

Peace Walls & Barrier Removal:

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium

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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.

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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.**

SOURCES

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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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BCRC is supported by five partner organisations:

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Ex-Prisoners Interpretive Centre |
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