

Young People and Politics

North Belfast Community Research Group

Young People and Politics in North Belfast

An outline of a survey by the North Belfast Community Research Project

This short paper describes the initial work of the North Belfast Community Research Project, a partnership between LINC Resource Centre, the Institute for Conflict Research and individuals from the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist communities of North Belfast. The aim of the partnership is to train community activists in research methods and to initiate a community-based research programme in North Belfast. The paper discusses the background to the project, outlines the training programme and provides a review of the initial research project on the voting habits of young people.

Background

Between December 2002 and April 2003 staff from LINC Resource Centre carried out a series of consultation mornings, workshops and informal meetings with community activists, community representatives and members of staff of community organisations within North Belfast. One of the aims was to identify areas of work, which would not duplicate the work of others but support and compliment their work. The gaps that were identified were:

- Information gathering and networking;
- Research skills;
- Lobbying Skills;
- Monitoring and evaluation training.

Through a series of discussions with members of the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist community, members of Lower North Belfast Community Council and Ballysillan Forum it was recognised that these areas of work would not only support those organisations and individuals involved in 'capacity building' but would also bring added benefit through incorporating 'new skills' to those groups who were putting forward community empowerment partnership bids.

The outcome of these consultations is that a partnership has been established between LINC Resource Centre and the Institute for Conflict Research who through their long, established and tested networks within both the academic and community field will aim to establish a learning curve to address the above issues.

Rationale

The perceptions of many communities in North Belfast are that:

- North Belfast as an area has been over-researched by many different agencies and for many different reasons;
- the results of that research have, in many cases, never belonged to the community which were the key respondents;

- the findings of any research have been perceived to be used more for the benefit of the research agency than the community they initially researched;
- as respondents, rather than partners, the community has learned no new skills through the process and will continue to depend on others.

Although the community workers were fed up with the sense of being used by many researchers, they were also aware of the possibilities that research work could offer in identifying problems and issues in their local areas if they were able to set the agenda or direct the research in some way. A community-based research programme might also be useful as a means of influencing the policy agenda and increasing funding for local projects.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the partnership is to establish an ethical community research and consultation network that is capable of developing a qualitative research and consultation process that is community led and community based.

The objective is to make research skills socially relevant and useful to local communities across North Belfast as they seek to explore their problems and inform discussions about issues that affect their lives and interests.

To meet our objective, the North Belfast Community Research Group (NBCRG) was set up to take the project forward. NBCRG is a partnership involving LINC, ICR, and community workers from mainly Protestant areas in North Belfast, including Mount Vernon, Tiger's Bay, Ballysillan and Sunningdale. NBCRG aims to develop research skills that will be beneficial both to themselves and to their community. NBCRG is a practical project that aims to learn by doing.

Programme

The initial meeting attracted 14 people from across North Belfast. The group discussed their ideas and expectations and were presented with an overview of research skills and methodologies. As a result it was agreed to develop a six-week training project, this would be based around researching young people's attitudes to voting, elections and the political process. The target group of 16-24 year olds would cover those approaching the age at which they could register to vote as well as those who would have had an opportunity to vote at previous elections. The subject was considered a topical issue as the research was to be carried out over the period when the Assembly elections were to have been held.

A six-week programme was drafted in order to cover the main stages of the research project (see below). The programme focused on:

- Designing a questionnaire;
- Determining the main issues and themes;
- Type and style of questions;
- Identifying respondents;

- Deciding on survey areas and sample size;
- Piloting and revising the questionnaire;
- Undertaking a survey;
- Analysing preliminary findings;
- Identifying main themes;
- Presenting the results.

As part of the research programme ICR conducted a literature review on research relevant to the topic the voting habits of young people. An extensive search revealed surprisingly little published material on these topics. Two earlier studies, the Northern Ireland Young Life and Times Survey (1998), and Youth Quest Survey (2000), contained some relevant information on young people and their voting habits, but no other work covered this area, although some work in this field had been carried out in England, including Young People and Politics (2002) and Voter Engagement and Young People (2002)¹. ICR provided the group with information on these surveys as well as other research on young people and their attitudes to elections and politics.

The centrepiece of the research programme was the development of a self-completion questionnaire for young people. This was designed in Week 2 by those involved in the project and aimed to shed light of the political attitudes of young people in North Belfast. The questionnaire addressed such issues as level of political knowledge, levels of voter registration, voting intentions and attitudes to political parties.

Between Weeks 2 and 3 the trainees piloted the questionnaire among young people in their areas. A total of 25 questionnaires were completed at this stage. The process indicated that only a few minor alterations and adjustments were required. The pilot process revealed that the questionnaire only took a few minutes to complete and the young people had few difficulties filling it out. The pilot study also provided the group with an initial experience in administering questionnaires and conducting survey work.

Having agreed a final draft of the questionnaire attention focused on the practicalities of carrying out the survey. Researchers planned to work in pairs to survey the young people in their area. Each group were asked to monitor who they surveyed to ensure a balance between the three sub-age groups – 16-17, 18-21 and 22-24, and also to try to ensure an even balance of males and females.

The community researchers were then given a two-week period to identify respondents and complete the survey. Coming together in Week 5 the group carried out a preliminary manual analysis of the findings on an area-by-area basis. After this staff at ICR processed the data using the SPSS programme and in the final week of

¹ (1). Northern Ireland Life and Times (1998) *Young Life and Times*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive. (2) Smyth, M and Scott, M (2000) *The Youth Quest 2000 Survey*. INCORE: Derry Londonderry. (3) Children and Young People's Unit (2002) *Young People and Politics. A Report on the Yvote?/Ynot? Project by the Children and Young People's Unit*. Children and Young People's Unit. (4) Russell, A et al. (2002) *Voter Engagement and Young People*. Electoral Commission, Research Report.

the project the group discussed the survey results and explored options for analysis, presentation and reporting of the findings.

Demographic Information

The survey produced a sample of 143 completed questionnaires from young people aged between 16 and 24 years of age. The sample was broadly balanced by both age and gender:

- 36% were between 16 and 17 years of age, 39% between 18-21 years of age and 25% between 22 and 24 years of age;
- 54% of the respondents were male and 46% were female.

The survey questioned young people across North Belfast, the largest percentage of respondents were from Tiger's Bay / Mountcollyer and Ballysillan (both with 21% of the sample), and then Sunningdale with 14% and Mount Vernon (12%).

Respondents were asked about their employment status: 34% stated they were either employed or self employed, 28% were unemployed, 22% were still at school, 7% were currently receiving training; 6% were attending college and 4% said they were at university.

The substantive questions on the survey dealt with issues related to young people's general political knowledge, with their voting intentions and with their levels of political involvement. The answers to the questions on these three areas will be discussed in that order.

Political Knowledge and Interests

We asked respondents how much general interest they had in political matters: 16% said they had a great deal or quite a lot of interest, 39% said they had some interest and 45% said they had little or no interest.

Despite an apparently low level of general interest in politics 73% of respondents were able to identify Nigel Dodds as their MP, although one should bear in mind that Dodds is a prominent local figure. However 27% of the sample did not know the name of their MP, 11% of the total thought that Billy Hutchinson of the PUP was the MP, 1% thought Cecil Walker was MP and 15% said they did not know the name of their MP.

There was less agreement and less knowledge in relation to the Secretary of State: 44% knew that Paul Murphy is the Secretary of State, 25% thought that John Reid was still in post while 5% named Mo Mowlam and 4% Peter Mandelson as Secretary of State.

Most people said that they got their information on politics either from the television and radio (76%) or through newspapers (56%). Only 8% said they got information from party political literature and 7% said they got information through the education

system. However, 29% of respondents said that friends were an important source of information.

Voting

We asked respondents a range of questions about their experiences of voting, their future voting intentions and their political preferences.

Almost half the sample (48 %) said that they were registered to vote, while 52% said they were not registered or were not sure if they were registered. The main reason given for not registering was because the respondent was too young (23% of the total sample), while 6% said they did not know they had to register, 5% said they had no interest in politics and 4% said they did not know how to register.

Just over one third of respondents (36%) said they had voted in previous elections and the same percentage said they had not. 28% had been too young to vote in previous elections. The largest number of respondents (23%) had voted in the Assembly elections, 20% had voted in the Council elections and 8% said they had voted in a Westminster election. Only 4 % had voted in the European elections.

When we asked how important they thought it was for young people to vote, 39% stated 'a great deal' and 22% said 'quite a lot'. Only 17% said that it was not very important or not important at all for young people to vote.

However while 61% said it was important for young people to vote, only 54% said that they intended to vote in the forthcoming elections, 27 % said they did not intend to vote and 19% said they would be too young.

We asked all respondents to choose their top three political parties. The results, in percentage points, are as follows:

Democratic Unionist	50
Progressive Unionist	35
Ulster Unionist	29
UK Unionist	11
UPRG	9
United Unionist	8
Alliance	3
Women's Coalition	2
Sinn Fein	1.5
SDLP	1
Workers Party	1
Greens	1

When we asked why people voted for a particular political party, the main reasons given were religion (23%), community tradition (20%) and party policies (19%). 13% said they voted for a particular party because of family loyalty and 11% said they

voted the same way as their friends. Only 7% said that the personality of the politician was an important factor in determining how they would vote.

We also asked those respondents who said they did not intend to vote at the next elections why they would not vote. 15% stated that it would not make any difference if they voted, 10% said that they never saw the politicians, 9% indicated they had 'no interest', 8% said it was because of a lack of information and 7% said voting was a waste of time and energy.

Political Activism

Only 2% of the respondents belonged to a political party. Two individuals said they were members of the UPRG and one was a member of the PUP. However, when we asked people if they would consider joining a political party, 27% of the sample said that they would.

We also asked the young people what they thought the political parties could or should do to encourage young people to vote. They said that political parties had to be more active in the community (46%), be seen more and not just at election times (39%), they should involve young people in policy making (34%) and should provide more information on how to vote (29%).

Conclusions

The survey provides a glimpse into the political thinking of young people within the Protestant community of North Belfast at a time when the subject of electoral politics had been prominent in the media. The survey contrasts evidence of some degree of local knowledge, with lesser levels of knowledge of the wider political sphere.

The most important lessons that can be drawn from the research are that while many young people have a degree of knowledge of politics, at least at a local level, there would appear to be many opportunities to increase their interest and involvement. Only 3 of the young people surveyed said they belonged to a political party, but 27% said they would consider joining one.

Many expressed cynicism at the approach taken by politicians in only visiting their areas in the run-up to an election, but they also indicated that they would welcome more information and education about political and electoral matters. The project suggests that developing more proactive and imaginative ways to engage with young people may well be a fruitful move for local political parties.

The project also suggests that given the limited work on this topic, it would be well worth conducting further research on this theme both in the form of other localised surveys and on Northern Ireland wide basis.

North Belfast Community Research Project

**LINC Resource Centre & Institute for Conflict Research
at
Mount Vernon Community House**

Week One: 6 May - Designing a Questionnaire

- Aims and objectives – why are we doing a survey?
- Determining the main themes and issues
- Type, style and quantity of questions
- Looking at other surveys

The aim of this week will be to discuss and agree upon the main questions and format of our questionnaire.

Week Two: 12 May - Planning Fieldwork

- Piloting Questionnaire within group
- Interview techniques
- Deciding on survey areas
- Sample size and make up and identifying respondents

This week will focus on making sure the questionnaire ‘works’ and working through how it will be administered.

Over the next week the group will pilot the draft survey within their own communities.

Week Three: 19 May – Fieldwork Pilot Review

In this session we will review the experiences of the group members in carrying out the pilot survey. We will also make any final adjustments to the questionnaire.

Week Four: 26 May – No Class – Survey Being Carried Out

The group members have two weeks to carry out the survey within the agreed areas.

Week Five: 2 June - Analysis of Area Findings

- Preliminary analysis of main questions in each area
- Presentation to group of local findings

Working in groups the researchers (you) will identify the main findings from their area and briefly present these to the full group.

Week Six: 9 June - Full Analysis of Questionnaire

- Pooling local results

- Identifying main themes and findings
- Dissemination
- Next Steps

The final week will aim to pool all findings into a single set of themes and issues and decide how we might use and publicise the results.

We will also discuss the value of the project and whether participants wish to take the project any further.

LINC RESOURCE CENTRE

LINC is an acronym for **Local Initiatives for Needy Communities** and was established in September 1992 by the *Church of the Nazarene* as a Christian response to identified social needs in North Belfast and East Antrim.

It is an independent voluntary association recognized by the Inland Revenue as having been established for charitable purposes (XR16540) and is based at 218 York Street, Belfast BT15 1GY.

Our vision is for a just equitable and peaceful Northern Ireland with full dignity, freedom and security for all of our citizens. To this end we are dedicated to working to help break the cycle of alienation, conflict and violence through the development of sustainable Conflict Transformation, Restorative Justice and other Peace Building initiatives.



The Institute for Conflict Research is an independent research organisation, which specialises in working on issues related to both conflict and post-conflict societies.

ICR carries out action based research, which provides evidence-based perspectives on issues associated with conflict in deeply divided societies. ICR works both with those involved and affected by conflict in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Through its research activity, ICR aims to:

- Document and assess the nature, cause and impact of conflict.
- Design and develop monitoring and targeting systems for conflict related interventions.
- Identify local and international best practice in working with conflict.
- Disseminate the knowledge acquired and stimulate debate about the impact of conflict.

ICR is committed to produce and deliver high quality research both locally and internationally, to work in partnership with groups and individuals and to develop ways in which the research can be used to achieve positive social change.