Achieving greater integration in education and housing

PIVOTĀL

Contents

Executive Summary

This report considers integration and division in education and housing across the traditional community divide in Northern Ireland, looking at the barriers to greater integration and how these could be reduced.

Since 1998, much progress has been made in building peace and stronger community relations, but major structural divisions in how Catholics and Protestants live remain. Nowhere is this more evident, and consequential, than in continuing high levels of residential segregation and a divided school system. There is a strong relationship between segregation in housing and education, and evidence of one driving and reinforcing the other. While recognising the complexity of the challenges, with sufficient vision and leadership this report suggests there are opportunities to build a more united community.

Greater integration, sharing, and mixing in neighbourhoods and the classroom have been consistent ambitions over decades, but this broad aspiration has struggled to bring about societal change. Only 8% of children attend integrated schools, and 90% of social housing remains segregated. This report highlights the need for realism, and the danger of believing that integrating schools alone, however welcome, offers a panacea for community relations. Nevertheless, there are significant potential social, cultural and economic benefits for Northern Ireland from achieving greater integration, especially at time of acute housing need and pressures on public services.

Achieving greater integration means confronting not only engrained divisions, but also the stark realities of the housing market and an education system under strain. The

current inadequate supply of housing and supporting infrastructure are substantial barriers to building an integrated future. Equally, parents, school governors, communities and governments have other legitimate priorities when considering schools, often more immediately pressing than integration.

Fully acknowledging these challenges, this report calls for a renewed focus from political and community leaders on increasing integration, sharing and mixing. We suggest joint agreement to a vision that by 2040 data should clearly show substantially more children attending schools with a large cohort of both Catholics and Protestants enrolled, together with a growth in the number of mixed, diverse, communities.

Existing demand for integrated education needs to be met in the first instance and then encouraged to grow. This can be enabled by the expansion of existing integrated schools and the transformation of more schools from across the community to integrated status. In parallel, the larger established models of schools – Catholic and those historically seen as Protestant - need to substantially increase their diversity. Rather than a focus only on models of school, the conversation needs to shift to ensuring more schools are representative of their local community. A significant number of non-integrated schools are already educating pupils from across the old divide, but outside of a small number of areas these schools are the exception.

Increasing participation in shared education, especially in the most divided areas, should be another key objective. A further important factor is the declining number of school age children. Decisions will be needed about future school provision, and increasing integration should be a central consideration in these discussions.

A supply of affordable housing is the essential starting point for increasing mixed housing and building new communities open to all. Infrastructure and planning should aim to unite communities, not keep them apart. The successes of Housing for All projects, and its ethos of inclusivity and diversity, has potential to be a model for more mixed housing. For this opportunity to be met, the role of intimidation, fear and the marking of territory to keep communities separate needs to be addressed. There are no shortcuts to the long-term goal of expanding the number of areas people feel safe building a home. Part of the solution must be tackling the continuing influence of paramilitaries in some communities.

Northern Ireland has wider patterns of persistent segregation in a society that is nonetheless also changing quickly. Through the rise of those who classify themselves as 'Other' – rather than Catholic or Protestant – and the growth in inward migration, it is increasingly misleading to view Northern Ireland as two communities. Although the historic community divide is the focus for this report, this new diversity adds further urgency to efforts to advance integration.

Planning and building a shared infrastructure will require political leadership and support from across the community. It requires a vision from leaders of what sharing more resources and deeper integration will look like, and how it will contribute to the betterment of social and economic life and reconciliation. Pivotal offers the analysis and ideas in this report to inform these important discussions.

Building on previous work by Pivotal, this report is based on a policy and literature review, and 14 research interviews with public officials, voluntary sector staff, academics and others with expertise in housing, education and community relations.

Introduction

Despite broad peace since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, many local communities remain segregated. This report is the first part of a new Pivotal project analysing the barriers to integration in education and housing across community divides in Northern Ireland today.

The Agreement stated: "An essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing." There have been many such initiatives and notable progress in many communities, but deep structural divisions remain.

Persistent segregation means that much of the positive work carried out by the community and voluntary sector, schools, business, individual citizens and governments to reduce division and promote reconciliation, while undoubtedly transformative for many individuals, has struggled to move the dial societally. The Catholic-Protestant divide remains the defining factor in determining the background of most people's classmates and neighbours.

The issues examined in this report emerged in the findings of previous Pivotal research. This highlighted the presence and persistence of divisions in housing and education, and their ongoing impact on local young people. Interviewees and other participants, mostly from areas impacted by segregation and high levels of deprivation, said they want more shared and integrated education and housing, as part of a widely expressed desire to move on from the divisions of the past. However, this support came with caveats, especially with regards to community safety and fear. Even young people broadly in favour of more integrated schooling and housing often suggested this was for future generations,

and perhaps an unrealistic aspiration for theirs. A minority expressed concerns that integration could undermine their identity and culture and expressed fears regarding not feeling welcome across the divide.

Previous Pivotal reports confirmed the importance of education and housing to hopes for greater integration, and informed key questions addressed in this report:

1 What are the barriers to reducing segregation in housing and in schools?

2 How do current policies and institutions promote or hold back sharing and integration?

3 What are realistic policy objectives?

4 How do integration and sharing relate to the broader pressures facing education and housing in 2025?

While addressing other aspects of life in the community, this report will focus primarily on education and housing and the dynamic relationship between segregation in both. Our housing stock and education system fit into wider patterns of persistent segregation in a society that is nonetheless rapidly changing.

This report is based upon a literature and policy review, together with 14 in-depth interviews with practitioners, academics, officials, the voluntary sector, and others with expertise in housing, education and community relations. The project will conclude with a second report detailing the findings from another series of discussions with young people.

This is an era of intense pressures on public services and budgets. Half of all schools are in deficit, unable to cover routine costs. The NI Audit Office says the schools estate is "deteriorating", with ageing crumbling classrooms common in many schools. How does this affect aspirations for integration? The context in housing is, if anything, even more challenging: there are huge shortfalls in social and affordable housing, private rental costs are spiking, and creaking wastewater infrastructure blocks housebuilding in significant parts of the country. This is the stark material and economic reality for discussions around building a more united community. Conversations around integration too often appear theoretical, rather than rooted in the real choices facing individuals, families, schools, housebuilders, and government departments. Segregation is one concern of many.

Racist disorder in the summer of 2024, including attacks against the property of ethnic minority and newcomer families, highlighted that questions of good relations and integration now go beyond the 'traditional' Catholic-Protestant/nationalist-unionist divides. These new dimensions

of what is meant by integration emerged as a theme of this project, but its primary concern is the long-established community divisions and segregation in Northern Ireland.

This report asks serious, sometimes uncomfortable, questions about barriers to greater integration in our post-conflict society. It identifies social, cultural, political, economic and structural barriers and analyses how they can be removed, reduced, or better navigated. It also questions just how committed society and its leaders are, and should be, to making greater integration a priority. The roles of parental choice, the housing market, economic inequalities, existing structures and institutions, and political leadership are to the fore.

Aspirations for a more united community have been central to the commitment of many citizens and campaigners through the darkest days of conflict and later through the peace process. That key pillars of our society remain so divided is a clear sign of the work still to do.

Segregation in schools and housing

What does the data tell us about integrated education and the degree to which schools and housing remain divided by religious background?

changing society. Meaningful relationships across old divides may have increased but deep divisions remain. The clearest ways to close social distance between peer groups are in the neighbourhoods, schools and social spaces where young people meet.

Fig. 03 Social housing segregation in NI
Source: HE Community Cohesion Strategy 2015-2020

90% of NI social housing remains segregated

Fig. 01 Integrated education and support for the sector
Source: Dept of Education, Lucid Talk

only **8%** of pupils attend integrated schools

but **67%** want integrated to be the main school model
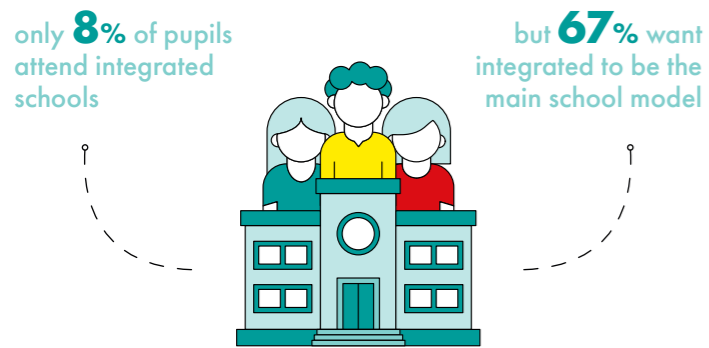
Fig. 02 Schools with a mix of pupils
Source: NI Council for integrated education, DoE analysis

14% of schools have at least 10% Catholic and 10% Protestant pupils
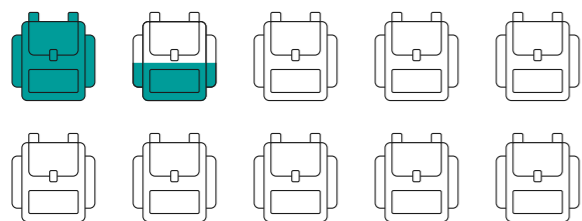
The headline statistics displayed in **Fig. 01-03** indicate the extent of ongoing divisions, and how community background and affiliation remains the definitive factor in shaping where most people in Northern Ireland live and go to school. **Fig. 04** highlights the broad support for building a more united community.

Measuring integration and segregation is a more complex task now than during the more clearly demarked 'two communities' Northern Ireland of earlier generations. Increased inward migration and the growing section of the community who define themselves as 'Other' or 'None', when asked to classify their religion or community background, add new dimensions to community relations and cohesion. Diversification, secularisation and the sharing of resources is happening unevenly across different communities and areas. These questions have locally-specific contexts, distinct dynamics in urban and rural Northern Ireland, and look different again, in terms of context and scale, in Belfast.
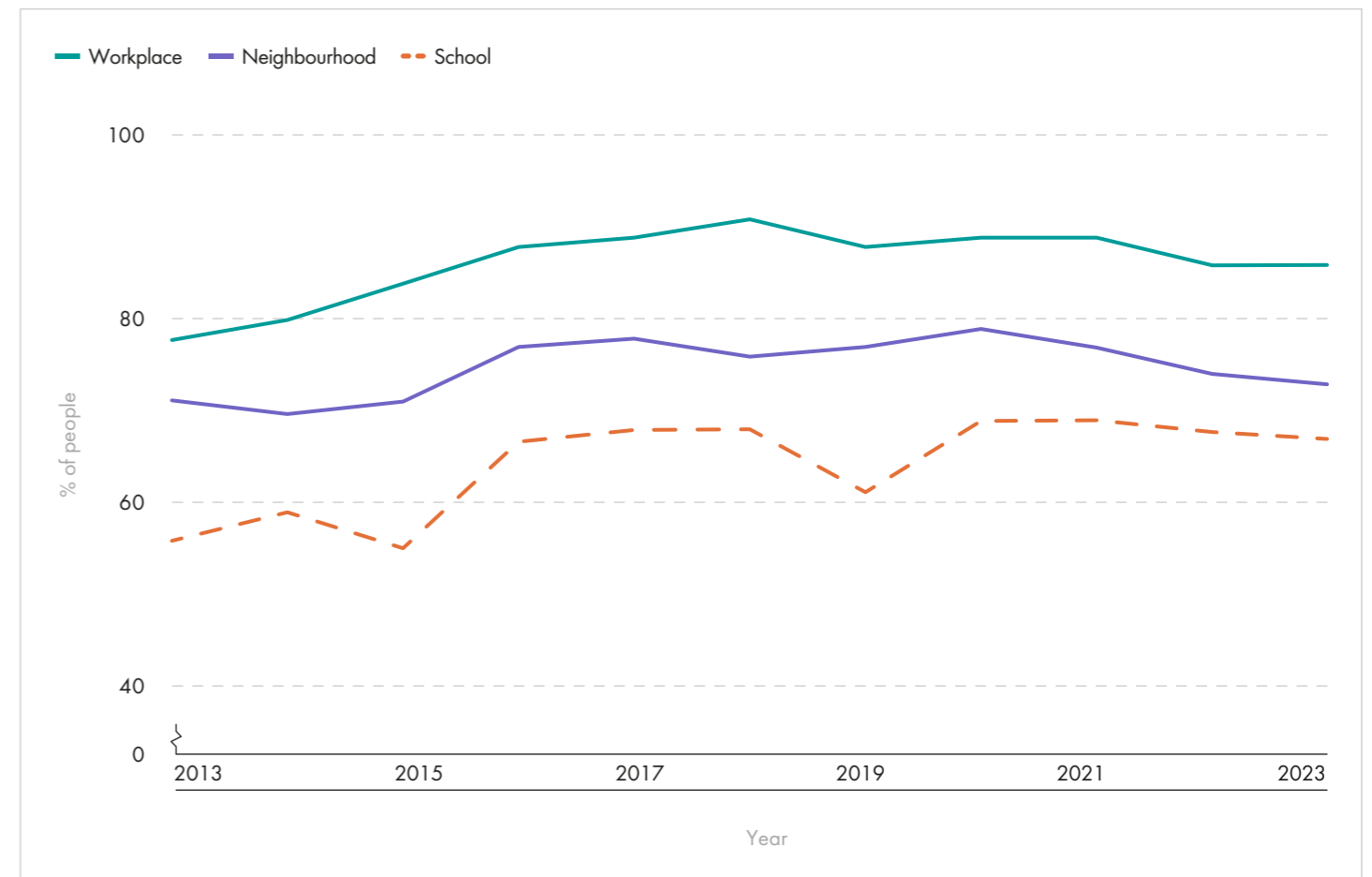
Despite ongoing divisions, it is impossible to deny the transformations brought by the broad peace of the last twenty-six years. The achievement of integrating workforces, driven in large part by Fair Employment legislation, are now taken for granted. So too is the expansion of shared spaces in many town and city centres - spaces previous generations often felt unsafe or excluded from. The rise in 'mixed' relationships is another under-appreciated sign of a

Fig. 04 Those who would prefer mixed religion neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools (%)
Source: Good Relations Indicator 2023 Report

Pivotal's research has noted the views of community workers that for some single-identity areas: "we need to tackle deprivation before we can even approach reconciliation here". Interviewee A for this new report argues "social class is key in the choices people face in these questions of integration." Social class shapes experiences of division, and often intra-community development is required in single-identity areas before cross-community work can succeed.

New Good Relations data highlights that over the last decade there has been a small but consistent fall in optimism about the future among both adults and young people (see **Fig. 05**).

Fig. 06 shows approximately two-thirds of young people do socialise or play sport across the religious divide, but this has not grown over the last decade.

Fig. 05 Those who think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in five years' time (%)
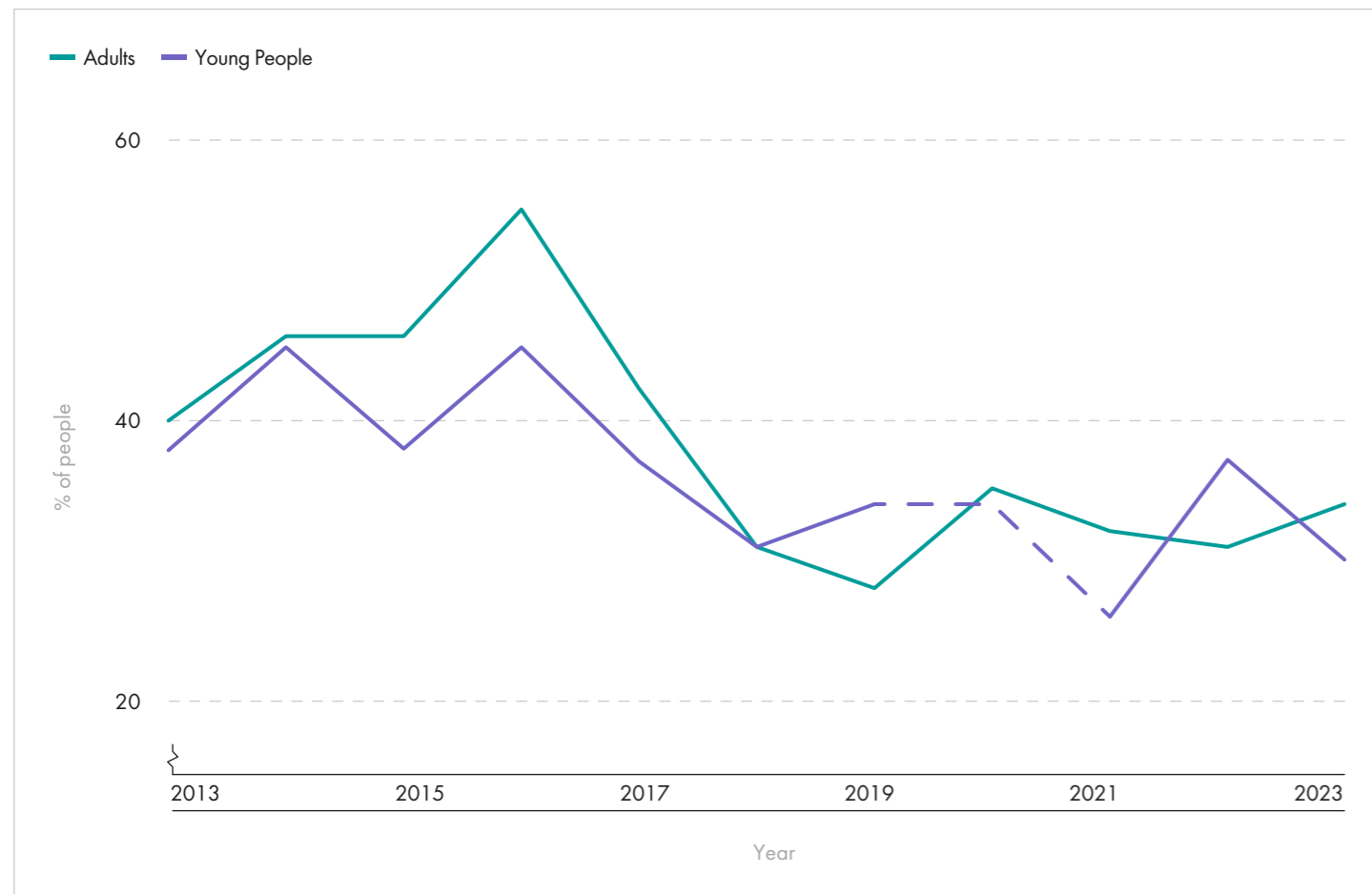Source: Good Relations Indicator 2023 Report

Fig. 06 Young people who regularly socialise or play sport with people from a different religious community (%)
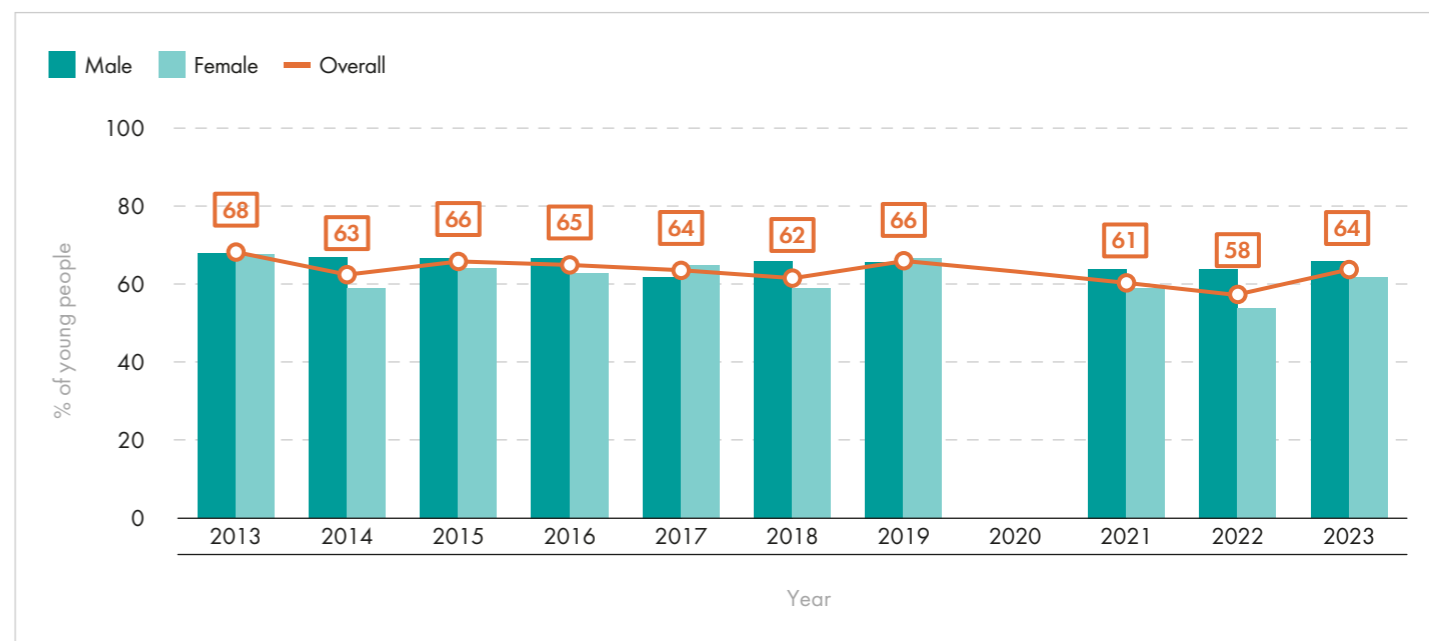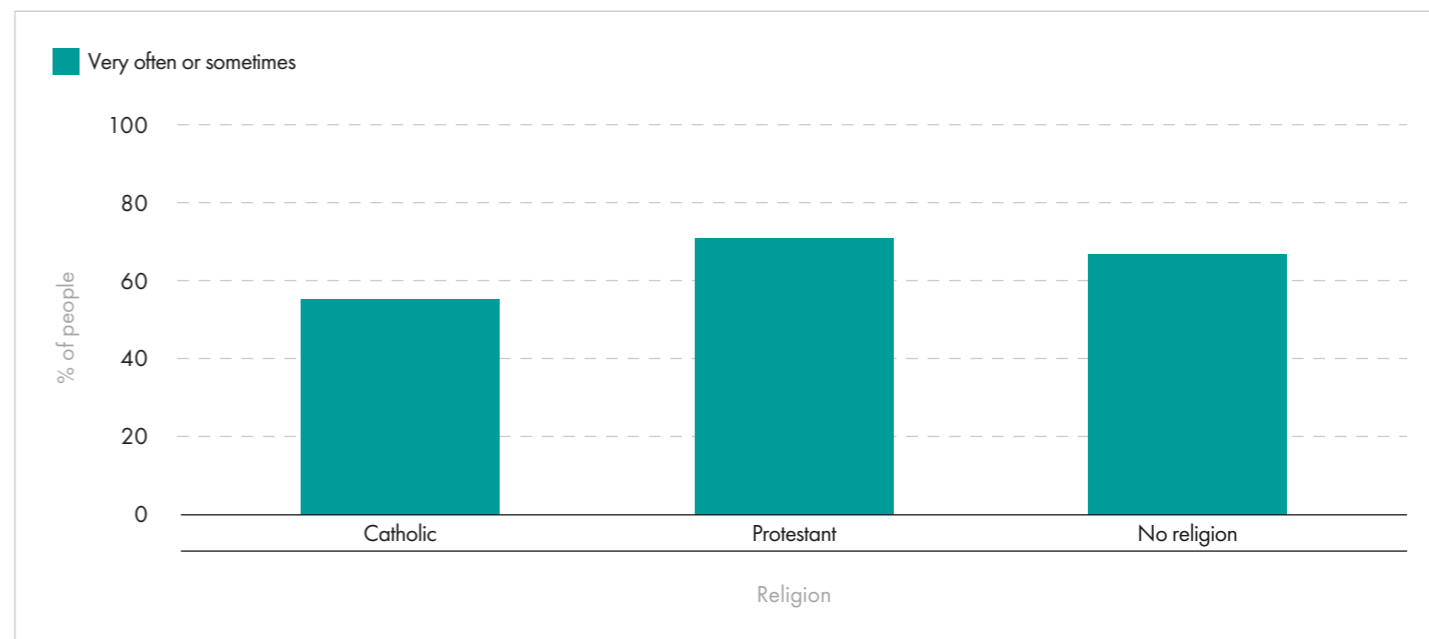Source: Good Relations Indicator 2023 Report

Fig. 07 The respondent religion: regularly socialise together
Source: Good Relations Indicator 2023 Report

The value of greater integration

A more integrated society would bring substantial social, economic and cultural benefits to Northern Ireland. These goals would deepen peace and create new opportunities for reconciliation and understanding.

// Opportunities for meaningful childhood friendships across the divide remain rare for children growing up in segregated schools and residential areas. //

A society where old sectarian divides are weakened offers the opportunity of a more positive peace, rather than merely the absence of violence.

Greater integration can provide a richer cultural and social life for everyone. A community less divided along traditional lines would help make Northern Ireland more welcoming for newcomers. The serious disorder of the summer of 2024, which included a litany of racist hate crimes, showed the urgency of this challenge. A sense of shared belonging and shared citizenship is deepened by increasing the number of common endeavours and shared spaces. For these to prosper citizens first need to feel welcome and safe – this means tackling sectarian and racist behaviour, paramilitarism and threats of violence against those perceived to be from 'other' communities.

Generations of research based on the model of contact theory suggest a school system where more children from diverse backgrounds learn and play together provides a foundation for more cross-community friendships and greater understanding, together with less space for ignorance or fear of the unknown. Schools can also produce bonds and common aspirations for parents, families and the wider community – not just the pupils.

Opportunities for meaningful childhood friendships across the divide remain rare for children growing up in segregated schools

and residential areas. Schools, of whichever model, that appeal to families from across traditions offer an opportunity for a more cohesive community. However, research also suggests that mixing, or simply being in the same building, is often insufficient to build lasting friendships or a cohesive school community. Blaylock et al state that "institutional support" from the school for an explicitly pro-integration ethos is required to better promote longer-lasting connections, "best friendships", and deeper understandings of other backgrounds. This is a key argument of the integrated sector in Northern Ireland – that their mission is about ethos, not just pupil numbers. Interviewee I asks: "even if other schools become more diverse...what happens with this diversity? How do they learn about each other?"

Arguments over numbers and religious breakdowns of pupil roles were, however, central to the rationale and development of integrated education and remain central to the purpose of the sector. A core question in recent debates is – should a school gain integrated status with less than 10% of its pupils from one of the two main religious identities?

The economics of greater integration

Greater integration and sharing can expand economic opportunities and encourage dynamism. Open spaces produce greater mobility, partnerships, cultural exchange and innovation. In turn this encourages customers, and their money, into areas that otherwise may be bypassed as 'not for us'.

In some single identity areas most in need of economic development this would be a new version of a past era as a cross-community commercial or shopping destination. In Belfast and beyond opportunities are emerging thanks to new infrastructure and business investment that helps break down – or at least blur – patchworks of segregated living. Attracting trade from across the community to single identity areas is not easy and will not on its own remove other barriers to integration, but it would be a good first step to a more inclusive future. This is especially true for single identity communities with high rates of deprivation close to the commercial centres of our towns and cities. Like housing and schools, economic co-operation and shared workforces are building blocks for an integrated future.

As Interviewee D suggests: "there are lessons to be learnt from past mixed housing estates", such as Rathcoole and White City. These were successful mixed districts prior to the Troubles. Sadly, as well as pointing to visions of shared living,

these examples also highlight how conflict can quickly rip communities apart.

Importantly there are also examples where integration offers a route to more cost-effective public spending and the rationalisation of public services. The scale of the costs of divisions may be disputed but, at a time of immediate pressures on public spending, reducing the duplication of services in a divided society is an important consideration. Interviewee K, who works in social housing, states: "people need to cop on to the reality that the money is no longer there to fund this duplication".

Integration and an ageing society

Recent projections indicate a fall in the overall number and the share of the population who are under 15 over the next two decades (see Fig. 08). The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre notes that faced with a reduction in pupil numbers of 53,000 by 2040 - 15% of the current numbers - "It is unrealistic to expect individual school principals to find further efficiencies with falling pupil numbers, those efficiencies will need to be found through overall school estate rationalisation".

The Education Authority and previous Education Ministers have accepted that there are too many small, unsustainable schools. Decisions on closures and reducing the number of

teachers we train and employ will become more difficult to avoid over time. An ageing society will place more pressure on our education system to produce the skilled, more productive workforce needed.

Maintaining the parallel, highly segregated schools - and teacher training - we currently have will require active decisions, rather than simply standing still. The coming demographic changes will make the existing dynamic between education and residential segregation more pressing, and risk spreading the phenomenon of "Isolated Pairs". These are pairs of largely single identity schools, mostly in rural areas, both with falling pupil numbers – one serving the Protestant community, the other Catholic. The closure of one school in a pair can increase residential segregation, as families move to other areas with schools serving their community. The remaining school of the other tradition may still lack long-term sustainability. Stopping this dynamic, by promoting more cross-community schools and shared education, should be an urgent priority for those who wish to halt residential segregation and secure the futures of minority populations.

More inclusive schools will enable a smaller number of schools to welcome a broader range of pupils – saving school budgets, confronting demographic change, and offering hope for a cohesive community. A pathway to this vision is most clearly offered by successful integrated schools, but more diversity of pupils attending the larger other models of school will be vital.

The risks to community relations from the closures of treasured local schools, however, should be acknowledged. Structural educational decisions can turn into competing demands for resources that reflect broader cultural and political discontent. These matters require sensitivity, consultation and community engagement. There is a fear (expressed by multiple interviewees) that integration through the removal of duplicated services can feel like "a punishment", rather than inclusivity, for local communities already experiencing economic and cultural insecurities

A positive message of integration is needed, alongside conversations regarding stretched budgets and an ageing society. The value of greater integration needs to be asserted by political and community leaders. Leadership is needed to present both the push and pull figures that drive the integration discussion. A new generation, further from memories of violence, need more examples of how cultural expressions of varieties of nationalism, unionism and other cultures can coexist and thrive together.

Fig. 08 NI's changing age profile
Source: NISRA 2022 population projections
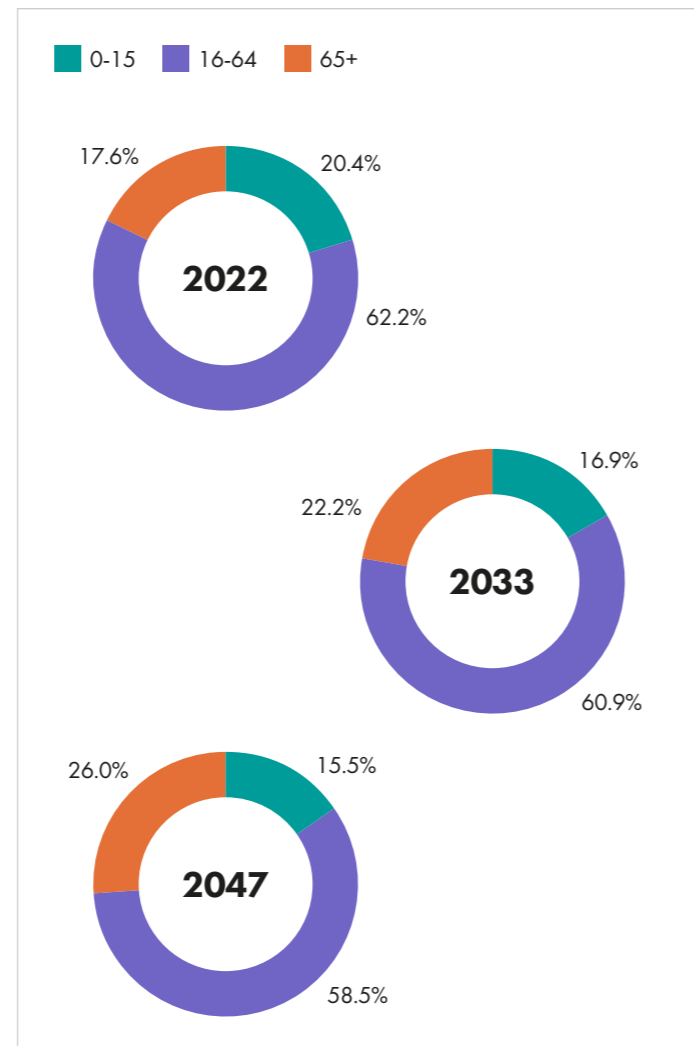
0-15   16-64   65+

17.6%   20.4%
2022
62.2%

16.9%
22.2%
2033
60.9%

26.0%   15.5%
2047
58.5%

A positive message of integration is needed, alongside conversations regarding stretched budgets and an ageing society.

The tensions between integration, diversity and choice

Integration can find itself in tension with other valid priorities and preferences. Choice is perhaps the key word here – parental choice about schools, and the choice of where you feel happy and secure living. Northern Ireland's social geography, with divided placement of churches, families, community centres and schools, emerges from a troubled past. Access to and comfort with these resources is understandably a priority for most people, before they consider questions of breaking down barriers. Where you settle and where you send children to school are two of the most important decisions any household will take. The security and confidence that bonds of tradition offer when making these choices cannot be easily dismissed.

There is also a perception, or a fear, held by some that integration can equate to the absence of cultural expression and political identity. This does not have to be the case. Interviewee L states, "there is no tension between integration reconciliation and rights". However, finding a balance between inclusivity and cultural expression will remain a challenge in a deeply divided society, where public cultural expressions, murals, language, flags and other markers are important to many people, but exclusionary to others.

Public policy and integration

Since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement affirmed the importance of breaking down divisions in education and housing, integration policy has evolved – occasionally retreating and then re-emerging as a government priority, but with different language and varying approaches. The stop-start nature of devolved government has added to the challenge.

2005's A Shared Future, produced under Direct Rule, boldly stated: "Separate but equal is not an option. Parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable both morally and economically". However, when devolved government returned, A Shared Future was shelved. In 2010, Cohesion, Sharing and Integration went out for consultation. Echoing many academics, Irwin describes it as comfortable with a "separate but equal approach". After public consultation the 2010 document went no further.

In 2013 came Together: Building a United Community - T:BUC. This approach saw a reaffirmation of the importance of sharing and breaking down divisions, but with a new focus on headline targets – most notably the removal of so-called peace walls. T:BUC included the birth of Housing for All projects – shared, inclusive, housing delivered by housing associations. 44 developments of 2490 units have been completed, a further 33 are approved. The 32 Local Advisory Groups add to the community impact of Housing for All. T:BUC has also been the vehicle for community development, such as Urban Villages, leading to debate about distinctions between promoting community development and integration.

The importance of integration is vividly spelt out in 2020's New Decade New Approach agreed between the UK and Irish governments and the local parties. It stated a commitment for: "Enhanced strategic focus and supporting actions on educating our children and young people together in the classroom, in order to build a shared and integrated society."

NDNA's language of "together in the classroom" points to support for both shared education and integrated education. Shared education includes a broad range of outputs and outcomes but emphasises schools with pupils from different traditions sharing resources while maintaining separate school identities and ethos. This model is built on decades of cross-community school activities, and was codified in The Shared Education Act of 2016. Outside of government, additional funding for shared education has also been provided by Atlantic Philanthropies and Peace IV money.

The Integrated Education Act of 2022 now defines this sector. Ethos and the community background of pupils remain key to schools being granted integrated status. Under law an integrated school is "a school which...intentionally supports, protects and advances an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, between those of different socio-economic backgrounds and between those of different abilities". It is also defined as: "the education together, in an integrated school, of...those of different cultures and religious

beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons; those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and those of different abilities."

The phrase "reasonable numbers" is open to interpretation, with the final decision sitting with the Education Minister (as demonstrated in the recent high profile case of two schools in Bangor). Some view the lack of a clear minimum level of diversity as a weakness in the legislation, others argue that the Department of Education needs to step up its efforts and fulfil its remit "to encourage, facilitate and support the development of integrated education". Interviewee I argues: "there is not a huge drive to promote integration from the Department". The Act also affirms the role of the Education Authority in "strategic planning" and to "take steps to ascertain the demand for integrated education."

The 2023 Independent Review of Education, requested in NDNA, links "unviable" small schools with the need for more jointly managed schools, and the merger of schools from different sectors, adding: "Northern Ireland could significantly benefit if unnecessary fragmentation or duplication, where they exist, were removed or rationalised."

The freshly published Housing Supply Strategy for Northern Ireland reaffirms the Executive's support for Housing for All, recognises the "consequences of the segregation of housing here, the lack of integration across our communities, and the benefits of creating more shared housing areas." The strategy's target of building 100,000 homes over the next 15 years, with one third of these being social homes, highlights the urgent crisis in housing.

An Independent Review of the Executive's Anti-Racism Strategy concluded it had failed, primarily due to a lack of funding and "an action plan" – criticisms echoed by the Equality Commission. A new strategy is due soon.

The Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme has been visible recently with its Ending the Harm public campaign. The work of the Independent Reporting

// Many of the barriers to integration prove so difficult to remove because they are formed in the interaction between socio-economic, educational, community and market forces. //

Commission confirms that: "while it is without doubt that there has been real transformation in Northern Ireland over the last three decades, paramilitary groups continue to exist and exert coercive control over some communities."

Aspirations versus realities

Too often in Northern Ireland integration is discussed in imprecise aspirational terms. Most people say they would prefer a more integrated society, but there is a suspicion this is often meant abstractly - removed from decisions and priorities facing real lives and communities. When considering greater integration, policy makers are faced not with a blank canvas, but existing housing, schools and services developed over years, including the local preferences that shaped this provision.

For researchers and commentators there is a danger integration becomes something other types of people have a responsibility to do, or to have forced upon them. Often this responsibility is placed on communities with limited resources, living in poor housing with long waiting lists, with relatively low educational attainment, and in areas worst impacted by conflict.

Barriers to integration emerge from values, existing community bonds and prejudices, and legacies of conflict and political division. However, they also exist within social,

economic and market forces. Tackling segregation means engaging with the housing market, regional economic development, education policy and public investment. Each area has its own distinct needs. Integration therefore requires a local touch. As one key report states, there is a need to think Beyond Belfast when considering shared space, shared public services and patterns of division.

There are multiple urgent crises in education and housing outside of segregation. Divisions between homeowners and renters, and between grammar school pupils and those in non-selective schools, are often much more profound than the sectarian divide. Many of the barriers to integration prove so difficult to remove because they are formed in the interaction between socio-economic, educational, community and market forces.

Good public policy should start by asking local communities most impacted by decisions what they want, and what they most need. In communities with growing social housing waiting lists and steep increases in the cost of rent, making integration the priority is frankly unrealistic. Realism, however, about communities' other priorities should not mean that greater integration cannot be central to a longer-term reimagining of public space, community life, planning, housing and education. Interviewee G states that: "With housing and education we need to work where we can - to chip away at division".

Education

Northern Ireland's education system is anything but straight-forward. The diversities in governance structures, ethos, and entry requirements can easily be missed in broad brush discussions of 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' primary and secondary schools.

// A significant minority of non-integrated schools have diverse pupil enrolments, and all the main models of schools reflect the increasing secularisation and multiculturalism of Northern Ireland to some degree. //

The system grew from long-established family and community choices, alongside other traditional divisions. The resulting school network arguably helps sustain these different community attachments, even in times when other community markers may be loosening.

Education systems strongly rooted in religion are not unusual. In Scotland, the Republic of Ireland and large parts of England, religion and church affiliations are a defining aspect of education. Many selective schools with a religious ethos produce outstanding exam results. The difference for Northern Ireland is that religious divisions also map onto wider separation and division in society.

The popular shorthand for this diverse picture is to group schools outside of the integrated sector and the Catholic sector together as 'Protestant', simplifying school labels to Catholic, Protestant and integrated. There are dangers in this labelling. A significant minority of non-integrated schools have diverse pupil enrolments, and all the main models of schools reflect the increasing secularisation and multiculturalism of Northern Ireland to some degree.

The catch-all label 'Protestant school' in particular conceals complexities and a diversity of management and pupil enrolment, but there are historical and governance justifications for this shorthand. Most notably through the presence of Protestant clergy on the Boards of Governors, and the

Protestant background of the majority of their pupils historically. The Irish language medium sector (see **Fig. 09**) is another aspect to this complexity. Irish medium schools sit within the maintained and voluntary structures.

Religious background and schools: the data and what it means

Data in **Fig. 10** presents a stark picture of division. In 2022 only 1.3% of pupils attending a Catholic maintained/voluntary school were Protestant; up slightly from 0.7% since 2001. Of pupils attending non-Catholic and non-integrated schools – presented in the shorthand 'Controlled/Voluntary' – 8.7% are Catholic - a more substantial increase from 4.6% in 2001, but still a small minority. The most significant change is the overall increase in 'Others' attending these traditionally Protestant schools.

A large number of young people have been educated in schools without any classmates from across the divide. A 2012 investigation by The Detail revealed that 180 schools had no Protestant pupils registered, and 111 taught no Catholic pupils. Almost half of pupils attended a school with at least 95% of pupils from one tradition. This is how the post-Troubles generation, now in their 20s and early 30s, were educated.

In 2023 the Belfast Telegraph presented updated data in a vivid manner. It locates these overall trends in individual schools, and shows the degree to which non-integrated

Fig. 09 Irish medium education in NI
Source: DE 2023

7,310
enrollments

2%
of all pupils

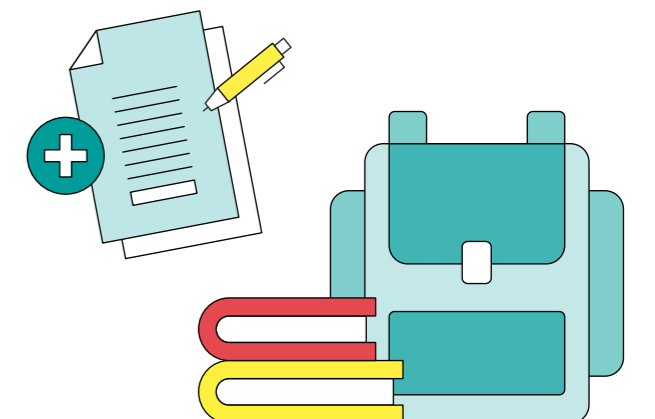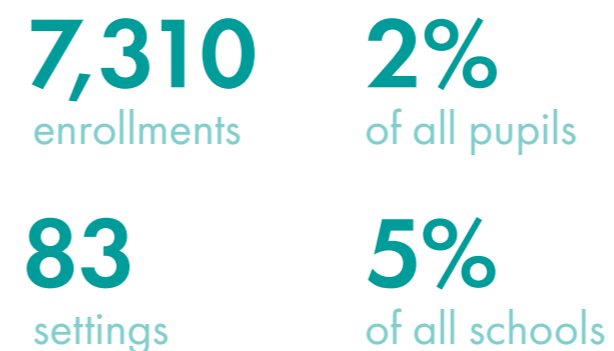**83**
settings

5%
of all schools

Fig. 10 Religious profile of school types by denomination of pupils
Source: Tony Gallagher, 2024
Schools grouped together to reflect: Catholic, Integrated and historically Protestant/Controlled & Voluntary

Data for 2000/2001

SCHOOL TYPE	PROTESTANT	CATHOLIC	OTHER
Catholic Maintained & Voluntary	0.7%	98.9%	0.4%
Controlled & Voluntary	83.7%	4.6%	11.8%
Integrated	44.2%	40.9%	14.9%
All schools	42.8%	50.7%	6.5%

Data for 2021/2022

SCHOOL TYPE	PROTESTANT	CATHOLIC	OTHER
Catholic Maintained & Voluntary	1.3%	93.5%	5.1%
Controlled & Voluntary	61.8%	8.7%	29.6%
Integrated	35.5%	34.7%	29.8%
All schools	31.3%	50.6%	18.1%

schools in many areas have tiny numbers of pupils from the other tradition. For example "in Mid-Ulster, and Magherafelt in particular, two Catholic schools, one grammar and one secondary, do not have a single Protestant pupil registered between them." In Ballymena, which has an oversubscribed integrated secondary school, two of the three grammar schools have minority pupil numbers below 2%, the third is 5%.

Analysing such figures, the exceptions also stand out. The data highlights the substantial number of non-integrated schools educating pupils from across the divide, most clearly with

regards to many controlled and voluntary grammar schools in Greater Belfast, but also in the north-west. For example, Foyle Grammar – a voluntary grammar in Derry – had a pupil mix of 46% Protestant, 34% Catholic, 20% Other; Limavady Grammar: 49% Protestant, 38% Catholic, 13% Other; Belfast Royal Academy: 39% Protestant, 30% Catholic, 32% Other. As **Fig. 10** highlights, mixes of this type are much less frequent in Catholic schools, but one notable exception is St Columbanus College, in Bangor: Protestant: 28%, Catholic 38%, Other 34%. This example adds complexity to the controversy regarding integrated status for other schools in Bangor.

The integrated sector: numbers, ethos and direction

The basis of integrated education is a belief in educating pupils from different religious and community background together, with a proactive ethos of addressing differences and encouraging diversity. The aspiration that integrated schools should have a mix of 40% Protestant, 40% Catholic, 20% Other was a guiding roadmap in the first decades of the sector. More recently the changing demographics of Northern Ireland, and a recognition of the challenges of achieving 40/40/20 in many areas with demand for integrated schools, led to the looser target in the Integrated Education Act of enrolling "reasonable numbers" from both main blocks.

The Integrated Education Fund's strategic plan sets a target to grow the sector from 68 to 100 integrated schools, but, as Professor Tony Gallagher notes, does not have numerical targets for the community balance within schools. Interviewee I, an advocate for the sector, states, "40/40/20 does not work

in every community". This is acknowledging that the religious demography of parts of NI makes such a split unrealistic, and perhaps undesirable. For advocates of integrated education its "intentional" ethos towards diversity and integration is what sets it apart from other models of schooling that may have a mixed student population.

The integrated movement has its origins in the 1970s when a small group of parents began the All Children Together campaign, at the darkest stage of the Troubles. This was part of a broader peace and reconciliation movement that saw education as key to community relations. Often ecumenical Christianity was a motivating factor for the pioneers of the integrated movement and a Christian ethos remains within the sector. The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) state that: "The integrated school provides a Christian based rather than a secular approach."

In the face of substantial opposition from political leaders, some physical threats from others, and scant financial

Fig. 11 Growth of integrated education (1981-2021)
Source: NICIE
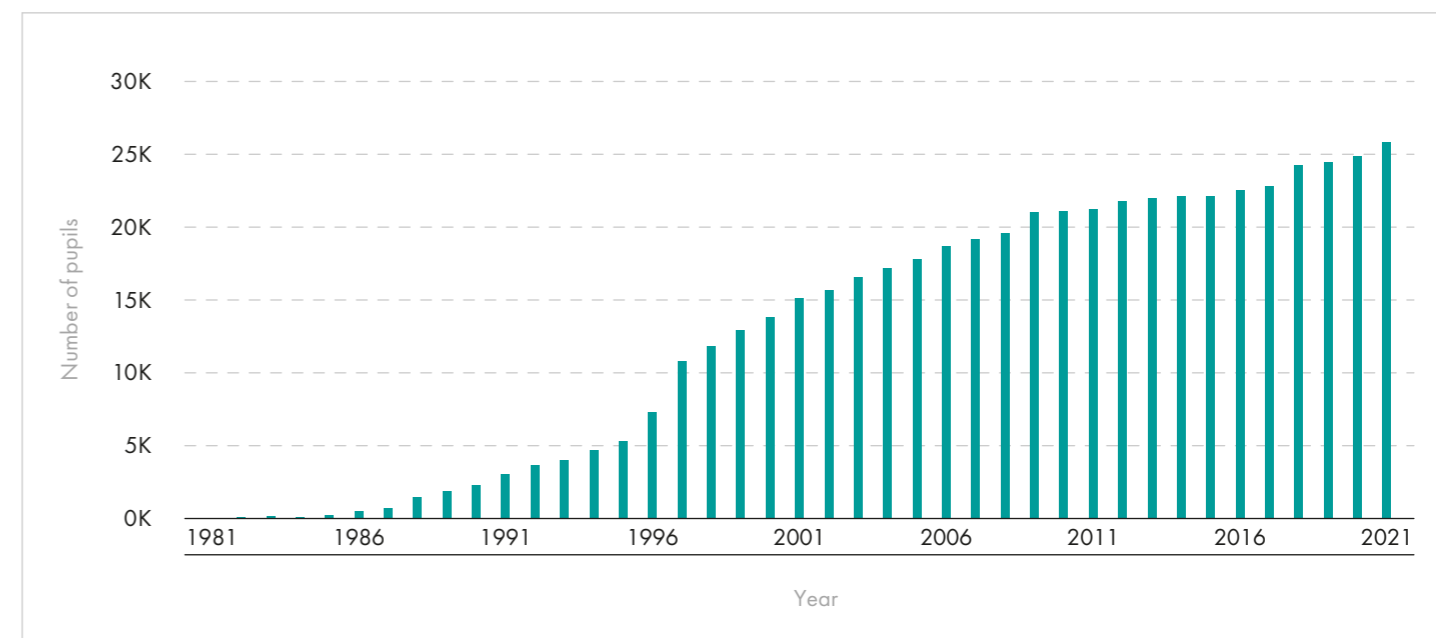
assistance from government, the first formally integrated school, Lagan College, opened in 1981. The sector has since grown substantially (see **Fig. 11**) but, at 8% of total pupil enrolment, still educates only a small minority of Northern Ireland's young people.

There are now 26,183 pupils enrolled in integrated schools (excluding the pre-school and nursery integrated settings) – 11,162 in primary schools and 15,123 in post-primary schools. Of the 68 integrated schools 47 are primary schools, 21 are post-primary.

A key element of the steady growth of integrated schools is the transformation process – where existing schools gain integrated status through consultation with parents, the community, teaching staff, and finally the approval of boards of governors. This is a complex process, and many see this complexity as a barrier to expansion. The small number of new build integrated schools is likely to remain, given limited capital budgets and long-term projections that pupil numbers will fall. Therefore, transformation is key to the growth of the integrated sector. The question of what types of school are

// The sector has grown substantially but, at 8% of total pupil enrolment, still educates only a small minority of Northern Ireland's young people. //

transforming can be consequential for community balance and integration. So far only one Catholic maintained school has made the shift.

Some advocates for the schools seen as historically Protestant wonder: "if we only have one type of school transforming, what is happening elsewhere?" (Interviewee H). This imbalance in community background explains some of the caution evident within sections of the Protestant/unionist community. Equally, the reluctance of Catholic schools to transform is, in part, due to the historical importance of Catholic schools in supporting and representing communities that felt unrepresented by other state-funded institutions. This imbalance may prove difficult to change.

## Educational attainment and inequalities

The integrated sector is also distinct as its post-primary schools do not rely on academic selection with transfer tests at age 11. Some integrated post-primary schools have "grammar streams" within the schools. NICIE's opposition to selection at 11 is long-standing.

The contentious subject of academic selection at age 11 remains pivotal to shaping the structure of the education system, as well as the choices, educational opportunities and inequalities experienced by pupils. The 2023 Independent Review of Education recommended "that the transfer process move away from being based on a one-off test at age 11". Similar calls for change made to government date back to the 1960s, and were recommended in the 2001 Burns Report and 2004 Costello Report. Consensus has proven impossible.

The most important metrics for any education system are the grounding, opportunities and qualifications it provides. In Northern Ireland this has long been two contrasting stories. Attainment is high among those who study at selective schools – consistently higher than other parts of the UK. For A-Levels: "Pupils here are still producing more top grades than in England and Wales (27.8%), with 30.3% awarded A* or A grades". However, Northern Ireland

Fig. 12 Pupils entitled to free school meals (%)
Source: Department of Education
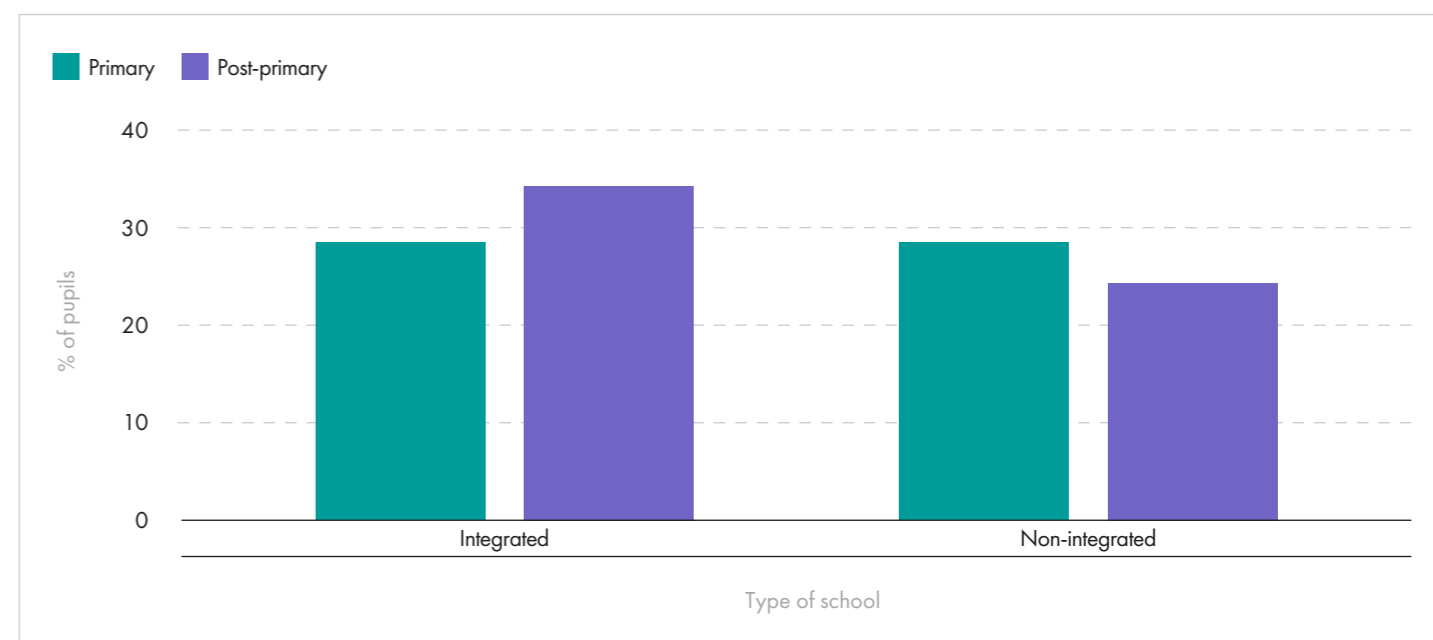
also has the highest proportion of pupils who leave school without 5 good GCSES in the UK.

This is a divided, unequal system. Markers of poverty, such as eligibility for Free School Meals, point to the type of school you will attend – selective or non-selective - and your likely level of educational attainment. Interviewee H adds that "deprivation is the key marker to [levels of] integration...Underachievement and deprivation are the main challenges in education." Socio-economic background has more impact on attainment than religious or community background.

The proportion of pupils at integrated post-primary schools eligible for free school meals is noticeably higher than average, which counters some old stereotypes of the sector as a home for the middle-class. Interviewee G said that for many parents selection and the attraction of grammar schools is key to the journey many pupils make from an integrated primary school to a non-integrated grammar school.

The need for more diversity within all schools

Traditional school sectors are keen to counter arguments they are monocultural or exclusionary. The Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC) states that: "The controlled sector is open to all faiths and none". Interviewee H, an advocate of the controlled sector, states: "controlled schools are community schools and should be inclusive of everyone in society" and "open to all is a challenge not an aspiration". Similarly, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) states that: "Far from being segregated, exclusionary spaces, Catholic schools stretch outward with a common goal of creating a better world for everyone."

A contentious issue is the degree to which the structures of administrating a divided education system block integration. Some argue there are "vested interests" within sectors maintaining the status quo, including Interviewee D who argues "there are institutional interests in keeping jobs and power". The CSSC and CCMS reject this assertion. Asked

about the role of the churches in both sectors, Interviewee H states "the attitudes of the churches have changed. They are not a barrier to integration." However, he suggests CCMS faces additional difficulties diversifying their enrolment: "the word 'Catholic' over the door can be a barrier. The CCMS ethos is an inclusive ethos, but the narrative isn't getting through."

Blanket criticisms of the established model, with regards to representing the wider community, are often unfair. Often schools without a significant minority cohort among its pupils are reflecting the local population, and often they are providing education in areas with multiple other challenges beyond segregation. Interviewee H powerfully states this case by saying: "I can't stand a controlled school being criticised for supporting its local community."

Measuring demand for integrated education

Existing demand for integrated education is not being met. This fact should drive policy, especially when allied with

public polling that shows high support for the principles of integrated sector – measured at 67% by Lucid Talk in 2024. Frustrations within the sector about its untapped potential are understandable. In 2024 the Department of Education said "there is demand for post-primary integrated education in excess of supply in six localities: Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh, Ards and North Down, Antrim and Newtownabbey, Mid and East Antrim, and Newry and Mourne." This reveals the geographical concentration of "excess demand", which remains largely east of the Bann. The Department recommends integrated schools in oversubscribed areas increase places, and other schools consider transformation.

However, some caution is needed when trying to measure demand for integration. A highly valuable paper, commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund, details the difficulty of measuring demand when all other factors are considered. Parents rightly care about a range of priorities and challenges. A school's reputation and results, historic

family attendance, proximity to home, available extra-curricular activities, ethos, and other factors can shape parental choice. Support for integration often slips down the priority list, in comparison.

The rise of 'the Others' in education

Northern Ireland now has three main communities – Catholic, Protestant and Other. At the heart of this process is secularisation, but this has been uneven. How different communities identify themselves in surveys has changed at a different pace. In broad terms, those from a Protestant

background have secularised in larger numbers than those from a Catholic background, especially when it comes to the Census.

The impact of these changes is evident through research by Tony Gallagher. The proportion of pupils classified as Other has increased from 6.5% in 2000/01 to 18.1% in 2021/22, and "while the proportion of pupils identifying as Catholic has stayed almost the same over this period, the proportion identifying as Protestant has fallen from 42.8% in 2000/01 to 31.3% in 2021/22." We can see this clearly from this **Fig. 14** and **Fig. 15**.

Fig. 14 & 15 Controlled & voluntary / Catholic maintained & voluntary schools - pupils by region (2001 vs 2022)
Source: Tony Gallagher, 2024

Fig. 13 First preference applications to post-primary integrated schools that do not result in admissions (%)
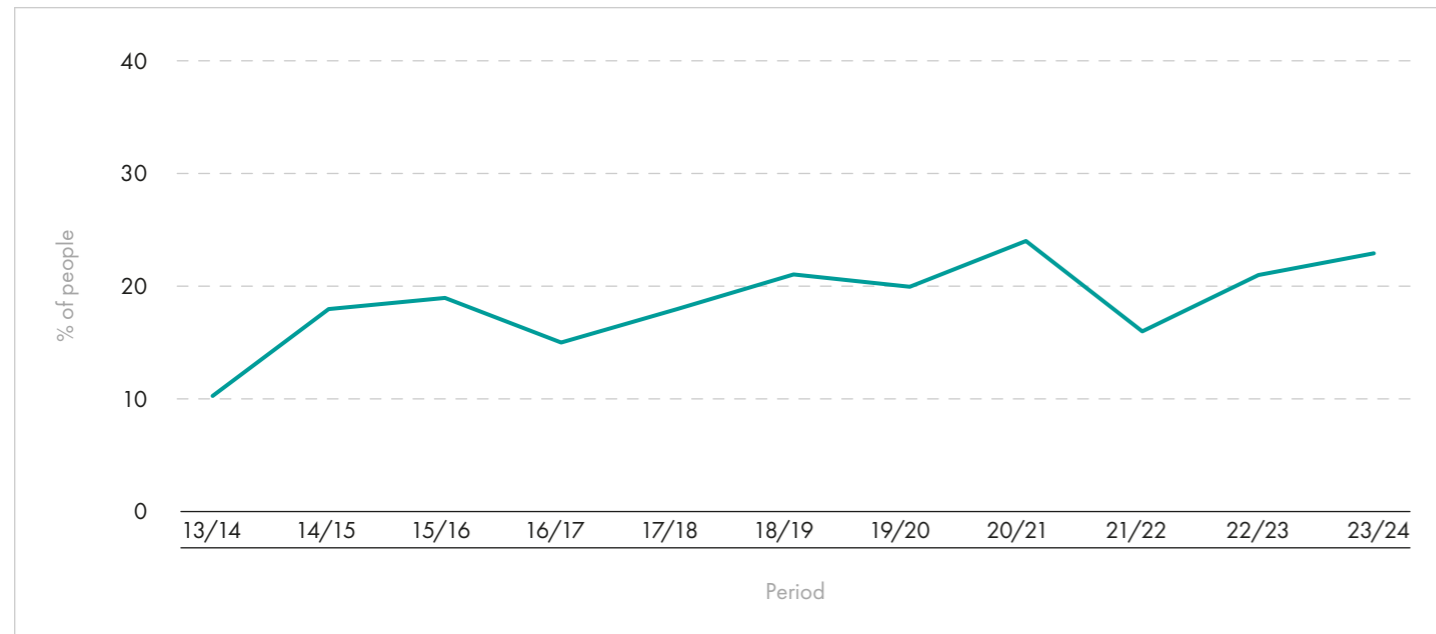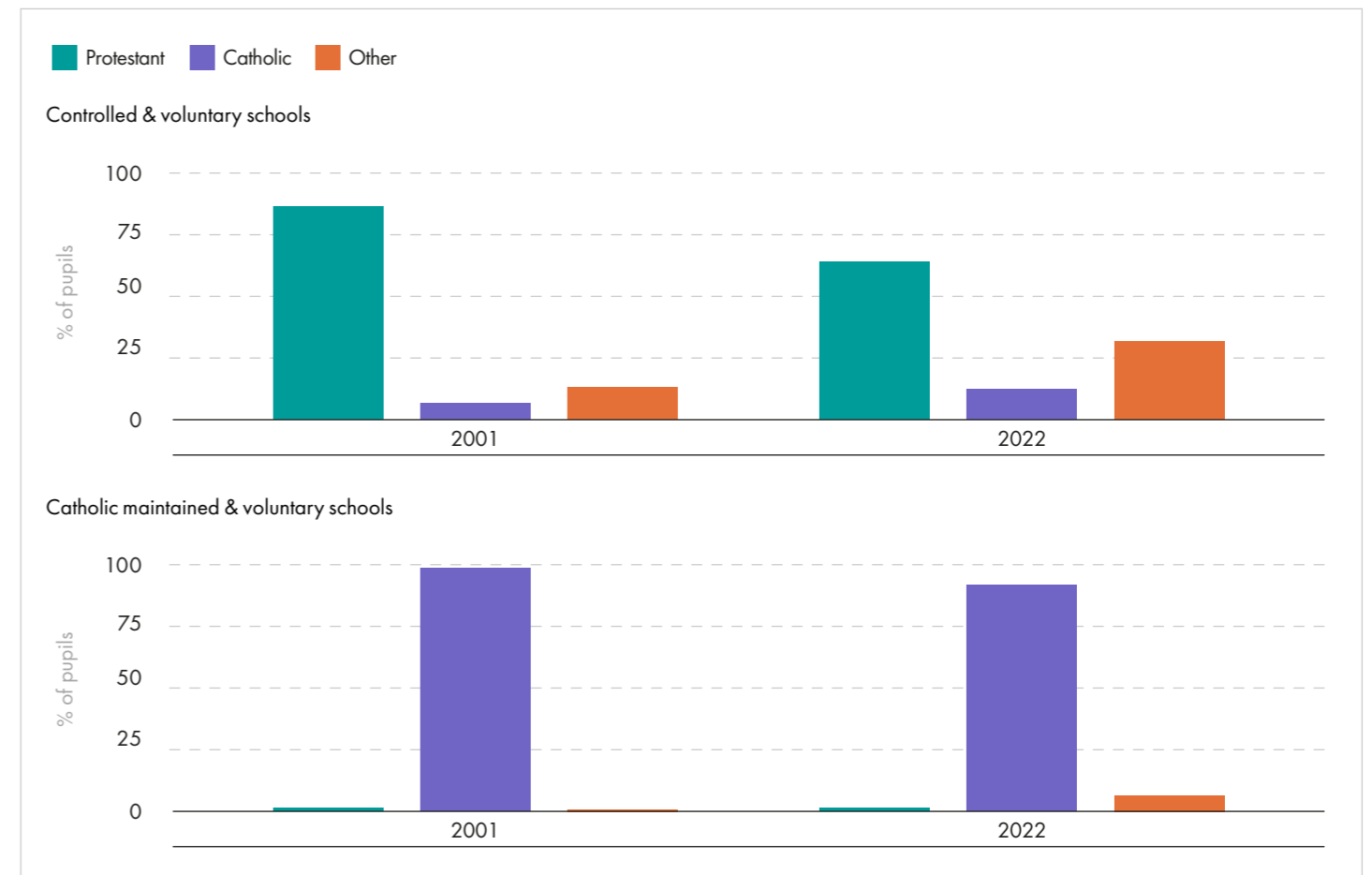Source: Good Relations Indicator 2023 Report

Fig. 16 Newcomer pupils as share of total pupils
Source: Department of Education, 2023

19,470
newcomers

5%
of total school population

Have historically Protestant schools really become much more diverse? Increases in both newcomer families and the number of mixed relationships has been far outstripped by the growth in non-religious identification of the children and grandchildren of Protestants who attended many of the same schools. This questions what we mean by religious identity and community, and places strain on an integrated model which, ironically, is built on a traditional two community understanding of NI.

The 2023-24 School Census found "nearly 21,000 newcomer pupils accounting for 5.9% of the school population. This has risen by nearly 4,750 pupils since 2018/19." Northern Ireland has a new diversity, and the education system caters for many more traditions than two. Interviewee H states, "We can't just talk about Protestants and Catholics in integration anymore, we need a wider focus for inclusion."

Shared education

Shared education represents a different approach to reconciliation within schools. Programmes are varied, and centre around "reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils, and those of different socio-economic status" being brought together to improve educational outcomes, "promote the efficient use of resources", and break down community barriers.

The Department of Education states: "Shared Education … provides opportunities for children and young people, who may not otherwise or ordinarily have the chance to do so, to mix, interact, socialise and, fundamentally, to learn with and about their peers from different backgrounds."

This can mean shared resources, classrooms, sport facilities and teachers. Cross-community school trips, experienced by generations of Northern Ireland pupils, were given more structure, support and impetus by the Shared Education Act. At

❝❝Neither integrating education or shared housing on their own will solve the issue, they need to run in parallel. ❞❞

the other end of the spectrum, the model can also develop into shared campuses – most strikingly in Limavady, where the local Catholic and Controlled High schools now share a campus. The controversial approval of the £375 million Strule shared campus in Omagh – against the advice of the Independent Review of Education – is a sign of Executive commitment to Shared Education, while the Catholic and controlled sectors both have policies in support of the model.

Development of this approach can be dated from the early 1980s, and was first formally added to the curriculum in 1989. For some, the continuation of separate school identities and uniforms for pupils from different religious background in a shared campus is a poor substitute for a full merging and transformation of schools. Sharing, learning together, but still separate is clearly at odds with the integrated model. The Shared Education Act, however, argues that sharing "enables the development of meaningful relationships with and between parents, caregivers and the wider community".

Conversely, some parents and communities were initially cautious about shared education because they feared it could lead to integration. However, Interviewee G, an academic expert in shared education, argues that there is "less of a tension now between shared education and the integrated sector … and less fear from others that shared education is just a stepping stone to integration. We don't know where it will lead, and how it will develop … it is open, and that is a good thing."

Data from the School Omnibus survey reveals a slight decline in schools participating in shared education since

2018, although the legacy of Covid has to be considered, while the figures highlight the breadth of current activity and opportunities to expand activities. Increasing participation and prioritising schools close to each in divided communities collaborating together should be key targets.

HOW CAN THE INTEGRATED SECTOR GROW?
● Increase capacity of existing integrated schools
● Build new schools - unrealistic in current climate
● Transform schools - parents drive this process

What can a less segregated education system alone achieve?

Many interviewees, including advocates of integrated and shared education, were concerned that education should not be treated as a silver bullet: "schools feel pressure that it is their role to somehow solve the tension in Northern Ireland, but it is not a panacea." (Interviewee G).

Interviewee F is cautious about what sharing a school can achieve on its own. A young community worker committed to cross-community work, Interviewee F attended a post-primary integrated school. However, they did not make any

long-lasting cross-community friends. Their experience was one where sectarian division within the school remained, and "views were not challenged in school unless slurs were used". Despite the efforts of teachers and the inclusive ethos of the school "we weren't really learning about each other together". F argues that sport outside of school was a more powerful tool for developing cross-community friendships and understanding.

That is one person's story. Many who attend integrated schools have positive experiences – including better implementation of the sector's proactive inclusive ethos. Research points to the power of the integration in facilitating long-lasting cross-community friendships. However, Interviewee F's experiences were shaped not just by individual circumstances but by the wider social environment. They grew up in a single identity area with a visible paramilitary presence, where an integrated school's uniform was enough to raise questions from some locals about a pupil's allegiances. Classmates from other areas did not feel safe visiting F in their home area, and similarly F felt unsafe visiting some of them. In this case residential segregation, the legacy of conflict, threats or perceived threats to outsiders and other social issues combined to neutralise much of the potential integrated education can offer. As Interviewee G says, "if society itches, schools get scratched".

Interviewee F's case should not be used to dismiss the wider potential of the integrated sector, but it points to why it should not be viewed as a panacea, especially in areas

worst impacted by division. All schools face challenges when attracting pupils from across divides and from areas with complex social problems. An advocate for integrated education acknowledges this and argues that: "neither integrating education or shared housing on their own will solve the issue, they need to run in parallel." (Interviewee I)

Choice: for parents and government

It is striking how often parental choice is mentioned by those generally supportive of the status quo in education. Liberty to choose a school for your child should be fundamental to any reform, but this freedom of choice should include meeting community demand for integrated education. With limited resources and falling pupil numbers in some areas, school choice will always be rationed, and selection removes options from many children, but improved area planning that links shared housing with integrated education can provide more parental choice and, longer-term, stimulate demand for integrated education. This will only happen, however, with political and community leadership that aspires to more integration.

To try and build consensus, the language of this discussion should move onto outcomes – meaning increasing the mix of pupils in all schools - rather than just focussing on models of school. By analysing division and supporting schools who reach out to their local communities, all schools and sectors will need to ask whether their ethos includes a genuine desire for school enrolments reflective of the whole community.

BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION IN EDUCATION

- Residential segregation: often largely single identity schools are representative of their communities. Where families live and where children go to school are deeply entwined.

- Continuing religious, cultural and historical connections with particular schools or sectors, and a fear of these identities not being respected or even lost elsewhere.

- Separate administration and structures of school models, up to and including teacher training.

- Significant unmet demand for the integrated sector, including oversubscription to leading schools, is blocking the growth of the sector.

- Parental choice: the prioritisation of other factors when selecting a school, including the attraction of many established, successful schools outside the integrated sector.

- With some notable exceptions, a general failure of non-integrated sectors and schools to diversify their enrolments, particularly Catholic schools

- Practical difficulties with the transformation process which requires significant and persistent efforts from parents and staff

- Lack of clear objectives and a vision for how to increase shared and mixed education, as well as integrated education.

- While there is a high-level of broad support for integration amongst the public, there has been a lack of political and community leadership to drive the changes needed to bring about large-scale transformation.

Housing

A religious basis for schools is not unusual across the UK or Ireland, although Northern Ireland is notable for the extent to which education is divided. What sets it further apart is that this religious structure to school enrolment largely maps onto a deeply divided, post conflict society outside the school gates.

Measuring community background and segregation in housing is complex. Discussions tend to focus on social housing (see **Fig. 03**) as this is where public policy can most directly impact trends, where the best data is available, and where divisions are most stark. However, any overall assessment must consider the private rental and owner-occupier markets. Housing is also affected by local specificities in different cities, towns, housing estates, suburbs, villages and rural areas. It is tied to family, community networks, tradition and belonging. It is shaped by political and social divisions, and by the market.

Lack of clear data creates obstacles, especially in private renting and owner-occupier properties. Key documents from the NI Executive's T:BUC programme were in 2019 still quoting a landmark 2008 study by Shirlow and Murtagh estimating that "the majority of NI's population resides in areas that are, at minimum, 80% either Catholic or Protestant (67% of Catholics and 73% of Protestants live in such areas)."

Substantive analysis of segregation based on the 2021 Census is yet to be published but trends from 2001-2011 remain instructive. **Fig. 17** shows that between 2001 and 2011 the number of council wards with over 90% of residents from one community declined, without the overall picture transforming.

Summarising the data and the trends Shuttleworth and Lloyd state there was "a small but clear decrease in residential segregation during the first decade of the 21st Century", adding: "There are, in 2011, fewer very Catholic wards and very Protestant wards than there were 10 years earlier.

Conversely, there are more wards than ten years ago in the middle of the distribution although these remain still in the minority. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that the middle ground is growing." They emphasise, however: "Between 2001 and 2011 there were a lot of things going on including immigration, changes in the way people reported their religion, and what might perhaps be understood as genuine falls in residential segregation." This points to a small peace dividend in desegregating housing, and one happening slowly. The change in how people report their religion highlights that understanding the 'Others' is as challenging in housing data as it is in education.

Shuttleworth and Lloyd concluded that: "For social and housing policy in Northern Ireland, it suggests that aspirations for greater residential social mixing are unlikely to be met in the near future by the status quo". Predicting that analysis of new census data will not show a marked change, a leading academic in the field bluntly states that "patterns of segregation are, I think going to be fairly durable" (Interviewee C). Many interviewees with longstanding knowledge of housing urged realism about the potential for dramatic falls in segregation.

Fig. 17 Percentage distribution of council wards by religion (2001 vs 2011)
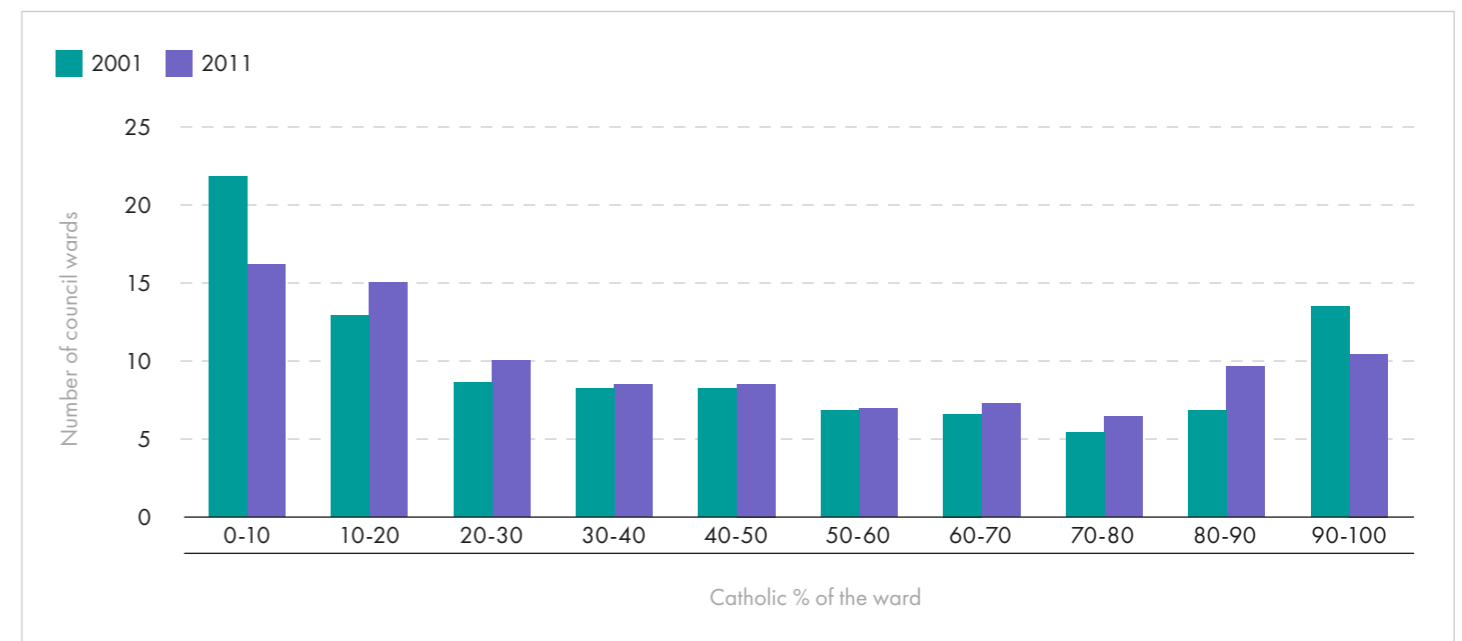Source: Shuttleworth & Lloyd

Fig. 18 The people who want to live in an area where housing is mixed, and perceptions of their own area
Source: Good Relations Indicator Report 2023

73% the percentage of people who prefer a mixed neighbourhood

the percentage of people who perceive their area is mixed **31**%

The urgent crisis in housing

The primary housing crises in Northern Ireland, in common with the rest of the UK and Ireland, are ones of supply and affordability. More integration, shared housing schemes and expanding 'mixed' areas are broadly supported by the population, but currently way down the agenda for most people looking for a home or thinking about where the next generation will live.

By the end of 2024 there were 48,325 applicants on the NIHE waiting list, 36,891 of whom are in "housing stress". 30,982 of these have Full Duty Applicant status, meaning the state has a duty to house them. In the private rental market, one survey found average rental costs increased by 9% in the last year. House prices also jumped by 9%, and are now at a 17-year high.

Historically low levels of housebuilding – both in total and specifically for affordable and social housing – help drive

these costs. In 2024 Northern Ireland had lower levels of housebuilding than in any year since the Second World War (see Fig. 19).

Northern Ireland's water infrastructure is currently insufficient to support the building of new housing, making the creation of new shared communities much less likely. Last year, only nine houses were built within the entire county of Fermanagh. One councillor noted: "Local people are often offered temporary hostel accommodation in Ballymena or Coleraine which doesn't make sense. It shocks them as the only offer on the table." Compared with this, integration and shared housing are secondary matters. As housing rights campaigner Interviewee B states: "How are we supposed to get kids to integrate when they are homeless, or in temporary accommodation?" and, "if there aren't enough houses being built, where do you start with integration?"

Communities become mixed when there is a flow of people moving in and out, uninhibited by fears they are

Fig. 19 Annual new dwelling starts and completions
Source: Department of Finance - new dwelling statistics

> ❝ **How are we supposed to get kids to integrate when they are homeless, or in temporary accommodation?** ❞

unwelcome due to their community background. However, this flow is currently very restricted in many areas because of low housing supply and rising costs. In common with other jurisdictions, housing mobility in Northern Ireland – the number of times people move house – is falling. As Interviewee C states: "most people move and build homes between the ages of 18 and 34", but this age demographic faces many financial barriers and the average age of first-time buyers is increasing. The IFS calculates that 23% of 25-34-year-olds in Northern Ireland live with a parent - the highest rate in the UK.

Housing academic Interviewee C is clear about the priority for increasing housing integration - "Build a lot of cheap affordable housing if you are really serious about this". Meeting the demand for affordable, sustainable housing will require radical planning reform, new financing of social housing, a fix to a broken underfunded wastewater system, the challenge of adapting public services and amenities to new developments, and the training of new generation of builders. These are no easy tasks, and they are challenges shared across the UK and Ireland. NI's added dimension is that a failure to build is freezing de-segregation. The current housing market limits choice for some and wholly excludes many more. Building a more integrated society through constructing areas of mixed housing will only be possible if these fundamental issues are addressed.

New housing can also create new communities with fresh shared identities, without the baggage of the past. Interviewee K highlights the opportunity to "bring more

people back into city centre living", where retail has retreated. This change, from retail to residential, is visible in some town and village centres. For this trend to grow will require cultural change, and is more applicable for households without children, but town centre living is a way to increase the number of people living in areas that are often now shared spaces.

Housing: past and present

A roof over you and your family's heads is one of the key needs in any society. In Northern Ireland housing has a contested history. A campaign for fair allocation of housing, in opposition to anti-Catholic discrimination in social housing in some local government districts, helped drive the 1960s civil rights movement. The removal of housing powers from councils and establishment of the NIHE, formed in 1971, and its equality agenda greatly increased perceptions of fairness. This was a remarkable, underappreciated achievement for an institution forged in troubled times. However, the already deeply divided communities of pre-Troubles NI were driven further apart by conflict, despite the efforts of the NIHE. The impact of the Troubles on segregation is clear – "35-40% of the population resided in completely segregated neighbourhoods" by the 1990s ceasefires.

Fear and intimidation contributed to the huge population movements of the early Seventies, driving minority populations out of districts of Belfast, Derry-Londonderry and elsewhere. This coincided with the de-industrialisation and the depopulation of Belfast and other urban centres.

Strength comes from allowing the expression of identity but with respect.

Interviewee C estimates that "we would need to build 100,000 more homes" to reverse the segregating impact of this train of events.

Dungannon housing campaigners played a central role in the 1960s civil rights campaign and now the town is a powerful example of contemporary challenges and opportunities for shared housing. In addition to longstanding community divisions, the district is now home to a hugely diverse set of newcomers – leading it to be named "NI's diversity town".

Dungannon has seen significant investment from the Housing for All Programme. Established under the management of the Department for Communities as part of T:BUC, the programme initially launched ten pilot shared housing schemes. Housing for All declares its ethos: " Is not about forcing people to live in a certain way or in a certain area, but rather to improve the choices that are available by tackling the barriers that prevent individuals from opting to live in shared neighbourhoods."The programme envisions that:

> "Shared space need not be neutral space; it is not about pursuing some sense of sanitised territory that denies the ability of people to celebrate their culture. The challenge is to ensure that shared space remains open on the basis of equality of opportunity, to ensure that all sections of society can have access to, and treatment of it, without denying the ability of others to do likewise."

Since 2024, responsibility for Housing for All lies with NIHE. The scheme works with twelve Housing Associations and, so far, has delivered 44 shared housing developments. With a further thirty-three planned, this equates to nearly 2,500 housing units with an ethos of shared, inclusive, living. Scepticism from some, including Interviewee C, that projects of this size however laudable "will only work around the margins" are understandable, especially when measured against the overall need for new housing. But, as Interviewee N states, "Shared Housing projects provide examples of how to overcome these problems, so people can feel comfortable living together…while not changing who they are and their identities." Senior social housing manager Interviewee J summarises this approach as "the strength comes from allowing the expression of identity but with respect". Housing for All is quietly succeeding in this work, including in districts with high degrees of division.

There is an opportunity to expand the number of Housing for All projects, and also to consider how some of its core principles could be implemented in other developments. Joined-up area planning that envisions shared resources for shared housing projects will be key. Here again education is at the forefront, as integrated education advocate Interview I states: "it makes absolute sense to link shared neighbourhoods to integrated education." Linking shared education and the greater diversity of all schools to shared housing has huge untapped potential to encourage integration.

In a divided society, housing is intertwined with the demographic balance of an area and local political power. Housing will always be politically charged. One study bluntly argued: "For many Unionists, sharing space means encroachment by an expanding Catholic demographic".

Before adding that if a premium is placed on the mix of housing allocation, then: "For many nationalists it means their right to housing is relegated in a peace settlement that idealizes mixing over basic needs". The recent growing shortage of housing in all communities somewhat changes these divided perceptions, but the politics of housing remain sensitive.

Paramilitarism and other forms of marking territory

The single biggest barrier to residential integration is one community not feeling welcome in a new area. In a notable number of places a climate of fear remains, including the control, or perceived control, of paramilitaries. A recent ARK report stated that paramilitaries' continuing presence is due to a web of reasons that enables illegal organisations a presence in communities, to be granted legitimacy by some and to coerce and create fear for many.

Committed work has taken place within government on Tackling Paramilitarism, evident in public information campaign Ending the Harm. This campaign has received some backlash that its messaging can stigmatise areas unfairly. There are strong arguments, however, that 26 years after The Belfast Agreement pathways to leaving paramilitarism need stronger justice and policing red-lines and firmer end dates for transition. The Northern Ireland Development Group's report Ending Loyalist Paramilitarism states: "Just as there have to be enticements to help bring about the closure of paramilitary organisations so there must be tangible disadvantages and consequences to not committing to such a process." The UK and Irish governments' new proposal to commission another independent review, to consider if there should be more engagement directly with paramilitaries to hasten transition, has been opposed by the Justice Minister and other local parties.

Ongoing paramilitarism was a serious concern for many interviewees. Youth work leader Interviewee E emphasised "we see the ongoing recruitment". Another community worker, Interviewee F, says: "Paramilitaries are still massively relevant to the lives of many young people". As well as impacting their own lives and educations, younger people's recruitment into paramilitary orbits perpetuates the groups' abilities to 'police', or create a hostile environment, for who can live in some areas.

Suggestions that paramilitaries played a role in the disorder of summer 2024 are contested. However, interviewee E notes with sadness "a deafening silence from leaders" at the time of the disorder. For E the absence of clear, urgent, statements from some community leaders and elected representatives on the ground in support for minorities is a case study of missing leadership.

Nevertheless, it is important to note the distance Northern Ireland has travelled. As Interviewee D states, "Violence has largely gone, fears are less acute." There is optimism that gatekeeping of who can and cannot live in certain areas, whether explicit or implicit, can be challenged, reduced and ultimately depowered. Linking our two topics together, Interviewee J believes that, when it comes to housing, "Fear is still a major barrier…and educating children together, is a great way to reduce this fear."

The marking of territory remains another major barrier to integration. Paramilitary emblems and displays of national allegiance – most clearly through flags, murals and the painting of kerbstones – decorate many areas. Competing perceptions of some parades persist. These are incredibly difficult issues to reach consensus on, evident in the shelving of the work of the Commission on Flags Identity Culture and Tradition.

The toughest decisions often relate to British and Irish flags, which many view as exclusionary in some contexts but others believe are important expressions of belonging. Local agreements limiting the time flags fly offer a potential solution that can facilitate diversity. But these agreements can be difficult to sustain, especially in areas where the community balance is shifting. The use of restrictive covenants, limiting the flying of flags and political emblems on private property, is a new contentious development for policymakers to monitor. There should be cross-community and cross-party agreement

about the removal of murals and flags representing, however obliquely, illegal paramilitary organisations, but in too many areas this is not the case. Removing paramilitary displays should be a priority for those seeking to decrease residential segregation, and part of efforts to finally challenge and remove paramilitary power. This will be costly and contentious work and will require clear political and legal support for the police and other agencies.

Intimidation, and the targeting of residents with verbal and physical threats, remains a tool used by paramilitaries and others to control who lives in an area, and an important barrier to integration. However, there is disagreement regarding both the scale of ongoing intimidation impacting social tenants and how to respond. The conclusions of a report by Bryan and Sturgeon were that awarding additional points to assist the rehousing of victims of paramilitary intimidation is open to abuse, and "there is reasonable evidence to indicate that the present points-based system offers a certain level of control to paramilitary groups in some

areas." The Communities Minister agreed, and reduced the housing points – arguing the old points system discriminated against victims of domestic abuse and other forms of non-paramilitary intimidation in need of rehousing.

The complexity of tackling paramilitarism, other forms of marking territory, and localised intimidation highlights the need to add realism to hopes for a quick shift in patterns of housing in some of the most divided areas. As Interviewee B states, "it is rational for people to not want to move to an area where they don't feel safe, or away from support networks". Building a sense of safety, support networks and shared resources takes time, commitment, opportunity and leadership.

Housing as part of wider integration strategy

Interviewee D argues that "if communities don't get more integrated then schools don't". Equally this powerful statement could also be inverted. Often when discussing the relationship between integrating housing and education the chicken and

egg comes to mind. Depending on where you are looking, the solution looks like it starts from the other side.

Increasing shared living and community cohesion needs more social building blocks that are open and attractive to all – in childcare, education, work, leisure, sport and public services. This can only happen through choices made by households and individuals. Some people, for legitimate reasons, will not actively choose to make this a priority - but it should be a choice. A guiding principle simply stated by Interviewee N is that "everyone should have a choice as to where they live".

To this end, better infrastructure is required. Interviewee L states a strong case that: "Regional development should be designed around Section 75 agendas", and instead, "we have had a lack of strategic thinking." Historically, key infrastructure in Northern Ireland was often built to keep communities apart. Road networks, public transport routes, interface peace walls, and other aspects of the built environment actually make it difficult to get from A-B, never mind getting to know people

living in other areas. Infrastructure such as the Glider bus service in Belfast has potential to join up parts of the city not previously connected by public transport. Northern Ireland need more of these physical connections.

Across the UK and Ireland there is a need for new infrastructure – wastewater, transport, housing, energy – to provide affordable housing, meet environmental targets, solve travel gridlock, and stimulate economic growth. In Northern Ireland this should also be treated as an opportunity to remove old divisions and craft sustainable, shared building blocks for the future. As Interviewee D states: "There is no solution to segregation without public investment in shared infrastructure, housing and public services." Interviewee I argues that: "our government does not plan for integration". To prove this wrong the Executive needs a strategic approach to integration encompassing infrastructure, economic development, education and housing.

Fig. 20 Those who see the area they live in as Protestant, Catholic or mixed (%)
Source: Good Relations Indicator Report 2023
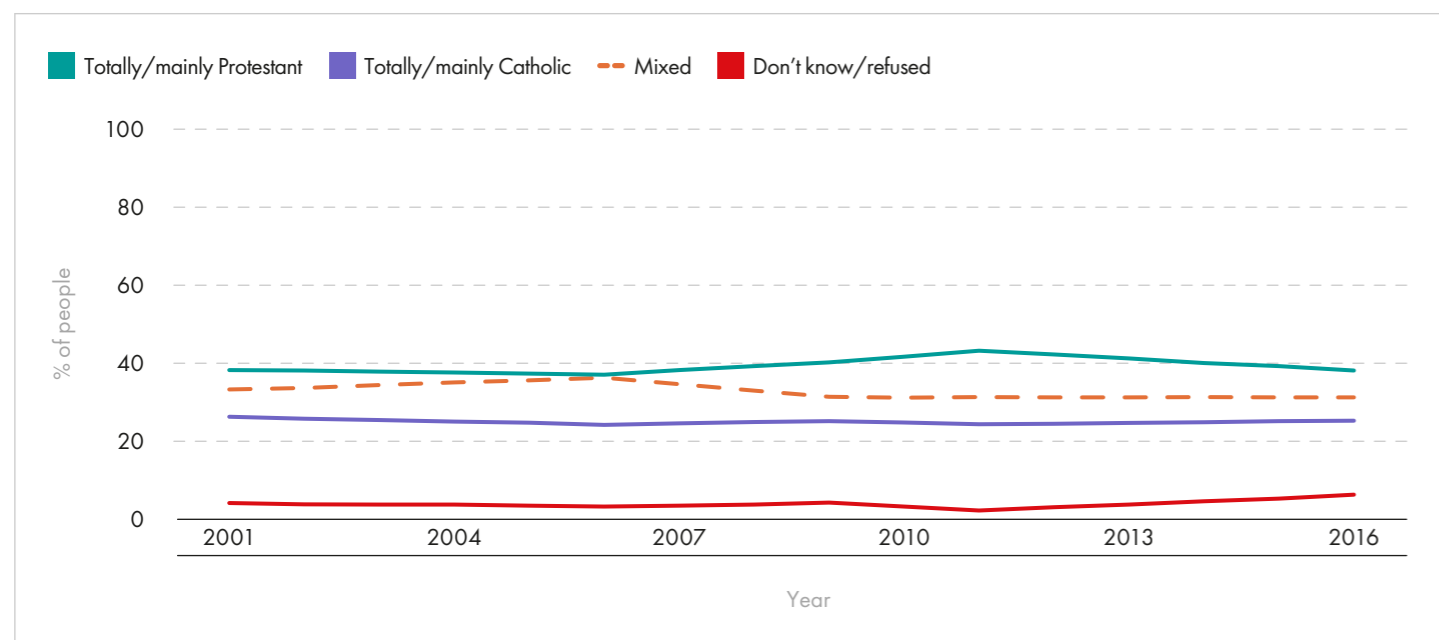
HOW COULD HOUSING BECOME MORE INTEGRATED?

- Increase in the supply of affordable housing, which would help restore mobility in the housing market and enable communities to become more mixed.
- Expand new shared social housing projects, building on Housing for All
- More integrated community resources and shared spaces, making residential integration more attractive
- Link new shared housing to shared education and expanding integrated schools
- Tackle paramilitary influence and coercion
- Reduction in fear, intimidation and the marking of territory
- More mixed peer groups, encouraged by sports and other activities
- Transport Infrastructure connecting more people across divides
- Continuing the removal of Peace Walls

A way forward

There has been substantial progress towards breaking down barriers across many aspects of life in Northern Ireland. Clear examples include workforce integration and the expansion of shared spaces for socialising and mixing in urban centres.

The limited but notable success of integrated education, progress within shared education, and the growth in mixed neighbourhoods in some places should not be dismissed. However, an honest assessment of how segregated housing and education persist is essential. Most qualified teachers in Northern Ireland attended three levels of education largely segregated by community background, before commencing a career in the persistently divided school system. Most are also likely to live in an area with more than 80% of the population from one community background.

How should policymakers change this picture? Firstly, more clarity is needed on the ultimate aims and what we mean by them. Interviewee L believes: "We need a big, centralised objective, and clarity about what rights-based reconciliation or integration should mean." Definitions of key terms like "reconciliation", "integration" and "shared" need to be explicit. There will always be disagreements, or differing emphases, across politics and society. Regardless, breaking down divisions will require clarity of language.

After clarity about definitions, we need clarity of purpose. Many agree with Interviewee I's analysis: "our government does not plan for integration." Objectives across government should be explicit, including increases in mixed schooling and housing. Whether the current Executive has these goals already is unclear, as they are not mentioned in the newly published Programme for Government. Clarity would shift the focus away from arguments about different models of schooling or housing and onto outcomes – substantially more measurable mixing, sharing and integration. The Executive

should commit to an objective of more people from different backgrounds living and going to school together with clear, demonstrative data by 2040.

Firm targets for pupil numbers and percentages for mixed housing projects would be unrealistic, but the Executive can still commit to tracking tangible indicators. Political leaders should commit to these guiding principles:

1 Northern Ireland will significantly reduce the number of districts with less than 20% of residents from one of the two main traditions by 2040.

2 The number of schools with at least 10% of pupils from both traditions will be substantially higher than 14% by 2040.

Achieving these missions would be evidence of broader success in schools of all types becoming more diverse, and significant progress in furthering community cohesion and safety. These missions would set the agenda across departments and different sectors of education and housing.

Conclusions

From political and community leaders we need a stronger, more defined, vision of what a more united community would look like by 2040, including significant improvement in indicators of integration.

In many areas, more mixed and integrated schooling will create a healthy de-segregating dynamic in housing.

The likelihood of tight budgets in future years should reinforce the strategic and economic case for greater integration.

NI Executive should do much more to plan for integration when it makes decisions about new transport, infrastructure and community facilities, as well as schools and housing.

We need clearer definitions of what integration and mixed mean in the context of a changing NI.

KEY CONCLUSIONS FOR EDUCATION
1 In the first instance, increase the provision of integrated education to meet existing demand.
2 Political leaders need to show greater leadership in promoting integrated education, increasing diversity in non-integrated schools, and setting clear goals for what should be achieved and by when.
3 Non-integrated schools need to achieve increased diversity. The Catholic maintained sector has so far failed to attract significant numbers of non-Catholic pupils, with a handful of exceptions. Many traditionally Protestant schools have achieved more diversity, but the rise of the 'Others' may hide a failure elsewhere to attract pupils whose families are not from a historically Protestant background.
4 The integrated sector needs to address perceptions held by some communities that it is not welcoming to their cultural expression and identity.
5 The declining number of school-age children and the need for more sustainable schools increases the urgency of achieving greater integration and sharing.
6 Schools should pro-actively recruit a more diverse workforce, when advertising for positions and setting job criteria.
7 Shared Education needs higher participation rates, with a focus on schools and areas which are most divided and a priority put on neighbouring schools working together.
8 Schools should be supported to enable staff working in key areas of the curriculum, such as Religious Education, Citizenship or History, to adopt more inclusive approaches.

KEY CONCLUSIONS FOR HOUSING

1 Meeting the demand for affordable, sustainable housing remains the top priority and is also the best way to facilitate greater integration.

2 Greater supply of housing requires fixing and funding a wastewater system capable of supporting all communities, including shared communities.

3 Expand the scale of Housing for All schemes, which have demonstrated successful models of integration

4 Encourage public transport routes, cycle paths and roads, where viable, to move people back and forth across community divides.

5 Successes of Peace Wall removals are noteworthy and should be used as models for future action.

6 Encourage local agreements about flags and other cultural expressions where possible, with cross-community engagement.

7 Ending the control and influence of paramilitaries is key to more inclusive communities, but remains elusive. Clear routes to transition, including penalties for those who refuse, are yet to be established by governments, and will require wide-ranging local political support.

8 Area planning that clusters shared housing projects with cross-community schools needs to be prioritised.

Next from Pivotal

This project will conclude with analysis of a series of focus groups discussions conducted with 48 young people, aged 15 to 25. These groups of young people from Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Enniskillen and South Armagh discuss their experiences and perspectives of integration and division in education and communities – providing new, grass-roots, understanding of how the issues discussed in this report are impacting a new generation, and how voices from that generation envision barriers to integration being removed.

Interviewees

A Community and voluntary sector (CVS) worker
B Housing rights advocate
C Housing Academic
D Social housing and CVS leader
E Youth worker
F Youth work leader
G Education academic
H Controlled school advocate
I Integrated school advocate
J Social housing senior manager
K Social housing administrator
L Public policy strategist
M Academic
N Social housing manager

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