Interface Communities

and the

Peace Process

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Interface Communities and the Peace Process
Summary

- Northern Ireland is characterised by residential segregation between the nationalist and unionist communities - the common boundary lines between these communities are the interfaces between them.

- There are at least 17 purpose-built 'peace-lines' in Belfast alone, with very many more 'invisible' interfaces between communities in Belfast, in other towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland, and in rural areas.

- Interface communities have been amongst those most affected by 'the troubles' and, typically, experience an unusual combination of kinds of disadvantage including:

  - constant background levels of intercommunity violence and intimidation;
  - high levels of social and economic disadvantage;
  - restricted access to facilities and services perceived as being located within the 'other' community;

- Peace and stability at the interface, and their absence, are both a 'barometer' of the health of our peace-process and, importantly, a key influencing factor in shaping the success or otherwise of that process.

- For all these reasons, cross-party support in addressing issues of concern to interface communities will help to restore faith that the peace process can produce real results which will have a positive effect in stabilising our society.

Recommendation:
That the 'confidence-building measures' subcommittee of the peace-process should address issues of concern to interface communities as a priority area for attention.

The following are presented as key areas which this subcommittee could address, although this list is not intended to be exhaustive:

- promoting measures and models which aim to minimise tension and violence in interface areas;

- addressing the needs of children and young people in interface areas;

- promoting economic and environmental regeneration in interface areas;

- assisting and supporting interface communities in the processes of healing and coping with the traumatic effects of violence;

- promoting confidence-building and mutual understanding within and between interface communities.

Interface Communities and the Peace Process

interface /'ɪntəˌfeɪs/ *n. & v.* —*n.* **1** esp. *Physics* a surface forming a common boundary between two regions. **2** a point where interaction occurs between two systems, processes, subjects, etc. (*the interface between psychology and education*).

(Concise Oxford Dictionary)

1 Background

This document has been prepared by the Belfast Interface Project and is based on the work of this project in identifying key issues of concern to interface communities in Belfast. It is believed that many of the issues raised within this document may be equally significant with regard to interface communities in other towns, cities and rural areas of Northern Ireland.

2 Introduction

Northern Ireland is characterised by segregation (1); the two dominant communities unionist and nationalist usually attend separate schools, often work in separate workplaces, worship at separate churches, socialise mainly within their own community, and generally live in separate residential areas (2).

What is an interface?
An interface is the common boundary line between a predominantly unionist area and a predominantly nationalist area. An interface community is the community which lives alongside an interface.

What does an interface look like?
It can be a solid brick wall 20 feet high, or a steel fence, or a road, or it may be unnoticeable to the outsider but local people know exactly where it is. It can be crossed simply by crossing a street, passing a landmark, or turning a corner.

How many interfaces are there in Northern Ireland?
In Belfast alone, there are at least 17 purpose built 'peace-lines', i.e. walls and fences especially built between unionist and nationalist areas (3). There are many more 'invisible' interfaces between communities. North Belfast, especially, is a 'patchwork quilt' of interface communities (4). Many interfaces also exist between communities in other towns and cities in Northern Ireland (5), and recent research has confirmed the existence of interfaces in rural areas also (6).

In short, just as Northern Ireland is characterised by residential segregation between unionists and nationalists, so it is characterised by the interfaces which often exist between these residential areas in our cities, towns and rural areas.
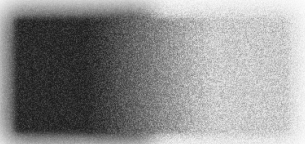
Different kinds of interface
At least three exist:
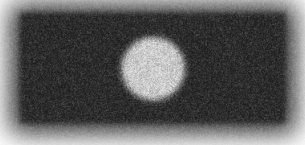
the 'enclave' area, totally surrounded by the 'other' community; e.g. Suffolk, Short Strand, Torr Heath, Bawnmore;
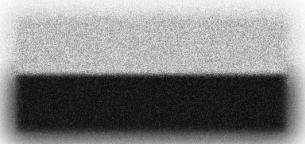
the 'split', a wall or boundary evenly separates the two communities; eg Shankill/Springfield, Westlink, Duncairn Gardens/New Lodge;

the 'buffer zone', a mixed community separates two different communities; eg Ballynafeigh, Mid-Springfield, Mid-Skegoneill;

and, of course, there are variations within this:- interfaces within 'mixed' communities, 'almost' enclaves, etc.

Why are there so many interfaces?
Most unionists and nationalists live in separate areas because they feel safer that way or have little choice particularly within the public sector housing market, so there are many interfaces between these communities.

What are interfaces for?
Interfaces provide some physical protection from intercommunity violence, especially for those living furthest away from the interface, and mark 'safe' boundaries so that people know where it is safe to go and where it is not. Interfaces also provide psychological security, i.e. a community on one 'side' or the other will be made up of people who share roughly the same religious and political outlook, and help to create a strong feeling of community identity and solidarity.

3 Interface Issues

Communities living along interfaces, generally, live with least of their advantages and most of their disadvantages. Interface communities, typically, experience an unusual combination of three kinds of disadvantage:

- High levels of social and economic disadvantage (7).

- High levels of intercommunity violence and intimidation (8).

- Restricted access to facilities and services perceived as being located within the 'other' community (this is particularly severe in 'enclave' areas).

In May 1994 the Centre for Policy Research published a report entitled 'Ethnic Space and the Challenge to Land Use Planning: A Study of Belfast's Peacelines'.

Some statistics from the research:

Interface Areas (averages)		**NI average**
69%	of the community earned less than £5,000 pa	45%
31%	were unemployed	14%
41%	received Income Support	21%
5%	received Family Credit	2%
2%	had "A" level as highest qualification	12%
1%	had a university degree	12%
25%	wanted to leave the area within the next 3 years	
55%	experienced stonethrowing as a problem	
41%	experienced shootings and bombings as a problem	
34%	experienced rioting as a problem	
15.5%	experienced petrol bombing	

More recently, the Belfast Interface Project has carried out a series of structured interviews with community groups in interface areas of Belfast. A clear picture has emerged of the concerns shared by these interface communities in different parts of Belfast. They include the following:

a) The Social Economy:

lack of play facilities;
"   crèche and day-care facilities;
lack of nursery facilities;
"   after school projects;
"   focused work with young people;
"   support for lone parents;
"   support for isolated elderly;
"   support for community development work;

Community groups in interface areas commonly report inadequate provision of support services and facilities across a broad range of ages and interest groups within their communities. Given the material disadvantage which exists in these areas and the vulnerability of these communities in terms of intercommunity violence, it is important that these areas are addressed.

Whilst all of these issues are of concern, however, there is broad agreement amongst interface community groups that two themes are particularly important within this social economy category.

These are:

i) The Needs Of Children And Young People:

There is a concern about the **effects** of violence on children and young people in interface areas, as well as a concern about the effects upon them of the disadvantage and restricted access which characterise many interface areas. Children and young people in interface areas are particularly vulnerable to sectarian violence, intimidation and harassment. Children are often exposed to such dangers on their way to school, going to the shops, or playing near the interface. Additionally (and particularly in enclave areas) children's and young peoples' lives are often severely restricted by their difficulty in travelling out of their area or bringing friends into the area. Children and young people in interface areas have often witnessed extremes of sectarian violence.

There is a concern about the **role** of children and young people in intercommunity violence. In many parts of the city, children and young people are attracted to the interface from further afield as an area with commonly fewer adult checks and balances upon their behaviour (9). Whilst at the interface, children and young people often become involved in intercommunity violence which then rebounds' on interface communities and feeds the process further. Whilst it is important to be clear that it is not only young people who have been involved in intercommunity violence across the interface, and that young people should not be scapegoated for their behaviour in this respect, nevertheless it is important also to be clear that interface community groups commonly report that the behaviour of young people at the interface is a key element in the cycle of intercommunity violence which has caused so much fear and pain amongst all our communities (15).

and

ii) Support For Community Development Work:

Many interface areas have a very low (or virtually absent) level of community infrastructure through which to address the needs of children, young people, elderly and other vulnerable groups within the community - this appears to be particularly true in unionist areas, although not exclusively so (10). The proactive promotion of community development work in interface areas is felt to be important for two reasons:

• so that interface communities can begin to articulate and address issues of concern to them

• to help promote the formation and development of community groups so that, at a later date, channels exist for communication between interface communities

It is important also to note that depressed levels of community infrastructure in many interface areas may contribute to lower levels of uptake there of, for example, European Peace and Reconciliation funding and other sources of funding and resources.

b) Unemployment:

Unemployment in interface areas is often extremely high, reflecting the lack of investment in those areas, the difficulties in travelling to work and the lower levels of educational achievement in some areas (11).

c) Physical Space:

Restricted access to: buses, shops, hospitals, leisure centres, housing, schools, work, pubs;

Interface communities commonly report restricted access to services and facilities which are viewed as being located within the 'other' community and therefore dangerous to access. There is a marked gender difference in this respect: women, although fearful in accessing services and facilities 'on the other side', often find that (at least in times of relative peace) they encounter less resistance in doing so than do men.

The issue of restricted access permeates virtually every aspect of life on the interface, including access to work, leisure, education, transport, shopping, housing, cultural expression and access to health and social services.

d) Land and Territory Issues:

In terms of land and territory, there is a deep and ingrained sense of ownership of land within both communities. Recently, though, major demographic changes have occurred across Belfast, in other cities such as Derry/Londonderry, and in rural areas such as County Armagh and others with regard to the issue of contested space. Typically nationalist areas are filling their allotted space and wishing to expand further, while unionist areas are resisting this pressure on the land but generally becoming more depopulated as younger families, in particular, move to outlying areas (12).

e) Law and Order:

Interface policing issues: these include both the acceptability of the police in many areas (particularly, though not exclusively, nationalist areas) and more broadly the effectiveness of interface policing policy and practice, for example in relation to the policing of young people in interface areas.

Marches and parades: controversy regarding marches and parades generally arises when a parade crosses, or passes alongside, an intercommunity interface. This issue has been the greatest single spark which has ignited intercommunity violence in recent years.

Summer violence: particularly in relation to young people, who are often drawn to the interface from further afield.

f) Trauma and Health:

alcohol and drug abuse;
asthma (especially in children);
nerves and depression;
bitterness and grief;

There is no doubt that interface communities have been profoundly affected by the extent, duration and intensity of the intercommunity violence and intimidation which have been experienced over so many years and, in many areas, continues today. It is important in this respect to note that interface communities, generally, are the victims of violence to a greater extent than they are its perpetrators - violence is largely perpetrated from each interface's 'hinterland' community while the interface community serves as a 'human shield' and front line of defence for that hinterland; i.e. interface communities are the site, rather than the sole source, of intercommunity violence (see diagram). Equally important is the observation that, although sectarian prejudice often exists between interface communities, a major factor in inhibiting dialogue across the interface is a fear of retribution from within one's own community if seen to be involved in cross-community dialogue.

g) Communication between the Communities:

lack of information about the other community;
desire to know how the other community perceives them;
desire for a better relationship with the other community;

These issues illustrate the effect of the interface in restricting not just the movement of people between communities, but also the movement of information and culture.

In viewing the physical interface as a symptom, rather than the cause, of division between communities it is perhaps easier to appreciate that most interface community groups contacted do not want their walls to come down, where they exist, viewing them instead even in times of relative peace as an 'insurance policy' (albeit far from perfect) against future violence - a common feeling amongst interface community groups is that "the mental barriers need to come down before the physical ones".

Interface Conflict
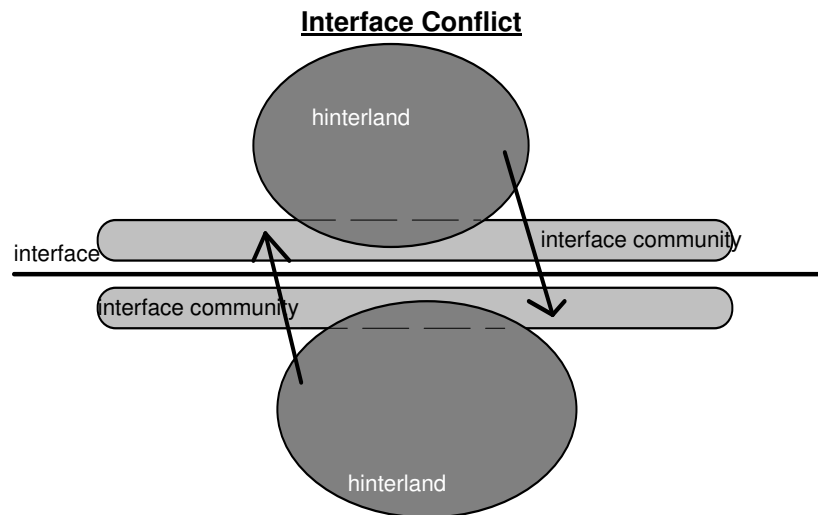
4 Why should the Peace Process address interface issues?

The interface is where our communities meet. Interface communities have been amongst those most affected by 'the troubles' of the past 29 years (13) and experience a severe and unusual combination of kinds of disadvantage because of this (14). Stability, and the lack of it, at the interface are both a 'barometer' of the health of our peace process and a key influencing factor in shaping the success or otherwise of that process. By signalling the intention, on a cross-party basis, to address interface issues, the peace process will do a great deal to restore faith that the process can produce real results which will have a positive effect in stabilising our society.

Just as the peace process represents a real movement towards reconciliation by the parties and agencies concerned in the interests of peace, stability and prosperity - so for the process to have a real impact 'on the ground' it must have that same effect amongst and between our divided communities. Nowhere is the need for these outcomes greater than within our interface communities.

For these reasons it is in all of our interests to address the issues facing interface communities today - in addressing them, we are helping to secure our own future.

5 Recommendations

That the 'confidence-building measures' subcommittee of the peace-process addresses interface issues as a priority area for attention - the following are presented as possible areas which this substrand could address:

- **promoting measures and models which aim to minimise interface violence:**
  e.g. through -
  research into the causes and nature of tension and violence at specific 'flashpoint' areas;
  active involvement of local partnerships and interagency groups in initiating, resourcing and supporting local measures aimed at reducing tension and violence in interface areas;
  development of locally consultative and accountable policing policies and practices, recognising and addressing the difficult relationship that often exists between police and community;

proactive promotion of local accommodation, wherever possible, regarding contentious marches and parades;

promotion of the 'parallel process' model (15) found to be effective elsewhere (this approach has been taken in Belfast by, for example, the Inner East Youth Project, the Springfield Inter-Community Development Project, the North Belfast Community Development Centre's Community Bridges Project, the Shankill and Falls Think Tanks and Intercomm);

resourcing local communication networks aimed at defusing tension, rumour and violence through the efforts of local community activists;

resourcing stress-reduction and diversionary measures especially during times of potential tension and violence.

- **addressing the needs of children and young people in interface areas:**
  issues to be addressed include -

  assessing and evaluating the exposure of young people to violence in interface areas;

  improving the relationship between young people and the security forces e.g. through enhanced training of security forces regarding needs and issues for young people in interface areas;

  resourcing a support network for those involved in work with young people in interface areas in implementing conscious and effective local strategies of peace-building;

  resourcing and supporting innovative approaches to work with young people in interface areas, which recognise and address both the traditional nature and the attraction of interface violence;

  the ensuring of adequate facilities and opportunities for young people especially during times of tension and civil disturbance;

  the provision of much more effective training and education for employment and enhanced life opportunities.

- **promoting economic and environmental regeneration in interface areas:**
  for example through -

  concerted inter-agency targeting of blighted interface areas for economic and environmental regeneration by the mainstream statutory funding and business investment agencies and local partnerships through extensive and meaningful local consultations;

  'fast-tracking', in particular, cross-community initiatives of long-term benefit to both communities;

  protection and enhancement of existing community employment and training programmes in interface areas and promotion of new initiatives where these do not already exist;

- **assisting in the process of healing and coping with the traumatic effects of violence and bereavement:**
  for example through -

  research and evaluation of the incidence of such trauma within interface communities;

  promotion of effective measures of assisting interface communities in addressing these issues - effective community-based models, for example, include the Shankill Stress and Trauma Centre and the Ardoyne, Bone and Ligoniel Survivors of Trauma Group.

- **promoting confidence-building and mutual understanding within and between interface communities:**
  for example through -
  recognition of the relatively depressed community infrastructure which exists along many interfaces, for example in North Belfast, and in Protestant areas;
  promotion of inter-disciplinary training between community development and community relations groups and practitioners i.e. examining how the community development process must recognise and address the needs of other communities (e.g. for housing or for security);
  research and evaluation of access to services and facilities in interface areas;
  promotion of single identity work within each community as an end in itself but also as a precursor to meaningful community relations work.

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(15)   Belfast Interface Project (1997) - 'Work with Young People in Interface Areas. Seminar Report'

(16)   'Parallel Process Approach': Development work is carried out separately with Protestant and Catholic groups on each side of the interface, often by workers employed by a joint management committee and working in parallel on issues such as capacity-building within each community; cross-community contact and/or co-operation on common issues is promoted only where this is appropriate and after careful consultation and preparation work has been carried out.