



A discussion paper proposing a five phase process for the removal of 'peace walls' in Northern Ireland

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1. Preface

I grew up at the top of the Shankill Rd in Belfast in the 1970's. The so called 'peace walls' went up all around me. The nearest one was at Springmartin. For every inch I grew, it grew six feet. It made me feel safe but it obviously didn't work. People from either side crossed the interface to kill people on the other side.



In the 1980's, while working across the sectarian divide in North Belfast, I lived right on the peace line. I will never forget feeling so vulnerable to attack every single night, the insecurity and the lack of sleep.

I no longer live there, but for the past 25 years I have worked with hundreds of groups who are tackling sectarianism and trying to improve the quality of life in our most disadvantaged communities.

Many of those groups are doing courageous work across the interfaces and in the past few years I noticed a change in their conversations about the peace walls. People started to talk about 'when' rather than 'if' the walls come down.

Research carried out in January 2008 reflected this change. The US-Ireland Alliance engaged Millward Brown Ulster to ask residents of a sample of interface areas in Belfast for their views on the 'peace walls'.

The survey found '*strong agreement that the walls serve to help residents feel safer by keeping the communities separated.*'

However, when asked if they would be in favour or opposed to the walls coming down, 81% of the residents polled were in favour:

- 21% said now
- 60% said yes, when it's safe enough, but not at present

Then during the investment conference in May 2008, the Mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg said "*The historic cultural barriers between the two communities here are slowly coming down and the sooner they do, and the sooner the physical barriers come down as well, the sooner the flood gates of private investment will open.*"

Later that month, speaking in the Assembly, former First Minister Ian Paisley responded positively. He said "*But when those on both sides of the wall mutually come to agreement and say we are taking down these walls, then we will have won a great victory and I look forward to that victory being sealed over and over again in these areas where there has been great trouble in the past days.*"

However in spite of these changes, walls continue to go up, most recently in the grounds of Hazelwood Integrated Primary School and as part of some new private developments.

In 2005 a mapping exercise carried out by Belfast Interface Project and the Institute for Conflict Research identified 83 barriers in Belfast alone. Outside of Belfast, ask any 14-year-old boy and he will tell you where the sectarian interface is, the line he doesn't feel safe to cross in his own town, whether it's Lurgan or Limavady, Cookstown or Kilkeel.

The erection of peace walls has been sustained through the ceasefires, the ten years since the signing of the Agreement and the establishment of a devolved government. However in recent years, community initiatives have resulted in a decrease in the number of serious violent interface incidents. In some places the walls provide a venue for 'recreational rioting' organised by cross community texting and in other places there are now more tourist visits than violent incidents.

As a result of this changing context, I decided to write this independent discussion paper, 'A Process for Removing Interface Barriers', to stimulate discussion about the sort of process that needs to be put in place to make it safe enough for the walls to come down.

It's a completely independent paper. It wasn't commissioned or funded by any organisation. It is a personal contribution to stimulate discussion.

The paper highlights the conditions required such as reaching a 'tipping point'; when the benefits of removing interface barriers, such as economic regeneration, outweigh the benefits of maintaining them.

It also identifies the essential characteristics of the process such as the safety, wellbeing and quality of life of interface residents being of paramount importance.

The proposed process has five main phases to be carried forward within the context of community, social, educational and economic development in interface areas. This involves mapping all of the interfaces in Northern Ireland, a major consultation with people living in interface communities, developing 'Local Interface Development Plans', implementing and supporting these plans and moving to 'normalisation' without barriers.

The initiation of the overall process would be the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive. The community/voluntary sector, local authorities, police, youth service, schools, businesses, elected representatives and churches within interface areas would all play a part.

The process would be community driven and government supported – both 'bottom up' and 'top down'. Local people living beside the peace lines would decide how and when a barrier should be removed, with the full support of government to plan and support the changes.

Since circulating the paper in July 2008, the response has been overwhelming. People really want to talk about this.

There has been a lot of interest from community groups, churches, statutory agencies, elected representatives and the media. It seems it is the right time for this discussion.

Most people have welcomed the discussion and are supportive of a process of this kind.

Speaking on BBC Radio Ulster's Talkback programme, OFMDFM Junior Minister Gerry Kelly said the paper was 'important' and supported the idea of both a strategic approach and the involvement of local communities. Other MLA's and Belfast City Councillors have been keen to discuss the ideas further. I believe this is a very positive sign. If our political leaders can agree on launching an initiative that will result in the peace walls coming down they will have made an enormous step forward, not just for the wider economy, but more importantly, for the people living in communities that have suffered so much in the past.

Removing the peace walls will be an enormous challenge but I think we can do it. I firmly believe that the peace walls that went up in my youth will come down in my lifetime.

Tony Macaulay

October 2008

2. Introduction

This discussion paper suggests a process for the removal of interface barriers in Northern Ireland. It is an independent proposal intended to stimulate discussion within and between local interface communities and government and other stakeholders.

For the past forty years, interface barriers have been erected in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Portadown and Lurgan¹ as a response to inter community violence. These barriers include walls, fences, security gates, derelict 'buffer zones' and barriers that have been planned into infrastructure and regeneration development.²

The erection of interface barriers has been sustained through the ceasefires, the ten years since the signing of the Agreement and the establishment of a devolved government in 2007. However in recent years, community based interventions have resulted in a decrease in the number of violent interface incidents.

In January 2008, the US-Ireland Alliance engaged Millward Brown Ulster to ask residents of a sample of interface areas in Belfast for their views on the 'peace walls'.

The survey found '*strong agreement that the walls serve to help residents feel safer by keeping the communities separated.*'³

However, when asked if they would be in favour or opposed to the walls coming down, 81% of the residents polled were in favour:

- 21% said now
- **60% said yes, when it's safe enough, but not at present**
- 17% said they didn't care if the walls never come down

- 61% agreed that local politicians should be doing more to create conditions for the walls to come down

This paper suggests **a process that would create the conditions to make it safe enough for the walls to come down.**

¹ Less formal interface barriers also exist in many other parts of Northern Ireland

² For a breakdown of the type and location of interface barriers in Belfast, as well as an analysis of the background and changing context see '*Security and Segregation: Interface Barriers in Belfast*' by Neil Jarman in '*Shared Space: A research journal on peace, conflict and community relations in Northern Ireland*' published by the Community Relations Council in June 2008.

³ 1,037 people were polled in the Falls/Shankill, Short Strand/Templemore Avenue and Antrim Rd/Tigers Bay areas. For details of the survey methodology and findings see www.us-irelandalliance.org

3. Conditions for an Effective Process

The conditions required for an effective process that would result in the removal of interface barriers are as follows:

- a sustained period of political stability
- a sustained period of a substantial reduction in violent interface incidents, particularly during the summer period
- sustained contact, dialogue and discussion between community leaders on both sides of the interfaces
- reaching a 'tipping point', when key stakeholders see the benefits of removing interface barriers as outweighing the benefits of maintaining them
- a high level of confidence in the policing of interface areas
- ongoing community, social, educational and economic development and the regeneration of interface areas
- effective youth work strategies in place in interface communities
- both support for the process and engagement in the process by interface residents (including children and young people), elected representatives, government bodies and civic society
- a high level of confidence among interface residents that the outcome of the process will be a lasting improvement in safety, security and quality of life
- adequate resources to support the implementation of the process

4. Characteristics of the Process

The essential characteristics of the process are as follows:

- The safety, wellbeing and quality of life of interface residents must be at the centre of the process
- The process must recognise, build on and learn from the success of 'grass roots' interface work in recent years
- The process requires political leadership and government support
- The process requires cross departmental and cross sectoral co-operation
- The process must be both 'bottom up' and 'top down', with local community and government taking on appropriate roles and responsibilities
- The process requires a strong commitment to co-operation and partnership among all stakeholders
- The process requires effective management, co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation
- The process will require sufficient finances to support effective implementation
- The process must be flexible to accommodate the fact that all interfaces are different and will require different approaches and timescales

- The process should operate within the context of any wider policy of cohesion, sharing and integration and should be underpinned by principles of equality and human rights

5. A Five Phase Process

The overall aim of the process is to create the circumstances in which interface barriers can be safely removed.

The proposed process has five main phases (see Figure 1 overleaf):

Phase 1: Mapping

Phase 2: Consultation

Phase 3: Local Interface Development Plans

Phase 4: Implementation and Support

Phase 5: Normalisation

The five phases would involve the following action:

Phase 1: Mapping

This first phase will involve a detailed mapping of all interface barriers across Northern Ireland including type, location, history, records of recent incidents, analysis of any existing research, consultation and reports on views of local residents and other key stakeholders.⁴

Phase 2: Consultation

The focus of the second phase will be to consult with local residents (including children and young people) in each of the interface areas identified through the mapping process, to seek their views on the 'peace wall' and the conditions, if any, under which they could see it safely changed/removed.

⁴ In 2005 a mapping of interface barriers was carried out in Belfast by the Belfast Interface Project and the Institute for Conflict Research. This identified 83 barriers in the city. See www.belfastinterfaceproject.org

Phase 3: Local Interface Development Plans

The findings of each local interface consultation would feed into a Local Interface Development Group (LIDG) in each interface area or interface cluster area⁵. The LIDG would be made up of representatives of all community, voluntary and statutory stakeholders including interface groups, community groups, churches, local authorities, youth service, schools, Housing Executive, police, local business and elected representatives from both sides of the interface.⁶

The LIDG would engage in a participatory planning process⁷ with local residents to develop a 5 Year Local Interface Development Plan for their area. This would include action steps, roles of the various stakeholders in delivery of the Plan, timescales and the resources required. A key outcome of the Plan would be the removal of the interface barrier.

The Development Plan should dovetail with existing local and regional policies, strategies, programmes and initiatives.

Phase 4: Implementation and Support

Once the Local Interface Development Plan has been agreed and adequate resources have been committed, an Implementation Phase would commence. This will require ongoing management, co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation by the LIDG. The process will also require ongoing inter community contact, dialogue and discussion, effective youth work strategies and ongoing community, social and economic development and regeneration. The implementation of the Local Interface Development Plans will require the ongoing co-operation and support of a range of government agencies such as Roads Service, Planning and Invest NI. The LIDG would, as part of the Plan, put in place protocols for support for local residents in response to any possible incidents.

Phase 5: Normalisation

By the end of the 5 Year Interface Development Plans the interface areas will have reached a phase of 'normalisation' where ongoing community, social,

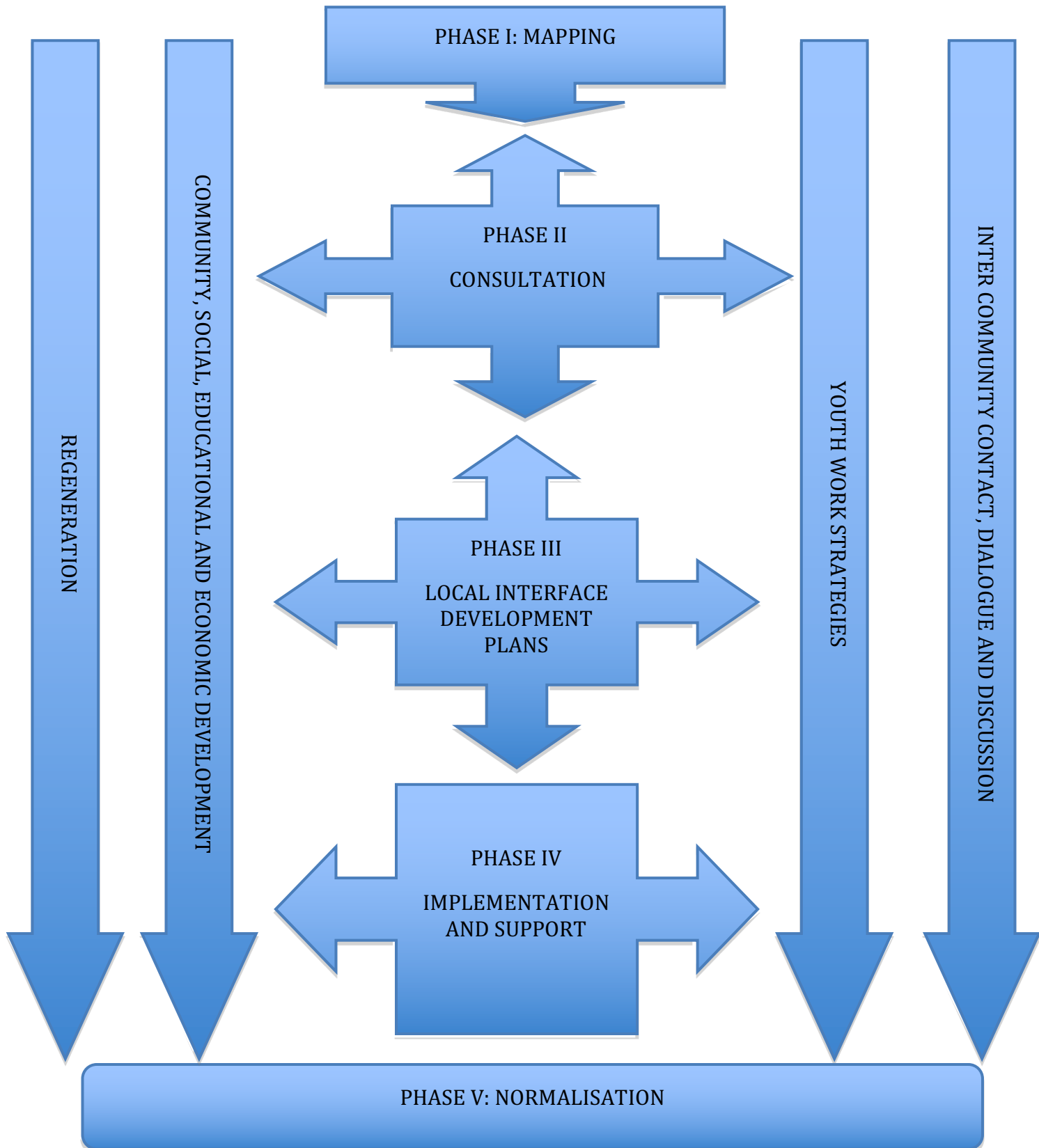
⁵ Some local areas have clusters of nearby interface barriers.

⁶ In some areas a structure of this nature may already exist.

⁷ Participatory planning is an approach to planning which involves the entire community in the strategic and management processes of planning.

educational and economic development is no longer restrained by the impact of the existence of an interface barrier. At this stage the LIDG will no longer be required. However an ongoing monitoring function would be mainstreamed within more permanent structures in each local community.

Figure 1: A Process for Removing Interface Barriers



6. Roles and Responsibilities within the Process

The initiation of the overall process would be the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Other key stakeholders at present include the Northern Ireland Office, the Community Relations Council and Local Councils.

A Regional Working Group would be required to lead, facilitate and co-ordinate the overall process.

Local Interface Development Groups with representatives of all the key stakeholders would be required for each interface or interface cluster to lead, facilitate and co-ordinate the consultation, development and implementation of the Local Interface Development Plans.

7. The Way Forward

This proposal will be circulated to a wide range of stakeholders to stimulate and contribute to discussions on the way forward.

It would be particularly important for groups, organisations and sectors that have not yet considered their role and responsibilities around these issues to begin a conversation to explore what role they have to play in such a process.

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