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174 Trust

PEACE IMPACT REPORT

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The Northern Ireland Select Affairs Committee visit The Duncairn (2025)

174 Trust

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People from different communities dance in The Duncairn Arts Centre (2024)

Foreword

When I first came to 174 Antrim Road in the early 1980s, I had no idea that I was stepping into a story that would shape the rest of my life. I was a young graduate then — more familiar with macroeconomics lectures than with riot control or community development. My friend Mary Hutton (who became the first Director of the Trust) had been volunteering at the youth club on Thursday nights and used to tell us stories of the chaos and creativity that unfolded each week on the Antrim Road. She called it youth work, but to the rest of us it sounded more like frontline peacebuilding.

In those early days, North Belfast was raw with pain and division. The Troubles were raging, and places like the New Lodge and Duncairn Gardens were seen by many as no-go areas. The idea of a shared space was almost unthinkable. Yet, amid all of that, a small group of people — full of faith, idealism, and a bit of naivety — believed that love and community could cross even the most entrenched lines.

When I moved into the community flat at 174 Antrim Road, a young woman from a rural Protestant community, people thought I was mad. A friend warned me that it was "Murder Mile." But what I found inside that big old building was not fear, but hope. There was laughter, music, cups of tea in the white kitchen with red gingham curtains, and endless conversations about how to make life better for families whose loved ones were in prison, for young people who had grown up surrounded by violence, and for older neighbours who longed for somewhere safe to belong.

I still remember the founder of the Trust, Rev Patton Taylor walking me up the stairs that first night, explaining the vision for every floor: a café on the ground level, offices above, community space for youth and families, and our flat at the top. He paused at the window and said, "Mind the sniper." I didn't know whether to laugh or crawl. But behind the humour was a truth we all learned early: peacebuilding in Belfast was never abstract — it was personal, risky, and real.

Those early years at 174 were an education in faith and courage. We didn't have much training or experience, but we had conviction that something new was possible. We learned to navigate fear with creativity, to replace hostility with hospitality, and to turn derelict buildings into places of belonging. That spirit — a blend of prayer, quiet persistence, and ingenuity — became the foundation of what is now the 174 Trust.

Four decades later, I am proud and humbled to have served as Chair of an organisation that continues to live out that same vision. The Duncairn Centre for Culture & Arts now stands as a beacon of shared space, welcoming people from every background to create, listen, learn, and dream together. The faces have changed, the context has evolved, but the heartbeat remains the same: to bring people together across divides, to build relationships of trust, and to keep believing that peace begins with small acts of courage.

This Peace Impact Report captures that journey — the vision and the story, the programmes and the people. It honours the generations who gave their time, their gifts, and sometimes their safety, to build peace in a divided city. And it reminds us that what began as a few young volunteers on "Murder Mile" has become a lasting symbol of reconciliation and hope.

As we look ahead, I hope this report inspires new generations to pick up the baton — to see that peace is not a destination we've reached, but a journey we continue together.

Heather Carey
Chair, 174 Trust



A reception with Belfast's Lord Mayor to recognise the work of The 174 Trust (2004)



Then and Now

A Personal Reflection on a Changing Context

When I first walked onto the Lower Antrim Road in the early 1980s, the atmosphere was unmistakable: fear lived in the air, deep weariness overwhelmed families who had lost too much, and a heavy security presence shaped every movement. Military sangars, checkpoints, armoured Land Rovers, riots, shootings and bomb scares were a daily reality. Yet, alongside all this, there were moments of warmth, humour and fierce resilience. Those contradictions defined the North Belfast I came to know — first as a young volunteer, and later as Deputy Director of the 174 Trust from 1985 to 1988.

I reflected on many of these experiences in my memoir, Little House on the Peaceline, which tells my story of living and working on the front line of North Belfast's conflict in the 1980s. The book describes the relentless violence, the small daily rituals of community life, and the surprising ways hope survived amid intimidation, poverty and sectarian division. It also points to the profound lesson that shaped everything that followed: peace begins with being present.

Back then, the community surrounding the Trust was one of the most disadvantaged in Northern Ireland, and over the decades this high level of social deprivation has persisted. Between 2001-2010 the New Lodge Ward was the most severely deprived ward in North Belfast by employment and by health[1]. Today, the area in which the Trust is located ranks 2nd most deprived out of 890 areas in the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure. The wider catchment — Duncairn, Cliftonville, New Lodge, Newington, Shore Road, Tiger's Bay and the Shankill — all sit within the top 100 most deprived neighbourhoods[2].

This level of poverty is not abstract — it shapes every aspect of community life. In the 1980s, child poverty levels in North Belfast were already among the highest in the country, with large families living in overcrowded housing, limited access to early years support, and few opportunities for children to thrive.

The economic picture was catastrophic. The unemployment rate in Northern Ireland reached over 20% in 1985[3]. In Belfast, unemployment doubled between 1979 and 1986[4]. Male unemployment was estimated at around 26% and in the New Lodge area it was over 40%[5]. Early 174 Trust leaflets describe a local youth unemployment rate of 90%.

Low income, educational underachievement, homelessness, substance misuse and intergenerational trauma created a level of disadvantage that could be felt simply by walking the streets.

North Belfast bore a disproportionate share of the conflict's trauma. It recorded 577 Troubles-related deaths, the second-highest total in Northern Ireland. Belfast accounted for nearly half of all conflict deaths, and North Belfast was its most fractured landscape. The New Lodge ward had the second highest number of Troubles-related deaths in the whole of Northern Ireland.[6]

Segregation became woven into the geography of North Belfast with over 40 peace line barriers, the highest concentration in NI, more than half of these constructed after the ceasefires in the 1990s.[7]

The conflict's legacy remains visible today. Between 2013 and 2023, 223 people in North Belfast died by suicide — the highest rate in NI[8]. Trauma became intergenerational, shaping families long after the gunfire ceased.

When I lived and worked there, this trauma sat alongside moments of hope: informal neighbourliness, quiet acts of defiance, and the daily courage of people trying to raise children in impossible circumstances.

Today the landscape looks very different. The sangars are gone; cultural venues, shops and cafés have replaced military infrastructure. North Belfast has become one of the most diverse parts of the city, with newcomer families from across the world making their home here.

But deprivation remains deep. Over 30% of children in North Belfast are living in poverty — around 8,400 children9. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust reports that approximately 10% of local children are referred to social services annually, many living within walking distance of the Trust. The area continues to face high disability rates (ab estimated 25% of the population)10, alongside persistent inequality, poor housing and ongoing mental health crises.

The 174 Trust's nursery, disability programmes, community support services and arts activities now operate within this complex, multicultural and still-traumatised context.

The world is entering a new era of fracture — driven by online extremism, disinformation, identity-based politics, economic instability and rising mistrust. The forms of division may differ from the sectarian lines of 1980s Belfast, but the emotional drivers — fear, grievance, exclusion — are universal.

Whether we look at migration tensions in Europe, racial and political polarisation in the US, violent extremism in the Middle East or growing hostility toward minorities across continents, the global landscape is marked by widening lines of separation. In North Belfast, recent spikes in racist intimidation and hate crime reflect these global patterns at a local level.

Across four decades — as volunteer, staff member, Board member, researcher and consultant — I have watched the Trust remain rooted in the same core conviction that defined those early days: Peace is built by being with people — through presence, connection, and compassion.

As you read this report you will learn of the Trust's 40 years of experience in navigating division, building safe shared spaces, supporting families under pressure, bridging differences through everyday relationships and holding a steady, faith-informed presence in a fractured community. This offers not only a model for North Belfast, but a resource for other communities facing division around the world today.

From the violence and sectarian divisions of the 1980s to a multicultural North Belfast in the 2020s, the Trust's story shows that even in the most fractured places, people can build something better. And in a world struggling with new forms of division, this story may be more relevant — and more needed — than ever.

Dr Tony Macaulay



Tony Macaulay (Deputy Director) at the Saltshaker Cafe with John Evans (Director) receiving a donation from NIVT (1986)

Footnotes

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Executive Summary

For more than forty years, the 174 Trust has been a constant, courageous presence in one of the most divided and disadvantaged parts of Belfast. Established in the early 1980s at the height of the Troubles, the Trust offered an alternative to fear, isolation and sectarian separation through simple but transformative practices: creating safe places, building relationships, and accompanying people through hardship with dignity and compassion.

This report assesses the long-term peacebuilding impact of the 174 Trust from its beginnings on "Murder Mile" to its present role as a thriving, multicultural hub in North Belfast. It draws on archival research, interviews, focus groups, and theoretical frameworks including Positive Peace.

The Trust emerged in a neighbourhood marked by severe deprivation, trauma and division. North Belfast suffered 577 Troubles-related deaths, the second highest in Northern Ireland, and continues to exhibit the highest concentration of peace walls in the region. Even today, the area in which the Trust is located ranks 2nd most deprived out of 890 NI neighbourhoods. The legacy of conflict and poverty remains profound.

In a world now experiencing increasing political polarisation, hate crime, cultural division and misinformation, the experience of North Belfast is newly relevant. The Trust's long tradition of practical, relational peacebuilding positions it as a model for communities facing division far beyond Northern Ireland.

The 174 Trust has evolved into a multi-purpose hub encompassing arts, disability support, early years education, mental health work, social enterprise and cultural inclusion. Over the years, the Trust has increased its influence through government and civic engagement.

The report identifies that the Trust's approach aligns strongly with the Positive Peace model — strengthening good relations, human capital, equitable opportunities and community resilience. The Trust's new strategic framework expresses this through PEACE:

Presence – long-term, everyday presence in a fractured place
Everyone – unconditional welcome and radical inclusion
Alongside – working with people, not for them
Common Cause & Creativity – building relationships through shared purpose and the arts
Empowerment – supporting people to thrive, lead and contribute

Key Findings

The Trust has played a unique role in creating safe, shared spaces in one of the most divided parts of Belfast.
Its relational approach has transformed lives, supported families, and strengthened community resilience across generations.
The Trust has enabled people from opposing political perspectives to build relationships rooted in shared humanity.
Its arts, disability and early years work provides daily, practical expressions of reconciliation.
The Trust now contributes not only locally but regionally and nationally to policy, community practice and peacebuilding learning.

The report sets out a three-level set of recommendations:
Organisational: Strengthen governance and sustainable finance to secure the Trust's long-term future.

Community: Deepen work in disability, early years and arts; expand cross-community and intercultural encounter; embed Positive Peace and Circle of Change; and continue modelling everyday reconciliation.

National & International: Grow policy influence, partnerships, international learning exchange and the sharing of the PEACE model in other polarised contexts.



Northern Irish journalist Brian Rowan speaks at a book launch at The Duncairn (2025)

Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

For over four decades, the 174 Trust, located in the lower Antrim Rd, has been a cornerstone of peacebuilding and reconciliation in North Belfast — a community long defined by division yet rich in resilience, creativity, and faith. In its original base at 174 Antrim Rd and nowadays in the former Duncairn Presbyterian Church, the Trust has created shared spaces where people of all backgrounds can meet, learn, heal, and build hope together.

Since its establishment in the early 1980s, the 174 Trust has worked through the darkest years of the Troubles, the uncertainties of transition from conflict to peace, and the ongoing challenges of building and sustaining peace. Its work has spanned youth engagement, early years services, cross-community contact and dialogue, arts and cultural expression, Irish medium education, disability inclusion, and social enterprise. Across all these areas, the guiding vision has remained constant: to build a more inclusive, peaceful, and compassionate society by transforming lives and relationships at the grassroots.

This Peace Impact Report has been commissioned to capture and communicate the long-term impact of that work — not only in terms of outputs and outcomes, but through the lived experience of those whose lives have been changed. It seeks to answer three central questions:

1. What difference has the 174 Trust made to peace and reconciliation in Belfast and beyond?
2. What lessons can be drawn from its approach to grassroots peacebuilding?
3. How can its legacy inform future strategies for building peace in divided communities?

This report therefore serves both as a retrospective impact assessment and as a strategic guide for the future. It recognises that peacebuilding is not a finite project but an ongoing process — one that evolves with changing political realities, social needs, and community dynamics.



Young Adults from our Disability Club visit a local supermarket (2024)

1.2 Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this Peace Impact Report is fourfold:

- To document and quantify the scale and reach of the Trust's peacebuilding programmes over 40 years.
- To understand and interpret the deeper personal and societal changes that have emerged from these efforts.
- To situate the Trust's experience within wider peacebuilding theory and practice.
- To identify strategic priorities that will enable the 174 Trust to continue contributing to peace and reconciliation in the decades ahead.

1.3 Methodological Overview

The process has been divided into four interconnected parts. This approach reflects the Trust's ethos of inclusion and collaboration, ensuring that a wide range of voices — from programme participants to policymakers — shape the analysis and conclusions.

The process has been divided into five interconnected parts:

Part A: Historical Impact Assessment

Objective:

- To explore the scale, reach, and outcomes of the 174 Trust's peacebuilding work to date.

Methods:

- Archival Analysis: Review of 40 years of organisational records, annual reports, evaluations and projects.
- Trend Analysis: Mapping change over time, from early initiatives to present-day programmes.

Part B: Qualitative and Theoretical Assessment

Objectives:

- To explore personal, community, and societal changes resulting from the Trust's peacebuilding work.
- To identify and articulate the theories and principles that underpin its effectiveness.

Methods:

- A list of the seventeen interviewees is in Appendix I)

Part C: Strategic Framework: A Positive Peace Approach & The 174 Way

Objectives:

- To identify the Trust's distinctive approach to peacebuilding to guides it future work and to share with other organisations in similar contexts.

Methods:

- Review of the Strategy 2025-2030 and framing within the Positive Peace Model.
- Creating a mnemonic for the distinctive approach of the 174 Trust.

Part D: Strategic Forward Planning

Objectives:

- To identify future directions for the 174 Trust's peacebuilding role based on legacy insights and current socio-political realities.

Methods:

- Stakeholder Interviews: Consultations with staff, partners, and funders to co-create practical recommendations for future strategy.
- Contextual Review: Consideration of the evolving peacebuilding landscape in Northern Ireland — including funding shifts, demographic change, generational change, and the wider UK-Ireland context.

1.4 Ethical and Participatory Principles

- The process of developing this report has been grounded in the 174 Trust's core values: inclusivity, respect, transparency, and empowerment.
- Participants were fully informed of the purpose and use of the report, and all interviews and focus groups were conducted with consent and confidentiality.
- Voices from across the community were included to reflect the Trust's diverse constituency.
- The findings were validated through dialogue with stakeholders to ensure accuracy and shared ownership of the conclusions.

1.5 Limitations

- While every effort has been made to capture the breadth and depth of the 174 Trust's peacebuilding work, some historical data is limited. As precise measurement data was not possible, qualitative evidence and testimonial data from clients, internal and external stakeholder have been used to triangulate findings.



Young Adults from our Disability Club hosting a thankyou meal for Clothes Bank volunteers

Part A: Historical Impact Assessment

1980s – Foundations of Faith and Risk

Living Differently in the Middle of Conflict

The story of the 174 Trust begins not with grand strategy, but with presence. In the early 1980s, at the height of the Troubles, a small group of Christians from Duncairn Presbyterian and Antrim Road Baptist Churches decided to act on a simple conviction: that the church could not retreat from pain but must live in the heart of it.

As Rev. Patton Taylor recalls, *"When we arrived, soldiers stood outside the gates and hunger strikes dominated the news. We didn't talk about peacebuilding then — but living differently in the middle of conflict was peacebuilding."*

The lower Antrim Road was one of the most volatile parts of Belfast. For Protestants to stay or move into a Republican community, let alone set up a youth club and café, may have seemed reckless. Yet those founders and early volunteers, inspired by faith and compassion, chose to live among the people they served. Their daily routines — walking children home during street disturbances, running youth clubs at risk of 'drive-by' sectarian attacks, brewing tea for exhausted parents and grandparents — became quiet acts of resistance to fear.

As Heather Carey remembers, *"Presence meant walking the young people home, not just running a great session."*

Case Study: Out of the Saltshaker — Foundations of Presence

Before the 174 Trust ever existed, a quiet foundation of cross-community relationship and courageous presence was already being laid through Antrim Road Baptist Church, one of the Trust's founding partner churches.

The Baptist Church had developed strong relationships with local Catholic families through its children's work and pre-school playgroup. One of the most striking examples was the Girls' Brigade.

"We even had Catholic girls coming to GB — that was really unusual at the time."

Lois Whyte recalls one girl who attended despite the risks:

"She walked down to GB with a big overcoat over her uniform to hide it. She was scared of what others might say."

These small acts of courage — by the girls, their families, and the volunteers — built trust and familiarity across the community divide in ways few programmes ever managed.

These early experiences helped make the Trust's unusual model not only possible, but welcomed, in a deeply divided neighbourhood.

As a teenager and later a young volunteer, Lois remembers the annual summer schemes Antrim Rd Baptist and Duncairn Presbyterian ran together in the lower Antrim Road area:

"We saw real benefit in those two weeks… but then we left for the other fifty. There was a growing desire for a permanent presence."

This desire — to step outside comfort zones and be present all year round — was heavily influenced by a popular Christian book of the time: Rebecca Manley Pippert's Out of the Saltshaker. Its message was simple: faith should be lived "out in the world," not confined to church buildings.

The name of the first community café at 174 Antrim Rd— The Saltshaker Café — came directly from that book.

"The book was very popular then. The whole idea was getting the 'salt of the earth' out of the saltshaker — being present where people actually live. That's where the café got its name."

This ethos of presence, hospitality, and everyday engagement would become the DNA of the Trust. But this presence came with real risk.

"There were bomb scares, cordons… an Army lookout post right beside the café. Looking back now as a grandmother, I don't know why my mum let me do it!"

For Lois and other early volunteers, this was simply the norm — a mix of naïveté, faith, and brave commitment to being with people where they lived.

These early years did not use the language of peacebuilding. There were no peace programme grants, no strategies, no frameworks. Just people intentionally living out their faith in a place where few from their community would go.

"We weren't thinking about peacebuilding — we were sharing our faith with our local community. It just happened our community was Catholic."

This established the core principle that shaped everything that followed:

Peace at the 174 Trust didn't start with programmes. It started with presence. Small, courageous relationships — quietly built over years — became the soil in which the 174 Trust could take root.



Saltshaker Cafe Volunteers (1984)

Faith in Action, Not in Words

The work of the early 174 Trust was grounded in practical service rather than preaching. Audrey Peterson, one of the first youth workers and now a member of the Board, describes it as "Christian witness in action, without shoving Bible verses down people's throats. People got to see love in action."

This approach — faith lived out through hospitality and courage — built credibility across divides. As Patton recalls, "Choosing to live in the manse in the middle of the New Lodge was itself a peace statement." Catholic families began to send their children to programmes in a Protestant-owned building. One local woman later told Patton, *"You're the vicar who used to live in the big house. Everyone was so thrilled at how you brought in the children."*

The Chair of the Trust, Heather Carey remembers in those days the more she listened to the vision — supporting families with loved ones in prison, supporting the elderly, mentoring youth — the more fear was replaced by hope. "We were pioneer peace makers in God's hands," she reflects.

Case Reflection: Mary Hutton – First Director of the 174 Trust

Early Leadership, Courage and Quiet Conviction (1980s)

Mary Hutton, the Trust's first Director, offers one of the clearest windows into the spirit of the very early years. Like many involved at the time, she insists that peacebuilding wasn't the language they used — but it was certainly the outcome.

"We didn't set out to build peace. We set out to create a safe place with a different kind of behaviour, a different response."

Mary recalled moments when the community, in the thick of high emotion and paramilitary control, asked whether the Trust wanted "those responsible" for thefts to be "dealt with." The answer was always no. *"We wouldn't allow retribution. That mattered. It showed we weren't there to take sides — we were there for everyone."*

She describes those years as a mix of naivety and courage. She describes those years as a mix of naivety and courage. She, Heather and the others were young and didn't fully grasp the dangers of working in a predominantly nationalist area as Christians from different backgrounds, but Patton Taylor understood the risks clearly. His vision, Mary believes, was what made the work possible.

"Patton had a lot of vision. We were offering something Christian, not denominational. People were weighing us up, but they saw fairness and kindness — and that helped us be accepted."

The café and youth club became early spaces of connection and safety — long before *"cross-community work" became policy language. Mary now recognises that the Trust was already doing what today we would call community connecting.*

"We were ahead of our time. We were giving people a place to come together."

Looking at the Trust today, she sees the long-term impact of those early choices.

"It's become a very safe place. It's broken up the old fear around the area."

For the future, Mary believes the Trust's greatest strength remains its ability to bring people together in an increasingly fragmented world.



Mary Hutton in the Saltshaker Centre (1984)

"People are struggling to connect after. The Trust is well set up to be that connector. Young people don't think in divisions the way we did — and 174 can help keep it that way."

Mary's testimony confirms the essential truth of the 174 story: peace was not a project — it was a posture. It grew from everyday decisions rooted in fairness, courage and the simple belief that people deserved more than fear.

Ordinary Acts as Peace Asset

In a city fractured by sectarianism and political divisions, the 174 Trust modelled peace through ordinary life. The youth club became a bridge between communities. The café provided a refuge for grandparents and parents who had somewhere safe to meet. Each small act was both pastoral and practical.

Philip Orr, historian and author of An Ordinary Kind of Miracle, calls this "reconciliation by relationship, not rhetoric." He describes 174 as
"a healing space — a rare, trusted crossover zone where people who were never meant to meet actually met."

Ordinary activities — playing pool, visiting older people, children's summer schemes — became the raw material of reconciliation. The volunteers' courage lay not in speeches, but in staying. As Orr observes, *"They worked in the blast zone, not beside it. That proximity bred credibility."*

Presence Over Programmes

From the start, the Trust rejected short-term, project-based approaches. It prioritised relationships over outcomes and consistency over campaigns. Heather recalls how the ethos shaped everything:

"One night of youth club doesn't change lives. We wrapped around school, home, health, employment, belonging. It was a whole-family, whole-place approach."

This philosophy — what Orr calls "presence over programmes" — would become the Trust's defining hallmark. It allowed relationships to mature across sectarian lines and created the social trust necessary for future peacebuilding.

In the words of one early document: "The 174 Trust was established by a group of concerned Christians dedicated to tackling the problems confronting the local community and addressing the real needs of those living in a materially and socially disadvantaged area."

Breaking Down Barriers

Even in those early years, signs of transformation emerged. Audrey Peterson recalls young people asking questions they could never ask at home — "questions about the other side, about God, about why things were the way they were." She tells the story of a colleague who confessed prejudice towards her after months of praying together:
"He said, 'I didn't believe you were a Christian because you were Catholic. I was wrong.' That moment was a revelation on both sides."

Each small reconciliation story — a shared prayer, a mural repainted without guns, a cup of tea across difference — hinted at what was possible when people met as equals.

Risk and Resistance

The Trust's existence was not without controversy. In the early years some members of the Presbyterian congregation opposed Catholics using the church premises. Others in the local community viewed the Protestant volunteers with suspicion. Patton recalls, "Some said Protestants were godless. Others said Catholics didn't belong here. We were mistrusted by both — but we stayed." That consistency earned grudging respect, even from those who might have wished them gone. Presence became persuasion. Simply by being there — steady, caring, and real — the 174 Trust shifted perceptions and softened lines.



Bill Shaw accesses the damage in the pre-school play group room vandalised during the weekend.

Picture by Mervyn Dowling



Former CEO Bill Shaw welcomes Irish President Mary McAleese and her husband (2006)

Legacy Marker: What the 1980s Built

The 1980s established the foundations on which all later work was built:

- Credibility through consistency: staying when others withdrew.
- Faith expressed through hospitality: service before sermon.
- Reconciliation through relationship: ordinary acts that transcended identity.
- Courage in context: choosing to live in contested space, embodying peace before the ceasefires.

These early pioneers did not set out to *"build peace."* They simply lived out compassion in the middle of chaos. Yet, in doing so, they created the conditions for everything that followed: a movement of quiet courage that would, in time, transform not just a building but contribute to the transformation of a wider community.

1990s – Building Relationships and Shared Spaces

Holding Ground in a Divided City

By the early 1990s, the 174 Trust had survived a full decade of life and work in one of the most contested areas of Belfast. The violence of the Troubles still cast its shadow across the New Lodge and Antrim Road, but inside the Trust's modest premises at 174 Antrim Rd, the Saltshaker Centre, a quiet transformation was underway. What began as an act of faith in the 1980s was now maturing into a long-term presence rooted in relationships, trust, and everyday service.

The wider city remained fractured. Yet, in the middle of it all, 174 Antrim Road became a place where both friends and enemies could meet without fear. Its doors stayed open to everyone — Protestant, Catholic, and neither. It was not a *"peace project"* in name, but peace was happening in practice.

As one archival report described it, "Belfast is a troubled, divided city — nowhere is this more obvious than North Belfast… It is against this context of hardening attitudes and inter-community violence that the 174 Trust continues its role as peacemakers and bridge-builders."

Faith that Crossed Lines

By this time, the Trust's reputation had begun to spread through Belfast's faith communities. For many clergy, it represented something they longed for but could not easily do within their own denominations: a faith-based, cross-community witness that put compassion before controversy.

One Presbyterian leader, recalled the tension of the times:

"We would help anyone — Catholic, Protestant, nothing — but we didn't make a big deal of it, because if you told people you were working with Catholics it would have created problems. The difference with 174 was that they didn't hide it. They created space for what the churches couldn't do."

For others, 174 showed that faith could be both courageous and credible in a divided city. The Trust's steady, visible commitment to breaking down barriers and cross traditional divides gave hope to church leaders who struggled to bridge the same divides from within their pulpits.

As one church leader reflected, *'the work itself was in a place that many of our churches couldn't be — physically, theologically, operationally."*

From its roots in the Presbyterian community 174 modelled what open, grounded faith could look like in practice.

A Safe Space Before Its Time

Throughout the 1990s, the Trust's greatest strength lay in its role as a safe space — a rare environment where difference could coexist without threat.

Linda Duffy, who would later become the Disability Co-ordinator, described that atmosphere:

"The Trust was always meant to be a safe space where people could come together quietly, across divides. That's what we did at our best."

Projects such as the quilt-making initiative, which brought together women from both sides of the community, wove reconciliation into fabric as much as conversation. Even small acts — tea mornings, youth projects, drop-ins — carried enormous symbolic weight in a city where people rarely crossed the road into another community.

At the same time, the Trust's emerging disability work, led by Linda and a small team of volunteers, embodied peace at the most personal level — creating belonging for those society often overlooked. Building relationships and trust through common cause.

Linda later reflected. *"From seven children at the start to seventy-five today, it has changed me completely."*

Hospitality as Theology

As the decade progressed, 174 Trust's distinct ethos began to attract wider attention. A Christian leader, then working in youth ministry and later in faith engagement, recalls bringing international groups to visit:

"People would ask, 'Where's Jesus?' expecting tracts or sermons. After an hour, they'd say, 'You can feel it in the fabric.'"

174 redefined what Christian witness could look like in a divided place. Instead of preaching reconciliation, it models it — through boxing in a church hall, arts events that blend cultures, and clergy breakfasts where honesty matters more than appearances. *"It's a place where people can say things are getting worse — and still find the courage to try something new,"*

This kind of faith-based hospitality — practical, inclusive, quietly radical — was the theology of 174 in practice.

Bridge-Building and Beginnings of Change

By the mid-1990s, the Trust had become a bridge between worlds. It worked across denominational lines, supported major employment and training initiatives (the ACE scheme), and opened its doors to groups from every tradition.

The Trust became a quiet meeting point for local clergy, community workers, and ordinary residents seeking another way to live. Its porridge breakfasts, carol services, and shared events laid groundwork for the reconciliation initiatives that would follow.

"You can build a bridge, but people won't necessarily cross it. 174 is the person in the middle saying, 'It's okay, come here, meet some of these people.'" (Church Leader)

It also began to build relationships with new allies — churches, funders, and community partners who recognised that something extraordinary was happening in this *"ordinary house on the Antrim Road."*

Community as Common Ground

For local residents, the 174 Trust wasn't a project — it was part of daily life. In focus groups, women from the Thorndale area spoke of how it became a pillar of the community. When Rev Bill Shaw became Director at the end of the decade, he began with relationship building:

"Everybody trusted him. He was kind. He just cared.'
"He helped everybody — Protestants, Catholics, it didn't matter."

The focus group participants remembered laughter, warmth, and everyday acts of care: the Boxing Club keeping teenagers off the New Lodge Road; and later the Clothing Project offering dignity through service; and the tea and banter that made friends.

Their words testify to the ordinary peace of that decade — not grand declarations, but a quiet culture of meeting and working together.

"It's open for everybody — and if it wasn't here, there wouldn't be a place like it."

Case Study: Two Mothers, One Friendship, Twenty Years (from an interview with Geoff Kerr)

One of the most powerful examples of peacebuilding at the 174 Trust began quietly, with two mothers who met in a hospital ward. Both had just given birth to babies with disabilities. One came from a Protestant background, the other from a Catholic community. In the early days of their friendship, they knew they wanted a space that was safe, neutral, and welcoming — somewhere they would not be confined to the boundaries of their own communities.

They had heard about the reputation of the 174 Trust and decided to walk through the doors. Welcomed by staff, they were offered a room and encouragement to shape their own support group. What started with two women soon grew into a lifeline for dozens of families. Week after week, for nearly twenty years, parents gathered, children played and grew up side by side, and friendships flourished across community divides.
By the time their children reached adulthood, the group naturally came to an end, but the relationships remained. For Geoff, this story captures the essence of what the Trust has done best: providing a safe space where ordinary people, supported but not directed, could create something enduring. It is a reminder that peacebuilding often begins not with programmes or funding streams, but with an open door and the chance to belong.

The Turning Point: Hope and Renewal

By the late 1990s, as the peace talks gathered momentum, the work of the 174 Trust had already been modelling what the Good Friday Agreement would later promise: coexistence, partnership, and trust built from the bottom up.

The community's appetite for change was growing, and the Trust's consistent, apolitical presence made it a natural convening space. It was not driven by policy, but by people.

In 1998, as the Good Friday Agreement was signed, Reverend Bill Shaw stepped into leadership — bringing new energy, pastoral depth, and vision. Bill embodied the Trust's ethos of "presence, not parachutes." His arrival marked both continuity and evolution: the same spirit of grassroots faith, but with renewed capacity to widen its reach.

As one resident put it in 2025, "Tim's picking up where Bill left off — taking it to the next stage." The same was true in 1998: one generation passing the baton to another, the mission unchanged.

Legacy Marker: What the 1990s Built

The 1990s transformed the 174 Trust from a courageous experiment into a trusted community anchor.

- It became recognised as a shared space in one of Belfast's most divided areas.
- It embodied faith as hospitality — practical, inclusive, and lived.
- It began to connect churches, civic leaders, and neighbours across divides.
- It offered training and employment in an area of high unemployment.
- It offered ordinary relationships as the foundation for peace.
- And it prepared the ground for a new era of creativity, culture, and reconciliation.

When the guns finally fell silent, 174 Trust was already living the peace many still dared only to imagine.



Young graduates of Naíscoil Mhic Reachtain (2006)



2000s – Innovation, Partnership and Cultural Bridge-Building

From Conflict to Creativity

When Bill Shaw arrived at the 174 Trust in 1998, the ink on the Good Friday Agreement was barely dry and the ceasefires were fragile. North Belfast remained a mosaic of walls, watchtowers, and wary glances. Bill walked into a community still bruised by decades of suspicion but ready, in small ways, for a new conversation.

"It wasn't about programmes; it was about presence," Bill recalls. "People were exhausted by slogans of peace. They wanted someone to show up, stay, and listen."

He saw his task not as replacing what had gone before but as building on the Trust's moral credibility. Under Bill's leadership, the Trust's focus shifted from surviving in conflict to creating space for peace to grow.

"You can't import peace. You cultivate it," Bill says. "Our job was to give people soil to grow in."

Through the early 2000s, the 174 Trust began connecting the language of faith and community with that of art, culture, and social enterprise. Bill described this as "moving from charity to creativity" — an evolution that mirrored Northern Ireland's own uncertain transition from conflict management to peacebuilding.

The Peacemaker's Test

The real test came in 2001, when the Holy Cross school dispute brought global attention to North Belfast. The images of children walking to school under police escort shocked the world. While many organisations froze, the 174 Trust engaged behind the scenes.

Bill and his team didn't issue statements; they made space — for prayer, quiet meetings, and human contact across the barricades.

"We weren't heroes," Bill reflects. "We were neighbours who refused to look away."
The Trust's reputation as an honest broker grew from that crisis. It showed that reconciliation was not an abstract ideal but a posture — one of calm endurance, hospitality, and moral courage. Geoff Kerr, Deputy Director, remembers that atmosphere:

"174 wasn't waving peace banners. They were just steady. People could go in there, have a cup of tea, say what they really thought, and nobody judged them. That's why it worked."

Case Study | "The Confidence to Be Confident" Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain and the 174 Trust (Source: Dr Séamas Ó Donnghaile interview)

Beginnings in Uncertainty

In the early 2000s, a handful of parents in the New Lodge area of North Belfast set out to create an Irish medium school independent of the Catholic maintained sector. Their dream was fragile — five pupils, borrowed books, and no building. When the local leaders in the Catholic Church withdrew promised premises at the last minute, despair set in

The Intervention of the 174 Trust

At that moment, Bill Shaw called.

"Bill said, 'Look, we've got some rooms. They're not ideal but come and see them.' And that was it — we were saved," recalls Séamas.

The Trust converted the manse, library and café into classrooms overnight.

"When they opened their doors, they threw a cloak around us. Nobody could bother us. We had safety, and we had dignity."

For a full year, the children studied under the Trust's roof while the school pursued Controlled School status with the Belfast Education and Library Board (now the EA). That breathing space changed everything.

"The 174 Trust cared for our children and gave us the confidence to be confident."

Stories of Care and Protection
Séamas recalls,"We were safe and felt protected by the 174 Trust."

Beyond education, the Trust offered pastoral care. After the death of a young man on the Antrim Road, Bill quietly led a prayer service, at Séamas's request, for four people in a living room on the New Lodge Road to help a family in deep grief.

"Bill and his staff's mission are so central to the happiness of many people. He lives his mission - he breathes it."

Values That Build Peace
For Séamas, what mattered most was how the Trust acted.

"They lived their mission. When others preached, they acted. Their mission wasn't spoken from the lips out — they lived it. Constant thought of others."

The Trust's generosity safeguarded a generation.

"Children who sat in those classrooms are now teachers, lawyers, and professionals with warm memories of Rev. Dr. Bill Shaw and his amazing staff. That's the legacy of the space we were given. The directors of the 174 Trust offered us hope when others wouldn't.

Christianity in a book is useless - the Trust took it from their books and put it into action. They really are all about people and everyone should have a 174 Trust in their area."

Reflection
Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain's survival became a parable of the Trust's peacebuilding: faith lived through welcome, courage, and imagination. It showed that peace is not only the absence of violence but the presence of care.

From Mediation to Movement

The Trust's quiet mediation work in the early 2000s evolved into a wider movement for community transformation. Through initiatives like the McCracken Summer School, cross-community music events, and cultural exchange programmes, the Trust began to translate reconciliation into art and story.

"We started to see creativity as conversation. If you could sing together or paint together, you could start to talk."

Partnerships with groups such as Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich opened new doors. Culture became the bridge where politics could not tread.

From its modest base, the 174 Trust supported choirs, poetry nights, and shared-language classes. In a city still dominated by peace walls, it began to build invisible bridges of empathy.

Faith in the Fabric

The dream that had been gestating since the 1980s — to transform the disused Duncairn Presbyterian Church into a living shared-space — moved closer to reality. Under Bill Shaw's leadership, plans were drawn for a Centre for Culture and Arts that would bring people together through creativity rather than confrontation.

Linda Duffy's disability work ran parallel to this renewal. Her inclusive programmes modelled what the future Duncairn would stand for: access, dignity, and shared belonging.

"Peacebuilding doesn't always mean big projects," Linda says. "Sometimes it's as simple as saying: the doors are open, you're welcome here, let's sit down and talk."

The 174 Trust's theology of peace was now embedded in its very walls. When renovation finally began, the old church building echoed with hammer blows of reconciliation — a physical manifestation of decades of moral labour.

Legacy Marker | Creativity as Continuation of Peace

The 2000s established the 174 Trust as a creative engine of peace:

- From mediation to imagination — bridging divides through art, music, and language.
- From charity to empowerment — supporting others to flourish in their own right.
- From church buildings to shared cultural landmark — laying foundations for the Duncairn Centre.
- From fear to confidence — giving individuals and communities space to thrive.

By the end of the decade, the Trust's mission had evolved but its essence remained the same: a quiet, enduring presence turning compassion into creativity and conflict into community.



2010s – The Duncairn Centre and the Rise of Cultural Peacebuilding

Rebuilding a Church, Restoring a Community

By the start of the 2010s, the 174 Trust hatd already lived three decades of faith, risk and relationship-building in North Belfast. But the next chapter would see its most visible transformation — the rebirth of a disused church into a living, shared-space for peace through culture and the arts.

The restoration of Duncairn Presbyterian Church, completed in 2014, was more than a construction project. It was an act of symbolic reconciliation: a church reimagined as a home for all. The decision to create the Duncairn Centre for Culture & Arts reflected years of listening to the community's deeper needs — not only for safety and support, but for beauty, belonging, and creative expression.

"We weren't just restoring a church," Bill Shaw said. "We were rebuilding trust — brick by brick, note by note."

From the start, the Duncairn embodied the 174 Trust's ethos of inclusion. It wasn't branded as a 'peace centre,' yet peace pulsed through its walls. Concerts, poetry readings, exhibitions and theatre replaced silence and suspicion. The Centre became a place where difference could breathe freely — where Irish traditional musicians shared the same stage as loyalist writers, and where laughter rang louder than politics.

Art as Bridge, Music as Language

When Ray Giffen joined as Creative Director in 2013, he brought both artistic vision and respect for the Trust's roots. What struck him most was its sincerity — "no box-ticking, no pretence, just a genuine desire to help people flourish."

"We looked at this place like a home," Ray recalled. "You have friends round, you make them comfortable, you put the best fare on the tables, and see what happens. That's how you build peace — with a cup of tea, a tune, and honesty."

Under Ray's guidance, the Duncairn began to use the arts as a language of relationship. Events like Super Sunday offered an open invitation to everyone — "no background questions, just come with an open mind."

"We were sowers of seeds," Ray said. "Some won't grow, but some will — and they'll change things."

Through music and art, people met across the lines that once divided them. A loyalist artist and a republican ex-prisoner became unlikely friends. "If we'd been born in each other's shoes, who knows what we'd have been?" one told him. "But our friendship now means something. I draw on it. I learn from it."

Ray called it reconciliation by stealth — friendships forming naturally, without speeches or slogans.

"We are reconciling people without them even knowing it — almost by stealth. The arts reach places politics never can."

Case Study | "Super Sunday" and "Club 50" – The Courage to Converse

Super Sunday – A Place of Welcome

One of Ray's first projects at the Duncairn was Super Sunday — an open-doors afternoon of live music, food, and conversation.

"Everybody's welcome here," he told guests. "You won't be asked about your background. The only thing we ask is that you come with an open mind."

It worked. People who would never have walked into each other's communities shared food, stories, and laughter. The tone was unforced and human. *"Slowly," Ray said, "people relaxed — and learned that everybody's welcome here."*

Club 50 – Brave Conversations

If Super Sunday built trust, Club 50 tested it. The only rule: you must respect everyone in the room.

One session brought together a former hunger striker, a loyalist playwright, migrants and academics to talk about Brexit and borders. The playwright confessed to Ray, *"I've never spoken publicly in the New Lodge before." Ray replied, "You don't have to say anything — sing a song if you like. But if anyone disrespects you, they'll be crossing me."*

The man spoke. The room listened. When he finished, there was silence — then applause. "I never thought in my wildest dreams I'd be playing 50 feet from the New Lodge Road," he said.

Peace Through Childhood

At the same time as the Duncairn was filling with music and art, the Trust's nursery and early years work under Kelly Burke was nurturing another kind of peace — one that began with children.

"Early years education lays the foundation for a peaceful society," Kelly explained. "When children experience kindness and inclusion from the start, they grow into adults who can build community."

Her nursery welcomed families from across Belfast and far beyond — Protestant and Catholic, Irish and migrant, rich and poor. Diversity wasn't a lesson plan; it was a fact of life.

"We don't need puppets to teach inclusion," she laughed. "We have real people."

Everyday moments in the nursery mirrored the wider mission of the Trust:

- A refugee child who arrived traumatised found joy and safety. "We were in hell, and now we are in heaven," his father said.
- A little girl comforted a newcomer at the "feelings bench," learning empathy through play.
- A four-year-old became a helper, leading new children by the hand — "a quiet but powerful act of reconciliation," Kelly called it.

For Kelly, peace was not a policy but a practice: "one child, one family, one small act at a time."

Disability Inclusion – Dignity as Dialogue

Parallel to the arts and nursery work, Linda Duffy's disability programmes continued to expand through the 2010s, embodying inclusion as peace in practice. From a handful of families in the 1990s, the programme had grown to more than 70 participants by the mid-2010s.

For Linda, inclusion wasn't a side-project of peacebuilding; it was peacebuilding. "When a child with additional needs is welcomed into a community, everyone grows," she said.

Her work blurred boundaries between care and culture — children from the disability project took part in inclusive arts workshops, and made the Centre a place where ability, faith, and background no longer defined belonging.

"The Trust was always meant to be a safe space where people could come together quietly across divides," she reflected. "That's what we did at our best — and what we need to keep doing."

Everyday Peace, Extraordinary Place

By the end of the decade, the Duncairn had become one of Northern Ireland's most respected shared cultural spaces. International artists and local poets shared the same stage. Loyalist, republican and newcomer artists found common ground.

"This generation doesn't want to be trapped by the past," Ray observed. "They want to build the future — and their energy is infectious."

What distinguished the Duncairn from other venues was its authenticity. Nothing was contrived or performative. As one visitor put it, "It feels like being in someone's home — and you don't want to leave."

Through its mix of art, inclusion, and education, the 174 Trust showed that peace could be creative and joyful.

Legacy Marker | From Healing Space to Creative Movement

The 2010s redefined what peacebuilding could look like:

- A church reborn as a cultural sanctuary.
- Art, music and storytelling as instruments of reconciliation.
- Children and families experiencing inclusion from the ground up.
- Disability work modelling belonging and dignity for all.
- Friendships and dialogue replacing fear and formality.

The Duncairn Centre became both symbol and substance — proof that creativity, compassion and courage could transform a disused space into a living movement of hope.



Young adults from our Disability club show off flowers which they have made (2024)

2020s – Resilience, Relevance, and the Future of Peacebuilding

Continuity and Change

As the 2020s began, the world shifted underfoot. Political polarisation deepened, a pandemic isolated community, and funding for peace work tightened. Yet through these storms, the 174 Trust continued to embody what it had always stood for — faith in action, quiet courage, and compassion without condition.

When Bill Shaw passed the baton to Tim Magowan, the transition was seamless not because the task was easy, but because the ethos was strong. Tim, shaped by years of community and international development and peacebuilding across Northern Ireland, understood that the Trust's success lay not in novelty but in consistency.

"We've never been about grand gestures," Tim said. "We've always been about presence — turning up, standing with people, and staying the course."

The 174 Trust entered this decade as a mature organisation, no longer just surviving on goodwill but living its mission through structure, skill and story. It was ready to face new complexities: migration, identity, mental health, and digital division — the unseen fault lines of modern Belfast.

Presence in a Pandemic

The pandemic tested that love in new ways. As the world shut down, the Duncairn's stage fell silent — but the Trust's compassion didn't. Food parcels, phone calls, and online concerts replaced public gatherings.
"We went from packed halls to doorstep conversations," said Ray Giffen. "But it was the same spirit — community first, always."

In a time of crisis, the Trust's adaptability proved its resilience. It wasn't just a venue; it was a lifeline. Its online performances reached thousands, bringing comfort through song and solidarity.

As so many places went into lockdown, the nursery remained open for vulnerable and key worker children. Kelly Burke explained:

" We provided home learning resources and packs, virtual stories and songs and weekly curriculum-based play and learning ideas for children who did not meet the criteria to attend in person. We also offered phone call support to parents who just needed a chat about the challenges of lockdown or who were worried about their children. We also greatly improved our outdoor environment so we could offer a wider range of safe outdoor learning experiences."

Similarly, the disability work supported children and parents during a time of unprecedented uncertainty and disruption. Linda Duffy said:

"When Covid struck and the special schools closed, I knew we could not close. We had parents already struggling with their children. How were they going to cope 24/7 and in the house all the time? We were able to provide two hours of respite per session twice a day. This was a lifeline for parents and the children. Our children did not understand the world at that time; they just knew their routine was broken. These sessions provided a little routine in a strange world and gave our parents a chance to voice their concerns and frustrations. We offered a listening ear and, because of my experience with my own son Alex, someone who truly understood the impact on what was happening."

This adaptability and resilience — creative, caring and grounded — reflects the Trust's ongoing evolution: a peacebuilder that remains relevant because it listens, learns, and leads quietly.

Authentic Consistency

One partner highlighted the Trust's distinctiveness in a sector often shaped by bureaucracy.

"What makes 174 different," she said, "is that it doesn't reinvent itself for funders. It stays true. You walk in the door, and you know what it stands for — welcome, integrity, and humanity."

She emphasised how the Trust's trauma-informed approach gave people safety without spectacle:

"It's not about fixing people. It's about holding space for them until they remember who they are."

She spoke too of the organisation's moral steadiness — how it continues to act as an anchor in North Belfast when many projects rise and fall with funding cycles.

"It's a place where people can still talk honestly about pain, loss, and hope — without labels. That's rare now."

Faith, Integrity, and Innovation

Another stakeholder highlighted continuity as its deepest strength.

"They've never been driven by fashion. They're driven by calling," she said.

She believes that 174 has always been prophetic rather than reactive — doing what is needed, not what is popular. She describes the Duncairn as a living parable: a sacred space that has become secular and spiritual all at once.

"You can feel the holiness in the honesty. People are met where they are — artists, activists, clergy, atheists. It's the kind of church Jesus would walk into."

Yet, she also recognises the challenge of generational change.

"Younger people aren't carrying the same sectarian scars — but they're burdened by other traumas: identity, poverty, loneliness, digital isolation. The Trust's job now is to speak that new language of peace."

She sees the new leadership as continuing that translation: turning the gospel of reconciliation into practical acts of kindness and courage for a new age.

Positive Peace and the Future Landscape

Professor Dominic Bryan, academic and long-time observer of peace processes, places the Trust's work in the broader context of Northern Ireland's evolving landscape.

"We're in the era of post-conflict peacebuilding fatigue," he noted. "Yet the 174 Trust has avoided the trap of institutionalisation because it remains relational. It deals with people, not positions."

Dominic distinguishes between negative peace — the absence of violence — and positive peace — the presence of justice, trust, and inclusion.

"174 has always practised positive peace," he said. "They work at the intersections — disability, migration, art, faith, family — where people learn to live together again."

He highlighted how the Trust's bridge-building now includes new communities: migrant families, refugees, and those excluded by poverty rather than politics. In a city still segregated by walls, 174 remains a place without barriers.

"They're not shouting about peace," Dominic observed. "They're showing it."

The Web of Relationships

In a city still marked by deep political polarisation, the Trust has repeatedly created spaces where individuals from sharply different political traditions find themselves on the same team, in the same nursery line, or working on the same project — proving that everyday relationships can succeed where formal politics often falters.

The Focus Group participants, reflecting from the heart of the community, reaffirmed this reality.
"It's open for everybody," one said. "And if it wasn't here, there wouldn't be a place like it."

Those words echo across decades. From the 1980s youth clubs to today's arts performances and family support programmes, the same truth rings out: 174 is not an institution — it's a relationship network.

It still embodies "presence over programmes," as Philip Orr once described.
It still lives "faith in action, not in words," as Audrey Peterson said. It still gives people "the confidence to be confident," as Séamas Ó Donnghaile put it.
Every decade has added new language, but the same melody continues love in action.

Legacy Marker | From Peacebuilding to Positive Peace

The 2020s reveal the 174 Trust's enduring character and contemporary courage:

- Continuity of ethos — faith, inclusion, hospitality.
- Cultural creativity — art, dialogue, and diversity as daily peace work.
- Community resilience — practical care in crises.
- Theological authenticity — prophetic presence rooted in compassion.
- Commitment to positive peace — not just ending conflict but enabling flourishing.

Across four decades, the 174 Trust has become a microcosm of Northern Ireland's best self — ordinary people doing extraordinary things quietly, faithfully, and together.

The Work of the 174 Trust Today

Today, the Trust's work spans early years, disability services, arts and culture, community support, peacebuilding, and shared space development. People from across North Belfast and beyond use the services of the Trust over 50,000 times each year. Thousands of people crossing its threshold each year, finding connection, support, learning, creativity and hope.

The scale of the Trust's current impact includes:

Inclusive Disability Support

- 100 people benefiting from eight disability clubs, offering social connection, skill-building, respite for families, and a sense of belonging in a community that has historically experienced exclusion and stigma.

Early Years and Family Support

- 24 children from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds attending the Trust's inclusive nursery, which provides early learning, play, stability and a safe start in a community where over 30% of children live in poverty.

Arts, Culture and Community Life

- Over 8,000 people each year coming to concerts, classes, workshops and events in the Duncairn Arts Centre — now recognised as one of Belfast's most creative and welcoming cultural spaces.
- Support for two start-up arts businesses, including one new resident tenant, strengthening North Belfast's creative economy.

Practical Support and Crisis Response

- 2,500 people supported through the clothes bank, which meets urgent needs for families experiencing poverty, homelessness and hardship.

A Shared Community Hub

Since the earliest days, the Trust has focussed on supporting and empowering others. Today the Duncairn is now home to a diverse ecosystem of organisations working across peacebuilding, inclusion, wellbeing, talent development and community action:

- Embrace – A Christian network supporting immigrants and refugees
- TIDES Training – A leading peacebuilding and mediation charity
- Belfast Trust Community Development Worker – Connecting local health priorities with community services
- Untap Talent Agency – Supporting artists, performers and cultural entrepreneurs
- Northern Ireland Mental Health Arts Festival –using creativity to support wellbeing
- Kronk Boxing Club – Offering sport, discipline and connection for young people
- AA – 12 Alcoholics Anonymous groups meeting weekly, providing vital support for recovery
- Irish-language nursery – Strengthening cultural identity, early learning and cross-cultural dialogue
- Two start-up Arts businesses
- The Café – Continuing the tradition of hospitality, shared space and informal connection that defined the original Saltshaker Café

A Place of Creativity, Community and Shared Hope

These activities — diverse, grassroots, creative, These activities — diverse, grassroots, creative, trauma-informed and grounded in welcome — reflect the Trust's evolution into a community anchor, a cultural hub, and a centre of practical compassion.

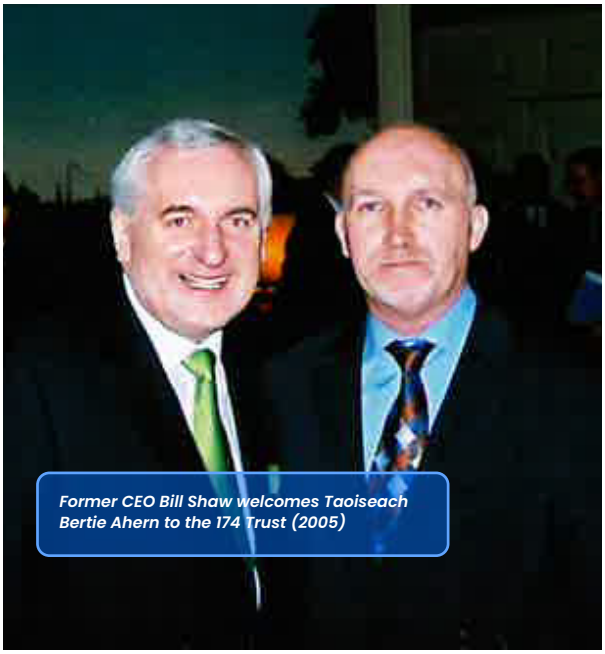
They also embody the Trust's modern peacebuilding approach: everyday presence, empowerment, inclusive relationships and spaces where everyone can belong, regardless of background, culture, age, ability, faith or identity.

In recent years, in addition to the main site, McCrory Hall in Duncairn Gardens, has become part of the 174 Trust. This building now hosts community-based initiatives including a cross-community boxing club, gym and other community-development activities. As one of the few available indoor halls in the area, McCrory Hall extends the Trust's capacity to serve a diverse local population, offering space for sport, support and reconciliation in a neighbourhood continuing to experience high levels of social need.

Today, the 174 Trust is no longer simply responding to North Belfast's needs — it is shaping what a healthy, connected, shared community can look like in a changing and increasingly diverse society

Influence Beyond North Belfast

From its earliest days the 174 Trust has been more than a local project. Its consistent, faith-rooted presence in one of the most contested parts of Belfast has quietly shaped conversations about peace, reconciliation and social justice at city-wide, national and even international levels. That influence can be seen in two ways: who comes to the Trust, and who goes out from it.



Former CEO Bill Shaw welcomes Taoiseach Bertie Ahern to the 174 Trust (2005)

A recognised place of learning for politicians and policymakers

Over the decades, the Duncairn Centre and the wider 174 Trust complex have increasingly become a destination for political leaders, visiting delegations and policymakers who want to understand what every day, relational peacebuilding looks like in practice.

In 2014, an Assembly debate on community relations referenced a Community Relations Week event hosted at the 174 Trust, where Denis Bradley challenged parties to show greater humility and honesty about the scale of unresolved issues. The choice of 174 as a venue for that conversation underlined its reputation as a trusted, neutral space where difficult issues can be explored with honesty and respect.

Academic work has also drawn on the 174 Trust as a concrete example of "from-below" peacebuilding. Research on protests and flags disputes in Belfast, for instance, cites the 174 Trust as a long-term peacebuilding project that embodies the kind of grassroots, church-linked initiatives which stepped into the vacuum where institutional leadership was often absent.

In recent years, the Trust has begun to name and nurture this more intentionally:

- By hosting visiting delegations – from government, academia, churches and NGOs – for learning visits, seminars and roundtables.
- By contributing to research, consultations and policy discussions on issues such as shared space, disability rights, mental health, poverty and refugee support, using its experience to inform wider practice.
- By partnering with organisations such as the Ireland Funds, the Community Relations Council, and universities to share learning from North Belfast with other divided or disadvantaged communities.



Women from different communities show wreaths they made together (2024)

On his first official visit to Northern Ireland as Taoiseach in May 2024, Simon Harris chose the Duncairn Arts Centre as one of his key community engagements. The visit focused explicitly on "the achievements in reconciliation and community development work of the 174 Trust, through disability, arts, women and pre-school groups," recognising the Trust as a model of grassroots, inclusive peacebuilding supported by the Irish Government's Reconciliation Fund and Shared Island programmes.

In March 2025, members of the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee highlighted in Parliament that, during a recent visit to Belfast to engage with victims and legacy issues, they had met with the 174 Trust. The organisation was named in Hansard in the context of discussions about victims, reconciliation and how government should respond to the legacy of violence.

Taken together, these visits and references signal something important: the Trust is not simply a service provider in a deprived neighbourhood. It has become a living case study of how to build positive peace over time – a place where politicians, civil servants, international visitors and researchers come to see what long-term, relationship-centred work looks like on the ground.

The outward ripple of 174 Trust people

At the same time, the Trust's influence can be traced through the many lives of people who have passed through its doors – as volunteers, staff, board members, tenants, service users or partners – and then carried its values into wider leadership.

Over forty years, 174 has functioned as a kind of *"leadership nursery"* for peace and reconciliation. Former volunteers and staff have gone on to play significant roles in civic life, peace work, church leadership, youth work, the arts and public service – often explicitly drawing on their formative experiences at the 174 Trust.

Figures such as Alan McBride, Debbie Watters and Laura Coulter, who, in different ways, have combined lived experience of the conflict with leadership in victim support, restorative justice, cross-community engagement and policy advocacy – part of a wider cohort of "174 alumni" whose work now stretches across the voluntary sector, churches, arts, education and public bodies.

Younger generations who first encountered the Trust through youth work, disability projects, nursery, arts programmes or the café, now volunteer, lead projects, or sit on boards and advisory groups in other organisations.

What links these diverse stories is a distinctive formation: learning to hold faith and justice together; to work with, not for, local communities; and to understand peacebuilding as slow, patient, relational work rather than short-term projects or slogans. Those who have been shaped by 174 carry that DNA into their workplaces, congregations, neighbourhoods and professional networks.

Innovation & Social Leadership

In 2024–25, 174 Trust developed Circle of Change which brings together people from across Belfast — from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities and identities — to learn, share their stories and invest in the future of their communities.

The approach is simple but powerful: 12 participants commit to a period of shared dialogue, mutual learning and collaborative decision-making. Together, they raise funds, discuss community priorities, and channel resources into small-scale, high-impact projects that would otherwise struggle to secure statutory funding.

In the most recent round, the Circle raised £11,000 and supported three projects in North Belfast and Greater Belfast:

- A 12-week traditional Irish music programme bringing locals, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers together through shared cultural experience.
- A peer-to-peer youth mental-health training initiative empowering young people from ethnic minority backgrounds to support peers.
- An intergenerational storytelling and community art project exploring identity, racism, belonging and healing.

For 174 Trust, Circle of Change represents a new expression of its long-standing values: presence, inclusion, empowerment and shared purpose. It extends the Trust's impact beyond its own programmes — enabling a culture of community philanthropy, creative collaboration and civic leadership that plants seeds for long-term peacebuilding, social justice and reconciliation.



Children in our Nursery enjoying painting together (2025)

Part B: Qualitative and Theoretical Assessment

2.1 Overview

This section interprets the lived experience and findings from interviews, focus groups, and archival research through the lens of peace-building theory. The aim is to understand how and why the 174 Trust's practice has achieved long-term reconciliation outcomes — and to articulate its distinctive contribution to the theory and practice of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and beyond.

The analysis draws on three core frameworks:

- Lederach's Conflict Transformation Model – peace as relationship and moral imagination.
- Allport's Contact Theory – peace as sustained contact under equal status and shared purpose.
- Galtung's Positive Peace Framework – peace as justice, inclusion, and structural transformation.

Together they illuminate what many interviewees described simply as "the 174 Way" — peacebuilding that is relational, inclusive, faith-inspired, and rooted in everyday life.

2.2 Authentic, Long-Term Presence — Peace as Relationship

Across every decade, one phrase recurs: "They were always there." From Patton Taylor's decision to live on "Murder Mile" through Bill Shaw's calm leadership at Holy Cross to Tim Magowan's stewardship today, 174 Trust's defining feature has been presence.

This aligns with Lederach's Conflict Transformation: peace grows from the quality of relationships sustained across divisions. 174 has spent four decades building trust — not through statements but through constancy and compassion.

"They've never been driven by fashion. They're driven by calling."

This moral credibility — earned through service rather than ideology — is what Lederach calls "moral imagination in practice."

2.3 Faith-Inspired but Inclusive Practice — Peace as Moral Credibility

As one interviewee said, "Faith is our engine, not our badge."

The Trust bridges the faith and secular sectors, expressing what Galtung would call Positive Peace: systems and cultures that foster justice, empathy, and inclusion.

"You can feel the holiness in the honesty."

Hospitality, humility, and hope define this theology of service — a spirituality that makes reconciliation credible.

2.4 Everyday Peace-Building — Peace as Daily Practice

174 Trust's peace work is embedded in ordinary life: nurseries, disability sessions, recovery groups, cafés, concerts. It exemplifies Lederach and Mac Ginty's idea of everyday peace — the small, relational acts that rebuild trust.

"It's not about fixing people. It's about holding space for them until they remember who they are."

This instinctively trauma-informed approach recognises that reconciliation begins with belonging.

2.5 Safe and Neutral Space — Peace as Structure and Symbol

The restored Duncairn Centre is both structure and symbol of reconciliation — a Presbyterian church reimagined as civic shared ground.

"It's open for everybody. If it wasn't here, there wouldn't be a place like it."

In Galtung's terms, it is peace architecture: a physical and cultural system enabling cooperation and equality.

2.6 The "WITH" Principle — Peace as Shared Humanity

Interviewees repeatedly described the Trust's philosophy as "with, not to." This echoes Freire's co-creation and Lederach's "accompaniment."

"They don't parachute in. They're there — with people, for the long haul."

It also fulfils Allport's Contact Theory: equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support. At 174, these conditions are lived, not engineered.

2.7 Working Together on a Common Cause — Peace as Shared Purpose

At the heart of 174 Trust's work lies a simple but profound truth: people build peace best when they work side by side on something that matters to them both.

From painting murals and running youth clubs in the 1980s to creating inclusive arts events, disability programmes, and nursery, 174 has always understood that shared purpose disarms prejudice. Cooperation toward a positive, visible goal turns strangers into teammates.
This reflects Allport's Contact Theory, which highlights common goals and cooperation as antidotes to bias. The Trust transforms shared tasks into shared meaning.

"You can build a bridge, but people won't necessarily cross it. 174 is the person in the middle saying, 'Come on — we've got work to do together.'"

Examples abound:

- McCracken Summer School – artists from both traditions collaborating on heritage projects.
- Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain – parents and teachers building a new school community.
- Duncairn Super Sunday & Club 50 – neighbours volunteering, performing, and sharing meals.
- Disability and early-years programmes – families working together for their children's wellbeing.

In each case, peace wasn't the agenda — it was the outcome. Through cooperative endeavour, 174 has operationalised what Lederach calls "the meeting place of the practical and the moral" — turning shared labour into shared life.

2.8 Intergenerational and Intercultural Inclusion — Peace as Evolution

As Belfast diversified, so did 174's mission — from cross-community to intercultural reconciliation.

"Newcomer integration is the third strand of our peace work," one interviewee said.

This embodies Galtung's Structural Peace and Lederach's generational continuity: systems and stories that sustain inclusion over time. Projects now link older people, migrants, and young creatives — living examples of positive peace.

2.9 Creativity and Dialogue — Peace as Cultural Expression

The Duncairn has made art the language of peace.

"We're reconciling people without them even knowing it. The arts reach places politics never can."

This is Lederach's moral imagination in motion — transforming old pain into shared performance

2.10 Credibility and Courage in Contested Spaces — Peace as Trust

Across all decades, the Trust's moral consistency earned respect from every side.

"They're not shouting about peace. They're showing it."

That credibility forms the invisible infrastructure — what Lederach calls "strategic peace networks" — that make formal peace durable.

2.11 Challenges and Opportunities — Peace as Practice under Pressure

Relational work is hard to quantify, and funding models can prioritise short-term outputs over long-term outcomes like trust. Yet opportunities abound for intercultural bridge-building, inter-generational mentoring, faith-based moral leadership, and creative dialogue on identity. 174's challenge is to articulate and evidence these softer forms of success without losing authenticity.

2.12 Synthesis — The 174 Model and Theoretical Alignment

Theoretical Framework	174 Trust in Practice
Lederach – Conflict Transformation	Relationships sustained over decades; moral imagination through presence and creativity.
Allport – Contact Theory	Equal-status cooperation on shared goals; common purpose through joint projects.
Galtung – Positive Peace	Structures and cultures promoting justice and inclusion — embodied in Duncairn, disability and arts programmes.
Everyday Peace (MacGinty)	Ordinary kindness, humour, and hospitality rebuilding social trust..
Trauma-Informed Practice	Safety, empathy, and consistency across all interactions.

2.13 Conclusion - highlight

"Every community needs a 174 in their life."

174 Trust's peace is not programmatic: it's personal. It fuses presence with purpose, faith with inclusion, creativity with courage. It shows that reconciliation is built not by rhetoric but by working together on what matters, again and again.

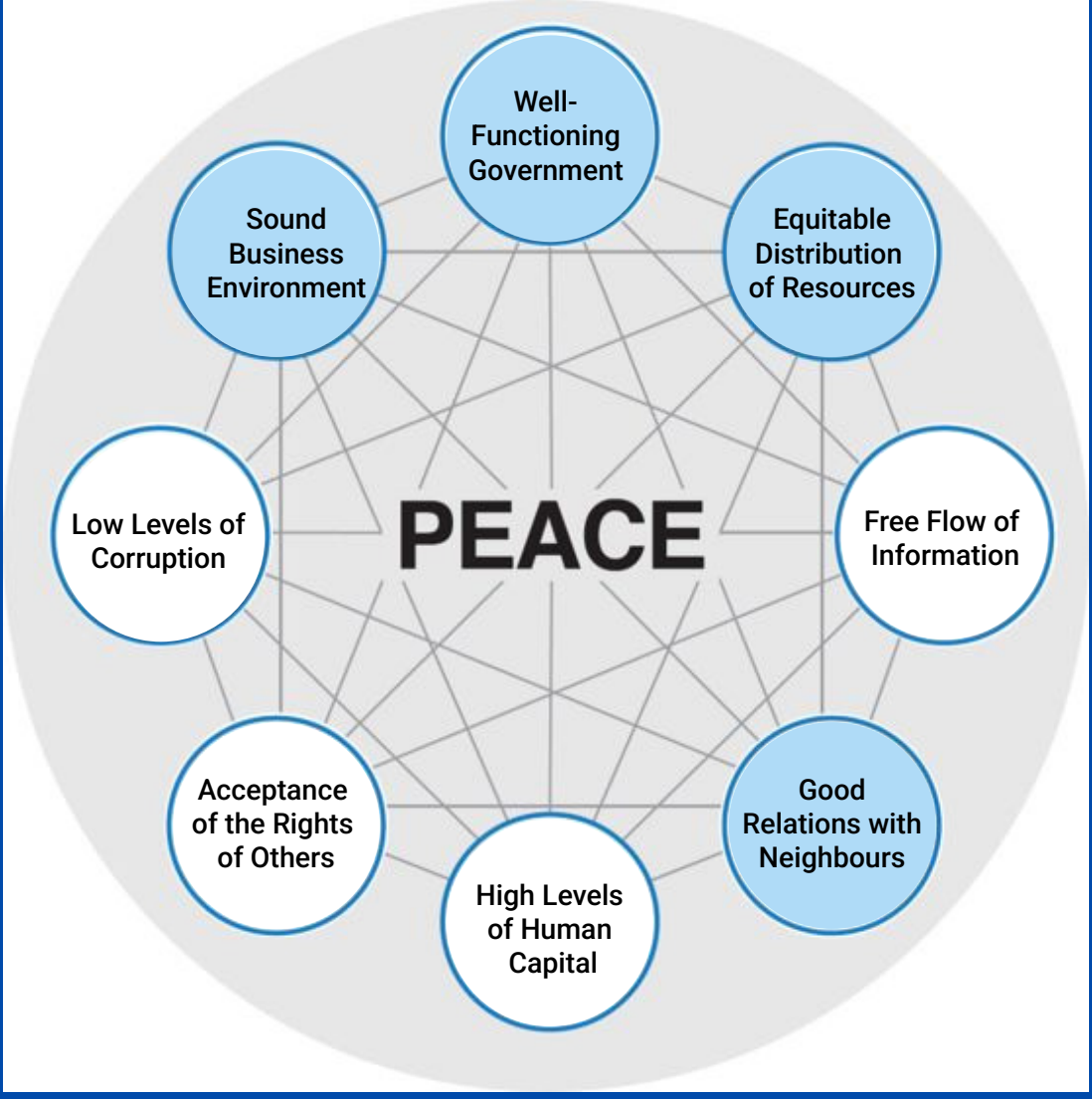
Across four decades, the Trust has become a living expression of Positive Peace — not merely the absence of conflict but the steady creation of community, dignity, and hope.

Part C: Strategic Framework: A Positive Peace Approach & The 174 Way

The 174 Trust has built an approach to peacebuilding grounded in relationships, presence and perseverance. This aligns strongly with what global research now identifies as Positive Peace—the set of attitudes, institutions and structures that create the optimal conditions for human flourishing (IEP, 2019). Today, as Northern Ireland and the wider world face a renewed era of fragmentation and polarisation, the Trust's long-developed relational approach has become not just relevant, but urgently necessary

Positive Peace: A Framework that Reflects Practice.

According to the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), Positive Peace is built on eight interconnected "pillars," including:



The Trust has been a Positive Peace institution long before the term existed.
The new 174 Trust strategy (2025–2030) draws explicitly on this model and demonstrates how deeply the Trust's lived practice contributes to these pillars:

- Good relations with neighbours: welcoming 20,000+ people annually from diverse backgrounds into spaces of shared encounter.
- Equitable distribution of resources: tackling deprivation through disability work, early years support, crisis help and access to arts participation.
- Strengthening human capital: investing in children, young people, families and emerging creative practitioners.]
- Well-functioning government: constructive engagement with local and national government, as well as international visitors and partners.
- Sound business environment: hosting start-ups, social enterprises and community organisations within our buildings, creating jobs and enabling local entrepreneurship.

The PEACE Approach: The Distinctive 174 Way

Drawing on forty years of experience, the Trust can describe and share its distinctive approach through a simple but powerful framework: PEACE.



P – Presence
Consistent, human presence in the community—being with people, not delivering to people. The Trust's early volunteers often speak about simply being a "safe and sane presence"streets marked by fear and division. That presence continues: in the nursery, the disability clubs, the arts centre, the clothes bank, and the café.

E – Everyone
Inclusive welcome without conditions. Young and old, Protestant and Catholic, newcomers and long-settled residents, people with disabilities, families in crisis, emerging artists—everyone has a place.

A – Alongside
Working with people as partners, not clients. The Trust's ethos has always been deeply relational, prioritising listening, accompaniment and co-production.

C – Common Cause & Creativity
Bringing people together not for political dialogue but for shared purpose—childcare, arts, disability support, sport, culture, crisis assistance, community development. Creativity remains a driving force in building confidence and belonging.

E – Empowerment
Supporting people to thrive, lead and contribute—volunteers, artists, parents, tenants, partner organisations and local youth.

This experiential model, grown from the ground up in North Belfast, complements and enriches international peacebuilding theory. It demonstrates what can flourish when a local organisation remains committed, over four decades, to nurturing trust, modelling inclusion, and encouraging shared humanity.

Responding to a World of Growing Polarisation

Today, societies across the world are experiencing increased division—political, cultural, economic and ethnic. This has accelerated through global social media dynamics, widening inequality, declining trust in institutions and the aftermath of the pandemic.

Northern Ireland has not been immune. Polarisation is visible in politics, community tensions, digital misinformation, and the continuing existence of peace walls.

Against this backdrop, the Trust's approach has something vital to offer: a model of patient presence, courageous encounter, and creative community building that is deeply rooted in lived experience, not theory.

As an organisation that has navigated one of the most divided neighbourhoods in Western Europe, the Trust's learned wisdom has relevance far beyond Belfast—including for other divided communities globally who seek practical, relational approaches to rebuilding trust.

Reinforcing the Strategy

The Positive Peace Model and the PEACE framework shape and guide the new strategy's four pillars:

1. Surviving to Thriving – strengthening crisis support, early years development and disability inclusion.
2. Thriving Collaboratively – deepening partnerships and building strong, diverse networks.
3. Thriving Creatively – using arts and culture to inspire connection and challenge division.
4. Thriving Sustainably – ensuring strong leadership, financial resilience and environmental responsibility.

Together, these commitments represent a modern, outward-looking expression of the Trust's long-standing belief: that peace is not a programme or a moment, but a way of being with each other.

Guardian charity appeal 2025
Belfast

This article is more than **2 months old**

'It restored my hope': how community action is confronting racism in Belfast

An initiative linking people across race, class and faith offers an antidote to silence, hate and growing division

Donate to the charity appeal here



Rory Carroll *Ireland correspondent*

Sat 27 Dec 2025 08.00 GMT

Share

Prefer the Guardian on Google



Newspaper article, (2025)

Part D: Strategic Recommendations for Forward Planning

A. Organisational Recommendations

Strengthening the Trust's internal capacity, leadership and long-term sustainability.

1. Governance & Leadership

- Establish a regular governance review cycle to ensure the Board remains skills-balanced, diverse and future-focused.
- Introduce trauma-informed leadership and governance training for staff and trustees.
- Embed the WITH principle in all governance and programme design — ensuring that people are co-creators, not clients.
- Strengthen succession planning for key roles, ensuring organisational continuity.

2. Strategy & Impact Measurement

- Embed the PEACE framework (Presence, Everyone, Alongside, Common Cause, Empowerment) into organisational decision-making and programme design.
- Develop a light-touch, outcomes-focused impact and learning framework to evidence the value of relational peacebuilding.
- Build a strong culture of reflection and learning, with regular internal learning sessions.

3. Financial Sustainability

- Advocate for strategic, multi-year core funding agreements with government and philanthropic partners.
- Develop a three-year fundraising strategy, including major donors, legacies and small-gifts campaigns.
- Continue expansion of the tenancy model to support sustainable income.
- Position 174 as a Centre of Practice for Local Peacebuilding, offering reflective learning and practitioner exchanges.
- Work with funders to redefine "impact" in peace work — measuring trust, belonging, and relationship capital alongside traditional outputs.

B. Community-Level Recommendations

Deepening the Trust's local impact in North Belfast and across interface communities.

1. Strengthening Core Work

- Expand the disability clubs, nursery provision and arts engagement to meet growing demand.
- Continue responding to cost-of-living pressures through food, clothing and crisis support.
- Increase outreach into neighbourhoods most affected by deprivation, isolation and intimidation.
- Strengthen partnerships with local artists and cultural centres to ensure work remains community-led and co-created.
- Engage younger generations in storytelling — through digital media, social content, and participatory art.

2. Building Positive Peace Locally

- Use the Positive Peace model to guide programme development, particularly in supporting good relations, equitable opportunities and human flourishing.
- Facilitate cross-community and cross-cultural encounters through:
  - **Arts and music**
  - **Shared parent programmes**
  - **Youth programmes**
  - **Intercultural events**

- Continue creating spaces where political opposites and diverse communities meet as colleagues, parents and neighbours, modelling everyday reconciliation.
- Expand intercultural and intergenerational programming, creating shared spaces where old residents and new communities meet through collaboration.
- Use arts and storytelling to shape public conversation on what peace means in today's Northern Ireland — helping people move from surviving to thriving together.

3. Circles of Change

- Embed and expand Circles of Change as a flagship storytelling and dialogue programme — bringing people together to share lived experiences of hope, loss, and belonging with outcomes of:
  - Community-led philanthropy
  - Cross-cultural collaboration
  - Leadership development
  - Small-scale grants to grassroots groups
- Develop creative outputs (exhibitions, performances, short films) that grow directly from these sessions.

4. Mental Health & Trauma

- Train all staff and volunteers in trauma-informed communication and practice.
- Establish reflective practice sessions to support emotional resilience and prevent burnout.
- Partner with mental health and counselling services to provide support where needed.
- Position 174 as a Centre of Excellence in Trauma-Informed Community Peacebuilding.

C. National & International Recommendations

Extending the Trust's influence and sharing learning beyond North Belfast.

1. Policy Influence & Government Engagement

- Continue to host government delegations, committees and political visitors.
- Contribute proactively to policy consultations on issue such as interface areas, arts and culture and disability inclusion.
- Develop a communications and advocacy plan to articulate 174's distinctive approach.

2. Academic & Sector Partnerships

- Position the Trust as a thought leader in faith-inspired, inclusive peacebuilding.
- Deepen collaboration with community, faith, and statutory partners through co-located services and shared staff development.
- Pursue strategic partnerships with universities and creative industries for research, learning, and impact evaluation.
- Explore shared-resourcing and fundraising partnerships to sustain operations and innovation
- Share learning with the wider community-relations, arts and youth-work sectors in Northern Ireland and beyond through conferences, podcasts, publications, and exchange visits.

3. International Learning & Exchange

- Position the Trust as a global case study of grassroots peacebuilding, particularly relevant in a world facing new polarisation and rising hate.
- Explore reciprocal learning partnerships with communities in other divided cities, polarised communities and post-conflict regions.
- Present the Trust's model at international peace, arts and community conferences.
- Offer short courses, study visits and leadership retreats to organisations seeking to learn from North Belfast's experience.

Conclusion

Across forty years of conflict, transition, and change, the 174 Trust has demonstrated that peace is built not in grand moments, but in everyday acts of courage, compassion, and connection. Its story is one of people choosing presence over fear, hospitality over division, and common cause over suspicion.

As Belfast continues to evolve, the Trust stands as both a reminder of what is possible and a guide to what is still needed — a place where people meet as equals, work together on what matters, and discover again that hope is strongest when it is shared. The task ahead is simple and profound: to keep showing up, keep opening doors, and keep building peace one relationship at a time.

“Together Is Better”

The next phase of the 174 Trust’s journey is not about reinventing its purpose, but about reaffirming its presence in a changing Belfast.

By protecting its ethos, deepening inclusion, expanding creative peace work, and strengthening leadership, the Trust can continue to be a beacon of relational peace for generations to come.

Its task now is to move from being a story of the past to becoming a strategy for the future — showing that peace, like love, is not a project but a way of life.



Appendix A – Interviewees and Contributors

1) Professor Dominic Bryan – Professor of Anthropology, Queen's University Belfast

2) Kelly Burke – Early Years Coordinator, 174 Trust

3) Heather Carey – Chair of the Board, 174 Trust; early volunteer (1980s)

4) Linda Duffy – Disability Services Coordinator, 174 Trust

5) Ray Giffen – Creative Director, The Duncairn Centre for Culture & Arts

6) Lynda Gould – NICVA Faith in Community

7) Geoff Kerr – Deputy Director

8) Mary Hutton, Former Director, 174 Trust

9) Trevor Long – North Belfast Presbytery

10) Tim Magowan – Executive Director, 174 Trust (Current)

11) Dr Séamas Ó Donnghaile – Principal, Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain

12) Philip Orr – Historian and Writer

13) Audrey Peterson – Early Full Time Youth Worker, Board Member 174 Trust

14) Bill Shaw – Former Director, 174 Trust

15) Patton Taylor – Trustee, Founding Minister, 174 Trust

16) Lisa Wilkinson – Director, TIDES Training

17) Lois Whyte – Early volunteer, Founding Board member

Community Focus Group Participants – 4 Local Residents, North Belfast



Artists from Cork and Belfast come together at 'The Ties that bind' event (2024)

Photo credit: **Collette O'Neill**

An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
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