The Peace Walls:

AN ORAL HISTORY

Voices from those living in the Shadows of the Walls
I came home one day and there’s a big barrier in front of me

I was a homebird and I didn’t want to leave... we were all going and the bags and all were packed and we were like evacuees, you know, during the war.

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This publication shares the personal stories of residents from the Lower Oldpark and Cliftonville areas who have lived alongside the peace walls for thirty years or more. It is the culmination of a community-based Oral History Project carried out with local residents as part of the Imagine Peace Walls Programme.

Much literature surrounding the peace walls comes from an academic perspective with little input from the communities’ most affected. This balance is important to address, particularly for those who feel their experience of the conflict has been ignored.

This Oral History project’s aim is to ensure that through the collection and storage of interviews, the previously unheard voices of ordinary people will enter public discourse.

The Imagine Peace Walls project would like to express our gratitude to the International Fund for Ireland for supporting this work and to Patricia Mullen for editing the text. Further thanks to Rory from 1440 for the design work and Frankie Quinn for the photographs.

A heartfelt thanks to all of the interviewees who shared with us their living memory associated with the walls. We are grateful for their time, and honesty in sharing their personal experiences, which was at times difficult.

It is important to record the history of the peace walls and to document the memories of those living alongside them. Who better to tell the story of the peace walls than those who have lived in their shadows? These testimonies can speak for themselves.

Sarah Lorimer
Peace Walls Officer for the Imagine Project
The areas of Lower Oldpark and Cliftonville are separated by a peace wall which runs from Cliftonpark Avenue, through Manor Street, across Rosevale Street and Rosapenna Street to the junction with Oldpark Road, one of many such interfaces that mark Belfast’s landscapes. Many of the residents who live here would have suffered the brunt of the troubles and continue to suffer today from the legacy of the conflict. Incidents in this area have reduced considerably but there can still be the odd sporadic or opportunist attack. The Peace Walls may act as ‘protection’ but interface areas remain characterised by a number of negative factors including the visible and geographic segregation of both communities. There is a natural inclination for some residents to move away from the area resulting in an unstable population. Many residents suffer from high unemployment, low education attainment, health problems, and trauma. In the past these issues have resulted in the interface becoming a flashpoint and many residents on both sides have been the victim of attacks. The Peace Walls can limit movement and restrict vision. Peace Walls hinder regeneration and economic development of some of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland.

Most people living in North Belfast are aware of the territorial boundaries that exist and the closer to the walls you live the less you see them. Thankfully, there is hope for change within these communities for a better future, but this sits side-by-side with on-going fears and insecurities. Recent quantitative research has indicated that 63% of survey participants continued to identify safety and security issues as their primary consideration at the barriers. Most – 68% - would like to see them gone during the lifetime of their children or grandchildren.

The peace walls were first constructed by the British Army in 1969 as a response to sectarian violence and disorder. They were built as a temporary measure meant to last only six months, but due to their effective nature they remained. There is no agreed classification for what constitutes a peace wall and no one knows exactly how many gates, barriers, fences and other kind of interface structures exist. Community practitioners and academics would suggest there are over ninety peace wall structures. They have been increased in both height and number since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Jarvis (2004) defined an interface area as “the intersection of segregated and polarised working-class residential zones in areas with a strong link between territory and ethno-political identity.”

Well, I was born in 1940 in Arkwright Street, which is just off the Old Lodge Road. It ran parallel with Agnes Street and between Crumlin Road and Shankill Road. Up to the War, people round about the Old Lodge Road were all ... I think the whole thing was everybody was in the same boat. Nobody was very, very rich but at the same time because the cost of living here was very, very low, while the wages were very low as well compared to England and the rest of the UK, we were able to do very handy. I don’t remember people being in abject poverty and the thing was in those days, even if you were unemployed or anything, the dole was very low. National Insurance and Sick Benefit – it was very low as well. I think the Widow’s Pension would have been around ten shillings which is fifty pence in old money, a week.

So there was nobody running about. Anybody who had a car was a rich person. I can remember the first car in our street was in 1953 and it was a Ford Popular. The gentleman across the street was a Foreman Builder in the Shipyard and he worked all through the war years. He worked twenty four hours a day during the war years to produce ships and things like that. So he was the first one with television and it was during the Coronation and I can remember half the street sitting and watching a 12 inch black and white television and we thought it was great. It was like being in the cinema. When you think of it now – last week I got a 49 inch TV – when you think of a 12 inch TV and these ones nowadays are in colour. But we enjoyed ourselves because we made our own fun. I mean the girls would play hopscotch and they would play with tennis balls and they had other games. They had skipping which when you think of it was actually good exercise as well. The boys were playing football and running around so actually you were getting exercise and as a plus you had a great appetite because you weren’t able to buy the grunge foods. But it was very happy.

Due to the decision to place a specific focus on hearing the stories of those who have memories of Lower Oldpark and Cliftonville before the peace walls were erected, most interviewees were able to recall what life was like before the ‘defining moment’ of the conflict and the emergence of the Peace Walls. A male resident from Lower Oldpark speaks about what it was like growing up here in the 1950s and early 1960s.
"Nearly every family had some connection to a mill here. And those mills were entirely straight down the middle. Protestant and Catholic, and the Catholics and the Protestant people, women especially and men, but the women mostly because the majority of them were mill workers, they were all great friends and they visited each other's houses without any trouble at all. You had only a small minority of extreme really on each side. So people lived together and were great friends on both sides of the religious barrier."

(Male, Protestant, 70-79).

Going out to work was considered very important and this was reflected by a number of residents recalling how they left formal education at an early age in order to begin working for a living.

"I ended up in the Technical High School. I stayed there for probably two years. I tell a lie – a year and a few months. I started in August and went through the first year. I got as far as Christmas and my dad said 'You're leaving school.' I said 'Why' and he said 'Because your ma is working in the Mill and [name deleted] in the Mill is going to get you a job. So I was in the shipyard from when I was fourteen, fourteen and three months."

(Male, Protestant, 70-79).

Another resident remembers leaving his home-place in County Tyrone in order to find work in Belfast:

"I was born in 1929 and we come from a place called Ballymongan in Co. Tyrone. I was born and reared there and worked with a farmer before I came here – I came here in '38. I was a bit lonely now in the beginning. But as time went on I got used to it – I got a job the second week we were here. I got a job out the Hollywood Road on a building site. They were building houses and I'm telling you, you had to work at that time and in 1958 I was coming home with twelve pounds, working from 8 o'clock 'til six and to 1 o'clock on a Saturday ... if you wanted to work, you got work. At that time you could have walked out of one job and onto another one. ..."

In the 1950s, the urban economy in Northern Ireland remained strongly reliant on shipbuilding and textile manufacturing. One resident describes how mills were once the powerhouses of the economy in North Belfast and that many local people from both areas would have worked there side-by-side:
I worked away and put my nose to it most of the time. Like there was no trouble that way. I had no trouble with neighbours or workmates like. You went in in the morning and worked ‘til six in the evening... We were the best of friends. But nearly anyone we were working with were the same as us. If they went into a Catholic area they would (be) the same as us. Like there was no (difference) ... and I daresay if there had been anyone there that started to raise any trouble that they would have been pushed on. Like, they wouldn’t have stayed.
(Male, Catholic, 70-79)

There was dishonour in being unemployed:

“Everybody had a job and if you didn’t have a job you were actually despised and looked down on by your own mates. People would have said ‘Get a bloody job, you lazy so-and-so!’ It was a stigma to be unemployed and that’s why, when I was growing up I can remember men, before they would go on the dole, there were people wouldn’t even go for the dole because there was such a stigma on it, being unemployed.

I can remember many many, tons of men would have bought boxes – everything came in boxes in those days, apples and everything else, all your provisions came in a wee box. They would actually have broken up those boxes and bundled them up and went round the doors selling a bundle of sticks before they would have gone on the dole. They would have taken any job at all. Nowadays it is straight on the dole.

In those days that was a terrible stigma on the family and those men would have done anything. They would have cleaned your house for you, painted your house for you before they would go down and collect the dole. So the work ethic was there. They call it the Presbyterian work ethic or the Scottish work ethic. But that’s a load of nonsense. They just had a work ethic.”
(Male, Protestant, 70-79).

Recollections about the area at this time also paint a picture of a bustling neighbourhood community with services and shops used by both communities:

A vibrant community

WE HAD GOOD NEIGHBOURS...

“WE had lots of shops. Coming from the Oldpark Road you had the Manor Bar, you had the chip shop at the top of Summer Street and then you had a wee bakery on the corner there. You had a launderette at the corner of Omni Street. And then you had an old pub. The Meeting of the Waters across the way. You had another wee convenience store, shop for cigarettes and whatever in the block and a chippie as well.

At the very end of Manor Street you had a wee convenience store across the road, a grocer at Bruce Street. So there was plenty of stuff there for people to shop and a Pakistani shop.”
(Male, Protestant, 70-79).
This area was residentially ‘mixed’ with Catholics and Protestants living side-by-side. A resident from Lower Oldpark recalls that living in such neighbourhoods enabled more opportunities for people to interact with each other. He recalls the positive nature of the relationships between his family and neighbours from the other community: ‘We had good neighbours. We had Catholic people. We all knew each other and his family. They were lovely people. They wouldn’t have passed you on the street. [The houses were] mixed. Oh yeah. All mixed media. There were forty-eight houses … there were people down below we knew from Agnes Street and there was people round the corner [names deleted]. A very nice family. They had one boy and two girls. They used to play with my kids. And then the next street there was [names deleted] We all got on well together. After we were there a couple of years, a son, his best mate was [name deleted]. They took out the car and they had a bonfire together at the bottom of the Street. The first bonfire on the Street. I went down and I said ‘[name deleted] and I said ‘The kids are going to have a bonfire and could you chip in something for the bonfire’? And guess who they said ‘Oh, why don’t you?’ So they went round and got rubbish out of people’s houses but it wasn’t any more than 3 ft high and about 10 ft wide. They used to play with my kids.

So they went around to the neighbours and said ‘the kids are having a bonfire and could you chip in something for the bonfire?’ and I said ‘Oh, why don’t you?’ So they went round and got rubbish out of people’s houses but it wasn’t any more than 3 ft high and about 10 ft wide.

Feeling Free

‘Everybody looked after each other. There were actually people round [about] — I can remember at a funeral – obviously people hadn’t much money then and the whole area joined in. If someone was having a funeral and they held a wake there they would take it in turns to bring in food. Some would have brought their best chicken, others one, others would have brought a big tablecloth for the table and all the women made sandwiches and buns and cakes for the wake. … This is what we have lost. It was a great community. … Not only that, we had a mixture, even though we were going down the Shankill Road. We had Roman Catholics, Italians and we had Jews. I remember the first black man to come on the Old Lodge Road actually was a boxer, Floyd Robertson, … his name was the feeling of freedom felt by younger adults, particularly in relation to dancing. And could they socialise. One resident reminisces about the enjoyment he felt in being young, single and dressing ‘to impress’ when attending dances: ‘I would have been twenty-four in 1964 and the thing I remember best was when you went to the dances and you got up on the dance floor … So you had a great community ….’

‘As you are growing up, you don’t realise who everybody is. You just go out as a child and you play on the street. There were no indoor games or nothing like that. For a start the houses were too small so the family lived in it and it was a two up and two down and there was no room for everybody to stay in the house, so we were on the streets. You made friends with everybody in the area.’ (Female, Protestant, 50-59)

There was also clear evidence from testimonies that this was a time of greater community spirit with a level of light-heartedness and camaraderie about difference.

‘We had good neighbours. We had Catholic people. We all knew each other and his family. They were lovely people. They wouldn’t have passed you on the street. [The houses were] mixed. Oh yeah. All mixed media. There were forty-eight houses … there were people down below we knew from Agnes Street and there was people round the corner [names deleted]. A very nice family. They had one boy and two girls. They used to play with my kids. And then the next street there was [names deleted] We all got on well together. After we were there a couple of years, a son, his best mate was [name deleted]. They took out the car and they had a bonfire together at the bottom of the Street. The first bonfire on the Street. I went down and I said ‘[name deleted] and I said ‘The kids are going to have a bonfire and could you chip in something for the bonfire’? And guess who they said ‘Oh, why don’t you?’ So they went round and got rubbish out of people’s houses but it wasn’t any more than 3 ft high and about 10 ft wide. They used to play with my kids.

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‘As you are growing up, you don’t realise who everybody is. You just go out as a child and you play on the street. There were no indoor games or nothing like that. For a start the houses were too small so the family lived in it and it was a two up and two down and there was no room for everybody to stay in the house, so we were on the streets. You made friends with everybody in the area.’ (Female, Protestant, 50-59)

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espite the commonality that existed in working-class and economic conditions, within both communities in this area, segregation existed most obviously in the spheres of education, churches and politics. One resident recalls the heavy influence of community background and religion in shaping fixed political affiliations despite the presence of political parties that would be considered as more representative of the working classes.

You all knew about politics and in those days the politicians came around in big open-back lorries – in breaks, for some reason they called them. It was a terrible smell. They had sulphur [inaudible] on them. Today it wouldn’t be allowed because the Health breaks, for some reason they called them. It was a greatest factors because

Unemployment was one of the greatest factors because it put people on the streets with nothing to do and they were easy prey for the scaremongers. You know, the Catholics are going to take your jobs and all the rest of it. The Catholics are getting jobs here and you are not getting jobs and that’s how it started up. And as a young man who had laid dormant, they saw this as a great opportunity.

But the age before ‘69, ‘69 destroyed everything and pre-‘69, ‘64 it started there. And what happened in ‘64 was the Protestants were a bit worried because ‘64 was the 50th anniversary of the Rising and they thought it was going to be a big massive show of strength by the Republicans and I think that’s why so many of them went to Paisley.”

(Male, Protestant, 70-79).

One resident remembers how the economic decline and the emergence of political hardliners impacted on the attitudes of people in the area:

“It was only in the mid-sixties - first of all, I actually think it started. Firms started to lay off people. After the war firms were going full blast to make up for the war time and it started to slow down in the sixties. Industry and everything started to slow down in the sixties. You had guys on street corners with nothing to do so all it was was some firebrand and unfortunately a firebrand emerged in the form of the Rev Ian Paisley and his cohort.

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Onset of the Troubles
- A child’s viewpoint

IT HAD A BIG IMPACT ON MY LIFE

Most interviewees involved in the project were young adults before the Troubles erupted in 1969. However, two interviewees who were still children at the time recount hearing about the conflict or directly experiencing violence for the first time and noticing unsettling changes in their area:

The Troubles started when I was nine years of age and it had a big impact on my life. You made friends with everybody in the area and whenever the Troubles started in August ’69, I was nine and half and I was playing about, no problem, and I could hear people saying that trouble had broken out in Londonderry. I said to my mummy ‘What’s that?’ and she said ‘That’s miles away from here. Don’t worry about it. Its miles away, don’t worry’. So that was okay then. We were playing and that night I went into the house and came back out the next day and everything seemed really desolate. There was nobody about and the place was all quiet. I knew nothing about the Troubles. We were sort of hid from it. We were sheltered from it, being a young child. But there were people about the streets - older people seemed to be about, a lot of people on the streets. And I said to my mummy one time ‘Where’s my friends?’ and she said ‘Oh I don’t know. Just go and play. There’s plenty of friends out there. Go and play’. But I came in again and I says ‘I haven’t got my friends. My friends aren’t here’. And she says ‘I don’t know’. She just kept saying ‘I don’t know where they are. I don’t know where they have gone’.

So that was okay then but what I didn’t know was a lot of my friends were Catholics. I didn’t know that’s what the fighting was over in between Catholics and Protestants and we were separated then because on Cooper Street, one side was Catholic and the other side was Protestant. Clonard Gardens – well I used to play in Clonard Gardens and all my friends were all on Bombay Street and then the next thing Bombay Street was burned to the ground. And that’s the last that I remember of seeing any friends that I had from the other side of that barrier.

“Just as a child, seeing two pubs burned at the corner of Agnes Street and mummy and daddy getting you out of bed. I remember we had the old paper blinds and seeing this glow, and as a child you are curious and you pull the blind across to look and there was this blaze of flame. But it was the next morning going past and the smells, the smell of the burned charcoal, the burned debris and the smell around the buildings and things like that. So its things like that you remember as a child.”

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(Female, Catholic. 50-59).
The trouble and attacks were really serious. And then because the police were getting on top, it wasn’t until then when it was the police first, and they were getting on top of it and their story goes that well it did happen, about a quarter past twelve o’clock one afternoon a mob came up from the Falls Road and attacked a house. I think it was Percy Street, and they burst windows, attacked cars and they beat up an old pensioner. God help her and a wee man who lived there, he walked out and burned stuff that was set on fire, whoever it was. My wife was attacked by an Alsatian dog. I was very friendly with a lady on the opposite side and I was friendly with all the people down here. We used to stand and chat and all the rest of it. And then one day the people down here didn’t talk to me anymore. And I said to my friend ‘What’s wrong? What have I done?’ She says ‘No, you haven’t done anything, you are talking to me and they don’t like it’. So that was the attitude...

Another mob came up from the Shankill went down Percy Street and they put a Union Jack on a lamp post that night up at Conway Street there were mobs running around wrecking things on both sides. That night, up at Gillypark Avenue. You had a block of houses and then you go along Cliftonville Road. There was a church there and it closed down for the same reasons. And your man Paisley moved in there and they broke into it one day and burned it because he owned it. It was just going downhill at that time.

My son, he was in the boys’ band in the school at the time and they started throwing nut balls at him in the street at half past eight in the bloody morning. So I had to walk him to school and then he got the bus, he was friendly with all the people down here. We used to stand and chat and all the rest of it.

Then the Troubles started here in Belfast and it was bad here. Churches were burned. People’s cars were attacked outside churches. We got married in a Methodist church just up at Linenhall facing that junction there. It’s gone. It’s gone because the congregation were afraid to go there anymore, because if they went in there their cars would be attacked. Then they closed it. Then the so-called Protestants in the area – they set fire to the church hall but they said that they weren’t going to let the RUC get it. They ended up knocking the church down.

Then we had a Presbyterian church at the end of Cliftonpark Avenue. You had a block of houses and then you go along Cliftonville Road. There was a church there and it closed down for the same reasons. And your man Paisley moved in there and he called it the John Knox Memorial and they broke into it one day and burned it because he owned it. It was just going downhill at that time.

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Then the Troubles started here in Belfast and it was bad here. Churches were burned. People’s cars were attacked outside churches. We got married in a Methodist church just up at Linenhall facing that junction there. It’s gone. It’s gone because the congregation were afraid to go there anymore, because if they went in there their cars would be attacked. Then they closed it. Then the so-called Protestants in the area – they set fire to the church hall but they said that they weren’t going to let the RUC get it. They ended up knocking the church down.

Another mob came up from the Shankill went down Percy Street and they put a Union Jack on a lamp post that night up at Conway Street there were mobs running around wrecking things on both sides. That night, up at Gillypark Avenue. You had a block of houses and then you go along Cliftonville Road. There was a church there and it closed down for the same reasons. And your man Paisley moved in there and they broke into it one day and burned it because he owned it. It was just going downhill at that time.

My son, he was in the boys’ band in the school at the time and they started throwing nut balls at him in the street at half past eight in the bloody morning. So I had to walk him to school and then he got the bus, he was friendly with all the people down here. We used to stand and chat and all the rest of it.

## Change in relationships

### The end of the friendship...

A s the Troubles developed, communities began to close in on themselves as neighbours turned away from each other. Many of the interviewees have stories about the impact this period had on such relationships:

Before people started to leave they started a vigilante type of thing. I came out the door one night and there were about seven or eight guys standing at the top of the street. I walked up and it was a young fellow who lived up the street. I can’t remember his name but I knew he was studying for the priesthood and they were all standing along the wall, sort of like lecturing them.

I said ‘Is he a neighbour? How is it going?’ I said ‘Are you alright? [name deleted]?’ and he said ‘Yes [name deleted], we’re alright’.

### Incident with a dog

I listened and then I said ‘To my neighbour’, why are you worried about that, sure the only house they can shoot into is mine. And he says, ‘Sure that’s alright’. I said ‘What?’ ‘That’s alright’. I said ‘Oh!’ and I turned around and said ‘Do you all feel that way?’ Not one of them spoke. I said ‘Thanks, you’ll not be seeing me back here’. So I walked round to my house. It was only about thirty yards up and that was the beginning of the end of the friendship. That was probably the end of it...

Those were my neighbours, yeah.”

(Male, Protestant, 70-79)

### A second interviewee considers how things changed on her street:

“I was very friendly with a lady on the opposite side and I was friendly with all the people down here. We used to stand and chat and all the rest of it. And then one day the people down here didn’t talk to me anymore. And I said to my friend ‘What’s wrong? What have I done?’ She says ‘No, you haven’t done anything, you are talking to me and they don’t like it’. So that was the attitude of people and from that day on I never made a friend up here. If they say ‘Good Morning’ I say ‘Good Morning’.”

(Female, Catholic, 70-79)
“One night my husband went out on a Wednesday over to the dogs or wherever it was he went to and he always came back about 10 o’clock. It was a Friday night. He didn’t work Saturday. I was having his tea and all ready when he came back and the children were in bed. I said to him ‘That’s shots.’ Not at all, love. He wouldn’t worry me. I’m telling you that it is a backfire! So no time ‘til I could hear that. They shot a man up at Summer Street there and then they wheeled the thing down and then they burned him at the top of the street……. That was the start of it. I says ‘No. I’m not moving. I was going to lose my home. I did lose my home. Was I right or was I wrong?’ Put yourself in my shoes. We had four children and you worked and take in the ironing and everything. I’m not going into no council house after paying all that money and the work we have done to our house.”

(Female, Protestant, 80+)
We went to Scotland. Everybody went to Scotland but I didn’t want to leave. I was a home bird and I didn’t want to leave. My brothers went but the day we were going, we were all going and the bags and all were packed and we were like evacuees you know, during the war. The bags were all packed and I always remember, I hid below the bed and nobody could find me. When they were doing the names they said ‘Where’s [name deleted] and my brother says ‘She was here a minute ago I don’t know’. So my brother came running down to the house and he says, ‘my mummy was with us, my mummy says I don’t know where she went’. So my brother came down to the house in case I had went down and he looked all around and says ‘No, she’s not here’. And then that was a whole panic. Mummy came down and I had hid below the bed and I said ‘I don’t want to go’. ‘I’m not going’ and she says ‘But you can’t stay here’. ‘It’s not safe to stay here’ and I says ‘Well I’m not going’. So they went. Eventually they all went without me and my mummy’s cousin had moved to Carrick because she lived on the Shankill and they decided they were not staying in Belfast. They had got a house then in Carrick and she says ‘She can come and stay with us’. So I went and stayed with her because she had a daughter the same age as me and it was company. So I spent the whole summer in Carrick whenever the schools were off. It was just to keep everybody out of trouble.

So I went to Carrick and they went to Scotland. But it meant then, and nobody had a phone. My friends had a phone and we went to Carrick and we said from us and I remember ringing my mummy at seven o’clock every night. Mummy would have to go down to her house because her mummy would say ‘Yes, certainly’. That was me making sure everybody else was okay at home. You know it’s a lot of confusion. A lot of worry – is my mummy okay, is my daddy okay? Then my brothers are in a different country and no way of contacting them. Are they all right all right?

(Female, Protestant, 50-59)

“There were things going on but your parents never spoke about it. Everything was all quiet. You were very, very protected. We, at that particular point in time, we used to have a telephone where very few had it. So they used to come and speak to their brothers, the mothers would speak to their sons in prison. We always knew our phone was tapped because you could hear this click, click, click, and I heard it. And we used to get a shared line and the crossed conversation and things like that, as a child. But no, we were very protected, very, very protected as children”. (Female, Protestant, 50-59)
Vigilantes & paramilitaries

BARRICADES WERE PUT UP

As conflict emerged across Northern Ireland, local men began patrolling the boundaries of their community. This was designed to act as a deterrent and prevent attacks. Residents discuss the transition of these groups into something more sinister:

S o the next thing was in the Protestant areas barricades were put up and vigilantes sprung up. Men went round in their own areas and barricaded the streets up at night and then they paraded around to guard the streets from attack and the Catholics were doing the same on their side. They were building barricades in their areas. Every place became ghettos. There were ghettos in the Shankill Road …….. The thing is the vigilantes got together and grew bigger and bigger. Well the UVF had already been formed.

The UVF had been formed by people in Paisley shirts. Because Gusty Spence and all them, they were all Paisleyites.

That’s how they started the UVF up again but the UDA - that came later. It was the vigilantes starting to get together and they decided then, because they were into sticks and stones and daggers and everything, anything to defend your area… So the next thing the shooting started. Then they said right, so they formed the Ulster Defence Association and started bringing in weapons, arms and ammunition from all over the place, wherever they could get them. And that was the start.” (Male, Protestant, 70-79).

T here was vigilantes in every area and my daddy was a vigilante for our area … and the vigilantes used to sit in the bar then at night and they would have watched the area … and they would have sat there and kept an eye and they sort of policed the area.

Then my daddy came in one night and he says “I’m finished. I’m not going back because this is getting too hairy.” He says ‘They are starting to talk about starting up a group’ and that’s where the UDA and the UVF all formed. You know, things like that. Because they were all starting to talk like that and he says ‘I don’t want anything to do with it’. He warns my eldest brother to stay out of everything. He says ‘If you hear, because you are a young boy, and that’s what they are looking for, young boys to join up’. So then that was okay. He didn’t. Lucky enough he didn’t get involved in anything. None of my brothers got involved, thankfully.” (Female, Protestant, 50-59).

T his fear that male members of the family might become directly involved in the violence was discussed by several residents.

“… The children got up well and like I had four sons which was rough enough… It was rough enough at that time and they didn’t get involved either in anything so we were very lucky.” (Female, Catholic, 70-79).
Another female resident from Lower Cliftonville reminisces on her fears of raising boys in this environment:

“I had four boys. My fear was they are going to grow up. They are going to join the paramilitaries. They are going to get shot. They are going to shoot somebody. It was like, how do you get away from it and I actually thought about moving to England to get away from it, but I didn’t go. And thank God none of my boys, none of my family, my brothers or sisters, none of my family relations have ever been in jail for murder or doing something from the other side. I have never had anybody murdered in the family so I don’t have that. Some people can be really bitter. I don’t have that bitterness. Maybe because it hasn’t happened to me.”

(Female, Catholic, 50-59)

The strength of mothers dedicated to protecting their children from this was highlighted by one female from Lower Oldpark:

“There is also the impact it had on us as children growing up who came from a family who kept them away from paramilitary groups. I know what happened. I know one particular point in time there was things going on in the house and to this day I always regret not asking mummy, but I think they tried to recruit my big brother and my mummy was the backbone with daddy, a strong big man, but he wouldn’t have had the brass that mummy would have had. I think [name deleted] was a name that came into my head. I think he was part of the paramilitaries and she went to school with his sisters. She made contact with someone and thank God none of my brothers were recruited in, but it was so close. Things were going on but it was never spoken about. Mummy was a very wise wee woman. She always – she met you for the first time and she could read you. She had just a gift and a real wisdom with people and a great gift of making people laugh and just ooze with love. And her family were her life and she protected us, like most mothers do, but really protected us.”

(Female, Protestant, 50-59)
Normal people, abnormal events

THERE’S A LOT OF PEOPLE WITH PTSD AND MENTAL ISSUES BECAUSE OF THE TROUBLES

People tried to continue living normal lives against a constant cycle of violence. Many interviewees could provide detailed accounts of the violence they witnessed and the distress caused:

I remember Bloody Friday. 20 bombs went off that day. Because I remember sitting as a child counting them, one after another – the bombs going off. We sat there and the soldiers were in the street. Everybody was just sitting out in the street. It was a lovely, lovely sunny day and I just heard them going off – one, two. At that age, we were very young and we didn’t know what it was. But it was the bombs going off at Oxford Station and all around there.” (Female, Protestant, 50-59).

“Well I remember being in the chip shop one night. You know whenever you are kids and all and you go down and we had went down to get chips and we were standing in the chip shop and next thing – bang, bang, bang and the bullets came through the windows and we had to dive onto the floor, get round the counter of the chip shop and lie down on the floor. You know it was fear after fear. It really was. I mean you never knew where you were going, where it was going to be safe for everything else… I’ll never forget one night me and my husband went into the cinema in the town. You didn’t call it the cinema then, it was the pictures. So we went to the pictures in town and we were sitting watching the film and the next thing the writing came across the screen that there was a bomb scare and we had to leave as quickly as possible. And we left, and it said ‘please do not panic’. And we got up and we left, but the panic, and I can remember sweating and everything else and I couldn’t get out. We couldn’t get out quick enough. They had opened all the escape doors and the fire doors to let everybody out. We did get out quick enough. It was okay but I felt as if it was a long, long time and we couldn’t get out. And ever from that I have not been to a cinema in the town.” (Female, Protestant, 50-59).

“When I was thirteen that would have been the Hunger Strike trouble. It was chaos. I mean I would have got up at six in the morning and I lived in Harcourt and I would have went straight to Ardoyne because the trouble happened there the night before so I would have gone over to see the aftermath. Roads were dug up – buses, lorries – it was just mad. And then at night time I would have gone back over because I was nosey and I stood outside the front gate to watch all the casualties. There were people split from the top of their head to here, fellows shot in the face. It was horrible.” (Female, Catholic, 50-59).

“Normal people, abnormal events. People tried to continue living normal lives against a constant cycle of violence. Many interviewees could provide detailed accounts of the violence they witnessed and the distress caused.”
Residents recalled the direct impact this violence had on their families:

“...We got a phone call to come up the Springfield Road. When we went up ‘Name deleted’ had been shot and the cops rang when we were sitting in the house talking to this wife. The phone rang when the cops came up and they said that they needed somebody to go in and identify him. Well I was the only man there. She wanted to go and I said ‘I’ll go along with you’. So we went over and your man said ‘Who’s going to identify the body’ and she says ‘I’ll do it first’. I had to go to the hospital that night.

And then there was another wee girl. She worked in a wee shop there in Manor Street and she was shot dead too. And the woman that worked in the shop, she lost her eye. She’s dead now too. God rest her. But my daughter, she worked in the shop too. Thank God she wasn’t on that night but this other wee girl was. She lived above us here and they went into the shop and they shot her dead. I don’t know if they intended to shoot them or if they intended to steal in the shop or what they intended to do, but that was two bad incidents that happened.”

(Male, Protestant, 70-79)

“...My sister and I were out playing and the shooting came down the street. We just got down or ran. But my wee brother was out and the shooting came down the Clunymore Road. So I remember there was an article in the newspaper all about a young boy for the lunch and when she came home. She used to come home here for their lunch and when she came home, she went down on Oldpark Avenue and my daughter came down here and she was shot dead, that wee girl. That took an awful lot out of me. I had to go to the hospital that night.

And then there was another wee girl. She worked in a wee shop there in Manor Street and she was shot dead too and the woman that worked in the shop, she lost her eye. She’s dead now too. God rest her. But my daughter, she worked in the shop too. Thank God she wasn’t on that night but this other wee girl was. She lived above us here and they went into the shop and they shot her dead. I don’t know if they intended to shoot them or if they intended to steal in the shop or what they intended to do, but that was two bad incidents that happened.”

(Female, Catholic, 70-79)

Violence affected every part of people’s lives, including attacks in the workplace:

“There was an explosion one day inside the factory and we ran out …... Me and (Name deleted) ran and we stood under the dynatherm boiler and we were coming in because we had booked different lunch hours. They were coming in and there were guys with blood running out of their sides and their heads. I ran over and helped this fellow and I walked away from the whole bloody place and (Name deleted) stood underneath the dynatherm boiler and they had put a bomb in there too. And he was killed. He was only twenty-three. I was about twenty-five. There was another bomb blew up first inside and (the other) must have stayed all night, the bloody thing. But this thing that blew up, it burst and the stuff that came down apparently was burnt black. His head was all damaged and burnt black from his waist down. It was just by the grace of God by helping this guy that I was saved.”

(Male, Protestant, 70-79)

“...They bomb the water tanks at the top of the house and they burst and came down the stairs like a waterfall. Well we couldn’t have business and everybody floating around in water so we have to close the front of the hotel …... You don’t upset your staff because they are hysterical, so you have to keep quiet. And for the customers’ sake as well you have to go around and search your whole area, in to the toilets and everywhere to see if there is anything pinned under the tables. So you had to do all that quietly and I asked one – there were three people sitting at a table and they were from Sweden and I asked them very quietly would they move into the back of the hotel and one of them went ‘Oh there’s a bomb, there’s a bomb’ and they went flying out the front door.”

(Female, Protestant, 70-79)

Interviewees described the importance of a positive mental attitude to ‘get through’ and showed remarkable fortitude in the face of such experiencing such trauma:

“It all depends on just the way you feel yourself. I think it’s a personal feeling, accept and just get on with life. There’s no point in dragging yourself down with it. It’s still there …... I would say that’s why there is a lot of people here with PTSD in this place and mental issues because of all the Troubles. My husband will say to me sometimes ‘You know you have PTSD and you don’t realise it. You are not accepting it that that’s what you have’. I just get up and get on with it …... I think you had to get up and get on with it and just accept this is the way life is. Get up and move on or else sit in the corner and weep over it. Fair enough, don’t forget about things and I know people that have hurt and they can’t forget about it but again, we have got to forgive and forget.”

(Female, Protestant, 50-59)
Emergence of the Peace Walls

About the backdrop of escalating violence, segregated communities and sectarian tensions, barricades began to be erected across Lower Oldpark and Cliftonville. These were patrolled by local men and later evolved into the more permanent structures of the ‘Peace Walls’. Many residents have very clear memories of these barriers being constructed:

The first [peace walls] were metal. They were quite substantial.” (Male, Protestant, 70-79).

“They got sandbags or else steel drums and put sandbags in between them and planks at the top and there was one in Manor Street. I walked past it one night. I walked up Summer Street. I was down seeing my da. He was still living in Bristol Street and I turned the corner and walked up and there was a barricade across the road and about a dozen guys there... That was just at Manor Street. But they were at their barricade to attack at their end. There were barricades going up everywhere.

I remember there was a gate at Mountview Street, a big steel gate, and it wasn't up that long 'til a couple of nights two or three hundred came down on a bus to get in. They brought them from everywhere – maybe Falls Road, New Lodge wherever, dozens of them, a couple of hundred, I reckon, and they had petrol bombs and they were chucking bricks over the wall. They took that gate down and made it a permanent structure.

The Wall was just at Roopenna Street but it didn't come down the Oldpark Road. There were still wee bungalows down there. It's a space ground now. But they used to come down there at night, maybe a couple of dozen of them, smashing windows and attacking the pensioners’ bungalows and they tried to get down into [inaudible] Street through the back way and it was hand to hand fighting, to tell you the truth; it got really vicious. But as I said, the Wall went up and I wasn't consulted. I don't think anybody was consulted.” (Male, Protestant, 70-79).

“I came home one day to come up this way and there's a big barrier in front of me. And I couldn't understand that so I came around and up this way and it was a big brown barrier just across the road from one house there to the shops on this side. After that the Peace Line went up. So it was the powers that be that decided to put a Peace Line up.” (Female, Protestant, 50-59).

There was a general acceptance that the Peace Walls were necessary at the time:

“It was the first good idea they had during the whole Troubles, putting those Peace Walls up because otherwise nobody was safe because nobody was safe and vigilantes started up and actually started barricading their own areas up. So putting up the Peace Walls was a proper thing to do and it gave people a respite. If you had been here before the Peace Walls you would have seen all the houses with cages over their windows because they were getting bricks and what they were scared of most of all was a petrol big barrier in front of me
"Well it kept both sides apart which had to happen. Something had to happen because there was always a lot of fighting going on down Manor Street."

(Female, Catholic, 70-79)

"There were bad people on both sides, really bad people. When the Walls went up they were a blessing because there would have been more people killed. I thought the Peace Walls would give them a bit of breathing space and they would sort of think about what they were doing and think about what they can do and what’s the best way forward."

(Male, Protestant, 70-79)

"It was just something you accepted was going to happen. What I do remember is the times whenever Manor Street was opened and difficult times and my brother was always attacked coming home from school. I remember my mum and sister having to walk on the opposite side of the road because at that point in time, he always, when they were a wee bit older they would go down themselves to school, and he always used to be attacked. So at that point it became very segregated… At that point it was protection."  

(Male, Protestant, 70-79)

"It was because I just seen it going the same way as it had went with the other places that I had left – Ainsworth Avenue, you know. Cupar Street. It was just going the same way. Exactly the same way. Because I just said to my husband ‘Here we go again. I mean do the Peace Walls follow us?’ Everywhere we live, its open and next thing a Peace Wall goes up. But the fear – I mean that’s what it is. I just couldn’t understand – you know, here we go again. Years later, and I even said, to myself, ‘How long is this going to go on for?’ Something starts and the next thing a Wall goes up and blocks off."

(Female, Protestant, 50-59)

Despite most interviewees welcoming the Peace Wall, the interface also acted as a flashpoint. Throughout the conflict missiles were thrown over the peace walls, houses were attacked and there was a fear and lack of safety and security on the part of local residents:

"I don’t think people thought about safety then even with the Wall going up because it was still very difficult challenging times. Even with the Wall there it was still the height of the Troubles so people could still come round and come in different ways if they needed to.

(Female, Protestant, 50-59)

"It started off with young children going out throwing stones and it escalated and their parents came out. Then at times whenever the Peace Walls followed a big stand-off we were hemmed in to our own house for quite a number of weeks because at night, at the interface building were set on fire, because we are quite close to the interface, but with the properties at the back of us, it was quite frightening.

(Female, Protestant 50-59)

You just went in and you shut the door and you just hoped and prayed that nothing would happen. For years I didn’t go anywhere. I always wondered why I was here. I prayed to God I used to cry and walk along the streets and cry ‘Why do you have me here?’ because they were difficult times."

(Female, Protestant, 50-59)

"Neighbours down the street were petrol bomb- ed all on the one night. Most of the street had to get out and then it was like there was a bomb device in one of the gardens. So they were getting my neighbour and her friend’s daughter and son out of the house when they threw a petrol bomb over it and landed at their feet. They were very, very lucky, that family because as they were coming out of the house the petrol bombs were hitting them. They couldn’t get out the back way. The back way was at the side sort of so there was no other way out. It was awful."

We had a lot of trouble with bricks, bottles coming over that daily, every day, every night. Then one night, it was about four in the morning and we heard the smashing coming over the back and I just saw a flash and I knew then; I jumped out of the bed. And thank God two wee boys, two of my boys were in the back bedroom but I had the grills in front of their window; the police said they wouldn’t have been burned to death.

"The stone just went by and splattered me, fire paint bombs after.

(Female, Catholic, 50-59)"
You couldn’t get out to meet people unless you were going into Protestant areas. So you weren’t meeting any … oh you were definitely losing your freedom. You were hemmed in. You were hemmed in because the simple reason was the Shankill Road was never famed for having very great public houses. Most of the pubs in the Shankill I can remember were like John Wayne walking around in a cowboy film. There was sawdust on the floor and spittoons in the ring on it and the drink would be sort of thrown up to you …….. suddenly you were hemmed in. You were hemmed into some wee stupid bar and all you were meeting were the guys you were meeting all your life. You were just going over the same thing all the time.”

(Male, Protestant, 70-79)

One female interviewee recounts the growing dereliction and lack of services in the area:

“Our playground was the empty homes on Dargle Street and Rose Street – all those streets had massive big homes, like six-bedroom homes and they were knocked in. The rooms were knocked in to like upstairs knocked into like big holes in the walls so you could literally run through them. And we used to play hunts….Our playground was basically the empty homes and looking back now you think of the fear and the danger associated with that.

Then in later years I would have gone to Lisburn, because there really was nothing here. There were not youth-clubs, there was nothing, no services. So I was getting out and finding people the same kind … the area wasn’t great and you were embarrassed. You were embarrassed at times, to be honest, but I got to the point where later on in life it was like they accept me for who I am not for what I’m living in. It’s the person not the place.

There was a lot of dereliction, empty homes and streets were demolished and you remember, mostly the impact is the smell of the dereliction. You would pass somewhere and it brings back these old memories of dereliction and I have visions, and sort of memories of the old streets still come back to me. Slowly but surely you are seeing it disintegrate. You know, the people moving out and you are living on a street with only like two houses and then the kids beside you would be demolishing the house and there was the danger of, at that point there was the old gas [could be released] …… and it just left things very, very unstable. It was quite creepy and eerie. Cliftonpark then was quite a horrible place to walk up. It used to have the old derelict houses – every house would have had a hedge and the hedges were overgrown and you felt safer walking on the [actual] road at night and it wouldn’t be lit up and was very desolate.”

(Female, Protestant 50-59)

Another interviewee, a female resident from the Lower Cliftonville, recalled how as a home owner she felt trapped living at the peace wall and couldn’t sell her home for the market value:

“It looks very bad especially for anybody coming. And the wire on the windows as well. And to get them cleaned I used to get a can and try and throw the water up. But you couldn’t have washed them the same. And then my husband bought one of them power hoses and washed it down as best he could. We had to put wire up on the windows. It wasn’t The Men Behind the Wire, it was my windows behind the wire, and that was the wire mesh. A lot of them moved out but we were paying off that house. We would have lost our house so we put the wire up on the windows. We had four children and you worked and take in the ironing and everything. I’m not going into no council house after paying all that money and the work we have done to our house.

(Female, Catholic, 80+).

The peace wall also impacted on the landscape and infrastructure of the local community. The mobility of local residents was affected as Manor Street, a former throughway, was cut in half by a peace wall. Residents remember how it was before the wall and how things changed:

“I mean, I could have walked up Cliftonpark Avenue and walked right through into the Waterworks which we did many a time and from the Waterworks across over into the Grove playing fields because a lot of us didn’t have..."
the money for the bus. So we walked up to the Grove with football boots round your neck and walked back again and never any trouble. (When the Peace Wall went up it meant that you just couldn’t go from A to B anymore. You had to go A, B, C and D to get to where you were going whereas before that you went through Catholic areas. Catholics went through Protestant areas. Now, even when I look that wee job, I had to go either up round Rosapenna Street and away down to get there or else go away down, up Cliftonpark Avenue over the bumps to get away down, up Shaftesbury Square and off at the hospital."

"At that time there was very little – there weren’t two or three cars at everybody’s door so we had a bus run from here, from the Antrim Road to the Gasworks. The 77 bus ran across there and then they done away with it when the Troubles started. I used to go to the hospital on the bus and it was great because you got off at Shaftesbury Square and then you walked up to the hospital." (Female, Catholic, 70-79).

Despite these difficulties, interviewees remember the strength of the community they lived in and the pride they took in their area:

"I can remember moving into Rosevalle Street, twenty-two years ago and the Peace Wall was right behind me. Now you could have gone out and you could have ate in that entry. The entry was spotless. The women looked after it, cleaned it. The entry was full of young children. You put them out, a big long entry and they played up and down there with their skateboards or their wee dogs."

"I must say even though it was on the Peace line it was one of the best streets I ever lived in. It has been the best street, for your neighbours, for people helping each other. It was such a real community wee street. Every day all our kids played together. People were out from supper time at night after the men had their dinner. The women were out on the street with all the kids. It was a wee group team we had. I mean the whole street was out and we would have tea and sandwiches every night, obviously somewhere, and a brilliant, brilliant street."

It was such a pity the houses up and down there with their big long entry and they played together. People were helping each other. It was such a real community. (Female, Catholic, 50-59).

"The women have held the communities together. The women have been there when the fellows have been in prison and they have held communities together. But there has been last generations. There is no leadership in the community. Leadership comes from the women, not from the men. The men are in the background doing the things that they do best as men. The women, not from the men."

"The older people knew because they had already lived through the troubles. The men knew it wasn’t going to be overnight. The young ones knew what was going to happen. They knew it wasn’t going to be overnight. The young ones didn’t think how long it was going to be. The men knew it wasn’t going to be overnight. The young ones didn’t think how long it was going to be before you’d get the Peace Walls away."

"I'd love to see it go. I don't like barriers. Barrier causes problems and I don't like that. Open it all up. The people will either live together or they will move away. One or the other. Why can't they forget? That was yesterday, close the door. Move forward. Think of your children and the future you want for them!" (Female, Catholic, 70-79). Others feared for the consequences of such an act and felt the time was still not right for taking such a permanent step:
I must confess I have never considered taking the Peace Walls down because I think it’s too early. I think I would have torn them down tomorrow there would be a bloody funeral because that would just open the gates to all the mayhem because it’s not over. They were there for a few years but I don’t think it’s anywhere near the right time to do. Maybe eight, ten or fifteen years you can see what will happen at the minute.”

(Female, Protestant, 70-79)

“I know it’s hard whenever things are still happening. If everything was sort of cut and dry I could say ‘Okay, the war is over, get on with it.’ We’ve got to do this and got to do that. Pull the Walls down. We’ll all be friends again. We’ll all live together in mixed communities but there’s still people out there that still hold on to things and still would like to get their own back.”

(Female, Protestant, 50-59)

“I’m a wee bit old now! Laughter! But I hope they will come down in my lifetime, but I would say you are going to have to do an awful lot of work. It’s not just a matter of knocking those Walls down. You are going to have to do an awful lot of work. Forget about the Peace Walls. Make them nice and then spend the money that’s being used and that’s been... to get the two groups build relationships. The people will eventually want to get rid of the things. We don’t want the bloody things. The Peace Walls – make them nice. Make them the way they have in New York with a lot of graffiti on them and a lot of dancing wee figures on them. It’s going to be a long time but you a lot of work you have to do to get the hearts and the minds of both communities – the young ones – the old ones don’t count..... the older people, because they are Catholics and Protestants congregating together but these young ones don’t have and that’s what your whole trouble is. You are going to have to get the heads and minds on both sides of the Peace Wall and get them integrated in wee informal groups and keep widening that circle. Bring small groups, wee discreet groups and get them together and then let them – it’s like throwing a stone into a pond and let the ripples go out.”

(Male, Protestant, 70-79)

There were comments too about the attitudinal change that needed to happen before the walls could be removed:

“They are not mixing enough to create peace. Like I mean, there was one teacher in school and she always wanted to learn Irish and I said to her ‘Why don’t you? Look up Irish classes and go to them.’ So she found somewhere up The Falls and she went. She said ‘I never had a better time’. She said ‘The people are lovely’. I said ‘The people are no different to us. We are all the same. It’s just that tradition has told us don’t talk to them’. Sometimes I think that people don’t really know who they are or what they are. They are like the nomads running round the desert. They have no base and I put that down to the politicians trying to divide everybody. It’s all wrong. It’s a most beautiful country, North and South, and it could be on top of the world.”

(Female, Catholic, 70-79)

Others highlighted the progress made in the area in the past decade and the importance of the younger generation being involved in cross-community initiatives to aid attitudinal change:

“Well there has been a bit of sharing going on here. Small groups meet together, residents from one side and the resident who from the other. At least it lets these people see, and I’m talking about both sides here, that that person has a head, two arms and two legs like me. Nobody chooses to be a Roman Catholic and nobody chooses to be a Protestant but if you are born into a Protestant family or Roman Catholic family then you will be that. It’s maybe an accident of birth, if I could describe it like that. Taught they’re either a Loyalist or a Tricolour. You know what I mean. It doesn’t happen that way. It’s what they are told. ‘He’s an Orangeman. Don’t talk to him.’ It’s bloody brainwashing of the youngsters, like it’s mind game really. Its (sic) confirmed opinions. It’s your attitude too, you know. My experience of the Falls in Manor Street was great.”

(Male, Protestant, 70-79)

“I think now kids are realising, where years ago we were taught, well not taught, but people would have said that all Protestants were bad where now ‘My daddy wouldn’t say that to me’ but with even my children know they are not all bad. I think they are half of the learning. You have to teach them that there is good and bad that not all Protestants are bad and not all Catholics are bad. You have to teach them that. There are comments about the pain. You want to teach them that there is good and bad. Not all Catholics are bad and not all Protestants are bad. You have to do that.”

(Female, Protestant, 50-59)

“It has been, I think, a steady progress. It has its challenges and it will still continue to have challenges but as groups who have different needs, I think you have to work alongside each other. The difficulty is in this part of the city the Protestant community would be seen as a weaker link, looking at the funding element of it. But I see in the last two years we have seen massive, massive transformation of the area and the attitudes of people in the area. I think people’s attitudes has livid change.”

(Female, Protestant, 50-59)
Hope springs eternal

Despite the difficulties faced within this community, the trauma and violence witnessed and the hardships of living in an area lacking investment, hope exists. One resident explained further about her hopes for the area and the importance of harnessing the power of young people living there:

There is hope. People see things changing. It creates a bit of hope but there is also that fear. The fear is still there. Many people have been born and bred beside the peace walls. People are starting to see that there is an opportunity to build something new. People see things changing. People see things happening. It’s good to know we are part of that change. The fear is still there. We are becoming a more settled community and that’s only within the last two years. For me, a resident living here for forty years, I find it quite exciting. It’s good to know we are part of a beautiful building like the library. That was a dream to make that library come back to life again – that is another hub within the community and hopefully it will become a space for employment and community use. So yeah, and the Gaol and all the re-developments are really exciting. A new hotel, the Courthouse. I was born beside the Courthouse. As a child growing up, I have many, many dreams of the Courthouse being transformed. It is going to be a twenty-five million pound project so I think many local people can get jobs. It will be nice seeing a part of North Belfast where people never wanted to come to, you were embarrassed, people coming up your street, and it’s going to be a place we are going to be so proud of, and creating a future for the young generation and hopefully people will carry on the good work, especially in communities because I think you need places like this to engage with. We need to empower and bring young people on board. (Female, Protestant, 50-59).

Methodology


As is required practice, each participant signed a consent form outlining that they are aware of the nature of the project, understand that their interviews are to be recorded and that, they consent to the release of their transcript, and hold ownership of a copy of their interview. A copy is also held at an archive in the Lower Ormeau Community Centre in a password protected external hard drive. Each interview has also given prior approval for the use of any direct quotations attributed to them in this publication.

Transcripts were analysed by importing into nVivo and following the six-phase thematic analysis process as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) below:

1. Familiarising yourself with your data. Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and revising the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes: Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, coding data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes: Collating codes into potential themes, gatå†hering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes: Checking the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes: Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report: The final opportunity for analysis by selecting and compiling selected extracts and relating back to the analysis of the initial research issue.

I n May 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive published a policy document setting out the power-sharing Executive’s approach to building a shared society in Northern Ireland — Together: Building a United Community. In this document the Executive made a commitment to reduce and remove all peace walls by 2023. In January 2012, the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) launched a funding programme to support local communities wishing to work towards beginning the process of transformation of the peace walls. They have invested substantial funds to positively transform interface neighbourhoods through a range of confidence and relationship building interventions delivered through community-based organisations. Any efforts to remove the walls will be decided by the communities themselves, without whose permission, everyone has agreed the walls will not be touched.

The Imagine project has engaged with local residents in a process on both sides of the interface and consulted them on their views on how the interface and adjacent lands can improve the quality of life and increase confidence in the process. The project is resident-led carried out by the two based community groups, the Lower Oldpark Community Regeneration Forum, and the Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum, supported by outside agencies with relevant local authority responsibility and appropriate expertise.

The objectives of the project are to engage the two communities to tackle the consequences of living by an interface and identify sites where improvements are possible and achievable. It aims to engage both communities in a meaningful way without compromising the needs for personal and household safety, alongside wider regeneration plans for the area, including housing regeneration at Lower Oldpark the re-development of Girdwood Park, the activities within the Crumlin Road Gaol and surrounding area. It aims to encourage local residents to develop a vision for the area and deploy visual tools whilst developing a ten-year plan for this interface area.

When Imagine began in January 2014 there were many reasons to have high hopes that the project could be part of this apparent new Government commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. However, the sudden announcement that there was a plan to create a ten year programme to reduce, and remove all interface barriers by 2023 was not well received by many residents living at or close by the interface barrier between Lower Oldpark and Lower Cliftonville.

This had a very negative impact upon the Imagine project with residents assuming that we ‘the workers’ would then be implementing the immediate removal of the local interface barrier. In recent years we have worked very hard in establishing trust in the communities following this.

Having weathered the storms and tried to address the issues that people had, we have been able to make progress on most of our key objectives. The process of transformation of the peace walls. The Imagine Peace Walls Programme Reference Group are in regular contact and are usually updated on the progress of the project.

The landscape is transformed, from the Lower Oldpark area, where previously the view of the city centre and docks was obscured by the Girdwood wall. From Bucovate the view of Belfast Mountains is now apparent.

There has been meaningful cross-community dialogue between women’s groups from across the Lower Oldpark and Cliftonville areas and a range of cross-city and cross-community youth programmes including a 3D modelling workshop and media course addressing the peace walls. The Imagine Peace Walls Programme Reference Group are in regular contact and are regularly updated on the progress of the project. This involves the Department of Justice, the Housing Executive, Belfast City Council and the PSNI.

A major success to date is the regeneration of the Girdwood Barracks on Cliftonpark Avenue through the EU’s PEACE III Programme. Local community representatives have worked together to manage the process of transformation of this site from an unused contested space into a ‘shaded space’. The Girdwood community hub is a ‘state-of-the-art’ shared space hub which offers first-class leisure, community and education facilities. Sixty nine social houses have been built on the Girdwood site by APEX Housing Association. A final housing phase will ensure housing on Cliftonpark Avenue. There will be further developments within the site for a sports centre of excellence and social enterprises. The Girdwood hub and housing will change not only the physical landscape but the wider social dynamics of the area. It is a landmark project, a real opportunity which could have wide-ranging impact on the regeneration of this divided part of the city.

Some residents within the Lower Oldpark community were reluctant of the removal of the boundary wall which they feared would cause sectarian attacks and violence. The process of transformation had to be managed very delicately. The Girdwood Hub opened in January 2015 and has been received well by the community.

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