



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Shared Island Dialogue Series

Identities on a Shared Island - new generation perspectives

Dialogue Report

Introduction

The Shared Island Dialogue series was [launched](#) by An Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD on 22 October 2020 as part of the Government's Shared Island Initiative to foster constructive and inclusive civic dialogue on all aspects of a shared future on the island underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

The Dialogue Series brings people together from across the island to discuss key concerns for the future, opportunities for cross learning and understanding and harnessing the full potential of cooperation through the framework of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Dialogues actively seek a broad range of perspectives and experiences from civil society on the island and the inclusion of voices that have been under-represented in the Peace Process, including women, young people and ethnic minority communities on the island.

Previous Dialogues have focused on the themes like New Generations and New Voices on the Good Friday Agreement; climate and environment; civil society cooperation; equality issues; economic recovery on the island; health cooperation; the future of education, tourism, sport and rural and community development. Reports and videos from past Dialogues are available online [here](#).

The key points from the first year of discussions have also been captured in a composite report: "Looking to a shared future: Report on the Shared Island Dialogue series 2020-2021", which can be read [here](#).

The eleventh Shared Island Dialogue took place on 28 June 2022 in St Columb's Hall, Derry on the theme '[Identities on a Shared Island – new generation perspectives](#)'. Over 90 people attended the Dialogue in person and a further 60 people joined online for this third hybrid event of the series.

Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD, participated in the event delivering an [opening video address](#). The Dialogue heard specifically from young people from North and South on their views, experiences and hopes for the future on identity issues on the island, with reference to the Good Friday Agreement including the principles of partnership, equality and mutual respect; respect for and equality of civil, political, social and cultural rights; freedom from discrimination; and right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity.

The Dialogue was moderated by journalist, Aoife Grace Moore and featured two panel discussions which addressed the topics [Cultural identities on a shared island - can we move from acceptance to celebration?](#) and [Personal identities - better representing diverse identities on the island of Ireland](#).

Discussion at the Dialogue was open, free-flowing, respectful, and thought-provoking on these themes, and focused on how to better acknowledge, accommodate and celebrate identity diversity in all its dimensions on the island of Ireland.

The Shared Island Dialogue series is organised by the Shared Island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach working with the Department of Foreign Affairs, other relevant Government Departments and Agencies and in consultation with civil society stakeholders across the island of Ireland.

Further information on the Shared Island Dialogue series including videos of the plenary sessions is available at gov.ie.

Report: Identities on a Shared Island – new generation perspectives

Summary:

Over the course of the Dialogue a number of key themes emerged from the discussions that took place:

- Throughout all the discussions, panellists spoke of the importance of **young people having the confidence in their own identities and of the imperative of societal acceptance of identity diversity and complexity**. There was an emphasis also on the value of promoting interaction across different cultural communities and of fostering greater acceptance of others' cultural expressions. It was broadly agreed that **greater collaboration between political and civil society North and South** should be encouraged to bring different communities together more.
- Discussion in Panel 1 referred to the **power of community and cultural events** - that can help change attitudes and bring people together. There was a particular focus on **music-themed events** in bringing people together and allowing for an easy sharing and experiencing of different traditions. The role for the **two Governments and the Executive in promoting cultural diversity was highlighted** and the need for sustained public investment in cultural projects and groups that support cross-community interaction and cohesion, North and South.
- A strong theme in the Dialogue was that **cultural identity does not make up a person's full identity**; someone may identify as a unionist, nationalist or with neither political tradition, but identity also includes race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, socio-economic background and the full composite of identity should be acknowledged more. There was an emphasis on a point that the vast majority of young people do not want to be pigeonholed with one ethnic, political or religious binary, and political, media and public discourse should reflect that.
- On the impact of **approaches to education**, some felt a more broadly integrated educational system would be better, as this is an effective way of fostering interaction and mutual understanding across different communities. Others referred to focussing on all schools to ensure support and funding for cross-community and cultural exchanges, with a broader view than the two religious denominations, recognising the ethnic diversity of communities now.
- Discussion in Panel 2 explored **changes that young people want to see** in how identities are addressed in the years ahead, and the dynamics for civil society in engaging for positive change. There was a broad focus on improving **representation of women and ethnic minorities** in political and public life, and of providing space for **gender identity** to be affirmed and celebrated. There was discussion also on overhauling approaches to **sex education North and South**, as a priority for and to be led by both Administrations on the island.
- Panel 2 also considered the specific ways in which young people interact, organise and advocate for change in society today, with exploration of the pros and cons of social media; of the significant but sometimes under-appreciated roles that young people play as community organisers; and of how young people's leadership in areas such as music or sports, can also be a basis for engaging outside of traditional political channels.
- Across the Dialogue there were references to the importance of **politicians listening to a diversity of voices in their communities**, and acknowledging people's understanding of the complexity and nuance of identity, which is not adequately reflected in political debates. **The importance of reaching out and engaging more with minorities, including the Traveller and Roma communities was raised, as was the positive role that political leaders can play in supporting communities** on the margins, by acknowledging, representing and promoting their experiences and concerns.

Taoiseach's Contribution

- In an opening [address](#), Taoiseach Micheál Martin, TD spoke of the importance of hearing from young people on how we can **better accommodate our identities on a diversifying island and of the vital role that young people play in shaping the future of the island.**
- The Taoiseach referenced that twenty-four years ago, the people, North and South, in resoundingly endorsing the Good Friday Agreement resolved to **work across communities and borders for a shared, reconciled future.** Through the Agreement, the people affirmed **principles of partnership, equality and mutual respect** as the basis of relationships and the right of the people of Northern Ireland **to identify and be accepted as Irish, British or both.** The commitments and protections set out in the Agreement “need to have meaning for how we do politics, how we govern and legislate, how we interact in and across both jurisdictions”.
- The Taoiseach referred to the “way to go if we really are to not just acknowledge, but fully accommodate and celebrate our different identities” and of the challenges at this time for the operation of the institutions of the Agreement, which much be overcome.
- The Taoiseach also noted that ethnic minority and new communities today comprise 15% of the island’s population, whose contributions greatly enhance our communities, and they have a role to play in the Peace Process too, with the perspectives of minority communities informing and enriching how we look at relationships on this island, North and South.
- Greater reflection in the South is needed on how to **engage more positively and proactively with unionist and loyalist cultural traditions** and in Northern Ireland, respect and tolerance for linguistic and cultural diversity requires continued political leadership and attention, and the support of the two Governments as co-guarantors of the Agreement.
- There are also growing numbers in Northern Ireland today who **don’t identify with either unionist or nationalist traditions** and greater recognition in the peace process is needed to acknowledge that identity isn’t a political contest.
- The Taoiseach also spoke of ‘important, overdue progress, North and South, on a more equal society that takes better account of our diverse personal identities’ and of the need to protect rights and ensure equality and freedom from discrimination, in real terms, for everyone.
- **Gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and ability** make up parts of our identities but should have no impact on how we each make our way in society and reach our potential. Both governments need to provide political leadership and concrete actions, to ensure there is **no tolerance for discrimination, racism or other forms of prejudice.**
- Finally, the Taoiseach noted that acknowledgement of the legitimate diversity of identities on this island was critical to reaching the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and it creates the civic, cultural and political space to fully harness and genuinely celebrate different identities. The views and actions of young people will be fundamental to how that space is used in the years ahead and this Dialogue is therefore important in hearing young people’s views.

Panel Discussion 1

Cultural Identities on a Shared Island – can we move from acceptance to celebration?

Key Messages:

This panel was moderated by Aoife Grace Moore and had the following panellists:

- Darren Milligan; North West Cultural Partnership
- Éile Smith; Tyrone County Youth Officer, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann
- Kyra Reynolds; Bogside and Brandywell Initiative

This discussion is available online and can be watched back [here](#).

Key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- The panel discussed a range of issues including whether traditional cultural identities North and South are changing and interacting; whether there is sufficient engagement across different communities to try and bridge gaps that exist; the role that education and integrated education can play; and, how to genuinely celebrate cultural diversity.
- Panellists spoke of the **power of community and cultural events** that have helped to change attitudes and bring people together. They agreed that **music-themed events** are popular and bring together communities and allow for an easy sharing and experiencing of different cultural traditions. Éile Smith described music as “that one kind of common denominator - it doesn’t matter what community you are coming from or background, you can just move forward with the music.”
- Speaking to levels of engagement with some Unionist communities, Kyra Reynolds noted the difficulties for young people in interface areas, and that in order to encourage more interaction between communities, emphasis must be placed on **bringing people together on common issues** (such as cost of living, improving mental health), “rather than concentrating on bringing together for the sake of being different”.
- Panellists agreed on the importance of young people having **confidence in their own identities**, which helps in promoting and encourage broader societal cohesion, and difficulties with others’ cultural expressions and traditions. Éile Smith noted on cultural exchange, “we had marching bands in our St. Patrick’s Day parade, and why not?”
- On integrated education, there were different opinions. One view was that there is a need to focus on all schools in terms of supports and funding for cross-community and cultural exchanges, and added, “It’s not just about green and orange any more. It’s every other race and identity out there too.” Others put emphasis on the importance of **integrated education** as a systemic approach to help overcome distance between communities and denominations, in schools both North and South. Kyra Reynolds spoke of her experience and background and said “I kind of never really felt in or out of place in either community to be fair. I think integrated education would help big time...that’s where young people spend most of their time and if everyday things like education are normalised together, I think that the discussions are less about them over there and them over here.”
- On what does **celebration of cultural diversity** on a Shared Island look like, panellists referred to the common denominator and potential of music in transcending identity. Éile Smith spoke to the participation of marching bands, highland dancers and Bulgarian dancers in the recent St. Patrick’s Day celebrations in Tyrone with all cultural identities coming together. Darren Milligan spoke of the 12th July celebrations, and told a story of his grandmother in Strabane having a garden party with her Catholic neighbour during the

parade. He reflected that, looking to the future, he would like to get to a point where celebration of the 12th is something that all of the people of Northern Ireland are proud of, likewise with St Patrick's Day parades. Darren also noted the need for increased understanding of the pro-British culture in the South, and the influence of media and politicians in supporting this, or not.

- A question was asked on whether unionism, nationalism, republicanism, loyalism etc. are labels that are fully representative of identity today in Northern Ireland. The importance of **opening up the traditional identifiers** was noted in response - it is possible to have many different aspects to identity all at once. Kyra Reynolds spoke powerfully to this point saying: "We can get stuck in these two binaries; because we have become so tuned to you are either this or that. Well no, no, you are not. It is blurred... I have a photograph of my granddad who led a marching band and I have a picture of me and my sister standing beside him in our communion dresses. He was standing in the middle selling poppies on the street and I just love that photo. And for me that's my identity. All mixed up, all jumbled, all confused and all gorgeous!"
- Panellists agreed that a tendency to identify people with one cultural or other identity leads to people feeling either pigeonholed, or being viewed solely as their identity. Éile noted that in her first week of university in Dublin, she was amazed to be asked by members of her class if she was Protestant or Catholic, when such a question would never be asked up front like that of someone from the South. Darren also spoke to his British identity, and that when this is conveyed, some people "just see the Union Jack above your head and automatically maybe align you to a certain political party, which is not really the case".
- When asked what the panel would like to convey to politicians, all panellists agreed on the **importance of politicians listening to the community**, and acknowledging people's lived experience of identity issues and understanding of the complexity and nuance. Panellists spoke to the role of both Governments in promoting cultural diversity on the island of Ireland. Darren spoke of the power of music and the significance of public investment in culture, noting that many young people have gone on to further and higher education and successful careers, following confidence and leadership skills built up through their participation in marching bands and other community music. Kyra referenced the lack of opportunities for young people "at the very bottom of society", and the need to develop a greater culture of education for young people staying in Northern Ireland to help improve their own community.

Panel Discussion 2

Personal Identities – Better Representing Diverse Identities on the Island

Key Messages:

This panel was moderated by Aoife Grace Moore and had the following panellists:

- Bukky Adebawale, Equality Officer, Union of Students in Ireland
- Sam Blanckensee, Transgender Equality Network Ireland Board and Equality Officer, Maynooth University
- Aoife Clements, Co-founder, 50:50NI
- Matthew Taylor, Co-founder, Pure Mental NI

This discussion is available online and can be watched back [here](#).

Key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- The panel featured a discussion on the dimensions of personal identity, including race, ethnicity, and gender identity, and the ways these are accommodated in society, North and South. The panel considered the challenges and opportunities for interaction between Northern Ireland and Ireland in government and civil society. The panel also explored changes that young people want to see in how identities are addressed in the years ahead, and the dynamics for civil society in engaging for positive change.
- The panel opened with a discussion of the obstacles that young people face in expressing their personal identity. Sam Blanckensee spoke of the desire of young people to have their **gender identity affirmed** and celebrated in Irish society. Aoife Clements noted the **importance of representation**, particularly of diverse backgrounds, as a means of encouraging young women to enter politics and noted the additional sectarian undertone that is still present in Northern Ireland politics. Bukky Adebawale agreed that representation and role models were important, as well as the need for government and other organisations to genuinely reflect the societies they serve.
- The panellists agreed that **greater collaboration between civil society North and South** should be encouraged. Bukky noted the need for spaces that allow communities to come together, recognise the commonalities across the border, whilst also acknowledging differences in circumstances. Sam spoke of interaction between transgender activists, North and South and of the challenges for transgender adults in Northern Ireland in accessing the Irish Gender Recognition Act. Matthew Taylor noted the specific challenge of **trans-generational trauma** that particularly impacts mental health in Northern Ireland, and that cross-community engagement on a bigger scale was needed to overcome these issues.
- Sam spoke of the **positive role that politicians can play in supporting communities** on the margins, by raising their voices and providing them with a national profile. It was added that politicians should **listen to the needs of young people** who will play key roles in shaping the future. Aoife Clements suggested that political parties should provide women candidates with the resources to get elected. She also acknowledged the influence political leaders can have and the opportunity for them to lead on key societal issues.
- The **opportunities that social media** presents for young people to interact and represent their views on identity and other issues was also discussed. Bukky spoke of how social media can be used to convene communities or re-establish networks that fell away during the pandemic. It was noted social media can be divisive, but also has the ability to 'democratise

voices'. Sam highlighted that the advantage of in-person gatherings is the opportunity it offers to speak to and learn from those different to you.

- Aoife Clements spoke of the need for more work to be undertaken in schools to **educate young people, particularly women, about the political system**, to help them feel involved and empowered to take part in the democratic process. This would in turn help young people in expressing and representing their diverse identities. Matthew added that a tailored, rather than 'one-size fits all' approach, is most effective as young people do not represent a collective group in terms of any one identity.
- The importance of **support for young people** was raised throughout the discussion. Matthew spoke of the need to amplify voices and organisations promoting specific causes, which can also act as a source of inspiration for young people. Aoife Clements emphasised the **importance of funding and engagement at a structural level**, such as with local councils, as a means of supporting young people. Sam suggested there should be more acknowledgment of the roles that young people play as community organisers, and a recognition that young people and youth organisations can act as exemplars in their areas of work. Bukky added that young people's talents and leadership, in areas such as music or sport, can also be a means to organise outside of traditional political channels.
- In response to a question raised, panellists agreed that there is an **onus on political representatives and civil society to reach out more to the Traveller and the Roma communities**.
- Regarding sex education in the North and South, there was agreement that an overhaul should be a priority for both governments. Aoife Clements referred to the scope for **government-directed compulsory sex education** in all schools, regardless of religious ethos. Sam noted that universities are having to compensate for shortcomings in sex education in schools, particularly regarding the LGBT+ community. Matthew echoed this point, and highlighted the higher rate of suicide in the LGBT+ community than heterosexual peers.
- A question was asked as to why more progressive social attitudes are often slow to come through the legislative system and translate into policy. It was suggested that the public in Northern Ireland is more progressive than their elected politicians. Sam noted that there has been a vocal minority in the United Kingdom against the rights of transgender persons. He said that there are ways, more reflected in discourse on transgender rights in Ireland, to consider and deal with issues, laws and public policy, in a manner that respects each person's identity, seeks to minimise conflict, and focuses on allowing every person to thrive.

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