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I grew up at the top of the Shankill Road and I remember the 'peace walls' going up all around me. The walls made me feel safe but they didn't create peace. In the 1980's when I worked across the interfaces in North Belfast I lived right on a peace line. Then I married a rural woman and moved away from Belfast only to discover that there were just as many interfaces in rural areas even though there were no walls.

Today peace walls continue to go up in spite of the ceasefires, the Agreement and the establishment of a devolved government. The most recent research commissioned by the Community Relations Council identified 88 barriers in Belfast alone.

Over the years I have worked with hundreds of community groups who are tackling sectarianism and improving the quality of life in our most disadvantaged communities and I used to think the peace walls would be there forever. But in recent years community initiatives have resulted in a decrease in the number of serious violent interface incidents and people doing courageous work across the interfaces have started talking about the possibility that these barriers might not be permanent after all.

Research carried out by Millward Brown Ulster for the US-Ireland Alliance last year asked 1,037 people in the Falls/Shankill, Short Strand/Tempemore Avenue and Antrim Rd/Tigers Bay areas for their views.

When asked if they would be in favour or opposed to the walls coming down:

- 21% said now
- 60% said yes, when it's safe enough, but not at present
- 17% said they didn't care if the walls never come down

As a contribution to this changing context, I wrote an independent discussion paper, 'A Process for Removing Interface Barriers' about the sort of process that might make it safe enough for the walls to come down. It proposes a major consultation with people, including children and young people, living in

interface communities. It suggests that every household beside a peaceline should be consulted. When I lived on the peace line I felt vulnerable to attack every single night. Hundreds of families are still living with this fear every day. I can understand they would be terrified at the idea of a barrier being removed prematurely, without consultation and exposing them to sectarian attacks.

The discussion paper suggests that local people would decide if, how and when a barrier should be removed, with the full support of government to plan, resource and support the changes. The community/voluntary sector, local authorities, police, youth service, schools, businesses, elected representatives and churches within interface areas would all play their part.

In October 2008, Junior Minister, Gerry Kelly announced in the Assembly that a new Strategy on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration would include the priority “to dismantle peace walls with communities’ support”. The newly elected Lord Mayor of Belfast, Naomi Long, has already stated her commitment to addressing “barriers which exist physically and in people’s minds”. If our political leaders launch an initiative that makes it safe enough for the peace walls to come down they will have made an enormous step forward, not just for the wider economy, but more importantly, for the security and wellbeing of people living in communities that have suffered so much in the past.

I used to think the peace walls that went up in my childhood would never come down in my lifetime. Now I’m not so sure.

Tony Macaulay

Tony Macaulay is an independent consultant who has worked in community development and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland for the past 25 years. You can download a copy of the full discussion paper at www.macaulayassociates.co.uk/pdfs/peace_wall.pdf