

CONFIDENTIAL

Report of working group on peacelines

February 1994

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REPORT OF WORKING GROUP ON PEACELINES

1. The Working Group on Peacelines was established following the discussion with the Secretary of State earlier this year about the housing situation in North Belfast. The Secretary of State was concerned about the acute housing problems on both sides of the community divide and also about the continuing existence and appearance of peacelines throughout Belfast.

2. The membership of the Working Group was:-

Tony McCusker - Central Secretariat
Simon Marsh - NIO
David McAuley - DOE

Chief Superintendent
W J Davidson - RUC

Eric Dalzell - NIO
Ian Raphael - DOE

3. A Steering Group was established to oversee the study and included:

David Watkins (Central Secretariat)
John Steele (NIO)
Nigel Hamilton (DOE)
Dick Mackenzie (DOE)

4. The terms of reference agreed for the study were:-

“to identify existing peacelines;”

“to review opportunities in selected/priority cases to remove or replace them by alternative means of separations;” and

“to make recommendations.”

5. **Methodology**

It was agreed at the outset that the study should be conducted internally so that fears or expectations were not raised within communities. In effect, this limited the study to identifying all security divisions within the City; attempting to identify any where there was potential for removal or alteration; and, in the event that barriers needed to be retained, suggesting what measures might make them more environmentally acceptable to both communities.



6. Initial work concentrated on reviews by DOE and Civil Representatives to ensure that all peacelines were identified. Annex 1 provides a comprehensive physical analysis of each of the peacelines together with photographs to illustrate the problems and opportunities.
7. As the study precluded a qualitative community analysis, both the Civil Representatives and the Belfast Action Teams were asked to provide opinions on likely community views and perceptions, based on their extensive network of community contacts. These extremely valuable reports, which are included [Annex 2], greatly helped the Working Group shape its view about future action.
8. The overwhelming advice from the Police, Civil Representatives and the Action Teams is that, on security grounds, the peacelines must be retained. There is some evidence that communities do want to reach out to each other but the continuing violence increases the demands for more and better security barriers, and this is often heightened by the nature of sectarian politics in Belfast.
9. It was clear from the outset that peacelines present a massive environmental problem; dereliction and graffiti covered walls are common features in most peacelines. It was decided, therefore, to commission a study by DOE to examine the environmental issues surrounding peacelines and possible solutions should their

removal not be an option in the short to medium term.

Background

10. **Existing Interfaces**

At present there are 15 locations in Belfast where a wall or fence separates the two religious communities. In broad terms there would appear to be two typical situations:-

- a. where the wall or fence divides two areas of housing in close proximity. Typically houses on the Catholic side may extend up to the wall itself while on the Protestant side some dereliction or vacancy may exist. Examples of this include Manor Street/Roe Street, Torrens/Oldpark Avenue, Alliance/Glenbryn, Cluan Place, Bryson Street, Cupar Way and Beverley/Ardmoulin;
 - b. where, in addition to a wall or fence, a major road divides the two communities. Examples of this occur at Duncairn Gardens, Crumlin Road, Ainsworth, Springmartin Road, Springhill, Roden Street, Newtownards Road and Stewartstown Road.
11. The appearance and general environment of interfaces vary considerably, as do their contributions towards greater security and social stability. The Belfast Peacelines Study prepared for the Belfast Development Office in January 1991 concluded that the most successful solutions from an environmental viewpoint were those at Crumlin Road and Newtownards Road while least

successful were at Beverley/Ardmoulin, Cupar Way and Duncairn Gardens. The success factors are difficult to judge, but distance apart and functional use of space in between would be significant.

12. Peacelines in Belfast are essentially a response to existing political and security realities at local community level. In many parts of the city, particularly the more disadvantaged areas and in the public housing sector, some people are afraid to live together and some also choose to live apart. Indeed, the very act of living apart may act as an integrating force within each group and permit the maintenance of ethnic cultural attributes (Boal 1978). Peacelines, therefore, are required where the possibility of inter-community tension and violence exists.
13. The "Sectarian Interface Project", funded by CCRU and carried out by Dr Brendan Murtagh at the University of Ulster, set out to examine the origins and development of "territorial space" in Belfast, to describe the functions which segregated living might fulfil, and to examine the scope for a policy response to the problem. The study covered the 13 sectarian interface areas of Belfast but had a specific case study focus on Stewartstown Road, Short Strand, and Ardoyne.
14. Murtagh concluded that although segregated living might not be desirable, it is a fact of life in many areas and is the preferred way of living for many people. From the survey work carried out

in the case study areas, he reports that segregation fulfils the functions of making people feel safe, of providing physical and community support, and of contributing to group identity processes. If policy is to respond to this expressed preference, he argues, it should focus less on encouraging mixed areas and more on fostering cross community initiatives whilst allowing the population to live where it wants (in segregated areas). Murtagh argues that current planning policy in Northern Ireland is not responsive to the needs expressed by the respondents in his surveys and is often based instead on what he calls inappropriate planning strategies "imported" from GB.



15. Murtagh builds on these arguments by suggesting that cross-community groups should be encouraged to come together to discuss ongoing planning issues (this is also based on his belief that CR work is most effective when groups have a common cause which has a long-term focus). The Government should encourage and foster such groups by offering them “a seat at the planning table”. Murtagh will probably conclude his report by saying that a specific planning framework needs to be evolved for interface areas and a community relations agenda needs to be “stitched in” to provide the sort of community infrastructure which encourages participation and community interaction.
16. The contrasting population and housing profiles of the two communities in Belfast are a complex aspect of the peaceline problem. In simple terms, the problem is one of declining Protestant areas with low levels of housing demand alongside overcrowded Catholic areas with high levels of demand. Belfast Catholics are perceived as the growing group producing a threat in particular pressure localities in the city, particularly North Belfast. The problem, is, therefore, not only one of housing management, but also one of territoriality. The availability of unused space on the Protestant side creates fear in the Protestant community as they believe the Catholic community see that space as an opportunity to increase the Catholic housing stock. Appropriate land use is critical, therefore, to reduce ambitions on the Catholic side and ease fears among Protestants.
17. Essentially the peacelines become territorial boundaries and for the foreseeable future the Working Group believes that the Government should not contemplate a solution to Catholic housing by pushing the Protestant community further back; though the Government will eventually have to confront this issue. Many community activists in the Protestant community believe that the fundamental housing principle of responding to proven, quantifiable demand only should be more flexible to allow the speculative “put-back” of housing to try and hold Protestant communities and attract younger families back into the areas. This is an extremely sensitive and complex issue and the Belfast Special Action Group will be addressing the issue also in the context of urban housing regeneration issues within the revamped strategy for MBW.
18. One possible way round the problem would be to try and encourage modest “put-back” of housing in Protestant areas through private developers rather than through the public sector. The Working Group recognises the immense problems involved and that put-back is determined by quantifiable demand, but does believe that imaginative ways can be found to hold community structures in the city.
19. Finally, the problem is an environmental one. Many peacelines in Belfast are extremely unattractive structures, while areas adjacent to peacelines are often derelict or vandalised. They promote a sense of isolation and strike fear in many people from

outside the areas. Their presence and appearance also make it extremely difficult to promote the areas in terms of economic and social development and to attract inward investment.

20. **Recent Government Initiatives**

Government's approach to interface problems has, until recently, been primarily reactive, responding to each situation in the appropriate manner as it arises, usually in response to local community pressures. Very often walls have been erected when adjacent housing areas were being redeveloped as, for example, was the case with Manor Street/Roe Street. Other walls, such as that at Cupar Way, originate from the early years of the troubles. The design and environment quality of walls has improved immeasurably since the 1970s.

21. In recent years the Department of the Environment has attempted a more proactive approach to interface problems. In Duncairn Gardens an enterprise park is proposed which will provide an effective buffer use between the Catholic New Lodge and the Protestant Tiger's Bay, hopefully leading to reduced community tension and improved stability. At Alliance/Glenbryn the approach has been to promote a new shopping centre at Ballysillan which, it is hoped, will provide a commercial/social focus for the wider Protestant community of North West Belfast. The problem of agreeing suitable land uses adjacent to the peaceline remains, however, highly sensitive.

22. At Ainsworth the Department's Springvale Project Team proposes to clear derelict property on the Protestant side of Springfield Road and create attractive landscaped development sites. The Springvale Project itself is a cross community one which seeks to break down sectarian divisions and the prospect of a University Campus should contribute to that objective. In all of these initiatives consultation with the local communities has and will continue to play a major role.



23. The NIHE approach has been to acknowledge the existence of interfaces and design and build new housing schemes on either side accordingly. The NIHE have also an estate based strategy programme for public sector housing estates in Belfast, including those adjacent to peacelines. In Suffolk, for example, adjacent to the Stewartstown Road peaceline, the strategy included improvements to dwellings and layout along with the provision of additional community and commercial uses. Elsewhere, in Protestant estates such as Lower Oldpark, measures have included demolition of long-term void properties, landscaping, restriction on transfer out of the estate, marketing programmes and the encouragement of house sales. All of these measures are designed to improve and stabilise housing estates.

24. **Future Peaceline Policy**

Future approaches to peaceline problems must be guided by a number of principles. First, the segregation of the two communities, whether desired or not, has to be accepted as a reality by urban planners and attempts should not be made to force people to live together against their wishes. Physical separation, however, does not preclude the possibility of future inter-community contact on social and economic issues which, in the long-term, could lead to the removal of physical barriers. This is an area which the Community Relations Council, Action Teams and other Agencies should address and Central Secretariat will co-ordinate this approach and report regularly to Ministers.

25. Secondly, no attempt should be made to alter the religious complexion of areas on the Protestant side of peacelines, thereby easing Catholic housing pressures. In some instances the stabilising and improvement of interfaces may release some housing opportunities on the Catholic sides of peacelines, but the Government should avoid giving the impression of social engineering to realign religious and cultural boundaries.

26. The approach has to be cautious. At the very least the physical appearance of peacelines can be improved and the general environment enhanced. This can be complemented by the continuation of the NIHE's estate based strategies and by sensitive planning of private regenerative housing in Protestant areas.

27. Continued monitoring is essential as the housing management situation in many areas may well change. It is possible that some of the more vulnerable Protestant peaceline estates such as Torrens and Lower Oldpark may require more radical action in the future which could involve the wholesale clearance of houses adjacent to the peaceline. This situation has already been reached at Northgate, Alliance/Glenbryn and Ainsworth where, as mentioned in Paragraphs 21 and 22, Government initiatives are at present underway. The position in Suffolk is also critical and the question of whether further significant investment in housing should continue there will have to be addressed.

28. In some cases it may be justifiable to consider more radical action than at present. A number of opportunities have arisen recently in the vicinity of the Cupar Way peaceline which suggest that an overall planning framework for the area should be prepared. The Catholic Clonard area is to be redeveloped and overspill housing in vacant land may be one option which would assist the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; Lanark Way is closed indefinitely and there have been recent discussions about the possibility of establishing a secured enterprise park; the Army are to vacate the North Howard Army Base by the end of 1994; and there is increasing vacancy at the peaceline end of some of the housing areas on the Shankill side. The University development will also add to the debate and provide opportunities both in terms of the campus development itself and the provision of access roads.

29. **Conclusions and General Recommendations**

Each peaceline is different in terms of physical appearance, security and housing management and there is no single blueprint for action. The approach must continue to be primarily a reactive one, choosing the correct line to take in each circumstance. However, the Group does believe that much could be done to enhance the appearance of peacelines and their surrounding areas and would fully endorse the recommendations made in the Environmental Study, and recommends that resources should be made available to undertake a planned programme of work.

30. Clearly priorities have to be determined and the Group believes that the three peaceline locations most in need of improvement are Springfield Park/Springmartin Road, Cupar Way and Torrens/Oldpark Avenue [Annex 3]. Each of these has a long history of murder and attempted murder attack and also many incidents of rioting and stone-throwing, causing substantial damage to property on both sides of the divide. The Group believes that these particular areas must be addressed as a matter of urgency. It also recommends that within the MBW programme an environmental improvement programme for peacelines should be phased over the next 2/3 years.

31. Continued monitoring of peacelines should be given priority and it is further recommended that MBW, in conjunction with the Belfast Development Office, should report to the Secretary of State and Ministers regularly on security, social and economic impact of peacelines and regularly seek opportunities to remove peacelines or improve their appearance. Any proposals for new peacelines must clearly rest on security considerations but Ministers will also need to be aware of social, economic and environmental issues and whether there are prospects for the early removal of barriers.

32. Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

- *Peacelines must be retained for security reasons (paragraph 8).*
- *The Government should not, at present, increase Catholic housing land at the expense of the perceived Protestant community (paragraphs 17, 18 and 25). Imaginative ways should be found to address the question of housing in Protestant areas (paragraph 18).*
- *The Community Relations Council, Action Teams and other Agencies should encourage greater cross community contact on social and economic issues and Central Secretariat will co-ordinate action (paragraph 24).*
- *There must be continued monitoring of housing needs (paragraph 27).*
- *The question of further significant investment in housing in the Suffolk area should be examined carefully (paragraph 27).*
- *Resources should be invested in environmental improvement with priority for Springfield Park/ Springmartin Road, Cupar Way and Torrens/Oldpark Road (paragraph 30).*
- *MBW and BDO should report regularly to the Secretary of State and Ministers on the security, social and economic impact of peacelines and the development of better relations between communities affected by peacelines (paragraph 31).*

