

10 October 2014

Submission to the Inquiry into Building a United Community

The Peace Walls Programme is an IFI funded project which is managed by St Columb's Park House Activity & Reconciliation Trust. The Trust was set up in 1994 to establish a centre for reconciliation and a safe venue. The centre seeks to contribute to peace-building and social inclusion through a range of programmes promoting civic participation, human rights, and democratic pluralism. In addition, the Trust manages St Columb's Park House as an income generating community business offering conference and residential facilities.

The Peace Walls Programme is based in the four interface areas in the Waterside in Derry-Londonderry and our main aim is to facilitate the removal of interface barriers. These barriers are both physical and psychological and so the founding principles on which we operate are contact, dialogue and reconciliation. This works hand in hand with the goals of physical regeneration and economic and social advance.

Our sister project is based in the Fountain and Bishop Street area in the Cityside and is managed by Triax. Together we are in the process of developing a body of research which aims to create a learning tool that can be used in interface areas. Along with an in-depth attitudinal survey, we will gather all our knowledge and experience on the ground to assess what has worked and what hasn't. We hope this will influence policy on a wider level and lead to a successful interface strategy.

We have contributed to the Submission by the Holywell Trust and would now like to add a few points which are particular to the Peace Walls element of the TBUC strategy.

1. From our perspective the matter of Peace Walls should fall into two categories: Shared Space and Safe Community. At the minute it is seen as a Safe Community Aim, and while this is an important element, it is by no means the only component to the problem. The issue of community safety is ultimately why physical barriers are created in the first place but the notion of shared space runs deep into the heart of why communities are divided and why residents feel they can't use amenities in a neighbouring estate. A large amount of time by our Outreach Workers is spent dealing with anti-social behaviour in the individual estates. This is extremely important as this behaviour can spill over to the interface. This mainly involves young people so the starting point for any good relations work should always be Single Identity training and instilling respect for your own community. Gradual interaction can then build up into true friendships across the divide, as we have seen in our work with Tullyally and Currynerin. With regards to crime prevention in the areas, there is a need for work on interfaces to reduce crime as part of an informed strategy, guided by proven theory. There is a need to start where people are at and work on an agenda informed by the local community. The interface communities are by nature, the most fragmented. In time of heightened tension any adverse scenario is played out in these areas. Neighbours who rub along nicely (albeit with no contact) suddenly find themselves on the frontline. These residents bear the brunt of violence and anti-social behaviour and as such deserve special consideration.

2. What would an Interface Barrier Support Package look like? We need to know what resources would be available and what areas would fall into its remit. We need to know how our good relations work is supported by this package. Building bridges between communities takes time, money, effort and a coordinated approach. We need a long-term strategy that incorporates the physical regeneration of areas with capacity building and good relations. There needs to be recognition that the work on the physical sites is important but should be combined with a person centred approach that builds relationships of trust and helps build capacity in the area. We feel there is a lack of long term vision, strategy and funding for interface areas. This endangers the sustainability of work and jeopardises the relationships that have been formed both between the communities and with the Peace Walls workers. What has happen when the funding ends? Does the capacity programme and work disappear? If short-term funding ends then all relationships that have been built up with communities dissolve and the communities lose faith that anything will change in the long-term. The present fragmented approach to work in interface areas needs to be replaced with a proper coordinated approach. Measuring impact and effectiveness of existing work is key to developing this work and gaining credibility and funding for it.

3. Our IFI project is focused on improving the physical environment as well as encouraging reconciliation. To this end we work with all the Statutory Agencies to make sure regeneration work is carried out successfully. This is an important element to any future package. Our Programme operates with each agency working together and coordinated by us through Reference Groups and follow up work. It is clear that a prerogative must be to build community capacity, but the residents on either side of structures also need to see physical change. Whether that will be regeneration of derelict buildings or developing waste land into a vibrant shared space, all done with substantial community consultation.

This approach has proved to be extremely successful in our interface areas. Estates that have been essentially 'forgotten' now recognise the work of the Peace Walls Programme in issues of dereliction. These physical achievements serve the dual purpose of instilling a renewed respect within communities and also instilling a trust in the Peace Walls workers that they will get concrete results.

4. It must be said that 16 years after the Belfast Agreement good relations work should still be a priority for any government. We are seeing young people growing up who have no knowledge of the conflict yet still hate their neighbours. This cannot go unchallenged or we will be picking up the pieces for many generations to come. In Derry-Londonderry we are now seen as the 'model' for peacebuilding. This is a worrisome title as it implies that we have succeeded, when in fact reconciliation is still an ongoing labour. There is a piecemeal approach to good relations work that relies on organisations to constantly seek funding with the OFMDFM and the Council offering little in the way of proper support. To this end, we welcome this 'Interface Barrier Support Package' and hope the OFMDFM have the good sense to take their lead from work that has been done on the ground.

Kirstein Arbuckle
Project Coordinator
Peace Walls programme