Peace Walls,
Public Attitudes and Impact on Policy

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1. Overview

2019 will be the 50th anniversary of the construction of the first and possibly still the most famous peace wall in Northern Ireland. The wall was built in 1969, in response to the increasing levels of communal violence and disorder and to separate the Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill Road in West Belfast. An 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'. In 2012, that wall still remains and almost 90 additional walls, barriers and fences now complement the original. This briefing paper presents findings from new research examining the public's attitudes and awareness of such peace walls. This is of particular relevance as a key commitment within Priority Four of the current Programme for Government is to 'actively seek local agreement to reduce the number of peace walls'. This policy brief draws upon the results of two surveys – one of residents that lived in close proximity to peace walls in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry and another general sample of the wider population. The data provides an insight into the public's views on the impact of the peace walls; attitudes towards any future attempts to transform and/or remove peace walls, and assesses the role of government departments in terms of policy and interventions.

2. What Do We Define As Peace Walls?

For the purposes of this briefing paper we use the term peace walls, as this is the term used in every day conversation. However we use this term to cover all kinds of interface barriers that keep communities apart including walls, gates and security fences and explained this distinction to those who took part in both surveys.

3. Why Are They Significant?

The growing significance of the walls can be framed in five distinct ways:

(i) From a security perspective, the peace walls continue to focus negative attention on the devolved administration's response to communal violence and disorder.

(ii) Financially, the peace walls impact on the delivery of services and reduce the potential for communities that have been severely affected by violence and disorder to attract inward investment.

(iii) From a good relations perspective, the peace walls continue to emphasise the cultural, political and religious differences that exist across our community.

(iv) In the context of health and social well-being, each of the neighbourhoods with peace walls in Belfast are in the top 10 per cent of the most socially and economically deprived electoral wards in Northern Ireland.

(v) Finally, from an international perspective, the resilience of the peace walls keeps Northern Ireland in the international spotlight but for reasons that are at odds with the accepted narrative that promotes the success of the peace process. In 2008, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, on a visit to Belfast, explicitly connected economic investment and the removal of the peace walls when he stated that 'the sooner the physical barriers come down as well, the sooner the flood gates of private investment will open'.

4. How Many Are There?

The Department of Justice (DOJ) along with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) are responsible for the majority of peace walls in Belfast, Lurgan, Portadown and Derry/Londonderry. However, providing a definitive total for the number of peace walls is problematic as there is no general definition of what exactly constitutes a peace wall. Table 1 provides an overview of Dr. Neil Jarman's position on the development of peace walls, barriers and fences in Belfast since 1969.

Table 1: The construction of peace walls and barriers by location (Belfast) and year

Year	Central	East	North	South	West	Total
Unknown	11	4	9	1	9	34
1969					2	2
1970-1979		4	9		5	18
1980-1989	2	1	4		5	12
1990-1994			5		7 (3)	12 (3)
1995-1999	1	1	12 (1)		(1)	14 (2)
2000-	(1)	(6)	5 (7)		2 (2)	7 (16)
Total	14	10	44	1	30	99

Source: Belfast Interface Project (2012)

5. Recent Research on Public Attitudes

The University of Ulster research team (Jonny Byrne, Cathy Gormley-Heenan & Gillian Robinson) conducted two postal surveys in March-April 2012. 1451 postal questionnaires were returned from the general public and from homes adjacent to, or in close proximity to peace walls in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. The questionnaires were structured on several themes which included respondents understanding of the context around the establishment of the peace walls; the perceived impact of the peace walls on people's lives; the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in historical and current initiatives around what could/should happen to these walls; the extent of knowledge surrounding such initiatives; their attitudes towards any future attempts to transform and/or remove peace walls and finally their views on what might actually happen if the peace walls were to be removed. Full details on the methodology is available in the technical report available at www.ark.ac.uk/peacewalls2012/ where you can also access lay friendly tables and the datasets.

6. What Do the General Public Think about Them?

82% believe peace walls are ugly
78% believe that segregation of communities is common even where there are no peace walls
76% would like to see peace walls come down now or in the near future
64% believe that peace walls should be a big priority for the Northern Ireland Government.
60% can envisage a time when there are no peace walls
38% believe that peace walls are necessary because of the potential for violence
38% believe that peace walls are a tourist attraction

Most striking is the view that more than three quarters of the general population (78%) in Northern Ireland believes that segregation is common in the absence of peace walls. In a sense, this suggests that respondents see segregation and division as something much bigger than simply the physicality of the walls and the problems that the walls themselves continue to perpetuate. For the general public, focusing on the problem of peace walls might not be enough to address the broader issue of segregation in our society. Nevertheless, 64% of the general population still maintain that solving this part of a bigger problem should be a key priority for the Northern Ireland devolved government.

7. What Do Those Living Closest To Them Think?

69% maintain that the peace walls are still necessary because of the potential for violence
63% would like to know more about initiatives and discussions on the peace walls
58% would like to see the peace walls come down now or sometime in the future
58% were very/fairly worried about the police ability to preserve peace and maintain order if the peace walls was removed
38% can envisage a time when there will be no peace walls
37% believe that if the peace walls were removed there would be some significant incidents but only during particular dates/anniversaries or marches; but
23% believe there will be constant problems.
34% know a little and/or a lot about initiatives and discussions on the peace walls
31% believe the community has overall responsibility for making decisions about peace walls

Generally, residents frame the issue of peace walls in relation to violence as opposed to one of segregation. Despite the progress in the political and peace processes, only 38% of residents can ever see a time without peace walls. However, a further 20% would like to see the walls come down now or at some point in the future. This gap of 20% suggests that while residents want to see these changes made, they do not believe/expect that it will happen. This pessimism may be as a consequence of a lack of knowledge and awareness (only 34% report knowing a little or a lot) of the various initiatives currently underway in developing a peace walls 'policy' through the Programme for Government. That said, there remains a strong desire for information on such initiatives and discussions (63%). In short, it seems that a majority of residents would like to see the peace walls come down at some point (58%). They accept that while there may be some significant incidents, the majority (67%) do not see the potential for constant problems. However the majority of respondents remain concerned about the ability of the police to deal with issues that could arise should the walls be removed (58%).

8. Why Do These Attitudes Matter?

It was not until 2010 when matters of policing and justice were devolved to the Stormont administration in the form of a newly created Department for Justice. The Justice Minister, David Ford from the Alliance Party took over the responsibility for peace walls from the NIO. This change of responsibility has resulted in a subtle shift in emphasis in terms of how peace walls are considered in policy terms. The previous NIO sentiment of 'walls as a security response' has been complemented with one of 'walls as a problem of community relations': 'these walls, fences and gates are daily reminders of the huge challenge ahead to break down the mistrust and separation that exists within our community' (DOJ, 2011). However, the survey results indicate that the respondents still frame the issue of peace walls in a multiplicity of ways which can be distilled into four main areas (figure 1) – security, community relations, health and well being, and culture and identity.

Figure 1: Framing the issue of peace walls through thematic policy analysis
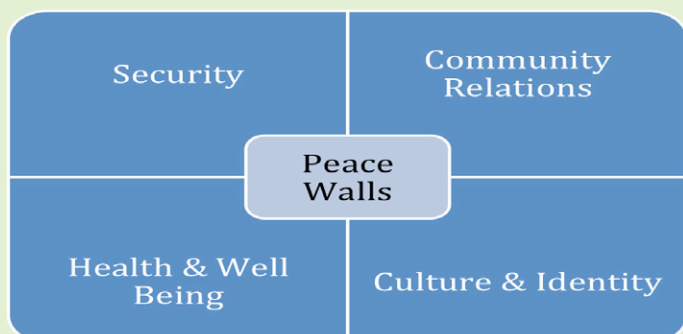
It is true that the devolved administration at Stormont and local government at council level have already recognized the significance of the walls and have incorporated the issue into broader strategies, policy frameworks and action plans designed to deal with the wider problems of segregation, community safety and urban regeneration. For example, the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government 2011-15 commits to 'actively seek local agreement to reduce the number of peace walls'. In addition, the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (2011) document published through the Office of the First Minister Deputy First Minister (OFMdFM); the Department of Justice's Building Safer, Shared, and Confident Communities (2011) document; and the Belfast City Council's Investment Programme: 2012-2015 consultation document each place an emphasis on the issue of segregation, interfaces and peace walls. Furthermore, the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) recently announced a £2 million investment in its Peace Walls Programme, to support confidence and relationship building initiatives across interface communities. Belfast City Council has also committed £421,000 to support its interface programme

around the removal of peace walls within the city. However, in order for the devolved administration and local government to begin to respond to these wider problems, understanding the public's attitudes and opinions towards peace walls is crucial.

9. Evidence Informed Policy Making

It is clear from the survey results that several key factors need to be taken into account to progress the issue of peace walls from an agreed policy objective to an implemented policy. The primary challenge for policy makers is reconciling the mixed messages of fear and optimism revealed within the survey, 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. An analysis of these survey findings complemented by previous qualitative research (Byrne, 2011) highlights six key factors, which could underpin the eventual implementation of a successful peace walls policy. **Firstly,** 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; **secondly,** there is a need to promote further engagement between and across communities divided by peace walls; **thirdly,** there remains the need to address the outstanding security concerns still prevalent within communities; **fourthly,** there needs to be greater emphasis at the macro-level in terms of 'encouraging the imagination' around what the landscape might look like post peace walls; **fifthly,** there is a responsibility to treat this issue as one in need of real 'joined-up' government by joining up the various government departments with responsibilities for either the peace walls themselves or the ramifications of these walls on society, the economy and the environment. **Finally,** the policy framework within the Programme for Government around peace walls needs to be clearer about those various stakeholders who should be included in the agenda setting and decision making element 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.

10. What Does This Mean For Government?

It is clear that the issue of peace walls is important for the majority of government departments within the Northern Ireland Executive. This can be evidenced in a number of ways – there is a correlation between peace walls and the local communities' ability to access services, their lower levels of educational attainment and the levels of unemployment (Hall, 2010). The implication of this is that peace walls should become a key priority area for

the Department of Social Development, Department of Education, Department of Employment and Learning and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, at least in the first instance. Recent research (O'Reilly, 2011) on levels of proscribed medication, mental health and peace walls has indicated a higher incidence of mental health problems for those living in closest proximity to the walls, which would imply that peace walls need to become a priority area for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In the context of building positive community relations, addressing sectarianism, and providing the vision for a 'shared future', policy responsibility lies primarily within the OFMDFM. The peace walls are the antithesis of this vision, providing a visible manifestation of the divisions, which continue to exist, and therefore constitute a real policy challenge for this department. The financial implications of the peace walls in terms of restricting investment opportunities (Bloomberg, 2008), limiting access to services (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006), and barriers to physical regeneration (Jarman, 2008) are obvious to the Department of the Environment, the Department of Finance and Personnel, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Figure 2: Policy responsibility based upon thematic analysis of peace walls
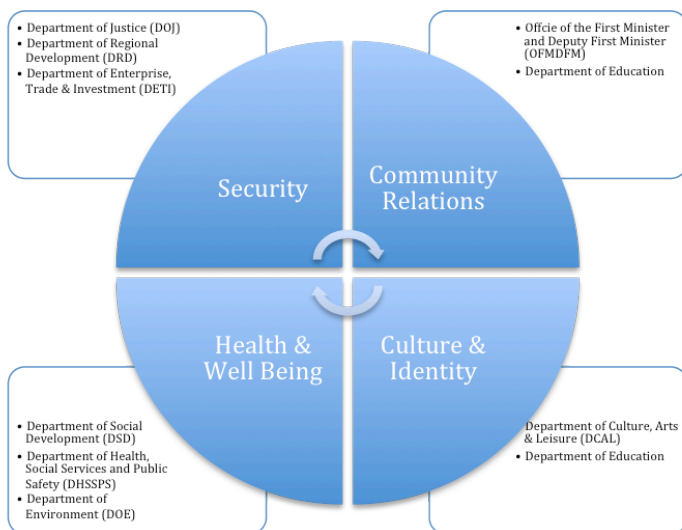
Although the peace walls can be directly connected to a large number of government departments (figure 2), they are not 'directed' by a specific peace walls policy which brings all of the appropriate departments together and/or holds them to account in terms of their departmental roles and responsibilities around the walls. In a recent attempt to develop a more joined up approach, the Department of Justice alongside the Community Relations Council established an Inter-Agency Working Group (IWG) consisting of various government departments, Belfast City Council and the PSNI. The aim of the IWG is to deliver the Programme for Government Commitment 68 to 'actively seek local agreement to reduce the number of 'peace

walls'; and the related outcomes set out in the Community Safety Strategy. While this is a welcome initiative, there remains the need for a more centralised policy unit which could co-ordinate the necessary consultation on policies from different departments, as well as joint working on policies with shared aims and objectives. The purpose of placing peace walls in a centralised policy unit would be to demonstrate to the public that walls are a key priority for government and therefore, to provide policy advice in accordance with the PfG policy priorities on walls, and to support the different government departments in developing effective strategies and policies which complement the overall policy priority.

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