

## Analysing Baseline Data on Peace Walls (6): Implications for policy

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### Policy Context

In 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive's *Together: Building a United Community* (TBUC) strategy committed the Executive to a 10-year programme to "reduce, and remove by 2023, all interface barriers" and to creating an Interface Barrier Support Package to enable this.

Through TBUC, the Executive set out its view that the elimination of barriers was "necessary in progressing as a community and facilitating the reconciliation that has been prevented for so long through division."

The Executive promised:

- government action: "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
- bespoke 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."

The Strategy made clear that

**"Local communities around the interface will be encouraged to come together and decide if they want to be part of this programme. If there is agreement to become part of the programme then the area immediately surrounding the barrier will be able to avail of a range of support and help over a 10-year period, provided agreed targets are met throughout the period."**

### Research Context

This research was commissioned by the Department of Justice (DoJ) in support of its lead role in the TBUC commitment to remove all peacewalls by 2023. It draws on statistical analysis of Census data (2011) drawn together in a recent project through the Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN) and a repeat survey of resident attitudes to peacewalls (2015). The research follows on from work undertaken for the Department in 2014-16 under the ESRC Policy Impact Programme, and work undertaken by the Ulster University team for the International Fund for Ireland.

### Findings and Policy Implications

**Finding:** The communities that have developed in proximity to peacewalls are among the most deprived in Northern Ireland. Some 86% of the

population resident within 400m of any peace-wall are in the most deprived quintile (20%) of the population of Greater Belfast, as measured by the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure.

The levels of health inequality are thus unusually high, but remain consistent with those predicted by social and economic disadvantage and show no additional health advantage or disadvantage as a result of proximity to a wall. There is also evidence that the older population in communities in proximity to peacewalls is unusually stable and there has been very little movement or mobility.

**Implications for policy:** The extremity of poverty in communities close to peacewalls is a consistent feature on both sides of the divide. While we found no evidence of a specific ‘peacewall effect’ on either mental health or mortality, there is evidence that peacewalls have resulted in static and embedded deprivation at high levels of concentration.

There are very few financial resources within interface communities for additional costs of transition while internal non-financial resources connected to health, education and social networks may also be limited.

This supports the hypothesis that peacewalls are directly associated with persistent and unusual concentrations of poverty as more mobile populations move away from peacewalls leaving pockets of severe deprivation. Our evidence does not conclusively resolve the question of causality: Does poverty underpin conflict? - in which case, efforts to address social inequality and deprivation are critical components of efforts to build a united community - or does conflict embed poverty? - in which case, no serious anti-poverty strategy can succeed without also addressing community conflict issues and inter-community relationships as a central element in an anti-poverty strategy.

If, on the other hand, the issues of deprivation and conflict interact with each other in complex ways, an effective policy mix would have to

include elements of both intercommunity and social equality policy. Thus, attempts to address multiple deprivation in parts of Belfast cannot succeed without removing walls.

At the same time, removing peacewalls will not alone address social deprivation. Furthermore, a policy whose success is measured by the removal of barriers will create inevitable transitional issues, which may increase the security risks in the short term in already deprived communities.

Strategies to remove peacewalls will require clear policies, strategies and actions for security and community safety **AND** for physical and socio-economic transformation, including housing and connectivity.

The successful removal of peacewalls in pursuit of reconciliation, as laid out in TBUC, will require priority interagency and interdepartmental engagement planning and resources, including the participation of local authorities and the Departments for Communities, Education, Health and Social Services, Environment and Infrastructure, and cannot rely or even focus on the Department of Justice alone.

**Finding:** Physical Barriers are intended to establish and ensure separation between communities in conflict, and give territorial expression to two ‘sides’. Having reinforced separation as a necessity for security, the internal development of either side takes place in isolation from and without consideration for developments in the separated community. Without change, separate development may also be predicated on assumed hostility and concepts of ‘the other side’.

While the evidence is that all districts share in multiple deprivation, the nature of organic development in neighbouring but hermetically sealed communities is highly unlikely to be identical, especially where separation lasts over a prolonged period. Our data shows that there are distinct differences in the profiles of Protestant and Catholic districts in proximity to peacewalls in Belfast.

In general, the population density and age

profile of populations in Catholic areas shows a younger population living in closer proximity to physical structures. The predominance of Catholics close to the wall within 300m of peacewalls diminishes by 400m distance. Among the most important findings were:

- Across Belfast, 65% of the population living within 100m of a peacewall were Catholic and 27% were Protestant;
- At 300m-400m distance from a wall, 49% of the population were Catholic and 40% Protestant;
- The proportion of Catholics within 400m of interfaces was higher than the proportion of Catholics in the overall population in Greater Belfast;
- The proportion of Protestants was lower than the proportion of Protestants in the overall population of Greater Belfast;
- The proportion of the population that was Catholic was greater than the proportion of the population that was Protestant at all ages within 300m of a barrier;
- Within 100m of a peacewall, there are 3 times as many Catholic children between 0-4 as Protestant children. The ratio at this age group falls to 2:1 between 100 and 400m of a peacewall;
- Only at age 60 and above, between 300-400m of a peacewall were there more Protestants than Catholics.

**Implications for policy:** Within 300m of most peace walls in Belfast, Catholic areas are generally younger and fuller, Protestant areas older and emptier. Furthermore, this difference is dynamic and likely to increase in coming years. As a result, the narrative of ‘two sides of a wall’ is likely to change into a narrative about smaller and larger communities with different demands. This has direct and immediate implications for:

- Separate experiences feeding very distinct

and evolving political narratives: We can anticipate that whereas a growing community will exhibit growing confidence, a declining or diminishing community will become less confident with implications;

- Community structures and leadership;
- The identification of priority policy issues;
- Understanding of responsibility for action;
- Attitudes towards, and concerns about, the future.

The implications of separate and contrary population dynamics at interfaces are potentially profound. The predictable result is that one side will frame its narrative in terms of inequality in relation to access to social resources while the other will fear the consequences of removing walls for the survival of their community. Thus, Catholic communities which are younger and poorer may experience restrictions on space and/or availability of resources including housing, and open space while Protestant communities which are losing residents and older, may experience a sense of community decline, dereliction and abandonment.

The wall itself, and community antagonism, prevents these issues being addressed through normal market mechanisms, whereby those requiring housing can access land where it is available, and abandonment is reversed through the influx of new and younger populations.

Because populations are organic and constantly changing, delay changes the circumstances in which policy is applied. But if both resentment and fear will change, they will not disappear as Catholic communities grow and Protestant communities decline in size. These differences are likely to grow if population dynamics continue to evolve along similar lines, with the population living in proximity to peacewalls becoming increasingly Catholic.

However, this could imply that instead of problem-solving towards shared problems, solutions

at peacewalls increasingly look like mediating opposed interests in a complex environment. If change appears to result in win-lose solutions in which the balance of risk is on one side, consensus about change is likely to become more difficult.

This has significant implications for the management and planning of space unless all space is transformed on a normal civic basis, and can therefore be accessed equally by all. The removal of peacewalls is only likely to contribute to its reconciliation objective if it is framed within a wider framework of transformation. At minimum, this evidence suggests that serious and accurate shared planning for a clearly described future is likely to be necessary in advance of removal of peacewalls.

Our survey of attitudes among residents living in proximity to peacewalls and work with projects supported under the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) peacewalls initiative also suggests that the demographic legacy and trajectory at peacewalls has generated clear narrative differences. While each locality is distinct, Unionist politics on interfaces often reflects the perception that Protestant neighbourhoods face:

- A reduction in the physical area of territorial control as a result of barrier removal;
- A consequent restriction of their area for community celebration (eg parades, flags and emblems);
- Potential restriction on access to services as a result of fears of walking around;
- Perception of growth in influence of feared enemies – ‘republicans’, ‘dissidents’;
- Cultural pessimism – loss, gaining, dying out, things are getting worse.

Nationalist politics is generally more optimistic that barrier removal can have benefits for the community. Unionist fears of loss or disappearance are secondary to concerns about unequal access to social goods. In this context, concerns

about change can be treated as ‘special pleading’ used to prevent a technical-rational equality-based approach. Instead Nationalist narrative emphasises:

- Overcrowding, and multiple deprivation rooted in unequal access to space, housing and other amenities;
- Evidence of systemic discrimination;
- Anti-social behaviour among young people in areas of high deprivation.

While the narratives develop on each side of the wall separately from one another, they remain interconnected in important ways. In particular, both the risks and solutions to problems in one neighbourhood are seen to lie in part with changes involving the wall and those living on the other side.

For example, an elderly community may feel that anti-social behaviour will be increased not only through inter-community conflict but by an increase in the number of teenagers, or a community with evident housing demand requires land which is only available by removing or moving the barrier between communities.

Our research underlines that the consequences of removing peacewalls do not only vary by locality but will be different on each side of the wall. Therefore, public policy will be asked to address different issues simultaneously, and the demands that go with it.

We can immediately identify a number of policy consequences:

- The removal of peacewalls will transform areas of extreme cultural and political separation into common planning and residential areas. There is therefore a risk that interface areas will immediately become spaces contested for resources, for and use, for services, for paramilitary control. Public agencies and local communities will be required to replace disconnected ‘one side of the wall plans’ and plans that focus solely on the target of

physical removal of barriers with integrated management frameworks designed to engage with interconnected but disparate issues over a period of years;

- Change will require mature community leadership on both sides of the wall, prepared to advocate for agreed goals and priorities and for good mechanisms of communication between communities and statutory services. Communities advocating for ‘their own’ priorities in the absence of a shared understanding are likely to create real political contention and resource dilemmas;
- Planning for the removal of a peace wall, will require addressing the needs, interests and fears of both communities in relation to each other and in relation to wider social trends. The policy mix, and the requirements for Departmental and agency participation will vary by locality but also require appropriate services for very different community profiles (for examples: nurseries, schools and daycare centres);
- In the aftermath of the removal of a peace wall, the opportunities for sharing resources are reduced where there is a very different population or age structure. This has implications for long-term social capital.

The core elements of an integrated strategic management framework for interface transformation can also already be identified:

- Settled and unambiguous political support across the antagonistic division;
- Transparent terms of reference setting out aims and objectives and goals;
- Sustained and reliable resource base;
- Shared framework for community safety and security management, including planning for emotive and contentious incidents;
- Developed and accessible land-use plan for the period following the removal of each

peace wall and a clear plan for managing and implementing regeneration;

- Networks and protocols for addressing intergenerational issues;
- An end to paramilitarism or local territorial control by groups or gangs including any connection between paramilitaries and the local community development infrastructure;
- Planning for integrated community development.

**Finding:** Because communities are distributed differently in relation to distance from a peace wall, are differently organised and have a different population structure, it is difficult to find a uniform mechanism for establishing ‘who’ the local community is and how consent should be measured. The principle of consent outlined in the TBUC strategy does not make clear how consent is to be formalised and realised, how or who should be consulted and whether there is a specific role for elected representatives.

In addition to confusion over *who* should be consulted and *how*, there is also confusion on what people are being asked to consent to. Currently, consent is required for a negative: to take the wall *down*.

The negative target in the policy inevitably draws attention to risk and loss rather than consent to a proposal for growth and development. As the question of whether peace walls comes down is also a question of ‘what comes next?’ the consultation might have different outcomes were it focussed on this.

**Implications for Policy:** Applying a simple metric of ‘distance from a wall’ to define locality and community results in very variable outcomes in different localities and on different sides of the peace walls. At worst it creates both distorted outcomes and ill-directed policy.

Furthermore, as fears are close to the surface, and removing walls is considered a policy that originated at regional rather than local level, the

opportunity for ‘spoilers’ is considerable. Success may depend on focussing the programme less on **removing** something that had a function but as **viable change towards something better**, offering a plausible and meaningful future to impoverished communities. In defining who should be consulted, it is important to pay attention to a number of dimensions:

- Designing a map of legitimate stakeholders and a consultation process, which does justice to all. Stakeholders will necessarily include civic authorities, elected members, community organisations and residents within an agreed boundary;
- Stakeholder consultation needs not simply be a one-off engagement on a single ‘take it or leave it’ proposal. Instead stakeholders could be engaged at all stages in a process of consultation about emerging aspects of change. Issues should be dealt with through negotiation and discussion, where possible;
- No wall should be removed without a clear plan for what will emerge in its place. Interface planning and developing visions of areas ‘without walls’ should become a critical focus of the Barrier Support Package;
- The role of local elected representatives in promoting Executive policy is central. While all community organisations should be engaged, suspicion of paramilitary control or veto over decisions should be avoided.

## Conclusions for Policy

The evidence of our research suggests:

1. All of the most deprived parts of Belfast are characterised by the religio-political monopoly of space. Walls and barriers often mark the boundaries and, our survey of attitudes shows, are widely regarded as necessary for safety, despite two decades of relative peace;
2. Peacewalls have potentially ‘normalised’

segregation in parts of Belfast. Whereas free flowing movement of people including open residential space in cities is considered normal and non-negotiable in most of Western Europe and North America, (albeit with dynamically changing pockets of distinctive population), it is still often (if paradoxically) described in Belfast as ‘social engineering’;

3. While a majority of people living close to interfaces express a general wish to see peacewalls removed, a majority is against immediate action. We can infer from the persistence of support for physical barriers that:
  - Neighbouring communities remain suspicious, if not hostile. It is widely presumed that safety in some parts of Northern Ireland can only be guaranteed by physical barriers and that there are no other policing or safety measures which can provide the same level of assurance;
  - There appears to be a fear that residential mixing could have cultural and political implications and would create winners and losers. This is currently most openly expressed in the Protestant/Loyalist community. Removing walls without clear planning could destabilise a fragile political balance;
  - Communities continue to fear that removing walls would increase the potential for serious violence. Furthermore, it is presumed that, even if violence did not increase in the short run, the potential for intercommunity violence in the future has not ‘gone away’. Implicitly, peace is still regarded as fragile and incomplete;
4. Our research shows that the costs of retaining peacewalls are measurable and considerable. Peacewalls mark communities suffering from very high persistent levels of multiple deprivation. Cultural and political antagonism has not been reduced by peacewalls but given physical and institutional expression and geographical location and there is strong evidence that paramilitary and other violent

organisations retain influence in the community, directly related to anxiety around inter-community issues. For as long as peacewalls remain, change will remain extremely challenging.

5. Peacewalls are physical structures through dynamic and organic communities. Social stability is only guaranteed in the short run. Our research demonstrates that communities have developed very different-age profiles, population density is, in general, very different and the demand for more land is not equal. There is currently nothing to suggest that these dynamics will change, resulting in inevitable emergent disputes over land use and access to social resources;

6. Over the last fifty years, resource planning has implicitly taken peacewalls into account with significant effects for (inter alia) housing, community development, education, policing, transport, and youth services. The fact that they are not normally, formally or officially acknowledged does not change this obvious conclusion, and may in fact prevent the radical action that would now be required to change normalised behaviour;

7. The achievement of the TBUC target of removing all peacewalls by 2023 will also remove the key planning presumption that has defined the areas around peacewalls and distinguished Belfast internationally for almost fifty years. It will therefore inevitably, and immediately raise a variety of issues:

- Policing, safety and security;
- Land use planning, including housing;
- Cultural and political issues, including parading;
- Age-related issues
- Planning issues, including transport, health, education and youth and community services;

- Paramilitarism;
- Community Development;
- Economic Development;
- Distribution of City and regional assets;

8. Achieving the Executive's stated target by 2023 will alter almost every presumption currently underpinning life in Belfast. In the event that peacewalls **ARE** removed, the question of redistributing city assets, currently concentrated in less contested parts of the city such as South Belfast and the City Centre is also likely to arise. As a result, the removal of peacewalls within 6 years could be the single-most disruptive event for the local communities, the city of Belfast and Northern Ireland since 1998, almost certainly requiring a comprehensive transformation and regeneration plan for the city.

### Acknowledgements

The Administrative Data Research Network takes privacy protection very seriously. All information that directly identifies individuals will be removed from the datasets by trusted third parties, before researchers get to see it. All researchers using the Network are trained and accredited to use sensitive data safely and ethically, they will only access the data via a secure environment, and all of their findings will be vetted to ensure they adhere to the strictest confidentiality standards. The Census data has been supplied for the sole purpose of this project.

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