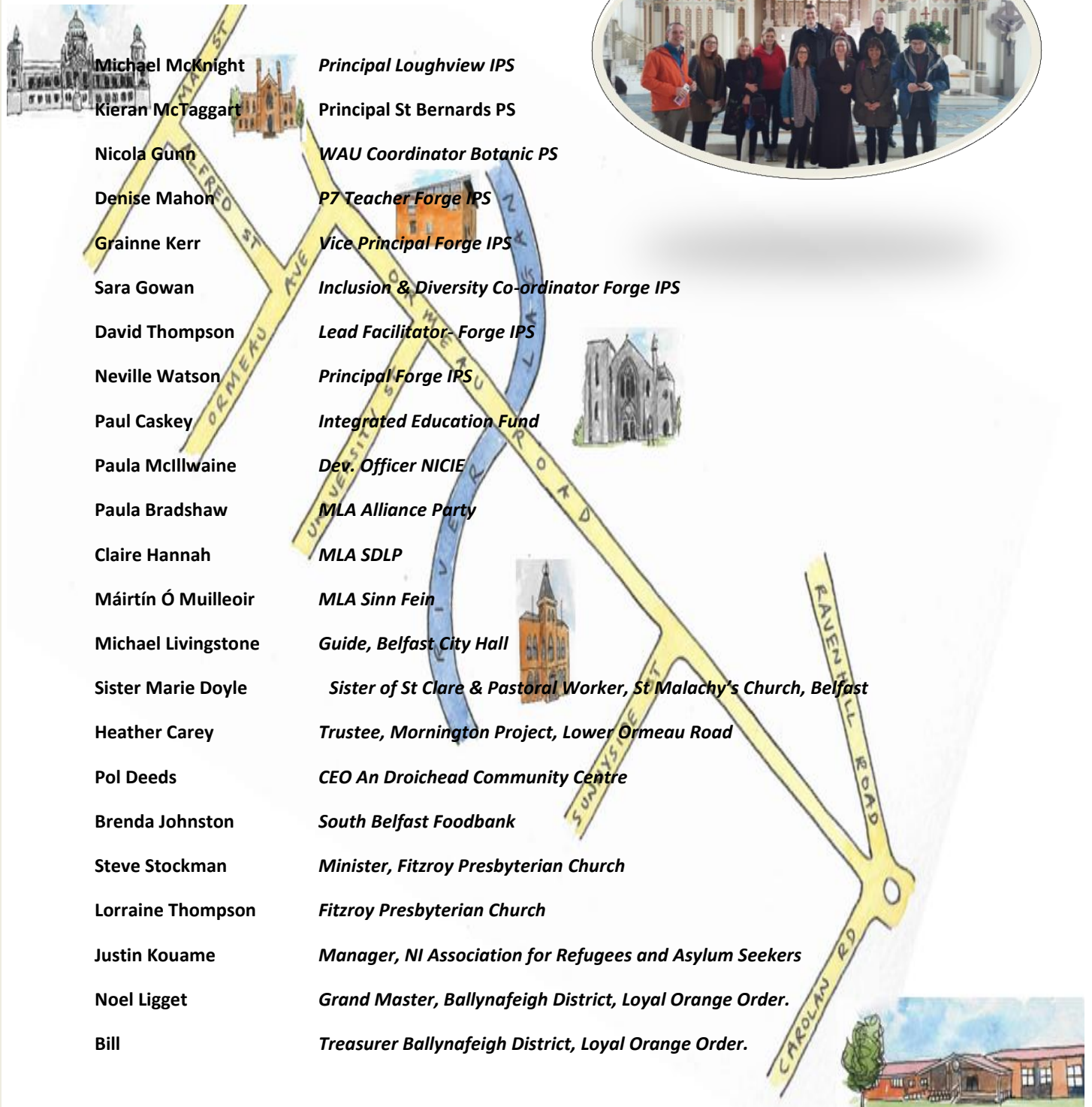


**March 2017**



## Participants and Facilitators

At the outset....this event was about people and we want to acknowledge the contribution of all the people who walked, talked and helped out in any way, all day, for part of the day or along the way!



## Introduction

In March 2017 with assistance from the IEF 'Integration in Practice' fund, Forge Integrated Primary School, in partnership with: Loughview IPS, St. Bernard's IPS and Botanic PS, piloted a community engagement programme based on an 'Urban Adventure Walk' starting at Belfast City Hall and working back towards the school using the Ormeau Road as a corridor.

We wanted to look at how we could enhance our community relations, local history and integration practice through engaging with local people and visiting places we may not ordinarily visit.

While we were visiting *places* – buildings and spaces - we primarily wanted to visit those places in the context of the people who inhabit them.

We wanted to connect with people who have a deep and passionate association with the places we were visiting and who form part of the community we operate in. We wanted to hear their stories.

Walking is a visceral pursuit, perhaps like sharing food it diminishes formality and encourages conversation and openness. We framed this pilot event as a 'walking conference.' The coming together of people from within our school and from a number of other local schools and organisations allowed us to share each other's stories and experiences as well as reflecting on those of the people we met along the way.

We had an ambitious itinerary and we fitted a lot into the day. The summing up of the day that follows can't do much beyond giving a flavour of the event. Different participants will have taken different things from their experience. We met a wide range of people and had wide ranging discussions, on and far beyond the subject matter. It would be impossible to do that justice in a few pages and a series of meetings and visits like this that touch on the past, present, culture and religion evoke very personal feelings, coloured by our own views, experiences and expectations.



## The centre of Things



The core group met at Forge IPS, had a quick coffee and a chat before getting transported by bus to City Hall. There we met **Michael Livingstone** who gave a short, bespoke tour of some parts of the building – setting the scene for the day at the city’s modern centre. We looked at some of the stained glass windows commemorating significant moments of Belfast’s history and also at some of the features of the building that looked to the city’s future and the role of the hall in building it.

A theme that came through is that for many of us who grew up or lived through the troubled period of the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is that progress and forward thinking here can feel like a recent phenomenon. However, it is good to be reminded that for centuries, people have striven to improve the lives of others, to build bridges and make progress, in complex and difficult circumstances.



## Sister Marie & St Malachy’s Church

We walked a few hundred metres to St Malachy’s Church in Alfred Street where we met Sister Marie Doyle, a nun of the Sisters of St. Clare attached to St Malachy’s Church as a Pastoral Worker. Originally from Scotland, she is one of three ‘Poor Clare’ Nuns living and working in South Belfast. Her colleagues also have specific roles: a cancer nurse and a minister of the Eucharist.



She told us about her religious calling and her life as a social worker within the church, working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who live with conflict legacy issues that are trans-generational.

St. Malachy’s is an architectural gem, with a rich and interesting history as a building. Sister Marie didn’t know much about it – it is to her a place of peace and sanctuary that attracts many people for that reason – but her busy working life was lived largely beyond the church itself.

## **Pol Deeds – An Droichead Cultural Centre**



Another few hundred metres brought us into the lower Ormeau and An Droichead Community Centre. Pol Deeds, the CEO told us about his background and reflected on Belfast's very close knit communities within communities. Originally from the west of the city he has worked at An Droichead for 14 years but is still not quite a local! He told us about the growth and development of Irish in the area and the very successful uptake of Irish in parts of East Belfast. An Droichead

translates into English as The Bridge. Pol sees his role as one of developing and sustaining an Irish language culture that bridges religious and political divides in a climate where it is difficult to gain support from above and where the potential for the language to be used either for or against political gain is ever present. This theme of grass roots activism struggling to grow a positive presence from the ground up was one that recurred throughout the day, and one that resonated with many of us.

## **Mornington – Heather Carey and Brenda Johnston**

Next stop was Mornington Community Project, where we met Heather Carey, a trustee of the project and Brenda Johnston, who manages South Belfast Foodbank. Mornington is an eclectic mix of community support and start up initiatives, centred on a house in the lower Ormeau Road originally bought by Crescent Church in the 80s and used to house a Women's Group.



The facility has morphed into something much more diverse and currently provides premises for a coffee shop, a global food project aimed at enabling asylum seekers and refugees to develop work and business skills and also acts as a distribution point for the South Belfast Foodbank. Throw in Solas, an early year Autism Intervention Charity and a number of small business start up rental spaces and you have what must be among the most intensively and productively used 2000 square feet in town.

The theme that came through from talking to Heather and Brenda was one of creativity and adaptability – an ethos of seeking out ways to enable people to do positive things that bridged the gap between needing to be supported and being self-supporting.

## Fitzroy Presbyterian Church



From Mornington we crossed the road and headed up University Avenue to Fitzroy Presbyterian Church. Here we had lunch and a chat with the minister, Steve Stockman.



Steve told us about the rather unique character of Fitzroy, perhaps moulded in modern times largely by his predecessor, the Rev Ken Newell, whose courageous peace building

efforts are well known.

This theme has been maintained by Steve and his congregation, whose eclectic approach to sermonising – ‘The Gospel According to Van Morrison, Bruce Springsteen, U2.....’ is mirrored in the church’s eclectic approach to community support work.

Another theme that carried through the day is the interconnectedness of several of the places we visited – the background community work that goes on by groups and individuals that may be seeded in a church but has no surface connection or benefit to the institution. Exploring this web of interconnectivity challenges assumptions and helps us to appreciate the sheer complexity of people and places.



## Northern Ireland Council for Asylum Seekers and Refugees – Justin Kouame

We left Fitzroy and wandered a little further to NICRAS to meet Justin Kouame.

Justin, originally from the Ivory Coast works to support refugees and asylum seekers. Our attention was perhaps particularly taken by the plight of people refused Asylum but who are unable to be returned to their home country because of war or conflict.



These people are in a kind of limbo – unable to claim benefits or work, and with no certainty about where they will be moved on to or when. Again, from the outside, viewed from the black and white perspective of tabloid newsprint these issues can seem very simple and people in such situations presented as exploitative. In the flesh, standing in Justin's cramped office with plastic bags containing basic provisions for failed asylum seekers ranged around the floor it is a much more complex and human issue.

### Pauses for Reflection

- From the NICRAS Office we crossed to the corner of Sean Graham's Bookmakers shop on the Lower Ormeau where we stopped with David Thompson for a short factual mention of the atrocity committed there by loyalist gunmen in 1992 when they burst into the shop on a February afternoon and shot five people dead. Nine others were wounded and the life changing impact on those survivors, their families and community reverberate to this day.

Inscribed in part of the memorial stone is a paraphrasing of a profound quotation from the father of one of the victims, 15 year old James Kennedy. Mr Kennedy remarked, following the death of his wife, whose death he felt was also, ultimately, a consequence of the attack:

"The bullets that killed James didn't just travel in distance, they travelled in time. Some of the bullets never stopped travelling."

- We continued along the road and paused again at the Rose and Crown Bar where a UVF bomb killed 6 people and injured a further 18 in 1974.

## Ballynaveigh Orange Hall – Noel Ligget



Over the Bridge and on the other side of the Ormeau Road, our next stop was Ballynaveigh Orange Hall where we met District Grand Master Noel Ligget.

Noel gave us a tour of the hall and engaged in a question and answer session about him, the Order and the sometimes controversial recent history of the local lodges. What emerged was a picture of a man dedicated to an organisation which he regards as an integral part of his family history and that of local communities.

A sense emerged of the impact of change over the years from Noel's perspective. A predominately unionist area has now become much more eclectic and the Orange fraternity now feel very much a minority. Noel also spoke about perceptions within the Orange Order about how attitudes have changed towards them from within the unionist and protestant



community. While membership may once have been considered advantageous in career terms, that is no longer the case and there is a sense that the middle classes have cut the order adrift.

For many of our group it was the first time inside an Orange Hall and an opportunity to ask questions and hear the story of someone whose life has had the Order very much at its centre. As was the case at all of the venues we visited, we were warmly welcomed and looked after. Noel Ligget, a baker by trade, bakes an excellent scone – people are never one dimensional!



## Final Pause - On the Walk Back to School



Our final stop on the way back to school was at the site of the Red Lion Pub (now Brewbot) where David Thompson acknowledged the fact that in November 1971 an IRA bomb killed three people and injured several others.

This photograph, taken at the time, seems, and in many ways is, from another time. But we were again reminded that many of those impacted by the events of that time are still with us here and now.

Image used with permission ©Victor Patterson [www.victorpatterson.com](http://www.victorpatterson.com) The photographer, from whom this photograph was sourced, was able to tell me that he clearly recalls the member of his staff who took it, jumping in the car in Eglantine Avenue to follow the ambulances – that was how it was.

## Final Word

Just before we walked home, before we moved on from The Red Lion site, David Thompson made his final contribution to the day by reading Padriag O'Tuama's beautiful poem:

### [the] north[ern] [of] Ireland

It is both a dignity and  
a difficulty  
to live between these names,

perceiving politics  
in the syntax of  
the state.

And at the end of the day,  
the reality is  
that whether we change  
or whether we stay the same

these questions will  
remain.

Who are we  
to be  
with one another?

and

How are we  
to be  
with one  
another?

and

What to do  
with all those memories  
of all those funerals?

and

What about those present  
whose past was blasted  
far beyond their  
future?

I wake  
You Wake  
She wakes  
He wakes  
They wake.

We wake  
and take  
this troubled beauty forward.

## Reflection



Back at school we had a short debrief session. In many ways the debrief had already occurred along the way – the visceral nature of walking with others and the free and easy atmosphere it affords was alluded to at the beginning of this report and we

certainly found ourselves discussing and feeding back opinion along the way.

All of the participants I talked with expressed an enthusiasm for the event. All of us had been somewhere new, met someone new; heard a perspective that wasn't quite expected. We had learned a lot, broken some ice; been given some food for thought.

**The following are a few of the comments I managed to type into my phone during that final conversation...**

"I found it opinion changing, uplifting, and a journey on a number of levels."

"I was struck by the similarities in terms of some of the stories – small organisations struggling to do things with very little help from above. It was very encouraging and resonated with some of our own experiences."

"It was very intense – I can't believe it was only this morning that we started out at city hall."

"I visited parts of Belfast I didn't know existed. It was a great opportunity to explore mutual respect and a real journey for us, together."

"I got an insight into places I drive past every day and had a view on, but now realise it was a very limited view."

"The success of this hinged on finding the right people who could be open and share their story, and we found the right people."

"I met some very interesting and inspiring people."

"The connectivity between some of the people and place we encountered today is very interesting. People are fostering and developing connections that allow real ground up work to be done in the community. That level of collaboration and positive interaction exemplifies us at our best. If we can somehow put some of that across to children it can only bode well in terms of a more functional community going forward."

## **Next Steps**

The general consensus of opinion on the day was that what we packed in as a group of adults would be too much for primary aged children. The group size and some of the venues would be a mismatch and some work may need to be done to make the subject matter more accessible to children.

But – there is room to adjust and adapt. Technology and smaller groups from different schools were mooted as possible ways of working around the issues and maybe there is scope to look at a project, involving small groups of pupils to create video interviews with the aim of making a documentary film about a walk.

Some pupils could be walkers and talkers. Others could be involved in the production of the film. There could be room to look at ‘performance’ showings in local venues to pull in parents as well. Such a project would take some work and we would almost certainly look towards external help from organisations with specialist skills to help and that would mean funding and resource. But watch this space, seeds have been planted – something may grow from it!

*Neville Watson, March 2017*



Many thanks to all participants and facilitators and to owners of copyright who gave kind permission to use their material. Original artwork by David Thompson.