

Young People Speak Out

Newhill Youth Development Team

compiled by

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Introduction

In early 1996, during a meeting of the Falls Think Tank, one participant wondered whether the discussions we were engaged in bore any relevance to the needs and aspirations of young people. Perhaps, he felt, young people would simply look at groups like the Falls and Shankill Think Tanks and say: “A plague on both your houses.” His comments were a reminder that we were ignoring an important and sizeable section of the community. For the next meeting, therefore, some local young people were invited to attend, and it proved to be a salutary experience for the other members of the Think Tank. Not only had the young people plenty to say, but they had no hesitation in saying it. However, at the conclusion of the meeting, one of them, Louise Beck, made a comment which took me somewhat aback. When we told the young people how much we had enjoyed their contributions, Louise replied: “I enjoyed it too – for nobody has ever asked me to give my opinion before.”

It was an astonishing admission, and a negative reflection on all those who are endeavouring, at whatever level – our own Think Tank included – to create the condition for a better future for our communities. Our young people *are* that future, and yet they are rarely asked to contribute to the building of it.

Hence, when I was appointed Co-ordinator of the Farget Community Think Tanks Project, I contacted Louise and her friends to find out if they wished to establish their own Youth Think Tank. Not unsurprisingly, they were more than eager, as their initial response revealed. They asked me to arrange the first meeting within a week, and I had to explain that I was only making preliminary soundings and it would be another six weeks before my post officially commenced.

“When does your job start, then?”

“1st October.”

“What day is that?”

“I think it’s a Thursday.”

“What about 7.30 in the evening?”

“Ah . . . in the evening of . . . ?”

“That Thursday, the 1st October.”

“Ah . . . why not? Thursday 1st October it is, then.”

The group of young people who would eventually comprise the discussion group already met together as a group – as members of Newhill Youth Development Team. This Team is based at Newhill Community Centre, located in a Nationalist working-class area of West Belfast bordered by the Ballymurphy and Turf Lodge estates.

Members of Newhill Youth Development Team are elected by all the other

young people from the area who use the community centre.

Our members are between the ages of 15 and 25. We have a say in the running of the youth club. Before, if there was money coming in and getting spent, kids weren't having a say in what it was being spent on. But with the formation of the Team that's all changed, and now Eilish [Reilly] will say to me: "I've money here for new equipment, for general activities, go and ask the members what they think." So we do surveys. Basically it's an attempt to give young people a say in how the place is run and what the money is to be spent on.

The Team devise different ways of creating a sense of ownership.

We're trying to get members of the youth club to design murals. It's no use adults designing what the place'll look like; it takes young people to do it, to attract their friends. Say the kids came in here and decorated this place the way they wanted, then they would come in more because they done it. They can show each other – "I done that drawing over there" – they can sit there in comfort, knowing that they done something themselves. It would give them confidence.

Members of the Team have also gone out to Canada and Texas, representing Ireland. The whole idea behind the Development Team is for young people to have a say, so there will be others going out a lot more, explaining about ourselves.

We have done some other training: RSA Stage I, Duke of Edinburgh, peer education, drug awareness, summer scheme training, child protection on trips and outdoor activities . . . a whole lot of things, learning good communications skills, organisational skills.

Ideas for sharing those skills with others are soon to be put into practice.

We've got a new project coming up that we're starting to plan. We're hoping to turn a section [of the Centre] into a drop-in café, for young people. It will be like an information point, and will involve peer education and outreach. We are going to run it, but we're hoping to involve other young people to design it and run it and manage it.

If the energy and openness displayed by those members of the Team who participated in the discussions relayed in this pamphlet are anything to go by, the young people of Newhill certainly have found their voice and I have no doubt that that voice will be increasingly heard.

Michael Hall

Note: All indented paragraphs represent a quote, and spaces between quotes indicate when a new contributor is 'speaking'. In line with Think Tank procedure, no quote is attributed, a policy which experience has shown allows for more openness.

Young People Speak Out

Part of the community, or apart from the community?

The young people of Newhill are no different from their counterparts in other working-class areas of Belfast, Protestant and Catholic, in their complaint that the adult world often either fails to understand them or else misjudges them.

Most young people from about the age of 14 to 20 are marginalised as hooligans. But you can't perceive *all* young people to be like that just because of the way certain ones carry on – that's stigmatising.

We work with young people who are standing at the street corners, and they get it all the time, even if they're not doing anything. They could be just standing talking, one of them could just raise their voice and the next thing the whole street's out starting murder. They're getting accused of being 'hoods', and yet they might not be doing anything. But most people are full of suspicions: they're going to steal my car, and all that. And because people are out shouting at them, they get defensive and then there's a whole thing started and these young people are then getting condemned and shunned, and moved on.

And if any of them do get caught doing something wrong, it would come down on them ten times worse, for they get blamed for everything else as well. Say they threw stones and got caught, then the next thing people are saying is it must have been them ones stole my car, it must have been them ones who broke my window, and did this and that.

The young people do not deny that some of their peers act in an anti-social way, but they feel the community, and authority, often overreacts in response.

They get moved from one street to the next and finally they end up in the Falls Park or the graveyard. But now the peelers have started going in and are cracking down on people there. There *is* a handful of young people damaging the gravestones, I accept that, but *any* young person seen in the graveyard is now getting blamed for it.

All young people are just stigmatised for the actions of a few. It's strange people here doing that –stigmatising people when they themselves have been stigmatised all their lives for living in Ballymurphy – you're a terrorist, a gunman, a murderer – and I don't think it's fair that we should stigmatise our own.

And, of course, in working-class areas of Belfast the community has recourse to more than just verbal condemnation.

If kids are standing at the street corners and people start shouting at them for raising their voices, the community might bring in the paramilitaries and tell them they're causing trouble every night – it's all blew out of proportion. And a lot of the young people are still being targeted for things they did in the past.

The punishments handed out by paramilitary organisations only add to the young people's sense of injustice.

People don't realise that when a young person is beat or shot, they're hurtin' a whole family and a whole lot of people.

What this community doesn't realise is that they've been going out for years marching up the Falls, and up this road too, against harassment and beatings from the RUC, and yet the same people are condoning the paramilitaries and sending them out from their own areas to do exactly what the RUC have been doing for years.

It must be noted, however, that the young people do not necessarily point the finger of blame at the paramilitaries for this state of affairs.

The problem is that everyone brings all the problems to the paramilitaries expecting them to do something about it. But I feel the community should sort out the problems themselves and take responsibility.

Let's face it, the paramilitaries are not counsellors, they're not community workers, they don't know how to deal with young people, don't know what measures to take. Yet the community is shifting it onto them, and just putting it into the wrong hands. The IRA can't be expected to solve all the problems that we have in this area, the community will have to do it, they need to take action for themselves. That 'restorative justice' scheme which is starting up might work – there's a similar one on the Shankill called 'Alternatives' – where everyone is asked to sign up to a Community Charter.

The young people are quick to accuse adults of double-standards.

Some of the other young people and I are in the [restorative justice] scheme. I actually said to the ones who organise it that it has to be used for *anyone* brought in who breaks the Charter, not just young people. See at most of the discussions, it is always young people who are brought up as examples, and I tell them that adults can be far worse and yet they're forgettin' about them.

I think they [adults] have a real cheek at times, for the noise and

damage that's done at the top of the road every night when they're leaving the pub is unbelievable. And it's only adults are doing it. One o'clock in the morning and all that noise and then they shout at young people for not making half as much noise as they do. I think they need to look at themselves and not be so judgemental.

In the Falls Park kids just stand and drink and that's it, but sure so do the adults. That's where the kids get it from, they see the adults and all *their* friends standing there drinking all during the summer.

Reasons behind the behaviour of some young people, they insist, have to be looked at.

They don't realise why young people are standing at the corners, they just judge them right away. There's no work for them, there's nothing for them to do. That's all they can do, is stand at corners.

Of course, they also admit that some of their peers are their own worst enemies, and for some even the threat of severe punishment fails to deter their behaviour.

Some of them don't care. Getting two bullets in the knees isn't a big deal to some of those young people any more. The best one I heard is: "That's okay, I'll get DLA [Disability Living Allowance] and then I can get a car and I won't have to go out and steal them." But getting a beating is, there's a total difference – I'd rather get two bullets.

A sense of belonging

And yet for all these grumbles about the adult world, the young people, while definitely feeling alienated from the wider society, are not really alienated from their own community, and they speak of it almost fondly.

I've started voluntary work and outdoor pursuits and I will be staying in my own area, but I know that after a while I will have to leave and go to other places for jobs and stuff, especially in outdoor pursuits, when I'm qualified. But I would like to come back here and do work with young people.

I love living here, like. You get used to it, and can see what can be done in this area. I wouldn't live anywhere else.

I think it's the same for anybody, they love going 'home'. It's a very tight community, though sometimes that's a bad thing, especially if you do something wrong – by the next day the whole place knows about it!

When you know everybody in the area, like, and you have a problem

you can go to somebody. . . there's different people within the area who have different things to contribute. See within this area, we could have a whole enterprise going on, there's so many skills and so many talents that there's no need to go outside for anything else. And the people are so friendly – when you walk around there's so many characters and you know everybody and you just chat with everybody and you're getting different stories, and it's real good craic, so it is. Not that the houses are up to scratch, mind you.

We were away for a week in Enniskillen: the place was good and there were plenty of activities, but the crowd we were with . . . we didn't like them. When we arrived we said 'hello' to them but they just put their faces down and walked on – ignorant so and so's. We were glad to get back here again.

I enjoy getting away, but as long as you know you're going home at the end of it. See if you were there and thought that you weren't going home at some stage, I think it would drive me insane.

I was in England about three years ago, for a month. Even though I was with my whole family I still wanted back, I didn't like it at all.

I've been to Belgium a number of times in the summer. I went there with an organisation called EuroChild when I was six or seven and I go back and see the family I first stayed with. They're great, like, it's just like having a second family; but even at that, by the fourth or fifth week I can't wait to get home again.

Nevertheless, within their community, they still feel the need to retain their own separate peer-group identities, which often assume a territorial nature.

Young people have their own wee groups and their own wee norms and they're comfortable together, no matter where they are.

There are some territorial rivalries. Between the Fort* and Turf Lodge, like. There's different crowds that stand at different places and if one person from one crowd actually even walks past this other crowd then there's a war started . . . sometimes just slabbering but sometimes it has got out of hand. At one stage I was talking to a few young people who stand in the Fort and they told me they were at Gortnamona teenage disco with the Turf Lodge ones and somebody threw an ice-cube and hit one of the Turf Lodge ones on the head, and it near started

* A reference to the huge British Army base, 'Fort Whiterock' (but known to local people as 'Fort Jericho' because of the frequency with which parts of the perimeter fencing would fall down), on the Springfield Road overlooking the entire area, which is currently in the process of being demolished. Not far away is another fortification, a joint army/police base known as the Henry Taggart, which closed in 1998.

murder! Every night after that the Turf Lodge ones came up into the Fort and there was war.

It used to be between young people from Springhill and Ballymurphy, but not now. I mean, there's still feuds going on between them ones, but it's between the adults now!

Then the Dermot Hill ones and the Barnsley ones – they used to fight, and Dermot Hill and Springhill. I remember when I was living in between New Barnsley and Dermot Hill and one week I was with New Barnsley and the next week I would be with the Dermot Hill ones getting them back. And then I had to walk in between them all!

Schooling – the failed promise

As with many working-class young people, their schooldays were far from being the 'happiest days of their lives'.

In our school courtesy was of more concern than our education. You had to stand up each day and say 'courtesy points' – about your conduct and uniform and stuff like that. You know what I remember learning? That when you get into a black taxi make sure you have the money in your hand so that you're not keeping the taxi driver waiting. That was one thing which sticks in my head that I learned at school, and I had to say it in assembly one day as a courtesy point. And keep your blazer on when going home from school – that was another.

In our school it was a case of how many teachers phoned in sick every day. You couldn't learn anything in the school I was in; the teachers didn't want to know. It was just a mad school, the teachers just couldn't hack it.

Teachers are not really in tune with young people, they're there as disciplinary figures, authority figures, and some young people can't adapt to that.

The thing I got in school from the teachers was: "There's a book, copy such and such a page; I'll write it up on the blackboard and ask you a couple of questions afterwards. . ." Then the next week you were just writing the second part of the page. It was mostly a case of the teachers always looking at the clock and saying: Good, it's ten to three; we'll get out shortly.

I hated school, and my mummy done everything she could in her power to make me go to school, but I was having none of it. And see at

the end of the day she could have talked to me 'till she was blue in the face but I wouldn't have listened to her. I just did not want to go and that was it. I ended up going to Father Wilson's* for two years.

The way young people see teachers is that most of them are snobs, they wear all these good clothes, their make-up is so pretty an' all, they think they're smarter than us and they look down their noses at you.

There was two okay ones in my school. My CDT teacher and my fourth form teacher –they would talk to you properly like, they were okay. My fourth form teacher would tell you stories from Irish culture. You could ask him questions, instead of having him fire you questions all the time. You felt comfortable asking him about things.

That's the way we were with our politics teacher, and you sort of went off the subject every time he took a class. He's from Andy'town, he's from the area, he's down to earth, and the young people at the school just related to him. Teachers should make it enjoyable for us to listen to them.

They're the best, the teachers who live local. They have been brought up in the area, they know what *they*'ve went through, not like some of these snobby rich this and rich that and then 'away you go' teachers – those ones don't know what the kids in these areas are going through.

I hated school and they got the school doctor in and she took my blood pressure and then she had the nerve to ask me: "Are you having your periods?" "Of course," I said. Fuck, I was nearly sixteen years of age! "And are you going with anybody?" "Yeah, I have a boyfriend." Then she asked: "You wouldn't be pregnant, would you?" And then I was sent to a psychiatrist. She asked me a load of stupid question too, like: "What does your mummy do, what friends have you got, what do you do on a Friday night . . ." And I'm sitting there thinking: "You're boring the tits off me, just leave me alone!" Her whole evaluation of me was that I was scared to leave the house. That's what was wrong with me – nothing to do with the fact that school was rubbish – it was that I was scared to leave the house. That's the mentality of them: if she won't go to school, then we'll send her to a psychiatrist.

Well, I was at the point where they were telling me that if I didn't go to school I was getting put into a home. And that was all they

* Father Desmond Wilson, a radical priest, has long been involved in self-help projects aimed at tackling the unemployment and alienation endemic in Ballymurphy. His own house (Springhill Community House) became a base for numerous community projects and discussion groups. Eventually too it became a focus for many school-refusers, and despite initial harassment from the education authorities and constant lack of funding, it was eventually designated as a legitimate 'alternative school' for these young people.

wanted to do for me, not come and help me in any way – just put me into a home. But that made me ten times worse, Anyway, my mummy got in touch with Noelle Ryan and that was it, one simple phone call and I was at a different type of school – at Father Wilson’s house. It was so informal but yet the amount of things that I done there was great. I went every day. I came out too with some basic examinations, whereas I knew if I had’ve stayed at school, I would’ve come out with nothing, so it was good in that sense too. I enjoyed it.

I sort of gave up. I stayed on ’till the end of fifth year, but then I thought: what am I going to school for when I just sit there and go to sleep? I just had this feeling, it’s like there’s nothing in this school to do. It’s like falling asleep in one class, getting up the corridor trying to stay awake and into the next class and falling asleep there. Nothing to learn there, for me anyway. Or anything I did learn was just going in one ear and out the other.

Even in the science class they wouldn’t let us do any of the experiments or nothing, ’cause they were afraid of us knocking things about. I remember we only got to do one experiment, it was something to do with a bit of paper and glass or something – I can’t remember. Before I started that school – you know when you and your ma are allowed to look around the school and all – and there was this sort of big electric ball, and when you put your hands on it your hairs stand up. That was the only interesting thing I got to do in science in school, and that was only *before* I went to the school! That was it: we’re gettin’ you in here, but once you’re in you’ll not be able to touch anything!

The only thing you’re taught to make is things like banana yogurt cake, stupid things you’re never going to make again. They teach you how to make all these things and you’ll just throw the recipes away.

My aunt has threatened to bring my cousin’s school to court on account of her being bullied. She was being bullied by a girl in the year above her, and she was defending herself once outside the school and she got suspended from school for a week for fighting in her uniform outside school premises. What about tackling the bullying first instead of suspending her for fighting in her uniform! The amount of bullying that goes on in that school, under their noses. And they know it’s happening, it’s always brought to their attention, they just never do anything about it.

Living with the Troubles

Most people old enough to remember pre-1969 days retain a fervent hope that since the ceasefires this society is slowly returning to a more peaceful normality. Yet this ‘normality’ is something young people in most working-class areas of Belfast have never really experienced.

The present change is hard to adapt to. We thought we *were* living in a ‘normal’ society – at least it was normal to us. It was normal for us to see the Brits every day; it was normal for us to riot. But now people tell us that that wasn’t ‘normal’, and that we’re *now* moving into a normal society. But it’s not normal to *us*, it’s a complete change.

It used to be okay to throw stones at the Brits, but now it’s not. Don’t throw stones at the peelers, we’re told, you’ll get put on curfew by the community or the paramilitaries. If you start anything, anything that’s going to be of a disturbance to the community, then you’re going to get put on curfew. But how do you tell people who all their lives have watched their family members being put down by these people and seen their house, or someone else’s house, being ripped apart by them... not to want to retaliate?

I think it’s really hypocritical [of the adults]. A couple of years ago they were all out throwing stones and stuff and today’s young people were kept out of it then, because they were “too young” and “youse’ll get yourselves hurt”, and yet they were watching their parents and friends getting hurt . . . now it’s like these same adults are sayin’: “Don’t do this, this is a disturbance”!

Sometimes, however, an almost surreal ‘balance’ can be struck:

What happened a year or so ago in Springhill was that the Brits were coming in and deliberately parking beside people’s cars, and the kids who knew no better were throwing stones and bricks at them and people’s cars were getting hit and people were then out shouting at the kids. Eventually there was one area in Springhill called the ‘throw zone’ where the kids were allowed to throw in . . . not in any other part of Springhill . . . and I thought that was a good idea. Anything that dared move into that ‘throw zone’ was fired at . . . if a cat had’ve stepped for just one second into it, kids suddenly appeared out from behind walls all firing at it! It was Brits and cats and dogs beware!

To many young people there has always been a real element of excitement involved in their almost ritualised confrontations with the security forces.

There’s the adrenaline rush, the fear that when you throw stones you

could get arrested. People in other places bungee-jump off big cranes for an adrenaline rush – we throw stones. One fella jumped onto a saracen and it spun round and round until he was finally thrown off.

I would've loved that. You could make a tourist attraction of it! "Take a spin round the Whiterock! See it from a different angle! Now, here we see, on your left, the Henry Taggart. . ."

But, such comments aside, the reality for most young people has generally been far from humorous.

Your experience has a lot to do with it. There's nobody in this area who's been unaffected by the Troubles, be it that their family members have been killed, or arrested, or their houses smashed up.

I've had a gun pointed at my head. Our house was targeted for raids almost every month, like clockwork. I've had a gun put at my head I don't know how many times. I was in the house on my own and I was threatened to be raped by a foot patrol. So I've had a constant fear of them, and over the years it's turned into an anger. But years ago I had no problems with the Brits, they've just turned it around themselves, it's their own fault.

I remember they were walking through our back garden and I said something to them, so they just grabbed a spade and started digging it up! And one time they were in my sister's house and there was a photograph of her later in the *Andytown News*, standing in the hole in the middle of her floorboards. They had done it for badness.

It's so degrading. If you see someone going through all your personal stuff, it's really degrading. There's nothing like it, you just don't feel you have anything personal.

My sister was only back from Canada and she had started to get her house done up and the Brits went in one day, ripped carpets up, holes all over the floor, and afterwards all they done was boarded it up with plywood. You could see these big lumps everywhere, and they just left it like that. They said they done it under 'Section 14 of the Prevention of Terrorism Act' – "we have reason to believe. . ." No 'reason' or fuck all!

You were that small compared to them, like, and when you'd walk past them they'd hit you with the butt of their guns.

There was an incident with me and my mummy and my aunt, who wasn't long out of jail, and she was pregnant. One minute we were

sitting there, the next minute the door was burst in and they had guns pointed at our heads. And they said they had 'reason to believe' that me, my mother and my aunt were sittin' making a bomb! Now I was sittin' in my school uniform in my lunch break. There was no 'reason' in them at all; I don't know where they get their information from, I really don't. See young people . . . the psychological effect this all has on them is tremendous, and I don't think that people really see the extent of it all. We've been living in a pressure cooker for years.

The relationship between the young people and the security forces is not without those small incidents which serve to highlight the unreality of the situation both sides have found themselves locked into.

Sometimes we used to bang the timbers when the Brits were walking past, and sometimes if *we* were sitting there quiet and playing cards they used to sneak up and bang the timbers and scare the life out of us, or else put a hose over the top of it!

It was mad, like, 'cause one night you were calling 'scumbags' at the Brits and the next night you'd be sittin' there round the back of the sangar talking away to some of them!

There was one Brit, a Scottish guy, we used to talk to him all the time. He used to shout out to us what time he was on in the sangar. We used to pass him cigarettes under the sangar and he used to run down and get them, and then when we had none he would throw them out to us and all. He got caught for that and he was 'jailed' for three days.

The kids are now taking the Fort and the Henry Taggart apart. Somebody actually stole timber from the Henry Taggart which had bullet holes in it, saying he was going to sell it to Americans. I can just picture him: "I was standing nearby when the bullets hit here!" You'll soon get people going up to the Fort with chisels, makin' new 'bullet holes'!

The young people, however, place the blame for any estrangement squarely on the shoulders of the security forces themselves.

When I was young I would talk to Brits. I remember giving them biscuits and all outside our house and they were standing there chattin'. There was no problem, and there was no way I was influenced by my parents to hate them, or to have a prejudice to hate them the way I do now. They just totally done it themselves, and for some reason they can't understand that. But the things they put me through when I was young, as a teenager, were not on, like.

During the day it's safe to go down town 'cause there's plenty of people about. But at night-time in town the peelers hassle you. Some

of them seem to know whether you're a Protestant or a Catholic. When you walk past them you hear them saying "Fenian!" Catholics must have a profile or something that they can spot!

Since the Agreement things have been just as bad for young people around here. When they took the Brits off the street they still sent out a foot patrol of about six cops to provoke young people. You'd think they want trouble – maybe they think they're going to lose their jobs if there's peace.

Cross-community relations

Not one of the young people during the discussions ever voiced any bitterness about their counterparts in the Protestant community. Indeed, for a few there is a realisation that the so-called religious 'divide' is not as sharply defined as it is often presented.

My grandfather was a Protestant from the Shankill and he married my granny from the Falls and turned into a Catholic, so I must have loads of relatives that live on the Shankill. I think that everybody would have that in their background, anyway.

For some the religious 'divide' can provide a ready source of amusement.

One time we came back from Swatragh and our minibus was behind another one carrying an Orange band. We were near Carlisle Circus, and we just sat there quiet, like, and then once we drove past them we started to yell and cheer at them. It was harmless fun – you wanna seen the look on their faces!

For others, it is a 'divide' they actually enjoy bridging.

We went away with Protestants through NICHS [Northern Ireland Children's Holiday Scheme]. We used to go away with them all the time. I used to go to Matt Talbott youth club and when I was younger I didn't really take on board what the whole Protestant/Catholic thing was. We kept going back to NICHS and started getting on very well together and knowing that these young people were Protestants. I thought it was class the way we got on, like.

Nevertheless, there are many underlying fears, which sometimes risk being translated into reality.

We used to go to Dundrum [with NICHS]. We would go into Newcastle, but this day there was a march on, an Orange march, and we were stuck in the middle of it. All the Prods [among the cross-community group] were watching us, to see what we made of the clapping and cheering. And we just sat there [on the bridge] like wee dwarfs; we

were isolated, you couldn't do anything. I was near shittin' myself! I was getting picked on by one of the other kids with us but another of the Prods – you called him 'Burger' – said: "Don't worry about it." He was sound enough, like. But they were all cheering an' all, and me and my brother was just sitting there, shittin' ourselves, and Burger says: "Nobody'll touch you here, you're too young to get thrown over the bridge, you're too young to be drowned." Fuck, he was making it worse! He says: "Just stay with me and you'll be alright." But then things got a bit heavy and I turns round and says: "Burger, help me here, I'm gonna get stiffed here." He was the only one I liked on that trip, that wee lad Burger – I don't even remember his real name. I couldn't have talked with the others, I found it really hard to talk, but even with him being a Protestant and me being a Catholic, it was easy, and I found that it's alright to talk. We kept in contact the whole way through, but the past few years we've lost contact.

When I go into town I take all my badges off – I have all these mad badges, Republican badges. I take them off in case you run into the wrong person. I'm one of these people wouldn't start anything, but see him there [indicating to his friend] – he's one of these people who would just walk around saying "Up the Ra!" He doesn't care!

For some, experiences of 'cross-community' efforts have not been that positive.

I remember our class went to the Girls Model. I can't remember what it was for, but I remember going and every time we walked past any of the girls they tried to trip us up or they tried to corner one of us to beat the shit out of us. We knew they had to come over to our school, so we were sitting planning – right, when they come over we'll do this and we'll start a fucking riot in the school. But that was the only time I remember us doing a cross-community scheme, but it just didn't work.

For others, however, it did work.

When I worked with the Young People's Health Project we run a summer school, right, and for one week we brought five girls from the Shankill and five boys from the Whiterock, and see the way they got on with each other, it was brilliant. Really, like from the very first minute that they met each other – excellent, you wanna seen it! I think it worked so well 'cause they all fancied each other!

Aye, but mixed groups can cause trouble. Sometimes you hear of groups getting jealous, if 'their' girls fancy the other fellas rather than their own. We brought a group away and it was a group of girls from the Whiterock/Westrock and a group of boys from Springfield Park – both from the same community, like – and they *hated* each other, near murdered each other. I couldn't believe it.

Some young people intuitively feel what numerous community activists have begun to suspect over recent years – that current approaches to bridging the divide are flawed in many ways.

We've attempted cross-community with our youth club projects, but see if you force an issue on people, instead of letting it take a natural course, it's not really going to work. If they like each other, if they find they've things in common, they have obviously more chance of becoming friends. But if they don't, then they won't. See forcing the issue – I don't think it's right. Sure even Catholics from here might hate Catholics from across the border, just because they have different personalities. If you force things, like saying: "Right, you two get together and go and do this and this," then it's no good; you should try and let them build their own relationship.

Just throwing two groups together is stupid. People you never met before and they expect you all to get on merrily with each other, like – and these are people you don't know.

Yet, there is an appreciation of the positive impact cross-community contact can often make.

When you get two groups together the first thing they want to talk about is their differences – like, "I'm an Orangie and you're a Fenian". At Springboard I've had arguments with Protestants from the Shankill Road umpteen times and the facilitators just sat and let it happen, 'cause it was a healthy argument, it was good we got it out, it was good that you got to know each other. And see after any argument, it was: "Right, let's all go out now." That was it! But it was good, it was good healthy argument, there was nothing wrong with it.

Sometimes you might not like the whole group but make friends with just one of them. See when I went away with the youth clubs it was mixed as well, and there was one Protestant I really got along with. He was one of my best mates on the boat the whole way there and back again, we just really clicked.

I think you should take young people away somewhere that's 'neutral', and not even tell them that they're Protestants and Catholics. You'll see how they get on with each other, you know what I mean; let them mix themselves, instead of saying: "Right, I want you to discuss this and that, that's such and such from the Shankill, that's such and such from the Falls; right, sort out your differences." That's stupid.

Like, I was away on a trip once, and there were Protestants on it as well, and we went to Southampton, and I really got on with them on

the way over, and I didn't find out that they were all Protestants until the way back! Just mixing like that, there's no problem.

Sometimes we just make a joke of it all. One group I was with just started slegging each other – you know: “You Orange so and so” – but we laughed about it, and still got on really well, like.

The group we brought away, the Protestant girls taught the fellas ‘The Sash’, and the fellas taught the girls ‘The Soldier’s Song’, just so if they ever got stuck in the Shankill the fellas could sing ‘The Sash’ in case they got beat up! The same for the girls, teaching them how to say the ‘Hail Mary’ and all.

Springboard is specifically cross-community, with young people from the Shankill, Falls and Tallagh from Dublin. And see the slegging between even the Northern ones and the Southern ones – “You durty Dubliners” and all like that . . . “thurty tree and a tird” – and it’s just good craic, that’s all it is. And Catholics would be telling jokes about Protestants ’till the Protestants and they would be laughing away at it. And it was the same with the Protestants, like.

Sometimes you couldn't care less. If you go into the clubs in the city centre you can mix with everybody, nobody cares about religion there.

The young people readily acknowledge that the Protestant/Catholic divide is not the only evidence of division.

We went down to Dublin for a Young Fine Gael conference, and as soon as we went in – we went in as Sinn Féin representatives – straight away we were made to feel totally isolated from the whole conference.

When some young people from the travelling community came to the youth club it seemed to be a problem with some of our own kids. I remember them saying to me: “What are *they* doing here, like?” They would come in here and curse a lot, and other things that singled them out from the rest of our members. There was a big problem with some of our ones slegging them: “Would you look at the state of him, look at the shape of his head” and things like that. But how do you tackle that?

I think if *anybody* came in here with a different accent, or done things differently, they are immediately going to be a spectacle for the rest to look at. Same with that group from Manchester, everyone was going: “Look at them weirdos.” Don't get me wrong, they liked our youth club, and the woman with them couldn't stop taking photos, like, and every time anyone looked up from behind something, she'd take another one!

Other events labelled as sectarian can actually be something else.

Sometimes when a bus gets ‘bricked’ on the Springfield Road you assume the Protestants are bricking the bus ‘cause they know Catholics are in it, but sometimes it’s not, it’s just kids doing it for the fun of it. It happens on the Falls Road too.

Often it is outsiders who have the *real* problem with understanding the nature of the divisions here.

There was a camera crew from Israel over and they wanted me to walk through Lanark Way, and there was just no way I was walking through it because I was shit scared, and I also thought I was being brought there under false pretences. But the man [the Israeli film-maker] said to me: “Do you not like Protestants?” I said, “Of course, I do.” He said: “Why then won’t you walk through the gates?” And I said “Wait ‘till I tell you: the Agreement has only been signed, it’s going to take years and years before people build up that trust and build up better relationships. I’ll only walk through areas where I feel safe.” I think people just imagine: right, there’s an Agreement, now everybody get together and we’ll have a big happy family! They wanted me to go up and shake hands with that fella [Protestant youth] and start talking to him. I asked why and they said because it will look good. I said but I don’t know him and that’s something I wouldn’t normally do with a stranger. They weren’t filming reality, *my* reality, they were just making up some fairy story for themselves. I said “Look, I do have some Protestant friends, but I hardly know this fella and you want me to go up and shake hands with him?” Here’s me: “No, that would be false.” So they just asked me some questions.

I was in New York for a youth conference, and I was sitting there and this journalist stood up and went: “What about the religious dispute in Northern Ireland?” I stood up and I said: “Excuse me, don’t ever assume things just because the British media have fed your brains with all that stuff; this is not a religious dispute, it’s a territorial dispute, it’s a dispute over equality and justice.” And she was like: “Okay, well,” and sat down. I actually had to go over and apologise to her, because I had been so fucking angry about it. And to be fair it wasn’t her fault, the media have painted that picture. And other people were going on about the Catholics and Protestants being at each other’s throats. I said, “It’s not like that. I don’t walk down the street and see a Protestant and think I’m going to attack that person because he’s Protestant, it’s not like that.”

The media have a big part to do with things here, they’ve hyped up things and used people, and they’ve made some situations worse than

they were. Journalists are supposed to find out what the truth is and then do their story. But they don't, they come here with their own views and only put down the 'facts' that fit those views.

Religion

What makes the media focus on our 'religious problem' somewhat ironic is that, for the churches, Catholic and Protestant, *their* main 'problem' might be the dwindling attendance rates among young people, something reflected in the discussion group.

I remember going to Queens for a Youth Against Prejudice conference and there were Protestants and Catholics there. And I'm sitting there referring to myself as a Catholic. Then I said to myself: what am I doing, I don't even go to Mass? I mean, I don't practise religion at all. It's just the fact that I live in a Catholic area; instead of saying I'm a Nationalist and a Republican, I kept referring to myself as a Catholic.

I don't think that young people care all that much about the church. When I was younger I had to go to church, it was one of those things – get round to Mass and get back again.

We'd go on the 'beak'. We used to sit outside the chapel and say: right, it's your turn to run and get the leaflets, and find out who said the Mass. Then we could all go home and say: "Ma – I was at Mass!"

When you go into Mass it's just the same thing every Sunday; you want to go the night before so you can get it over and done with, so you can get a lie-in.

There was a priest round in Matt Talbott's, before they knocked it down; you used to call him 'Father Speedy'. That was the only Mass I ever went to 'cause you were only sitting there about ten minutes, saying 'happy days'. He was so quick, but you couldn't understand what he was saying.

I think the Catholic church is very old fashioned and I disagree with a lot of their rules, or laws, or whatever they are. I think it's so stupid that there's not allowed to be women priests, that nuns aren't allowed to hear confessions, that we aren't allowed to have contraception yet we're not allowed to have abortions either, and you're not allowed to have kids before you're married. It's totally stupid. Our school was run by a nun and there were other nuns working there – and at the time I was in sixth year I was also training, outside school, to be a Peer Educator, and I did a session on safer sex with a group of young people

from Springhill. And they all went to the same school as me, but what they done was at the end of the session they all stole condoms and brought them into school and they were blowing them up and setting them on teachers' chairs! They got caught on and I was pulled 'till my Head of Years office and she got into me about how wrong it was for me to talk to the girls about such things. She sent me to a nun and the nun said: "What would the Falls Road think of this school if they knew that one of their young people was talking about this subject?" And half the older girls at the school was pregnant –I couldn't believe it!

However, while most of the young people had been turned off the established church, that did not mean that they had necessarily abandoned religion itself.

I used to watch the black people on television and the way they would get up and sing, and I would love that, it's so different.

Over the last few years I think some young people are going back to Mass. I would rather go to Father Wilson's, I preferred his Mass.

War and Peace

The current peace process, imperfect as it is, is welcomed by the young people, although the fact that violence has not been completely banished creates concern.

I like the way things are now, because for once in my life I'm not afraid to go anywhere, or worry about being shot. Although there could be trouble at any moment, and that's always a fear, I suppose.

There is still that fear that something is going to happen all over again, and then you have these breakaway groups like the LVF and things happening like the Omagh bombing, and there is still that fear that it could escalate into something bigger, because you don't really know what way these groups are thinking.

Before last year my opinion was that I don't care. For me, I thought this was a normal place to live in, and it would be no difference to me if I was living some place else. I've learned to live with it and that's just the way it is. But when it was somebody close [Terry Enwright] that I knew was getting killed, now I really do want peace. 'Cause you didn't really understand 'till you know somebody it happens to.

When you know someone that's been killed the first thing you think is: "Bastards, I want them instead!" But then when you think about it, when you actually sit down and rationalise it, you go: "No, it's somebody else's family, it's somebody else's son or daughter, it shouldn't have

to be like this.”

And as for their views on the last thirty years of conflict?

It shouldn't have had to happen, people shouldn't have had to fight.

Was it right for the British Army to go out and wage war on this country? You're talking about a generation at that point in time when the violence started who seen it as necessary for them to take that step, and it's sad that they had to do that, but they thought they had to.

It could have been sorted out, it could have been peaceful, if the British had've let it be peaceful. It wasn't allowed to be peaceful because the British were treating people here as second-class citizens and the people rose up against it. There's always going to be rebellion against people who oppress.

If you look at Bloody Sunday, that was a big recruitment thing for the IRA – it's things like that happening which influence people to join the IRA. I said last week about the RUC making me prejudiced against them because of the way they treated me. I think they helped the IRA the way they treated us, so they have nobody to blame but themselves.

Everybody is calling on the IRA to decommission. But what about decommissioning the RUC? Ingram – he says plastic bullets should still be used. There's a whole lot more to it than just IRA weapons, there's all the RUC and Loyalist ones as well.

I never questioned what the IRA did because there was no other way forward for people here; they were forced into that situation and they shouldn't have been. I know a lot of innocent people got killed; it's always a tragedy when people die, but it's war.

While most of the young people are of the opinion that the IRA's response to the circumstances confronting the Nationalist community over the past three decades has been understandable, a few are prepared to assert that another way must now be found.

If you walk down the Whiterock – the Falls Road's the same – whatever way you go it says “Not one bullet, not one ounce” plastered on the fuckin' walls. But I think that's all wrong. We won't get peace if they keep saying they're never handing in nothing. Like, I don't agree with any of it. The way I see it, it's all money now, money, money, money. Alongside the pure IRA men there's ones making money out of it, living in fancy houses, and with them supposed to be on the dole and all.

Political awareness

What of the young people's views on the political issues which confront them daily?

I'm actually a bit confused with the present situation. I don't think that things were explained properly to young people, they don't really know what's going on. I think people should have set aside time to sit down with our young people and tell them exactly what was happening, and where they thought it was going to go. Young people don't have a clue where their future's going.

Some Sinn Féin local councillors [before the Referendum] held a series of public meetings in each area. I went to one of them, but I found it very hard to understand all the political jargon, and I think that's a barrier for young people – it's getting past that jargon and understanding what it really means.

I was at that meeting too, and it was like in a different language, 'cause he was saying things like "articles 2 and 3 of section 4 on page. . ." And I just went "Fuck this, what am I doin' here, I can't understand all this." He was just reading out what was in that book [the Good Friday Agreement], but we wanted to hear what it actually meant for us in real terms, we want to know what the craic is, what you're voting for.

Like, some young people were just old enough to vote but they were too young to know what they were being asked to vote *for*, and none of the politicians came to help us with that. I think all young people were left in the dark. Sure, many still voted, but I reckon most of them just voted the way their parents voted, it didn't mean they themselves had their own opinion on what they voted for.

Some people were saying to me to vote because it [the Agreement] was something to build on, but I didn't vote 'cause I didn't have a clue; I didn't know what the fuck it was all about, so why should I? If I had voted 'yes' it would have been for the wrong reasons; if I had've voted 'no' it might have been 'cause I wasn't informed enough about it.

The feeling I get from watching some politicians is this attitude that we should leave it to them, leave it to the 'experts', we're not supposed to know what we're talking about.

The politicians should explain things to groups of young people, youth leaders and others, and then they can put it across better to other young people. It's presented wrongly altogether. If groups like us were told

about it and made to understand it better, then if a young person came and asked *us* what the craic was, we could help them understand what they're on about.

In Sinn Féin Youth, we had a national meeting and we discussed the Good Friday Agreement and how we thought people were going to vote. That document actually went to the *ard fheis* but I don't think it was really taken into account. People read it, but it wasn't actually going to influence the big discussion of whether Sinn Féin were going to go for a 'yes' campaign or a 'no' campaign. I just think they should start viewing young people as an integral part of our whole community.

If they don't they're going to lose the young people, and they're not going to be able to play a meaningful role in the community if they are being closed away. They get them to do their papers and go round the doors and collect money, and yet any time a young person tries to get involved in a more positive way, they're often not seen as responsible enough to do things. So I think that's a barrier.

What about the setting up of the new Northern Ireland Assembly?

I don't think anything is going to come out of it. They don't seem to be making a lot of progress with it. They discuss issues in meetings and all, but nothing has ever come out of that before, so I think somebody will eventually make it break down, that's what I think is going to happen.

And as for the continuing 'stand-off' at Drumcree, the young people are unanimous in their responses.

I agree with them ones having their tradition, nobody's trying to take it away from them. In years to come, if the peace process happens – years down the line maybe – we can all accept these marches, but the truth of the matter is people are still hurting, there is still that fear and they need to recognise that, and the inequality issue is there as well.

If it was the Nationalist community that was trying to march through a Unionist area it would've been cracked down on a long time ago, they would have been kicked into the ground. It really amazes me how they can get away with it. Last year they re-routed the Ormeau Road march and I thought that was them giving us a confidence-building measure, if you like, but now I think they just done that to take the interest away from other contentious areas and focus on Garvaghy. It will take a long time for people to get used to the fact that they are going to have to live side by side with each other's traditions, but at this moment in time it's just not possible.

If I had a big tractor with a big shovel, I would shovel them all up and move them off the road, 'cause that's what would happen to us if we tried it.

However, awareness of the need to educate young people politically and culturally is recognised by some members of the Development Team.

I would like to see a political education project in this area, to give an awareness of political issues to young people: through Irish history, the Irish Language, the history of their own area, the politics of Sinn Féin, as well as the politics of all the other political parties, just to build up their awareness of everything. And if they had any questions they could ask that the parties answer them in plain English, without all the jargon. I would like to see something like that happen here, because there *is* people who are interested in the wellbeing of their community but they just don't know how to go about it.

The pressure of everyday life

Irrespective of the broader political issues, for the young people it is other things impacting upon their daily lives which are paramount. Such as drugs:

Young people take drugs mainly because of the pressures on them, or because their mates are doing it, or just because they're there. 'E's and 'blow' would be the most popular drug in this area, but even in saying that, alcohol is the biggest problem we have in the Six Counties.

Or a more worrying trend of late, suicide among young people:

It's a big shock, especially when you know the person, when you've knocked about with them. When I heard that my mate did it, it was like being hit over the head with something, I really lost it. I'd known him for seven years during school. Some people say, well, why didn't his friends help him, but sometimes they don't always know.

Kids get confused, there's so much shit going on now, some young people are into drugs, the paramilitaries are after them, the police are after them. . . kids are getting caught in cars with drugs on them. Their ma's and da's are on their back, they're missing school because of drugs, and some end up in hospital. It all builds up, it's all buzzing to a young person, then suddenly the head explodes and suicide is involved. Then they all go mad: the ma and da blame the cops, the cops blame the paramilitaries, everybody tries to blame someone else when a young person kills himself . . . it's all fucking mad.

It's hard to know the signs. I heard that they prepare everything and once a person knows that they are going to commit suicide, once

they've got it in their head that they are going to do it, then they just go and do it and there's not much you could do about it. It's hard to recognise the signs, you don't know what to look for.

They don't even do it at the lowest point of their life, 'cause they don't even have the energy to do it then. It's when they are on their way back up and things are starting to go right again that they do it.

You hear people say, "Oh, I'm going to kill myself", but they would say it on a whim, they wouldn't mean it. Other young people you have to take seriously; sometimes you know there could be an underlying problem, and when they say it, they mean it.

Some people make jokes about it as well. If you're sitting with a group, all talking, and one turns round and says: "Fuck, I'm away home to throw a rope up!" and they say it like in a joke.

It's not a joke though, I've contemplated suicide myself over the years, I've contemplated it so much. It is a serious issue, it really needs to be addressed. There's so many things behind it. Stress, being unemployed, no job prospects, no money, where am I going to be living in five years' time? Am I even going to be alive in five years' time, anyway?

I think a big factor to do with it as well is that over the last lot of years the Troubles have been the top issue for everyone, people have taken such a big interest in it that they've sort of set aside other things that are important. It's only recently that young people are beginning to be more involved and participating in different issues, like drugs and sexual abuse and things like that.

It is difficult to help some people though. Years ago I had a friend, and she was really into drugs and didn't know what she was doing half the time. She started to sleep around and she got pregnant, then had a miscarriage. She was at the lowest point of her life, was totally wrecked on drugs and I didn't know what to do about it. I felt I had to tell her mummy, to see if she could help her. But it only broke our friendship, she didn't trust me any more. But it was a decision I had to make 'cause I didn't know where else to go for help. It made me realise that young people have to know about how to handle these things, what to do and where to go to get help.

Teenage pregnancies have to be looked at. No-one really talks about that subject though it's a big problem in the area. I was talking to this eighteen-year-old girl, we had her in a group once. Me and her were just sitting having a general discussion about people getting pregnant

and she said: “It doesn’t even shock anyone any more, it’s so common.” It’s not the right attitude to take, but she’s right, it is so common now that nobody is shocked by it.

There’s a wee girl at the minute and she had a child when she was thirteen, and her boy sleeps around and has two other kids by somebody else. She’s pregnant again and she’s still only fifteen, while he has got another girl pregnant, God help her.

I think parents have a lot of responsibility for it as well. I’ve seen young girls having kids, and their parents or grandparents saying: “Go you on out, here’s the money, and I’ll look after the child, I’ll keep her in our room tonight.” I don’t mean they shouldn’t be giving a hand, like, but I think they are just making it all seem too easy. They should make them see how hard it is, make them think: I’m not going to do this again, I’m not going to get myself into this situation again.

Parents are under pressure as well. It’s all got to do with unemployment, money and stress and everything. A lot of the time what their kids are getting up to they don’t see, it’s done behind their backs, and there’s nothing much they can do if they don’t know what’s happening.

Involvement in the wider society

The young people suspect that people of influence outside their communities have little interest in their opinions, let alone their needs and aspirations.

When they bring young people onto the TV to discuss things, it’s always students and ones in the grammar schools. But what about all the unemployed young people from the likes of these areas, the ones who left school because it basically failed them? No-one comes out to them and asks: “Do you want a say?”

You have these people come and listening to you but they don’t really take on board what you’re saying, and go away and do their own thing anyway. It’s only a token thing mostly when they ask for your views.

Aye, some of them are only doing it to be *seen* to be doing it, they’ve no real interest in your opinions. It’s so that they can say: we’ve done this and we’ve done that. It looks good on some report.

And when some young people *are* given opportunities, they take them with more than a little hesitation.

There’s a certain number of young people, myself included, that adults

would specifically go to and ask to speak at things. And don't get me wrong, I don't mind representing young people and giving my views, but I would like other young people who are not saying anything to be targeted and brought into more things like this. I've seen our young people resenting that, the fact that there's only a certain few that they'll go to.

It's hard though at times to get young people to do things, even with what we're doing. Some have other voluntary commitments, and some have jobs . . . like, a whole lot of us got temporary jobs in Funderland before Christmas. And you find that key figures do more, and *can* do more, than others. Although that's not to say it's not a team commitment.

Future prospects

And how do they see the future for the young people of the area?

I think a lot of young people are just happy being on the 'dole', 'cause for so long they haven't had to work and they would rather get their money and stand at the corner. Others just want to wait, 'cause they're hearing that jobs will be created here and created there, and they just think a job's gonna fall into their hands. But many young people's self-esteem is so low they don't know how to get themselves out of it.

For years there were no jobs for Catholics, but now they're starting to come up. I think there'll be more opportunities for Catholics; Catholics have been told all their lives – educate yourselves and you'll get a job. Whereas Prods were told their da would get them a job or whatever, in the shipyard or whatever, and they were never told to educate themselves, and I think now that Catholics are aiming their sights high . . . and now Protestants are feeling it tough too.

It's still hard to find work though. There's many Catholics who have all the qualifications but because of the low numbers of jobs available they still can't get any. And if you look at a place like Ballymurphy, it has a very high rate of young people coming out of school with low academic achievement.

But, above all, what the young people would like for their future is real peace.

I would like to see it stay the way it's been lately –no more shootings or no more bombings. I'd like to be able to walk through the town or down the Shankill and the Springfield Road.

It would be a long time before I'd walk down the Springfield Road, past the West Circular. I would rather walk right down the Whiterock, then down the Falls, before I would take any chances.