

An ethos of hospitality

**An evaluation of the
Belfast Friendship Club**

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Cover by Dunbar Design

Printed by TH Jordan

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Introduction

The Belfast Friendship Club was initiated in April 2009 as a social meeting place to enhance integration between newcomers to the city and long-term residents.

The Council of Europe (2008) has defined integration, following Jürgen Habermas (2004), as a two-way street—rather than placing the onus entirely on the outsider (as in the assimilationist conception of managing diversity) or denying the significance of the issue (as in the multiculturalist approach, with its separate ‘cultures’). Thus the Friendship Club brings together migrants, refugees and ‘indigenous’ individuals to develop inter-relationships in a way which renders integration natural and part of everyday life, rather than an ‘official’ task.

This is quite remarkable because, put in context, it is by no means as simple as it sounds. The same month that the friendship club was established, more than 100 Polish residents were expelled from south Belfast by thugs, following clashes between some visiting Polish football fans and police near Windsor Park stadium. Three months later, more than 100 Romanian Roma fled their homes in the area, following repeated intimidation which the police failed to tackle. So while south Belfast has been progressively cosmopolitanised, some among those for whom this is an alien idea have reacted, on occasion violently, to try to stop that process.

Conversely, news of the success of the friendship club has travelled and there have been initiatives to replicate it in Derry, Ballymena and Coleraine. As with any well-functioning social institution, however, what appears to work spontaneously rests on invisible but critical foundations—explicit rules or implicit norms. Since there are no ground-rules of attendance, however, written up on the wall, at the friendship club individuals who attend imbibe the norms that others already embody. So it is important to tease out what these norms are.

The evaluation

The aim of this evaluation was thus to ‘look under the bonnet’ of the Belfast Friendship Club and find out what makes it work so well. In commissioning it, the South

Belfast Roundtable identified the following objectives:

- To situate the Belfast Friendship Club within its social and environmental context and illustrate the developmental trajectory that has emerged in its work to date.
- To chronicle the work of the friendship club from its inception in 2009 to 2011.
- To compile the data gained from evaluation over the past two years.
- To document specific elements of good practice which it has pioneered.
- To identify key learning points uncovered along the way.
- To outline the challenges the club faces.
- To identify sustainable ways in which to maintain and expand the friendship club initiative in Northern Ireland.

These objectives structure the remainder of this report.

The evaluation took place in January and February 2012. It was conducted through:

- (i) a review of documents generated by the Belfast Friendship Club;
- (ii) a questionnaire survey of participants, to which there were 70 responses;
- (iii) 25 semi-structured interviews with attendees at the club, external stakeholders and organisers of other friendship clubs (listed in the appendix), and
- (iv) a visit to the Ballymena Friendship Club.

The evaluator was also able to draw upon his informal experience as a ‘participant observer’ at the Belfast Friendship Club, having been a regular attendee out of personal interest for the previous 18 months.

The author acknowledges the generous assistance of staff at the South Belfast Roundtable and especially the tireless help of the co-ordinator of the friendship club, Stephanie Mitchell. A debt of gratitude is also due to all those who helped the evaluation, including those who responded to the questionnaire and, in particular, those who gave so willingly of their time in the interviews. These provide the core of the insights in this evaluation but the conclusions reached are the responsibility of the author alone.

The context



Common purpose: Belfast Friendship Club members outside Common Grounds Café

South Belfast has to outsiders a stereotyped image associated with Queen's University, the Malone area and tree-lined suburbs. As with all stereotypes—including racist ones—this is a partial and skewed picture.

First, South Belfast is the area of Northern Ireland where what Ulrich Beck (2006) calls 'really existing cosmopolitanisation' has progressed furthest. Quite how cosmopolitanised it has become in the last decade will only be clear when the results of the 2011 census are available. But even in 2001, 4.6 per cent of the population of the Northern Ireland Assembly constituency comprised individuals born outside Britain and Ireland, while the figure for the region as a whole was just 2.8 per cent (NISRA, 2002: 16-17).

South Belfast is also marked by perhaps the largest social divisions in Northern Ireland: the Markets and the Village areas may each be only about a mile from Malone and Stranmillis but these working-class neighbourhoods are a social world away. And so, despite the evident affluence of the latter wards, the assembly constituency ranks fifth among the 18 in terms of the extent of 'multiple deprivation' (NISRA, 2010: 60).

This is the context in which, according to Police Service of Northern Ireland (2011: 21) statistics, around one in six incidents across the region categorised by the police as racist take place in south Belfast. Indeed two of the most vicious incidents of recent years, as mentioned in the introduction, occurred in the area, inflating the data for 2008-09 and 2009-10.

The South Belfast Roundtable was established in January 2004 to counter racism, promote integration and celebrate diversity. It embraces some 90 statutory and voluntary organisations, including representatives of the PSNI and minority ethnic associations, as well as community, religious and political leaders.

Recorded racist incidents (PSNI data)

	2004-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11
South Belfast	159	106	126	149	169	174	156
NI	813	936	1,047	976	990	1,038	842

The story so far

Announcing the Belfast Friendship Club to an unsuspecting world in March 2009, the South Belfast Roundtable said it would ‘provide a safe shared cultural space for a range of individuals from diverse backgrounds to meet others, socialise and build strong positive relationships’. The project, supported by Belfast City Council and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, and drawing on funding from the EU Peace III programme, also included an annual Belfast Inclusion Festival in June and a plan (which in the end did not come to fruition) to build a team of Habitat for Humanity volunteers.

The ‘intervention logic’ (Sanderson, 2000: 221) behind the friendship club was set out in the roundtable’s application to the city council. This identified sectarianism and racism as ‘by-products of entrenched intolerance and lack of understanding of “the other”’ and argued on the basis of research by the social

psychologist Myles Hewstone and others (Turner *et al*, 2007) that friendship was a potential solvent of such intolerance—indeed, the research cited showed that even knowing someone else who had a friend of the ‘other sort’ could reduce prejudice.

The friendship club meets for two hours every Thursday evening in the back room of the Common Grounds Café on University Avenue, which says on its website that it ‘reaches out to the wider world with compassion and generosity’. To date, more than 700 people have participated, comprising more than 80 nationalities. A core of regular attendees, from whom a small steering group is drawn, is matched by more occasional visitors and newcomers.

What is striking about the club is that ‘nothing happens’, except a round of announcements at the end of the evening, yet it is an intensely social occasion—as evidenced by the sheer volume of noise in the room as the

Intensely social: individuals from diverse nationalities get around a table at the the friendship club



evening progresses towards a peak attendance of 30-60. What is also remarkable is what does *not* happen: while there are lively discussions and debates, there are never arguments and confrontations. Nor indeed, while there is some tendency for *francophones* with weak English to group together, do participants clump along common national lines. And friendships made at the club spill over, not only into attendance at other events but also into self-generated meet-ups and occasions.

Yet what appears entirely ‘normal’ at the friendship club can be put in stark perspective when it is realised how *abnormal* it is for Northern Ireland. The diversity to be managed in Common Grounds on a Thursday evening is vastly greater than that as a whole in Northern Ireland—a region, let us not forget, notorious as the location of one of the world’s longest-running identity conflicts between members of its two main religious communities, whom most members of the friendship club would frankly struggle to tell apart. Participants, moreover, also come from highly diverse social backgrounds—from asylum-seekers dependent on National Asylum Support Service accommodation and the most meagre benefits to well-qualified migrant workers in good-quality information-technology jobs, from those whose origins are in the developing worlds of Africa and Asia to those who come from some of the most developed European economies. And some members—in particular, those with pending or failed asylum claims—face quite serious stresses in their lives outside the club.

So there is no particular reason why those who attend the friendship club should share any sense of common humanity at all—and yet, clearly, that is what emerges. This report seeks to explain why.

The friendship club has a virtual counterpart in a Facebook group, which has 210 members.¹ Club attendees use the group to flag up short-notice social events, like a party that weekend in somebody’s house, and to post requests for practical assistance. Prospective participants use it to find out more about the club. And those who have moved on from the friendship club—moving elsewhere, for instance, for work—use it to stay in touch, a sign of the enduring emotional ‘pull’ the club generates, as we shall see.

The events

A whole host of events have mushroomed beyond the Thursday evening meetings of the friendship club—some organised, some spontaneous. Every Thursday these are flagged by the co-ordinator towards the end of the session.

Some of these events have been external to the friendship club as such, like ‘Love Music/Poetry, Hate Racism’ in April 2010. Some have been hosted by the friendship club in the frame of the Belfast Inclusion Festival, like ‘Let’s Chalk About It’ at St Anne’s Cathedral in



Helping hands: the friendship club has provided many opportunities to develop practical skills

June that year. And some have been internal, like Anne Kilroy’s exhibition of paintings from Africa in May 2010 and photographs taken by members in Sudan during their trip there in March 2011.

Some events have been geared to learning, and displaying, new capacities. Participation in a print workshop led to an exhibition in June 2010 of members’ mono-prints and a puppet-making workshop similarly led to participation in the Belfast Carnival that month. There have also been ‘A Toe in the Arts’ tasters classes, in street dance, felt-making, painting and photography, in early 2012.

And some events, which tended to be those highlighted in members’ interviews, have been shared excursions, to Tollymore Forest Park and Newcastle in August 2010 and an extended trip to the north Antrim coast in August 2011, as well as a walk in the Mourne the following October.

A particularly poignant event was the birthday party for Norma Nyamambi in early 2012, to which the Thursday evening session was given over. Some 70 people attended that night, many of them conscious that Norma had lost her claim for asylum—despite coming from Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe—and evidently wishing to express their personal support for her at a difficult time. And many brought food from their indigenous culinary traditions, which reflected considerable effort.

The Christmas parties in the Chinese Resource Centre, another highlight, are explored in more detail in the next session. But it should be stressed that numerous events involving friendship club members have been self-generated—ranging from a ten-pin bowling session in the Odyssey, to a mini-film club in the Polish Association, to cycle trips and various dinners, parties and gatherings in members’ homes.

¹ See www.facebook.com/groups/15107848521013/.

And then there have been the spin-offs. The most significant has been the emergence of the Women's World United football squad. The Irish Football Association's community relations department had previously initiated a World United team of migrants, refugees and interested locals. And the IFA was happy to pay for a leading female coach to take weekly sessions for a Women's World United complement, recruited from members of the friendship club.

One event, or rather a series of events with a tragic conclusion, is worthy of special focus and involves a member of that team. Mimi Unamoyo is a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where she was involved in the democratic opposition to the current leader, Joseph Kabila. In November 2011 she organised a successful meeting in Belfast to highlight concerns about the freedom and fairness of the then forthcoming

presidential election in the DRC, in which Kabila was—amid great controversy—returned. Many friendship club members attended the meeting out of interest and to support Mimi.

That support was however much more directly called on within weeks, when news emerged that Mimi's brother had been murdered. Mimi was unable to go home for the funeral and a service was organised by her church in Belfast—in the same hall where the meeting had taken place. Even more members of the friendship club turned up this time, to show their solidarity in what was inevitably a day of intense emotions. In the run-up to Christmas Mimi sent a card to the friendship club, circulated by the co-ordinator. Her message read: 'Thank you so very much to all Friendship Club members in true appreciation for the kindness on your part, and to say a special "thank-you" from the bottom of my heart.'

A very special occasion: Norma's birthday party



The evidence

When the friendship club was established the following ‘performance indicators’ were set:

- 5 volunteers will make up a steering group for the club by September 2010,
- 75 people will attend the club by December 2010,
- 30 people will take part in additional social activities arranged as part of the club by December 2010 and
- 20 individuals will be signposted to statutory and voluntary services through the club by December 2010.

A six-member steering group was indeed established. But by December 2010 attendance had overshot the target by nearly 150%, with 181 individuals from 35 nationalities coming through the door of the friendship club. And 65 people had taken part in a dozen additional social activities by that time, again more than twice the number envisaged. Conversely, only 13 individuals were signposted to services.

This made clear that it was the *affective*, rather than instrumental, benefits of the friendship club which members valued more—and that this exercised such a strong ‘pull’ that participation far exceeded expectations. The survey conducted as part of this evaluation bore out this conclusion.

The members

The questionnaire was completed by members who attended at least one meeting of the club during the five weeks when it was made available. They responded quite avidly and 70 questionnaires were returned, against a target of 50.

Respondents comprised 37 women and 33 men, which reflects the broad gender balance of attendance. This is one of the taken-for-granted aspects of the friendship club which is however also *not* taken for granted in Northern Ireland—a very male-dominated society—nor indeed in a number of countries of origin of club participants. But it does reflect the egalitarian value system of the friendship club, discussed later, and perhaps also the aspirations of its relatively youthful demography: only 27 respondents gave their age as over 30 and only nine of those were over 40.

Only eight said they were from Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, and this issue of involving more

of the ‘host’ community will be addressed in the concluding section. Fully ten were from Spain alone—and that is not counting two Basques and two Catalans! The next largest group were the six Poles—unsurprisingly in view of how the Polish community has, since the accession of eight east and central European countries to the EU in 2004, become the largest national minority in Northern Ireland—and there were smaller numbers of Latvians, Lithuanians, Hungarians and Slovaks. But the four Indians testified to a less adverted pattern of migration, notably of technically qualified staff, from the sub-continent. The majority of members came as migrants or students, with a smattering of refugees—the latter particularly significant among African members. It should be stressed that this was a demographic snapshot, however: at other times more asylum-seekers/refugees have been present and the composition of the membership will evolve in relationship to outreach activities, as addressed in the final section.

The bulk of members (40) had heard about the friendship club by word of mouth from their existing friends. Twelve had heard about it via another organisation, like the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers or GEMS, a local organisation assisting labour activation. This snowballing effect lies behind the rapid expansion of the club, and testifies to the positive stories members tell their friends about the experience. But those who already have friends are by definition not the most socially isolated and there may be a case for targeted outreach, particularly via the Refugee Action Group and its member organisations, to promote the friendship club more among asylum-seekers and refugees.

The constant recruitment of new members to the club was evidenced in answers to a question on longevity of attendance. Twenty-seven respondents said they had been coming for less than a month and another 23 said less than a year, while 11 said more than a year and nine fell into the over-two-years veterans category.

Attendance itself was more bifurcated between peripheral members who attended only now and again (21) and those who came every week (18). A further 19 said they came as often as they could or as often as not, while only seven said they came once a month. This combination of a regular core and a changing periphery gives the club a good balance between stability and dynamism. While the former provides the reliability of familiar faces and the basis for the steering group, the latter reflects



More trips please: picnicking in Tollymore Forest Park

the absence of a clear boundary between members and those who are not members, a point returned to later.

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about their first sensation of the friendship club. Offered a choice of statements, 62 agreed with 'I was made to feel welcome from the beginning', five opted for 'It was a bit difficult at first but I felt at home eventually' and just two went for 'I felt awkward and unsure of myself'. This ethos of hospitality is discussed later.

The priority of non-material over instrumental concerns, signalled above, was evident in the reasons given by respondents as to why they came to the club. Asked to score the following statements from 1 to 10 in importance (10 being a very important reason), the tallies were:

- I enjoy the atmosphere and the conversations 636
- I make new friends and see existing ones 610
- I learn about other events and activities 566
- I find out about educational/work opportunities 421

As to what event beyond weekly meetings members had most enjoyed, responses were lower because of course newer members had not had the opportunity to attend any. But while many ticked the boxes for the summer trip to the north Antrim coast—which included an

overnight stay and was quite a bonding experience—and the 2011 Christmas party at the Chinese Resource Centre, several volunteered under 'other' suggestions the birthday party for Norma.

Members reported real spin-off benefits from their attendance at the club—with again the emphasis very much on the social dimension rather than self-interest. Forty-four respondents said they had become involved in other social activities with friends and 17 said they had subsequently volunteered with an organisation. Another five said they had taken part in an educational or training course as a result of their involvement.

Finally, in terms of how members felt about their experience of Belfast—against the background of serious manifestations of intolerance, as indicated earlier, in terms of racist incidents in south Belfast—coming to the friendship club had had a very positive effect. Of the 60 members who answered this question (meaningless to the indigenous attendees), 40 said participation had made them 'feel at home and keen to stay in Belfast'. Fifteen said it had made them feel 'okay about Belfast for the moment' and only five said it had not affected how they felt about living in the city.

What they said

Respondents were invited to add any further things they wanted to say about the club. There were many generally positive comments about the pleasure of meeting people from different cultural backgrounds and of being able to feel at home—and a desire was expressed for even more trips! But a number highlighted the unique and innovative nature of the project:—

‘[It] is a brilliant invention.’ Martina, Germany

‘This is a great concept. It helps me make friends and be social and enjoy Belfast to its fullest.’ Rishi, India

‘It is a great place to meet people, to make friends, to volunteer for different projects. Thanks to [the] friendship club I raised over £1,500 for Oxfam. Every city should have a friendship club! Thanks to Stephanie and other great people who are making it happen.’ Vikydroa, Latvia

‘BFC became a safe harbour for me, which I can rely on. We would like to establish a similar club based on the same values in Slovakia and Hungary.’ Viktor, Slovakia

Comments volunteered in the friendship club visitors’ book give more perspective to perceptions of the club:—

‘In the Friendship Club I have made so many friends. I have got much information and I have discovered many places in Northern Ireland. Also the Friendship Club for me was a place to amuse [oneself] and to chase away the stress.’ Lodorice, Cameroon

‘When I heard about the Friendship Club for the first time, I thought: “This can’t work. It will be boring.” And I was greatly surprised by the warm welcome, by being informed about so many events, that since then I nearly never stayed at home in the evenings and at the weekends. But the best thing about the Friendship Club is that I found there real friends very quickly and met a lot of very interesting people who all understood that I’m a foreigner and sometimes I have problems with the language, different culture, etc. It was a wonderful experience to see so many nice and helpful people at one place. Thanks a million!’ Katka, Czech Republic

‘Good news stories can be hard to find but here is one that even a semi-visually-impaired (contact lenses strength 4.5) couldn’t fail to spot. But I didn’t come here as a journalist, more as a proud member of the human race and

couldn’t praise the people behind this enough. I hope to be back soon and once again make more friends in two hours than a normal citizen of my home town of Stockholm would make in a lifetime.’ Henrik, Sweden

‘It is nice to meet people in the BFC. But it is even nicer that—once you’ve met them there—you often see them in the street, in the city centre, so you really feel [you have] arrived in Belfast.’ Nuria, Germany

‘It’s a fantastic idea. I met many people from different countries. I could listen to their opinions. It’s an unforgettable experience.’ Gisela, Hungary

In-depth comments

Those members who took part in individual interviews were able to elaborate on their experiences, their insights and their aspirations for the friendship club.

Zsuzsi Pelech came to Belfast from Hungary with her Slovak partner, Viktor. She became involved in the friendship club just shortly after it was established, when fewer than 10 people attended. Taking part had ‘changed her life’, she said. Wanting to avoid low-paid labour as a cleaner or waitress—the migrant experience often including having to take a step down in the labour market—she was signposted by the coordinator to an NGO where she found more convivial employment.

Zsuzsi is a member of the steering group of the club and she said: ‘I don’t feel as a foreigner here ... because everyone is here from all over the world.’ She stressed how close its members had become: ‘We are not just acquaintances of each other. We are friends.’



Selva Chandra, who comes from India and works for a high-tech company, found out about the friendship club from Viktor, a colleague at work. He has become another core member of the club, taking responsibility for the administration of the Facebook group. By nature unassuming, he has come into his own when it has come to club activities—from leading the Bollywood dancing on the evening of the trip to north Antrim to taking part in yoga, Tai Chi and the dragon dance which the friendship club contributed to the 2012 Chinese New Year activities in the Ulster Hall.

Selva said the club had raised his confidence. Now he felt able to talk to anyone and via the club he had developed contacts with individuals from the Chinese Welfare Association and the Corrymeela Community.



Having come alone to Belfast from Germany and knowing no one, René Wilsdorf saw a leaflet about the friendship club at work. 'I felt very welcome,' he said, having met Stephanie on his arrival. Having been stuck in a 'freezing' flat on the Shankill Road, he was able to get advice which led to him finding more comfortable accommodation in the south of the city. Indeed, he felt the club was a 'cornucopia' of knowledge, which could perhaps be shared more fully by workshops led by individual members with particular competences.

But René too highlighted the profound nature of relationships in the club. Describing it as like 'a little family', he said: 'You can talk not only superficially but about more serious stuff—when you have problems with your work, or health or whatever. It's always nice to get some support in this way, so you are never really alone.' He contrasted this with the 'hello and goodbye' relationship he had with more 'closed' indigenous individuals whom he had come across in daily life in Belfast—including the unwillingness that he had found to talk, or talk objectively, about the local situation.



Paul Tempan is a settled Belfast resident but the friendship club has proved invaluable to him too. Having experienced the loneliness of the long-distance PhD writer, he suffered a sudden bereavement when a nephew was killed in an accident in the US. But he said: 'People from the club were really wonderful in helping me out.' Equally, he said, it was wonderful that such support had been shown to Mimi after her tragic loss.

An avid cyclist, Paul has organised the friendship club cycle rides. But he said he realised that even the social connections around the club in which he had become involved were just 'the tip of the iceberg'. He paid tribute to Stephanie at the hub of that network, with her 'incredible' capacity to get people to do things for the club for free and her ability to handle sensitive situations—for instance, relating to club members who had been victims of trafficking.

Vlastimil Prorok is also now a long-term resident of Belfast, where he has been living and working for six years. A Czech, unlike the English-born Paul, he found the friendship club useful as a place to improve his English as well as to meet new people.

But in a comment reflective of the relative youth and transitory nature of the club clientele, Vlastik said that the experience of attendance could over time become one of 'same questions, same answers'. Equally, he had made friends among his colleagues at work. He thus felt that while the club was good for newcomers, like he had once been, it was perhaps not for those who were in Belfast for good.

Norma found out about the friendship club from her fellow Zimbabwean asylum-seeker Nommy. An ever-present for the last two years, she said with a smile: 'I am a person who likes to integrate ... Nothing makes me

happier than to be with different people.' And she described the club simply: 'It's my home.'

Norma felt that the activity in which members engaged beyond the club was important in deepening their relationships: 'It makes us know each other better. That's why we are growing, coming together.' Having herself organised birthday parties for others at her home, she was deeply touched by the empathy she felt at the party in her honour at the club. 'It was amazing,' she said. 'I felt like everybody is my friend.'



Suleiman Abdullahi is a well-travelled social entrepreneur from Somalia. He found out about the friendship club through the poster in the window of the office of the South Belfast Roundtable. For him it is 'a very innovative social enterprise', which encourages people to focus on common, rather than personal, interests—out of it came the new NGO he has established, Horn of Africa People's Aid Northern Ireland. The club should be open to ideas emerging from its members and should be replicated elsewhere, he said, including in Dublin.

Suleiman highlighted the visceral feelings the friendship club evoked because of its ethos: 'We are equal here. There is no authoritarian saying "you have to listen to me"', so people feel the freedom of being equal.' And he said: 'Everyone here is like a brother or sister, respecting each other.' As for him personally, 'I feel I'm a citizen of this country now ... I actually feel at home. I'm not feeling a foreigner.'

Mark Stephens, a very mature Lagan College student who was born in Hungary, has the distinction of being the youngest member of the club. But for him it is 'a fantastic place where people from all backgrounds and all ages can meet'. He appreciated the 'quite unexpected' nature of these encounters. And he said: 'I could have expected that I would feel left out but age doesn't matter here. They all treat me like I'm an adult.'

For Mark, this respectful treatment matters. He pointed to how bullying is part of the school experience and contrasted this with the friendship club, which had improved his impression of Belfast: 'It's improved because for myself it's better to socialise with people who get where you're coming from and are kind to you, whatever your nationality is.' Mark has played guitar for the friendship club and he suggested that a musical event, and outreach to schools and youth clubs, could bring in more young people.

Yvonne Naylor is a well-informed and attuned 'local'. A long-time volunteer, like her husband Richard, with the inter-faith Corrymeela Community, she could compare the friendship club with events organised by others working in this field. She said: 'I am impressed by the leadership and I like the atmosphere: it's very inclusive and that's not an easy thing to do.' And the reason? 'It's

just the welcome you get when you go in.' Yvonne had noticed too how members would always make space for others to join their company: 'A lot of people seem very affirmed.'

Some members had gone on to become volunteers with Corrymeela and acquired accreditation, she said: 'It's all part of the settling in for them—meeting people, making contacts, building networks, feeling they have something to contribute.' And in turn club members had been able to draw on those networks for support—for instance, if their asylum claim had been denied.



Liz Griffith works for the Law Centre, focusing on asylum issues. She had initially thought of the friendship club as a potential referral point for her clients—but then discovered that it was 'brilliant'. It was 'quite a magical place', she said, with warmth almost 'radiating' towards members when they arrived. As many others contended, for Liz 'Stephanie plays such a big role in all this'. Not just an advice or drop-in centre, a sense of 'solidarity' was the key, she said. 'In my view that's what makes the friendship club so special. For two hours a week people are on an equal footing.' It played 'such a pivotal role in some people's lives' but perhaps it could reach out more to the local 'host' community.

The first time Liz had attended in 2009, there were just four people in the room. Not only had the club dramatically expanded but members were increasingly taking the initiative, she said: 'I think it's brilliant when people stand up and say "I'm going cycling tomorrow. Would anyone like to come with me?"' Perhaps this could be formalised, so that members were regularly invited to propose ideas.

Denise Magno dos Santos shares Liz's enthusiasm for one of the friendship club spin-offs—the Women's World United squad. From Portugal, though born in Guinea-Bissau, she heard about the friendship club from a colleague in an English class at the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities. In turn, her involvement in the club helped her progress into employment at NICEM.

Denise had also watched the club grow from just one table to its current diversity and range of activities. Now it was like a 'second family'—for instance, in the way it supported asylum-seekers. She said: 'In one night you can go around the world.' But she too stressed the importance of the attendance of indigenous members in promoting the goal of integration.

Maeve McKeag, another WWU devotee, was like Liz also initially engaged through her professional involvement, with GEMS. She had found it 'a brilliant resource for people who are quite isolated' and 'a real hub for sharing information'. While stressing its 'different off-shoots', like the walking, the cinema and the salsa, she

said: 'It's a safe place and where else could you go and chat to people you haven't met before?'

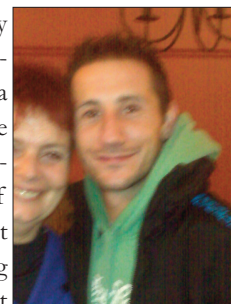
For Maeve, Stephanie's personality was key to the chemistry: 'It's that big welcome you get as soon as you go through the door.' The location was also important, because of the 'whole ethos of the café', she said: 'It's been invaluable for me as a practitioner working with the unemployed, having this resource to send people to. It's brilliant, absolutely brilliant. It's been incalculable. The difference for people who have been isolated, getting a network of friends and building that up, has just been amazing.'

Sean Brown demonstrates how not only members of minority communities have benefited from that 'incalculable' capacity to make a difference. Originally from Northern Ireland, he spent most of his life in England before returning to Ireland, and then to Belfast, a couple of years ago—arriving with not just his bags but some accumulated personal challenges. Having been told about the friendship club via a contact at the Welcome Organisation, he found himself entering a world quite unlike that to which he had been used. 'Friendly' was how he encapsulated it. 'The world I'd come from before was the total opposite.'

Sean certainly saw all the benefits of the club for integration, meeting people from all over the world, seeing where they were coming from and learning about their cultural backgrounds. But for him personally, it could have been the difference between life and death: 'The positive things for me have been that through the friendship club I have gained a lot of good friends who have given me a lot of support. Because where I come from before to where I am now is a long way and a lot of support I've got has helped me along, especially at times when I've needed it. I don't think I'd know where I would be without the friendship club.'

Charo Lanao-Madden, a settled Brazilian resident of Northern Ireland working as a self-employed consultant with the Centre for Global Education, brings some perspective to the club. She said: 'From the models I have seen on inclusion, I think it's a very good model.' While expressing a reservation about the location next to the church, she also used the adjective 'magical' to describe the venue. The strong support of the club for the socially vulnerable was critical: 'For me it's an excellent example of the difference between charity and solidarity.'

Charo also stressed the great importance of Stephanie's welcome at the door. But she said the club could not be expected to be 'a one-woman show' and pointed to the role of the steering group in that regard: 'If things are going to happen we need collectively to make them happen.' By perhaps 10 members being chosen more openly from the stable core of 30, it would be possible to reach 'another level for the friendship club', via members making suggestions and taking ownership. The next phase of the club—if the members were



ready—would thus be ‘more member-led but still with the support of the facilitator that is behind it’.

The external stakeholders

So what of the views of those who have a little more distance from the club? The most immediate external perspective is of course that of the staff of Common Grounds café—for which making available the back room has been a matter of goodwill, rather than a business arrangement. Pete Craig, the manager, was just as positive about the hospitality offered by the club as the members themselves. People who would have been apprehensive about meeting new people were ‘welcomed with open arms’, he observed.

The ethos of the café is a sympathetic one and Pete himself was socialised into Corrymeela via his father, Colin, a former Corrymeela staff member. He described it as ‘a multi-cultural volunteering place’, noting how members had volunteered in the café. Business, too, had been brought by the club, though he recognised that on occasions the club had suffered when the café was unavailable.

Jayne McConkey, who organises exhibitions in the café and is involved with the justXchange time bank in Belfast, has lived much of her life outside Northern Ireland and is conscious that it is not always a place where those of a cosmopolitan background feel at home. On the contrary, at the friendship club, she said: ‘The agenda is “everybody’s welcome”. The agenda is “this is a safe place”’. She felt the way every attendee was given an individual sticker with their name on their lapel on arrival was critical: ‘The name badge thing is an essential part of how it happens. There’s something levelling about it.’

The friendship club has developed strategic partnerships with a range of organisations. Some are minority-oriented NGOs, like NICRAS, the Chinese Welfare Association (CWA), the Migrant Helpline and the Homeplus drop-in centre. Others have a general social brief, whether interfaith dialogue (Corrymeela Community), employment/training (GEMS), homelessness (the Welcome Organisation), learning disability (*L’Arche*) or vulnerable youth (VOYPIC). Others are key statutory agencies: the Belfast City Council good relations unit, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive community cohesion team and the Belfast Health Trust family trauma centre.

For such agencies, while they can often deal with the physical needs of their users, the friendship club is an invaluable referral point as a supportive social network. Moira McCombe of NICRAS said it was really good, especially for new people and for those for whom there was no ready ‘community’ available of others of a similar national background. And its strength was that it *wasn’t* just for refugees and migrants only, she said.

Eileen Chan-Hu of CWA, who like so many pointed

to the importance of Stephanie’s ‘bubbly’ personality, described how relationships with the friendship club had proved a two-way street. By making available the Chinese Resource Centre on the Stranmillis Embankment for the Christmas parties, the association was saying: ‘It’s open to everyone.’ Eileen was happy to offer the centre too for, say, a friendship club international food day.

Conversely, individuals who had passed through the centre from the club had been signposted to other agencies, she said, such as the Simon Community and Sure Start for issues of homelessness and childcare respectively. The kids’ Kung Fu class had become one third local, one third Chinese and one third others, and Chinese parents of the kids had in turn gone along to the friendship club Christmas party.

Linda Hutchinson, race relations officer of the NIHE, said at one level that the friendship club was a useful vehicle to distribute practical information—for example, on how to cope with the freezing weather and associated burst pipes of Belfast in December 2010, an unprecedented experience for some members. But she also pointed to its social dimension.

The friendship club ‘really is terrific’, she said, being an alternative not only to bars (not attractive places for many club members for a range of reasons) but also to ‘the business side of race relations’. While it was important that there were the CWA and the Polish Association and so on, the friendship club was mixed up and so was about ‘people helping other people’. She felt it had improved relationships in the adjacent Holy Land area, where there had been racist incidents.

Belfast City Council has been a major stakeholder in the friendship club, funding its start-up via Peace III. Leish Dolan of the council’s good relations unit said: ‘I think it’s an absolutely fantastic initiative.’ The unit would frequently receive calls from organisations saying that an individual had arrived from X and staff knew that they could point the person to the friendship club, secure in the knowledge that there was an ‘informal approach with no hidden agenda’. The club had reached a huge amount of people, subtly providing links and signposting, and was ‘supporting integration at a really practical level’.

Leish put the club’s success down to the enthusiasm of the key figures involved and its informality: ‘There’s been lots of approaches to try to integrate people and this model is really ideal.’ While there was a massive problem of sectarianism, on which the Peace programme was primarily focused, it was nevertheless part and parcel of building peace and reconciliation that members of all communities felt integrated in Belfast. She suggested there might be potential for members to get more involved in debates about integration through telling their own stories in public.

Other friendship clubs

Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, according to Oscar Wilde. And one clear and unanticipated achievement of the Belfast Friendship Club has been the efforts to replicate it elsewhere in Northern Ireland. The Derry Friendship Club opened in the Café del Mondo on Shipquay Street in June 2010. That in Ballymena followed in June 2011 and Coleraine's two months later.

Laura Giacani of the diversity initiative SEEDS in Derry set up the friendship club in the city, having gone to see the Belfast club. Although Derry had many fewer non-indigenous residents than Belfast, she said she had accumulated a database of 200 members, 70-80 of whom were 'local'. Publicity had been via the sponsoring Multi-Cultural Forum, the North West Community Network, the Foyle Women's Information Network and the city council's community-relations bulletin. The main nationalities represented were Spanish, Italian, French and Portuguese and members received a weekly email. A £1 per person donation was requested at meetings and there had been some financial support from the city council.

With this smaller pool from which to draw, Laura said that from the outset there had been a focus on structured activities to engage members when they came together every Tuesday night. These had included quizzes, making a friendship-club quilt, flamenco dancing and football and some—yoga, for example—had been suggested by members themselves.

The club had moved to a cottage within the Derry craft village and since Laura had moved to SEEDS from the Multi-Cultural Forum, she said, it had gone a little bit flat. She hoped to relaunch the club (as a SEEDS project) in the spring. She stressed the importance of the co-ordinator's role: the person had to be someone who was energetic, could develop a rapport and could encourage people to mingle and mix.

Laura said her dream was a 'franchising' of the friendship club. She had used the Belfast club 'daisy' graphic in Derry, to encourage this sense of commonality of purpose, and she argued that there should at least be a common web site for the projects, to which members could contribute.

Alan Clarke, a student dentist, worked with Denise Wright at the South Belfast Roundtable three years ago, linked to work he was doing in the US Congress at the time, and so was involved with the friendship club from the planning stage. He explained how the Ballymena Friendship Club had emerged as a partnership between the Inter-Ethnic Forum and three churches, forming a management committee with the town council, which provided the café in its Braid Arts Centre for free. The club met there every Wednesday night and organised an event every month. Attendances averaged 30-40, with 60-70 for events. As in Belfast, funding had come from Peace III.

With few refugees and students in Ballymena but a

significant number of established migrant households linked to work in local factories, the attendance was more settled and family-based than in Belfast, Alan said. Poles and Slovaks predominated among the non-indigenous members, though not exclusively: for example, as a result of club connections, Indian and Pakistani children had taken part in a five-week outdoor-pursuits course together. The club had been publicised in the local newspapers and the council newsletter—the mayor and other councillors had attended—as well as the Ballymena Inter-Ethnic Forum and the Polish and Slovak food stores.

Despite the direct Christian involvement with the Ballymena club, Alan was happy that it ran on the same ethos as the Belfast club. Visiting the club and talking to those involved, including churchpeople, it was clear that the organisers were aware that personal religious affiliations should not impinge on the neutral atmosphere.

There had been recent leafleting by the British National Party in Ballymena, Alan said, but the partnership behind the friendship club was a visible manifestation of unity. For some individuals it had proved a 'lifeline' and, he argued, 'small gestures go a long way'.

The Coleraine Friendship Club is still a fledgling initiative, in a town which tends to close down at night and which does not have a high proportion of newcomers. Paddy McNicholl of Kilcranny House said that it attracted around 10 people on average, meeting once a month in Ground Café, again with Peace III support.

Church halls would have been available but this would have contradicted the ethos of the club. And even though the members of minority communities who attended tended to have other connections, some participants would otherwise have been extremely isolated and the relaxed format had benefited relationships, she said.

Second city, second club: members of the Derry Frindship Club



The good practice

Entering the friendship club for the first time is quite an experience—coming from Northern Ireland’s still almost homogeneously white, English-speaking (after a fashion) indigenous milieu, it feels like one has happened on a side room in the headquarters of the United Nations. And central to the success of the friendship club, as interviewees repeatedly remarked, is the way Stephanie welcomes new members individually at the door and smoothes their *entrée* by nudging them in the direction of initial conversations.

She also, as indicated, inquires as to their first name (if new) and writes it with a marker pen on a lapel sticker. This, obviously, allows a conversation to start easily: ‘So, tell me, X, about yourself ...’ More subtly and profoundly, it ensures that everyone who attends the friendship club immediately becomes an identified individual with their own name—not an African or an eastern European or an Asian or a ‘Muslim’, but Ayman or Csilla or Ranga or Omar.

This is critically important, because a body of literature demonstrates that stereotypes are inherently communal. They reduce diverse individuals, whose unique identities comprise a complex combination of elements but who share a common humanity with their fellow citizens of the world, to cardboard cut-outs. As the social psychologist Xenia Chrysoschoou (2004: 45) puts it, this can throw whole swathes of people ‘outside the boundaries of humankind’.

Stereotyping not only dehumanises the individual

concerned but, worse, allows an enemy-image to be attached to them. As Amin Maalouf, a Lebanese writer living in France, put it sharply in his excellent book *On Identity*, this is how ‘murderers are made’. And in 1993 Michael Ignatieff (1999: 38) talked to a Serb gunman in a bunker in Krajina, asking how in such a short time this man had come to be at war with his former Croat neighbours:

[T]he kind of Serb this man believes himself to have been before the descent into war is not the kind of Serb he became after the war. Before the war, he might have thought of himself as a Yugoslav or a café manager or a husband rather than as a Serb. Now as he sits in this farmhouse bunker, there are men two hundred and fifty yards away who would kill him. For them he is only a Serb, not a neighbour, not a friend, not a Yugoslav, not a former teammate at the football club. And because he is only a Serb for his enemies, he has become only a Serb to himself.

And this is, of course, the taken-for-granted language of Northern Ireland that undermines its still fragile peace. For all references to ‘unionists’ and ‘nationalists’ assume that everyone who happens to be born into the Protestant faith believes in the union with Britain, is attached to nothing else of significance in their life and is no different from any other Protestant in this regard—and *vice versa* for Catholics. It is unsurprising that hate crime, including with a racist as well as a sectarian motivation, should flourish in this cultural milieu.

A second important feature of the friendship club is the absence of alcohol, although members may, individually and severally, adjourn afterwards to Ten Square in the city centre for the salsa evening there. While superficially similar to an old Belfast tradition of ‘temperance’, this is motivated by a modern and quite opposite concern—non-discrimination. Clearly some individuals, from a Muslim background in particular, would not feel welcome were the club to serve alcohol and this convention is readily accepted. Moreover, it is critical that it is clear to all that the club is not a dating agency.

A third dimension comprises the practical activities and the associated sharing. This makes the friendship club more accessible to those who are not part of the ‘chattering classes’ or fluent in English and allows diverse experiences to be brought to bear. The food prepared

Not the chattering classes: in the painting class



for Norma's party was a good example.

Finally, it is very important that the friendship club, just like a good friend, is always just *there*. Meeting every Thursday in all weathers and during holidays—never mind all the ancillary activities—it has been a constantly available resource on which its members have come to know they can rely.

Making links

Integration is, at heart, a process of building relationships. And the friendship club has proved an effective vehicle not only for making friends but also for widening circles of contact and connection. It has provided access to other organisations—volunteering opportunities have been particularly important for asylum-seekers, denied the opportunity to enter gainful employment. And it has led to participation in other projects, like the Why Belfast? postcard photo-book.² As Stephanie has put it, the friendship club provides 'a springboard for other connections and possibilities'.

And those links have spread across the globe. While obviously the club is not a Christian institution, its parties at Christmas, generously hosted by the CWA, have been stand-out affairs in this regard. The 2010 party coincided with, and provided an excellent *entrée* for, the arrival of 20 young people from France, Sierra Leone, South Africa, the US and Belfast involved in the Global Xchange scheme, a partnership between the British Council and Voluntary Service Overseas. The group had been in South Africa for the preceding three months.

'Thank you so much Friendship Club for a great evening ... we couldn't have asked for a better introduction to some of the international community here ... brilliant initiative.'

Claire Faithorn, British Council Ireland

'Just so wonderful. My first time. It just made my day. Where could I ever meet so many nationalities? Fun and great.' Bala, India

Ninety-three people attended the even bigger 2011 party,



Baiting the dragon: fun and games at the Christmas party in the Chinese Resource Centre

from 31 nationalities and including 12 children. Notable was the presence of many members of the Chinese community. A cosmopolitan salsa class, with a credibly multilingual teacher, proved a highlight, with everybody taking part and constantly rotating their partners.

Earlier that year, links were made via the South Belfast Roundtable between Belfast and Sudan—the friendship club having previously supported a member who was an asylum-seeker from Darfur. In receipt of a competitive award from the British Council's Active Citizens programme, friendship club members visited Sudan and in July that year five community workers from Sudan reciprocated the contact.³ Having taken part in the friendship club, they pledged to establish one themselves in Darfur, on their return.

² See www.whybelfast.blogspot.com.

³ See www.britishcouncil.org/new/press-office/press-releases/Sudanese-Active-Citizens-visit-Belfast/.

The lessons

What the friendship club undoubtedly excludes is an ethos of **hospitality**, a micro-cosm of how Ash Amin (2004) has argued Europe should deal with its multi-ethnicity through ‘empathy for the stranger’. This ethos is evident in the absence of boundaries between members and non-members that would raise barriers to entry. It is evident too in the support for the most vulnerable which the club has manifested.

The socially conservative culture of Northern Ireland is reflected in a strong tendency, particularly in church-led charitable activities, to conceive of the relationship between the charitable provider and the user in a paternalistic fashion and, where this acquires an international dimension, to use the model of the

proselytising missionary. This might superficially accord with the ethos of hospitality of the friendship club but the latter is inextricably linked with another ethical stance to which Amin draws attention: solidarity.

This changes the relationship between provider and user to one of equality between global citizens. And that is fundamental to the friendship club. It lies behind the fact that, as far as is reasonably practicable, access to everything to do with the friendship club is free. The principle is not rigidly applied—members made graduated contributions (down to zero) to the cost of the overnight summer trip in 2011, depending on ability to pay—but it is an important statement of inclusiveness of all, which is made clear to other organisations wishing to offer something to club members.

Alongside the ethos of hospitality stands the principle of **impartiality**. This is often confused in UK and Irish debates, involving religious advocates, with a claim that it is synonymous with the promotion of secularism, presented as inimical to expressions of faith. On the contrary, impartiality is identified with non-discrimination: tolerance and freedom of conscience in multi-faith societies depend on public authorities being neutral between different religious orientations, rather than embodying any one affiliation which would discriminate against other- or non-believers. Similarly, the impartiality of the friendship club is central to its inclusiveness to all and to the way all members can feel at ease there.

There is in this context the issue of the association of Common Grounds with the adjacent City Church. In that sense, the venue is not entirely neutral. But this is overridden by the values of the café itself—the ‘compassion and generosity’ to which it is committed.

There are two phrases used by Stephanie as ‘slogans’ to sum up the friendship club in her regular emails to members. One is ‘a space for diverse people to experience common ground’. This perfectly expresses the interculturalist or cosmopolitan outlook on the world, combining an individualistic concept of society with a sense of common humanity, rather than fracturing populations on stereotyped communal lines.

The other is ‘a social peg to hang a conversation on’. This touches on the problem which social scientists refer to as a ‘co-ordination dilemma’. Individuals, whether from newcomer or ‘host’ communities, may well want to integrate with their fellow human beings but they lack the safe spaces for intercultural dialogue to take place. The importance of such spaces was one of the lessons

**Embodying the values of the friendship club: co-ordinator
Stephanie Mitchell**



drawn from the Shared Cities project run in the early 2000s by the Council of Europe.⁴

The ethos of hospitality and the principle of impartiality are both embodied for the visitor to the friendship club in the co-ordinator. That is why the role is so demanding—and Stephanie's impeccable execution of it vital. It is not just about the welcome, critical and enduring though that first impression is. It is also about a capacity for strict confidentiality: members of the friendship club do open themselves up in this environment of trust. It also requires extreme sensitivity, including the gentle, informal 'policing' of any inappropriate behaviour. And it demands a breadth of practical knowledge and useful contacts: while members themselves are involved in mutual signposting, ultimately this responsibility comes back to the co-ordinator.

In sum, the co-ordinator role in this—and any similar—venture requires finely attuned cultural antennae. S/he must be able to behave in an entirely non-discriminatory way, treating every individual with equal dignity, rather than imposing an unreflective personal agenda. Only on that basis can s/he stand back from her/himself, so to speak, and see the world from the perspective of the other.

⁴The author was an adviser to the project.



Reflecting the world: Denise (left) and Mimi from the friendship club

The challenges

The challenges facing the friendship club are fundamentally those of success. The dramatic growth of involvement has undoubtedly come close to bursting the seams of the back room of Common Grounds and one possible option might be to extend it. A larger venue will be needed if members are to continue to be able to sit together in comfort and hear each other speak, so that conversations do not become reduced to a more superficial level.

Success has also brought a lot of external attention to the friendship club. The co-ordinator has to field a host of queries for access to the club from those wishing to publicise events or courses, to speak to members for research or journalistic purposes, to present exhibitions, to circulate job opportunities and so on. She has however been anxious to protect club members from unwelcome or inappropriate intrusion. How to balance interest and insulation is an issue addressed in the final section.

This attention, allied to the burgeoning events around the friendship club, has meant that Stephanie has been working much more than the 2.5 days a month which she, entirely theoretically, devotes to the

friendship club. The club has been run on a modest budget: grants and donations in the near three years of its existence have amounted to under £52,000. It is understood that funders are always on the look-out for new initiatives, but innovative projects which have proved their worth should surely enjoy continuing support—indeed, should be resourced to the extent that they can scale up and replicate.

After all, while the success of the friendship club might encourage a complacent view that it can be taken for granted, it bears underscoring that this is a fragile plant in a quite inauspicious social and political climate. It does need to be nurtured to thrive—particularly for its capacity to be ‘seeded’ elsewhere and to provide a source of ‘cross-pollination’ with related initiatives.

While the case for additional support from Belfast City Council and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister thus appears self-evident—particularly as Peace funding runs its course—the logic of this situation, as explored in the final section, is however to encourage more active ‘ownership’ of the friendship club by its members. This, in itself, would be a desirable trajectory.

Fun on a shoestring: the friendship club trip to Lough Shannagh



The future

There has been some public attention to the Belfast Friendship Club. The launch was covered in the *South Belfast News*. There was a report on BBC Radio Ulster's *Saturday Magazine* programme in August 2011. A friendship club member, Nommy Mahlangu, was one of two subjects of a short film, *Belfast Now*, commissioned in 2011 by Channel Four.⁵ The co-ordinator was invited to contribute an article to *City Matters* magazine, distributed by Belfast City Council to all homes in the city, in November that year.⁶ And she was the source for a substantial *South Belfast News* report in February 2012.⁷

There is scope, however, for more robust media promotion of the friendship club—not to encourage more members but to raise awareness about how it models a culture of tolerance in concrete terms. This would be the most effective way to ensure that the ‘ripple effect’ of the club—in terms of assisting integration more widely and undermining racism and other forms of intolerance—has the greatest amplitude and reach. One specific project would be to engage a sympathetic film company in the production of a half-hour documentary, which might be sold to BBC Northern Ireland or UTV.

There is also room for more specific targeting of ‘indigenous’ members, including young people, as well as the more socially vulnerable. This could be done via a whole range of associations, including the Rugby Road residents’ group, the Spirit of Enniskillen cross-community school-students’ project, the Welcome organisation and so on. Such outreach takes time, of course, and the co-ordinator is already over-committed. But individual members could come forward to speak on behalf of the friendship club—which raises the wider issue of extending member ownership.

In 2011, Stephanie was unfortunately incapacitated for several weeks as a result of an operation. During that time, however, the informal steering group stepped up and kept the friendship club ticking over to good effect, suggesting there was scope for a more member-driven approach. This might be a way, for example, to address the mounting pressure of outside requests for access, for one reason or another. It might also, more positively, facilitate more presentations being proposed by members—as with Mark’s winning electric-guitar performance or the ‘Friendship Dub’ rehearsal in advance of its performance at the Chinese New Year festivities.

It would be difficult to formalise membership of the friendship club, given its inherently transitory nature to

One former member, Biniam Tesfai, an Eritrean refugee who is now working for an NGO in London, found life in Belfast frustrating: even when granted refugee status, he could not find work at the very high level to which he was professionally trained (as a telecommunications engineer) in local companies. He said of the friendship club: **‘Sometimes I was feeling so down that it was the only thing in the week that made me happy, that gave me some hope.’**



some extent. It is also a critical feature of the club that, as indicated above, there is no clear boundary between members and non-members which might impose any barriers to entry, particularly upon the most vulnerable and marginalised—as, for example, a membership fee would do. And indeed some of those feeling insecure on the margins would not wish their anonymity to be publicly compromised.

The big advantage the friendship club enjoys over many other membership-based organisations, however, is that it acts as a magnet for new members and is characterised by very active engagement: indeed, members who have not attended for a few weeks sometimes apologise for their absence, even though of course attendance is voluntary. This ultimately goes back to the affective, rather than merely instrumental, nature of members’ commitment. It makes the friendship club more the hub of a very wide social network than a discrete organisation.

It should thus be possible, without having a formal membership and constitution, to sustain and indeed further expand the friendship club and its associated activities in a way that is member-driven. Where an element of formality could be usefully included would be in the annual election / re-election of members of a representative steering group from those present at a well-signalled club meeting.

The steering group could then take some of the burden from the co-ordinator in two ways. First, looking inwards, they could channel ideas from members—many of whom have themselves considerable skills to share—into a rolling programme of activities integral to the club. And, looking outwards, they could filter requests for access to the club. None of this would of course detract from the capacity of individual members or groups of members autonomously to organise and publicise

activities of their own volition.

Given that a significant minority of friendship club members have been traumatised through experiences which led them to seek refuge away from their home country, enhancing the autonomous role of members in organising activities and determining the future direction of the club might help raise resilience and self-esteem. Agency, in that sense, matters.

The next step can be to develop the emerging friendship club network and expand it beyond Northern Ireland. The first task would be to establish a moderated website, which would provide up-to-date information on meetings and events, a discussion forum for members and a mechanism for exchange of information and skills.

The obvious next move would be to set up a friendship club in Dublin, which is a member of the Council of Europe / European Commission Intercultural Cities network. There are a number of NGOs there which might be willing to take the project under their wing. In the longer run, the ideal would be to find an established international NGO which was willing, on a European canvas, to take responsibility for the 'franchise'—or to set up an entirely new NGO from Belfast to that end. Support from the European institutions committed to intercultural dialogue could be anticipated for such a goal.

This report has made clear that any such efforts to replicate the friendship club would have to be based on an explicit understanding of its normative underpinnings. While these have evolved implicitly in Belfast as

the pioneer of this innovative way of practising 'really existing cosmopolitanisation', they need to be drawn out and highlighted.

These norms are not rocket science but they are universal, and it is critical to the inclusiveness of the friendship club that this should be so—that the values should simultaneously be readily understandable and widely accepted. As has been made clear above, the fundamental values are of hospitality and impartiality, which between them engender the solidarity that provides the 'gel' on which the friendship club subsists.

Conventional anti-racist activities are usually targeted at organisations and activists and may not touch the individual citizen. The friendship club does just that, and models an alternative, cosmopolitan way of 'everyday life'. As Belfast, and Northern Ireland, still wrestles with what 'normality' might look like—beyond an unending horizon of sectarian division, intolerance and residual violence—and as Europe, more generally, struggles with the challenge of xenophobia in an uncertain world, the friendship club has a much, much wider significance.

⁵ available at <http://adampatterson.wordpress.com/>

⁶ 'Celebrated citizen: Stephanie Mitchell', *City Matters*, November 2011 – January 2012, www.belfastcity.gov.uk/citymatters/pdf/CityMattersNovemberJanuary.pdf, p23

⁷ Scott Jamison, 'A hand of friendship to new city arrivals', *South Belfast News*, 20 February 2012, <http://belfastmediagroup.com/a-hand-of-friendship-to-new-city-arrivals/>

Looking to a bright future



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Interviewees

Belfast Friendship Club members

Sean Brown*
 Alan Clarke (also Ballymena Friendship Club)
 Zsuzsi Pelech*
 René Wilsdorf
 Paul Tempan*
 Vlastimil Prorok*
 Norma Nyamambi
 Suleiman Abdullahi
 Mark Stephens
 Liz Griffith (also Belfast Law Centre)
 Charo Lanao-Madden
 Maeve McKeag (also GEMS NI)*
 Denise Magno Dos Santos
 Selva Chandra
 Yvonne Naylor (also Corrymeela Community)

* Steering group members

External stakeholders

Pete Craig (manager, Common Grounds Café)
 Eileen Chan-Hu (chief executive, Chinese Welfare Association)
 Leish Dolan (Belfast City Council good relations unit)
 Laura Giacani (Derry Friendship Club)
 Linda Hutchinson (race relations officer, Ireland Housing Executive)
 Moira McCabe (NI Community of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers)
 Jayne McConkey (*inter alia*, organiser of Common Grounds exhibitions)
 Paddy McNicholl (Coleraine Friendship Club)
 Roger McVicker (Migrant Help)
 Ch Insp Gabriel Moran (south Belfast commander, Police Service of Northern Ireland)

About the author

Robin Wilson is a leading international expert in intercultural dialogue. He was one of the principal drafters of the standard-setting White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008). He advises the 21-strong Intercultural Cities network, whose members (including Dublin) are committed to making their diversity an asset rather than a liability, initiated by the Council of Europe and the European Commission as a practical follow-up to the White Paper. Since 2005 he has carried out with a colleague a number of evaluations of the anti-sectarian and intercultural programmes run by the Irish Football Association, including its World United squad, and he largely designed and has subsequently evaluated the 2007 intercultural plan of the Football Association of Ireland (FAI, 2007). He has also written two publications to assist the Ballynafeigh Community Development Association with its intercultural activity (Wilson, 2007, 2008). And he was recently commissioned with a colleague by the European Network Against Racism to write a paper on the discourse of the xenophobic and Islamophobic far-right parties across the continent (Wilson and Hainsworth, 2012).