



# Community Conversations

## HOUSING AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

A report prepared by Denis Long and Fiona Molloy for Forward South Partnership,  
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## Context

Forward South Partnership (FSP) was established in 1998 and is recognised as a cross sectoral representative body dedicated to the social, economic and physical regeneration of south Belfast. FSP does this through building connections between communities, organisations, businesses and statutory agencies across the area, encouraging cooperation and collaboration to address common issues. The organisation seeks to focus on the strategic delivery of programmes and events that empower communities and enable positive change.

The Community Support Group (CSG), which feeds into the FSP Board aims to ensure that the programmes delivered by FSP continue to be aligned to expressed community priorities and need. The CSG comprises a diverse range of individuals elected democratically from a significant number of south Belfast community-based organisations. As such, the CSG is an appropriate vehicle to gauge the challenges and opportunities presenting in the area.

A range of recurrent themes emerging from CSG discussions were prioritised in relation to housing and shared space as well as the broader implications of the cost of living and maintaining good community relations. Given the centrality of housing to social cohesion, FSP partnered with Radius Housing and Apex Housing Association to conduct a series of Community Conversations with individuals from different communities in south Belfast. The goal was to explore the themes highlighted by the CSG and gain a deeper understanding of individual lived experiences.

*” There is a synergy between involvement and cohesion, with cohesion often a byproduct of community involvement”. (NIHE 2024)*

The genesis of these conversations predates the recent racist violence that affected communities in many areas of the city, but disproportionately affected people living in south Belfast. Even though the need for this work became even more pressing, the conversations were temporarily put on hold, until it was deemed appropriate to continue.

The project was led by Denis Long and Fiona Molloy, two independent consultants with extensive experience of facilitating intercultural programmes and supporting marginalised communities. Ten participants from diverse backgrounds contributed to weekly discussions over a three-week period in October 2024, with each session lasting two hours.

Grounded in the Public Conversations model, the discussions were designed to promote equal participation. Active listening and inclusive language were employed to explore both differences and common ground and to engender a supportive and non-judgemental environment where participants felt safe to express their views.

Participants were introduced to the Cycle of Oppression model<sup>1</sup> to deepen their understanding of key concepts such as prejudice, discrimination and racism and to facilitate more informed discussions.

It must be noted that all participants agreed that their views belonged to them as individuals and that they did not attend as representatives of their respective communities or organisations. The focus of the conversations was to ensure diverse voices could be heard rather than to garner a representative opinion.

This project coincided with the NI Housing Executive (NIHE) consultation on its Community Involvement and Cohesion Strategy 2024 -2029. It is hoped that this work, undertaken on behalf of FSP, will help inform the discussions on the NIHE strategic direction and ongoing work being driven from within The Executive Office (TEO).

*” We believe that supporting and encouraging neighbourhoods, where everyone is valued and where diversity is celebrated, is fundamental to building a lasting peace and a stable society.” (NIHE 2024)*

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<sup>1</sup> Sheri Lyn Schmidt, “[Cycle of Oppression](#)”, 1994.

## 1. Exploring Underlying Issues

The conversations opened by examining the meanings and intentions behind statements such as "Local houses for local people" and "I am not a racist but ...". The aim was to support participants to listen empathetically to different perspectives and uncover core issues.

A participant commented:

*"These are taglines that shut down conversations and ignore the real issues. People are fighting over an ever-reducing slice of the pie. It's an issue with policy, not people."*

The statements were contextualised by a strong sense of family and what people felt was "local". Many of the families had lived in their areas for generations and there was an expectation, whether realistic or not, that their families would grow up and live in the same area. In this context, "local" typically meant extended families and neighbours, and ruled out anyone who hasn't been born and raised in the area, not just people from other countries but also individuals from neighbouring estates.

The discussions revealed that such statements point to a wide range of issues that require comprehensive and nuanced interpretations, such as:

### Inequalities and Injustices

- **Misrepresentation:** Participants<sup>2</sup> voiced frustration over the portrayal of working-class communities as racist, ignorant and xenophobic by the media and in decision-making circles. Such sweeping, negative generalisations make people feel unheard and undervalued. Additionally, clumsy language does not mean someone is racist. Communities need support to amplify their voices and use better language to articulate their needs and concerns, without being denigrated, misrepresented or judged.

- **Unequal access to resources:**

*" Housing is the biggest divide in communities, causing frustrations."*

Participants shared feelings of being left behind and raised concerns about unfair resource allocation. They felt that areas with the least capacity but the greatest need, are not being prioritised, thus perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

Challenges in accessing essential services such as health, education and housing,

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this report, the term "participants" is used to represent the views expressed by the individuals involved in the conversations. This term does not imply that everyone shared identical opinions. Instead, it indicates that once a point was raised, it was generally accepted as a valid argument.

were cited as evidence of this perceived inequality, forcing people into competition with each other over limited resources.

- **Coercive control:** Participants reflected on the well documented, ongoing influence of paramilitaries within communities and how this can create an atmosphere of fear. Recent signs in some areas suggested a resistance to newcomer people, but these signs did not reflect the community's voice. It is fear that prevents people from openly challenging these actions. The responsibility lies with the relevant authorities to address the actual perpetrators rather than scapegoating communities that are left to fend for themselves.

### **Policy and Systemic Issues**

- **Political disconnect:** Participants felt that decisions made in the political arena often do not reflect the realities on the ground, leading to feelings of desperation, abandonment and defensiveness. Effective political leadership requires actively engaging with all communities to understand their needs, communicating clearly about possibilities and limitations, considering all voices and being accountable for actions.
- **Poor strategic planning:** Many participants believed that strategic planning is driven by profit rather than community wellbeing, resulting in public spaces designed for a privileged few. They advocate for shifting from an economic to a community model, recognising community wealth and prioritising community needs such as building family homes.

### **Intergenerational Trauma**

- **Legacy of the past:** The intergenerational trauma that many experience as a result of the conflict was identified as a complicating factor. This trauma shapes perceptions, attitudes and behaviours, fostering mistrust and an ethos of self-reliance over help seeking or collaboration. Prioritising support for individuals and communities affected by intergenerational trauma, as well as earning and maintaining their trust, should be of paramount importance.

### **Social and Cultural Considerations**

- **Racism:** Participants recognised that racism is a serious concern that cannot be ignored or diminished. They emphasised that racism is endemic in all communities, it is not confined to any one group. Instances of racist violence have occurred in many communities throughout the city, yet general discourse continues to single out communities, obscuring the widespread nature of the issue. Racism should not be used as a convenient tool to vilify certain communities. To combat racism effectively, there must be a collective effort to implement relevant measures against prejudice, discrimination and racism, wherever they arise.

- **Loss of identity:** Family proximity is highly valued for support and care, alongside a strong need for neighbourliness which engenders trust and belonging within the community. However, these community values are often downplayed, affecting people's sense of identity and their general wellbeing. This dismissal undermines the ongoing discourse on respecting cultural diversity, reinforcing the notion that some cultures are deemed less significant than others. People want their loss acknowledged and seek tangible actions that demonstrate a commitment to upholding their values and addressing their concerns.

- **Safety concerns:**

*”One thing that is fundamental to your safety and identity is your home.”*

There is a perception that the hard-earned safety of the communities will be compromised if “*new people*” move into those communities. Historically, living in segregated communities is what kept people safe. Ignoring genuine safety concerns is counterproductive to efforts in promoting wellbeing and fostering good relations.

- **Fear of change:** There is a perceived threat to the existence of the communities that families have lived in for generations. Resistance to change is only natural, when little regard has been shown to help communities adapt. Communities need targeted support in transitioning and adapting to societal changes.

## Key Notes

There was unanimous agreement on several key points:

- The core issues are complex, multifaceted and interconnected, cutting across both housing and community relations.
- The unequivocal wrongness of violence and racism and the crucial need to protect ALL children, regardless of background.
- The importance of paying attention to language to prevent assumptions and lazy stereotyping, challenge bias and encourage open dialogues.
- Recognition that Belfast is a good place, deserving of collective efforts to maintain and enhance its communal spirit.
- A drive to preserve the sense of community, recognising the importance of knowing and trusting each other.
- An acceptance that “*local people*” encompasses everyone, and the challenge is to overcome divisions forced upon people, by enabling inclusive and positive change from the bottom-up.

## 2. Vision, Aspirations and Motivations

Participants reflected on their aspirations and motivations for their communities. The aim was to identify common ground by exploring a shared vision that enables mutual trust, strong alliances and collaborative action.

### Vision

Everyone expressed their vision for connected, engaged and thriving communities.

Participants envisioned self-sufficient communities where trust and empathy are foundational values.

They expressed their ambitions for communities that are better politically engaged and, at the grassroots level, have the capacity and capability to overcome the systemic barriers they encounter.

Participants stressed the importance of justice and fairness in systems to ensure people do not feel victimized or harmed.

### Aspirations

Participants aspire to live in communities with enough housing for everyone, with improved access to healthcare, education and employment, local shops and green spaces.

Green spaces and sustainable urban development were highlighted as symbols of community pride and care.

They shared a strong desire for enhanced educational opportunities, both formal and informal, to expose people to diversity and promote equality and equity.

Achieving this future necessitates investments in infrastructure such as social development, schools and parks, to help communities grow.

### Motivations

A participant remarked:

*"The fact that we're sitting here is a miracle. It would be a waste – there's only a set amount of time. The opportunity itself is the motivation."*

The participants were motivated by the need to prevent the recurrence of past issues, such as the summer's violence and community strife, and to create safe, inclusive and sustainable communities. Their motivations are multifaceted:

- **Moral motivations:** Values, beliefs and a sense of justice and fairness.
- **Economic motivations:** Access to work and essential services.

- **Social motivations:** Importance of family, community and cohesion.
- **Environmental motivations:** Nature, health and resource sustainability.

### Key Notes

Visioning is a difficult task that cannot be underestimated. The challenges are complex and deep-seated, that it's often difficult to see beyond barriers. There are no quick-fix solutions; meaningful visioning demands sustained effort and commitment.

The conversations revolved around the recurring themes of **ownership, custodianship** and **empowerment**:

- **Ownership:** of the process to achieve their vision must come from within the communities themselves.
- **Custodianship:** this duty of care necessitates both individual efforts and collective actions to future-proof community assets.
- **Empowerment:** communities should be supported in developing their capacity and capability to articulate their vision and provide positive leadership.

All participants want a better future for their families, their communities and their city. Any next steps should build on these commonalities to achieve an agreed future that nurtures diversity.



### 3. Practical Actions

Participants were supported to work together to identify a range of realistic actions. The aim was to translate shared visions and motivations into tangible steps for change.

A participant reflected:

*"We need to do this differently. Every time there's an incident, the community gets painted in black and white. Violence and racism are wrong but making assumptions that shut down conversations is also wrong".*

Participants highlighted the need to return to community development practices and stressed the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to address the complex issues discussed. Within this context, they called for:

#### **Opportunities for Authentic Intercultural Engagement**

Community festivals and events can play a pivotal role in fostering understanding and unity among diverse groups. However, it's time to move beyond tokenistic initiatives that merely tick the diversity box. Instead, efforts should focus on authentic representation of all local cultures. For example, Open Botanic 2024 has been repeatedly acknowledged as a good example of inclusivity.

Creative approaches in various sectors, such as sports and the arts, can be especially effective. For example, using storytelling and drama to address pressing community issues, like housing, can provide a valuable platform for diverse voices to be heard and their ideas expressed.

#### **Opportunities for Meaningful Learning**

Promoting inclusive learning can support more informed, empathetic and connected communities. While there may be a perception that these strategies are already in place and actively implemented, participants shared a sense that many programmes are superficial and fail to fully embody the principles of inclusive learning. On the other hand, truly effective initiatives often operate in isolation, lacking proper recognition and upscaling.

Practical actions should focus on:

- Creating safe spaces for engagement, conversation and learning about local and broader cultural histories and heritage.
- Promoting collective exploration of identities to foster understanding and challenge misrepresentations.

- Supporting access to expert insights from other geographic areas on dealing with race riots and related issues.
- Advocating for the inclusion of local history and heritage in school curricula, spanning from primary to secondary education.
- Developing comprehensive learning resources for schools to educate both pupils and staff about culture, identity and oppression.

### **Proportionate Consideration of Power Dynamics**

Participants reiterated concerns about institutionalised prejudice against working-class communities and the media's influence on public perceptions. Effectively navigating these power dynamics is essential for achieving authentic and fair representations of all communities. This requires:

- Developing strategies to engage with different media outlets to ensure balanced coverage of diverse communities.
- Challenging sensationalist and biased portrayals.
- Advocating for equitable alternatives.
- Building robust personal connections with politicians, decision-makers and key stakeholders to significantly enhance community engagement and understanding.
- Establishing effective means to legally contest institutional prejudice and media influence.

### **Trauma-Informed Approaches to Addressing Prejudice**

Acknowledging the impact of trauma can provide a conducive environment for effectively combating prejudice. Holistic support systems facilitate healing and growth by promoting open dialogues where individuals feel valued and understood. Participants emphasized the need to create safe spaces, especially for those affected by historical trauma, to openly discuss and address concerns without fear of judgement.

### **Restorative Approaches to Addressing Conflict**

By focusing on restorative methods, communities can foster reconciliation and healing and build more resilient relationships. Participants highlighted the need for targeted, long-term interventions that holistically address conflict and provide opportunities for individuals to make amends without facing severe consequences. These approaches necessitate sustained collaboration with specialist organisations to work within communities, resolving conflicts through dialogue, mediation and restorative practices.

## **Roadmap to Transition**

Establishing clear boundaries, processes and parameters is essential to supporting communities in transition. Currently, communities are expected to navigate transitions without a defined pathway and measurable guidance. Many families, having endured traumatic experiences, require structured support to heal and move forward. These individuals are integral to society and cannot be overlooked. Without understanding their roles, people will struggle to fit in and accept change. Therefore, any process must consider trauma, mental health and legacy issues, as well as the active roles individuals will play within the *new* communities they are transitioning to.

## **Key Notes**

Participants emphasized the profound impact of language on people's understanding of prejudice and racism. People want a shared language to discuss these issues and reduce the fear of making mistakes or causing offense. It's ok to ask questions, ongoing self-inquiry and open dialogues should be encouraged rather than feared. The urgent need for widespread education on these topics, both at community and professional levels was emphasized.

Participants underscored the unrecognised challenges faced by grassroots community workers in addressing racism and violence. They recommended the creation of safe spaces for communities to discuss and challenge issues.

Participants stressed the need for nuanced conversations and strong alliances that include diverse voices and are not dominated by the loudest groups or the most established and best-resourced organisations.

## Recommendations for FSP

This report, emerging from a small-scale programme, serves as an invitation to delve deeper into the complex issues it uncovers. It is not a means to an end, but rather a catalyst for further exploration and discussion.

While these insights urge everyone to consider their implications for practice, the following recommendations specifically task FSP with ensuring they are implemented. These recommendations should be viewed within FSP's remit to promote effective practices through collaborative interventions in south Belfast:

1. FSP to share the final draft of this report with participants in the Community Conversations series, to ensure accuracy and transparency. This will allow participants to review the content and understand its intended use, prior to publication.
2. FSP to use the report to shift community relations discourse away from oversimplified and biased interpretations and advocate for holistic, inclusive and sustainable strategies that tackle overlapping challenges. This involves engaging community and statutory stakeholders and policymakers, to present the findings and advocate for the recommended strategies and practical actions.
3. FSP to model an inclusive platform for debate, issue exploration and collective learning, through the CSG. This regular engagement will respond to participants' wish to continue the community conversations and help monitor progress, address new issues and build solidarity.
4. FSP to bolster learning by developing a sustainable network of skilled facilitators to advance literacy on topics related to culture, identity, power, privilege and oppression. This initiative should target both community members and professionals across the community and statutory sectors.
5. FSP to garner support to develop grassroots capacity by enabling skills development in leadership, conflict management and advocacy. FSP to also identify tailored means to support community members to take active roles in their communities.
6. FSP to establish a dedicated Working Group tasked with developing a comprehensive framework to address the complex needs and roles within the transitioning communities. The forum should support collaboration between representatives from diverse communities, grassroots organisations, statutory stakeholders, expert professionals and decision-makers. This framework should prioritise structured support systems to tackle trauma, mental health and legacy issues.
7. FSP to take a lead role in advocating for systemic change focused on sustainable development in South Belfast. This includes environmental initiatives like urban gardening and green spaces, as well as accessible and affordable housing development.

## Funders` Closing Remarks

Social Housing, alongside education are the 2 settings in which community life is at its most segregated in Northern Ireland. To help address this segregation, building of Shared Housing is supported by the '*Housing for All*' Shared Housing Programme. Shared Housing provides a choice to live in a development with people from different political, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

The programme developed by the NI Executive and the Department for Communities, is managed by NIHE and delivered by Housing Associations through 5 Year Good Relations Plans overseen by Local Advisory Groups. Shared status is awarded to a new development when tenancies have been allocated, and this has resulted in no one community being in the dominance of more than 70% in terms of religion, nationality or ethnic origin within the development.

There are 77 Shared Housing Schemes across Northern Ireland managed by 12 Housing Associations. Each neighbourhood is supported by the development and delivery of a 5-year Good Relations Plan benefitting everyone who lives, works and socialises within a 5-mile radius. Shared neighbours can therefore be seen as something positive both for the residents who live there and the wider community. It is acknowledged however, that most social housing areas are not shared and as such, discussion around housing and community relations continues to be of significant importance.