

## **Introduction:**

Short Strand is a predominantly Catholic/nationalist enclave community situated on the inner-city edge of predominantly Protestant/unionist East Belfast. The 'Inner East interface' is a term coined to describe the set of 'peacelines', which effectively mark the boundaries between Short Strand and its neighbouring Protestant/unionist communities. The area has been characterised over many years by violence particularly at key 'flashpoint' interface areas including Bryson Street and Madrid Street, which mark boundaries between Short Strand and neighbouring predominantly Protestant/unionist Lower Newtownards Road and Thistle Court communities.

Suffolk estate is a small predominantly Protestant/unionist enclave community situated on the outer edge of predominantly Catholic/nationalist West Belfast. The 'Outer West interface', similarly, denotes the 'peacelines' which mark the boundaries between Suffolk and its neighbouring predominantly Catholic/nationalist communities. In turn, this area has been characterised by violence particularly at the Stewartstown Road interface, which effectively marks the boundary between Suffolk estate and the neighbouring predominantly Catholic/nationalist Lenadoon community.

This short booklet aims to outline some of the processes, underway since 1995, through which a number of community activists and workers in each area have sought to address some key issues relating to conflict and division between their communities.

The booklet is arranged in three sections. The first section describes the process involving Suffolk Community Forum and Lenadoon Community Forum. The second section, similarly, describes the work of the Inner East Interface Group. The final section offers a discussion of some key issues arising from the case studies and possible patterns emerging.

This booklet has been produced through consultation and with the agreement of the current memberships of the groups concerned.

## **1. Suffolk Community Forum/Lenadoon Community Forum:**

The Belfast Interface Project, as part of its initial 'scoping exercise' carried out a number of structured interviews with community groups in interface areas of Belfast, including both Suffolk estate and Lenadoon. Each interview addressed three areas: local concerns, concerns regarding the interface and concerns regarding the 'other' community.

Between October '95 and June '96 interviews were carried out with the committees of Suffolk Residents Association and Lenadoon Development Association. With their agreement, this interview information was exchanged in confidence between the two groups so that each could see what the other had said. The groups raised comments and queries regarding the other's interview transcript, and these were also exchanged between the groups. An agreed prerequisite of this process was that there was no requirement that the groups should meet unless they wished to do so.

Overlapping with this process, interviews were also carried out with the two larger 'umbrella' groups from each area, of which each smaller group was a constituent member - Suffolk Community Forum (SCF – originally known as Suffolk Strategy Group) and Lenadoon Community Forum (LCF). Interviews and comments were also exchanged between these two groups. This process eventually subsumed the exchanges between the two smaller groups as they agreed to continue their 'dialogue' through the exchanges between the larger groups of which they were members.

The interview exchange process was stimulating, informative, and often frustrating for those involved, with long time lags between each group's receipt of the other's comments. This process culminated in a request from LCF to meet with SCF in order to further discuss the issues that had been raised to date. In the aftermath of 'Drumcree Two' (summer '96), SCF and LCF agreed a set of guidelines under which they might be prepared to meet. A small working group, made up of three members from each larger group, was formed in order to plan a future joint meeting between the two larger groups.

Each group received and agreed the names of the people who were to become the working group, and this small group met on a number of occasions between October and December '96 to plan the larger joint meeting which was held on 17 December at a hotel which was agreed as a neutral venue. Two people facilitated the joint meeting, one from each perceived religious/political affiliation. The format of the joint meeting was that small 'mixed' groups would hold discussions and then 'feed back' to larger group discussion. The working group had planned that the topics for discussion would include 'the things we think we have in common', 'the difficulties that exist between us' and 'how we can be better neighbours'. As it turned out on the day, the small groups were so engrossed in their discussion and debate that there was insufficient time to address the whole agenda. This aside, those who attended (approx 12 from each group) felt that the day had been useful and positive and that further joint meetings would be helpful.

Following this meeting, it was agreed that a report on the day would be written up and circulated widely within each community. This would enable the 'joint' group to examine local feedback in order to check whether or not there existed a sufficient local mandate to continue. At this time in Suffolk, a loyalist attack was carried out upon a local 'mixed' relationship in the estate. This caused the Suffolk members of the small working group to

become concerned that their continuation of contact with activists from Lenadoon might make them targets of loyalists who were against such contact. Subsequently the report was not circulated within Suffolk.

For this reason more than any other, and despite requests from LCF, the joint working party did not reconvene with 'formal' cross-community contact diminishing in the period between February and the summer of '97. Some members of SCF did, however, meet with local people from the mainly Catholic/nationalist Garnock Hill/Arlington area in early July to discuss ways of reducing violence at that interface with Suffolk.

During July '97, following the disturbances associated with the marching season and 'Drumcree Three', the Suffolk and Lenadoon estates experienced possibly the worst violence seen there since the early 1970's.

As a way of preparing for possible civil disturbance in a number of interface areas of Belfast over this summer period, MBW had allocated a mobile phone to a local community activist in Suffolk and also in Lenadoon. These activists, however, did not know each other and the Suffolk activist was completely unfamiliar with the operation of the phone. This resulted in the Suffolk activist being unaware that Lenadoon activists had left messages on the phone. Some of the Lenadoon activists who were known to Suffolk, including members of the small joint working group, were on holiday at the time, so that communication across the interface was difficult, disjointed and confused. In Lenadoon, meanwhile, community activists were trying to cope not just with inter-community violence across the interface, but with intra community violence as property and cars were attacked in Catholic/nationalist areas. Much of the violence directed against and within both areas was caused by people who came there from outside of the two areas. In the midst of this violence and its immediate aftermath, a local newspaper carried a series of articles that served to further inflame local feelings. It was later discovered that a number of 'quotes' had been printed without interviewing the people concerned.

Following this violence, a number of approaches were made by LCF to SCF, requesting that the groups should meet to discuss how best to proceed. In the light of the violence, however, it was felt by SCF that a cooling-off period was necessary on their part as their confidence in the process had been shaken and that their community would not, at that point, support such a meeting. Not long after this SCF's application for funding for a major project was turned down. The project aimed to relocate Suffolk community groups in the presently derelict flats above and refurbish for commercial use the largely empty shop units below in a large block of shops and flats along the interface at the front of the Stewartstown Road. At the same time, a number of other funders made it clear to the group that such a large project was much more likely to be successful in attracting funding if carried out on a cross-community basis.

With this to concentrate their minds, and with ever more news filtering into Suffolk that the majority of violence directed at the estate had come from further afield than Lenadoon, SCF agreed that three members should meet with three members from LCF. The aim of this meeting was to see if there existed enough common ground to resume regular contact and perhaps adopt the economic regeneration project as a jointly managed cross-community project. This joint 'clear the air' meeting took place in October '97. A number of issues were raised including: the lack of communication between the groups between February '97 and the summer and resulting lack of joint preparation to defuse/reduce violence; the sense of

hurt felt by both communities as a result of the summer violence and the difficulties for both communities in regaining trust, and finally the possibilities and potential of the economic regeneration project.

Following this a presentation was made to LCF in early November on the economic regeneration project. This was attended by NIHE, IFI and members of both SCF and LCF. The presentation was received very positively by LCF as being of practical benefit to both communities. In late November the small joint group met again, this time with five people from SCF and five from LCF. On 26 November LCF held a public meeting in lower Lenadoon (which is closest to Suffolk) to assess local support for the project. LCF were satisfied from the meeting that the project had the overwhelming support of people from this area. On 3 December 1997 SCF carried out the same process within Suffolk estate and held a public meeting in Carnanmore Park Community Centre. After some discussion, SCF received unanimous support that the project should go ahead.

Around the same time, a joint group between the two areas was formed. This group aimed to build a jointly managed family centre/childcare project along the interface. This project's steering group was made up of representatives of LCF and SCF, and also included parent representatives and local professionals from both communities. The project, it was agreed, would cater for children from both communities.

Following this, members of LCF and SCF have attended a number of parallel sets of joint meetings. One set of meetings has been focused entirely upon the joint economic regeneration project and another upon the Family Centre project. These meetings address the practical items of business required in order to keep these projects moving forward. Meanwhile, another set of meetings has explored a broader range of issues including the state of relations between the two local communities and how best to attempt to reduce local tension and violence. This has allowed for the frank exchange of views on a wide range of issues. The groups have felt that the sets of meetings are complementary – the trust needed to engage in the economic regeneration project and the joint family centre is generated through the broader meetings, while the worth of the broader meetings is supplied by the practical benefits of the economic regeneration project and the Family Centre project.

Over the period January to July 1998, within the broader meetings, much time was devoted to discussion of how best to try to prevent a repeat of the violence of summer 1997. With this in mind the groups issued, in early summer, joint statements to a range of groups and agencies including the local press and political parties, loyal orders and residents groups. These statements emphasised their wish that the summer of 1998 should not be marked by violence along their interface and that any protest regarding the contentious marching issue should be peaceful and non-confrontational. Significantly, each group also sought and secured local political support on this issue, with public statements issued through local press by local political leaders within Sinn Fein, UDP, and PUP.

In June '98 Making Belfast Work again issued two mobile phones, one to a member of each group. These were supplemented by a range of other contacts which had by now been established between the groups.

During the period from the beginning through to the middle of July, there was large-scale violence directed mostly against the security forces in Protestant/unionist areas across

Northern Ireland and in Belfast. These took place in response to the Parades Commission's decision not to allow the Portadown Orange Lodge to march along the Garvaghy Road.

Throughout this period, a relatively small group of people from Suffolk (including a local minister) and from Lenadoon patrolled their interface from each side, particularly at night. They kept in contact in order to defuse rumour and encouraged groups of young people in particular away from the interface, where their very presence might be seen as provocative. In marked contrast to the previous summer, there was very little violence across the Suffolk/Lenadoon interface during this period. This can be attributed to a combination of factors including the active involvement of community activists and political leaders in working to prevent violence. This was supported by tacit agreement from the main paramilitary organisations which were on cease-fire to do nothing which would provoke or inflame the situation. Other factors included the changed larger political climate following the Belfast Agreement, the Referendum, the election to the new shadow NI Assembly, and the widespread revulsion against violence which followed, especially, the tragic deaths of the Quinn children in Ballymoney.

During this summer period, representatives of Suffolk Community Forum also met with residents of the nearby Garnock Hill/Arlington area together with representatives of RUC and DoE and some local young people. The aim of the meeting was to discuss joint concerns regarding growing violence at this interface along the lower edge of Suffolk estate along the Blacks Road. It became clear that both communities were united in condemning this violence and that, if the violence were to continue, the security forces' preferred response would be to fence off the area of open land in question. This would effectively have created a sterile 'exclusion zone' which would be to the detriment of both communities. Violence at this interface subsequently declined also.

While violence had been greatly reduced, however, this was certainly not 'peace'. Local levels of tension and fear in both communities were massively high over this key period, with each community absolutely dreading a repeat of the violence of the previous summer.

Following the summer period, the joint groups have continued to meet through the economic regeneration project, the Family Centre project, and the general 'interface' meetings. It is important to note that while violence was very significantly reduced during the summer period, it has not been eliminated and sporadic outbreaks of violence have continued. These are, often, apparently 'out of the blue' and more often than not involve young people whether from within or outside of the local area.

Over this period, also, Suffolk Community Forum has accepted an invitation to join the West Belfast Partnership Board in the belief that this would be firmly in the interest of the Suffolk community.

At the time of writing, the economic regeneration project shows signs of beginning to come towards possible fruition. A major retailer has expressed an interest in opening an outlet along the interface, and NIHE have approved (to date) the proposal to regenerate the blighted block of shops and empty flats both for commercial and community use. Both projects have also been approved at public meetings held in March 1999 in both Suffolk and Lenadoon. Disappointingly for the family centre group, an application for funding has been unsuccessful, and this has been a major blow. Undaunted, this group is determined to

continue to promote this project as of key practical and long-term benefit to both communities.

Meanwhile the general 'interface' group continues to discuss issues of concern to both communities. These include possible future work with local young people and other interest groups, while continuing to plan to reduce local tension and violence over the summer period of 1999.

A major issue over the past year has been concern over the current dismantlement of the ACE and Community Work Programmes within both areas, in common with other areas of Northern Ireland, due to take effect from 31 July 1999. Within both Suffolk and Lenadoon ACE and CWP have been the major local employers and the bedrock upon which local community infrastructure has been built in recent years. This community infrastructure has helped communities in Suffolk and Lenadoon to provide local 'hubs' and support systems, which have enabled both communities to 'weather the storm' throughout the worst of the Troubles here. It is important to note that local employment schemes such as ACE and CWP are especially valued in interface areas where, otherwise, mobility to access employment and training opportunities can be greatly limited.

LCF and SCF share a deep concern that the replacement of ACE and CWP with 'New Deal' by the Training and Employment Agency will effectively axe much of their community infrastructures. This will have a major impact upon the work that the groups will be able to carry out in the future. With this in mind representatives of SCF and LCF have sought meetings with a range of government representatives in an effort to reverse this decision or at least postpone the decision until a new Assembly may be able to address this issue. So far this has been without success.

## **2. The Inner East Interface Group:**

During October '95 a group of local community activists from the Inner East Belfast area began to meet to discuss possible ways forward in reducing tension and sectarian violence at the interface. Some of the issues raised at this meeting were to surface again and again as key concerns in future meetings. These included: the significant role played by young people in intercommunity violence, the great capacity for the parade/protest issue to ignite violence at the interface, and the relative lack of community infrastructure particularly on the Protestant/unionist side of the interface with Bryson Street at Thistle Court and Madrid Street.

Early contacts were successful in reducing local violence by encouraging young people away from each side of the interface so that 'flashpoint' situations were reduced. Plans were also discussed to regenerate the bleak interface buffer zone area of Madrid Street by converting a derelict site there into a cross-community meeting place with a 'peace garden' in adjacent land. It was recognised that this project would only be successful if local people were thoroughly consulted and their views taken on board in terms of how they would most like to see the land used. It was also recognised that in order to be successful the project would need to address the needs of young people on both sides of the interface, as otherwise the project would be at risk of vandalism. A local residents' association also formed which aimed to represent the people of the predominantly Protestant/unionist Thistle Court area, and was allocated a house by NIHE at the corner of the interface.

It is important to bear in mind that these meetings and plans were drawn up during the heady days of the first joint cease-fire period. Activists were, with hindsight, perhaps overly optimistic about what they could achieve through co-operation.

By spring of '96 however, the Major government had given its response to the 'Mitchell report' on arms decommissioning, the IRA's cease-fire had ended, and the situation had changed. Protestant/unionist activists found it increasingly compromising to attend meetings of the group in the midst of the IRA's latest campaign. Indeed some felt unable to continue until the cease-fire would be restored. Local violence began to rise here as in other parts of Belfast and elsewhere across Northern Ireland. The summer of '96 was a particularly tense time as the tensions associated with the Drumcree stand-off spread to this part of the city and the group felt that they simply could not meet during this time of fear. The Thistle Court residents association also folded during this time due to apathy and lack of local support together with the fact that their community house was subject to persistent vandalism and sectarian attack.

By the winter of '96 the interface group had begun to meet again and had identified a need to broaden its membership wider than the local interface area. It was felt that this was needed in order to enlist help and support from further afield for their aims of reducing local violence, promoting local community development work particularly in Protestant/unionist areas nearby, and developing opportunities for meaningful cross-community work on issues of common benefit.

With this in mind a seminar was held in January '97, to which a broader representation of community activists from the greater East Belfast area were invited. At the seminar, workers from the Springfield Inter-Community Development Project (perhaps the longest-established interface project in Belfast) gave a presentation about how that project originated and what it has achieved through work on either side of the Shankill/Springfield interface. This was followed by a discussion about how best to address interface issues in East Belfast. Despite this attempt to create broader interest in interface issues, the core group remained unchanged.

In the run up to the summer of '97, paramilitary violence continued to grow from a number of quarters including the INLA and IRA as well as a number of loyalist groups including, increasingly, the LVF. Against this backdrop, the group discontinued meetings in June, agreeing that it was necessary to redefine ground rules for meetings before these could restart.

The whole group did not meet during the summer, but a number of key 'single identity' meetings were held throughout this period. These meetings helped to clarify 'sticking' points and agree the terms of reference under which the group could meet in the future.

During this period, at the height of 'Drumcree Three' with its associated civil disturbance across the province, a small number of local activists with a connection to the group kept in contact with each other through mobile phones - some acquired through the assistance of Making Belfast Work. These activists were effective, possibly for the first time, in systematically and deliberately defusing local 'flashpoint' scenarios by encouraging groups of people away from the interface where otherwise they may have engaged in or attracted intercommunity violence. Often this required communication to ensure that reciprocal actions were carried out on each side of the interface. While not all of the activists felt able to keep in contact with an 'opposite number' from within the other community, each was able to contact someone from within their own community who could do so. In this way a very small number of activists acted as conduits on behalf of the others. Significantly, local activists felt that their interface was "one of the quietest in Belfast" over that summer.

In October '97, the core group met to discuss ground rules under which they would be able to continue to work together. The group recognised the value and effectiveness of their interventions in defusing violence over the summer and agreed a number of ground rules. These addressed issues such as confidentiality and sensitivity, use of the media, membership of and commitment to the group, and the need to draw up a development plan of practical work which could be achieved in the newly unfolding context of joint cease-fires.

Within weeks, however, small resumptions of interface violence had begun mostly as a result of groups of young people breaking windows etc. Making Belfast Work by this time had discontinued their 'crisis intervention' policy of allocating mobile phones to community activists in interface areas. There appeared to be a backlash from within some of the Protestant/unionist community as to the usefulness and desirability of 'their' activists attending meetings of the Inner East Interface Group, thus compromising some of those who otherwise would attend meetings.

Subsequently in late 1997 the group agreed that its main priorities should be:

- to try to minimise local tension and violence;



- to carry out work on a 'single identity' basis with local residents on either side of the interface;
- to aim to improve the physical appearance of the interface area through consultation with local people.

The group used funding from the Community Relations Council to hire more mobile phones before the Christmas '97 holiday period in order to improve communication. It was felt that it is especially during holiday periods that young people are more likely to engage in interface violence.

Following the Christmas period, the group agreed to extend the hire of the phones indefinitely. The phones have proved effective when fast communication is needed and this kind of violence-reducing work, although most needed during the holiday and parades/protest periods, can be required at almost any time.

In early 1998 the group began to draw up a survey to be carried out separately with residents on each side of the interface. Through the survey the group hoped to gain local views regarding key issues of concern to residents and how best to proceed. The possible refurbishing of two derelict houses at the interface for inter community use would also be subject to local consultation through the survey.

In order to maximise local involvement in this consultation exercise, the group agreed to enlist and train, on a single identity basis, local people to carry out the survey within each interface community. Given the rapidly approaching stressful summer-period, it was agreed that the survey should be carried out following this period rather than beforehand.

During the summer of 1998, as per the previous year, a small group of activists from both communities patrolled the stretches of interface often until very late at night. Where necessary, they kept in contact in order to defuse rumour and pull back groups of people who might otherwise have become involved in intercommunity violence. As previously, not all activists were in contact with an 'opposite number' from within the other community, and so a number of key activists acted as conduits on behalf of others.

During the weekend of 3-5 July a very tense situation developed within Short Strand following what was perceived locally as a 'heavy handed' policing operation in the area. After the withdrawal of the police and in response to local tension and anger, a public meeting was held within Short Strand which was attended by approximately 300 people – a large turnout by local standards. At the public meeting local community leaders and representatives of Sinn Fein appealed for calm and stressed the need not to add to tensions locally and province wide by engaging in violence. These appeals were influential in providing positive leadership within the area, and in sending an important message to the security forces and to the nearby unionist community that there was no desire within Short Strand for violence.

Public statements issued by UDP and PUP representatives, equally, were extremely influential in signalling that these parties supported the loyalist right to peaceful protest regarding the marching issue, but would not support violence as a means of protest.

As in the previous summer violence at the interface was greatly reduced through these actions, though local fear and tension remained high throughout this period.

The surveys were carried out within each community over an extended period from the winter of 1998 onwards.

Over the period from summer '98 to spring of '99, while sporadic violence has occurred occasionally, activists feel that the number of incidents involving larger groups of rioters has continued to fall. As one activist put it: "It's gone from nobody's stopping it, to people like us who are on call and can be here in minutes to stop it, to the rioters knowing it'll be stopped – word gets around". It is an indication of the deep-seated 'traditional' nature of such rioting that activists are still required to respond to local requests to come to the interface to draw young people away from such confrontations.

Over this period also, responsibility for such communication has lain with a handful of activists – perhaps no more than two or at most three from each community. Indeed it would be true to say that the bulk of the work of the group over this period of time has been carried out by a very small number of local people, with access to support from other nearby agencies and groupings as these are needed. Part of this consultation process has involved the RUC, whose approach has become more pragmatic.

With the deadline approaching, in the winter of 1998/99, for applications to the Belfast European Partnership Board, the group agreed to draw up a joint application under the 'interfaces and peacelines' funding category. The group applied for funding to implement a range of measures aimed to help consolidate and build upon the progress already achieved. These include a recognition of the need for capacity-building work particularly within the local Protestant/unionist community through provision of a community leadership training programme. Proposed measures also include single identity programmes aimed at young people within both communities, programmes of training in conflict resolution and negotiation skills, and the organisation of seminars and workshops on issues such as housing, the local environment, and local economic development.

A potential difficulty for the group in implementing this programme is that, as one activist put it: "We're all up to our eyes in other work within our communities and, while we want this to happen, it's hard to make the time to make sure it all gets done".

There is a commitment within the group to help local people collectively to find solutions to local problems. There is also a hope that, at some stage in the future, both communities will be able to engage in this on a broader basis through working together on these issues. As one activist put it: "If anyone had said to me three years ago that we'd still be working together now I wouldn't have believed it. We should give ourselves a clap on the back. We've built trust that wasn't there before, we've reduced local violence, other agencies are now starting to come to us for advice and ideas on how to regenerate the area, and now we have a strategy for moving forward. We don't know if it'll work, but at least it's a strategy that makes sense to us."

At the time of writing the Inner East Interface Group is smaller in numbers than at any time in its history, with a particular lack of broad representation from within the local East Belfast Protestant/unionist community. At the same time there are encouraging signs that a local

community development infrastructure has begun to form amongst the Protestant/unionist interface community and that the approach taken by the interface group, although slow and often frustrating, may be an appropriate one.

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### **3. Discussion:**

#### **Common issues:**

In all of the areas, the same key common issues were of concern to activists:

- the need to reduce interface violence;
- the need to address the needs of young people who are largely, post ceasefires, responsible for the violence;
- the need to increase understanding and trust between the communities;
- the need to improve the local area both economically and environmentally.

#### **Co-operation:**

Co-operation between activists in addressing these issues has produced some positive results.

In Inner East Belfast for example, activists from both communities were instrumental in reducing inter-community violence over the summers of 1997 and 1998. In Outer West Belfast, there are hopeful signs that co-operation in managing a local joint economic regeneration project will bring benefits to both Suffolk and Lenadoon. Finally, through meeting together there has been an increase in channels of communication and understanding between activists from each community and a relative reduction in tension in these areas.

#### **The Enclave Experience:**

Every interface area is unique and Short Strand in Inner East Belfast and Suffolk in Outer West, although both enclaves, are in many ways very different communities. Short Strand has a relatively large and growing population (approx. 4,000 residents) and has a high proportion of young families. Suffolk's population has fallen from 980 in 1991 to approximately 830 in 1998 and has a relatively high proportion of elderly householders.

Over the last 25 years Suffolk has become more and more cut-off from its natural links with nearby Protestant/unionist areas, from its potential links with Catholic/nationalist areas, and from its access to relatively neutral areas. This has been due to the steady building of predominantly Catholic/nationalist housing along the Black's Road and the perception within Suffolk that access is restricted to Stewartstown Road. Thus Suffolk has become steadily more isolated from its access to facilities and services outside the immediate area. Over the same period Short Strand's population has steadily grown larger, maintained links with nearby nationalist areas and has always had the relatively neutral routes of East Bridge Street and Bridge End into the safer city centre and beyond. As in Suffolk, there would be a common perception within Short Strand that it is often not safe, particularly for males, to access facilities and services within the 'other' community.

The areas have striking similarities in terms of what might be termed the 'enclave experience'. Each community lives with the constant and real fear of sectarian attack and intimidation. Each lives with the perceived 'veto' imposed by the surrounding 'other' community over its use of facilities, services, public transport etc. This perceived veto applies both within the 'other' community and in order to move through the 'other' community. Each exhibits high levels of unemployment and other indicators of social and economic disadvantage. Each worries about its future ability to overcome these odds. This is not to say of course that violence is always one-sided, directed towards each enclave area alone, since this is patently not the case. Rather it would be true to say that for each enclave area many of the resources and freedoms required in order to grow and develop are sited largely within the 'other' community.

Enclave areas hold a symbolic significance in the perceptions of their surrounding communities where, often, enclave community members may be the only Catholics/Protestants they may come into regular contact with. This contact colours, and is often coloured by, received prejudice and experience regarding the 'other' community. In this way enclave areas may often be perceived certainly by some elements within the surrounding community, as 'the enemy in our midst'.

One consequence of this is the way in which enclave areas serve as 'whipping boy' in relation to larger political issues largely beyond their control. The experience of violence directed towards Suffolk as part of widespread nationalist anger and protest at the decision to allow the march through Garvaghy Road in the summer of '97 has already been described. In a similar way, Short Strand has often received violence in the past as part of unionist anger and protest when the decision is taken not to allow an Orange march to go ahead (for example, across the Ormeau bridge).

In this way enclave areas often experience violence as the result of the apparent achievement of some of the goals of their own 'natural' cultural and political hinterland. This feature is common to interface areas generally. The option which is most likely not to result in violence - namely accommodation between parties rather than one appearing to win at the other's expense - is often the most elusive and rarely appears the most sought after.

Enclave areas also have a symbolic significance within the enclave community's own hinterland. For example, an attack upon Short Strand would be seen by many nationalists elsewhere as an attack upon their culture and community while the same would be true of unionists of an attack upon Suffolk.

In this way, enclave areas are both symptoms and symbols of a complex interaction between larger cultural and political processes. Meanwhile the issues both Suffolk and Short Strand seek to address are similar both to each other and to the wider political process - 'how can our minority be accommodated within your majority?'

### **Differential development:**

There is a lower level of community development infrastructure in both Protestant/unionist East Belfast and Suffolk estate than in Catholic/nationalist Short Strand or Lenadoon. This is manifest through fewer people involved in local community activity and fewer community

groups. Having said this, it should be clear from the case studies that this situation is changing significantly over time with increasing community development activity in both Protestant/unionist areas.

Within the Protestant/unionist areas also there is to some extent a feeling of insecurity in that the greater political process is perceived as granting undue concessions to Catholic/nationalists and that any intercommunity dialogue/activity should therefore be viewed with the same caution. This may in part explain why there appears to be a greater fear by Protestants/unionists in these areas of loyalist paramilitaries than by Catholic/nationalists of republican paramilitaries with regard to paramilitary attitudes to intercommunity dialogue. Within the Protestant/unionist areas and within Protestant/unionist culture generally, there is a tradition of localised and diverse command structures reflecting the broad cultural diversity within the Protestant tradition. This diversity, and accompanying fragmentation, applies not just within the community sector but also within the paramilitary organisations, the churches and political parties.

We are accustomed for example to speaking of Catholics and Protestants as if each tradition has clearly defined linkages which hold it together as a unified structure. It is worth noting that a Protestant may belong to any one of a large number of different Protestant denominations e.g. Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Free Presbyterian and many more with relatively little opportunity for contact between these. Similarly, within the loyalist paramilitary movements a range of organisations exist which reflect a broad spread of loyalist political and historical origins. Finally, the emergence of new political parties in recent years such as the UDP and PUP has been accompanied by grass-roots activism that has brought some real benefits to working class communities. Competition and conflict have inevitably, however, accompanied this as each party within the broad unionist family has sought to consolidate its position.

For all of these reasons the process of reaching consensus within the Protestant/unionist interface communities studied, particularly on contentious issues, is slow and difficult. This requires a degree of consultation for which the necessary infrastructure is largely under-developed, and takes place against a backdrop of insecurity with regard to the present political situation.

In contrast, there is a much longer history of community development activity within both Short Strand and Lenadoon, with well-defined and long-standing local community infrastructures in both areas. Within the Catholic/nationalist areas, also, there is a tradition of centralised and hierarchical command structures, for example within the Catholic church and education system, the paramilitary organisation of the IRA, etc. There is of course only one kind of Catholic church and there is a small number of nationalist political parties, with ideological differences having been clarified a considerable time ago. In relation to intercommunity dialogue, 'fear of retribution from within our own community' has not been as major a factor within these areas except in terms of contact with the security forces. This is not to minimise the very real suspicion, fear, grief and anger which exists within the nationalist as well as the unionist community.

For all of these reasons the process of reaching consensus within Short Strand and Lenadoon regarding contentious issues, while not without difficulty, has appeared more straightforward with clearer lines of communication and accountability.

Relating all of this to the work in Inner East and Outer West, one recurring theme has been that Catholic/nationalist community groups have appeared to desire to move forward into intercommunity dialogue at a greater speed, often, than the Protestant/unionist groups and activists appear to have been able to accommodate despite their desire to do so, given the range of checks and balances within their communities.

The speed of movement into and within a process of intercommunity dialogue may not necessarily indicate either lack of commitment or over-ambition, although they may often be interpreted this way by 'the other side', and may instead be natural reflections of variations between Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist culture, society and organisation.

In both Inner East and Outer West, a major challenge for activists will be to address these issues of differential development while accepting that any movement forward will often appear too fast to one 'side' and at the same time too slow to the other.

It is worth noting that, throughout the period covered by this study, all of the groups concerned have recognised the need to ensure that local mandates are sought and secured before action is taken on possibly contentious local issues.

### **Land and Territory:**

In Suffolk and the Protestant/unionist East Belfast interface community, there are a significant number of void dwellings and a higher proportion of elderly people. In Lenadoon and Short Strand there are few empty dwellings, with relatively little green play space, and these areas are characterised by a higher proportion of younger families.

Within the Catholic/nationalist areas there would be the view that 'our community is expanding - we need more houses' while within the Protestant/unionist areas there is to some extent a view that 'Catholic/nationalists want our houses'. These views reflect, in microcosm, the larger demographic process within Northern Ireland i.e. a steadily increasing Catholic/nationalist proportion of the population. These views and fears form part of every individual's legitimately held set of beliefs and it is important that any process of intercommunity or intra-community dialogue addresses these transparently and openly. In essence, there is a need for each community to understand and respect each other's concerns as meaningful dialogue is only possible when these concerns are respected even if they are not shared.

For example in Outer West Belfast Protestant/unionist activists are clear that, although they are committed to intercommunity dialogue and co-operation on issues of common benefit, this does not in any way dilute their view that Suffolk will remain a predominantly Protestant/unionist estate for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile for the Catholic/nationalist activists their respect for this view does not dilute their hope that, through increased understanding and co-operation, there may come a time when the two communities can peacefully integrate.

### **Outside influences:**

Throughout the processes described earlier 'outside' influences have had profound effects, both positive and negative, on local ability and commitment to engage in intercommunity dialogue. The Conservative government's response to the Mitchell Report and the IRA's break of its cease-fire in February '96 had a devastating impact on both unionist and nationalist faith in intercommunity dialogue and the effects of this are still keenly felt today. Similarly, the INLA threat of March '97 had the effect of minimising, temporarily at least, loyalist involvement in the Inner East Interface Group. The growth and activity of the LVF and other loyalist paramilitary groupings have also heavily influenced both Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist ability and commitment to engage in dialogue, particularly over the winter of 1997/98.

The contentious issue of marches and parades inflames passions every summer and in recent years has been the greatest single spark to intercommunity violence across the interface in both Inner East and Outer West Belfast. Lack of accommodation and agreement regarding contentious marches such as those along the Garvaghy Road and Ormeau Road and elsewhere creates very real fear of violence amongst both nationalist and unionist communities in interface areas far from those sites.

The deeply ingrained socialisation of young people into violence at the interface has been a constant theme within both areas. This pattern is particularly evident during good weather, holiday periods, and times of political tension when young people come to the interface often from far afield.

The role of the media at times of tension must also be highlighted. In both East and West Belfast local newspapers have printed stories which have almost seemed designed to promote local fear, anger, outrage and violence. In West Belfast, for example, a local newspaper carried a number of articles at the height of the civil unrest of summer '97, beginning with the formula "X (nationalist or unionist) hit out angrily at suggestions by Y (opposite affiliation) that..." - the language alone evokes visions of violence. There is a need for editors to consider carefully their role in peace-building within this context.

### **Resources:**

One issue, which surfaced many times in both East and West Belfast, is the lack of neutral venues for meetings between activists. There is often no neutral or 'safe' space in interface areas. In practical terms this meant that, especially in times of tension, city centre venues were used or hotels that were accessible by car only.

The Belfast Interface Project's role throughout varied over time, ranging from convenor to shuttle mediator and 'trusted third party' on occasions when direct communication between activists was temporarily impossible. This independent 'honest broker' role was particularly useful during times of tension or temporary breakdown of communication.

### **Fear of retribution:**

An examination of the mechanics of interface violence highlights certain trends. Each 'hinterland' community's recourse to violence inevitably means that its own interface community will be the next victim as the violence-hurt-anger-violence cycle strikes at each interface in turn. In this respect it is true to say that hinterland communities and those that

use violence to represent them are in denial of their part in the mechanics of intercommunity violence. Each interface community is in effect ritually and regularly sacrificed for the greater good of its hinterland community. At the same time 'fear of retribution from within our own community' remains a major barrier to intercommunity dialogue, and appears to be especially true within the Protestant/unionist community.

Interface communities and activists are often caught in a no win situation. If they enter into intercommunity dialogue they risk retribution from within their own communities, yet if they do not they risk further intercommunity violence. It is only when 'hinterland' organisations begin to recognise and address issues relating to their interfaces, that the compound nature of interface disadvantage will be seriously and holistically addressed.

It is these issues in particular which underline the importance of capacity-building work within a single identity context as a precursor to or in tandem with meaningful cross-community work. This is the present intended approach of the Inner East Interface Group.

**End note:**

Given all of the above, it is clear that real and meaningful intercommunity work can be a very slow and frustrating process, often disrupted and punctuated with breaks which may be due to influences beyond the control of those concerned in the work. 'Cooling off' periods are sometimes necessary especially in the aftermath of conflict when communication may be temporarily impossible. It is clear also from the two brief case studies outlined that effective work is not necessarily washed away by intermittent outbreaks of violence and tension, although it may sometimes appear so in the heat of the moment. In all of the areas studied, intermittent violence has continued. At the time of writing, May '99, violence has begun to increase again.

The summers of '97 and '98 in Inner East and Outer West Belfast have shown that local community activists can play a crucial role in reducing violence and stabilising intercommunity relations at the interface. This can help to create a platform on which further work may proceed in the future or, at the very least, prevent a backslide towards an escalation of violence which can very quickly spread further afield.

The processes outlined throughout these case studies are a testament to the courage and creativity of the community groups, activists, and workers concerned, as well as to their sensitivity to the constantly changing circumstances within their communities and the regard with which they are held there.

There is no doubt that similar processes, undertaken across a range of interface communities in Belfast, greatly contributed to the massive reduction in interface violence which characterised, especially, the summer of 1998.



The summers of 1997 and 1998 in Inner East and Outer West Belfast have shown that local community activists can play a crucial role in reducing violence and stabilising intercommunity relations in interface or 'peaceline' areas. This can help to create a platform on which further work may proceed in the future or, at the very least, prevent a backslide towards an escalation of violence which can very quickly spread further afield.

This booklet outlines some of the processes underway since 1995, through which a number of community activists and workers in these areas have sought to address issues relating to local conflict and division.

The processes outlined throughout these case studies are a testament to the courage and creativity of the community groups, activists and workers concerned, as well as to their sensitivity to the constantly changing circumstances within their communities and the regard with which they are held there.