

# Peace Summit

## 2023

### *The Unfinished Business of Peace and Reconciliation*

**Consultation Document 3 March 2023**



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## CONTEXT

April 2023 will mark 25 years since the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement was the centrepiece of efforts to bring peace to a society which had been in open conflict for three decades, where division and violence shaped every aspect of life from education, housing and policing to culture, sport and friendship. The legacy of violence left scars on individuals, communities and the whole of society. Divisions over nationality and identity remain.

It was always clear that reconciliation was not an event. The Agreement was welcomed as the end of the political conflict and the beginning of a new opportunity. Society has changed in important ways, enabling new people to live and work here and opening new possibilities for communities.

However, twenty-five years after the Agreement, we are reminded that peace and reconciliation require ongoing action and change.

The Peace Summit is an initiative by the John and Pat Hume Foundation and Community Dialogue, in partnership with YouthAction NI, Holywell Trust, Ulster University, Integrated Education Fund, and the Glenree Centre for Peace & Reconciliation. It is funded by the International Fund for Ireland.

The Peace Summit provides a chance to consider both the progress that has been made and the steps still to be taken in relation to the peace process.

The Summit follows months of consultation with peacebuilders, local communities, and young people from across Northern Ireland and the Border region in the Republic of Ireland, asking what remains to be done, how do we achieve this, and who is responsible for implementing the next steps?

Society, now more than ever, needs visionary leadership for peaceful change. The Peace Summit, which is a process rather than a one-off event, aims to listen to voices of hope and refocus attention on the peace process to ensure we honour and build upon:

- a robust peacebuilding infrastructure that was created through commitment, courage, skills and risk-taking that people here have campaigned for over decades
- the massive investment of funding and political support from funders and governments across the globe
- the opportunity to create an inclusive, multicultural, modern society that our young people demand and deserve.

The Summit will draw together some of the best ideas and distil them to create an agenda for the future that speaks to issues from the past and towards an agenda for peace and reconciliation for the next 25 years. This document is the beginning of that process. It summarises what the various consultations have revealed.

We seek your views on this document.

Most importantly, we want to hear opinions about the call to action in this consultation document. In other words, the programme and steps that we should follow, and what should be prioritised, to make sustainable peace a reality.

## **THE PROCESS**

This report summarises the key issues and common themes emerging from a series of engagement events with young people, peacebuilding practitioners, community groups and ordinary citizens from across Northern Ireland/the North of Ireland and the border counties between October 2022-February 2023.

The consultation took some 5 months and engaged at least 587 people at 24 events (see Appendix for more detail on the consultation process).

At these different workshops, discussions and events, participants were asked to reflect on peace and reconciliation over the past 25 years and consider their aspirations for the future.

## **THEMATIC CONCERNS: 25 YEARS ON**

The consultation, and this document, are not a summary of what has been achieved thus far in terms of the peace process as a whole nor a statistical analysis of what has changed or not since 1998.<sup>1</sup>

Rather this report is based on a consultation with those engaged in peace process matters or who have a stake in the peace through four sets of events (see Appendix for more detail):

- Youth peace summits
- Peace practitioner workshops
- Community dialogues
- Citizen assemblies

It outlines the most pressing issues 25 years since the signing of the Agreement.

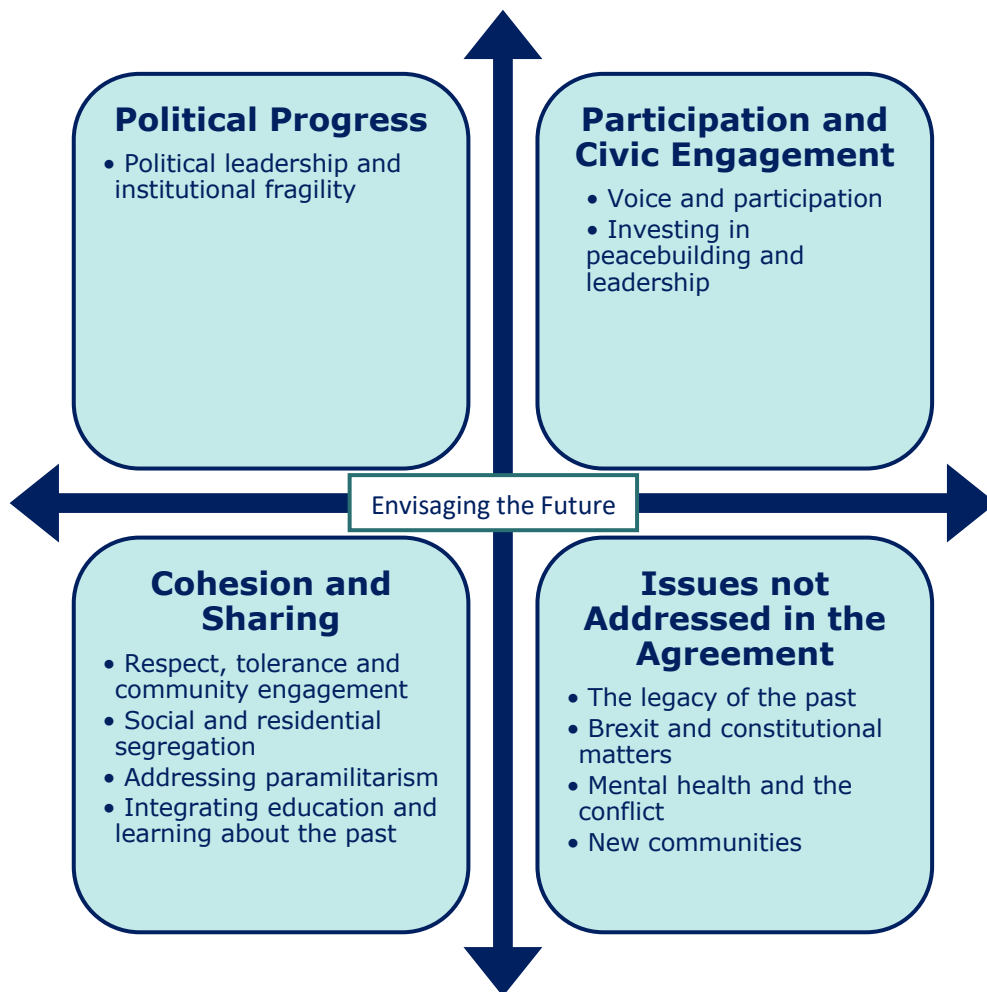
The themes extracted have been grouped under four key dimensions of the peace process:

1. Political progress
2. Participation and civic engagement
3. Cohesion and sharing
4. Issues not addressed in the Agreement

The themes raised can be summarised as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> For a monitor of the peace process and measurement of the delivery on various aspects of the peace process see the Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Reports. These are available at: <https://www.community-relations.org.uk/publications/northern-ireland-peace-monitoring-report>



## Political Progress

*"They're not changing their future. They are changing ours" (Youth Peace Summit participant).*

### Political leadership and institutional fragility

Political progress since the darkest days of the conflict was acknowledged in terms of the establishment of the Agreement, the development of a range of new institutions such as reform of the police service, increased sense of safety, demilitarisation, the enshrinement of the right to be British or Irish or both, a gradual breakdown of traditional identity blocks, normalisation of movement across the border and a significant decline in politically-related killings. A consequent range of positive impacts from the Agreement, such as economic improvement, tourism, and employment, were also noted. As such, a general view was that the Agreement needs to be

cherished and protected going forward. All those consulted were concerned with maintaining the hard-won peace.

***"Where would we be if it wasn't for the Agreement?" (Community Dialogue participant).***

***"I feel safe visiting the Shankill now whereas I didn't feel safe in the past" (Community Dialogue participant).***

***"Back in the Troubles days you would go, you would join the UVF, you wouldn't trust the police. But now, if you see some random act of violence, you would go tell the police, the police are trusted now in the community. I think that's about it, the conflict, it hasn't stopped but it's definitely went down, and you feel safer, you can feel safe – anyone can go into Portadown... there's more of a community now" (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

However, it is equally fair to say there was real frustration with political leaders from all the consultation groups. Many felt the principles of the Agreement and its reconciliatory spirit are being ignored and needed to be upheld and implemented. The peace process was described routinely as being in crisis, and the Assembly was characterised as a revolving door with suspensions and constant elections. The political system was described as a spectator democracy. The blame was laid squarely at the door of politicians who were seen as manipulating the system for political ends, only paying lip service to cross-community efforts and undermining their own good relations strategy.

Some feared that the ongoing political instability would give paramilitary groups more power. The current dysfunction exacerbates distrust and apathy in social and political institutions, particularly for young people. It was concerning, for example, that in one of the community dialogues, only two out of the 18 people present said they intended to exercise their vote at the next election.

***"I'm conflicted about voting, aware that women have died for the right to vote but toying with the idea of not voting this time. I'm just disillusioned" (Community Dialogue participant).***

The political governance issues that remain unaddressed are numerous, including the failure to maintain a working Assembly, misuse of vetoing powers, lack of progress to prioritise and deliver on key issues such as health and infrastructure, limited scrutiny



over legislation resulting in poor policy, and limited outcomes in terms of the peace dividend or economic benefit, particularly for working-class communities.

Even those areas deemed relatively successful were seen to require new energy and focus, and reconciliation needs to be prioritised. Policing was singled out as a successful process where trust was built after 1998. However, the general feeling now is that in both urban and rural areas, trust has decreased in the police. Some raised concerns about the “harassment” of young people. The ongoing negative role of paramilitaries was also raised as a common concern in urban and rural areas.

The cost-of-living crisis was frequently raised with a feeling that politicians are not tackling issues in local communities, and that economic inequality exacerbates social and political divisions. Consequently, the limited impact of the peace process on socio-economic issues has made the Agreement feel remote from everyday concerns.

***“In 25 years we want to see a functioning government for all, parties are still focused on religion rather than actual policies and a lot of communities have suffered because of this. As part of this we want to see unsegregated parts of towns and communities as there is a lot of socio-economic divide between them” (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

Some proposed the need for the Agreement to be understood as a starting point, not an endpoint that has been reached. Many – especially at the youth events and community dialogues – feel “fed up” with “orange and green” politics. At these events, adults talked about how the politicisation of “orange and green” keeps the political parties in power and young people feel their future is being undermined.

***“Class and poverty and trauma are not about orange and green” (Community Dialogue participant).***

There was also the observation that people feel caught in a cycle of negative voting, i.e. continuing to vote for parties even though people do not believe they deliver.

***“We still vote for the same parties come the next election to keep the other parties out” (Community Dialogue participant).***

***“A lot of politicians now, those in power, they’re only concerned with the old tribal politics of green and orange, but now there’s so much more going on, especially the cost of living, more people are worried about that there than a***

***border in the Irish Sea, people are worried about putting food on the table, they don't really care about stupid stuff like that" (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

In short, the strong political leadership involved in creating the Agreement was recognised. Its early implementation was also viewed with some success. However, the political focus to sustain this work was thought to have waned with time. Deep frustrations with the lack of political progress, or capitalising on what has been achieved, was palpable in all consultations.

***"Politicians worked well initially but again failed to progress with needs/wants of society" (Group feedback on flipchart, Practitioner event).***

***"I was 10 when the GFA and the referendum were agreed but I remember the time vividly. I was allowed to stay up late to see the results. I was sitting with my dad and was politically aware given the context of where we live. My dad said 'remember this moment as it is important'. But it feels like I am part of the last generation to remember it. It sparked my interest in the political process and a love-hate relationship with it. I am now 35" (Citizen Assembly participant).***

## **Participation and civic engagement**

### **Voice and participation**

There was a view that there is a general lack of voice and participation in public institutions. The citizen assemblies overwhelmingly expressed the view that as individuals they feel they had no voice in society.

***"The quest to participate as a citizen is not possible within the party-political system which is dedicated to party politics. I feel that that structure of government does not represent me" (Citizen Assembly participant).***

***"To have your voice heard depends on whether or not you have a mechanism to feed views through. But most people don't have that route" (Citizen Assembly participant).***

Women, young people, older citizens and ethnic minorities felt particularly marginalised from political processes. There was a common view that women's contribution to the peace process and peace more generally is underappreciated. Some participants highlighted how women feel inhibited from getting involved in politics, and that "bully tactics" are still used to intimidate female voters.

Young people are particularly keen to be involved in political and social processes but feel powerless and their voice is not listened to, creating a sense of frustration. To this end, young people want to push society forward and contribute constructively and creatively but feel trapped by the past. While welcoming indications of shifts in traditional voting patterns, some at the community dialogues spoke of a need to explore motivations for voting, particularly where there is fear about “going against the grain”, confusion about the voting system, or disillusionment in exercising the vote. The limited political progress undermines trust in government. There was also concern about whether enough has been done to create a new generation of peacebuilders and new political leadership that is more participative, inclusive, and collaborative and can address a range of issues (such as climate change) and meet the needs of different sectors.

***“People in power today are too old and don’t understand the youth. They don’t understand that it’s our future and we should be able to decide how to shape it. They’re not changing their own future, they’re changing ours and they don’t have the experiences that the youth have today so youths should have their say in what should be done about it” (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

Ideas about how to increase participation were discussed. Some endorsed the original concept of a Civic Forum as outlined in the Agreement, yet others were sceptical about its potential impact and whether adequate representation could be achieved. If a Civic Forum was established, it was noted that it would need to represent new communities. The two citizen assemblies, however, felt the original idea of the Civic Forum was no longer possible, and something new is needed. Citizens Assemblies were raised as an approach to explore how a shared peaceful future might look. Others called for the establishment of a Bill of Rights. The citizen assemblies endorsed ideas such as a Speaker’s Corner, People’s Parliaments and the building of a movement to enhance the civic voice.

That said, although approaches varied and different views were expressed, a vehicle for enhanced political participation was endorsed across the board. As it was put in one of the citizen assemblies, whatever is put in place, there is a need to get as much of the community involved as possible. Representation must be transparent, fair, and not tokenistic, and include “ordinary citizens”.

## **Investing in peacebuilding and leadership**

Leadership, capacity and a desire to make positive change exist within youth groups, but the narrow avenues for participation and the constant politicisation of the past in the present hampers the engagement of young people. Likewise, those who see themselves as practitioners were concerned about ongoing investment in peacebuilding and declining resources. There was a view that the community sector had to do the “heavy lifting” whilst the politicians failed to maintain functioning institutions. The civic assembly consultation felt that more leveraging of the community and voluntary sector skills was needed to amplify the civic voice and respond to local needs. Practitioners want funding to be more strategic regarding objectives for peace, particularly in government policy approaches which were often seen as limited. Younger people stressed the need for facilities such as youth centres for young people to be supported. It was raised that young people in rural areas feel particularly socially isolated and need connectivity. A wish was expressed for wider civic engagement and structures to offset the politicisation of the peace process and lack of progress.

***“I wouldn’t say that we don’t care – I would say that we don’t care in the same way that our parents care” (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

## **Cohesion and sharing**

### **Respect, tolerance and community engagement**

Across the board, a great deal of commitment to the importance of respect, tolerance for others, appreciation of diversity and the need for equality was expressed. Dialogue and relationship-building were flagged as key to sustainable peace, although this takes time and requires skills and practice. Such work has lost momentum in the last number of years. For many practitioners consulted, ongoing and sustained contact between those who are divided and learning more about one another is vital to making relationships last between communities and building peace. Practitioners expressed the view that strategies for peacebuilding and the role of community development in sustaining and delivering the promise of the Agreement are undervalued. Such a process, which some call a peace strategy or plan, must be co-designed, grassroots-

led, inclusive, and long-term. Respect and celebrating diversity were seen as the cornerstones of such an inclusive community engagement.

***"We would like to see everyone in unity, the government working together. Nobody disrespecting or discriminating each other about their identities. Looking past people's race and culture and focusing on their personality. Letting people celebrate their cultures with respect from everyone in the community" (Group feedback on flipchart, Youth Peace Summit).***

## **Social and residential segregation**

Despite progress and broad public support for integration, segregation remains a key challenge at a structural level, particularly in terms of housing and education. This impacts interpersonal and inter-community relationships. Twenty-five years after the Agreement, it was noted that it is still possible to live a separate life from those perceived as "other", leading to a lack of understanding of different cultures and traditions. The fact that peace walls have not come down, and some felt increased in number, was raised as problematic. Equally the point was made at one of the community dialogues that barriers were not only physical but there were also "invisible walls in people's minds".

Practitioners tended to speak about segregation in policy terms (e.g. the need to integrate housing or education). The importance of paying attention to the deeper structural issues that maintain segregation was noted. It was suggested that all policies and investments should be "good relations-proofed". These structural issues also have an impact on how people live their lives. Some young people expressed the day-to-day challenges of living in a divided society, e.g. fear of walking into the wrong area, and it was noted that tensions can become particularly acute at certain times of the year.

***"We want to see the sharing of traditions and people welcomed to everywhere so you can celebrate your own culture and background from wherever you're from. We also agree that we want to see more integrated and mixed schools and mixed housing" (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

***"If you're just surrounded by the same people with the same opinions as you, you're going to feel persuaded to say what they say rather than what you actually want to say" (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

## **Addressing paramilitarism**

There was a general view that it is deeply unacceptable that 25 years after the Peace Agreement, some areas are still controlled by paramilitaries. It was noted that paramilitaries still have a “sinister hold” in some areas. This means, as someone put it in one of the citizen assemblies, some people did not have “ownership of their area”. Paramilitary control inhibits community work and negatively influences well-being, exacerbated by some paramilitaries' role in drug dealing.

The failure to tackle the issue of paramilitarism was seen as a failure of the political institutions. Practitioners and those in the community dialogues were frustrated by the existence and influence of paramilitaries and the lack of accountability attached to their actions. Young people also wanted to see an end to paramilitaries. Young people, however, tended to focus not only on direct paramilitary control but also on the social and political division influencing their daily lives. Paramilitaries in an area meant social divisions were also less likely to change. When it came to visioning the future, it was noted that the future should be one free from paramilitaries and the way their presence has been normalised 25 years since the Agreement was alarming for many.

***“We want to see the end of paramilitary violence as this is a big issue in today’s society” (Group feedback on flipchart, Youth Peace Summit).***

***“Stop funding paramilitaries and anyone else not committed to peace – millions of funds spent on areas where they exist with little to show for it apart from their continued existence” (Group feedback on flipchart, Practitioner event).***

## **Integrating education and learning about the past**

There was overwhelming support for integrated education. Although it was not seen as a miraculous cure to the conflict, across the age ranges, it was generally seen as necessary to normalise society and decrease sectarianism. However, some were also concerned about integrating the education system, e.g. some schools might close, or history teaching of a certain type might dominate, diluting different understandings of the past.

There was a view that the education system was letting down the youth in terms of dealing with the social issues that confront young people. Although the history of the conflict was taught in schools, the feeling was that this did not get to grips with the deeper conflict-related issues that persist. Furthermore, not all young people take history or have formal education beyond sixteen. Young people themselves expressed a strong desire to learn about the past. The need to learn and share between the generations came up routinely. This could increase empathy, foster new connections, and offer old and new leaders a space to learn from each other.

***"Integrated schools, promote inclusivity in multiple areas such as the workplace or friendships or even wider in places like housing...in Northern Ireland we have a very tribal view on life, where you're from one side or you're from the other side but with inclusivity, it means there's no more of that and we can live together in harmony and promote peace" (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

## **Issues not addressed in the Agreement**

There was some discussion about what could be considered more recent challenges to society – issues not envisaged or discussed during the peace process in 1998.

## **The legacy of the past**

Peace practitioners noted numerous issues about the past that require attention (e.g. flags and emblems, parading). There was discussion about the challenges of ongoing paramilitarism and how to appropriately address the past in terms of truth and justice, especially in some of the community dialogues. There was also an acknowledgement of the challenges facing victims and survivors of the conflict and the need to centre victims' perspectives. The intergenerational impacts of the conflict were acknowledged. Some expressed concern about the latest British government legacy proposals. When this was mentioned, particularly in community dialogues, there was a view that the British government was using the current Legacy Bill to shut down all future truth-recovery processes.

Young people did not focus on the specifics of the legacy debates (e.g. legislation, truth or justice questions) and had a more generalised view of the past (e.g. community separation, different versions of history). This reflected their reality. Day-to-day segregation and safety concerns about going into the "wrong" area seem to impact

them more directly than larger political debates, such as who was responsible for past violence or what mechanisms need to be implemented to deal with the past. As such, there were concerns with flags, emblems and territory marking, while others associated issues regarding the conflict with the past rather than the present. However, young people showed a nuanced view of this issue, recognising how flags have different meanings in different places – some can create a sense of antagonism or hostility for those on the outside of those communities, while others can create a sense of pressure to be patriotic.

On the whole, young people believed that the Troubles were a “bad time”, and they were grateful not to be experiencing them as their parents did. Some felt the discussions at the youth events were a sign of progress. Yet at the same time, tension existed between wanting to speak about the future and learning more about the past as it continues to shape their lives. Importantly the interest here was not directly in personal histories of the conflict, but in learning more about the cultural and community perspectives on the past. For the past to be addressed, however, it needs to be relevant to personal experiences such as division and identity rather than only discussing wider questions of legacy, policy or legislation.

## **Brexit and constitutional matters**

Although the issue of Brexit, and questions concerning the Protocol, came up in some meetings, they were completely absent in others. Overall, participants did not seem that exercised by the intricacies of such matters (e.g. how trade might work). Some felt there was no user-friendly information about Brexit, the Agreement and constitutional issues to guide discussions or make informed opinions. At the same time, it was clear in some community dialogues that Brexit and border issues were becoming increasingly destabilising and polarising for local communities and the peace process. Some politicians and local representatives were seen as politicising the issue.

At the youth events, there was little mention of the constitutional question, and the young people’s reflections indicate that the conflict is primarily interpreted through the lens of a religious divide. Young people focused significantly more on everyday and broader social issues such as equality, climate change and poverty. For practitioners and in the community dialogues, although Brexit emerged, it was claimed that because



of the changes it has brought, it has further polarised society as noted, this made it hard to discuss constitutional questions for fear of exacerbating differences.

***"Brexit magnified polarisation within Northern Ireland, we are kind of stuck, unsettled. We had unfinished business and we were not ready for such a jolt!" (Community Dialogue participant).***

***"It's [Brexit] been an opportunity to back-pedal on some of the Good Friday Agreement. A way to add another layer to cement their position" (Community Dialogue participant).***

There was some discussion, particularly in community dialogues, about the constitutional question more broadly. Although the specifics were not discussed (e.g. the benefits or problems with a new constitutional arrangement), concern was raised about how the discussion in the future should be held about the border. Dialogue was understood as essential to help dispel misplaced fears, enable understanding of different views, and to explore what it might mean for day-to-day life.

***"Politicians in England don't understand the difference between north and south, and don't care, and therefore cannot be trusted to treat any referendum on unity with the care that it needs" (Community Dialogue participant).***

## **Mental health and the conflict**

For practitioners and those who lived through the conflict, there was a focus on the consequences of the conflict. There was discussion about the "collective trauma" and "intergenerational trauma" that persists in society. Others talked about the fact that society is still grieving and the need for healing spaces. The impact of the conflict on broadly on well-being was noted, e.g. disinvestment in certain areas or people moving countries or regions, and young people had some awareness that their parents still seem to "suffer" the effects of the conflict.

***"It's the older generation pushing it down on us, with our generation coming up no one really cares about it anymore" (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

Although not a focus of the facilitated discussions at the youth peace summits, mental health featured in young people's visions for the future. The view was expressed that

“mental health matters”, and young people want it to be taken seriously and better understood. They want it included in the education curriculum, and issues such as suicide to be discussed more openly. There seemed to be a view from some adults in the consultations that some young people suffer from low self-esteem, and this inhibits relationship-making in the context of building community relations.

***“We want to see an improvement in mental health for young people in Northern Ireland because we think this isn’t as important as it should be” (Group feedback on flipchart, Youth Peace Summit).***

Practitioners felt there is evidence of a degree of “normalisation” of issues that occupy young people’s energies such as body image, relationships with peers, mental health, drugs, anti-social behaviour, and conflict arising from the fallout of incidents shared and spread via social media. Young people tended to focus on the future, the need to be consulted and participate, and for society not to be hindered by the past. Normalisation of society (i.e. decreasing separation, safety in public spaces, identity) was not separate from fostering well-being.

## **New communities**

A change in demographics in society was noted with more migrants and refugees arriving, as well as a recognition of growing diversity and new communities. Several issues were raised by participants, of whom the majority could be described as white. It was noted that the society is now a “region of minorities” and that this could present an opportunity to bring people together beyond the traditional divides and to harness the leadership potential of newcomers. In the citizen assemblies the point was made that minority ethnic groups have life experiences that is often ignored. Most of the participants in the community dialogues saw the growing diversity and multiculturalism as a positive sign and an opportunity to encourage greater openness.

It was also noted that although those new to our society were generally welcomed, racism and concern for people moving to communities controlled by paramilitaries were highlighted. Young people also mentioned racism but tended to be more concerned with local divisions. They tended to link questions of race with more global

phenomena such as Black Lives Matter and felt young people were generally open to diversity.

***"Speaking to each other and not judging someone for the way they speak, finding they come from another country, not judging them straight away, you get to speak to them and see where they're from and what their experience is in life, they might have some of the same experiences to you. You never know, you might make a new friend or a best friend" (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

***"The older people in power are stuck in the past, and they only teach the kids what they believe, like if you're from a Protestant background you only really hear about the issues, you only hear bad things about the other side and vice versa, whereas whenever you're younger you mix with anyone and you don't really care about where they're from so you get to learn more about different, diverse communities" (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

## **Envisaging the future**

A key part of the consultations was identifying the problems linked to the past and discussing what might be needed in the future. Overall, all the events could be described as expressing hopes and fears in this regard.

A general theme that came across is that perhaps contrary to what some think, young people are positive about the future. They expressed a strong desire to make positive change, but as noted, often felt constrained by the past, lack of voice and older people deciding the parameters of what was important or how issues should be addressed (much of this involved the conflicted past). There was a tendency among young people to see the world in an intersectional way, i.e. political exclusion, economic marginalisation, equality issues, educational limitations, migration, gender, identity, future climate threats and so on, as interlinked.

***"I don't really want Ireland, north and south, to be underwater...need more investment in things like solar panels and hydroelectricity, stuff like that there to decrease our chances of dying" (Youth Peace Summit participant).***

Practitioners, in contrast, tended to see challenges specifically in line with conflict segregation, peace walls, sectarianism, and paramilitarism. Issues such as the cost-of-living crisis, and the need for economic development, however were raised as cross-cutting issues. Particularly in the community dialogues, there was a strong desire to see the political system tackling everyday issues and moving away from "orange-

green” dynamics and towards greater pluralism, and a focus on consensus-building. At the same time, there was a fear that it was taking time to move beyond the past and that politicians in particular were holding back progress. The spirit of the Agreement, as was noted earlier, needed to be re-energised and communities put at the heart of the process going forward.

***“It’s the people’s Agreement; we must take it back” (Community Dialogue participant).***

## **A CALL TO ACTION**

With such a wide range of issues, it is not possible to come up with specific policy solutions for each issue from the economy to addressing social segregation. To this end, in the next section, based on the consultations and subsequent discussion with the Peace Summit partners, we outline a call to action on a range of issues 25 years since the Agreement. We seek views on the call to action through this consultation document. We propose 12 actions:

### **A Call to Action**

1. Re-establish Political Institutions and Address Deficits
2. Ensure Positive Progressive Leadership
3. Formulate an Inclusive Peace Plan
4. Adapt the Agreement
5. Tackle Paramilitarism
6. Good Relations Proofing and Address Segregation
7. Integrate Education
8. Enhance Youth Participation
9. Create a Vehicle for Civic Engagement
10. Invest in Peacebuilding
11. Enhance Societal Well-Being
12. Civic Education on the Past for the Future

## **Re-establish Political Institutions and Address Deficits**

1. Re-establish the institutions and make them work more effectively. Build on what has been achieved and refresh and reinvigorate the institutions. Adapt them to the current context and be aware many in the society do not even understand the core purpose or function of the political institutions, and how they relate to the Agreement. Moving beyond crisis to stable political systems is essential to rebuild trust and develop a sustainable approach to peace and reconciliation.

## **Ensure Positive Progressive Leadership**

2. Political leadership is failing. The demand is strong for functional leaders who will build on the spirit of the Agreement, moving society forward in a progressive manner. This should include a process for civic engagement to help address the issues government cannot (see 8. and 9. below) and give voice to the so-called silent majority and marginalised groups. The peace process is the responsibility of everyone. Political leaders should show young people that democracy and participation can work. The fragile institutions, constant crisis and failed leadership create disinterest and distrust in formal politics, feeding apathy. Leaders need to move to address issues (e.g. health, cost of living, mental health, and education) rather than politicising such issues. This will create trust.

## **Formulate an Inclusive Peace Plan**

3. The Executive needs to formulate a coherent and effective peace plan with a strong vision and collective approach for its delivery across departments, policies and funding streams. This requires political buy-in and support for a united visionary peace process fit for today's society. We need to strengthen our commitment to peace and reconciliation at all levels of society, while we rethink how we see peace 25 years on. We need to address ongoing concerns such as segregation, paramilitarism, poverty, the legacy of the past, lack of participation, political apathy, distrust in institutions, and support for

peacebuilding initiatives (see actions below), while we recognise new priorities. The latter include the inter-related nature of the peace challenges in 2023, e.g. economy, new communities, the environment, LGBTQi questions, and human rights. Culture and identity now go beyond the two main communities and must be considered in relation to the integration and inclusion of a diverse society and identities. We must update our 1998 thinking to include these issues. More visioning work is needed on peace that stretches the boundaries of “peace”, which sometimes has a connotation of the past rather than the present. Peace is also a holistic concept, although at a policy level it is not treated as such. To provide a holistic approach to peace a new peace plan is needed and the government must join up its myriad of strategies, policies, Commissions and funding such as the Racial Equality Strategy; Children and Young Peoples Strategy; Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC); Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, Independent Reporting Commission; Commissioner for Victims and Survivors (CVSNI); District Council Good Relations Fund; Central Good Relations Fund, among others, recognising their interrelated contribution to peace. This will require rethinking how sustainable peace is understood, a fresh commitment at the government level for a new inclusive peace plan, along with interdepartmental collaboration and delivery with strong influence and engagement with independent voices and civil society.

## **Adapt the Agreement**

4. Revisit some issues from the Agreement and adapt the Agreement for the current context. For many 1998 is now distant history rather than of current relevance. Many no longer have any knowledge of what the Agreement even contains or its significance. Even those issues arising from the Agreement that were seen as successful need updating, e.g. reviewing of policing and trust, addressing outstanding issues such as legacy, rights and equality, and opening the discussion without prejudice on other issues such as Brexit and the Constitution. Adapt the Agreement to a changed context.

## **Tackle Paramilitarism**

5. It is unacceptable that 25 years after the Agreement, paramilitaries still have control of some communities, remain armed and carry out murders and violent assaults. This impacts well-being and prevents political progress. Political leaders have a role in this issue. Dysfunctional institutions and collapsed political structures create a vacuum that others fill. Communities must be supported to reclaim their community and build resilience against paramilitary control, such support and participation is also key to addressing poverty, deprivation and segregation.

## **Good Relations Proofing and Address Segregation**

6. Address segregation head-on and recognise it is embedded in everyday life from housing selection, education, recreational activities, sport, religion and shopping. There is a need for good relations proofing of all policies at central and local government level, including job creation, investment, housing and development, and challenging the current societal and policy norms which foster community separation. Good relations proofing examines any negative good relations impacts on policies and investment. It also explores the potential for promoting good relations, e.g. a clear and public commitment to end segregation in education and teacher training, and the promotion of shared housing in all areas with a zero-tolerance policy to intimidatory and/or threatening behaviour or displays. Such an approach should also tackle visible and hidden interface barriers by building good relations, integration, safe spaces, investment and regeneration in partnership with the communities living in interface areas.

## **Integrate Education**

7. The consultation endorsed the need to integrate education. Separate schooling creates division and does little to change social and political perspectives. There were different views on how to do this, and concerns about the impact on smaller schools for example. But greater educational integration, done in a

considered way, is important to break down barriers. How we learn about the past is also critical. The amalgamation of all teacher training is critical to integration within the education system.

## **Enhance Youth Participation**

8. Young people are particularly keen to be involved in political and social processes but feel powerless and their voice is not listened to, creating a sense of frustration. Enhance the voice and participation of all by bringing young people into official processes and stop excluding them. The Agreement means little without the participation of young people in public life now and into the future. Participation, however, is also dependent on addressing community relations and segregation. Community relations programmes with young people are often limited because relations built between communities are constantly undermined by continued living in single-identity areas or those dominated by paramilitaries. Regeneration in these areas and work with families and communities is required to ensure young people are supported to participate fully and do not feel trapped by the parameters of the past that still impact on their lives in the present.

## **Create a Vehicle for Civic Engagement**

9. Civic engagement is critical to a functioning polity. Create a vehicle for civic engagement in politics, including excluded constituencies, and those not part of the 1998 Agreement, such as new communities. Also, pay attention to excluded groups in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, race, religion or political opinion.

## **Invest in Peacebuilding**

10. Grassroots peacebuilding and its contribution to society is undervalued. Invest in peacebuilding in the long term and invest in young people as the next generation of peacebuilders. Invest in people as the backbone of peace, not



institutions alone. The Executive must commit to greater recognition of peace and reconciliation. The opportunity to do this exists now through the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) review and the potential for creating a new peace plan to reflect society 25 years after the signing of the Agreement (see 3. above). The new plan should address the issues identified through the Peace Summit process and existing research. It should be a comprehensive plan with costed actions, targets, timeframes, and a strong monitoring and evaluation structure. Civic participation and genuine investment in peacebuilding is key to delivery and monitoring from the bottom up.

## **Enhance Societal Well-Being**

11. Mental health matters. Invest in the well-being of society. There are many needs of the direct victims and survivors of the conflict that require attention and investment. The intergenerational impact of the conflict needs to be urgently tackled. This consultation, however, also highlighted how the legacy of the conflict and its mental health impact could not be divorced from other interrelated pressures (such as cost of living, poverty, lack of hope, poor infrastructure and connectivity, and access to health and social care). These and other issues have created a range of interrelated mental health needs that must be addressed. This is not only an individual process but a social one that recognises how social issues create mental health challenges.

## **Undertake Civic Education on the Past and Future**

12. Through transgenerational sharing and learning, engage in a civic education process about the Agreement, the past and the conflict. Break the silence about the past and learn positively. Young people want this – not to come to terms with the past individually or psychologically as such – but to help create a new future free from the past. It is important to link understanding the past with a constant process of future visioning.

## **NEXT STEPS**

This Peace Summit marks a moment to recognise the distance travelled and delineate the work yet to be done. The consultations demonstrate there is both hope and disillusionment 25 years on. The positive energy of the past needs to be rekindled and new thinking developed if the hope is not to fade completely.

For 2023, the partnership which organised this Peace Summit will continue to gather views and ideas through further community dialogue and engagement events.

The discussions and recommendations of the Peace Summit will be added to this consultation document, with a view to driving forward discussions with political leaders, policymakers, local communities and emerging civic actors.

We would like to hear from anyone who has a view on this consultation document.

Please send your response by 7 April 2023 to [b.hamber@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:b.hamber@ulster.ac.uk).

## **APPENDIX: CONSULTATION PROCESS**

This report summarises the key issues and common themes emerging from a series of engagement events with young people, peacebuilding practitioners, community groups and ordinary citizens from across Northern Ireland/the North of Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland between October 2022-February 2023.

Several host partners organised the events – Community Dialogue, YouthAction NI, the Holywell Trust and Ulster University in collaboration with the John and Pat Hume Foundation, as well as the Integrated Education Fund, and the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation with funding and support from the International Fund for Ireland.

Over a 5-month period at least 587 people were engaged in discussions and asked to share their views, at some 24 events. At these different events, participants were asked to reflect on peace and reconciliation over the past 25 years and consider their aspirations for the future.

The consultations involved 4 key strands:

- Youth Peace Summits
- Peace Practitioner Workshops
- Community Dialogues
- Citizen Assemblies

Following all the events reports were written capturing the main issues shared. These reports were summarized in sectoral reports linking the strands outlined below (e.g. youth strand, practitioner strand).

From these reports, the main themes that were the most consistent and prominent were extracted and cross-checked by researchers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The research and drafting team included Brandon Hamber, Debs Erwin and Eliz McArdle.

<b>Process</b>	<b>Nos</b>	<b>Where</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>Youth Peace Summits</b>	6	Belfast, Crossmaglen, Armagh, Derry/ Londonderry, Lurgan	341	185 F 156 M
<b>Peace Practitioner Workshops</b>	3	Belfast, Dungannon, Derry/ Londonderry	75	44 F 31 M
<b>Community Dialogues</b>	13	Online and in-person events in Derry/ Londonderry, Armoy, Belfast (various locations), Lurgan, Co. Donegal, Dundalk	132	97F 35M
<b>Citizen Assemblies</b>	2	Buncrana and Belfast	39	30F 9M
	<b>24</b>		<b>587</b>	

## **Consultation Strands**

The consultation process had four strands:

### **Youth Peace Summits**

The format of each of the six events centred on a full-day programme called ‘Hunger for Peace’ Games. Participants (aged 13-24) were split into smaller teams and guided through various interactive teambuilding, competitive games and visioning exercises designed to enable the young people to reflect on life in a divided society and identify ways to overcome conflict and contribute to peacebuilding. The young people explored topics such as sectarianism, flags, education, religion, identity and difference, conflict and shared their ideas for life in 20-25 years’ time.

### **Peace Practitioner Workshops**

At each of the three events, 2-4 speakers from Ulster University, YouthAction NI, Community Dialogue and the Rural Community Network were invited to present their reflections on the peace process in the past, present, and future and pose key questions for group discussion among participants. Topic areas included the Peace Process 25 years after the Good Friday Agreement; Building an Inclusive Peace with reference to the voices of young people; Safety and Politics – Community Policing;

Paramilitarism and Political Structures, and People and Place – Reconciliation; Sectarianism, Equality and Human Rights for Marginalised Groups.

## **Community Dialogues**

Community Dialogue brought together a range of different constituencies and community groups. At each of the 13 events, some 132 participants were invited to share what they felt has been achieved, implemented or changed because of the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement and identify their hopes and fears for the future and recommendations for key actions.

## **Citizen Assemblies**

The Thirty Project run by the Holywell Trust is modelled on the concept of a Citizens' Assembly and sought to engage at least thirty people, who responded to an open call, over a focused weekend residential. Two workshops took place with 39 participants in total. The project is, at its core, about trusting people to arrive at solutions for some of our most difficult problems. Two residential weekends were held in January and February 2023, examining the theme "Good Friday/Belfast Agreement: Civic voice 25 years on". These sessions were facilitated discussions where participants heard input from guest speakers before deliberating on possible solutions to challenges raised.