

Interfaces

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Introduction

A Shared Future: Policy And Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland, (ASF) was published in 2005 by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister with the aim of establishing “over time, a shared society defined by a culture of tolerance: a normal civic society in which all individuals are considered as equals.” 1.2.1

It highlights a number of policy aims including the need to “reduce tension and conflict at interface areas” 1.2.2

This paper seeks to outline a number of prominent issues affecting the daily lives of those who live and work in our interface communities. Following on from extensive and detailed discussions with those living and working in interface communities it presents a number of specific recommendations for consideration. As a result of the refinement and adoption of these recommendations it is hoped that the complex and extensive area of interface policy issues can be embedded in government and entwined with the promotion of *A Shared Future*.

A Shared Future makes a number of observations about conditions at interfaces and their linkage with conditions in our broader society. It also makes observations about the internal dynamics of conflict within and between interface communities.

It acknowledges that, “Conflict at interface areas is the tragic symptom of a systemic lack of trust rather than the sole cause or evidence of it.” 1.4.1

Furthermore it reminds that, “Building trust involves everyone, including political and civic leadership and institutions of government. It should not be expected to emanate from violent interfaces alone.” 1.4.1

A Shared Future is challenging. It seeks to promote integration at all levels and within all sectors of our society and whilst this is desirable it will encounter particular obstacles at interfaces, where integration seems both unviable and daunting.

Whilst supporting communities in conflict prevention, management and transformation is extremely important, there is a concern that without a holistic, inter agency approach, the onus to resolve interface conflict will be placed solely upon people living and working within interface communities, without broader statutory and local government support.

A Shared Future recognises this issue and accepts that

“Reducing tensions at interface areas must go beyond the ‘band-aid’ approach. It requires a combined short, medium and long-term approach that is earthed in encouraging local dialogue and communication, the sharing of resources, which is set in a wider context of social and economic renewal.”
2.3 (OFMDFM, 2005)

Belfast Interface Project (2004) highlights the importance of such a holistic approach:

“We need a commitment at the heart of Government to address the regeneration of interface communities both strategically and comprehensively. This means placing interfaces in the Programme for Government as this connects so many themes of Government planning including tackling disadvantage, making people healthier and promoting community safety, education, skills-development and employment.” (p 24)

The report also makes a series of specific recommendations on the role of statutory agencies and the formation and delivery of interface impacting policies which could form the cornerstone upon which other discussions should be built. As a document which has been endorsed by all the political parties on Belfast City Council, its further promotion would be of use in discussing interface policy issues across Northern Ireland.

A Shared Future welcomes this report, stating that it “offers significant contributions to the emerging discussion on responding to issues in interface areas.” 2.3.2

It also acknowledges its argument for “the development of a coherent long-term strategy to address the needs of interface areas and communities both through government plans and priorities and through strategies developed by local bodies, such as Belfast City Council.” 2.3.4

There is a shared understanding amongst interface practitioners and residents that interface conflict draws people from hinterland communities. There is a need to influence those who travel to such conflict to do otherwise. This is not within the immediate gift of those who live at the interfaces and is illustrative of how wider society can impact on conditions at the interfaces.

The complexity of the issues surrounding interfaces is discussed extensively by Jarman (2004), and is welcomed by Government. *A Shared Future* states that his report

“reminds us that interface areas are not a static phenomenon, nor a purely historical legacy of ‘the Troubles’. Rather they are a dynamic part of the social fabric of a community that is highly polarised and extensively segregated. The concept of an interface and the forms of interfaces are more complex than has previously been acknowledged”. 2.3.3

This complexity is further discussed by Jarman (2004):

“Furthermore, forms of interfaces and examples of inter-ethnic violence have occurred beyond the inner city areas of Belfast and Derry Londonderry in which it has to some extent come to be expected as a fact of life. Over recent years more formalised segregation and associated violence has become a feature of towns such as Antrim, Ballymena, Larne, Lurgan and Portadown, to name only the most prominent. ”

It is important to note that conflict is not the only feature of life for interface communities. A clear example is the issue of restricted access to services and facilities due to the composition of neighbouring communities which has a massive range of implications in everyday civic, economic and social life. This is strongly illustrated by Shirlow, (1998) and remains a persistently difficult, but important, issue to be addressed particularly as it

impacts upon the effectiveness of policy initiatives such as New Targeting Social Need (NTSN).

Again, it is not within the gift of residents in interface communities alone to effect the change that will improve access to services and facilities. However, policy service providers working in conjunction and co-operation with communities can create structures and services that will improve the situation.

There is a strong argument that addressing issues needs to move beyond ‘managing’ mode and into policy drive that affects change and transformation. Whilst management mechanisms need to be maintained and supported, areas need on an individual basis strategic re-generational support which transforms conditions.

A Shared Future makes the following commitments:

“Supporting communities in these areas to transform conflict remains an important priority for Government.” 2.3.2

“It also agrees that a **more coherent longer-term approach is needed to tackle the problems of interface areas** (and those areas at risk of becoming flash points).” 2.3.5

“This is best taken forward as part of a more integrated local planning framework, led by local councils in collaboration with key agencies and other stakeholders. 2.3.6

“The triennial action plan will provide detail of such an integrated planning framework: it will look at a range of interventions to address strategically the issues at interface areas, including specific action in other areas, including those in rural communities, potentially at risk of becoming ‘interfaces’.” 2.3.7

Issues and themes arising

The interface related literature cited above charts many of the historical developments in the events within communities and charts the development of governmental and political responses to those issues. (For a comprehensive overview of interface history see Byrne & Conway, 2005).

However, it is now imperative that the employment of new methods and approaches is adopted in order to address the issues. Whilst much effort, accompanied by some resources such as mobile phone networks, has necessarily been focused on conflict management much greater policy work is required in addressing the ongoing features of disadvantage endured by interface communities. These are:

- Disadvantages created by violent conflict and its legacies
- Disadvantages due to restricted access to services and facilities
- Disadvantages due to social and economic decline.

In tackling these there is a growing sense that there needs to be comprehensive and consistent auditing/measurement of indices of conflict, responses by statutory agencies to conflict, and ultimately policy developments with specific interface awareness.

Measuring change

How do we measure progress made in reducing interface violence? There have been ongoing difficulties in measuring levels of violence based on PSNI and court statistics. Thus there is a difficulty in accurately recording how levels have varied over time. We have legislation to specifically monitor and address hate crimes yet we have only recently had access to such figures on interface violence from the PSNI, on aspects of interface conflict in North Belfast, through lobbying by the Institute for Conflict Research.

The recording of data and statistics can serve to illustrate the sources, extent and impact of interface conflict and inform more effective preventative practice.

Access to services & employment

In assessing the impact upon communities of restricted access to services there needs to be auditing and monitoring exercises undertaken into the use of services, both public and private, by service providers. Patterns of movement should be collated in order to identify the key areas of restriction, to identify

potential trends and to help in the formulation of responsive policies to break these barriers.

Shirlow's work in Ardoyne cited earlier, measures patterns of movement to services and facilities but this exercise needs to be reciprocated by councils, other statutory providers and the private sector so that increased understanding of segregated living, working and social life maybe understood by all involved and affected.

One example of this process is the work being conducted by the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) in Belfast. It has approached a number of groups in the last two years to try to identify specific restrictions that prevent residents in the Village and Sandy Row area of the city from seeking employment at the RVH. They have been listening to concerns about safety, not necessarily on site, but in the travel that would have to be taken to and from the area.

On a further encouraging note there have been inter community consultations by civic leaders and representatives around the Inner East Belfast interface to see how all sections of population in the area can access retail developments at the new retail development on the old Sirocco works site. This project is examining the issue not just in safety terms, but also by auditing the skills needs of people in the area to successfully gain jobs.

Recording and collating examples of good practice for sharing can also inform further good practice at other interfaces and may be a focus for CRC in promoting A Shared Future.

Physical environment

Many threads of social and economic disadvantage become physically manifested at the interface and particularly in the form of environmental blight. This can be reflected through the cycle of inter related issues: conflict leads to less accessibility which leads to degeneration and decline which leads to more conflict, more physical and environmental blight and creates a compound disadvantage that presents some of the most difficult challenges to service providers and all levels of Government.

Education

As a sub section to social and economic disadvantage *educational disadvantage* must be considered. Educational delivery in interface areas suffers from a low status priority. In Great Britain educational priority is given to economically and socially marginalised communities and the same priority status should be given to educational delivery via the Education and Library Boards here. If the goal is the creation of a vibrant and peaceful community educational investment in financial and human terms must be prioritised.

Belfast Interface's policy agenda highlights some of the statistics surrounding educational attainment in interface areas,

“In terms of those aged under 55, the number who did not hold any qualifications was twice the Northern Ireland average (28%). Among those who had qualifications, 5.2% held qualifications at ‘A’ level or above. This is significantly below the Northern Ireland average.” BIP (2004) p13

Community Development

Traditionally, community development work has been under resourced despite the contribution it has made to conflict management, economic regeneration and relationship building, e.g. the Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project which despite winning a British Urban Regeneration Award (BURA) has consistently faced financial collapse due to funding problems for the Suffolk Community Forum from Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO). Neighbourhood renewal needs to imbue *A Shared Future* in its approaches.

As previously stated Community Development programmes have often been innovative and have involved risk taking by workers and communities. There is an ongoing argument that similar risk taking needs to happen within Government in funding decisions to sustain successful projects and reward good practice.

A Shared Future acknowledges that there is a need for, “promoting high risk action e.g., developing and supporting interventions at interfaces and other ‘at risk’ areas” (3.2.4). This should allow organizations to begin the process of sharing good practice with an allowance for ‘risky’ initiatives.

If A Shared Future is to be successful in producing identifiable outcomes there needs to be a community development infrastructure within interface and hinterland communities that allows those areas to address the issues outlined above in conjunction with a broader framework of statutory support.

Community Development projects have played a vital role in incorporating the energies of ex-combatants into productive roles in conflict management and prevention, relationship building and in projects combating environmental blight at interfaces. This tangible work needs sustained, long term support.

Youth

Developing constructive roles for young people in interface communities and diverting their energies away from participating in interface conflict has always been challenging. The support of the Belfast Education and Library Board summer intervention programme monies has been welcomed by interface groups and communities yet there are issues that need to be resolved to ensure they achieve the goal of diverting the energies of young people away from conflict. Groups have consistently raised concerns about inadequate levels of funding, particularly in areas that have a large youth population and the late release of money which hinders planning and limits the effective impact of the programme.

Interface groups have viewed the summer intervention programme as being amongst the most strategically important in their overall work, yet the role of the statutory providers is often viewed as being inflexible, bureaucratic and unsympathetic. The development of a more sympathetic mind set, coupled with easier procedures, would greatly enhance the delivery and impact of these programmes.

Interface workers also identify problems with chronic under resourcing in other fields. The Cliftonville Community Empowerment Partnership area has nine interfaces within its boundaries but has no youth provision in the area. Interface workers repeatedly move young people away from the physical interfaces but there are no youth facilities to divert or support this and the cycle continues.

Interface workers, including youth workers, need acknowledgement and validation of their work through training, progression routes and other forms of support.

The Belfast Interface Project's Survey of Membership Needs, 2004, also identified the need for longer term citizenship education which assists young people in understanding their role within our communities and broader society.

Shared communities

In the limited number of communities that remain shared there is concern that the free market is threatening their composition. The main example is that of Ballynafeigh in South Belfast, which has traditionally been mixed in its religious, political and socio-economic composition. Census data shows that the area has become more Catholic over the last two decades whilst still retaining a considerable Protestant population.

Ballynafeigh Community Development Association (1994) reports the very real desire for people in Ballynafeigh to remain a community shared by different people. What has slowly altered the community composition has been the gentrification of the private sector housing market.

The redevelopment and regeneration of brownfield sites, specifically in urban areas, is another process that has the potential to change the demographic balance of an area or to impact upon established patterns of use. This in turn can have an impact upon community relations as established boundaries are revised and traditional understandings of territory are forcibly amended. "Redevelopment can take the form of creating both commercial buffer zones and new, often private, housing developments. Each form of development can create different types of tensions." (Jarman 2004, p 14)

The closure of state schools in the area has potentially contributed to the contraction of the Protestant community in the area. There is a sense that if Government is serious about a shared future involving shared spaces then areas such as Ballynafeigh should be 'nurtured' to support their mixed composition, particularly as the residents have consistently cited their desire to live in such a community. Again, whilst this is a sensitive demographic issue, it is not about preventing people moving into communities but creating structures that support the retention of components of such communities. What form these structures may take needs discussion but immediate ideas could focus on provision around schooling, social housing and affordable housing. There may be value in examining housing models in England and the

Republic of Ireland where private developers are obligated to incorporate social housing provision in their programmes.

Jarman's report (2004) stresses the need to acknowledge the social dynamics in processes of social segregation and this is reflected in *A Shared Future*.

“It makes the point that shared and neutral spaces come under particular types of pressure and need positive, sustained actions to ensure that they are not abandoned nor avoided, but rather that they remain shared and used by all sections of all communities.” 2.3.3

Local Government and the broader environment

Local government, particularly councils, have an important role to play in helping create more stable and healthy interface communities. As the deliverers of many front line services, which are so vital to supporting the quality of life, councils have an important role to play. The withdrawal of services during periods of conflict has been seen to further undermine the quality of life and feed ongoing conflict. For example, the withdrawal of refuse and clean up services after disturbances leaves an abundance of materials at hand for further conflict and this has been cited by many communities as an ongoing problem.

On the political level more constructive leadership needs to be shown by councillors and local representatives. The shared seeking of resources for interface communities by political opponents helps increase trust and optimism and can provide an acknowledgement of the 'shared' issues.

There has always been a link between the broader political environment and the conditions of interface communities. Knowledge and information about these links needs to be documented and promoted within political and civic society to inform responsible and responsive leadership.

Conclusion

The above attempts to draw together the complex and diverse strands of many interface issues as identified by research, community workers and other stakeholders.

Issues tend to be interwoven and overlapping and creating a clear panoramic overview is challenging. However with many issues now listed and opened for further discussion the following recommendations arise.

Recommendations:

1. An examination and definition of the term 'interface' will be undertaken recognising that there is no longer a simple stereotypical model represented by physical barriers.
2. Existing and potential interfaces will be mapped to include the roles of statutory bodies and service providers. There should be an examination of the potential of the private sector in relation to provision of housing and engage with the business sector to identify problems and solutions for the delivery of services at interface areas.
3. The government will develop, in partnership with interface communities and other key stakeholders, a long term vision for interface areas. This will acknowledge and address the regeneration of these communities through short, medium and long-term interventions and will ensure a structure for development and delivery of partnership working on interface issues.
4. There will be a commitment to building no more physical barriers and to the eventual removal of these barriers.
5. Consultation on A Shared Future (ASF) highlighted the key role played by young people in both the problem and solution. Initiatives focused and targeted in key areas will provide an ongoing commitment to finding solutions. The Department of Education's Youth Service will provide a strategic lead role in partnership with neighbourhood agencies at interfaces.

6. Interface workers, including youth workers, need acknowledgement and validation of the work they do through training, progression routes and other forms of support. There will be mechanisms put in place which allow links and a support system to be built by and between these workers.
7. The development of good practice models and associated resource materials aimed at advancing ASF objectives will be prioritised.
8. As a catalyst to enacting all of the above Government will work with key stakeholders to host a multi agency conference following the Community Relations Council's (CRC) April conference to bring together all sectors to progress developing a policy approach framework to interface issues. Belfast Interface Project's 'A policy agenda for the interface' will be used as the cornerstone for this debate which will be broadened to include rural and border areas, and implemented across Northern Ireland.
9. Research will be undertaken to identify the links between activity and experience at interfaces and wider social political developments. Intervention to support the quality of life at interfaces will also demand action elsewhere.
10. The Triennial Action Plan will commit to the above recommendations and, in partnership with the Community Relations Council, will follow through on actions emerging and determining a way forward.

Bibliography

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