Removing peace walls and Public Policy (3): the challenge of engaging communities

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Introduction

The NI Executive's current response to peace walls has been shaped by two key documents, which set out their dedication to addressing the issue of physical segregation across Northern Ireland. Firstly, the Programme for Government (2011-2015) has a key commitment to 'actively seek local agreement to reduce the number of peace walls'. Secondly, in 2013 the NI Executive launched its Together Building United Community strategy which put in place a ten year programme to reduce, and remove by 2023 all interface barriers. Furthermore, the document stated that 'Taking down interface barriers is not something that can be achieved without engagement with, consent and support of the people who live there. We must be sensitive to the views and perceptions of residents and balance this against the responsibility on us to create the conditions within which division and segregation can become resigned to the past' (TBUC, 2013).

Underpinning the Executive's approaches to dismantling the physical barriers is the importance of the community. There is a clear and coherent message that no decisions will be taken without the supportive mandate of local residents, and that they are integral to any processes that may result in the removal of the peace walls. More specifically, the policies and strategies refer to community consent and consultation, but provide no guidance as to what these terms mean, or how they can be assessed or measured. Furthermore, the language and rhetoric surrounding the policy recognises the importance of community confidence in any decision-making process, but does not articulate how this should be expressed or ascertained.

This policy brief explores the concept of 'community' by drawing on research conducted through an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant that looked at peace walls and public policy in Northern Ireland. The yearlong project, which concluded in September 2015, involved academics working in partnership with representatives from the Department of Justice on a range of issues, in leading delivery of the TBUC target of removing all peace walls by 2023. The engagement included a number of discrete quantitative and qualitative research projects and several focused workshops designed to allow key stakeholders inside and beyond the Department to reflect on the requirements for delivery and to bring to light critical issues influencing a successful outcome.

What do we mean by community confidence?

The emphasis from the NI Executive has always been one, which emphasises the need for community confidence in any process that aims to remove the peace walls. However, there is an absence of understanding around what constitutes 'community confidence' and more importantly, how do you know when it has been reached? What is clear is that the peace walls have come to represent more than simply physical barriers that divide two communities. They have become entangled within wider societal challenges such as the legacy of the past, expressions of culture and identity, along with developing a shared future. Although the walls are located within small geographical areas, local public confidence that might equate to support for any process to remove the walls is potentially shaped by macro political events.

Furthermore, safety and security continue to be two variables (Byrne, et al 2012) that influence how local residents view processes to remove peace walls. Those that reside closest to the walls want to be assured that their homes and families will not be at risk, and that in the absence of a barrier, they will remain safe and not vulnerable. However, the 2014 NI Peace Monitoring report noted that sectarian violence was problematic and that 'in working class communities: paramilitaries are still very much part of today's reality' (Nolan, 2014). Furthermore, the recent announcement from the PSNI Chief Constable, that cuts to the PSNI would 'fundamentally change how and where policing is delivered' (NIPB, 2014) could have a detrimental affect on the communities confidence in formal policing structures addressing community fears around safety in the absence of the peace walls.

Therefore, questions remain from a policy perspective as to what is required to build and maintain community confidence in any process aimed at removing the peace walls. The NI Executive have failed to produce a series of indicators that might provide a framework, in which those tasked with implementing the TBUC strategy can determine whether a community is ready to see the peace walls removed. And from the community's perspective, there is a lack of direction around what variables (micro and macro) specifically link confidence with policy attempts to deliver on the 2023 target.

How is community consent understood?

A key tenant of the Executive's approach to removing the peace walls is the assurance that decisions will only be taken 'with the consent and support of those that live there' (beside the peace walls). However, this position, although well meaning, raises a number of challenges for those responsible in implementing the strategy (Figure 1). Firstly, what exactly does community consent equate to? Does this require the full consensus from everyone that is consulted, or is a simple majority enough? Secondly, who should be included and excluded within any process that is attempting to ascertain levels of community consent? Thirdly, should there be a hierarchy of consent within communities depending on proximity to the peace walls, previous personal experiences of violence and intimidation, and length of time residing in the community. Finally, how can one ensure that any consent given or not given, has been achieved fairly and legitimately, in the absence of threats and intimidation?

These questions reveal the challenges for those tasked with delivering the 2023 target. The strategy provides no guidance or template that might support departments and community organisations build, sustain, and measure local community consent for the transformation of peace walls. Furthermore, in the absence of any clarification as to what constitutes consent, policy implementers remain unable to provide guarantees that the decision making process has been positively endorsed by the required number of residents.

How does TBUC foresee consultation with communities?

The NI Executive is very clear that any decision-making processes associated with the removal of peace walls must include a consultation with local residents. There is recognition that the 2023 target for the removal of all peace walls will only be achieved through the support of local communities. This will require residents having the opportunity to participate in any process, and contribute views on proposed changes to their local environment. However, there remains a degree of ambiguity as to what is meant by consultation. Recent research by Bell and Young (2013) highlights the complexities that surround developing a model of consultation and reinforces the idea that one aspect of effective consultation is to develop local knowledge to increase levels of engagement and create more informed decisions around options for regenerating or transforming

Figure 1: Exploring the meaning of community consent

interface communities. The challenge for those tasked with meeting the 2023 target is to ensure that local residents feel included in any process, have been consulted on proposed changes, and are aware of the implications of the policy. However, there is a distinct lack of clarity about what a consultation should incorporate, in the context of engaging with local residents about removing peace walls. The absence of official guidelines raises a series of pertinent questions that are critical to understanding the nature of consultation (figure two). What are we asking people their views on? What is the vision that the Executive is trying to promote that is aligned to the removal of peace walls? What is the most appropriate method of engaging and consulting with local communities to ensure the maximum level of participation? Who is best placed to deliver the consultation, and not be associated with particular agendas? How does one ensure that residents have been well informed to make a series of judgements on complex and emotive issues? What geographical remit should any consultation? And finally, what terms and words should be used to ensure that residents both understand the extent of the consultation, but are not influenced by the structure of the questions?

The ambiguity around consultations simply raises more concerns about the implementation process surrounding the TBUC strategy. Without proper consideration, the consultation process is open to manipulation and could potentially become a tick box exercise, yet it also has the ability to empower communities and place then at the centre of the decision-making process.

What are the implications for the 2023 target?

The TBUC strategy appears to set out a clear and unambiguous target for the removal of all peace walls by 2023. However as policy brief one and two also indicate there appears to be a significant lack of clarity or direction around how exactly this target can be met. This policy brief recognises the importance of 'community' but argues that there is also no understanding or direction about how these community contributions may fit within the overall policy process.

Figure 2: What to consider prior to commencing a consultation

Because of this the NI Executive may wish to reassess their commitment to meeting the 2023 target. In doing so, there needs to be a new policy focus on what consent, confidence and consultation means within the context of having communities central to any process surrounding the removal of peace walls. In light of this the NI Executive should consider developing:

- An official model of consultation (that allows for bespoke approaches) that has been endorsed by the NI Executive and can be adopted by community representatives to ascertain local residents views and positions towards removing peace walls. This will enable maximum participation and ensure that those associated with the process have both the legitimacy and credibility to deliver it.

- A series of indicators to ascertain the relationship between community confidence and the removal of peace walls. Without understanding the different social, political, cultural and economic variables that affect people's views on the future of peace walls, the policy implementers will be unable to seek solutions to address their concerns.

- A clear definition as to what 'community consent' means. In the absence of such clarity, bespoke processes aimed at removing peace walls run the risk of being restricted because of community vetos. There needs to be some form of directive that guides communities around this complex and divisive issue. Furthermore, there is an onus on the NI Executive to put in place appropriate mechanisms to support communities manage incidents where the level of 'consent' is unclear.

References

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