

Rethinking Transport and Connectivity for a Shared City

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1. INTRODUCTION

Belfast is still a city of contrasts. Despite recent political developments, statistics show that polarisation is rising, with an increasing number of people living in segregated areas. This is particularly obvious in public housing estates and in Belfast's many 'interface areas', some of which are marked by physical barriers separating historic Protestant and Catholic communities. There are still many areas within the city where the change has been much slower and deprivation remains – for example, every Super Output Area (SOA) in the most deprived 10 per cent in the city is either over 90% Protestant or Catholic community background, compared to none in the least deprived 10%.

Belfast City Council recognised the important role that transport and improved connectivity could play in reducing sectarian tensions and the isolation faced by some of the more deprived members of both communities. In April 2008 it commissioned a study from Colin Buchanan consultants to explore issues of connectivity and mobility, as part of a wider Conflict Transformation Project. This paper reports the main recommendations of that study¹.

The next section provides a brief description of the methodology that was employed in the connectivity and mobility study. Section 3 then summarises the main study recommendations.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study had to be completed within two months, and involved the following stages:

- Briefings with the client, Belfast City Council, to expand on the study specification, with later discussions to review the initial findings
- A high level review of key policies, strategies, projects and policy directions across a number of bodies and agencies in Belfast. The list of relevant documents was initially drawn up by the Belfast City Council, and then added to during the course of the stakeholder interviews
- A series of 18 stakeholder discussions. The aim of the discussions was to draw out a combined appreciation of mobility and connectivity problems in Belfast, and to discuss some possible projects and initiatives that could aid the resolution of these problems.
- Development of some strategic concepts, with a view to bringing in new ideas and perspectives, drawing on the wider experience of the study team
- A Round Table discussion on the 12th June 2008, to get initial feedback from stakeholders on a draft version of the final report, and to obtain an indication of level of support for the recommendations.

3. STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Overview

The principal concept underlying the recommendations put forward in the report is to start expanding the number and range of the city's "shared spaces". Note that, in contrast to the rest of the UK, "shared space" has a unique meaning in Northern Ireland, where it refers to buildings and public spaces where both communities feel that they are in non-sectarian, 'neutral' territory, rather than to street layouts where cars do not dominate.

The Northern Island Life and Times survey² has highlighted the extent to which people would value the creation of more neutral and shared spaces. In particular, results from the 2006 survey show that:

- 95% of people think that their workplace should be a neutral space; only 4% disagree
- 96% of people think that their 'local shops or garage where you might buy bread or milk should be a neutral space'; only 2% disagree
- 96% of people agree that 'the shops where you and your family do your main weekly shopping and the area around the shops be a neutral space'; only 2% disagree

Developing a shared space strategy will provide more areas which people can safely travel to and through, thereby expanding their travel horizons and encouraging inter-community and inter-racial tolerance; it will also help to bring wealth into deprived communities. The expansion of shared spaces has the potential to be the catalyst for unravelling some of the long standing issues confronting Belfast.

There are six main high-level components to the shared space:

- i. Ensure that all major new development sites are developed and managed as shared spaces, made accessible to all communities. In turn, work must be done to ensure that new sites are accepted by all communities and that they contain suitable employment opportunities and attractions that will draw people from across the city.
- ii. Provide appropriate cross-city and orbital public transport routes from deprived residential areas to these major shared space attractors, and gain widespread acceptance that public transport vehicles and route infrastructure are shared spaces. Also develop the black taxis as a regulated, niche market.
- iii. Improve local employment opportunities and services in deprived areas, by transforming arterial streets into shared spaces with jointly used facilities, thereby increasing customer catchment areas and growing local employment.
- iv. Improve local cycle and pedestrian routes, to enhance access to these facilities on the arterial streets, as well as improving connectivity between adjoining neighbourhoods and communities.
- v. Increase the number of cultural and sporting events that are run, to encourage greater use of all parts of the city by its residents and visitors, drawing them across the city to unique, high quality events.
- vi. Develop a common definition/framework and evidence base on space use and perceptions among the different communities and ethnic groups, and devise targeted information campaigns.

Figure 1 provides a flowchart summary of how these six components led to proposals for 15 initiatives, which have resulted in 24 recommendations. Each component is discussed, in turn.

3.2 New Shared Spaces and Destinations

Recommendation 1: Develop more shared destinations. Consider placing greater emphasis on natural resources as major attractors, like the hills and waterways

Shared spaces are key to overcoming the problems of segregation in Belfast. Shared employment sites provide an opportunity to attract the most talented staff from across the region, and to enable communities to start working together in a supportive environment. Major shared service, retail and entertainment sites can provide the whole community with top quality, cost effective provision. There are opportunities to develop public-land destinations, such as the hills and the waterways. An increase in shared spaces will in itself increase mobility around the city, leading to more mixing of communities.

Recommendation 2: Promote uniqueness and complementarity of destinations

One of the outcomes of segregation in Belfast is the provision of duplicate services and facilities to meet the needs and requirements of each community. This duplication bears a high cost to Northern Ireland, prevents cross-community sharing and dialogue, and has an added disbenefit of downgrading the unique characteristics of each destination.

3.3 Promoting Public Transport as Mobile Shared Spaces

Recommendation 3: Develop the notion of buses as mobile shared spaces and information points

During the years of violence and troubles, the Belfast bus system was the target of attacks that led to widespread destruction of buses, and some injuries and fatalities. This was partly due to the bus services being associated with a particular community. Since then, things have improved dramatically, with greatly reduced attacks on buses and increases in patronage. The public transport operator Translink has made considerable efforts to recruit drivers from both communities, and has worked hard to position the bus service as a service for all.

There is still, however, a reluctance to use buses, for a number of reasons. Some of these relate to the ease of car use in the city, and the availability of alternatives such as black cabs and private hire cars. But for many people, there are still concerns about perceived personal safety (as evidenced from the

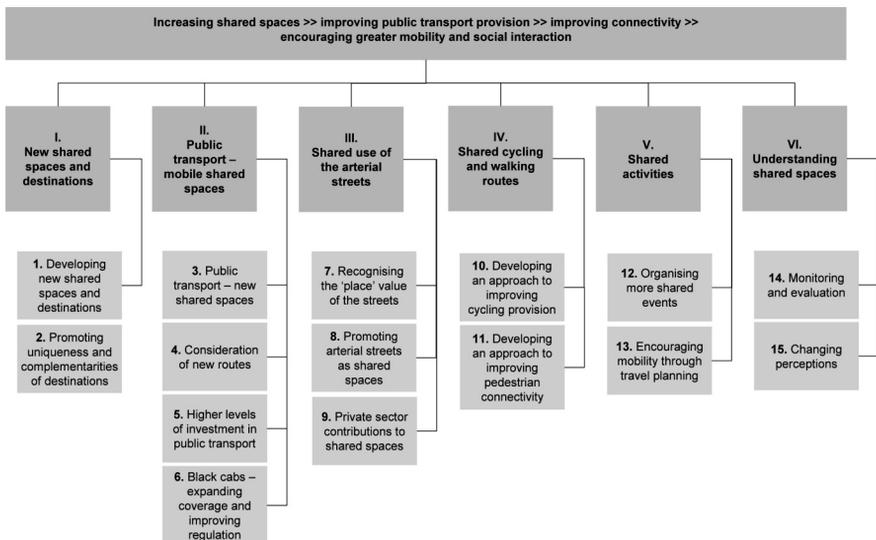
provision of community-specific bus stops), coupled with limited knowledge of what the city has to offer and how it can be accessed.

Belfast buses should be promoted as mobile shared spaces for the whole community (“everybody’s bus”), providing safe passage from one part of the city to another. This notion would need to extend to the bus stops and waiting areas themselves – linked to the development of arterial streets as shared spaces, discussed later.

Specific actions might include:

- Providing improved high security on buses with live CCTV feeds and higher police presence
- Securing representatives from each community to visibly ride buses
- Expanding the role of buses to act as mobile ‘information hubs’ for events, locations, destinations and facilities along the routes and more widely across the city.
- Improving information throughout the journey, to inform and reassure passengers including information about the location of the next stop and the end destination
- Putting in place an active information/communication campaign to promote the role of buses, to embed the notion of buses as shared mobile paces, to advise of ridership and safety statistics and the many benefits of using public transport (from environmental to financial)

Figure 1: Summary of Recommended Initiatives



Recommendation 4: Investigate potential public transport demand and consider orbital and cross-city routes

Currently most of the city buses in Belfast converge on City Hall in the city centre. While there are many practical and commercial reasons for this, there are also some disadvantages. From a social policy perspective these include: bus routes perceived to be following the sectarian segmentation of the city and exacerbating segregation; routes easily identifiable with specific communities; a lack of orbital routes, discouraging cross community contacts; and, the need to pay twice when interchanging in the city centre.

There was an overwhelming stakeholder consensus that there is a need for cross-city and orbital routes, to promote new travel and social patterns, enhance city cohesion and improve mobility. This suggests that there needs to be a thorough investigation of public transport use, looking both at current and socially suppressed demand – covering all modes of transport, as well as future demand associated with new developments. Currently bus transport is regarded primarily as a commercial operation that is demand led. Encouraging new cross community patterns of mobility will require the provision of some new services that are unlikely to be commercially viable in the short to medium term, but with large social and economic benefits long-term. This would require both a change in Translink's operating brief and a source of financial subsidy, linked to achieving social policy objectives.

Recommendation 5: Carry out a study of the relationship between bus services, patterns of segregation and potential demand, and consider the best means of addressing the issues

As part of a study of the relationship between bus services and segregation, it is recommended that the feasibility be considered of the proposals below:

- Developing additional routes to new and emerging shared space destinations
- Changing (where possible) bus routes to traverse the different communities rather than move along the boundaries
- Changing (where possible) bus routes to travel to a shared space as a destination point – this will limit association of the service with either of the communities

Recommendation 6: Carry out a study of the direct and indirect economic and social benefits of public transport provision, to identify the case for higher subsidies in conjunction with modified service patterns

Currently Metro bus services in Belfast are broadly self-sufficient in financial terms, by covering operating costs through the fare box. To recognise the potential of public transport to stimulate the economy and meet economic and social objectives, a study is warranted to look at current levels of investment and indirect benefits and impacts. It is expected that the wider economic and social benefits will warrant higher subsidies for carefully targeted public transport services, enabling better and more frequent services to be provided at a lower price to the consumer.

Recommendation 7: Improve the operation and regulation of black cabs

Black cabs are a unique phenomenon in Belfast, springing up from the years of civil unrest, when bus services were withdrawn from certain routes due to buses becoming targets for violent attacks. In Belfast, black cabs are associated with particular communities and operate at multiple occupancy and often follow a pre-determined route, similar to a 'mini-bus' service. Now they provide an alternative to buses on some corridors, with similar fares but with a degree of penetration into the residential streets in the housing areas. They also provide reassurance to those who feel less secure in travelling into the city centre.

Black cabs have been a successful community enterprise over many years, providing local employment and are now strongly culturally embedded in the city fabric. In addition to their transportation function, they are becoming a tourist attraction – which helps to expose local people to new ideas and sources of income. It would not be acceptable to the local communities to curtail these services, and so the study team recommended that they be developed in a way that offers a complementary service to the city buses, but with increasing regulation of vehicle type and condition.

3.4 Shared Use of the Arterial Streets

Recommendation 8: Enhance the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan to consider broader 'streets' requirements, as Places as well as Links, not 'roads' alone

Belfast, like most other Western cities, displays evidence of the 50's and 60's road traffic engineering solutions that predominantly focussed on the needs of cars, in places strengthened by the need to contain civil unrest in some parts of the city. Unlike most other Western cities however, Belfast currently experiences low (but growing) congestion problems and still caters well for motorised traffic. It is perceived overwhelmingly by the stakeholders

interviewed that the needs of cyclists, pedestrians and the street as a destination have been overlooked. This links to growing concerns about the need to make travel more sustainable.

The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) focuses predominantly on roads as Links – as corridors for public and vehicular transport. It provides a hierarchy of roads in terms of their Link function, without recognising a complementary hierarchy of Place needs. Conversely, the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) and associated Urban Design Study, clearly states its vision for streets and public realm predominantly in terms of their Place function, to be one of ‘high quality places for people to enjoy’. As one of the six concepts of how the structure of Belfast can be consolidated, it proposes to ‘Develop guidance for the arterial routes’ and to ‘Develop an understanding of the various character areas in the city’. The Urban Design Study provides a list of key development recommendations for the arterial routes.

‘Roads’ commonly focus on carriageways, whilst ‘streets’ actively consider all land between frontages, including the carriageway and footway. Thus there seems to be a disconnect in the understanding of how transport requirements can be balanced with the wider street requirements as destinations. To resolve this issue, there needs to be more engagement between the organisations responsible for transport and for planning functions in Belfast, to bring together the planning and design of the movement (Link) and destination (Place) functions of streets.

Recommendation 9: Develop a two-dimensional hierarchy of streets in Belfast, linking BMTP’s Link-based road hierarchy and BMAP’s recommendations for the Place aspects of arterial routes

Several authorities have now developed a street hierarchy, covering both Place and Link functions³, basing design solutions on an appropriate balancing of these two functions on each street segment. The experience from this work suggests that, unless the Place dimension is explicitly considered and discussed amongst the stakeholders, there is no mechanism to balance these competing requirements and consider the streets in their wider urban context.

Recommendation 10: Define the ‘Place’ function of arterial streets with local communities, building on the place-making proposals in BMAP in greater detail

Recommendation 11: Review BMAP alongside BMTP, to develop a comprehensive classification of street functions and appropriate mechanisms for encouraging investment and businesses to return to arterial streets

Recommendation 12: Upgrade the physical environment, including public realm and street furniture enhancements, better street lighting and security features, and traffic calming measures

Recommendation 13: Locate new facilities within existing service areas along arterial streets

Recommendation 14: Organise community events or neighbourhood festivals on arterials that will attract a wide range of public groups

Arterial streets used to be major service spines and served as district high streets with a wide range of local shops and services. With the rise of the car and the increase in social segregation, many of the Belfast arterial routes became primarily transport corridors, with their role as destinations having diminished. This has reduced local employment opportunities, and the traffic severance effects now exacerbate segregation issues; in some places arterials serve as boundary lines and act to separate communities.

Reversal of this trend would provide a unique opportunity to increase local shared spaces - which is put forward as the key catalyst for improving connectivity – thereby increasing local employment, and starting the process of bringing neighbouring communities together. Arterial streets have a potential of becoming the areas of sharing, bringing together the two main communities and the newer communities, rather than acting as boundaries that push them apart. This will reinforce the notion of public transport services and associated bus stops as shared spaces. Over time, it could also help to reduce tensions during the marching season, if there was less territoriality associated with the arterial streets along which many parades take place. The parading season that runs from April to November in Belfast is part of a cultural tradition, commemorating historic events. However, the parades are often seen as forms of political expression and end up feeding fears in segregated Belfast communities, becoming a source of violence.

To achieve this, work will need to be done to enhance the attractiveness of arterial streets and to promote them as safe spaces for the whole community – thereby increasing the customer base for local businesses and community services. This will involve improving their state and the bordering public

realm, by providing higher quality street lighting, paving, seating, etc., by attracting more activity and businesses and by organising more community events on arterial streets as part of a community cohesion and capacity building process. It will also require that new facilities, intended for both communities, be located along such routes.

It is recommended that this process begin with show case corridors along the arterial streets that lie on the boundary between the two communities, or pass through different communities (as in North Belfast). Once the initiative has been shown to produce real benefits to local communities, it could then be rolled out to other arterials that are more firmly located within one or other community. The show case corridors would promote the arterials as places of shared space, by providing upgraded facilities for both communities, thereby enlarging the customer base, increasing local employment and starting the process of bringing the communities back together, at a local level.

Recommendation 15: Consider setting in place a mechanism for developing a vision/strategy for arterial streets, to guide transport and planning authorities and developers in transforming the arterials into shared spaces

Recommendation 16: Develop a vision/strategy for each arterial street, building on the BMTP and BMAP requirements

Further consideration may need to be given to the statutory mechanisms of how development and investment can be encouraged on the arterial streets. Currently, a Masterplan can only be produced as part of a new development, and is limited to the land owned by the developer. BMAP provides only a high-level guidance for place-making opportunities, and responsibilities for place-making are split between the Department for Social Development, Department of the Environment, Department for Regional Development and Belfast City Council, without a clear definition of roles. There needs to be a united vision/strategy for each of the main arterial streets in Belfast, prepared with community involvement, that will reflect the longer-term movement needs (in the context of more sustainable and inclusive travel patterns), alongside the vision for each street as an economic and social Place. Thought should be given to the appropriate mechanisms for developing this vision and the appropriate involvement of the parties listed above and the private sector.

Recommendation 17: Review the planning powers and their application, to fully exploit opportunities for investment in transportation and mobility, and public realm, associated with proposed developments on arterial streets

There is scope to negotiate with developers for the provision or improvement of infrastructure works as part of a planning agreement. The Government's 1998 Planning Policy Statement 1 makes clear that "Planning agreements can apply to land, roads or buildings other than those covered by the planning permission, provided there is a direct relationship between the two". However, current practice is to obtain contributions to mitigate the impacts of developments on traffic, but do not go wider than that. This suggests that an opportunity may exist to obtain contributions to the physical improvement of the public realm on arterial streets.

3.5 Shared Cycling and Walking Routes

Recommendation 18: Develop a strategy and implementation plan for cycling provision

Due to the availability of extensive physical space on the main road networks in the city, Belfast has a unique opportunity to develop a significant cycle network and cycling community, contributing to meeting health and sustainability objectives while dealing with segregation issues.

Further, since cycling speeds are much higher than walking speeds, cycling has the potential to open up larger areas of the city to residents and visitors, and is much less constrained in spatial coverage than public transport services. Furthermore, users are likely to feel safer cycling in unfamiliar residential areas than when travelling through them on foot.

Some specific suggestions include:

- Define cycling standards and a design approach (there is a lack of consensus about the design standards for cycling in Belfast)
- As a priority, develop a cycling route along the waterfronts
- Carry out a cycling campaign to promote cycling
- Plan and implement traffic calming, where necessary, to improve cycling safety
- Organise a high-profile cycling event to promote and encourage cycling (e.g. 'Tour de Belfast')

Recommendation 19: Develop a strategy and implementation plan for improving pedestrian connectivity and encouraging higher levels of activity

While the Quality Walking Routes initiative has provided excellent walking links in the city centre, and stimulated footfall and economic activity,

a number of issues remain in other areas of the city which would benefit from being addressed, which include the following:

- Poor pedestrian connections across motorways such as the Westlink
- Poor pedestrian accessibility to and across the arterial streets
- Interface walls and barriers that restrict movement
- Psychological barriers to crossing physical or perceived boundaries

There will be a need for enhanced infrastructure to encourage walking, such as improved footways, safer crossing facilities, better CCTV, lighting and walking signage. By providing incentives for pedestrians to access shared spaces, greater numbers of pedestrians on the streets will, in turn, improve the perceptions of personal security that with time will further increase mobility.

3.6 Shared Activities

Recommendation 20: Further develop a programme of events that are open and accessible to all, building on the success of events such as Halloween, Continental Markets etc.

Events that attract people across all of the communities lead participants to move beyond their current areas of activity and broaden their perceptions, creating a concept of participation, belonging and wider opportunities.

In addition, mobility can be encouraged through the provision of better information, both about travel alternatives (e.g. cycling maps and customised bus timetables) and about the shops and services that are available in different parts of the city. This may be accompanied by marketing activities, designed to improve the image of modes and reassure people about their safety or social status.

There is still an un-exhausted need for more community events that can place an emphasis on greater cross community participation. Some are likely to attract additional tourists, bringing in extra income to different parts of the city and providing more reassurance of personal security to the city's different communities.

Specific suggestions made in the report included:

- Sporting event: 'Tour de Belfast' – a cycling race to follow a cross-community route traversing Belfast. This event will open up (through television coverage and attendance) different parts of Belfast.
- Family events: a Christmas Pageant, or the 'Northern Lights' initiative as in Adelaide, South Australia.

- Heritage events: an Open Day for buildings and gardens, or a heritage trail competition for school children.
- Car free days in particular areas, linked with a special event using the freed up road space.
- Neighbourhood tours, showing cultural attractions (e.g. a local food festival), as used successfully in Chicago.

Recommendation 21: Carry out a pilot residential travel plan exercise in Belfast to encourage the use of alternative modes and shared spaces, and to investigate the potential impact in influencing travel perceptions and behaviour

Workplace travel plans are relatively common in Belfast, but there may be scope for extending the initiative to education and health establishments. In addition, the study team recommended that a pilot study be conducted in a residential area, to raise local awareness of travel alternatives and of the availability of city-level and local shops and services. The aim of such a pilot study would be not only to consider alternative travel and destination choices, but also to investigate the physical and psychological barriers and obstacles that prevent people from considering leisure and other facilities that they have not accessed in the past.

3.7 Understanding Shared Spaces

Recommendation 22: Create a common database for information and statistics on travel patterns, the use of shared spaces and perceptions of urban spaces

There is a high degree of variability in understanding of the problems of mobility, connectivity, transport provision and use amongst stakeholders in Belfast. The facts about the patterns of use of streets and public spaces remain largely undefined, often with anecdotal evidence presented to back up different arguments.

With fragmented powers and responsibilities for the provision of transportation services and street infrastructure, it will be beneficial to create a common data base and a point of reference that will bring together existing information about:

- Use of shared spaces and streets
- Transport use and travel patterns
- User perceptions of the various urban spaces

Recommendation 23: Monitor and report on travel patterns, attitudes and the use of shared spaces

To develop a better understanding of current travel behaviour and community perceptions associated with the use of shared spaces, it will be beneficial to carry out sample surveys of attitudes and behaviour. This should include an understanding of the backgrounds of those accessing shared spaces and the main reasons preventing others from using these spaces. This information will greatly assist the understanding of the readiness of different communities in Belfast to embrace future initiatives that are under consideration.

3.8 Changing Perceptions

Recommendation 24: Devise information campaigns to disseminate positive information about the safe use of public spaces and transport modes, linked to new initiatives that are being introduced

Psychological barriers to mobility are often founded in perceived fears that may not be based on facts. Negative past experiences often skew current perceptions of reality and are propagated through communities ('bad news travels'). We often remember and recall the negative experiences far more than the positive ones.

These negative perceptions can be countered by providing information about the high degree of personal security now experienced in Belfast, and the extent of cross community activities. This information can be channelled through council leaflets, via local community/leisure centres, on public transport, etc. It should form part of the wider programme of measures, which make people aware of what is being done and the successes that are being achieved.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Natalya Boujenko and Peter Jones. Discussion Paper: Improving Connectivity and Mobility in Belfast. Paper submitted to Belfast City Council, June 2008.
- 2 *NI Life & Times Surveys*, www.ark.ac.uk
- 3 Jones, P., Boujenko, N. and Marshall, S. (2007), *Link and Place: A guide to street planning and design*. London, Landor Publishing.