Everyday Peacebuilding

International Fund for Ireland

FundFocus

October **2026**

IFI **40th ANNIVERSARY**



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Chair's Introduction



As we mark the 40th anniversary of the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), this edition of Fund Focus reflects on four decades of resilience, courage, and grassroots transformation.

Over the last forty years, we have taken great pride in our willingness to take calculated risks, to invest in the areas and individuals that need intervention the most, and to reach deep into communities where the benefits of the peace process have taken longer to emerge.

This milestone edition captures the essence of that ongoing journey. Inside, we look back at our key milestones - from early economic development programmes to our recent focus on community capacity building, peace barriers, and empowering young people to shape their own futures. Never standing still, the IFI has continually evolved against a shifting landscape, to ensure our support and interventions reach the peacebuilders and communities that need it most.

We are also honoured to feature insights from guest contributor Monica McWilliams, co-founder of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, who reminds us that true peacebuilding requires trusted spaces, critical thinking, and civic activism that bridges everyday realities.

Most importantly, this Fund Focus highlights the beating heart of the IFI; our participant voices, project case studies and the shared journeys that nurture new relationships. Through previous initiatives like our Personal Youth Development Programme (PYDP), and Communities in Partnership Programme (CIPP), projects such as the Mid-Louth Youth Service, Limavady's Building Brighter Futures, the LEAD project in East Donegal and West Tyrone, and the EMBRACE project in the Northwest, we saw the true impact of what is possible when young people and isolated communities are given the trust, space, and time to find their voice.

The inspiring stories of people like Adam and Sophie demonstrate how grassroots support can completely transform their path in life, turning young people from isolated recipients into the community leaders of tomorrow.

Celebrating twelve years of impact, Belfast's IMAGINE peace barriers project recently unveiled new artwork for permanent installation at Cliftonpark Avenue, which will stand as an enduring symbol of transition, renewal, and hope.

As we reflect on our legacy, we are acutely aware that the work of peace continues to walk with us. Contemporary challenges force us to rethink our methods, combat misinformation, and seek new ways to foster and encourage civic dialogue. Looking forward, our new strategy, Crossing the Threshold, points us directly towards that bold future.

I would like to thank our international donors, our dedicated project partners, and, above all, the everyday peacebuilders whose courage continues to forge a shared future over a divided past.



Shona McCarthy, Chair

Key Milestones

Four decades of progress, partnership and peace

40 YEARS

1986 – 1995

The Foundation

The International Fund for Ireland is established by the British and Irish Governments with founding support from the United States. Six pioneering programmes are launched spanning business enterprise, tourism, urban development, agriculture, science and technology, and the Wider Horizons Programme. The Fund begins its mission of promoting economic and social advance, creating employment opportunities and stimulating local enterprise in disadvantaged areas on both sides of the border.



Caption: John Hume pictured with President Ronald Reagan, Tip O'Neill and Senator Edward Kennedy.

1996 – 2005

Building on the Peace Process

Following the historic ceasefires and the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, the Fund identifies a critical shift is needed — from economic development to community capacity building and reconciliation. The European Union, Canada, Australia and New Zealand join as donors. Sixteen programmes are developed across community capacity building, regeneration, and economic development, helping stabilise the broader context of newly formed political institutions.



Caption: Navan Centre & Fort was funded by the IFI.

2006 – 2015

Deepening Community Impact

The Fund publishes Sharing this Space and launches its flagship programmes — the Peace Barriers Programme to help interface communities tackle the legacy of peace walls, and the Peace Impact Programme to reach communities not yet engaged in peacebuilding.
The Personal Youth Development Programme is launched to empower at-risk young people with life skills, confidence, and resilience.



Caption: A former Peace Wall is transformed into a children's play park in North Belfast.

Key **Milestones** (continued)

40 YEARS

2016 – 2026

A Lasting Legacy

The Communities in Partnership Programme embeds cross-border cooperation and local leadership. The Fund responds to new challenges including Brexit, social division, and the ongoing need for dialogue. The IFI documents and shares its accumulated knowledge through Sharing the Learning, ensuring its insights into peacebuilding practice benefit communities and practitioners worldwide.



Caption: Manchester United Foundation launch a new cross-community programme at Ulster University.

IFI Sharing the Learning
https://sharingthelearning.com/

Congressman Brendan Boyle



Over the past four decades, the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) has worked to build a lasting peace and improve the lives of countless people. I have personally visited several IFI projects and strongly support them. I'm proud to have worked with both Democrats and Republicans in Congress to secure funds for IFI's noble work. Just as so many Irish have contributed to the United States, America will continue to return that support. Congratulations on 40 years of extraordinary peacebuilding.

Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick



For forty years, the International Fund for Ireland has helped communities across Northern Ireland and the border counties turn the hope of peace into lasting progress. The Fund has grown into one of the most meaningful examples of what partnership, perseverance, and local leadership can achieve. I am proud to stand with partners on both sides of the Atlantic who remain committed to protecting and strengthening that progress. The work of peace is never finished—but the progress made through the International Fund for Ireland shows what is possible when communities choose a shared future over a divided past.

FundFocus **Guest Contributor**

Monica Williams

Peacebuilding: reflections on the 40th anniversary of the IFI



Peace is not a place, it is a condition, and peacebuilding entails putting the elements in place to create these conditions. When the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was ratified in 1998 by the people's referenda, North and South, it spun the aspiration of peace into a challenge for our politics to work so we could deliver on what was promised.

I was a representative for the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC), at the multi-party peace negotiations in 1998, and believed that our principles of Human Rights, Equality and Inclusion, as applied on an inter-community basis, would copper-fasten that promise. Sadly, that failed to materialise in practice. Power-sharing became dysfunctional on too many occasions while mutual respect became mutual attrition, particularly over symbols and aspects of identity. As for human rights – we are still waiting for the promised Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and, given the Supreme Court's recent interpretation of Article 2 of the Windsor Framework, the vacuum remains.

So, the lesson that I draw from the last 28 years is that while politicians are important, we cannot rely solely on political players to either appreciate the promises contained in the 1998 Agreement, or to respect them. And that is why peacebuilding remains so important today.

Having seen how women from very different backgrounds worked so well together in the Women's Coalition, I am convinced that two essential elements were trust across those differences and the intellectual curiosity to ask questions. We learnt the importance of this from our years active in the Women's Movement, the Trade Union Movement as well as the Business Sector where we were accustomed to reaching a deal on our varied interests. Never settle for

> *What peacebuilding needs today is the space to bring people together, across their differences, to discuss the nature of their hopes and their anxieties.*

FundFocus **Guest Contributor**

the simple assertion which all too often hides the accountability of powerholders by rejecting the suggestion that 'things have always been like this!' The reality is that things can be different and decision-makers must be held to account in a responsible manner.

I have seen how people can build trust through sharing their lived experience in safe spaces. A 'Peace Wall' does not change the experience of not being able to make ends meet or to get timely access to a doctor or a dentist. Yet for too long we have been told by various political powerholders that 'they over there' get everything and 'we, here' get nothing. Worse than that, we have been told that this injustice is the fault of 'them ones', not the political decision-makers. The politics of blame used to be framed by national/religious difference, now it is as likely to be framed by 'othering' based on race. Social media too often sings the same song with irresponsible actors spinning the line that if it wasn't for 'them' everything would be wonderful. A retrospect rosiness of the past blithely forgets the exploitation of the linen-mills, the shipyards and the docks when past efforts were made to divide workers in much the same way as we now see the division of neighbours.

What peacebuilding needs today is the space to bring people together, across their differences, to discuss the nature of their hopes and their anxieties. To critically interrogate the nature of decision-making and to be clear about the nature of the good society and what changes are necessary to achieve it. This is trust-based activism - not delineated by an activist's position on the constitutional question - but starts with the realities of lived experience. When we are clear about the society that we want, then we can discuss how this can be achieved and what constitutional framing can best deliver it. The Women's Movement have long spoken in terms of politics with a small 'p' and Politics with a big 'P' – civic action being the former and elected democracy the latter. The reality is that we are currently seeing that progressive, inclusive change needs both. That is why the Women's Coalition proposed a Civic Forum, as part of the peace agreement, to act as an advisory body to the Northern Ireland Assembly. It was sidelined by the traditional political parties shortly afterwards and has yet to be reinstated. Sharing decisions – or even power - with an active citizenry was considered as surplus to requirements and the vacuum for deliberating on issues 'too hot to handle' persists. Given these short comings, the projects funded by the IFI over the decades has enabled much-needed risk taking for communities to move forward.

If 'peace comes dropping slow', as W.B. Yeats once wrote, then peacebuilding goes hand in hand with perseverance. But slow as it might be, community-based steps have delivered impressive results. Just look at initiatives such as the Blackmountain Shared Space and the Peace Impact Programme that are so inclusive of young people and women - too often 'the missing peace'. Look too at those local activists who have the courage to refute the politics of blame. Peacebuilding requires critical thinking and an analysis rooted in the question 'who benefits from division both at neighbourhood and regional level?'

Sustainable peacebuilding also needs a leap of imagination. Change does not need to be confined by the tram tracks of inherited understanding. It is possible to entertain ideas about how society should be organised and design the menu of options for more participative governance and inclusive reconstruction post conflict. What this requires is a focus on solution-based alternatives. As a leading African American community organiser said in Belfast during a visit two months ago, Martin Luther King did not say 'I have a complaint!' He announced, 'I have a dream!' and mobilised people around his dream of non-violent change. The IFI has also held on to its vision – now 40 years old - and can be proud of what it has achieved. I have worked in war torn regions where the peace builders, community development workers and civic society leaders would give their right hand to have a fund like the IFI's. My hope is that, despite the governments' focus on 'Troubles' more global than ours, the IFI will persevere so that we can continue to build back better, together.



Monica McWilliams is a Northern Irish academic, peace activist, and former politician. In 1996, she co-founded the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and was elected as a delegate to the negotiations that led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

FundFocus
Participant Voices

Adam Murtagh

Over the last 40 years, the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) has prided itself on taking risks and investing in communities that need intervention the most—particularly in areas where the benefits of the Good Friday Agreement have taken longer to reach.

One recent example of this long-term approach is the Mid-Louth Youth Service. Supported by the IFI over a seven-year period, the project has established a permanent place, creating a safe space that will continue changing young people's lives for years to come.

Formerly known as "New Leaf," the project was funded under the IFI's Personal Youth Development Programme (PYDP). Its unique approach of tailored, intensive support was exactly what this rural area needed at a time when there were no dedicated local youth services and limited support available.

Beth Carragher, Project Co-Ordinator at Mid-Louth Youth Services, recalls:

"The IFI was the first funder to put money on the table for our project in 2017. It invested at a time when the area had been starved of youth services and when other funders and agencies had not fully recognised the level of need. Its support was particularly important in a rural area, where young people can be geographically isolated and face significant transport barriers. They cannot always travel to larger towns to access mental health services, education, training, or employment support."

PYDP projects typically support young people aged 17 to 24 who are not in education, employment, or training. Many face complex challenges, including rural isolation, poor mental health, addiction,



Caption: Young people and project team meet Tánaiste and Minister for Finance Simon Harris

FundFocus **Participant Voices**

homelessness, family difficulties, and limited access to transport.

"Some young people were involved in antisocial behaviour or criminality, while others were at risk of exploitation and negative influences," Beth explains. *"There was also a belief among some that there were few opportunities available to them and that their future was limited by where they lived or the circumstances in which they had grown up."*

The project team provided intensive one-to-one support for participants and forged valuable partnerships with key stakeholders, including the School Completion Programme, An Garda Síochána, and the Juvenile Liaison Officer service.

"Our aim was to support young people to return to education, employment, or training, but that journey looked different for every young person. Some needed practical assistance, while others first needed a safe adult to talk to and support with their home life, addiction, homelessness, or significant life changes."

From interview preparation and driver theory test support to confidence building and personal development, participants systematically overcame barriers. Crucially, they started to believe they had something valuable to offer, regardless of the path they chose.

Adam Murtagh's transformational journey illustrates how young people can dream big. Despite facing significant challenges, he is now the first person in his family to go to college.

"I was an early school dropout," Adam shares. *"I was picked on quite a bit and found it hard to make friends. I felt I was never good enough for college because none of my family went, or because I came from an estate that was deemed a bad estate. My family also has addiction issues, and I was always just on the barrier of falling down the wrong path."*

Change began with small steps. Adam started attending the project's drop-in service with friends, getting involved in activities, and building trust with a team dedicated to helping him reach his potential. Building this trust unlocked a host of opportunities.

"Genuinely, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the youth centre, they've done so much for me. They helped me get my first job, apply for college, and secure school equipment through SUSI grants. There have been some incredible experiences as well—we went to the European Parliament in Brussels to meet MEP Nina Carberry, and we also met President Joe Biden when he came to Ireland."

For Adam, the milestones go beyond his positive experience.

"My biggest achievement is being the first person in my family to go to college or complete a Leaving Cert. It mightn't seem big to some people, but to me, it was the biggest thing in my life because I didn't think I'd do it. If the team hadn't pushed me so much, I probably wouldn't have done it. I also got my driver's license at a young age. These were the things I wanted most and worked hardest for, so I'm very proud."

IFI funded projects have proven instrumental in restoring hope, particularly in isolated rural communities. Beth believes the IFI has contributed enormously to the Peace Process, creating opportunities that transform everyday lives like Adam's.

Beth says the IFI's legacy extends far beyond the initial programmes they funded.

"The IFI's legacy is the young people whose lives have changed—who now have support within their own communities and trusted adults there when they need them. It is also the project itself: a sustainable youth service that grew from the IFI's initial belief in Mid-Louth and has now expanded into North East Meath. That service, and every young person it continues to support, is a living part of the IFI's lasting legacy."



Caption: Participant Adam Murtagh is the first in his family to go to college, thanks to support from the project.

FundFocus
Participant Voices

Sophie

For Sophie – and other teenagers like her – taking the first steps towards a more confident and independent outlook began with the 'Building Brighter Futures Project'. Delivered with funding from International Fund for Ireland's Personal Youth Development Programme (PYDP), the Limavady-based initiative is helping young people overcome barriers to education, employment and social participation. It provides a supportive environment where they build confidence, develop skills, and discover new opportunities.

When Sophie first heard about Building Brighter Futures, she was unsure whether it was for her. In fact, it was her mum who encouraged her to get involved, sensing the project could help build her confidence and create new opportunities.

Sophie also realised her lack of qualifications was holding her back. *"I was quiet and shy. I was very isolated. I had no friends and I had very little qualifications, including no English or Maths GCSEs. This stopped me from looking for further education courses after school and employment, because I knew they were a requirement,"* she says.

Today, Sophie's view is very different. She's met people, developed practical skills, taken part in activities and experiences previously unthinkable, and become more involved in her community. Most importantly, she has a newfound confidence and belief in herself. *"I've learned to be more positive and to push myself out of my comfort zone. Meeting new people, feeling involved, and learning new skills have really helped me. The project also helped me with my CV and job skills."*

Project Coordinator Karen Campbell believes the combination of experiences is central to Building Brighter Futures. Working with young people aged 16 to 25 across the Limavady and surrounding



Above: A mural being created to encourage young people who are isolated to reach out during difficult times.

FundFocus **Participant Voices**

area, the project supports those facing a range of barriers, including educational disadvantage, economic inactivity, poor mental health, social isolation and limited confidence. Karen says it's deliberately designed to look beyond employment. *"We start with the individual – building trust, confidence, routine and relationships and addressing some of the other issues happening in their life. From there, we can begin looking at education, qualifications, employability and ultimately progression."*

That approach has produced significant results. By the end of 2024, 122 had participated in the project, with 52 progressing directly into employment and 23 moving into further education or training. They also had access to accredited courses and a wide range of non-accredited programmes.

Karen stresses success cannot always be measured by qualifications or jobs. *"For some young people, the first significant achievement is simply turning up, developing a routine, believing that they could achieve something or mixing with people outside their normal friendship or community group. It is the people who have changed direction in their lives, the relationships that would not otherwise have happened and the community organisations that now have the capacity to continue peacebuilding."*

In the case of Sophie, those first cautious steps have become life-changing achievements. She has now successfully gained her GCSE English qualification and is taking her first steps towards employment. Yet the *"biggest achievement is being more confident and outgoing and I am looking forward to my future"*, she explains.

Her experience illustrates the wider purpose of Building Brighter Futures. Alongside accredited training and Essential Skills support, participants can access CV and interview preparation, industry visits, work shadowing, placements and volunteering as well as activities focused on mental health, personal development, confidence, budgeting and Good Relations. Karen says giving young people the chance to become involved in their community is another important element: *"We have tried to turn young people into contributors rather than simply recipients of a programme."*



Above: The project has had a positive impact on Sophie.

That has included young people developing community projects, supporting family activities, creating safe spaces and helping organise events in their neighbourhoods. Volunteering has also provided participants with genuine workplace experience and, in some cases, a direct route into employment.

For Sophie, that future now includes employment, greater independence and continued personal development. She wants to secure work and progress towards full-time employment, but she also wants other young people who may be experiencing isolation or low confidence to realise that change is possible. *"Never give up and get involved. Push yourself out of your comfort zone. You never know what will come from it and how it will help you,"* is her advice.



Left: Participants try their hand at go-karting.

PROJECT CASE STUDY

LEAD Project



For young people in border communities, the past can feel both distant and close, shaping identities, stories and division. The LEAD Youth Leadership Programme, led by Lifford Clonleigh Resource Centre in partnership with Include Youth, is changing perceptions by giving young people space, time and trust to explore conflict, identity and peacebuilding at their own pace.

Caption: Participants from the project on a study trip to Stormont

Delivered through Lifford Clonleigh Resource Centre by Project Worker Mark McCollum, LEAD primarily supports 16-year-olds across East Donegal and West Tyrone from different community, cultural and political backgrounds. It combined classroom learning with creative and civic participation.

Young people explored leadership, identity, diversity and conflict through dialogue, Theatre of the Oppressed exercises, and engagement with political and peacebuilding institutions. They also encountered local and international perspectives, connecting their experiences of the border with wider questions of conflict, reconciliation and social change.

Supported by the International Fund for Ireland's PYDP, it combines leadership, critical thinking, creativity and dialogue to help young people understand the past, navigate the present and imagine the future. The programme drew on over 30 years' of experience across community development, advocacy, youth work, participatory arts and peacebuilding: *"Looking back, the thread running through the last 30 years of fairly diverse work has been listening, participation and creating a space for people who are not always heard. That is where the LEAD project has brought all those strands together."*

A central principle of LEAD is that real participation means more than asking young people for views after adults have designed a programme. Mark's community arts background, especially Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, shapes his approach.

> *"...the thread running through the last 30 years of fairly diverse work has been listening, participation and creating a space for people who are not always heard."*

PROJECT CASE STUDY

Boal's 'Games for Actors and Non-Actors' is, in Mark's words, *"the Bible"* for much of the creative work that he delivers with LEAD. Through storytelling, role play and filmmaking, groups explore power, identity and conflict, consider different perspectives and imagine alternative outcomes.

Mark says: *"It was never my job to tell a 16- or 17-year-old what leadership looks like. Diversity is about exposing them to different ways of thinking, giving them permission to question, and creating trusted spaces where they can find their own answers. That emphasis on trust can often take time."*

One powerful example is Melissa, a 16-year-old who moved to Donegal from Zimbabwe. Quiet at first, she rarely spoke in sessions, but Mark understood that participation is not always measured by who speaks first.

After several weeks, Melissa began speaking in a smaller group, sharing her experiences of Zimbabwe and Donegal, reciting poetry and revealing she could speak four languages fluently.

"She was listening, watching and deciding whether she could trust us," Mark recalls. *"All of this was there from the beginning, we just hadn't heard it."*

For the group, diversity stopped being abstract as they heard another young person's lived experience. *"LEAD did not give her a voice, she always had it. Our job was to create an environment where she felt comfortable using it,"* Mark explains.

This flexibility is fundamental for project delivery. Mark may arrive with a plan but will abandon it if the conversation becomes more meaningful elsewhere, or step back and let the group lead. When the drama Adolescence became a topic, the group asked him to watch it and return ready to discuss its themes. *"It was by mutual agreement. We worked together and it evolved,"* he says. "*Each session was carefully prepared, but the approach remained responsive. When young people raised an issue that mattered to them, the session could adapt, allowing the discussion to develop and giving the group a genuine role in shaping their own learning."*

Donegal presents challenges, including limited access to opportunities, transport and distance barriers. But rural communities also offer strong ties to family, community and places. *"Rural does not have to mean peripheral. The aim is not to prepare them to leave rural Donegal, but to ensure where they come from does not limit where they can go,"* Mark says.

LEAD also responds to contemporary challenges, including social media, information and misinformation. Sessions use myth-busting and critical thinking to challenge assumptions around immigration and migration. *"We can't keep reproducing the same models we used 20 years ago and expect them to solve today's problems,"* Mark believes. "The connection between a LEAD classroom and wider peacebuilding is clear: whether a young person is finding confidence to tell their story, or communities are navigating identity, history and change, the process begins in the same place.

"Listen. Build trust. Create space for difficult conversations. The context will change and our methods must evolve, but after 40 years of the IFI, those fundamentals remain vital. I'm optimistic about the next generation because when young people are given space, trust and opportunity, they continually surprise us."

LEAD creates a valuable space for young people to understand where they come from, make sense of the world around them and shape the future they want.

> *Diversity is about exposing them to different ways of thinking, giving them permission to question, and creating trusted spaces where they can find their own answers. That emphasis on trust can often take time.*

> *Each session was carefully prepared, but the approach remained responsive. When young people raised an issue that mattered to them, the session could adapt, allowing the discussion to develop and giving the group a genuine role in shaping their own learning.*

PROJECT CASE STUDY

EMBRACE Project



Caption: Regular dance performances form an important part of EMBRACE.

The North West frequently ranks as one of the most economically deprived regions in Northern Ireland and the UK, shaped by decades of underinvestment, social inequality, and the legacy of The Troubles. While considerable progress has been made in peace and reconciliation, underlying challenges remain—including political disenfranchisement, cultural marginalisation, rural isolation, and identity insecurity—all playing a part in daily life for communities.

Against this backdrop, the EMBRACE Project—supported by the International Fund for Ireland's (IFI) CiPP Programme and delivered cross-border by the Northwest Cultural Partnership (NWCP) and Inishowen Development Partnership (IDP)—uses a creative lens to connect communities. It features dance performances, particularly Highland dance by Sollus Highland Dancers, alongside music, drama, and storytelling to connect Irish and Ulster-Scots traditions.

Culture, arts, and dialogue create a space for those from different backgrounds to deepen their understanding of the past while empowering people to look towards the future. Alongside performing arts, the project drives dialogue through panel discussions to increase understanding of PUL issues and help improve community relations.

James Kee MBE, Project Manager at EMBRACE, is bringing about positive change and a fresh take on culture.

"My work spans many years, with a focus on culture, youth development, heritage, and civic dialogue," James says. "EMBRACE grew out of that long track record of cross-community engagement and the trust the IFI placed in us to transform communities.

"People have moved forward, but many still haven't fully crossed into stability and long-term civic participation. Communication is one of the most important tools we have, especially among younger people who are increasingly focused on practical solutions rather than inherited divisions."

The project has a history of progressive work with tangible outcomes. Among its notable milestones is playing a key role in the Maiden City Accord—guidelines introduced in August 2014 by loyal orders and marching bands in Derry/Londonderry to promote respectful and dignified parading. The initiative has also led important debates around the future of Northern Ireland through 'Envisioning the Future' conferences. High-profile performances at the Fleadh, the Ard Fheis, Culture Night at Dublin Castle, and for the Prime Minister at Number 10 Downing Street stand out as memorable moments that have united communities through culture.

None of this would be possible without taking risks, James notes: *"People will walk into a cultural space long before they'll walk into a political one. That's why creative, community-led approaches have been so effective. Culture has always been central because it is accessible, familiar, and rooted in identity.*

"We've stepped into spaces that challenged stereotypes and built trust. You could call it courageous leadership in practice,

PROJECT CASE STUDY

but the real challenge now is developing future leaders. The next generation needs the space to use their ideas and creativity to build on what has already been achieved and to bring consistency to the progress made so far."

In politically sensitive situations, quiet diplomacy plays a major role. Resolving disputes through private, discreet communication rather than public pressure relies heavily on confidentiality and trust, creating a safe space for breakthroughs away from the spotlight. EMBRACE gives people the opportunity to discuss, respect, and understand one another's traditions through creativity as opposed to conflict, making it easier to engage with sensitive topics within a broader historical or cultural lens.

This collaborative approach is reflected on the ground. Shared cultural projects create neutral ground for building trust: Highland dancers have worked alongside Irish dancers, traditional musicians have collaborated with marching band flute and drum players, and schools from both sides of the border have created animated films together.

Looking ahead, James continually seeks new avenues to deepen the work. *"The 250th anniversary of American Independence offered a powerful opportunity to explore how the island of Ireland contributed to the creation of the USA. Those wider connections often unlock additional resources and give us new ways to address local issues."*

James is immensely proud of what has been achieved in building confidence within the PUL community and growing cross-border cultural collaboration.

"One of the most meaningful outcomes has been watching rural communities evolve," he reflects. *"These were communities overlooked for years when it came to equality. Now they're more confident, more engaged, and more central to the conversation. That shift from being on the margins to shaping the future has been remarkable."*



Caption: Music is used to connect Irish and Ulster-Scots traditions through the project.



Caption: Dancers from the EMBRACE project at the IFI's 40th anniversary event.

As the IFI marks 40 years of taking risks and backing projects that require courage and trust, James acknowledges the massive impact it has had.

"Peacebuilding isn't finished, and the IFI remains one of the few funders willing to go where others won't," James concludes. *"The IFI helped us cross the first threshold, and now they're helping us cross the next with their new strategy and vision. Looking ahead, peacebuilding must continue with structured civic dialogue, youth leadership, rural outreach, and long-term sustainability. That's exactly the direction Crossing the Threshold is pointing us in."*

> *"One of the most meaningful outcomes has been watching rural communities evolve..."*

FundFocus News...

IMAGINE Peace Barriers Project
Peace Barriers Programme (PBP)



North Belfast based IMAGINE project recenly held a celebration event, marking 12 years of community engagement and progress around Peace Walls in the area. Local young people created new artwork which will eventually be installed as a permanent mural on the Cliftonpark Avenue peace barrier, symbolising a future of transition, renewal, and hope.

The Project has engaged with over 5,000 residents in its lifetime and transformed two local interface sites through a wide range of programmes, events, and community-based activities encouraging positive cross-community dialogue and the possibility of life without Peace Walls.

Community confidence has grown significantly in the area thanks to regular engagement led by the project around key issues such as anti-social behaviour, which has now been reduced by 80%. More than 70% of local residents have more positive attitudes towards the re-imagining of peace barriers and 80% say there is more trust between communities across the interface.

IMAGINE project team pictured with project participants and stakeholders at the celebration event with new artwork that will be installed as a permanent mural on the Cliftonpark Avenue peace barrier, symbolising a future of transition, renewal, and hope.

Drumgor Detached Youth Project
Personal Youth Development Programme (PYDP)



Drumgor Detached Youth Project celebrated the achievements of local young people through a unique initiative designed to help participants overcome personal challenges and build vital skills for employment.

Operating across disadvantaged areas in Lurgan, the project provides tailored support to at-risk young people. Over the past two years, the project has delivered a series of good relations activities, personal development sessions and employment workshops to offer participants positive pathways and opportunities.

To mark the outstanding achievements of those involved, a celebration event was held at the Ashburn Hotel in Lurgan. Guests in attendance included Lord Mayor of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, Councillor Mary O'Dowd.

Throughout the programme, participants completed valuable training opportunities, including qualifications in Food Safety, Computing, and Leadership. Essential life skills, employability workshops, and direct employer engagement with major brands like Coca-Cola and Tayto provided participants with insight into the world of work.

Pictured, above, (L-R) Evo Larkin, Sorcha O'Hanlon (Senior Youth Worker, DDYWP), Liam Black, Anne Carr (IFI Board Member), Lord Mayor Cllr Mary O'Dowd, Dara Breen, and Barry McCrory (Chairperson, DDYWP).

FundFocus News...

Active Play Programme
Communities in Partnership Programme (CiPP)



Sixty families from communities across the border region visited the CPI Centre, Castlefinn, Co. Donegal, for the Active Play Family Fun Day.

It has been delivered over a two- year period through a cross-border partnership between Donegal Sports Partnership and Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership, Derry, with support from the International Play Association Northern Ireland.

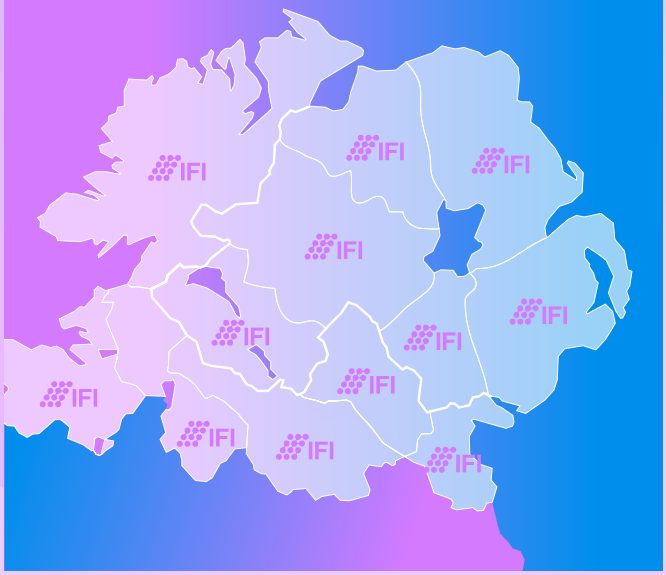
Families from the Donegal and Derry region enjoyed a day of shared, inclusive play designed to promote wellbeing, participation and positive cross-community engagement.

Guests participated in a wide range of activities including garden games, sensory and messy play, orienteering, traditional games, and loose parts play. All activities were facilitated by trained Active Play Leaders, who delivered a 12-week programme of activities to children aged 8–12 years.

The Active Play programme is designed to move away from structured sport and instead encourage recreational, child-led physical activity that supports creativity, confidence and social connection. The initiative also plays a wider role in strengthening relationships between communities north and south of the border through shared participation in positive, informal settings.

Pictured, above, (L-R) is Danny Gillespie (DSP) Alan Egan, IFI Dublin Secretariat, Alison Wallace(WNP) Shona Mc Carthy (IFI), Declan Boyle (DSP), Kirsty Browne (DSP).

The IFI delivers peace and reconciliation work across Northern Ireland and the six southern border counties as illustrated in the map.



The International Fund for Ireland is an independent international organisation established by the British and Irish Governments in 1986 with the objectives of promoting economic and social advance and of encouraging contact, dialogue and reconciliation between Unionists and Nationalists throughout Ireland. Donors to the Fund are the United States of America, the European Union, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

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