

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



Department of

Justice

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Mike Nesbitt MLA
Chairman
Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
Room 285
Parliament Buildings
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21 October 2014

Dear Mike

INQUIRY INTO BUILDING A UNITED COMMUNITY

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into Building a United Community. In particular, I would like to focus on one aspect of your Terms of Reference for the inquiry, namely "seeking views on what issues need to be addressed in order for interface barriers to be removed".

My Department has been working, with some success, in this area through our Programme for Government Commitment 68 "to seek local agreement to reduce the number of peace walls". We have reduced the number of interface structures that we have responsibility for from 59 to 53, with further reductions planned. Since devolution of policing and justice functions, strong relationships have been established with all of the key stakeholders and, importantly, trust has been established at a community level in many areas. Naturally, I am eager for us to build on that success.

The “Together: Building a United Community Strategy” has the potential to be a vehicle to do that. However, there remain challenges which need to be overcome if we are to achieve the removal of all structures by 2023.

Background

At the outset of devolution of justice, the Department of Justice assumed responsibility for 59 interface structures from the Northern Ireland Office. Cupar Way was the first barrier to be erected. It was a temporary wooden and barbed wire structure erected by the Army to separate communities in 1969. It is the longest barrier stretching to 650m long.

Between the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and 2008 eight new fences and one security gate were put in place. The last barrier erected was in 2008 at Hazelwood Integrated Primary School.

The structures maintained by the Department are located as follows:

Location	No. Walls/fences	No. Gates	TOTAL
East Belfast	4	0	4
West Belfast	12	6	18
North Belfast	14 (15)	4 (5)	18 (20)
North West (Derry/Londonderry)	4	3 (7)	7 (11)
South West (Portadown/Lurgan)	6	0	6
TOTAL	40 (41)	13 (18)	53 (59)

It is recognised that there are other physical barriers in Northern Ireland which the Department of Justice does not have responsibility for but which may be relevant to the issue of progress towards a shared future, for instance the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has responsibility for circa 20 interface structures.

Strategic Context

Building shared communities is one of the pillars of the Department's Community Safety Strategy 2012-2017. The Strategy seeks to contribute to the creation of a safe, secure and shared future by addressing issues of prejudice and division and by working to support the efforts of many in society to overcome the physical and psychological barriers which exist in some communities.

In improving safety in interface areas and promoting community safety, the aim is to help to contribute to progress on issues like economic development, housing, shared space and employment growth.

It is clear that there are particular challenges in interface areas which in many cases have been disproportionately affected by the legacy of conflict. There has been considerable investment over the years aimed at improving delivery of services and the physical environment in interface areas, where some of the most acute divisions in our society are found. Our approach has been to build on that work.

We recognised through our work on the Programme for Government that solutions to the most deep rooted problems facing our community could not be delivered by any one Government Department or, indeed, by Government alone. We also acknowledged that change would require a process of careful engagement with communities over time.

Collaboration and partnership has been necessary at a number of levels including:

- Government;
- service delivery partners in the statutory and private sectors;
- community and voluntary groups; and

- importantly, whether through the community and voluntary groups or otherwise, with local communities who need to play a leading role in identifying and defining priorities and needs and contributing to decisions about how those can be most effectively met.

The issue of funding to support change remains a significant factor, but especially in the current economic climate. Many of these areas face multiple difficulties resulting from high levels of social deprivation and economic disadvantage. These social factors can often lie behind problems of criminality and anti-social behaviour, or the fear of them, and so the issues cannot be addressed in isolation. The Department has been working with others including Belfast City Council and the International Fund for Ireland, as well as looking at the use of Government resources within other departments, to seek to identify ways in which change can be progressed using the funding that is available to best effect.

The priority in the Programme for Government concerning building a strong and shared community includes a commitment to “actively seek local agreement to reduce the number of ‘peace walls’”. The legacy of division and segregation is still obvious. While the interface structures are a symptom of the division in society and not the cause, a number of communities continue to see the need for physical barriers such as walls/fences or gates at an interface to ensure separation from ‘the other side’. For them, the barriers give a sense of security and so are welcome and perceived as necessary.

While recognising the concerns, there is an increasing appetite for change. That desire needs to be nurtured. Government and other agencies need to create the environment for, and facilitate, positive change. We are committed to facilitating alternative mechanisms which can enable safety for communities by supporting a transition from the view that safety is achieved through separation.

Our work to date has focussed on an approach where crime and fear of crime is “designed out” or reduced. That might be by the approach of additional police resources for an area, or the provision of better street lighting, combined with CCTV, or redesigning physical structures etc. Our aim is to create spaces that are for the community as a whole and which the community feel safe using or passing through.

Our approach under the Programme for Government commitment is based on the following principles:

- The perceptions of safety and security of the people living near to interfaces and interface barriers must be addressed;
- We will aspire to the removal of all interface barriers over time;
- The process of removing interface barriers will be undertaken on the basis of sustainable regeneration as part of a process towards building shared cities and towns;
- As Minister of Justice I made it clear at the outset that I did not intend new security barriers or structures that serve to segregate communities to be built; rather priority must be given to other forms of investment in people and places that will provide appropriate levels of safety and security;
- Change is most likely to progress where it comes from within communities, but communities should be facilitated to see the benefit of such change;
- Government and its agencies should seek to facilitate change and, where possible, encourage it; and
- Greatest value should be obtained from the limited resources, and effort should be made to identify sources of funding.

Taking these principles we looked at two main stages in developing a framework for change. This framework sought to build on existing structures:

- First, at a Governmental level, to ensure that there is an appropriate level of support and engagement within relevant Government Departments, within key

statutory agencies, and in the Police and other agencies responsible for safety and security; and

- Second, developing local approaches based on the need for inclusivity, involving community representatives and local residents, and recognising the need to take account of the local context. In other words, one size did not fit all. The approach to individual interfaces needed to be flexible.

The Department of Justice's experience from its work in interface areas to date is that collaborative working between Government Departments and statutory bodies undoubtedly assists in dealing with the issues more effectively. I agreed to create a standing Inter-agency Group, as signalled in the Programme for Government, so that we could respond to any request for the transformation of an interface structure coming from engagement with the community. The Group would also generate schemes for particular locations and then suggest these to communities to show what would be possible.

I recognise that 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. Shared space and wider investment in employment and services accessible to all are key parts in reducing the impact and number of interfaces over time.

The creation of the Inter-agency Group has led to a more strategic approach to how interventions are designed and resources are allocated. This Group, in dealing with issues concerning safety and security at interfaces, seeks to work with communities and to build community confidence. The progress made to date has created some momentum for progress which we want to build on. It works alongside the existing structures such as the Community Relations Council led Interface Community

Partners Group and The International Fund for Ireland Peace Walls programme and aids their work in developing and nurturing requests for community initiated change.

Building a United Community Strategy

The most challenging commitment under this strategy is the complete removal of all peace walls by 2023. From the work we have engaged in under the Programme for Government and from wider studies on the regeneration of interface areas we recognise that:

- Residents are concerned about change because of concern about safety;
- Residents must be at the heart of decision-making about interface areas (although there are challenges in engaging/identifying residents);
- The regeneration of interface areas is at the core of addressing the problems experienced by residents;
- Residents have identified their priorities and should be listened to, but expectations in terms of what is possible and when also have to be managed;
- The focus on walls/barriers in isolation from other issues is unlikely to be successful in many areas;
- The walls/barriers were a symptom rather than a cause of division but now reinforce division/suspicion; and
- Public policies (including planning, education, health, and housing) need to give a firmer commitment to support and prioritise the regeneration and sustainable development of interface areas. (We need to keep in mind the developments in the organisation and responsibilities of councils).
- We need to utilise, for instance, the work of Neighbourhood Renewal Programmes which already exist in many of these areas, including the availability of data covering a wide range of indicators and the specialist skills

and knowledge within the statutory agencies to support the community in selecting appropriate interventions.

The weaknesses we have identified in respect of the current approach are:

- The lack of a dedicated programme budget has led to difficulty in securing cross departmental funding as priorities identified within the programme often do not align with existing Departmental plans;
- Our focus therefore has been primarily on creating more attractive and safe environments through a range of physical renewal measures aimed at improving safety and security without the need for physical walls and barriers. Without a cross Executive commitment we have had limited opportunity to address economic, social, and community renewal as part of a holistic plan. That will be necessary for the more difficult areas.
- The IFI Peace Walls Programme has been advantageous in facilitating the close engagement between statutory agencies and local communities. However, there remain interface structures where engagement has yet to take place, such as Portadown/ Lurgan, East Belfast and parts of West Belfast where community relations, to a greater or lesser extent, are particularly fragile. There remains a need for continued, intensive good relations work in these and other areas to bring them to a point where they can engage in discussion on the removal of interface structures.

Taking these points into consideration, we believe that the United Communities strategy, having gained cross Executive support, should provide an opportunity to address the weaknesses in the overall programme and to create an innovative approach. However, at this time, without the ability to address these weaknesses and set the target within a wider framework of improving safety and supporting regeneration, combined with the resources necessary to deliver it, and consistent and sustained political leadership at all levels, there is a substantial risk of failure.

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I trust this information is helpful. I have copied this correspondence to the Chair of the Committee for Justice.

Yours

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Ford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

DAVID FORD MLA
Minister of Justice