

# ESRC – Open Call project proposal

(Dec 2017)

## ***Project details: Beyond the (Peace) Lines: Re-define the value of urban parks as socially inclusive spaces in Belfast***

### **Investigation Objectives**

The project aims to *assess the role of publically accessible parks in Belfast as "places" of social inclusivity in a city where "space", proposed as the physical architecture and form of a location, has been aligned with a history of sectarian violence and ethno-cultural, i.e. those relating to specific ethnic groups, segregation. It will explore how parks are viewed within changing historical narratives of division within Belfast; looking both at the "official (e.g. city council) and "unofficial" (e.g. community) perceptions and the changing spatial and ethno-cultural interpretations of parks.*

Focusing on the intricacies of communal interpretations of parks in Belfast as sites of inclusive social interaction has the potential to offer insights for Belfast City Council, the environment agencies and the third sector including community-based agencies such as the city's Partnership Boards. *This timely investigation evaluates the duality of how formal approaches to parks management developed by Belfast City Council (through the Belfast Agenda programme) compare to the ways in which the non-governmental and community based organisations engage with parks, and how informal understandings of parks by local communities of different faiths lead to varied types of interaction and inclusivity. The project would run during the build-up to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (1998) and as economic and demographic changes in the city force its government and communities to rethink their attachment to place, and reassess whether a process of 'cultural mediation' of place can both support new and maintain existing cultural links to the city's parks.*

The project will *place community understanding* at the centre of these debates. Physical and ethno-cultural segregation in Belfast has a well-known history (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006). This project will focus on the dialogue between "official" and "unofficial" narratives of parks and their planning/management, which is often overlooked (Abdelmonem & McWhinney, 2015; Nagle, 2009). Our reflective approach to perceptions of parks will draw directly from community representations to create a living archive of localised knowledge within a contextual mapping resource and a *multi-stakeholder platform to explore the evolving values of parks within the city's diverse communities. The evidence generated will examine the complexities inherent in attempting to develop a universal understanding of "place" in Belfast, where investment proposals are often unaligned with local understandings and can be viewed as being exclusionary and/or segregationist* (Byrne & Gormley-Heenan, 2014).

### **The project aims to:**

- a) Bring together a grounded co-produced narrative of the value of public parks in Belfast, utilising a mixed-method approach with spatial and participatory mapping that assesses how these sites are or have the potential to be, conciliatory spaces in a divided city.
- b) Establish how the formal planning approaches of Belfast City Council align with community interpretations of parks, and how this this relates to City Council attempts to promote parks as inclusive community spaces

**Its research objectives are to:**

1. Draw on existing literature to identify the current role of parks as conciliatory and socially inclusive locations and evaluate the potential of such places in Belfast to contrast with the historically exclusionary nature of “interface” spaces (such as Peace Lines) in Belfast;
2. Examine how temporal changes in communal interactions with parks have developed both organically and through government-led initiatives such as the Good Friday Agreement;
3. Mapping the spatial understanding of local communities of the interactivity between parks in Belfast using ethnographic and participatory mapping approaches;
4. Mapping how ethno-cultural change in the city is affecting access to, and physical and psychologically perceived barriers to the use of parks in Belfast;
5. Examine local development/policy objectives for parks to assess official/unofficial approaches to development in Belfast using evidence gained through ethnography and interviews with people on the city’s strategic Partnership Board, community group and environmental agency, focussing on knowledge to engage with the Belfast City Council’s *Belfast Agenda* in particular.

**Overall Project Impact**

The project will have impacts on both public policy and community arenas, focussing on the following:

- community interaction and understanding of the inclusive nature of parks in Belfast;
- potential influence of this on planning policy following the generation of grounded and co-produced evidence;
- facilitation of reflection by city agencies/stakeholders on how the city’s parks can be used to promote ethno-cultural integration. The innovation and timeliness of the project, together with co-production through focus groups and other means, will ensure that stakeholders within the city engage with its findings, especially as communal dynamics and the policy needed to manage growth in Belfast continues to evolve.

**Funding Amount:** Direct costs (non-staff costs) **approx. £80k**, including indirect/in-kind support contributions from project partners.

**Project Duration:** The project would run for a period of **3 years**, starting at the end of next year, working on six work packages (WPs).

**Bid Partners:** The project will be led by **Dr Ian Mell** (University of Manchester, School of Environment, Education & Development) who will co-ordinate the WPs. Other investigators include:

- **Dr John Sturzaker** (University of Liverpool, Department of Geography & Planning,)
- **Dr Alice Correia** (University of Salford, Faculty of Arts & Media)
- **Dr Mary Gearey** (University of Brighton, School of Environment & Technology)
- **Dr Neale Blair** (Ulster University, Built Environment Research Institute)
- **Research Fellow/PDRA** (Grade 6) working with the PI, CIs and project partners in Belfast the RF will coordinate (with the PI) the development and delivery of each WP.
- **PDRA** (Grade 5) will work with the PI/CIs to deliver the projects primary research activities.

### **Project Partners:**

#### **Other support financial/indirect**

In-kind (non-direct financial) support for the project will hopefully be generated from the following public and NGO/community/third sector in Belfast:

- Connswater Greenway,
- South Belfast / East Belfast Partnership Boards,
- Belfast City Council,
- PLACE
- Community Places

These organisations will commit to support the project through the provision of officer time in terms of engagement with the project, facilitation and participation in community meetings, and the development of community advertising materials.

In the interim period, the City and Neighbourhood Services Department will coordinate the work associated with the research proposal. This may also require involvement from other Departments across the Council, including:

- Member services – elected member commitment
- Planning department
- C&NS Department – Parks department and Good Relations

#### **Estimated BCC Commitment**

As a project partner the expectation would be that BCC would be able to facilitate connections with community and city stakeholders in Belfast to enable the project team engagement. This would be in the form of contact information, introductions where appropriate and attendance at a number of consultation events over the 36 months of the project. The project lead anticipates this activity to be less than 10 public meetings, as not all will need or require a formal city presence. The meetings would be approximately 2 hours each.

The project lead would also hope that BCC would be willing to attend twice yearly catch up meetings with the project lead and/or other members of the project team in Belfast to discuss progress and any issues that arise. The expectations are that these meetings will last approximately 2 hours.

The lead partner is willing to make some kind of contribution to BCC through the project or offering a commitment of time to help BCC green infrastructure or green space/parks work as a quid pro quo (for every hour I provide a reciprocal service for BCC).

Therefore the lead partner would expect approximately 30-40 hours of BCC contact over the project lifespan. This is flexible though depending on commitments and aspirations to be more involved. The commitment would also be very much one of facilitation and introductions not one of leading the process or managing the project, which will be done by the project team.

Partners have asked the same of other partners in the city seeing their roles, as helping to facilitate the research (and potentially shaping the outcomes in the early stages) so that any outcomes are of value to BCC and other partners.

#### **BCC Project benefits**

The benefits identified for BCC, include the provision of baseline community-led evidence that could be integrated into city and local planning ensuring that perspectives on the value of parks, are engaged with. Spatial analysis will also be

generated that could be used to identify key areas of division, as well as good practice in terms of engagement and inclusive social behaviour, to direct future development and management of planning/ green space policy/ practice. The work could also complement and inform current programmes of work i.e. Peace IV programme and Smart Cities Framework. The outcomes and recommendations generated from the research could assist in identifying where interventions could be made to positively impact good relations.

### **BCC Project Implications**

Some of the possible ramifications of the research include the resource commitments required and the ability of BCC to support this project, particularly in light of other funding commitments and ongoing work in local communities i.e. Peace IV and area planning. This work may also jeopardise current relationships the Council has established within local communities and their perceptions of BCC's involvement, but if managed properly by appropriate staff members, this can be substantially minimised.

### **BCC Project risks**

- Out of all project partners – BCC probably carries the highest degree of risk in relation to the outworking's of the research.
- That the output and outcomes from the research could be of a sensitive and contentious nature.
- The output of the research would be available in the public domain via publications.
- That the findings could negatively impact on good relations at a City and local level.
- The biggest risk could be the lack of BCC involvement – it would be better for BCC to be in an influential position as opposed to not being involved at all.

### **Next Steps**

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**BCC will need to make a final decision with regards to which scenario we commit to and who within the Council would be responsible for taking this research work forward. The four possible scenarios for consideration in relation to the extent of BCC's involvement in the research project include:**

*Scenario 1:* Full support as a Project Partner – with full commitment and a letter of support from BCC. This would involve approx. 30-40 hours over the three years of the project and constitute time to discuss the project in the early stages, interaction with the project team to make introductions with members of interest groups in local communities focussing on parks, and the occasional attendance at events to discuss the value of parks in the city. In return the project lead will offer pro bono/reciprocal work for BCC based on time committed to the project.

*Scenario 2:* Partial support as a Project Advisor - with partial support in an advisory capacity. The project will aim to establish an advisory group for the project made up of local advocates, including staff from Queen's University Belfast and a representative from BCC. This group would provide guidance on a quarterly or bi-annual basis, with limited time commitment required and responsibility for reporting to partners and the project team.

*Scenario 3.* No formal support - BCC would not be in the position to provide formal support for the project in terms of a Letter of Support, officer time or introductions. BCC would be invited to work in an adhoc capacity with the project at specific events/activities but the project leads would not approach BCC for information in

the same way. Any engagement would be at the discretion of BCC officers and management.

*Scenario 4:* No support or involvement – BCC would not be in the position to support or be involved in any capacity in the research and withdraws based on the inherent implications and risks outlined above.

Obviously each of the scenarios has a different level of time and commitment from BCC. At this stage BCC recommend providing full commitment and support via opting for Scenario 1, with the ability to influence the project in its early stages and throughout development.

Summary Document