossip about us. They don't care about us but they certainly care about what we do! They support the cops trying to catch us for underage drinking, but I wish they'd tell us what else there is for us to do!

The people in our area think we're a disgrace, with all the smoking and drinking; they say we *cause* trouble and we *attract* trouble.

We are not even allowed to use the community centre, even though some people from as far away as North Belfast can come over and have birthday parties in it. But *we* can't have parties in it; they used some excuse that we didn't clean it properly the last time they did let us use it. And just because we drink and listen to music and then go up the road to slag people for a laugh we've got this really bad reputation. Also, a lot of people think we're involved with the UYM [Ulster Young Militants]. But there's nothing for us to do, and that will be even worse now that the club is closing. The police in the area treat us like shit; they can't even *talk* to us, they're always shouting and telling us to move on or we'll get lifted. They don't give a fuck about the way they treat us.

One group in the Ormeau Road area even felt itself under threat from 'newcomers' to the area:

Too many strangers have moved into the area – students. These students think they own the place. They give us a hard time after they've been out

drinking at the weekends. We have lived here all our lives and they think they can just come in here and give us a hard time!

It must be said, however, that some groups *did* find the local community tolerant of their ‘hanging about’, as long as they did not deliberately set out to annoy anyone. And, depending on the proximity of their gathering place to the interface – and, more importantly, the relative ease by which it could be ‘breached’ by the ‘other side’ – often local adults preferred that their young people congregated in the relative safety of their own estate away from the interface, and were prepared to tolerate any attendant ‘nuisance’ factor.

Having said this, in many cases it did seem that this nuisance factor – and some of the young people admitted that at times they *were* a nuisance – meant that it was pressure from adults to ‘move on’ which often led young people to seek the relative anonymity of the interface.

The gathering spots

A couple of the groups had the advantage of being near parkland. This was deemed to be a more attractive place to assemble.

Why do we go there? Because we don’t get moved on [by residents or paramilitaries], and if we see the cops coming there’s loads of places to run to.

_____ Park is great in the summer; well, if there’s good weather, anyway. We hang about there with our mates and have a drink and a laugh. It’s really crap though that the gates are locked at 5pm – we have to sneak in over the gates. There is rumour that the police are putting up surveillance cameras to catch people who are sneaking in. It should be open to us all the time.

For others, deprived of the benefit of nearby parkland, but not wanting to congregate near houses with all the attendant hassle, other locations were utilised: playing fields; a local garage; the local Co-op; a nearby shopping centre; the hallways at the base of blocks of flats; at the bottom of the street or at corners away from the front doors. Shopping centres in particular provided a popular meeting place.

There’s nothing to do in our area so we go to _____ Shopping Centre every night and sit and watch people.

We usually hang about at the Co-op, especially in the winter.

Some of the gathering places, however, possessed an added significance, which sometimes evoked unease . . .

You have to watch your back all the time, you don’t know when trouble [with the other community] can start.

. . . and sometimes held out the possibility of added excitement:

We have a place where we all hang out, where we go every night in good weather and sit and smoke. No-one lives there so we get less bother from our own community, though we often get told to move on by the police. As well as that, there's a chance of a riot there too.

These places were those which came closest to the boundaries which separate Protestant and Catholic territories – the interface.

Dangerous territory

In the public imagination the 'interface' is invariably represented by a sturdy physical structure, often unsightly, though segments are actually quite modern in appearance – a new 'designer' style of 'peaceline', fashioned with different coloured bricks and having flower beds at its base. However, as was noted earlier, more often the interface has no such physical presence, yet it exists nevertheless. To the young people it was often 'the bottom of the street', or 'the top of the street', or even 'halfway down the road'. There existed a demarcation line which might be totally invisible to the passing stranger, but was very real to local young people and added a host of additional restrictions to their lives. The reality of the interface and of its restrictions is self-evident in the following comments.

We can only go to the swimmers at the Robinson Centre – Maysfield Leisure Centre is seen as Catholic and therefore it's dangerous for us to go there.

There's nothing to do around here, and nowhere to go so we usually meet in the Games Zone; it's our place to hang out. We can't go down the road to meet because it's 'their' meeting place. 'They' hang out down in the Twilight Zone; if we went down there, there would be a lot of slabbering and fighting.

The shops are all on the Protestant side of the road. We're frightened to use them sometimes, even the Post Office, especially when things are tense. My family want to move away from the peaceline, but we can't because all the houses [in the area] are taken.

If we walk near 'their' area we'd get 'munched', yet if we stand around in our own areas we get moved on all the time.

Sometimes it's possible to walk up and down the road during the day – unless they recognise you – but you couldn't try that at night.

At school times we can go up and down the road on our own. During dinner-time we might get shouted at, or even hit, but usually nothing happens during the day.

We can't go to Suffolk pitches, or through Suffolk, or through Dunmurry, Orpen Park or Finaghy Road South. We could walk through Finaghy

during the day but not at night. Suffolk and Taughmonagh are the worst – more dangerous. If our bus is late they chase us; they brick our bus when it goes through Suffolk.

You have to mind what clothes you wear if you're going out of the area [i.e. Celtic or Rangers tops].

Things get more dangerous in the lead up to the 'Twelfth'. The buses are stoned when going to/from St Joseph's on the Ravenhill Road. I'm not allowed to get the late bus from St Joseph's – I must get an early bus, taxi or walk the long way round via Ormeau Road.

Surprisingly, while most people might assume that Belfast city centre is a 'neutral zone', this is not always the case, as some of the young people made clear.

We can't walk into town over the bridge to go into town, we have to take the bus – we're worried about getting done in by people from Short Strand and the Markets. They'd know us through the rioting. I think that the Catholics control Castle Court and Castle Street.

One young person, by his preparedness to be imaginative, indirectly confirmed the reality of the territorial division:

The way to get to the shops is to walk to them on the 'wrong' side of the road – that way you can pretend you're a Taig.

Inter-community violence

The reasons given for the recurrent episodes of youth-inspired violence at the interface were varied.

It usually starts with someone slabbering at us – or us at them – or calling us names, and then this leads to stones being thrown.

Boredom. Excitement. If we or them have a lot of drink, it's easy to start a fight out of boredom.

Why? 'Cause it's fun, it's something to do. We live here, it's boring – this place is dead – and we're surrounded by them [the other side]. So we riot.

They start it; they sit on the wall and call us names. We know some of them by name from school trips [organised under EMU – Education for Mutual Understanding]. They come over here more than we go over there. They outnumber us in younger ones, and it's often their younger ones who actually start it.

Sometimes one of us gets hit on his own so then the next night we all arrive down and start a riot.

I think it mostly happens because of the peelers. Nobody likes them.

Sometimes it can just start from people gathering at street corners, sometimes it's because of the taunting over marches.

Some of the young people linked the causes into a broader framework, a few actually describing the violence as 'traditional'.

Why does the violence happen? It's a tradition; we're brought up that way. We hate them because they're Orangies; they hate us because we're Catholics.

It's definitely a tradition – been going on for the last fifteen years.

It's because we're different religions; our hatred comes from our parents.

The ritualistic nature of the exchanges

Given that boredom is a prime motivating factor among young people, it is perhaps not surprising that it is the 'buzz' they gain from their inter-community skirmishes which they refer to most; none of the young people articulated any deep desire to destroy a hated enemy. Nothing better epitomises the almost ritualistic nature of these fracas than the manner in which they are conducted, often with a surprising adherence to unwritten rules.

I enjoy rioting. There's usually riots on Fridays and Saturdays, when we've a bit of drink. It starts off verbally, then they get more of a crowd, so we get more. Don't usually actually fight – except throw stones and bottles. It's like a sport, usually no-one's badly hurt. There are no 'top-dog' fights, we don't trust each other enough. Though the rioting sometimes get really serious, then the older ones in the area join in.

Girls get hit by other girls, not by fellas.

There's no winning in it – nobody wins.

We wouldn't bother them when they're playing football.

It's different for fellas, they seem to fight for no reason at all, but with us girls it's mostly all slabbering to each other. We start shouting at each other, usually over who gave who dirty looks. That's the way it usually starts.

The trouble is caused by ones from ten up to seventeen-years-old; after that age people do other things instead of hanging out the way we do.

If it gets serious someone will run and get older fellas or girls to come and join in, especially coming out of bars at the weekends. It's fun to watch the fighting though! It's exciting when the other side is younger because you know you can beat them.

Nor was there was any attempt to pretend that the violence always originated from the ‘other side’.

We start it the odd time, especially when we’re blitzed.

It usually starts with either us mouthing or slabbering at them, or them slabbering at us. We both start it; it’s not a one-sided thing.

However, these riotous ‘games’ frequently step up a gear and get more serious. And often, even though all the blame will be heaped upon the heads of the local young people for starting the trouble, it is not always them who finish it.

Other young people join us, mostly from the Markets.

Last year we had loads joining in – all our friends came up from Andy’ town.

Ones from the New Lodge and Cliftonville and Ardoyne come here to help defend their side. . . or to help fight for their side.

Other people come into this area to fight also, it’s not just us. Outsiders come in even when there are no parades, just to have a go. We don’t really fight together, but we would stick up for each other against the Catholics.

Lots of people come over here to fight, it’s not just us who live here. People travel from Ballynahinch and Carryduff to fight down here.

The adult community, too, cannot wash its hands of responsibility:

Sometimes it’s younger ones than us start it, then we get involved, then older ones. . . if it’s serious rioting adults come out and join in.

Especially when the Peelers arrive, then some of the older men in the area lead it [the rioting].

My granny came out with milk bottles!

The effects

Recurrent inter-community violence obviously has its consequences, sometimes on a Province-wide scale, but invariably it always has a local impact, a fact which some of the young people were only too aware of.

My parents live in fear; they’re scared that anything will happen to me. My sister wets the bed.

My mum’s very nervous, especially as our windows always get hit. They try to make me come in early.

We hate the Twelfth. They walk along our road and throw bottles at us. Their band practices start at 5 am . . . we find it very tense over the

summer. . . we don't want to go out of our areas. Our youth club is closed from the end of June to September. 'They' come over from Finaghy during the summer and cause a lot of trouble, so it's better just to close the club.

Quite often 'macho' attitudes among the young people only served to disguise the genuine fear and apprehension many of them felt – even those who behaved with the most bravado – but the interviewers could detect a genuine anxiety when some personal 'incidents' were recounted:

I've been hit with bricks and bottles and my home has been attacked. Orangies started doing our windows as they ran down the street.

I was in the phone box and got hit on the mouth by a glass bottle.

Cross-community contact?

Discussion with the young people as to their preparedness to 'cross the divide' met with a varied response. Some adopted a stance which reflected what is often heard from adult members of their community:

Protestants have been walking down the road for 100 years and now all of a sudden we have to stop because 'they' don't like it. It's our country, we should be able to do whatever we like. Everyone talks about *their* tradition and culture – what about *ours*? We can't even walk down the road now, we have nothing.

They slabber about our parades going down the road, but yet they're up here every night trying to rule the road. We don't stop them coming through here to use the chapel, yet they won't let us down the road with our parades. It really pisses me off.

For others, their response is more directly related to their own experiences.

We used to play football against a Catholic team but when two top Loyalists were shot a few years ago we stopped as it got scary.

We've gone go-karting sometimes with Protestant kids, but you could tell that some of them didn't want to know us.

I used to enjoy those joint police trips, but you're too old once you pass twelve or thirteen.

I have no contact with them. Sometimes I talk to Taigs on the bus, but they're older than me.

Sometimes, however, the fears expressed were related more to what their *own* side would say or do, than anything specific emanating from the 'other' community.

We would get done in by our own side if we were friends with them.

A Protestant girl from here could go out with a Catholic boy from there, but a Protestant boy from here couldn't go out with a Catholic girl from there.

One incident of 'cross-community contact' occurred which fell outside the usual patterns. A Protestant group, in a mood of bravado, went *en masse* to a Catholic youth club:

We did go to _____ one time for a laugh and took the place over. But normally we don't go near their areas; we feel too intimidated.

Some Protestants expressed no problems whatsoever with Catholics – Southern Catholics, that is.

We don't get together with Catholics; well, except when we're away somewhere with groups from the South. But that's different – they're not bitter against us, and anyway, they don't have any real idea about what is going on up here.

We had an exchange visit here with Catholics from Dundalk. It was good going to Dundalk – most of them hated the IRA, so Sinn Féin doesn't represent *all* Catholics.

Some young people who lived in a mixed area felt less threatened by the idea of cross-community contacts.

Well, if you live in Ballynafeigh you see them all the time, and we don't bother about it [the religious divide] as we have all grew up together; we all know each other.

Some of us live in mixed streets, and the religion thing is never an issue. Some of us work with Protestants in our part-time after-school jobs, and there's no trouble. We play football every week with a mixed team and it's good craic. It's the ones down the road that cause the trouble.

Bridging the divide?

Some young people believed the present inter-community divisions to be insurmountable.

This country is a lost cause. It won't be long until they [the 'other' side] are coming over here with torches to burn us out. There's no solution.

Ma's and Da's bring their kids up to be bigoted.

Solution? No chance . . . 'mission impossible'.

We'd rather have peace, and a lot of them want peace, but the IRA don't.

They should allow Protestants from the South to move up here. They [the Catholics] should all move down South.

I don't think we can solve it; the older people don't want to make a change, they want to keep it going. We don't really care about religion at all, but it's the older ones who keep it going.

There needs to be a peaceline to stop us getting bricked and burned out. It makes us feel safer.

Others are more hopeful.

I think we should mix – cross-community – I would like to see this happen.

Why are there no mixed youth clubs? Would Catholics and Protestants mix together?

It's up to us as the next generation to break the chains and move on, but it's hard when there's so many people who are not willing to change. Everybody needs to agree in order for something to change.

I don't think they [the 'peacelines'] should be there at all – we should be able to be friends instead of enemies.

They're not 'peacelines' to us, they're barriers. They stop us going where we like, and they keep us in our own areas, especially at night.

A positive curiosity

Most of the young people interviewed expressed an interest in hearing what was said by the other groups. Encouragingly, much of this curiosity was directed at the youth group(s) sited closest to them on the 'other side' of the interface.

It would be good to hear what other people have to say about the same things.

We would be interested in knowing what they said from Suffolk – see how bigoted they really are. We want to know what they're really like, 'cause we don't really want to have a problem with them.

We would be interested in finding out what other groups have said, especially from Short Strand.

However, we'll leave the last word to one young person, whose comment highlights the paradox of our young people's everyday reality :

Despite it all, I wouldn't live anywhere else.

Overview

Subsequent to the interviews a group of youth workers and others sat down to discuss the social and political backdrop against which the views of the young people must be viewed. The following came from that discussion.

The Reality of the Interface

The interviews not only provided the various groups of young people with an opportunity to air their views and articulate their feelings – which for most was a rare enough occurrence, except among themselves – it was also instructive to the interviewers, all of whom were fully involved with young people and their needs.

I carried out some of the interviews, in both Protestant and Catholic areas, and I don't think I had really appreciated until then just *how much* young people's lives are restricted by interface issues. And regardless of whether it was a Protestant group, or a Catholic one, those restrictions are very real. They can't go here; they can't go there; they can't use a particular leisure centre, or they might go there during the day, but not at night because it wouldn't be safe for them to travel home.

Outsiders might find the exact geographical delineation of some of these 'restricted zones' quite complex, but local young people can identify them precisely. This occurs even along major arterial routes out of Belfast. The Ormeau Road, for example, leaves the city centre from the Markets which is Catholic in its composition, skirts Donegal Pass which is Protestant, continues into Lower Ormeau which is Catholic once more, then into Ballynafeigh which is almost a 'buffer zone', with parts being mixed and others being Protestant, then finally into Upper Ormeau and beyond which is predominantly Protestant. And where these communities meet there are 'interfaces', invisible perhaps to the multitude of car drivers commuting into Belfast each morning, but very visible to the young people who live along that artery. Often quite specific landmarks were identified by the young people as markers for the territorial 'limits':

Young Catholics at the top of the road wouldn't go past the Curzon cinema, while the young Protestants said they wouldn't go as far as Ballynafeigh police station.

Some of the interfaces have a well-established history, some are the product of more recent demographic changes in population, while others seem to spring up almost overnight:

Any time I used to walk up the Whitewell Road it never occurred to me that there might have been an 'interface' along it. That was until this summer . . . and they painted the lampposts! Then I realised that the 'interface' was where the green, white and gold lampposts stopped and the red, white and blue ones started!

While the Protestant/Catholic interface is the overriding one, it would be wrong to assume that territorial boundaries are defined by religious geography alone. Many areas, while predominantly the one religion, are nevertheless composed of quite separate 'villages', each with its allegiances and rivalries. One youth worker, more used to confronting the sectarian divide, recently found he had a more novel situation to content with:

We actually had to go out to calm down what we called a 'West Side Story' situation, where you had a group from the Newtownards Road and a group from the Albertbridge Road arranging to fight right in the middle of the two areas. Now I don't know if 'interface' is the right word to use in this case – for we have been using it up to now to define the Protestant/Catholic situation – but it certainly revealed that even within an area which is perceived to be all the one religion, in this case Protestant, access for young people could be restricted even further by local rivalries.

Such a situation was not confined to East Belfast.

When I started in my job I remember somebody saying to me on the Woodvale: "Forget the Shankill/Springfield interface, what about the Woodvale/Shankill one? There's people from here won't go down there, and people from there who won't come up here."

Nor was this rivalry confined to Protestant areas.

I know that during the first ceasefire there seemed to be much more *intra*-community violence between groups of young people than there had been before – I'm thinking of the young people from Divis Street and Roden Street, and the Whiterock and Westrock. And more recently with young people in Twinbrook and Poleglass and Andy'town.

In other areas, while differences exist, they were less of a problem:

There's always been rivalry between Short Strand, the Markets and Ormeau Road, but I wouldn't say it's serious as such; it's just a territorial thing.

However, notwithstanding the *intra*-community rivalries, the consensus is that these fade in significance when compared to the *inter*-community situation.

I think that if young people are living around a Protestant/Catholic interface then that will become the dominant thing which affects their lives and restricts their movements. Perhaps if they live further away

from such an interface then Protestant/Protestant or Catholic/Catholic interfaces might have more significance. But if there was word of trouble erupting at the main Protestant/Catholic interface then all local rivalries would be quickly forgotten. I mean, in East Belfast if there was trouble over a parade, or conflict with Catholics at Short Strand, then all the minor local tensions would lessen and the young people would see themselves collectively as 'Protestants'.

And while the inter-community interface acted like a magnet in attracting young people, many youth workers were only too aware that other factors had a direct bearing on the situation.

One of the reasons young people are attracted to the interface, apart from the potential for a bit of excitement, is that they are often 'pushed' there by their own community. When they gather together within the estate they keep getting moved on, and as houses are fewer or often bricked up the closer you get to the interface, it's one of the few places groups of young people can go without getting constant hassle.

There was also an element of voyeurism with the adults; many come from well outside the interface areas to spectate. I saw one family in a car . . . this was at midnight and the car had toddlers in it . . . and it parked where they could all have a good look down Short Strand. So it's not only young people who are attracted to the interface.

The 'gains' for young people

Although the young people's lives were beset with numerous restrictions, and young people themselves can list an endless stream of grievances and complaints, from boredom to frustration, youth workers nevertheless found them generally humorous, approachable, adaptable and full of energy. Even in those activities which adult society sees as 'anti-social' the young people seemed to obtain something tangible from participating, which went far beyond the initial adrenaline rush.

There's a bonding thing takes place when they congregate at the interface; they form relationships there. And when a riot starts, especially if they are called upon to defend their area, they somehow feel more linked in with their community.

I would agree with that. It's emotional; it's people coming together for a common purpose, and feeling less excluded.

The problem is, what can we as youth workers offer to them which can replace the buzz such activities gives them? The least we can do is to work with them as equals and take on board what it is they themselves want to do. Politicians especially are always telling these kids what to do, but they don't ask them what *they themselves* want to do.

Intervention

The summer of 1997 revealed to many Belfast-based youth and community workers that it *was* possible to impact upon street conflict.

Another thing which must be noted is that a lot of the serious stuff which happened in previous years didn't happen this time, because community workers and political representatives were out dampening things down. I think young people take heed of that – that 'muscle', if you could call it that – and it was pretty quiet compared to what on went before.

I think what happened over Drumcree in '96 took us all by surprise, and anyone who says they weren't taken by surprise and knew what was going to happen either has a crystal ball or is lying. Even workers on the ground were taken by surprise – there was no way we could have prepared for it. And nobody realised at the time the impact it was going to have on the whole community – and it was a terrible impact. I mean, some of the people who were put out of their houses in '96 are still in hostels. We were all taken so much by surprise that things almost went over the brink. So this year people were almost *over*-prepared.

We tortured MBW [Making Belfast Work] to get us mobile phones for the key flashpoint areas. They now say it was their idea, but it was never their idea, it came from community reps on the ground in North Belfast, and we kept at them until we eventually got them. And we sat down with community groups and worked out the vulnerable areas, and what system we could devise. And two of the areas where there *weren't* phones available was where it erupted!

I think in our area [Ballynafeigh], with people from both communities living next door to each other, the lid was on more; yet at the same time I think people were also finding it more difficult to express their anger because they lived so close.

As well as community workers being better prepared in the summer of 1997, there was a greater awareness of the risks involved to the entire community in letting things get out of hand.

In the East [Belfast] over the summer what happened was quite heavy rioting in Short Strand on the Sunday night when the decision was made over Drumcree [to force the Orange march along Portadown's Garvaghy Road], and the following night there was a lot of tension, with weapons moving about on both sides . . . potentially a very dangerous situation. And people on both sides realised that, and started trying to intervene – community workers, youth workers, police and political parties. And a line was drawn.

And this time young people were left in no doubt by their communities of the existence of that 'line'.

I think they were actually scared to start it this time because last year whole families were burnt out of their houses. It used to be just stone throwing at the peelers and that was it, but last year it came back really hard on the community. People confronted the young people and said: “You started that and look what happened . . . there’s ten people now out of their houses!” And with the community workers out on the streets this time the trouble was stamped out.

Sometimes when it’s two or three kids who start the whole thing off – kids with a lot of cider in them and probably rebelling as much against the local paramilitaries – the other side think the whole thing is orchestrated by the community, that it’s been sanctioned. And maybe this year that’s where the phones were so useful – helping to clarify those misunderstandings. And when people – on both sides – saw each other’s community workers out trying to stop the violence, they could see these attempts were community-led, and realised that the other community wasn’t wanting this at all. And that in turn encouraged people to try and cool down things on *their* side of the interface.

Yes, definitely the contacts made between communities certainly helped, and we now know there are people across the interface who can be got in touch with.

Footsoldiers in the ‘proxy war’

To some of the young people this turn of events during the summer of 1997 was more than a bit confusing.

One group told me they took a dander down the Limestone and were chased away [by their own side’s paramilitaries]. And they said: “how were we to know there was an agreement made to stop the rioting; the last time we were down here the same ones were telling us to get stuck in!”

Take what happened in my area. Some of the young people who were given the go-ahead to go out on that Sunday night [after Drumcree] – petrol-bombing and whatever else – are now up in court to be dealt with. And some of them are *also* being curfewed by the Provos for the anti-social behaviour they got up to after the tap was turned off [on the rioting]!

This realisation – that the violence *could* be turned off – was also a significant lesson for the youth workers.

The difficulty I have with all this is that if the adults could stop it this year, then they could have stopped it in years gone by. The responsibility always gets dumped on young people, but as far as I am concerned it’s the responsibility of the *whole* community.

It's what you could call a 'proxy war' – the paramilitaries either give it the nod, or turn a blind eye to it when it suits them, and some of the rioting was almost 'sanctioned' by the community.

I don't think the *whole* community sanctions it, certainly not in East Belfast, especially when two summers ago so many businesses and homes were burnt out. And I don't think people say they're not going to do anything about it, but more that they don't know *what* to do about it, or are afraid of it.

Of course, not *all* the community, but I would say that in Catholic areas, which feel they have been oppressed for so long by the police, that there's almost a certain level of 'acceptable' violence against the police, especially if it's coming from young people, who are perceived to have been harassed the most by the police.

And it was not only the young people who experienced at first hand the changing realities of street politics.

As a youth worker I was out on the streets to the early hours of the morning – sometimes to 4am – and I must admit that most of the time I felt helpless, for I knew that I had very little control, and if the paramilitaries had given the nod to the young people I couldn't have done anything. I think the only reason I had some small influence was because they [the paramilitaries] were saying 'no'.

Yet while a hand of warning went out to young people not to overstep the mark of what was acceptable behaviour, it was not accompanied by any hand of friendship or support.

See after it was switched off, after the nod was given to knock the violence on the head, these kids were still out walking the streets. And what happened then, at least here, was that the vandalism increased again – after all, the kids had seen adults engaging in rioting and acts of destruction. And now everybody is condemning them again, nobody tries to help them do anything better for themselves.

There was one occasion, during a public meeting, when some young people, who'd been out putting up posters and things at the adults' request, were told to "sit there and keep your mouths shut", and at the end of the meeting when they were told to put all the chairs away they replied "fuck off and do it yourself!"

Perhaps an awareness of this reality was behind a sea-change noted by a few youth workers.

The one thing I found this summer was that young people were asking a lot more questions. It used to be they went out and threw their bricks and

petrol bombs without questioning . . . this year there's a lot of them asking 'why?'

I heard of one group of young people who were forming themselves into a kind of self-help group, and one well-known local activist who was working with them made a real effort to get them to decide on a name with a 'political' connotation to it, but they said 'no' to each suggestion. Finally, when he left the room they came up with their own name – 'Detached Youth'. They wanted to do their own thing.

It is impossible to determine how prevalent such a growth of self-awareness is among young people – perhaps the two examples cited above were isolated occurrences – but certainly some youth workers felt that such an awakening of consciousness was long overdue.

The adults turn the violence on and off like a tap, and we expect young people to respond to this, and I think we shouldn't be surprised if there's a big kickback some day, when young people turn round to the adults and say either "we're not going to do it when you want us to", or "it's going to happen whether you lot want it or not". I think it's a kind of abuse of young people in a way. And other than misuse young people those same adults haven't tried to involve them in more constructive things. I'd actually be glad if one day they [adults] got the shock of their lives by young people saying they're not prepared to be manipulated any more.

Conclusions

The very open and honest responses given by the young people in the course of the interviews help us see ‘reality’ as young people perceive it and experience it. Having this insight should hopefully assist us to engage with young people and their needs more constructively.

THE REALITY

Alienation

While the young people themselves might describe their reality as one of ‘boredom’ or ‘frustration’, it is obvious that it goes deeper than this, and a more accurate description would be ‘alienation’. Such alienation is often experienced on different levels simultaneously.

Firstly, the young people are alienated from their own community. Certainly, they can readily identify with the religious and political aspirations held by their community, but, ironically, their *peer group* identity is more often created by being constantly *at odds* with that community. Indeed, some of the young people feel that their community just does not want to know them. As one said: “Nobody wants us outside *their* house; we get moved on from corner to corner, from street to street, by everyone . . . residents, police, paramilitaries.”

Just as tangible is the young people’s sense of alienation from the police, whom many believe “have it in for young people”. That there is no love lost between young people and the police is something which transcends the communal divide, for both Protestant and Catholic youth express much the same feelings in this regard.

To compound the total sense of being at odds with most of the adult world, is the added gulf which often exists between young people and local paramilitaries. While accepting that during periods of street violence paramilitary organisations are quite prepared to harness the energies of young people, at most other times paramilitaries are viewed by young people as yet one more segment of adult society which wants to exert control over them.

Restricted access, compounded by lack of local provision

One aspect of the young people’s reality which emerges starkly from the interviews is the extent to which their lives are constrained by the ‘barriers’ associated with the interface. Those barriers might take actual physical form – the ‘peaceline’ being the most obvious example – or they might be invisible, existing more in the fears and uncertainties which are shared by groups of

young people within a particular area (regarding ‘no-go areas’ and the like).

Proof that these barriers – visible and invisible – are very real is provided by the wide range of facilities and venues which young people list as places they cannot access – including leisure centres, shops, amusement arcades, main roads, parks, public transport, and even parts of Belfast city centre.

To compound matters further, existing social and leisure provision to which the young people *do* have access often fails – for a variety of reasons, some of which have never been adequately identified – to meet many of their expectations, despite the undoubted efforts made by those who initiate and run such provision.

More important perhaps than the perceived inadequacy of some of the existing provision is the *lack* of provision, particularly during the summer months. During this period, in which is concentrated most of the tensions associated with the ‘marching season’, many traditional support structures – schools, youth and community groups, etc – either close down completely or move the location of their activities outside the city. Even where local ‘summer schemes’ do exist, they are often geared towards younger children, not the needs of teenagers. And yet it is during the summer that inter-communal tension is often at its height, the potential for violence most real, and the absence of support structures for young people most evident.

Violence

It is clear from the interviews that young people (sometimes many young people) are attracted to the interface from further afield, particularly during times of tension and civil disturbance, in order to engage in inter-community violence there. Many young people are ‘socialised’ into inter-community violence at the interface in this way and it is important to note that these patterns of behaviour have, in most areas, existed for many years: as one young person put it – “it’s traditional.”

Given the reinforcing effect of ‘tradition’ and the involvement of young people from the wider community, as well as some of those who live at the interface, it is hardly surprising that interface violence, at least in relation to young people, has almost become a sport with its own rituals. Furthermore, many participants admit that they get a ‘real buzz’ from the violence. However, despite viewing such violence in an almost ‘recreational’ way, it is evident that many young people who live in interface areas are only too well aware that it can also pose very real personal dangers, and this undoubtedly adds to the stresses they live with.

THE WAY FORWARD

Enhancing access and provision

Judging by the interview responses, it would seem worthwhile to undertake more in-depth research into the following:

- (1) the various questions surrounding ‘access’: ‘who’ can use ‘which’ facilities? is it possible to enhance access at particular venues? is there more danger with night-time access? are there gender differences, both in terms of safety and the preparedness to access?
- (2) how can existing provision be made more attractive to the age group represented in the interviews?
- (3) what new or alternative types of provision might young people find attractive?
- (4) how can those involved with youth provision ensure there is equity of access for young people in interface areas to those services which many of their contemporaries take for granted elsewhere?

What hardly needs to be researched, however, is the need for more summer provision. Commonsense dictates that such provision is *essential* if young people are to be offered an alternative outlet for their energies and given extra support at a time while their lives are often subject to considerably greater stresses.

Involving the community

The ‘Overview’ discussion revealed how the community *can* intervene in situations of inter-communal tension when it acts with unity of purpose and firmness (not to mention the role good communications can play between community activists across the interface). If the lessons learned during the summer of 1997 can be built upon, a greater sense of intra-community and inter-community communication could be fostered, which itself might hopefully lead to a reduction in tension, and, as a consequence, the potential for interface violence involving young people might also be lessened. It could be reduced even further if young people themselves are encouraged to play their part within the process of communication.

One reason to suppose that community-led intervention could have positive effects stems from the realisation that much interface violence is misperceived. The ‘victim’ community often perceives the violence as being deliberately orchestrated or ‘sanctioned’ by the ‘other’ community, adults as well, and yet our interviews revealed – and those who work with young people can confirm this – that the violence is rarely orchestrated and is often a problem for *both* communities.

Of course, such perceptions have their roots in the long litany of youth violence which *has* been ‘sanctioned’ by paramilitaries. Any positive steps taken at grassroots level, therefore, could be entirely undermined if the paramilitaries continue to view young people as simply ‘foot-soldiers’. However, the political parties now representing both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groupings have indicated a desire to assist their communities in a more constructive

fashion and they should be encouraged to engage more productively with young people.

Finally, we must not forget that parents are a vital part of the equation. While many parents genuinely strive to keep their offspring away from anti-social activities and inherently dangerous situations, others either abdicate their responsibilities or are guilty of helping to reinforce – and even instill – much of the behaviour displayed by young people, including the sectarian attitudes directed against the ‘other’ community, and the confrontational responses to the presence of the security forces. For all their distinctive behaviour our young people have not developed their attitudes and behaviours in a vacuum, but in response to a socialisation process in which the rest of adult society plays the major part. Parents must be encouraged to engage more proactively with the needs of children and young people.

Engage with the young people themselves

More important, perhaps, than initiating new schemes *for* young people is to engage directly *with* young people. But before that can begin, it is important to have some understanding of the everyday reality as young people perceive it, and to do that we need to *listen* to what young people are saying, much in the way we have endeavoured to do here in our series of interviews, no matter how small-scale it might be. Despite concerns which may have been generated by what the young people revealed in these interviews – regarding their activities and behaviours – the fact that they so readily agreed to be interviewed was in itself a sign that a meaningful dialogue *can* be opened up.

Initiate internal debate and inter-community dialogue

One hopeful sign to emerge from the interviews is the curiosity the young people display towards their peers on the ‘other side’, even a preparedness to engage in dialogue with them. Serious consideration should be given to facilitating a series of small-scale encounters across the interface.

However, it has been the experience of many who work with young people that a necessary precursor to any *cross*-community dialogue is *intra*-community dialogue, engaging each group of young people singly. Some initiatives already engage young people in what is termed ‘single identity’ work, helping them explore their cultural, religious and historical backgrounds. These are valuable exercises, but the very lack of concern displayed by many of our interviewees to issues such as Protestantism and Catholicism, Nationalism and Unionism, should serve as a reminder to everyone involved in ‘single identity’ work to include an exploration of what ‘identity’ really means to young people, and what issues *they* see as being important in their lives.