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Sent: 15 November 2018 15:58

To: Local Development Plan <LocalDevelopmentPlan@BelfastCity.gov.uk>

Subject: response to consultation on local development plan

On behalf of Falls Community Council I wish to submit a response to the local development plan and agree that this submission can be made public.

Falls Community Council have published relevant research on planning and the city. The two publications are: Shared Space Research (2011) and Peace Walls and Barrier removal; building sustainable Communities (2016) and these are attached as part of our formal submission.

The shared space research emphasises the importance of repairing the disconnection and isolation of inner city communities and calls for future development in the city to prioritise the integration and development of these communities. The peace walls research outlines key principles to underpin a strategy for the removal of barriers and peace walls and these include the need for regeneration and sustainable development in interface communities. Falls Community Council believe that in order to meet the aim of inclusive growth and sustainable employment across the whole city the local development plan needs to address the legacy of negative regeneration and blighted disconnected physical environments. The legacy of the conflict can be seen in the city, not just through the peace walls but also in planning and roads policies that created poorly designed and fractured neighbourhoods that are disconnected from the city centre and therefore from the benefits of the city centre economy. Our own research and that of other groups highlights in particular the negative social, economic and environmental impact of the Westlink on surrounding communities cutting them off from the city centre. The local development plan does not demonstrate an understanding of this legacy and therefore does not fully address it. We welcome the aspiration for a shared city set out in the development plan but call for more work to address past failures. We believe that specific research examining the legacy of the conflict on the city would help create a better local development plan.

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BACKGROUND

The Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium

The Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium (BCRC) is made up of loyalist, republican, and community activists who have, for many years, been working at the interfaces where they live, to respond to tension and develop best practice for conflict intervention. Since its formation in 2007, BCRC has cultivated tentative contacts between activists and created effective working relationships into a cross community steering group, response network, and staff. One of the project's overarching aims is to build cross community strategic alliances to address disadvantage and social problems in interface communities.

In 2010 Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium decided to commission research that would critically examine the connection of inner city interface communities to the city and analyse the implications for shared space in the city. The research was to investigate the spatial connections of interfaces areas to the city and city centre and assess how planning, development and policy decisions have contributed to connection or disconnection. Forum for Alternative Belfast was appointed to carry out the research.

As part of the research process the Forum carried out a series of community meetings across the city in May and June 2011 to contribute to discussions about the strategies that are needed to repair disconnection and blight.

The Forum for Alternative Belfast

The Forum for Alternative Belfast was set up by a group of architects and urban planners in November, 2008, and formally launched in June, 2009. The Forum is constituted as a Community Interest Company. It has seven Directors and a support network of around 30–40 people from various backgrounds who have contributed to both projects and events. The directors include practicing architects and academics from both Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster.

THE ISSUES

The Concept of Shared Space

Definitions of shared space in Northern Ireland have evolved over the last 10-15 years and to some extent have been subsumed into the vocabulary of government and agency bureaucracy. In the context of Belfast, two key points are consistently made: one refers to the city centre as a 'successful' shared space, a place that is safe and devoid of sectarian paraphernalia; the other focuses on the segregated spatial geography of working class areas. The creation of shared space in relation to the latter

is about breaking down the barriers of territory and developing spaces, sometimes simply a building that both communities can have access to and indeed share. While these are laudable objectives, arguably they do not fully address other serious issues of division within the context of Belfast's urban environment. This report attempts to look beyond standard definitions of shared space in Northern Ireland and seeks to understand the broader spatial environment of Belfast's inner city.

Worldwide there has been a gradual erosion of our collective 'right to the city' by institutions, governments and by private interests. It was out of this pressure, played out in the subtle micro design of buildings and spaces that originally prompted the emergence of the term *shared space*.

The use of this term in Belfast should be reclaimed and demonstrated around the original definition. It is important for designers and communities to counter the forces that constrain or limit the use of public space: corporations, insurance industries, notions of security, government institutions and private sector interests. These issues are complex and difficult. It would be unfortunate, however, if the concept of 'shared space' in Northern Ireland is limited to a definition that relates simply to space and facilities close to interface areas, this would be to misunderstand wider thinking on the subject. Rather, shared space is about access; it is about having access to the city and all the facilities that the city offers. The structure and layout of the city is key to this, as is the development of civic ownership of spaces. Careful mapping of the city allows the identification of those barriers and obstacles that effectively hinder easy movement and connection. This is particularly important for those communities who depend on walking and public transport. For more affluent communities the city and its facilities are largely accessed by car. Indeed, this is how Belfast has been designed in recent decades, to meet the needs of the latter.

An analysis of city structure and layout would identify destination points including employment areas, shopping areas, parks, education and training centres, health facilities and so on and would then examine not only existing and potential access routes but also the quality of those routes. Of course, moving around the city and using space also requires an understanding of how communities and citizens more generally read the environment. Is it safe and welcoming or is it alien and scary; is it inclusive or is it exclusive. So we are talking not only about the functionality of space but also perceptions of space. It is important that a community perspective and methodology should be evolved and that this should become a powerful tool to enforce 'shared space' on private sector, public sector and institutional interests which currently, sometimes unwittingly, promote exclusion.

We should recognise, as many independent urbanists around the world have, that making *shared space*, civic space and public space in the contemporary world requires constant vigilance on behalf of those who care about our civic realm. *Unshared space* is a chameleon, it rarely shows its true colours, nor its motivations. It is perhaps significant that some of the most entrenched boundaries in Belfast are economic, between rich enclaves and poor enclaves. If we are to honestly tackle our peace-lines and interfaces,

we must, perhaps first, turn our gaze to social inequality and how poor design and planning, led by the public sector, has entrenched, perhaps unwittingly, working class communities, and moreover, tended to support the creation of subtle enclaves for the rich.

In the context of Belfast, we have a governance approach which is unsophisticated in terms of urban analysis. Largely driven by a bureaucratic culture it tends to latch onto easy-to-measure, politically endorsed criteria. Shared space as currently understood here falls into this category. However, everyone has a responsibility for creating a more inclusive and accessible city. While we can point the finger at government in all its guises as well as private development interests we must also recognize that communities have responsibilities too: to help politicize the issues that government and others are not confronting, but also to provide leadership for outward looking strategies and broad alliances for change.

Is it a Question of Access?

Definitions of 'access' cannot simply be confined to physical or spatial access. People's access to places also depends on their class, gender, age, sexuality and so on. However, physical or spatial access remains very important in the city not least because employment, services, and leisure facilities are all physically located. During the last 40 years a number of significant phenomena have affected the access of working class communities in and around Belfast's inner city. Firstly, the city has, since the late 1960s, been shaped and designed for the car. This has been manifested in some very obvious road infrastructure such as the Westlink and the Inner Ring Road, but is also evident in the layout of social housing and in the development of car parks to support the daytime economy of the central city. In essence the design and layout of Belfast's inner and central city has been driven by the needs of a car owning public. This is illustrated in figure-ground maps which compare city layout in the 1960s with the contemporary layout and demonstrate the space now afforded to the 'needs' of the motorist. Significantly too, the historical grid layout of streets around the radial roads had facilitated good connectivity and with that good access to services, many of which were located along the arterial routes.

A second key phenomenon that has affected access within the inner city relates to community reaction to the conflict. As a form of protection, communities became more insular and self reliant tending to stay within their own territorial boundaries. Indeed during the years of the conflict many key services and community facilities were purposively located in the heart of community neighbourhoods, and, of course, this helped to reinforce their insularity. All of this, moreover, contributed to a territorial psyche that helped to reduce contact with the rest of the city and between communities.

The post conflict city, in some respects, is a very different place. We now have what Murtagh calls the 'twin speed' city¹. In his view, the 'social disadvantage' and

¹ Murtagh, B., 2011. Desegregation and Place Restructuring in the New Belfast. *Urban Studies*, 48(6) 1119–1135.

'segregation' which characterizes the west and north of the city effectively excludes these communities from 'the economic optimism of the south'. More than this, we are seeing the development of a more overt class divide being expressed in the spatial geography of Belfast. The growth of the Catholic middle class has brought a fresh focus on this and, indeed, on how class division relates to the so-called 'traditional divisions'. In this regard, Shirlow has argued that '*while sectarian animosity is still visible among all social classes, a growing body of evidence supports the thesis that the middle classes, irrespective of their religious affiliations, increasingly share similar lifestyles and socio-economic pursuits, which are mutually agreeable and inherently less antagonistic*'.²

All of this finds expression in the spatial geography of Belfast and in the movement patterns of people. The concept of 'urban bubbling' has relevance here. This refers to the way in which the middle classes use the entire city and its environs as their neighbourhood. Of course the key to this level of access is the car; in other words 'the bubble'. Working, shopping, pursuing leisure and so on around the city is very much the middle class lifestyle. Significantly though, the city has been designed, developed and managed to facilitate this. Extensive car parks, ongoing roads development and even traffic management are all designed to assist this lifestyle.

For working class neighbourhoods on the other hand, movement is largely limited to walking and public transport. Local facilities are therefore more important, as are safe walking environments. However, in inner city Belfast we now have a double bind. We have, as mentioned above, the real and psychological constraints of territory and how that plays out in terms of movement and access, but then, in addition, we have a city designed for the car. What we might call physical or spatial pedestrian access to the city centre and indeed to other parts of the city is poor.

While the comfort of neighbourhood has been important for communities, particularly during 'the conflict', it should not distract from the need to create a more open and accessible city. So while the car owning middle classes are enjoying the wider city, should a substantial section of the population be 'confined to barracks' to live a very localized existence?

Interestingly, Jane Jacobs was making the very same point back in the early 1960s. She argued that the notion of 'neighbourhood' was a somewhat sentimental concept that was ultimately 'harmful to city planning'. Moreover, she lamented its central place in traditional planning theory and practice as well as its ongoing influence on the regeneration of cities. For her *the city is the neighbourhood*, offering its citizens 'wide choice and rich opportunities'.

'Whatever city neighborhoods may be, or may not be, and whatever usefulness they may have, or may be coaxed into having, their qualities cannot work at cross-

² Shirlow, P., 1997. Class, materialism and the fracturing of traditional alignments: In B. Graham (E), In Search of Ireland. London: Routledge, p. 89.

purposes to thoroughgoing city mobility and fluidity of use, without economically weakening the city of which they are part'.³

In the context of Belfast, the *location* of, and hence *access* to, centres of employment as well as educational and training facilities is crucial to creating a fair and equitable city. Currently, Belfast city centre and increasingly Titanic Quarter are being further developed as centres of employment and further education, as well, of course, for entertainment and leisure. The draft Metropolitan Area Plan confirms this:

'The promotion of Belfast City Centre and the development opportunities within Belfast Harbour will support the provision of new job opportunities in central locations accessible to all sections of the community.'⁴

All of this suggests, that, at the very least, facilitating good quality and direct access to key areas of the city should be a planning and regeneration priority. A study by Queen's University students showed that the city centre and Titanic Quarter were, potentially, within 5-10 minutes walking distance of Duncairn Gardens in the heart of inner north Belfast. However, the route to the city centre is frustrated by road barriers and poor quality frontage environments, while the route to Titanic Quarter is circuitous by both bus and walking. Titanic Quarter is, of course, similarly cut off from the adjacent East Belfast neighbourhoods. Given all of this disconnection, should any further public investment be made in Titanic Quarter until these major access issues are resolved?

Unshared Regeneration

In the last 20 years we have regenerated many parts of the city, but none of these initiatives have included meaningful connections to neighbourhoods. In other words, they haven't addressed issues of urban structure. Indeed for many local neighbourhoods there is only one way in and they have become 'dead end' places. Issues relating to the structure and layout of the city are not, however, confined to longstanding inner city residential areas; the redeveloped Laganside areas, for example, have no recognisable streets with shops, restaurants and consequently there is no sense of anyone actually 'living' there. An opportunity was missed to make living civic spaces, and ironically perhaps, most of the river frontage is completely blank. On Oxford Street one of the buildings is planned back to front, with bins facing the public street. It may feature fine paving, but the adjacent Markets area remains totally isolated and disconnected.

The Gasworks area has some good buildings and retains some good frontages to Ormeau Road. However, these closed walls were not reinvented. There is only one way into the Gasworks and the rather unnecessary security

³ Jacobs, J., 1993 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, The Modern Library Edition, New York

⁴ Department of the Environment NI, 2004, draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 Plan Strategy: Promoting Equality of Opportunity.

hut communicates unwelcoming signals. This sort of critical reflection is important if we are to learn from our mistakes and if we want to create a shared and accessible city.

The development of the University of Ulster's campus in inner north Belfast represents a major investment by our community. It is important therefore to 'get it right'. So what can we learn from elsewhere? The growth of Queen's University since the 19th Century is a very good example of a university integrating into its city. The campus extended through the public streets of south Belfast in an open manner with separate buildings.

The development of the University of Ulster in the north of city provides an opportunity to create a similar open campus. There is now an exciting potential for a city diagram of polar universities with the flows of people between them. Critically though, the new campus should, indeed must, evolve into an open campus of separate buildings. If a gated and internalised institution is built then a key opportunity to create accessible and shared space will have been squandered due to poor civic leadership.

Similarly, the issue of student housing needs to be addressed. The planned increase in student numbers in recent decades was not, however, matched with the management and regulation of student housing. In south Belfast this has evolved largely unchecked, with most of the housing now owned by a small number of private landlords. Significantly too, there is strong evidence of religious division across student housing areas.

The design, layout and management of the new campus in the divided north of the city should learn from the mistakes of the last decades. This is a key opportunity to build a shared space that connects with the surrounding communities and which integrates into the city fabric.

Population and Sustainable Community

The city of Belfast has been losing population since the 1950's. More particularly, it has lost 35% of its population during the last 35 years; in consequence, the suburbs and the surrounding towns and villages have grown at an unprecedented rate. It is estimated that over the last 30 years, districts such as Lisburn, Carrick, Banbridge and Down have seen their populations increase by, on average, 40%. While recent statistics suggest a modest increase in population (0.5% between 2006 and 2010), nevertheless, Belfast remains one of the few cities in the British Isles that has not recovered from the depopulation effects of deindustrialization during the 1970s and 1980s. Much of the city's depopulation relates to redevelopment design which saw, in some areas, a

decrease in population of over 60%. The Shankill area, for example, saw an overall decline in population of over 70% (1971-2001).⁵

The key to a good, well functioning and sustainable city is to have a density of population that can support local services. Low density housing together with large areas of vacant and underused land in Belfast's inner and central city contribute to an unsustainable and inequitable living environment. Of course sustainability is not only about the physical environment but it is also, importantly, about the social and economic environment, and about sustainable community. Over the last 10 years Planning has attempted to address the issue of low urban densities in Northern Ireland by setting a target for 60% of all new residential development to be built on brown-field sites. In the Belfast Metropolitan area, this target was surpassed. However, the detail of how this was to be achieved in terms of design, integration and supportive infrastructure was not addressed. Rather, it was left to the development market to identify sites and come forward with individual proposals. This, in turn, has created a number of problems.

Firstly, over the last 10-15 years speculative apartment developments have been built in and around the central city area. By and large, these are unplanned, one or two bedroom flats, often located within, or adjacent to, longstanding working class communities. A study undertaken for the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland⁶ surveyed eight of these new apartment developments and discovered that: the majority of residents (72%) were in the 19-34 age group; over 79% had tertiary level qualifications; and, interestingly, the vast majority (77.2%) either did not know their neighbours, or knew only a few. Moreover, a number of the developments sit cheek by jowl with communities who have some of the highest levels of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. So although, in statistical terms, these developments have brought new residents to the inner city, their physical detachment through gates, walls and security doors seems to reinforce their social detachment from the communities around them. Indeed this new layer of division in inner city Belfast does not bode well for long term community sustainability. As Gaffikin et al argue:

*'The new gated and secured apartment communities are in the inner city, but arguably, are not of the inner city. In other words, these new spaces are like little islands in the urban landscape. Good local planning would not only have considered how to integrate such new developments into the fabric of the city but would also have thought through the supportive infrastructure that would have assisted that integration.'*⁷

Secondly, Belfast has no vision for how the inner and central city might be developed. The accumulation of individual speculative developments does not add up to a coherent

⁵ Greater Shankill Partnership & the Department of Social Development NI, 2008, Greater Shankill Strategic Regeneration Framework.

⁶ Gaffikin, F, Sterrett, K., McEldowney, M., Morrissey, M. and Hardy, M., Planning Shared Space for a Shared Future (Belfast, The Community Relations Council, Northern Ireland, 2008)

⁷ Ibid. p. 123.

strategy for creating a sustainable city. Even some developers recognize this and acknowledge that good area planning can bring more certainty to their investment decisions. A vision for a re-populated inner and central city should surely be about building and developing sustainable communities that are socially and religiously balanced. Architecture, urban planning and urban design all have a role to play in achieving this. Active ground floor frontages, higher space standards for living accommodation, the avoidance of gates and barriers, good pedestrian space, and the supportive infrastructure of local services, including schools and open space are some of the basics of such a contribution.

Thirdly, communities themselves need to show leadership and vision. This requires a cross-community coherent voice about a vision that extends beyond individual community areas and which sets a framework and key objectives for both public and private development processes. The politics of this are potentially very powerful and ultimately rewarding for those working class communities who have had little or no place in the planning and development of the city.

Governance of the Built Environment

The governance of Belfast's environment over the last 30+ years has been characterized by fragmentation and incoherence. As Liam O'Dowd recently argued, 'contemporary Belfast remains nobody's project'. In his view, its 'fractured environment . . . expresses the "invisible hand" of modern consumer capitalism married to hopelessly fragmented systems of urban governance . . . this is a cityscape marked by incoherence, exclusion, and disconnection.'⁸

The disjointed governance of Belfast's built environment has undoubtedly contributed to many of the problems now facing inner city communities. A number of commentators have argued that the period of direct rule during the conflict generated a certain administrative culture that, to some extent, still prevails. This is a culture of technocracy and bureaucracy that protects itself from challenges of bias and partiality. It is a culture of regulation which practices within a 'silo mentality'. Most significantly though, it seeks to justify the decisions of individual departments without seeing the holistic nature of the problems we are facing.

All of this has had an impact on the shape, form, quality and ultimately, the sustainability of Belfast's built environment. As elsewhere in Northern Ireland, transport and roads, housing, regeneration and land-use planning have all been administered quite separately for Belfast and with little attempt to consider the city, or indeed its component parts, holistically as a place. The consequences of this are all quite evident in the environment: roads planning, that is exclusively about roads; social housing that deals singularly with housing and doesn't address the overall living environment; land-use planning that is two dimensional and overly focused on the 'technicalities of zoning'; and regeneration which lacks vision, quality assurance and authority.

⁸ O'Dowd, Liam, 'Belfast Transitions', in, Downey, Karen, *Where are the people: contemporary photographs of Belfast 2002–2010* (Belfast, Belfast Exposed Photography, 2010).

The outcomes from the review of public administration in Northern Ireland have yet to be agreed by the Stormont Executive. However, it seems likely that spatial planning, community planning and regeneration powers will be devolved to the new councils. For Belfast City Council, this potentially will offer greater opportunities to plan, design, and manage the development of the city. Community planning can, as elsewhere in the UK, play a significant role in all of this. Such Community Planning, however, treats the city as a whole community and seeks to advance a consensual vision for its development across a wide range of services. And, of course, the vision should, in turn, give direction to the city's spatial development plan as well identifying priority areas for comprehensive action.

For example, a vision for the spatial development of Belfast might highlight the long term decline in population, the spatial disconnections, and the need for the regeneration of vacant land in and around the central city. It might also identify inner north Belfast as a problematic area of the city which requires co-ordinated and comprehensive action. However, within inner north Belfast there are a number of planned, publicly funded projects such as: the University of Ulster's new campus; the York Street road interchange; the Gamble Street railway halt; the development of the Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood; the Royal Exchange regeneration scheme; and the City Quays development. Under the current system these would be planned and developed quite separately and without the benefit of an overall community agreed framework or vision. Good spatial planning, on the other hand, should employ an urban design practice that worked with local communities to agree a set of objectives that would not only maximise local and city wide benefits but would also seek synergies to make the best use of public and private sector investments.

This sort of spatial planning has been operative in England since 2004. Research shows that where good practice occurs, a number of key approaches are evident:

- there is a community owned **vision** for the local authority's spatial area;
- this **drills down** to those areas where action is required;
- there is an **integrated** approach to both the analysis and development of these areas; and
- the planned **delivery** of any overall scheme is regarded as an essential part of process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The issues raised in this report trigger a number of recommendations:

- Shared space needs an agreed definition; one that goes beyond the sometimes simple definitions offered by government and other agencies. Perhaps through widespread consultation and discussion an agreed check list could be developed

that can be used to test how the design, layout and management of major new developments can contribute to the creation of shared space. Such tests should be undertaken by an independent civic society body to ensure both effectiveness and reduced risks for public investment;

- For inner city communities, and indeed others who depend on walking, access to the city, and particularly to key areas of the city, needs to be addressed. This should be enforced in planning and regeneration processes. For planning this should be as important a criterion as car parking requirements and for regeneration practice there needs to be a new investment focus on improving access. In relation to the latter, a regeneration practice that seeks to create a shared city would prioritize the repair of the broken structure of the city.
- Potential new governance arrangements can make way for a more integrated approach to planning, developing and regenerating the city. However, in advance of that, government departments and agencies together with Belfast City Council can begin the processes of co-operation and collaboration to tackle those built environment issues raised in this report. A series of pilot studies should seek pragmatic solutions to the problems to be rolled out over priority areas.
- The issues raised here are vitally important to the quality of life for the city as a whole. Moreover, it is vital for the image and economic health of the city as a *place*. Many inner city communities have shown through collaborative effort how very difficult interface issues can be tackled through bottom up approaches. This co-operation around shared issues can, and should be extended to lobby for a safe, accessible and high quality inner city environment. Addressing the issue of the interfaces, therefore, should be twinned with addressing access to a shared city.

Peace Walls & Barrier Removal:

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium

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March 2016



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INTRODUCTION

In May 2010, Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium (BCRC) issued a position paper as a contribution to the broader debate around interface barriers and peace walls. Six principles were outlined in the paper:

1. Residents must be at the heart of decision-making about interface areas.
2. The regeneration of interface areas is at the core of addressing problems experienced by residents.
3. Residents have identified their priorities and should be listened to.
4. The focus on walls/barriers in isolation from other issues is detrimental.
5. The walls/barriers are a symptom rather than a cause of division.
6. Public policies (including planning, education, health, housing) should support the regeneration and sustainable development of interface areas.

These principles were reviewed at the beginning of 2013 and a discussion paper was launched in June 2013 which reiterated these principles.¹

In light of recent research and policy related to peace walls and interface barriers, not least the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to remove all peace walls/interface barriers by the year 2023, BCRC has again revisited the principles. This Policy Brief outlines the findings from an engagement and consultation process conducted during autumn 2015/spring 2016 with a range of key stakeholders at grassroots and statutory levels.

BCRC would like to acknowledge the funding support received from OFMDFM's Central Good Relations Fund. Many thanks also go to the respondents who contributed to the consultation.

OVERVIEW

Despite different definitions of what a peace wall actually is and disagreements over how many of them there are, it is nonetheless clear that there are many of them and that there are also differences of opinion as to their usefulness and whether or not they are necessary. The Department of Justice (DOJ), which is taking the lead in implementing the '2023' policy, for instance owns 54 interface structures, consisting of walls/fences and gates. The vast majority of these are located in Belfast (North 37%, West 33% and East 7%) but with some also situated in Derry/Londonderry (11%) and Craigavon (11%).² The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) owns a further 21 interfaces.³ According to a 2011 Belfast Interface Project report however, a total of 99 "security barriers and forms of defensive architecture" could be identified in Belfast alone.⁴ In their survey on *Public Attitudes to Peace Walls (2015)*, Byrne et al defines peace walls as "all kinds of physical interface barriers that keep communities apart..."⁵

Peace walls are included as a central feature in the 2013 *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* (TBUC) and more specifically in relation to its key priority 'Our Safe Community'. The strategy outlines the objective to "[c]reate a 10-year Programme to reduce, and remove by 2023, all interface

barriers".⁶ The '2023' goal was signed up to by all the main parties in the Northern Ireland Executive and the following rationale was provided:

*Removing interface barriers and other structures of division will send out an important message that our society is continuing on its journey from conflict and segregation to peace and reconciliation, but more importantly will bring community benefits. The elimination of these physical reminders is necessary in progressing as a community and facilitating the reconciliation that has been prevented for so long through division.*⁷

The TBUC strategy further notes:

*Removing barriers, increasing sharing and facilitating reconciliation not only bring immense benefits for relationships on an individual and local community level but can also bring economic benefits to wider society.*⁸

The lack of clarity in relation to the TBUC '2023' objective is however highlighted in three Policy Briefs issued by a Ulster University (UU) team in October 2015. These documents all emphasise that there is an urgent need to pay attention to this policy objective in order to ensure agreed definitions and to set out details for its appropriate implementation.⁹ According to one of the UU policy briefs,

In identifying some problems with the design and the articulation of the policy objectives regarding Northern

*Ireland's peace walls, there is an opportunity for the TBUC Programme Board to give further clarification to the objectives. Without such clarification, we will have designed this aspect of the TBUC strategy to fail. This can be reduced to three main areas for consideration: A need for linguistic precisions ... clarity in terminology (...) A recognition of scale. There is a need for greater clarification on the scale of the issue as well as the development of an AGREED list of peace walls. (...) A decision on ownership.*¹⁰

In line with the above, our consultation confirms that there is confusion and/or frustration regarding the '2023' policy objective among many stakeholders and also some resistance towards it, in particular due to the perception that it seems to encourage a focus on the physical acts of wall/barrier removal rather than longer term processes of transforming attitudes and community relations.

As part of our consultation process we engaged representatives of projects funded through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) Peace Walls Programme¹¹, representatives of relevant statutory organisations as well as representatives of informal networks working on local barrier removal and reimagining projects.¹² Due to the limited scope of this consultation process, it should be recognised that the analysis presented below reflects only some viewpoints, although significant, in relation to barrier removal and transformation issues.

A number of themes were highlighted throughout the consultation and these will be outlined and discussed below under the following headings:

- ✚ Examples of Good Practice
- ✚ Obstacles & Challenges
- ✚ Recommendations & Next Steps
- ✚ Reviewing the 6 Principles

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE _____

Our consultation has confirmed that significant work is ongoing at a grassroots level to address issues relating to interface barriers/walls and that this has been successful in many areas – in particular where there has been a context-specific focus and where local residents have been engaged extensively. The IFI Peace Walls Programme was for instance set up in 2012 to begin addressing issues relating to nearly 100 peace walls/barriers and it emphasises “confidence and relationship building” as a means to creating “conditions whereby residents would feel safe to commence discussions about the removal of Peace Walls”. In addition to residents’ engagement and relationship building, the Programme also supports a multi-agency approach in order “to deliver a coordinated and collaborative approach” between “communities, statutory agencies and funders”.¹³

Peace Walls Projects contributing to our consultation emphasised that successes can be linked to residents’ views being heard and respected, in particular when the voices of those living directly along physical interface barriers have been listened to. In other words, successful transformation processes are perceived as more likely when

the views of those living at the coal face are prioritised in discussions around removing or reimagining local walls and barriers.

Practical examples of positive achievements include: partial opening of security gates; cross-community engagement regarding particular issues; the removal of grills from houses on the request of local residents; increased opening hours of gates; fence reimagining, barrier reimagining; empowerment of local residents; improvement of residents’ quality of life; improvement of cross-community relationships through senior citizens events, fun days, Christmas grotto etc.; school programme; youth clubs etc.

It should be noted that in some cases, these accomplishments have been achieved despite a high threat level against those involved.

Consultation respondents emphasised the need for flexibility in the short term as a means to reaching long term goals and that any processes need to be reflective of where people are at within the local context. It was for instance observed that short term steps, such as the lowering of a wall and building relationships, are more likely to encourage full barrier removal in the longer term. It was reported that flexible approaches have ensured that issues raised by residents throughout the consultation process are taken on board. Environmental improvement projects were also presented as a particularly successful aspect of flexible approaches.

Respondents’ experiences have further shown that investment and incentives are required in order to build up community confidence and create a sustainable

process. As one person summarised, four key elements are essential regarding barrier removal processes: capacity building, confidence building, relationship building and infrastructure. This has for instance been accomplished through engagement with individual residents (using a 'door to door approach') combined with confidence building measures and 'quick wins'. Both single identity as well as cross-community engagement has proven necessary. The upskilling of volunteers and employees has also increased capacity and confidence. In addition, youth engagement in various forms has been successful in term of gauging views on the peace walls issue within local areas.

A good working relationship with funders was also emphasised as an essential feature in relation to successful processes. Furthermore, where statutory representatives and funders have an intimate knowledge of the local area and are actively involved, progress is more likely. To assist the process, some initiatives have for instance invited statutory representatives to the local area to provide them with an overview of issues, challenges and potential. The willingness and ability of statutory agencies to assist in monetary as well as practical terms is therefore viewed as another key ingredient towards success.

Progress and successful processes were also noted to have involved the buy in of local political representatives in addition to that of residents and relevant statutory organisations.

In relation to safety and security, managing crime and dealing with community safety issues were highlighted as key aspects of barrier removal processes. For instance,

'after care' packages were generally viewed as essential. Based on experience, some respondents also put forward the suggestion that there should be a 'before care' package in place to ensure that residents at the coal face feel safe and secure ahead of any process.

OBSTACLES & CHALLENGES _____

LACK OF FLEXIBILITY

Our consultation has confirmed that addressing interface barriers needs to be done in stages as part of a long term process. In particular, the more contentious interface structures need to be dealt with sensitively through engagement with the residents directly affected and at a pace that is in line with the needs of those residents. It was emphasised that this is not something that can be rushed and each area needs to be dealt with on a case by case basis.

Some respondents expressed concern that peace walls projects are being pressurised to deal with barriers too quickly even though it may not be the right time to do so. It was also observed that too high expectations by funders and statutory agencies to remove physical walls/barriers can in fact cause obstacles to progress on the ground. While some barrier removals are considered 'easy wins' as they represent less contentious cases others are more difficult and require a longer term approach. While the priority to date has largely been the complete removal of walls, reimagining was viewed as a useful interim step in a long term process towards removal of more contentious interface barriers.

It was acknowledged that barrier removal/transformation processes can be influenced and impeded by external factors, such as tensions and fall outs in relation to upcoming centenaries and the flags issue. Local dynamics therefore need to be taken into consideration during processes to address physical interface barriers. As argued by one respondent, each barrier involves its own circumstances – different structures, different impact and different outcome.

RESOURCE LIMITATIONS

It seems that even though barrier removal is high on the agenda among statutory agencies, the resourcing aspect has not been considered sufficiently. Therefore, in the case of projects and initiatives who lack capital funds there is heavy reliance on external actors for the funding of any physical changes to the interface environment. In fact, a lack or delay of funding was reported to have delayed project implementation by preventing 'quick wins' in the local community which would have produced visible results quickly and lead to an increase in community confidence. Examples were provided of where residents had been ready to move forward but by the time the funds from the statutory agencies were secured the momentum was gone as increased community tensions caused residents to change their minds. In some instances, the failure of statutory representatives to 'put their money where their mouth is' was reported to have caused a serious blow to those working on the ground to progress barrier removal/transformation through a loss of resident confidence in the process. The setup of a joint fund between relevant

statutory organisations and departments was suggested as a way to expedite the implementation of processes at a local level.

However, from a statutory perspective it was also stressed during our consultation that local dynamics, and in particular local gate keeping, can cause major impediments regarding implementation of reimagining or barrier removal projects. As one respondent pointed out, there are difficulties spending the budget in some interface areas as there is a lack of agreement within communities on how it should be spent. It was also emphasised that as public funds are involved, full economic appraisal is often needed which leads to a slower process before money can be allocated to projects.

In terms of resourcing, Morrow et al conclude:

In practice, the identification of resources has presented a considerable challenge. TBUC focuses much more on the efficient targeting of existing funding delivery than on additional resources. (...) To date, the primary vehicle for resources targeted at removing barriers has been the IFI Peace Walls Programme, funded by international donors. In January 2012 ... IFI invested resources amounting by 2015 to over £3.2m in eight projects in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.¹⁴

The recent Fresh Start document however outlines measures that have the potential to address some of the concerns regarding resourcing:

The UK Government will provide an additional £60m over five years in support of the Executive's delivery of confidence and relationship building measures within and between communities, contributing to the conditions that will allow the removal

*of peace walls and the creation of a shared future.*¹⁵

LACK OF COORDINATION

Our consultation has confirmed that statutory bodies cannot work in silos and need to link in with other statutory organisations as well as local communities. A lack of coordination of activities was in some cases reported to have led to reduced confidence among interface residents in statutory agencies' ability to assist processes of change.

In fact, the need for coordination is also recognised within the TBUC Strategy itself:

*Many of the challenges outlined within this Strategy require a cross-departmental approach and cannot be adequately addressed by one department or agency working in isolation.*¹⁶

The strategy document adds:

*For us to be serious about taking down the barriers across our society, we must match our words and vision with strategic action and joined-up working. The benefit of a more coherent approach has already been seen in a number of interventions at interface areas.*¹⁷

In terms of implementation, TBUC aims to address issues of cohesion and coordination through the establishment of a Ministerial Panel and an Inter-Agency Group.¹⁸

POLITICAL BUY-IN & SUPPORT

Although all parties in the executive signed up to the '2023' policy objective, there was reported to be a lack of support for it among some local political representatives.

Concern was therefore expressed regarding a potential disconnect between the political leadership and political representatives at a local level in relation to the Executive's policy to remove all interface barriers by 2023. The consultation emphasised that it is critical for the political parties to show leadership on the ground. It was reported that while local politicians do not block the policy they also fail to actively promote it, leaving this to statutory bodies and community representatives. Consultation respondents suggested that solid political support for barrier removal processes would make a significant difference towards implementation of the strategy.

Respondents' concerns are confirmed by Morrow et al:

*While the TBUC strategy and interface target was endorsed by all parties in the Executive, our research suggests that there is greater uncertainty and reservations about the target among some local party representatives who might be expected to act as brokers of practical intervention and champions of the aims of the policy.*¹⁹

THE '2023' POLICY OBJECTIVE

The time frame set for barrier removal by 2023 was generally viewed as unhelpful by those taking part in this consultation. Instead, it was emphasised that a focus on reimagining and making areas more attractive and welcoming would be more helpful. The emphasis placed on physically removing barriers/peace walls by 2023 even seems to have had the opposite effect to that intended. Instead of encouraging residents towards the eventual removal of interface barriers at a time suitable to the local

context, residents have instead been reported to 'dig their heels in' and in many cases object to this externally imposed objective.

According to the Byrne et al's 2015 peace walls survey, 60% of respondents believed that the OFMDFM (TBUC) '2023' target for the removal of all peace walls was unrealistic.

Morrow et al also conclude:

While it continues to be regarded as 'ambitious' by some stakeholders, a target also appears to have created suspicion in some communities that the Executive has taken final decisions about the future of barriers out of local hands. While some see a specific target as a means to accelerate change at the interface, others regarded as an unhelpful intervention in local initiatives that will delay change.²⁰

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

A number of issues were raised in relation to community consultation processes. While there is general agreement that local communities need to be engaged and consulted, how this is practically done is a more complex issue. To this can be added the observation that there is increasing 'survey fatigue' whereby local communities tend to be 'surveyed out'.

As highlighted by OFMDFM in relation to the 2023 goal, community consent and hence consultations should form a key part of any process. However, as the 2015 peace walls survey by Byrne et al confirms, large scale consultations are complex processes. For example, while their survey was circulated to 4,000 households, they only received responses from 27% of these.²¹

Their survey respondents were also asked how they perceived the concept 'community consent' – while the largest portion of respondents (38%) stated "Everybody in the community agrees with the decision", just over a quarter (26%) responded that it represent the views of more than 50% of the community and 25% that it means that "[a] decision is made by those most closely affected by a proposal". Only a small proportion of the respondents considered decisions "made by locally elected political representatives" (3%) or "by local community leaders" (6%) as constituting community consent.²² In other words, in order to achieve sufficient support (community consent) for a barrier removal/transformation process in a local area, a significant portion of the local community will need to have their say.

Diversity of opinion among residents along a peace wall was also reported to have the potential to create obstacles to the progressing of barrier removal/transformation processes.

Objections by external actors to local agreements can also cause halting of discussions around barrier transformation and removal, even where there has been buy in from local residents to make improvements to their living environment.

In addition, concern was expressed that the views of local residents are not always represented by community leaders and that, in fact, there is in some contexts fear among some residents to speak their mind. Obstacles to identifying community needs and wishes were emphasised by statutory consultation contributors who made clear that removal/transformation processes need to ensure that the broader

communities are included regarding consultations and information dissemination. It was reported that in order to avoid the issue of bias, consultations are most often carried out by statutory rather than local community representatives.

Byrne et al further argues that

“there needs to be a new policy focus on what consent, confidence and consultation means ... In light of this the NI Executive should consider developing:

- *An official model of consultation ...*
- *A series of indicators to ascertain the relationship between community confidence and the removal of peace walls.*
- *A clear definition as to what ‘community consent’ means.”²³*

LEGALITIES & OWNERSHIP

In some cases, legal issues were reported to have posed obstacles to barrier transformation despite cross-community agreement for a process.

Ownership issues regarding walls/barriers were also noted to have caused delays in some cases.

LOCAL BENEFITS & INCENTIVES: SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & REGENERATION

As was pointed out by one of the consultation respondents, residents living by a peace wall/interface barrier are unlikely to view the removal of this as a priority. Instead it is something that is viewed as keeping them safe and secure

and therefore not necessarily perceived negatively by local residents. In fact, barrier removal is something that is likely to be far down the list of priorities for those supposedly most affected.

As several respondents have pointed out, residents living near interfaces are generally perceived as vulnerable in socioeconomic terms. For instance, the vast majority of Belfast’s interface barriers are located within communities that have suffered disproportionately during the conflict and also continue to suffer due to persisting lack of development and high levels of deprivation. It can therefore be argued that those most vulnerable in our society are asked to take the biggest risk for the benefit of the rest of society. Given that almost exclusively the risks regarding barrier removal processes lie with local residents, the question was posed as to what they actually get out of it? What are the benefits to local communities? Indeed, according to Gormley-Heenan et al, “the current framing of the peace walls policy ... has been unable to convincingly answer the question of exactly why the walls should come down.”²⁴

Respondents argued that a holistic approach is necessary and that unless there are clear incentives in place for residents living by an interface barrier, there is likely to be opposition to its removal. The argument was therefore frequently made that the process of barrier removal has to be community driven and locally focussed rather than driven by statutory bodies’ policy priorities. As argued by Morrow et al, “local consent for change will depend on measurable changes to local wellbeing, including economic, social, security, and educational and environmental benefits.

(...)." ²⁵ In other words, attention needs to be paid to a range of areas in addition to changes of the physical environment. This is also supported in TBUC:

An important part of building community confidence will involve the regeneration of interface areas. We believe that people living within the shadow of a physical divide or those who avoid a particular area due to an invisible barrier, need to see the positive and practical benefits of sharing. ²⁶

In addition to regeneration and safety/security considerations, a strong argument was also made that mental barriers need to be addressed as part of any process to remove physical barriers. It was therefore suggested that attention is paid to interface areas (i.e. the physical barriers) as well as interface communities (i.e. the social/psychological barriers).

Addressing barriers within the social space of interface communities would for instance involve the following:

- ✚ Addressing psychological and mental health issues.
- ✚ Humanising the other community through ongoing engagement on shared issues and concerns.
- ✚ Addressing broader legacy issues to create the right mind-set for the process of barrier removal.

The need to pay attention to both physical as well as social/psychological barriers is also acknowledged by DOJ in its 2012-2017 strategy:

... the segregation in our society cannot be tackled through addressing community safety concerns alone. The issues that have perpetuated division are complex and inter-connected; and community confidence can only be built when community safety, community relations and community development issues are considered and addressed in a co-ordinated way. ²⁷

In its recently launched community cohesion strategy, NIHE also emphasises its continued commitment to “work to develop opportunities to bring communities together...” and to continue its programme “of capacity building in areas of weak social infrastructure and ... continue to invest in improvement programmes to transform interfaces through environmental initiatives and regeneration programmes.”²⁸ NIHE further stresses that “[t]his work will be undertaken at the communities pace and only in circumstances where residents feel safe and confident to transform their interface environment.”²⁹

It needs to be recognised that physically removing walls/barriers is only a small part of a long term process and that it is the local communities in their vicinity that should be the focus. There is also a need to deal with each barrier/wall in a way that is suitable to the local context. Physical walls and barriers are reflections of broader societal division which relates to mindsets and attitudes beyond interface areas. This is also something that is recognised in the TBUC strategy:

Separation is a state of mind as well as a specific local or physical issue. It does not always equate to tension and

*violence and does not always involve physical interface structures.*³⁰

In addition to the potential obstacles outlined above, additional pressure is put on some of those trying to progress barrier removal/transformation processes. For instance, attacks and threats on project workers by those opposed to cross-community work in the local area was reported to have had an impact on the work that can be done. However, in one case it was reported that cross-community engagement still continues despite threats against those involved due to a large degree of community buy-in.

Our consultation further highlighted the lack of formal engagement between the different IFI peace walls projects. This clearly represents a lost opportunity for the sharing of experiences and best practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following key recommendations were made during this consultation process:

- ✚ A holistic, long-term, strategic and sustainable process is required.
- ✚ A multi-agency approach is necessary.
- ✚ The residents most affected, living at the coal face, need to be prioritised during consultations.
- ✚ Socioeconomic issues in interface areas need to be addressed parallel to any barrier removal/transformation process.
- ✚ Incentives need to be in place for local communities, including 'before/after care' packages.
- ✚ Regeneration and long term incentives, such as mental health programmes and unemployment schemes, should be considered to allow residents the space to get over psychological barriers.
- ✚ Cross-community engagement on 'softer' issues is key in order to build relationships.
- ✚ The issue of who represent communities needs to be addressed.
- ✚ Guidelines should be put in place for consultations with residents.
- ✚ Best practice and experiences should be shared between the different peace walls/barrier removal projects.
- ✚ Local party representatives should be encouraged to actively support policies agreed at the Executive level.
- ✚ Legacy issues need to be addressed at the Executive level.
- ✚ A genuine effort should be made to deal with any contentious issues which may represent tangible obstacles as a pre-requisite to having a genuine and meaningful discussion regarding barrier removal.
- ✚ The broader issue of sectarianism needs to be addressed and local residents should be empowered to engage in the process.

REVIEWING THE BCRC PRINCIPLES

One of the questions asked of the respondents in our consultation was whether or not the six principles, as outlined in the BCRC 2010 and 2013 papers, are relevant, accurate and represent the

views of those working actively on these issues. Those consulted confirmed that the principles broadly continue to reflect priority areas for future direction of work regarding interface barrier removal and transformation.

In particular the respondents agreed that residents need to be at the heart of decisions regarding interface areas (1). However, some qualifying points were also made. For instance, the argument was made that, although it is necessary, regeneration (2) on its own cannot solve division and needs to be combined with the building of good relations as well as addressing wider community and/or political leadership which tends to reflect the politics of our segregated society. This is particularly the case in areas with particularly intractable problems and where funding/regeneration in isolation is unlikely to make a difference. In addition, while residents should be involved in decisions impacting on them and in identifying priorities (3), it should be recognised that not everything on everyone's 'wish lists' can be delivered on. Also, the issue of community consent needs to be considered as it is not usually possible to consult all residents in an area while community representatives don't necessarily reflect all residents' viewpoints. Suggestions were also made during the consultation that the principles should be expanded to reflect the recent Fresh Start Agreement, addressing issues around community representation and 'coercive control' within local communities as well as emphasising the need for positive local/political leadership and addressing sectarianism along with

other legacy issues as a means to breaking down mental barriers between and within communities. In addition, fear among local residents should be addressed, such as the fear of loss of identity related to territory and symbols/emblems such as flags.

The following revised principles are proposed:

- 1. Walls/barriers are symptoms rather than causes of division.**
- 2. The focus on physical walls/barriers in isolation is detrimental.**
- 3. Local regeneration and sustainable development considerations should inform any process to address issues related to peace walls and interface barriers.**
- 4. Local residents must be at the heart of decision-making about interface areas, barriers and peace walls.**
- 5. The views of local residents should be captured through appropriate consultation and be reflected in any decisions/actions.**
- 6. Public policies (including planning, community safety, education, health and housing) should support the regeneration and sustainable development of interface areas.**
- 7. Funding for short-term measures and 'quick wins' should be made available, where appropriate, to ensure local community buy in. After care packages for residents, where appropriate, should also form an essential part of any barrier removal/transformation process.**

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- ¹² Consultations were held with representatives of the newly established Clonard and Mid-Shankill Community Partnership, community representatives from East Belfast/Short Strand and the Newtownabbey/Glengormley Community Relations Forum as well as representatives from DOJ, NIHE and BCC. A total of 31 community and statutory representatives contributed to the consultation process.
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