



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office



Northern
Ireland
Office



Wilton Park



Report

A more confident and inclusive Northern Ireland

Wednesday 22 - Friday 24 June 2022 | WP1994



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In association with the Northern Ireland Office and UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

Executive Summary

1. Wilton Park, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the United Kingdom (UK) Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) hosted this conference in June 2022, facilitating a discussion between a wide range of academic, public policy, and third sector voices, including young people from Northern Ireland (NI).
2. Through open and constructive dialogue, the attendees at this Wilton Park conference considered the conditions needed to create a more confident and inclusive NI. The Conference gathered following the completion of NI's first century - which was marked by conflict, change and peace-building - and looking forward to the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA) in April 2023.
3. The conference was opened by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, The Rt Hon Brandon Lewis CBE MP, who noted the extraordinary transformation that NI has undergone over the past quarter century following the B/GFA. The Secretary of State highlighted NI's dynamic economy boasting growth industries, including fintech, cybersecurity and engineering, and its cultural richness that has given it a reputation for high-quality television and film and prowess in sport, music, and food.
4. The Secretary of State spoke of the ambition of the B/GFA in respect of education and how parents should have a choice of schools for their children, including an integrated school if they so wish. He confirmed that the UK Government would announce a programme to support greater integration through education and said that the 25th anniversary of the B/GFA would provide an opportunity to show how far Northern Ireland had come and deliver an even brighter future for its young people.
5. Following the Secretary of State's opening remarks, the conference explored several key themes. There was a particular focus given to the 25th anniversary of the B/GFA, and how to approach it to promote a more reconciled and integrated future for a Northern Ireland that is an even better place to live, work and invest. Discussion was given to how best to involve young people in the decision-making process, as well as the importance of youth work to support that ambition and achieving more integrated, reconciled, and resilient communities.
6. The conference explored the importance of early years and education, and the role they could play in supporting integration and a brighter future for Northern Ireland. Participants considered the role of skills provision and how to create opportunities for young people to participate in and support Northern Ireland's growing economy, ensuring it has the right expertise to secure in future. All the conversations took a holistic view, examining the roles of government, the Executive, as well as the third and private sectors, in considering how to build a more confident and inclusive Northern Ireland.

“Our greatest obligation as human beings is to be good ancestors: how do you want history to remember you?”

7. This report sets out the key recommendations made by the participants that resulted from the discussions held at the conference and is broken down into several key themes. Many of these ideas will need further detail and discussion but will ultimately form a basis upon which civic leaders, academia and the institutions that serve Northern Ireland’s people may work towards a more confident and inclusive NI in the quarter century ahead.

Background

8. Almost 25 years on from the signing of the B/GFA, NI has transformed, emerging from conflict to become a relatively peaceful society. However, despite the progress made over the past quarter century, the legacy of conflict continues to cast a shadow.
9. NI continues to suffer from the forces of division and sectarianism, which has a negative impact socially and economically. The history of community division, and political instability are commonly cited as key push factors for NI’s skilled young population emigrating, contributing to the region’s long-term ‘brain drain’.¹ The impact of this loss of talent and skills, particularly amongst the economically active younger generation has limited the potential of NI’s economic growth.
10. With a significant portion of NI’s population aged 25 and under, there is a growing need to assess the role of young people within civic society and the decision-making process.² Policy makers have key questions to answer over the role of young people in NI in creating and shaping a successful long-term future for the whole community, and the measures needed to support this.
11. This conference centred around the question of how to make a ‘more confident and inclusive Northern Ireland’ focused on the key theme of building a future of prosperity, integration, and opportunity for the young people of NI. Participants brought a wealth of knowledge and perspectives to the conference, and attendees included young people, educationalists, youth work professionals, academics, and policymakers.
12. The discussion of the conference focused on how to create this more confident and inclusive NI, through the empowerment of young people, the role of education, supporting greater social integration, promoting skills and opportunities, and re-embracing the hope and optimism of the B/GFA a quarter century on.

25 years of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA)

13. The 25th Anniversary of the B/GFA will take place on 10 April 2023. This momentous agreement brought with it a wave of hope and optimism and has provided a foundation for peace and prosperity in NI ever since.
14. Reflecting on the years since the Agreement, the Conference considered that, though the peace promised in the Agreement has largely been delivered, the ambitions for a system of good governance have not. Regular instability and lack of a functioning Executive in NI were cited as reasons for this view. Amidst this, recent election results show a shifting landscape in the political sphere. A growing middle ground of voters was spoken of who place a greater weight on socio-economic issues rather than matters rooted in community identity.³

¹ <https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/Stay-or-go-final.pdf>

² <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-population-and-household-estimates-for-northern-ireland-tables-24-may-2022.xlsx>

³ <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2021/Background/PROTCATH.html>

“There’s a danger of drift and a danger of repetition after 25 years. This is a hard environment in which to create change, but we need to tackle our dysfunctional political system and invest in young people if we want to sustain peace.”

15. Discussion considered how the 25th anniversary of the B/GFA presents an appropriate time for reflection on NI’s governance, the economic and social challenges that remain, and the need for an open and honest dialogue on what our ambitions are for the next 25 years in moving on from a legacy of conflict and violence. Participants regarded the 25th anniversary as an opportunity to share the triumph of NI’s peace with the world, along with stories of economic progress and other successes.
16. The Conference highlighted the importance of NI’s society moving away from what some participants regarded as its traditional deference and humility, to promoting its strengths. This includes a strong film/TV industry, a rich cultural heritage, technological innovation in emerging markets and a range of tourist attractions and areas of natural beauty that make it a growing destination for holiday makers. Participants considered many of these sectors to be the growing job markets of the future, where individuals from across communities can integrate freely. To create a more confident and inclusive NI, participants regarded these sectors as needing to be promoted more, so as to attract greater foreign investment, and to demonstrate their success globally.
17. It was clear from the discussion that there was a common ambition to rekindle the spirit of hope and optimism that was felt in NI in 1998, making clear why NI is a fantastic place to live, work and invest alongside the potential of its young people and the change that is possible in the coming decades. They regarded the anniversary as a moment to be capitalised on to lay the foundation towards a more confident and inclusive NI.

The role of young people in Northern Ireland’s long-term success

“Young people don’t deserve an Executive that’s absent for 37% of the time: young people deserve more from their political leaders so that they can get the future they deserve in NI.”

18. The Conference was premised on the understanding that the creation of a more confident and inclusive NI is dependent on its young people and their desires for change, as well as their ambitions to make NI their long-term home. Participants recognised that, too often, young people have left NI for opportunities abroad, choosing not to return due to political instability and communal division – even though we are now a quarter century on from the B/GFA.
19. To ensure young people feel connected to NI, and have a stake in its next quarter century, the Conference highlighted the importance of increasing their inclusion in the decision-making process. Participants were critical that, all too often, young people are consulted without any action following, leading to a state of what was described as ‘consultation fatigue’. The Conference regarded it to be vital for the meaningful inclusion of young people to become common practice.
20. The Conference considered that civic society and business should become more proactive on this issue, if young people are to be given a true role in shaping the future. Participants highlighted the need for both groups to create spaces for the voices and views of young people to be heard, listened to and then adequately used to influence the political and decision-making process.
21. Greater boardroom representation of younger people was suggested as a way of reflecting the concerns of this generation, as well as reframing job advertisements to encourage younger applicants. Participants raised the benefits of this diversifying the workforce and bringing in new innovative ideas to business, allowing for consumer driven change.
22. This conference suggested a wide range of methods to support inclusion of young people in political debate. Firstly, the establishment of a Minister for Children and Young People. This will entail an Executive minister and department able to legislate for children’s issues and be responsible for delivery of programmes targeted at young people.

“What young people want to talk about and what politicians in NI want to talk about are two different things.”

23. Secondly, inclusion and incorporation of youth workers, young people and departmental youth champions in the all-party group for children and young people. This would provide a safe place for collective debate and discussion on the issues affecting young people.
24. Finally, legislation to provide for the long-term future of the NI Youth Assembly, and to maintain this space for young people as a forum for political engagement. This proposal brought further discussion, with some participants highlighting the importance of developing education on politics and rights in schools as well as the extension of the franchise. The conference considered whether this might foster political thinking at a younger age and challenge the stigma of the younger generation being politically disengaged as well as instilling civic values more widely.
25. It is worth noting that young people are not a homogenous group. 25 years on from the B/GFA, NI is a much more diverse society, with many nationalities. Participants keenly highlighted the importance of the views of minority groups and refugees being reflected in policy development if the ambition of a more inclusive society was to truly be achieved.

Social integration

26. At the heart of creating a more confident and inclusive NI, is the need for increased and sustained integration in every aspect of society. The Conference considered the importance of ongoing dialogue and contact amongst individuals of differing backgrounds in creating greater empathy, which could help to create the more stable and just society that was envisaged in the B/GFA. Several participants reflected on how societal affairs are, in many ways, human relationships operating on a wider scale.
27. Participants also regarded interaction between individuals as not indicating support for the views of another, but rather accepting the other as of value and their views as of worth to the individual. In respect of communal integration, the participants considered that greater dialogue would help heal division and allow for integration, as well as an acknowledged respect for the history of the other.
28. The Conference considered the perspectives of generations born after the advent of peace and cessation of daily violence. Many participants highlighted a lesser connection among the ‘post-Agreement’ generation with the history of conflict that has often defined NI, particularly in emotional terms. Discussion took place on the positive opportunity these generations must write their own history but also the importance of understanding the past to avoid making the same mistakes or of only learning skewed history from one perspective.
29. The Conference considered that greater consideration ought to be given to enabling interaction amongst younger generations so as to support integration and a more inclusive society and acknowledged that education was only one way to enable this. Participants regarded a more inclusive society at ease with itself and accepting of differences of opinion and perspective to be a desirable outcome, if its benefits were to be felt by everyone.

Early years and education

30. Education and the school curriculum are key areas of influence in the development of children and young people. Education develops and nurtures children and young people, instilling them with the skills they will carry the rest of their lives. It is essential to achieving a more confident and inclusive society.

“Some in the Agreement Generation are suffering from a ‘loss of memory of harm’. That leaves them unaware of the human experience of horror and death that went before and at risk of a false romanticisation of the past.”

“Our education system is not fit for purpose. It doesn’t provide what young people need or what the economy needs.”

31. In addition to considering what education is for, society must consider questions of whether it should solely be outcome-focused with a strict concentration on economic development, or if it should have a wider social purpose. The B/GFA contained specific aspirations in respect of inclusion in education and, in this context, the exploration of any reform in respect of education or skills should consider how to achieve a more confident and inclusive future.
32. Participants explored these questions in detail and made several observations. Firstly, participants highlighted the need to re-evaluate the purpose of education. Participants felt that education should look at radical change including a review of how assessments are conducted, the possibility of delaying the age children start schooling and a review of educational curriculum across NI, Ireland, and possibility across the UK.
33. The Conference regarded investment in early years as being particularly important for addressing disadvantages. Research shows a learning gap has developed between children of different backgrounds before they arrive at school. To counter this, participants considered implementation of a strategy for early years development is required starting before birth and going on to the foundation stage. This would address the gap that exists at present between NI and England, where participants highlighted that a childcare strategy was lacking and regarded provision of early years education to be less comprehensive.
34. Participants considered that a clear strategy would help to improve educational outcomes and close the attainment gap, as well as helping to address issues of poverty and inequality. They reflected on the impact of Covid-19 on the education of children and young people and the loss of face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers, which will likely not be known for years. The participants regarded a long-term strategy for early years intervention and development as helping address the impact of Covid-19 on children’s development. They believed work to attain a more confident and inclusive society as something that begins at this early stage of life.
35. The Conference considered that the inclusion of soft skills is a further area of reform that needs greater discussion. Empathy training and other soft skills within the educational curriculum was the most frequently raised theme during discussions. Empathy, resilience, financial management and entrepreneurial skills were identified as soft skills that were not adequately provided within the school system and needed to be developed.
36. Participants highlighted how research shows that a widespread sense of empathy within society is vital to establishing a more confident and inclusive NI. Empathy training has been shown to reduce levels of racism, gender violence and bullying. Incorporation of empathy training as a core component of the academic curriculum would address the lingering issues of sectarianism and division prevalent in NI and provide the basis for greater integration and social cohesion.
37. On wider consideration of the education system in NI, participants felt reform is needed to foster greater integration amongst pupils. Participants were clear that recognition must be given to the Controlled and Maintained Schools sectors for the work that has been done over many years to provide integration in both the classroom and communities. It was recognised that shared education provision in these sectors has allowed many pupils to work in partnership and gain new opportunities to learn in new and collaborative ways. However, the participants generally considered that integration in the classroom must go further, including through greater provision of integrated education.
38. One proposal for reform that was considered particularly practicable was the exploration of introducing greater sharing of culture and sport between schools in local areas. The merging of schools in small rural areas to provide one school for all, and with the appropriate resources for delivery, was another.

“History and empathy education is a key tool to help understanding and healing in schools.”

39. Finally, participants discussed continued and expanding engagement between schools of different backgrounds on a regular basis. Many of these proposals are already delivered on a daily basis, however the level of ambition must be to formalise these structures, instil constant interaction and integration across communities, and expand this integration to all aspects of the education system and every school in NI.

The importance of youth work

40. Youth work and the space it provides is often cited as a key driver of community integration between young people in NI, and a determinant of the success of the next generation alongside education and early years provision. Participants highlighted how youth workers act as role models and educators to young people, providing effective skills learning, licence to develop and lead and provide a safe space for children to learn and develop with others across divides. Participants expressed a desire to see this sector expanded and formalised to provide a long-term and structured approach to their work.
41. The Conference heard how the youth work sector can suffer from short-termism that prevents strategic planning over multiple years.⁴ Participants considered that a long-term strategy developed and planned out in 5- or 10-year cycles with committed funding would provide a more secure footing for this sector, and one that could plan more effectively, and be more likely to achieve increasingly ambitious goals of social inclusion, empowerment and soft skills training in young people.
42. Related to the need for long-term planning and funding for youth workers are the calls for more clearly defined career structures within youth work to promote it as a sector that is viable and offers protection to workers. The Conference considered how long-term planning and formal structures would create a clear space for this sector to expand on its work of integration and provide adequate spaces in the long-term to develop skills in young people outside of the classroom.
43. Participants regarded there to be a need for greater consideration of the role youth workers can play within formal education and schools. It was highlighted that schools with youth workers engaging with children on a regular basis have delivered strong academic and social benefits and could provide important soft skills to support social⁵ inclusion.
44. The existing transactional relationship of term-limited Government funding provided for the delivery of certain objectives was highlighted as a problem. To achieve the societal change required for a more confident and inclusive society, participants suggested that the Executive should explore a model of longer-term funding for youth groups with a focus on these objectives over 5/10-year cycles. It was thought that such a model could empower youth groups and youth workers to plan and deliver change over the formative years of a young person's transition into adulthood.

Skills and opportunities

45. Promotion of skills and opportunities are of great importance for the development of a more confident and inclusive NI. Providing young people with the core skills and relevant opportunities for growth and experience are drivers of building their confidence, providing them with the knowledge and expertise to acquire employment, and to allow them the space to think about their career paths.

“Youth organisation and community organisations are leading the way and picking up the pieces for the government. The Executive needs to step up.”

⁴ <https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/14-19-final.pdf>

“Let’s mark the 25th anniversary with a strategy and a plan to shine the spotlight on why young people are leaving NI and to tackle the changes that are needed in the education curriculum, in the provision of jobs and skills and lifestyles.”

46. Conference discussion highlighted the need for greater variety and emphasis on skills promotion within the core education curriculum. Skills courses in higher education need to be promoted more, and on par with university courses. The discussion reached the conclusion that skills promotion coupled with the creation of a range of opportunities to provide young people with the experience they need to develop lays the foundations for society’s future success.
47. The young people of the 21st century already have a wide range of skills. Digital, technological, and creative skills are common among the youth of today’s digital revolution. These skills correlate with the necessary components of modern industries such as fintech, cybersecurity and creative arts, which have all seen great success in NI.
48. Development and nurturing of these skills in young people is vital to long-term economic growth in NI. Discussions considered the importance of instilling a sense of entrepreneurial ambition within young people. Participants suggested this could empower young people to start new businesses and revolutionise job roles in NI’s economy in the coming decades, enabling its expansion into other emerging markets.
49. To foster opportunities for future growth and entrepreneurialism, participants recommended the exploration of an entrepreneurial loan for young people. It was suggested that this loan could operate similarly to the traditional university student loan. It would allow 18–25-year-olds to avail of Government/Executive financing to start a business in NI, allowing them to add to the economy and create more jobs. In return, the Government/Executive would take a stake in their business, paying the loan and creating a sustainable system for other individuals to avail of funding in the future. This would give those young people not going to university the same access to Government funding and invest in both their future careers, and the local economy.
50. Participants considered the importance of developing opportunities where young people can gain real-world experience toward supporting their development. Examples given included the creation of boardroom apprenticeships, youth mirror boards, children’s champions, and consultation with young people by businesses, government, and civic society. The discussion considered this to provide a space not only for young people to gain knowledge and experience, but also provides organisations with feedback from a core section of society who will influence policy for years to come. It also regarded these options to be easy to introduce, likely to be low cost, and with possible significant returns for the future of the economy and civil society.

Participant recommendations

51. Following the discussions, that this report has set out above, participants made the following recommendations:
 - Use of the B/GFA to promote the success of NI and to the world, to nurture a culture of empathy and humanity and to reignite the spirit of optimism for an inclusive future.
 - Continued and sustained integration in all aspects of society through social interaction and dialogue.
 - The inclusion and promotion of children and young people from all backgrounds within the political, business, and civic decision-making process.
 - The creation of youth boards, board room apprenticeships and children’s champions to include the views of young people in economic and social policy.

- Long-term provision for the future of the NI Youth Assembly, along with greater consideration to political engagement with young people.
- Implementation of an ambitious early year's strategy for education that would invest in development from birth to foundation stage education to close the educational gap between individuals of different backgrounds.
- Teaching and inclusion of empathy within the education curriculum and explore options to improve young people's education of:
 - the history of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Britain - a factual course that allows the sharing of multiple perspectives with core facts and moments in history, and
 - the system of government and administration - helping young people to understand how decisions are made on issues that affect their day to day lives and the role of politicians and government.
- Considering the difference that education on rights as well as politics and citizenship, and changes to the franchise, might make.
- Establishment of an entrepreneurial loan for young people that provides for innovation and parity with university student loans.

Conclusion

52. Almost 25 years on from the B/GFA, Northern Ireland is vibrant, culturally rich, and abundant with economic potential. However, there remain clear challenges of sectarianism, political instability and high levels of young talented people making the decision to emigrate rather than contribute to NI's future.
53. The challenges ahead of NI are significant but not insurmountable. The Conference's deliberations expressed a degree of confidence that no problem remaining would be greater than those that have already been overcome. Participants shared a recognition that the potential for NI to develop is remarkable. Empowerment of its young people with the soft skills of empathy, resilience and a sense of entrepreneurialism will develop the capacity within society to support integration, economic prosperity, and stability.
54. The Conference was ambitious for the 25th anniversary of the B/GFA and regarded it as providing a near-term opportunity to not only reflect on the progress made in NI, but to outline where it is going. As well as sharing its success story with the world, the Conference considered this to be a moment to invest in young people and make them part of the conversation.
55. Participants were clear that the forthcoming anniversary could be used to reignite a spirit of hope and optimism and lay the foundations that will ultimately create a more confident and inclusive NI for the next generation. It is now a matter for those present to reflect on how they can best achieve this ambition, together.

Resources

[Pivotal: Transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland](#)

[Pivotal: Should I stay or should I go? Reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study or work](#)

[Pivotal: Education, skills and training for young people aged 14-19 years old](#)

[Pivotal: Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland](#)

[NI Life and Times: Community Background](#)

[Census 2021 population and household estimates for Northern Ireland](#)

[NI Youth Forum: Youth Manifesto for Change](#)

“As we come to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, we need a relaunch of Northern Ireland, building on its unique identity.”

Report compiled by the Northern Ireland Office.

Wilton Park | 15th July 2022

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