



Painful lessons

Once one of the worst examples of segregation, Northern Ireland is now moving towards better integration for its citizens. In the final part of our community cohesion series, **Paul Gosling** reports from a country bridging the divide



The Community Relations Council wants to promote cohesion by removing sectarian symbols such as murals

Northern Ireland provides an approach to community cohesion for the rest of the UK – a model lesson, it might seem, on how not to do it. Yet things are certainly improving: there has been a fall in inter-community tension, a new integrated housing development in Fermanagh and even outline plans to develop shared housing in that most sectarian of places, inner-Belfast.

It is widely recognised that what is needed now is greater integration. But the Northern Ireland Housing Executive – which has set up its own community cohesion unit – is equally clear that change must be gradual and rely on freedom of choice. 'We don't want to go too quickly,' says Housing Executive spokesperson Jim Murray. Before there are any commitments to new schemes, there must be evidence that the Fermanagh scheme, the first integrated social housing project for more than three decades, works well. 'But there's nothing to suggest it won't,' he adds. 'You don't socially engineer, you look to see where it can work.'

Efforts across the board

There is a consensus across housing professionals and community relations academics in Northern Ireland that integrated housing must be backed by other forms of social integration. Only 6 per cent of the province's children go to integrated schools – the rest attend grant maintained Catholic schools or state schools which are mostly Protestant, with a small minority going to Irish language schools. About 80 per cent of adults say they support integrated schooling – but most parents do nothing about it. Similarly, a large number of tenants claim they want to live in mixed areas, yet most do not try to do so.

The Housing Executive says it will not propose further integrated housing developments unless they are supported by local integrated schools that reinforce the mixing of communities. Northern Ireland's Community Relations Council also believes that expanding the provision of integrated education is central to a cross-community housing strategy. When parents feel they can no longer send a child to a local school – because it doesn't cater for their religion – it is only a matter of time before that community moves out.

'One thing we have noticed is that an area slides almost imperceptibly towards a single identity where everyone comes from a single religion,' says Ray Mullan, director of communications at the CRC. 'One of the stabilising factors is to have an integrated school.'

Mr Mullan argues that it is essential that decision-makers 'maximise opportunities to share', through mixed schools, community centres and other facilities. This means, for example, building facilities in neutral areas between communities so that they are used on a cross-community basis. It is also essential, in a Northern Irish context, to provide clear rules for shared spaces, including the absence of sectarian flags, murals, painted kerbstones and other symbols.

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Mr Mullan believes, on ways to build social capital, and to do so in a positive way. There is a perception in many unionist or loyalist areas that they are less articulately represented than republican areas, and as a result get less funding. 'There is a strong sense here of a local community identity, but it's a negative identity,' says Mr Mullan. 'It's often a sense of insecurity.' The response from ministers, says Mr Mullan, should be for funding of deprived areas to be linked to the bridging of communities. 'It should not be about communities digging further into holes, this is apartheid,' he says.

Better community leadership

Similarly – and here there might be a parallel to how British politicians operate in inner-city areas – there must be careful recognition of the nature of community leadership. There should be greater support and investment in community capacity building so that communities develop the leadership they deserve. 'The loyalist paramilitaries' role has been to negotiate for their communities, which is seen as basically a bribe for them to look after their areas – which is a mistake,' explains Mr Mullan.

Lord Alfred Dubs, a former Northern Ireland housing minister, is another who believes that moving towards greater community cohesion and integrated housing must be backed by wider integration of social connections, particularly in education. 'It is very difficult,' he says, 'because once you have got a certain level of segregation it is difficult to break it down, particularly in Belfast. One of the ways forward is to build new homes and ensure they are mixed. This is easier in rural areas.' But, he adds, 'one has to look at housing and education in parallel'.

Paddy Gray, director of housing management programmes at the University of Ulster, is convinced that the issue of social housing integration must be seen beyond the confines of religious segregation. 'We have physical segregation in Northern Ireland, but also income segregation,' he says. 'Most of our segregation exists in Housing Executive estates, which are low income estates. So it is about providing enough housing in which people can mix.' Mr Gray points out that in both the owner-occupied and privately-owned rental sectors there is a mix across the religions. But the social landlord sector has become reduced, through right-to-buy sell-offs, to 'residualisation' as 'dumping grounds' containing a range of social problems, just one of which is religious bigotry.

The build-up of problems was stoked, suggests Mr Gray, by the executive having failed historically to commit itself to a policy of community integration. 'In the past the Housing Executive did not push housing integration at all, only since the Good Friday agreement,' he says. 'What is needed now, Mr Gray argues, is more activity integration through cross-community facilities, such as Belfast's Odyssey leisure centre built on what was regarded as 'Protestant space', but which is used

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Mixed schooling – as in this school in Enniskillen – is vital to wider social integration



We are all
FRIENDS



Mediation in Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive established an in-house mediation service four years ago, as part of the responsibilities of a specialist community safety team. This was initially piloted in three areas, before being rolled out to all 37 districts. Since then, the mediation service has dealt with over 200 cases and now has three dedicated workers.

To support its work, the mediation service has delivered a two-day mediation awareness training course to over 300 district office staff. Consideration is now being given to extending the work of the service beyond neighbour disputes, through new statutory and community sector partnerships.

As part of Northern Ireland's shared future agenda of community reconciliation – arising from the Good Friday agreement – the executive is working with Mediation NI and the shared future advisory panel to implement an 18-month programme of good relations and mediation. This will form the basis for implementing a neighbourhood charter.

This programme aims to develop and encourage dialogue, prepare communities to deal with conflict, empower communities and put in place the structures, skills and relationships needed to build sustainable shared communities. It is due to start early next year as a pilot in Enniskillen, before being rolled out across Northern Ireland.

by both communities.

Interestingly – and significantly – the analysis from housing professionals and academics is backed by David Ervine, leader of the Progressive Unionist Party, which is regarded as the political wing of the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force. Mr Ervine served a five-year sentence for possession of a bomb, but is now a strong advocate for peaceful resolution of community tensions.

'The way we are trying to go is the right way, but it is not easy after all the segregation we have had. We have not got an integrated approach to communities. We need to develop the sense of shared space and shared living areas.'

No one, though, seems to have an answer to a contradiction at the heart of a democratic society – that you cannot impose shared housing on communities that do not want it. While Lord Dubs speaks approvingly of 'a little bit of social engineering', it is noticeable that the executive, the Community Relations Council and Mr Ervine all use the same phrase, resolutely rejecting social engineering.

Hard experience in Northern Ireland underlines some key conclusions that are probably obvious – segregation is bad, but that integrated housing cannot work unless there is also integrated education and shared socialising. But if people consciously and deliberately choose segregation then the best you can do is probably just to try to persuade them they are wrong.

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