Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium Response to Department of Justice consultation on the community safety strategy 'Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities'.

Deadline 15TH April 2011

1   *Background to the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium*

1.1   The Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium (BCRC) was set up in April 2007 to create a citywide approach to resolving conflict at interfaces. The formation of the BCRC emerged from an extensive process of consultation and negotiation between republican, loyalist and community activists engaged in conflict management at Belfast's interfaces. BCRC is grounded in the experience of grassroots practitioners and aims to create networks to develop good practice and influence policies affecting interface areas. BCRC has an intercommunity steering group and operational support is provided through its partner agencies: Falls Community Council (lead partner), Epic, Intercomm and Charter.

2   *Relevance of BCRC's work and approach*

2.1   The conflict transformation work of BCRC is highly relevant to the aspirations of the Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities' document. BCRC's overall approach to conflict transformation is informed by a shared commitment to the regeneration of interface areas. We believe that real change at interfaces cannot be achieved without the regeneration of interface communities through social and economic advances. This approach is outlined in a discussion paper we have formulated which is attached. The paper outlines six principles for development of interface areas including the approach to walls and barriers.

3   *A new approach*

3.1   BCRC welcomes the aspiration to a new approach outlined in the Community Safety document. We would point out that while most of the responsibility for community safety must lie with the PSNI and criminal justice agencies because of the resources they have, it is essential that there is a genuine partnership with the community and voluntary sector to ensure a community safety approach that delivers to all and prioritises the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Previous policy from the Community Safety Unit took a very top down approach to community safety so there is a pressing need for a stronger community development approach. This strategy document does not yet deliver that approach but it is an improvement on previous policy. We welcome the focus on prevention, diversion and early intervention.

4   *Safer communities*

4.1   BCRC agree that anti-social behaviour is a major concern for interface communities. This was documented in a series of workshops we carried out across Belfast in 2008 and written up in a report.[1] Participants at the workshops identified the need for an effective community policing approach to address anti-social behaviour.

4.2   Antisocial behaviour continues to seriously affect the quality of life for people in working-class interface areas and BCRC believe this should be a priority in community safety strategies. One of the most urgent needs is for a completely different approach to policing that puts community safety at the core. There needs to be a community driven, intercommunity and interagency approach to community safety. This would entail structures that enable communities to identify problems and issues and all organisations and agencies working together to come up with solutions.

4.3   BCRC welcomes the focus on early intervention and the need for joined up thinking to address antisocial behaviour. We would urge the Department of Justice to consider the structural linkages as well as behavioural and to promote an interdepartmental approach to the problem of anti-social behaviour that also addresses underlying causes. There needs to be consideration of linkages with unemployment and poor levels of educational attainment and provision.

4.4   While BCRC is in favour of the designing out crime approach we believe it is much too narrow in focus. We would advocate a much broader approach that links with planning, roads and housing departments to correct the failures of previous policies that have left a legacy of blight and disconnection in the city of Belfast. Policy should support the development of mixed use neighbourhoods with quality connected housing, businesses, streets and roads that support safe neighbourhoods and communities. Planning policy to date has favoured private development without regard to community safety and connected sustainable communities.

4.5   BCRC welcomes the specific attention to the serious issue of domestic and sexual violence. There is however insufficient acknowledgement in the document that women are the majority of victims - this must be made more explicit in order to address the issue of domestic and sexual violence properly. We recommend that the strategy makes explicit reference to partnership with Women's Aid and with women's centres to address this issue. We are conscious that this is a widespread issue that is nevertheless frequently hidden from public view and this makes it more necessary to be guided by the women's sector.

4.6   We feel a similar approach is necessary for the issue of hate crime. Homophobic and racist attacks frequently disappear beneath the radar.

5   *Shared Communities p25 - 28*

5.1   BCRC's strategy for conflict transformation is to build alliances around the shared experience of disadvantage in interface areas. This reflects our understanding that

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[1] Issues & Strategies for Conflict Transformation at Belfast's Interfaces. Available at www.bcrc.eu

reducing the division between rich and poor areas of Belfast is critical to the aspiration of a shared city.

5.2 BCRC's position on interface walls and barriers is that they need to be seen in the context of local regeneration of interface areas in which residents and local communities decide their priorities and give direction for strategies to improve the living conditions of residents.

5.3 BCRC's approach to the issue of interface walls and barriers is informed by the understanding that these barriers are a symptom rather than a cause of division and disadvantage. BCRC are therefore focused on tackling the underlying shared conditions of poverty and marginalization at working-class interface areas rather than taking down the barriers. We believe that the focus on the walls in isolation from other factors is a mistake and works against the most pressing concerns about social and economic disadvantage identified by local communities and residents.

5.4 BCRC have developed six principles that underpin our thinking on interface walls and barriers.
   1. Residents must be at the heart of decision-making about interface areas
   2. The regeneration of interface areas is at the core of addressing the problems experienced by residents.
   3. Residents have identified their priorities and should be listened to.
   4. The focus on walls/barriers in isolation from other issues is detrimental
   5. The walls/barriers are a symptom rather than a cause of division.
   6. Public policies (including planning, education, health, housing) should support the regeneration and sustainable development of interface areas.

5.5 BCRC believe that the Department of Justice and other bodies should take a much more comprehensive and broader definition of shared space that encompasses the idea of equal access to the city and includes the need to address social segregation.

5.6 We note the reference to the tension monitoring model developed by the Belfast Community Safety Partnership but would question the effectiveness of this model as it relies heavily on police reports rather than community networks. To be effective, tension monitoring needs to be designed from the experience and knowledge of community networks and forums.

6   *Confident communities p29 - 32*

6.1 BCRC welcomes the focus on creating confidence within communities in the policing and criminal justice system. We believe that this requires creating genuine partnerships with communities that are resourced to play a full role in the partnership. This approach, one example of which is the West Belfast Community Safety Forum, brings a focus on identifying problems and providing solutions. Follow up by statutory agencies is critical to this approach – one of the most frequent complaints about the PSNI for example is lack of response and lack of follow up when reports are made. Follow up by PSNI and criminal justice agencies is essential to gaining trust within communities.

6.2   We welcome the support for community based restorative justice schemes. Our experience has been that they have been effective in the communities in which we work and we urge continuing support.

6.3   Measuring success should entail establishing benchmarks around effective service delivery and community satisfaction. Success should also be measured by monitoring solutions and results from problems identified through community partnership and engagement.

7   *Delivering in Partnership*

7.1   The role of the community and voluntary sector should be to help identify the problems and issues that compromise community safety and to work with the PSNI and criminal justice agencies to come up with solutions. The community and voluntary sector needs to be resourced to play this role. BCRC recognise that the statutory agencies have many more resources to address community safety so therefore the critical role of the community and voluntary sector is to ensure that these resources are used to the greatest benefit and to make a difference to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities and groups.

8   *Equality Questions*

8.1   We agree that the strategy has equality implications, specifically with regard to hate crime, domestic and sexual violence and working-class communities.

END
Frankie Gallagher
Chair of Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium Steering Group

Joe Marley
Manager, Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium
C/o Falls Community Council, 275 - 277 Falls Road, Belfast BT12 6FD
E. joe.marley@bcrc.eu Tel. 90202030