Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Subject:	Notice of Motion re: Removal of Peace Walls
Date:	23 September 2011
Reporting Officer:	Peter McNaney, Chief Executive

1.0	Relevant Background Information
1.1	At the Council meeting on 1 September 11, Alderman Ekin proposed: "This Council can demonstrate true civic leadership by agreeing to tackle one of the biggest problems which affects all of the citizens of the City, that is, the continued existence of the so called 'Peace Walls'. These walls performed a necessary security purpose in the past in the several interface areas of the City but now serve to increase alienation and to inhibit regeneration and development of those very same areas and the time has now come to seek to move towards their removal. The Council agrees to take the lead in devising a strategy which seeks to move towards the removal of a number of these walls within the current Council term. This strategy should be inclusive and include the direct involvement of all appropriate organisations from the business, public and voluntary and community sectors, with the wishes and needs of those people who live in the interface areas being paramount." The proposal was seconded by Councillor Kyle. In accordance with Standing Order 11(e), the Lord Mayor indicated that the matter would be referred to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee without debate.
1.2	Previously, at the monthly meeting of the Council 3 March 2008, Councillor Maginness had proposed: "Belfast City Council resolves that it is now time to begin to work towards the reduction and the ultimate removal of the so called 'peace walls' and barriers that presently divide our City. To this end, the Council therefore agrees to establish a working group to explore ways and means to initiate such a process and to report back with proposals by September, 2008." The proposal was seconded by Councillor Long and the matter was referred to the Good

	Relations Steering Panel without debate. At that time, the Good Relations Steering Panel integrated a series of actions related to working in interface areas into its Peace and Reconciliation Plan 2009-2011 as well as the Good Relations Plan. Over £1.5m was spent on initiatives focussed on work at the interface during the first phase of the Council's Peace III Programme.

2.0	**Key Issues**
2.1	Drawing from a series of research reports, it is clear segregation has significant costs in the city. This includes the distortion of labour markets, the inefficient use of services and facilities, significant urban blight and poverty. The 'diseconomies of segregation' are borne disproportionately by the most disadvantaged communities. All of this projects a negative backdrop as Belfast presents itself as an outward looking and modern location for living, investment and tourism. Health and well-being are inextricably linked to community cohesion. Health tends to decline (with premature mortality and increased morbidity, particularly in stress related conditions) in communities where levels of interaction are low and where people feel insecure.
2.2	From the outset of the Council's good relations work, it was acknowledged that social divisions in Belfast were deep-rooted and that it would require a joint approach from a number of agencies, both statutory and voluntary, to effect change in our city and address issues such as sectarianism and racism. Since 2002, the Council has co-operated and partnered with a range of other agencies in the city in examining and tackling the issues that cause division.
2.3	While the removal of interface barriers is critical to the success of Belfast, it also presents an enormous threat to those who feel most protected by their existence. It is more likely that by promoting connections and access to safe and affordable shared spaces and high-quality services, community interaction will increase and suspicion and mistrust will diminish. Ultimately, it is hoped that safety and security in Belfast will only truly be guaranteed through interaction rather than hard physical measures such as barriers. Equally, we must proactively work with, and expedite bureaucratic processes for, those communities who through community consultation, are seeking to remove or reduce the interface barriers in the city.
2.4	Since the publication of the Good Relations Strategy in 2003, we have always advocated a 'commitment rather than minimal compliance' approach. As the public sector is increasingly challenged to meet the needs of our society within a reducing public purse, it is critical that good relations work continues to be seen as a central part of the city agenda rather than additional burden or an optional extra.
2.5	As part of the Council's Safer City Strategic Group business plan for 2010/11, an internal officers' group was established to develop a co-ordinated Council-wide approach to interventions at interfaces in Belfast. The Safer City group has identified three potential roles for Council in its approach to interfaces: 1. A civic leadership role – setting the vision that ultimately we should be seeking to develop a City without physical barriers 2. An influencing role – seeking to use the influence of the Council to ensure that all master plans, developments, regeneration projects seek to contribute to a City without physical barriers

	3. A practical role – using the resources of the Council (assets, facilities, funding) to complement and support wider initiatives aimed at promoting and ultimately achieving a City without physical barriers.
2.6	This Council group is currently considering ways in which a one Council approach can link with the work of the inter-agency Interface Working Group (IWG), convened by the Community Relations Council. The Interface Working Group has developed a number of initiatives, particularly around barrier removal. While the Council has no direct involvement in the erection or removal of interface barriers, a template has been devised through the IWG to assist communities seeking barrier removal and there is a defined role for Council's in this process. The principles involved in this are that in all responses to the legacy of physical segregation, the safety and security of the people living near to interfaces and interface barriers will be the priority. At the same time it is the responsibility of government to develop responses to the real challenges of fear and threat which do not rely on permanent barriers or patterns of exclusion and violence. The Council has a key role within this process and this role will be reflected in any strategy and action plan emerging from this report, in line with the principles contained within the IWG.
2.7	It is therefore proposed that a detailed framework for action, in relation to the interface barriers in the city, is developed under the 5 strategic themes of the Council. Across all of these areas of city development, there are multiple opportunities to promote good relations and community cohesion outcomes, with a focus on neighbourhoods located at the interface.
2.8	Some indicative actions may be: ▪ Better leadership – The place-shaping agenda in Belfast can proactively transform contested space in the city. City centre must be secured and promoted as a shared space alongside other iconic projects, such as University of Ulster, Girdwood, Springvale and Connswater Greenway. In addition, the Council can set an overall vision of a city without physical barriers and use its influence to permeate that vision within the wider regeneration agenda. ▪ Better opportunities for success across the city – Labour mobility in the city is dependent on ease of access and reduction in the perception of risk to personal safety. There is potential for orbital and cross-city routes, building public transport demand. – There is opportunity in Belfast to work with local areas on a series of linked cultural tourism and night-time economy projects which promote a unique 'City of Neighbourhoods' and ensures that the social and economic value of the multiple cultural identities of the city is maximised. ▪ Better care for Belfast's environment – Segregation has a carbon cost too, with distances travelled to access services in the city, such as schools, greater as a result of the distorted travel horizons we have in the city. Safe and shared connections for walking and cycling will impact upon the environment of the city as well as promote accessibility and connectivity. ▪ Better support for people and communities – It is critical that we work with local neighbourhoods who are seeking to reduce and remove barriers, in the context of local area working. There are already a number of communities who are looking for leadership and support in their desire to transform

	and remove barriers. We could seek to support and advocate for a number of pilot areas in Belfast, located at the interface, to regenerate the neighbourhood while safely and sensitively removing/reducing barriers.
	▪ Better services
	– Duplication and restricted access are key efficiency and value for money questions for asset management and service delivery in Belfast. We must develop a neighbourhood asset management model which will maximise social outcomes while at the same time reduce segregation.
2.9	It is recommended that a cross-cutting interfaces strategy be developed identifying resources, necessary partnerships and a monitoring framework for presentation to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

3.0	**Resource implications**
3.1	**Financial:** To be determined
	Assets: To be determined
	Human: Officer time to draft an interfaces strategy and associated action plan.

4.0	**Equality considerations**
4.1	A screening exercise will be undertaken as part of the development of the strategy and action plan.

5.0	**Recommendations**
5.1	The Committee recommends the Good Relations Partnership works with the Safer City Group to develop a strategy and action plan focussed on neighbourhoods located near/at the interface. This will be presented to the SP&R Committee for discussion at a meeting in November 2011, for integration into the forthcoming corporate plan and subsequent business plans in 2012/13.

6.0	**Officers to contact for further information**
6.1	Peter McNaney, Chief Executive (Ext. 6001)

7.0	**Documents attached**
	None