

# Belfast: Strategies for a Shared City

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## **Introduction**

Belfast is a microcosm of Northern Ireland. The city's structure and character reflect decades of society-wide sectarian conflict between the Irish nationalist (predominantly Catholic) and British unionist (predominantly Protestant) communities. Despite the Northern Ireland peace process, and the internationally welcomed 1998 Agreement, Belfast remains both polarised and divided. Most of the city's schools are separated according to religion, the levels of inter-faith marriage remain low, public spaces and facilities are perceived as the property of a particular community, a high degree of residential segregation is typical, and political representation on the city's council is, for the most part, defined along sectarian lines.

In a period of transition from violence to peace the choice for Belfast, and similarly divided cities, is between two alternatives:

- Firstly, we can choose to accept that the existing patterns of segregation and division are likely to remain for some time, and focus efforts on stabilising and managing the worst consequences of division, both between and within the main communities.
- Secondly, and by way of contrast, we can make efforts to focus on identifying and promoting some of the measures that may help transform the city into an integrated and pluralist entity where individuality is respected and diversity is celebrated, in an inclusive manner<sup>1</sup>.

The following article explores how policy makers and practitioners might conceptualise strategies that will favour the second approach. That is to say, it aims to identify and suggest measures that seek to reduce the sources of urban division in favour of promoting a shared city. In this sense, however, sharing requires more than conflict management. It is not enough that the citizens of a city like Belfast live in a relatively peaceful environment and yet continue to live separate lives. Sharing can, and arguably must, also include a stronger commitment to building and improving relationships. In essence, a fuller understanding of the concept of a shared city demands that programmes designed to encourage cross-community contact be adequately resourced and that the active promotion of good relations becomes the principal focus of any future public policy agenda.

### **The Sources of Urban Division**

In Belfast the logic that 'high fences makes good neighbours' has been a dominant feature of public policy. Recurrent and persistent inter-communal tensions, street disorder and violence, has lead to the creation of some 27 physical barriers, or 'peace lines', that mark the most prominent sectarian interfaces throughout the city. The Belfast interfaces are determined on a street-by-street basis according to local demography; they cut roads in half, split public parks down the middle, and may stretch for some kilometres. Alternatively, they can surround enclaves where a geographically defined minority live within an area dominated by the 'other' community. Such barriers often give the city's interfaces a distinctive physical appearance, which is reinforced by the frequent presence of bricked up, or derelict buildings, wasteland, sectarian or paramilitary graffiti and vandalism.

The earliest physical barriers in Belfast were simple barricades or barbed wire fences that were introduced in an attempt to segregate communities for defensive purposes or to stop sectarian rioting. Over the years, these ad hoc structures have been built up, enlarged and extended. Indeed, some of the most recently constructed 'peace lines' are landscaped with trees, shrubs and coloured fences, so that the barriers increasingly have a sense of permanence in the urban landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Physical barriers of brick walls or steel fences are not of course the only ways in which territory is demarcated in a divided urban setting. The concept of a sectarian interface is broad and used in Belfast to describe any common

boundary that divides a predominantly unionist area and predominantly nationalist area. Belfast's interfaces vary in their form, style and visibility, and are often identified in quite subtle ways such as:

- a turn in the road, a local landmark, or a row of shops;
- low-level barriers used to close roads and entries;
- redevelopment which distances segregated residential areas by the construction of industrial or commercial zones;
- new road lay-outs;
- flags, murals, election posters and street names;
- grills and bars used to protect domestic property.

For those unfamiliar with the city some of the physical divisions in Belfast may appear hidden; however, local people will know exactly where the significant boundaries lie. People living near, or along, a sectarian interface order much of their daily routine, travel patterns and social arrangements by reference to visible and invisible boundaries which form their conceptual and internalised social geography.<sup>3</sup> By their very nature interfaces are on the edge of a community's territory and they tend to be regarded as less desirable places to live. In this way, the vertical communal segregation of the city is compounded by its horizontal, class division. Far from class tensions presenting themselves in a left-right democratic political spectrum, the ghettoising of Belfast often feeds and is refracted through sectarian and paramilitary cultures.

The inter-communal violence and population movements that left Belfast divided were the bloodiest and largest to have been witnessed in a Western European capital city since the conclusion of World War II. The figure for internal displacement within the city between 1968 and 2001 has been approximated at 7500 families, the majority of whom moved to live in sectarian enclaves.<sup>4</sup> This figure has continued to rise. In fact, according to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive 534 families presented themselves as homeless in 2003-2004 as a direct consequence of intimidation and civil disturbance two thirds of which satisfied the legislative requirements for relocation and re-housing.<sup>5</sup>

In Belfast people tend to live in areas where their neighbours belong to the same community as themselves and appear to hold the same political values, national identity, religious beliefs, cultural norms and practices. Today, over 70 per cent of public owned housing estates are either more than 90 per cent Protestant or more than 90 per cent Catholic.<sup>6</sup> The problem with this, of course, is that the perception of what constitutes a community has, therefore, become essentialised and isolationist.

In a situation of endemic conflict, residential segregation often becomes a critical mechanism for protecting the members of opposing communities. Yet this simultaneously serves to reify the sources of hostility. The high level of single identity neighbourhoods that exist in Belfast negates the chance of creating a sense of civic unity within the city. Many people see themselves as members of their communities first, rather than citizens. Civic networks remain weak because funding has tended to support community development projects geographically bounded within neighbourhoods that are self-determined along the fault-lines of sectarian division.

Belfast has a thriving community and voluntary sector. Yet public investment remains limited. Although substantial funds have been received vis-à-vis the European Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, the difficulty is that this Programme risks being viewed as a structural or regional development fund similar to those received by new EU member states. For the most part, funding has overwhelmingly aided redevelopment in a physical sense. According to the Special EU Programmes Body, £176,684,208 (€256,291,431) of the Peace II funding has been allocated to organisations and projects based in the Belfast Local Government District (LGD).<sup>7</sup> Yet, from the perspective of sharing, decisions made on how this money should be spent is open to criticism. The building of roads, bridges and other forms of physical construction may benefit everyone in the city, but the extent to which this constitutes meaningful peace and reconciliation work is questionable.

Claiming that a project is cross-community and promotes the concept of a shared city because it provides ‘access for all’ is a seriously flawed assumption. This is not the reality of life in a divided urban setting. The difficulty in Belfast, however, is that this misconception has often dominated the policy agenda. Much of what passes for ‘social capital’ within the city is of the conservative ‘bonding’, rather than the cross-communal ‘bridging’ kind.<sup>8</sup> Community development work and post-conflict reconstruction efforts

that build capacity within communities and make new public amenities available to the citizenry rarely make the transition to sustainable community relations work that builds between communities and encourages reconciliation. As a result, the inadvertent actions of some funding agencies, has been to continue to equate sharing with the minimum standard of co-existence rather than integration.

The reluctance to engage in meaningful cross-community dialogue and to sustain cross-community contact means that when contact does take place it is often of a disordered and threatening kind. Violence continues in Belfast, sectarian attacks are regular and inter-communal rioting is common—especially during the contentious ‘marching season’. The paramilitary organisations responsible for the majority of deaths and injuries during the conflict are still in existence and they continue to threaten the other side whilst maintaining a large amount of control over their own communities. The vigilante policing of areas by these armed groups often manifests itself in brutal punishment attacks, mainly on young people, ostensibly under the guise of reducing ‘anti-social’ behaviour. Moreover, the continued paramilitary presence regularly serves to increase the problem of internal displacement. Feuding between and within paramilitary groups has been commonplace. People do not only suffer intimidation and threats from across the divide, but can also be forced to move out of an area due to intra-communal violence. The paramilitary presence in Belfast is partly legitimised by the communities who in the past may have seen them as a defensive necessity. In the post-agreement period, however, they also act as a barrier to dialogue by effectively preventing and placing restrictions on cross-community contact.

(January 22, 2003) Anne Bill, a community worker from the mainly Protestant Glenbryn estate in north Belfast, withdrew from the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation following alleged threats to Protestant community workers from the Irish Republican Army (IRA) (Irish News).

(January 23, 2003) The Ulster Defence Association (UDA) threatened to ‘put out’ a young pregnant Protestant woman and her children from the Glenbryn estate in north Belfast because she had allowed a Catholic cross-community worker from a local crèche to help her home. The Catholic woman was also threatened (North Belfast News, Community Workers).

It is hard to determine exactly how influential the continued paramilitary presence in Belfast is in maintaining divisions and social segregation. But it is

worth noting that since the IRA ceasefire in 1994, police reports for Northern Ireland as a whole indicate that 179 people have been murdered by paramilitary groups, 2,300 have been victims of so-called punishment attacks, more than 5,500 illegal firearms have been seized, 11,000 people have suffered conflict-related injuries, five police officers and one police reserve officer have been murdered, and 4,096 police officers have been injured. A substantial number of these incidents have taken place within the Greater Belfast Metropolitan Area.<sup>9</sup>

There are few neutral public spaces, never mind shared spaces, in Belfast. Although theoretically parks, leisure facilities, public buildings and the like are maintained by the city council for use by all of the citizens, the reality for reasons of personal safety is that civic amenities are often, to all intent, inaccessible for the members of one community.<sup>10</sup> The city centre is an exception to this rule. Here citizens interact in a shared space; however, this is largely the de facto product of a commercial centre of which no single community can claim ownership. In Belfast, it is usual for communities to claim ownership of territory and illustrate this ownership by displaying sectional symbols. Flags are erected on streets lights, kerbstones are painted in preferred national colours, and murals are painted on walls. All of this creates a chill factor that has the effect of making the members of the other community feel uneasy in venturing beyond the borders of their own social environment.

Even in those public spaces where people from different backgrounds come into regular contact with each other the concept of sharing is notably constrained. People tend to adopt an avoidance strategy and stay clear of raising issues of contention. They also tend to avoid displaying emblems perceived to be markers of cultural association. This decision is prudent. In those areas where the members of the two main communities interact there have been attacks and murders, the victims of which are identified by visible markers of culture. Sectarian-motivated hate crimes most often involve young men. Different sporting traditions and the accompanying sportswear can single individuals out for attack. For example, the two big soccer teams in Glasgow, Rangers (viewed as being Protestant) and Celtic (viewed as being Catholic), attract parallel and enthusiastic support in Belfast. Unfortunately, this sporting rivalry has frequently degenerated into violence, where inter-communal hostility and hooliganism becomes indistinguishable.

Perhaps more worryingly is the phenomenon of violent clashes among children on their way to and from school who identify one another by their different uniforms. Segregated education socialises nearly all the city's young people in stereotyped images of the opposing community. 95 per cent of children in Northern Ireland attend nominally state but de facto Protestant schools or their Catholic counterparts. These children often do not have the same memories of the violence and extensive bombing campaigns that beset the city prior to the 1994 ceasefires and, hence, are perhaps less wary of the destabilising impact their behaviour could have on society.

While the evidence presented here might appear to portray a negative and bleak picture of city wide inter-communal interactions, there is evidence to suggest that things need not be this way. In recent years, a number of public policies and community initiatives have aimed at tackling the sources of urban division with varying degrees of success. The next section details some of the best practices developed in Belfast and sets out to identify some of the ways in which the concept of a shared city might progress.

## Promoting Good Relations

Integrated education has been a remarkable, if in scale limited, success story in promoting good relations between the members of the two main communities. There are now eight integrated schools in the Greater Belfast area. The first, Lagan College, opened in 1981 in South Belfast and the most recent in Glengormley opened in 2003 in the north of the city. In total, these schools facilitate 3970 children. However, the demand for places is much greater than this and oversubscription has resulted in many children being turned away. In a recent poll conducted by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 60 per cent of respondents expressed a preference for integration.<sup>11</sup> Integrated education is the product of a bottom-up movement, inspired by parents, often of mixed relationships, rather than the authorities. A particularly positive case is Hazelwood College, which organises an annual 'Peace Day' and has offered for the most part a haven of co-existence and inter-communal dialogue, as well as progressive educational opportunities for working-class children, in the otherwise deeply divided North Belfast.

**Table 2: Integrated Schools in the Greater Belfast Metropolitan Area 2004**

School	Opened	Numbers of Pupils Enrolled	Numbers of Pupils Turned Away
Lagan College	1981	1040	154
Forge CIPS	1985	226	0
Hazelwood College	1985	744	17
Hazelwood IPS	1985	452	12
Cranmore IPS	1993	193	2
Lough View IPS	1993	368	0
Malone IC	1997	797	37
Glengormley CIPS	2003	150	0

The integrated education movement is important in promoting good relations and reconciliation. For the most part, it does more than adopt a neutral ‘keep sectarianism outside the door approach’, and has tried to bring a shared multicultural ethos into schools. This approach has not been, however, without its difficulties. The integrated schools programme started prior to any strong local government commitment to reconciliation and therefore has often had to work within a considerable public policy vacuum. Moreover, integrated education, and in particular primary schools, face the problem of employing staff from a sector where teachers’ training takes place in separate colleges. The majority of primary education Protestant teachers have attended Stranmillis College in south Belfast. The majority of trained Catholic teachers, by contrast, have attended St Mary’s College in west Belfast. As a consequence of their own divided background, teachers who work within the integrated primary school sector are often inadequately equipped to deal with the new environment. Despite the shared rationale, there is always the risk that teachers in integrated schools may resort to defending sanitised neutrality (such as, requiring children to remove emblems with sectarian connotations) rather than confronting the challenges of pluralism.<sup>12</sup>

Integrated schools are positive ventures but they have a limited impact on the lives of citizens. Schools cannot be a panacea for division when children

leave every day after lessons and return to divided neighbourhoods. Success is dependent upon a more sustainable approach, namely, the mainstreaming of the concept of a shared city throughout the public sphere. In this regard, a number of recent changes at a more general policy level are welcome.

The first major change has been the introduction of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 Section 75 (2). Section 75 is a piece of domestic legislation that places a statutory requirement on public bodies to promote good relations, and in particular ‘to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.’<sup>13</sup> While it is still unclear as to what the exact outworking of this legislation may be, the important point is that Section 75 indicates a strong commitment to move beyond the passive co-existence model of benign apartheid and physical divides toward a pro-active community relations agenda that actually encourages people to challenge the sources of those divisions.

Two public bodies, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and the Belfast City Council, have recently taken a lead in implementing Section 75 (2). NIHE is responsible for public housing throughout Northern Ireland and owns many of the residential properties found in and around the Belfast interfaces. In order to meet its statutory duty to promote good relations NIHE has recently undertaken an extensive review of its role within the communities it serves. This review has culminated in the establishment of a Community Cohesion Unit charged with the task of bringing forward a number of key aims and objectives in respect of community relations policy that are included in the Corporate Plan 2004-2007. An important development in this regard has been a commitment to identifying and facilitating a number pilot integrated housing schemes due to begin in 2005.

Most people (75 per cent) polled by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey have expressed a preference for integrated housing.<sup>14</sup> There is a clear distinction, of course, between expressing the preference to live in mixed areas and actually being willing to live together. Creating the conditions that would enable the realisation of the preference for integration is far from easy. NIHE is now starting to try to address the issue. Work, for example, is progressing on developing a range of initiatives and projects involving residents, local communities and statutory and voluntary agencies where a joined-up approach is required to tackle difficult problems that serve to propagate residential segregation. These measures include developing policies that might lead to the

removal of sectional symbols, flags and emblems traditionally used to demarcate the ownership of territory, thereby making areas more suitable for mixing and more welcoming to the members of both communities.

The second public body to have taken a lead in the promotion of good relations, Belfast City Council, has also initiated an innovative Good Relations programme that pro-actively sets out to reduce the sources of sectarian antagonism. Because Belfast is a city divided along sectarian lines its council has for sometime been characterised by power sharing, with unionist and nationalist representatives having to engage with each other in consensual and pragmatic politics. This task has not been without its difficulties and often policy decisions have stagnated due to competing communal self-interests. The recent establishing of a Good Relations Unit, however, charged with the task of developing policy and ensuring that the council meets its requirements under Section 75 is welcome.

The Good Relations Unit is important because it demonstrates significant commitment to civic leadership from a council that in the past has often been renowned for its own internal sectarian battles. The Unit has a high priority within the office of the council's Chief Executive and takes direction from a steering panel that combines elected members and outside representatives. This inclusive civic society structure is important because it enables the council to develop a joined-up approach to its work. To date, the Unit has been critical in developing Good Relations training to address community relations and cultural diversity issues for over 2,400 staff and elected Members of Council. It has organised displays of memorabilia that appeal to civic mindedness and a shared history within the city. It has also control of a £220,000 (€319,151) budget used to support community relations and cultural diversity projects throughout the city.

In addition to public bodies charged with delivering particular public services, other non-governmental organisations, community and voluntary sector groups have supported cross-community accommodation. The lead body in this area is the Community Relations Council (CRC). The CRC was established in 1990 as a non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation and independent charity with the specific aim of promoting better community relations between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and, equally, the recognition of cultural diversity. The CRC has a central role in helping develop a coherent inter-agency approach to the concept of Belfast as a shared city. For this reason, it aims to encourage contact between public bodies,

statutory agencies, and the community and voluntary sectors.

As an intermediary funding body under the EU peace II programme, CRC is also responsible for a limited percentage of the programme allocated for dealing with the difficult issues of sectarian conflict. Since 1998 it has allocated £9,181,000 (€13,317,445). This money, however, is for all of Northern Ireland and only a small percentage can be spent in Belfast. With limited resources, therefore, the CRC engages in and supports a number of important initiatives that seek to redress the sources of sectarian antagonism and facilitate inter-communal dialogue. CRC provides advice to NIHE and sits on the Good Relations Steering Group of the Belfast City Council. It funds cross-community groups in areas on, and near, the interfaces. It has funded mobile phone networks that enable community activists from both of the main communities to liaise with each other in an attempt to prevent outbreaks of sectarian violence. CRC showcases models of best practice by hosting an annual Community Relations Week and it facilitates dialogue and debate on contentious issues.

## Conclusion

Simply informing the citizens of a divided city that the sources of their divisions have received a political solution is inadequate. Removing the physical barriers (if that is even possible) is not an end in itself. In cities like Belfast – where the sources of division are both physical and psychological – developing the concept of a shared city is complex. What is required, therefore, is clarity regarding our objective. In a shared city, simply tolerating each other's differences for the sake of co-existence is a minimum standard. A deeper understanding of the concept, however, means being committed to the celebration and embracing of differences as the building blocks of a civic culture. Achieving this is no easy task. Social divisions are often the product of long histories and it is unlikely that we will be able to remove these divisions immediately. Although it is undoubtedly important to engage in community development activity, it is not sufficient to think that working in isolated communities will be enough to guarantee the transition from division to sharing. What is required for success is a strong public policy commitment to promoting good relations between and within communities, supported by relevant domestic legislation. Such a commitment must be seen to impact directly on the everyday lives of the citizens through targeted long-term public

investment in projects that aim to foster inter-communal dialogue and integration. These projects must form part of a coherent inter-agency approach that cuts across as many public bodies as possible.

### **Notes**

- 1 Darby and Knox, 2004, p.16.
- 2 Jarman, 2002, pp 23-24.
- 3 For further discussion, see P. Shirlow, 'Fear and Ethnic Division', in *Peace Review*, 13:1, pp 67-94.
- 4 Shirlow, 2003, p.79.
- 5 Northern Ireland Housing Executive, [www.nihe.gov.uk](http://www.nihe.gov.uk)
- 6 OFMDFM, 2005, *A Shared Future*, p.3.
- 7 Special EU Programmes Body, [www.seupb.org](http://www.seupb.org)
- 8 Putnam, 2000, p.22.
- 9 Police Service of Northern Ireland, [www.psni.police.uk](http://www.psni.police.uk)
- 10 Jarman, 2004, p.19.
- 11 Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, [www.nicie.org](http://www.nicie.org).
- 12 Wilson and Gallagher, p.5.
- 13 *Northern Ireland Act 1998*, 38.
- 14 [www.ark.ac.uk](http://www.ark.ac.uk)

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