

Submission to the Inquiry into Building a United Community

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Introduction

This evidence submitted to the OFMDFM Inquiry into Building a United Community is drawn from our previous academic research which considered public attitudes around peace walls and interfaces (Byrne, Gormley-Heenan, and Robinson, 2012) and is also informed by our current knowledge exchange activities and research, funded by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) in partnership with the Department of Justice (DoJ). This knowledge exchange work considers a range of issues related to the NI Executive's peace wall strategy contained within the *Together: Building a United Community* document (May 2013).

We are very grateful for the opportunity to respond to the consultation. Against the background of our current ESRC project, our response will focus on one key aspect of the Terms of Reference put forward by the *Inquiry into Building a United Community* (2014): **'Seeking views on what issues need to be addressed in order for interface barriers to be removed.'**

1) Background

- 1.1 The first 'peace wall' was built in 1969 to separate the Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill Road in Belfast. A British Army Major, overseeing the construction of the wall at the time, said: *'This is a temporary measure... we do not want to see another Berlin wall situation in Western Europe... it will be gone by Christmas'*.
- 1.2 In 2014, this peace wall still remains and almost 100 additional walls, barriers and other such interfaces join the original, stretching more than 26 miles in length across Belfast alone. Twenty years after the first paramilitary ceasefires and 16 years after the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement it has still not been possible to remove these structures in any systematic way, usually on grounds that the security of residents in the immediate vicinity would be put at risk. In many ways then, the 'peace walls' have come to symbolize the ongoing gulf between the aspirations of the peace process and the implementation of peace in practice.
- 1.3 Before 2012, the devolved government in Northern Ireland had no substantive baseline evidence of public attitudes towards the peace walls and barriers that cluster in the towns and cities of this region. Given the significance of peace walls as a policy priority in post-conflict Northern Ireland, we believed that understanding public attitudes about peace walls was necessary and developed a public attitudes survey to gather this data (Byrne, Gormley-Heenan & Robinson, 2012).

1.4 Carried out in March and April 2012, the survey gathered quantitative data, which highlighted how those living in closest proximity to the walls and barriers felt about their physical landscape; what they knew (if anything) about the different initiatives that the devolved and local government were developing; and what they hoped for in future. This research suggested that a number of factors needed to be taken into account in order to progress the issue of peace walls from any agreed policy *objective* to an *implemented* policy. The primary challenge for policy makers would be reconciling the mixed messages of fear and optimism revealed within our survey of local residents views, as well as using the results to act as the stimulus for the creation of conditions, to allow for the successful implementation of both devolved government and local authority policies.

1.5 The research highlighted six key factors that could underpin the eventual implementation of a peace walls policy:

- a. There is a need to improve methods of sharing information, alongside the need to undertake further community consultations with those who reside closest to the peace walls;
- b. There is a need to extend meaningful co-operation and engagement between and across communities divided by peace walls;
- c. Outstanding security concerns still prevalent within communities must be addressed;
- d. There should be greater emphasis on 'encouraging the imagination' around what the landscape might look like post peace walls;
- e. This issue must be treated as one requiring real 'joined-up' government, with real co-operation between the various government departments with responsibilities for security, social development, the economy and the environment.
- f. The policy framework around peace walls needs to be clearer about those various stakeholders who should be included in the agenda setting and decision-making part of future processes. To reduce their roles to that of 'street level bureaucrats' tasked with the implementation of policy decisions taken at a more macro level runs the potential risks of undermining any implementation process (Gormley-Heenan, Byrne & Robinson, 2013).

2) Key Issues Today

2.1 There are a number of misconceptions and issues of confusion related to the *Together: Building a United Community* policy objective of the complete removal of all peace walls and barriers by 2023 through the implementation of a 10-year Programme, working together with the local communities. For instance, there seems to be an accepted public narrative that more peace walls have been built since the Good Friday Agreement (1998) than before. In fact, the total number of barriers has increased only slightly, but the rate of construction and proliferation has decreased markedly, especially since 2007. Furthermore there has been some progress in

removing barriers, softening their impact or increasing the degree of communication between communities.

2.2 The study compiled by members of our research team indicated that while 58% of residents living near the walls 'would like the peace walls to come down now or sometime in the future', 63% of those surveyed would still 'would like to know more about initiatives and discussions on the peace walls'. Moreover, the research indicated that governments have not yet managed to reassure communities living near the walls that they would not be negatively affected by the removal of the walls.

2.3 Two decades after formal ceasefires and 7 years since the establishment of devolution 69% of those surveyed feel that 'maintain(ing) that the peace walls are still necessary because of the potential for violence'. In addition, 58% of residents living in close proximity to the walls 'were very/fairly worried about the police ability to preserve peace and maintain order if the peace wall was removed.' This suggests either that level of fears between communities has not reduced sufficiently since the beginning of the peace process or that trauma in the past creates significant grounds for suspicion of anything which promotes integration. The multiple points of misunderstanding and uncertainty are exacerbated by the fact that 34% of 'peace wall residents' know little about policies related to the walls (Byrne, Gormley-Heenan & Robinson, 2012).

2.4 In the absence of clarity about the policy towards the removal of peace walls, we have, through our ESRC funded knowledge exchange activities, encountered widespread scepticism about the plausibility of their complete removal by 2023. **It is not clear what information and research was used in arriving at the target date as indicated in TBUC, nor what preparations have been made to ensure delivery.** Beyond uncertainty about the prospective target, **it remains unclear who would be responsible for the success or failure of the strategy, as the Department of Justice (DoJ), Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the communities themselves** (as they must agree) all appear to have duties in delivering the output.

2.5 Failure to achieve the ambitious TBUC target of having all peace walls removed by 2023 will have significant ramifications for the credibility and reputation of the Northern Ireland Executive. Internationally, the removal of peace walls is seen as emblematic of peace and progress in Northern Ireland. There is a substantial risk that failure to achieve or make significant progress towards the target will create the impression that the Executive is either unable or unwilling to act to reduce territorial segregation and enmity. In the domestic context, failure to achieve the target is likely to be accompanied by ongoing evidence of concentrated deprivation in interface areas – with concerns that these areas have been left out of the wider benefits offered by the peace process in Northern Ireland.

2.6 Within Northern Ireland, the impact on the communities targeted by the strategy (where the walls reside) could be significant if it were to fail, as the communities could be psychologically damaged by an unsuccessful process. A number of areas have developed a reliance on their respective walls (seeing them as their last

physical symbol of protection from their ‘opposing’ community) – as a consequence, failure to complete the process after the community has agreed to be part of the strategy could understandably be harmful.

2.7 We would suggest that the simplicity of the target may, itself, be misleading. Although the removal of walls is a critical and highly visible aspect of the emergence of a ‘normal’ western society, it should be understood as an output in the journey towards this wider target rather than a specific goal in itself. As of now, we are unaware of any significant measureable indices to ascertain progress towards the outcome of a safer, fairer and more peaceful society. The single-minded focus on physical barriers creates a number of significant policy risks:

- a. There is insufficient emphasis on the requirement to generate significant social and economic change to achieve the wider target,
- b. There is no mechanism to allow for a staged approach which takes account of very different local circumstances (with the progress in some areas likely to be slower than in others).
- c. There is no mechanism to allow for a graduated response to changing local circumstances or the distinctive nature of the relationship between each community and their respective wall.

2.8 On the basis of our research, and give the enormous public interest in this issue we propose that:

- a. The target of removing walls should be set within a wider framework of improving safety and supporting regeneration.
- b. Within three years, a clear strategy for implementation of the goal should be published for full consultation and engagement with community, political and other stakeholders.
- c. As part of that strategy, clear structure for delivery of the target should be established which clarifies responsibilities across Executive Departments and makes clear how community organisations and other statutory agencies will contribute to the outcome.
- d. The resources that are required and available to deliver the target, should be explicitly identified and planned for.
- e. A clear framework for monitoring and evaluation should be established which enables public accountability for progress and enables an open communication about opportunities, risks and challenges.

3) Critical Success Factors

3.1 Consistent and sustained political leadership is essential if this target is to be achieved. As this policy is the agreed policy of the whole Executive, it is important that the target has the active support of all of the political parties and the active engagement of local representatives of the parties. Furthermore, there needs to be

evidence that all Departments and relevant agencies are fully signed up both to the target and to the resources required to achieve the target.

3.2 Close working relationships with local partners and representatives will be essential to identify and address emerging issues and concerns in creating and sustaining the cohesion necessary to deal with the challenges that this type of strategy will likely create.

3.3 Sufficient resources will be required to ensure that the different agencies and groups involved are able to meet their obligations, including public safety, regeneration and reimagining. It is very important that statutory bodies have the capacity to interact with areas where there is ongoing evidence of alienation from public authorities. The police continue to face challenges in achieving cooperation and support in some areas, but negative perceptions in some communities of the PSNI can be adjusted by the establishment of a consistent visible and reliable presence. However, this will require time and resources.

3.3 Credible policies and planning to promote good relations and regeneration processes and outcomes must be created and delivered. This includes creating formal good relations elements within community plans at local council level. This should just not be restricted to encouraging areas to have a greater acceptance of their longstanding 'opposing' community, but also be aimed at creating the type of environment that will create more plurality, communication and connectivity between and within the traditional blocs.

3.4 Coherent and consistent inter-Departmental working is required to ensure that the target is connected to an improvement in community safety and quality of life – this includes creating a dynamic and durable connection between Social Development, Education, Employment and Learning, Culture Arts and Leisure and OFMDFM, under the leadership of DoJ.

3.5 High quality qualitative and quantitative research can offer detailed and timely information that can help steer the strategy in the appropriate direction, if properly connected in to the strategy's framework and should be both commissioned and then fully utilized.

3.6 Within three years, the Executive should publish an agreed and universally understood timescale to ensure that all stakeholders, including statutory agencies and community group, can understand their participation in this shared goal and will remain involved as well as committed and energized by the strategy until its full delivery in 2023.

We hope that you find these comments helpful. If you would like to discuss our response, or would like to find out more about our ESRC funded Knowledge Exchange activities in this area, we can be contacted using the details provided on the

coversheet. We would also be pleased to provide oral evidence to the Committee on this inquiry.

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9 October 2014.

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