

# Building bridges at the grassroots

The experience of  
Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group

*compiled by*  
Michael Hall

ISLAND (81) PAMPHLETS

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# Introduction

When the Northern Ireland Troubles began, the institutions of state – from the political leadership right down to the public services – often proved inadequate to meet everyday survival needs at the grassroots. In many ways, it was left to ‘ordinary’ people, in both communities – relying upon inner strength and determination – to try and hold their communities together through the most dangerous of times. The personal stories behind these efforts, of which there have been many, have gone largely unrecorded and unacknowledged.

One such story of inner strength, determination, perseverance and courage is described in this pamphlet. It concerns working-class Protestants from Suffolk housing estate in West Belfast and working-class Catholics from the adjoining Lenadoon estate. Before the advent of the Troubles they shared an area which was almost idyllic, set against the gentle hills which surround Belfast. But eventually they too were to be engulfed in the bitter inter-communal violence which was unleashed. Given the trauma each side was to experience it would have been understandable if they had felt, and remained, bitter and hostile to the ‘other’ community. But something drove individuals in both communities to set their personal experiences aside and to strive to work together, not though any sense of ‘community-relations’-type reconciliation, but for the betterment of their two communities and with an eye to their children’s future.

The primary reason members of Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group wanted to tell their story here was in the hope that other communities throughout Northern Ireland might learn valuable lessons as to just what can be achieved through perseverance and working constructively together. They know only too well that the difficulties can often seem insurmountable. Indeed, their own work is far from accomplished: they see their efforts to stabilise their interface, and to bring more and more members of their respective communities into the process, very much as ‘work in progress’.

Normally in these Think Tank pamphlets no quotes are attributed, to encourage participants to speak more openly. However, in this document such an approach might create confusion for the reader, in terms of being able to tell whether a representative from Suffolk or Lenadoon was being quoted. Hence, a ‘Suffolk’ quote is preceded by [S], while a ‘Lenadoon’ quote is preceded by [L]. The only other label used is [Chris], a reference to Chris O’Halloran, a community worker who spent two separate periods working with both communities.

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# **Building bridges at the grassroots**

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## **A peaceful oasis**

Many outside observers of the Northern Ireland Troubles might be familiar with place-names like ‘Shankill’, ‘Falls’, ‘Ballymurphy’, ‘Ardoyne’ – areas relatively close to Belfast city centre. Most would be far less familiar, however, with the large hinterlands which stretch to the outer limits of the city, most of which are predominantly of one religion – Protestant East Belfast, Catholic West Belfast – but within which are to be found small pockets of the ‘other’ religion: such as Catholic Short Strand in East Belfast, or Protestant Suffolk in West Belfast.

Before the Troubles, Suffolk, although a mixed area, was largely Protestant, separated from the rest of Belfast by numerous Catholic housing estates. The area then defined as Suffolk spread out north and south of the Stewartstown Road, with most Protestants residing on the southern side (the area to which the term Suffolk has since been restricted), but a fair proportion living on the northern side (now referred to as Lenadoon), where they lived side by side with their Catholic neighbours.

[S] My husband’s sisters had lived in Lenadoon from the early 1960s. Now, although the Catholic population there wasn’t that big, I can remember neighbours getting on well with each other. There was a British Legion hall at the top of the road and many Catholics from Andersonstown, all ex-servicemen, drank there. I myself moved to Lenadoon in 1971. You could have walked to Andersonstown to do your shopping and nobody would have bothered you.

[S] My parents moved here when the estate had just been built. It was lovely, and was really an idyllic place to live in in those days. Like most families around us we were quite poor. Despite the fact that my father had had polio which left him with a weakness in one leg, I can remember him – rain, hail or snow in the middle of the winter – cycling the whole way to his work on the Donegall Road because he couldn’t afford the bus-fare. They were starting to build the houses in Horn Drive in the early 1960s, and my parents had been offered one of them. Now, and this would never happen nowadays, but I remember my mummy actually being told to take a look and see which house she would like. Now in those days whenever you moved into a new house you weren’t allowed to decorate for six months, to allow the plaster to dry properly. Those six months ended just before the ‘Twelfth’, and I recall that my parents worked up to 2 o’clock every night, trying to get the house decorated in time. And it was all done on a pittance.

For people living in public housing the actual setting, at the very edge of Belfast, would have been hard to better.

[S] My wife – we weren't married at that stage – had relatives living up here. And whenever we got the bus to visit any of them it was like going to somewhere posh, because it was a lovely place. Indeed, I thought to myself: God, some day I'm going to come up and live here; this is a brilliant place.

[S] There used to be an old Church of Ireland hall and I attended the 'Brownies' in it. And when I would walk from my home to the hall it was like walking up a wee country road. There were big hedges on both sides of the road and fields all around – it was lovely; there was a real country feel.

[L] The Woodbourne House Hotel then was a swanky hotel for wedding receptions – my brother had his reception there – and it was surrounded by beautiful trees. I was born and reared in Andersonstown but I remember us children walking up here. You weren't allowed to come up near the Half-Moon Lake, however, it was said to be very dangerous because of a tragedy which happened there. A wee boy fell in and his sister went in to try and save him and they both drowned. So all of us were ordered: never go near the Half-Moon Lake. But we would still have come out walking this way, because I remember it was really lovely countryside.

[S] My husband moved up here from the Donegall Road area of Belfast when he was eight. The first house his family got was on Blacks Road. And he said that it was just like moving from hell – the 12 kids had been crammed into a typical wee 'two-up, two-down' working-class house – to heaven. He said it was wonderful for them all to be able to run the fields; they used to go out pinching apples and their granny would make apple tarts on a Sunday.

[S] I remember we would have spent our summer holidays walking up the river, and going over and playing in the fields. Up where Glengoland estate is now it was big fields then, with big rhododendron bushes everywhere.

[S] One big difference when you moved up here from the city was that you really started to notice the way the seasons changed: the trees, the leaves....

[L] I was born in Suffolk Avenue, where my parents still live. I remember in the field near the post office we used to play football – pretending to be Celtic versus Rangers, or Man United versus Man City – right up until it was dark. I remember walking across the fields to Lady Dixon's Park, where it was all trees; and there was a wee bridge we had to go over to get to Lady Dixon's. I also remember that there were hedges outside the flats, and as the flats had wee balconies we used to dare each other to see if we could jump from the balcony right over the hedge.

[L] The only real employment in the area was the pig factory on the Suffolk Road. Who could forget their advertising slogan: 'You'll call again for Colin Glen!' And then there was also the pearl factory.

[S] Yes; my mummy did home-working for the pearl factory. I can't even bear to think of her doing it. She used to bring home loads of tiny plastic pearls and long thin needles, and that's what we all did most nights: we had to thread the needles with these tiny wee pearls. I mean, she probably got paid pennies for this work, but it still helped keep the house going.

[S] There was no religious problem then. I remember Catholic neighbours would have come out on the Twelfth morning to watch the local Orangemen setting out for the parade, and they would have wished them a nice day. Or when the wee 'BB' band used to parade round the area our Catholic neighbours would have come out and watched those kids. But that has all ended now too. The Troubles soon saw to that.

## **The Troubles change everything**

1969 saw the advent of the 'Troubles', and the beginning of escalating inter-communal violence in different parts of Northern Ireland, which ranged from stone-throwing at houses belonging to the 'other' community, to the expulsion of families from certain areas in inner-city Belfast (1800 families were forced to flee their homes, either through direct intimidation or fear – at that time the greatest enforced movement of people Europe had seen since the Second World War). And then in the 1970s the violence progressed to bombings and shootings, and tit-for-tat murders kept communities in a state of constant fear. For a while it didn't impact to the same extent on the Suffolk-Lenadoon area, but it was inevitable, given the fears and antagonisms which were being fuelled, that no mixed area could remain immune, and eventually the idyllic world of the Suffolk and Lenadoon residents was to be shattered.

[S] Before 1973 you could still walk about anywhere here and it never annoyed anybody. But eventually people from the estate thought twice about going down the Falls Road on the bus; you always wanted to go via Black's Road or Lisburn Road. I remember there was a new fella moved in here and he and I were sitting at the back of a bus, and as we went down the Falls Road the next minute these guys got on and pulled out rods! Before I knew it, this fella had opened the rear emergency windie and was out! Now I don't know whether they were only after him, but I thought I'd better follow suit. So, the next minute I'm out behind him and we're running down the Donegall Road, with these gunmen after us! They didn't catch us, and I never found out what it was all about, but it certainly stopped me from going down the Falls Road ever again. Even when people were returning to Suffolk after a day's work in town, and were waiting in Glengall Street station for a bus, most of the Catholics would have just jumped on a number 104 to come up here. But Protestants wouldn't; we would have stood waiting for the one which came up the Lisburn Road – even though it was a more inconvenient route and not as regular a service. We just felt safer.

[S] My windows were put in around me 13 times in two years. I remember on one occasion jumping over the hedging that used to be around the front here, trying to catch the two lads who smashed my windows, and running straight into British soldiers. When I thought about it afterwards, it must have been hilarious, because I set off so fast I left my husband standing with the arm of my anorak which ripped off, and not only that, but I was wearing a pair of fluffy slippers. And when I came back and looked in the mirror! I had no sleeve, these slippers were caked in muck, my face was caked in muck... no wonder the two soldiers just walked away from me as fast as they could!

[S] I was married in 1970. Now, my husband was a Catholic, and once the Troubles had started it was a big thing for a Protestant to be marrying a Catholic. Indeed, we were told by the Church of Ireland minister who married us that our marriage wouldn't last, because there was no future in this country for mixed marriages. At that time you could have seen the exodus of Protestants come that wee bit further down Lenadoon Avenue. The whole area was soon riddled with empty houses and Rev Robert Bradford – who was later murdered by the IRA – was the minister in the Methodist Church here and he and others were trying to encourage Protestant families to stay, and when they heard that we were looking for a house they moved us into a house in Doon Road. At first we were very dubious about taking it, because we didn't know how my husband was going to be received in a Protestant community. We were eventually put out of that house, but not by Protestants. We lived in it for about two years, and right from we moved in our house was constantly under attack. I had a baby and I couldn't even leave her outside the front or back door in her pram or she would be pelted with bricks and stones. We would have come down in the morning and found our keyholes blocked up with chewing gum. Our car was also petrol-bombed. Then the hedges outside the houses were burnt. And this went on for month after month. One day the baby was nearly killed, because she was sitting in her baby-chair at the kitchen table when the house was attacked: every window was put in and she was showered with broken glass. Eventually, two British Army soldiers arrived up at the house at 10 o'clock every night to let us go to bed, to make sure that the house was going to be protected.

There was a disturbing sequel to this:

[S] A good friend of mine was an English girl and, while I knew that her father had been in the British Army, I hadn't realised that he was in charge of the Army in Horn Drive at the time I was living there. And one day – this was just a few years ago – he was visiting his daughter and I happened to be there, and whenever he heard where I was from he said: 'You know, I have waited nearly 30 years to apologise to some of you people.' And I said: 'Apologise for what?' He then proceeded to tell me that while he was the local commander he had actually been negotiating with the Republican movement to kind of stage-manage the evacuation of the Protestant families. He said that there were hundreds of displaced Catholic families looking for houses and if they had all descended on Horn Drive/Lenadoon at the same

time there could have been wholesale slaughter. So they were being put into houses vacated by Protestants in small groups. In effect, the Army was actually ‘managing’ the process in cahoots with the Republican movement! In 2003, when secret government papers were released from 1973, we heard on the news that not only had the British government stage-managed the evacuation of the Protestant families but they actually handed over a cash sum of money to the Republican movement, to help them resettle the Catholic families in the houses Protestant families were being put out of! So that was all a big shock to us. And not only that, but I also found out that the two soldiers who were sent to guard our house were actually breaking our windows as well, to try and encourage my husband and I to get out!

[L] I can’t talk about anything in Lenadoon prior to 1982 because I only started living there from then, and yes, many of the families that I knew there were people who took over the houses that Protestants were put out of. But they in turn were all Catholic families who had been burnt out of other areas in Belfast. My wife’s family had been burnt out and they just arrived up with a lorry containing wee picks of furniture and it was just a case of grabbing the nearest vacant house. And they were saying that most of the houses they went into were wrecked, and they had to start from scratch.

[S] Yes, we wrecked ours before we left it.

[L] I came to Lenadoon in 1971 under those same circumstances. In the house I went into the sink was smashed, the bath was smashed, everything was smashed; indeed, the only thing intact in the house was the wash-hand basin in the bathroom. And for six months, if you were cooking something downstairs you had to bring all the dishes up to the bathroom to wash them. It became a no-go area: the Housing Executive wouldn’t come in to do any repairs; the Belfast City Council wouldn’t come in to empty the gas meters. You had to break the lock on the meter and bring the tin of money down to the gas office and get a receipt for it. I had ended up in Lenadoon through circumstances not of my own making, and I actually spent years thinking that I was in Lenadoon as some sort of punishment. I hated the sight of it and kept asking myself: why did I end up here?

[L] My aunt was the same. My aunt and uncle had worked hard all their lives. They had initially lived in a wee ‘two-up, two-down’ house but finally realised their lifelong ambition of owning their own home, in the Springfield Road area. Then, when the Troubles came, they were forced out of that house by Protestants and had to be rehoused by the Housing Executive in Lenadoon. And for many years my aunt deeply resented the fact that she had lost everything they had worked for, for the two of them had put their hearts and souls into it. And from the day she moved up here my aunt’s health deteriorated and within a few years she had developed cancer. I remember my uncle saying that he had been told that anything could trigger cancer, including an emotional upset, such as the time they lost their home.

[L] I ended up in a house that had been lying empty for a number of days, with the water running down the stairs; everything was smashed, the windows were smashed. I remember standing in the middle of the room with my child in my arms, crying my eyes out, saying to myself: 'I don't believe this; I can't believe that I've ended up here.' Then, within a couple of weeks of my moving in, the Army took over the vacant houses right beside me and turned them into a temporary barracks. And within a week of them doing that, it got blown up! I was in the kitchen one Saturday morning and my young son was in the front room sort of holding himself up at the window – he was only sixteen months old – and looking out. Now, I don't know what it was he saw, but he sounded agitated and I hurried in to see what was up, and the next thing I remember is him in my arms and us both being blown through the dinette window, right through it. Then there was a second explosion. There was glass everywhere and I remember walking through it, and then I realised I was in my bare feet. I had the child in my arms but when I looked down all I could see was blood. I suddenly felt really tired and cold and lay down on the settee, and next thing I remember is this man leaning over me. Now, I couldn't get my eyes fully open, but for some weird reason all I could think about was the terrible colour of the jumper he was wearing! I remember the man lifting the child out of my arms and taking him to my aunt who was standing outside: she was convinced that we were all dead and wouldn't set foot inside the house. As for the house itself, the beams had come down onto the child's cot – which he had been sleeping in a short time before – the ceilings were down, there were no doors left standing, tiles had been ripped off the roof, windows were blown in... and everything inside was destroyed.

I managed to get to my feet and wandered out the front door. All the neighbours had come out of their doors as well, and then somebody shouted: 'There's another bomb!' I will never forget the hysteria on that street, with people crying and kids and babies squealing. Two residents took suspected heart attacks but because it was a 'no-go' area the emergency services either wouldn't send an ambulance or couldn't get one in. The soldiers ordered up an army ambulance instead, and I recall one of them saying: 'We'll take the pregnant woman too' – for I was pregnant with my daughter at the time. I remember saying: 'Oh, please Jesus, no; don't put me into an army ambulance!' What if anybody attacks it! But, anyway, the three of us got into this army ambulance and somewhere near Lisburn the driver crashed going round a roundabout. And I'm thinking: this child is never going to survive all this!

I was told later that when a friend of my aunt's, a nurse, came they washed my son and it didn't seem that he was badly hurt – it had been my blood dripping onto him. I was also told that when a reporter from the *Daily Mirror* arrived up to take a photograph of the child he commented that it was a pity the child had been cleaned up – it would have made a better photo if he had been left the way he was! However, over the following years the doctors found out that his eardrums had been perforated by the explosion and he was left profoundly deaf. He had about eight or nine operations on his ears to try and restore some hearing but he has gone through life with hearing difficulties.

[S] When we were forced out, we lost our house and our car. But I'd neighbours who lost everything; they never even got their furniture out. And part of me was saying: yes, I know what was happening to the Catholic people was terrible, but did it make it right to then inflict the same suffering on the Protestant people who were living at the bottom of Lenadoon estate? Two wrongs don't make a right. I remember my husband and my daddy, who was the quietest, inoffensive wee man you could imagine, once blocking the road with all these men, trying to protect the last two remaining Protestant families, who were having their homes attacked – while the British Army stood back and did nothing. With hindsight, I now know *why* they did nothing – they *wanted* the Protestants to move.

[L] I suppose you could see how to the British Army this approach would have made sense. You have all these Catholics who are being burned out of their homes in other parts of Belfast, and who had to be put somewhere. And the Army probably thought: There's a group of isolated Protestant people in Lenadoon; if we force them back across the Stewartstown Road, we could move these Catholics in, and as well as that it would make life a lot easier for us, instead of trying to protect each side, with six living here and six living there. Now, that was all wrong, but you can see how to them it was simply a 'management' problem. And yet that directly created an interface here.

[L] There was definitely manipulation going on. I remember a policeman coming to our door one day. And he said: 'I'll tell you what it is: we've decided that we're going to make Falcarragh Drive the new 'peaceline', and there's a Fenian in Lenadoon Avenue wants to know if he can get on this side of the peaceline, so would you like to swap?' And my husband says: 'No, because we're some of them Fenians too and we're not moving.' First they were going to declare Falcarragh Drive the 'peaceline' and then they decided to move it down Lenadoon Avenue near the field; they put the barbed wire across there and they declared that that was the new 'peaceline'. Even after the bombing I still lived in that house. But because of the presence of the Army beside me, I lived with all these restrictions. I wasn't allowed to put lights on at night; I wasn't allowed any visitors at night-time, not even family members. The Army had sandbags close to my front gate and, God forbid, if you opened your front door even for a moment, even to get your milk, soldiers would just come in and lie in the hallway, for ages. They would change every three hours and it was only when they were changing that you had a chance to get your door closed. I also remember some high-ranking officer being brought up to 'meet and greet' the troops, one of those morale-boosting visits. It could have been yer man with the two silver guns – Major Lloyd 'Superstar' – but they all marched into our house and we were cowed into the living room by armed soldiers while he used our bathroom.

[S] There was that many incidents at the front of the shops here, 'cause I was up there regularly, every local man was. I remember one night a crowd of Catholics attacked the Leestone; I think it was the anniversary of Internment, and this got to be a regular thing – every year you heard the bin-lids coming

out and you knew it was going to happen. But they would come up to the nearest Protestant houses and put all the windies in, and we had been told to go up to try and protect them. And there was maybe 600 involved and eventually the cops would come and get in between both crowds.

[S] I remember Rev Paisley standing in the middle of the green, and there were thousands there. He was telling people: 'Stand your ground, stand your ground!' And the wee minister with him was saying, 'And mind the church windows.' And I said: 'Mind the *church* windows? What about *my* bloody windows – that's my home over there!' And I turned to Paisley and said: 'And as for you, what are you doing here?'

[S] I had an uncle in the UDA; I've been told he was actually a commander in the area, although I didn't know that. And he brought a crowd of men and they were putting our furniture into a van to get us out and there was a whole crowd of Catholics standing jeering at us. My husband went up onto the roof to take down the TV aerial and this crowd were shouting up at him: 'Go on, you Orange bastard!' And he came back down fuming: 'As if it's not bad enough them putting me out of my house, now they're standing there calling me an Orange bastard!'

[S] I can remember there was lorries coming up from Sandy Row, Taughmonagh and other Protestant areas, helping the people move out. And we were wrecking the houses as they moved out.

[L] To be honest, my understanding of this whole situation is different. I didn't see it as Catholics forcing Protestants out, but more a case of Protestants just up and leaving. One day yer man was in the field – I think it was John McMichael, the UDA leader – and as far as I know he said: 'This is the line, this is as far as we are going.' It was as if certain individuals on the Protestant side had decided that it would be easier to get people to the other side of the Stewartstown Road, for then it would be easier to defend them. To me, they told the people who were living there to move across the Road.

[S] Well, I can assure you that it was pure intimidation which moved me.

[S] *World in Action* did a documentary on it in 1976, called 'Belfast: Drawing a Line' and they concentrated on what was going on here. My granny, who was 78, told the programme makers that she had people from the other community coming over constantly, asking when she was moving out because they wanted her house.

[S] I was only 10 or 11 at the time but I can remember our door being kicked in and my father being beaten up at the bottom of the stairs. And me standing watching it; him having to defend his house on his own, that's the situation we were put in. And it was drunken men who did it. We took it for a long, long time and then just decided that we had had enough.

[L] I know that was going on, I know there was people's houses being

bricked by drunken ‘Saturday-night Irishmen’ walking down the road, or people with nothing better to do. Now, that cannot be justified, but I don’t feel there was a deliberate attempt by people on this side to push Protestants out. But what I do think *was* deliberate was that these attacks weren’t being prevented. If the police and Army had really wanted to protect those houses, a security fence would have been put up there, and if it had’ve been I think those people might still be there. But it was probably serving the Army’s purpose to get people back from that line, I think that was the scenario.

[S] If you’re having your home attacked – your door kicked in, or your windows broke – and you’re living with this every day, every week – because that’s how it was – it didn’t really matter whether it was orchestrated or not: you were being intimidated just the same.

[L] By 1976-7, most Protestant residents in Lenadoon had moved across the Stewartstown Road into Suffolk, while their houses had been resettled by Catholic families burnt or intimidated out of other parts of Belfast. And that’s when the Road became the permanent interface, the peaceline. And for most Catholics this road had become somewhere you didn’t cross, if you could avoid it. I would never go to the library and I never let my kids near the front of the Road. Even coming down to the bottom of our estate was to be avoided. I only came down the bottom of Lenadoon Avenue at Greenways if I really had to. My main thought was: stay away from the bottom of the estate, for I was always fearful down there, it was too near the interface.

[L] The outcome was that Lenadoon became a Catholic/Nationalist community, and Suffolk became a Protestant/Unionist community. And then, instead of the battle being between Lenadoon and Suffolk the focus of Republicans became the British Army, and their energy went into fighting them – although I accept that you still had sectarianism at the interface.

[S] You certainly did, and I think it is important to recognise that. For people living on the front of the road continued to be forced out of their homes. It’s simply not the case that once the interface was established that there was suddenly an end to intimidation against the Suffolk community.

## Separate development

With the two communities now deeply estranged but at least at arm’s length from one another – except for those individuals who made it their business to harass those living across the ‘peaceline’ – it was left to the residents in each area to pick up the pieces and try to re-establish the basics of life. For, aside from the trauma of the inter-communal intimidation and violence, people were now living in houses damaged either as a result of the conflict or by former occupants bitter at being forced to vacate their homes.

[L] It being a ‘no-go’ area, you got no services, no bins emptied, no gas people in; the Housing Executive largely ignored you and never consulted you – indeed, they would have talked down to you. In the ‘90s when the Executive really started to work in the houses, what they were doing was catching up with long-promised refurbishment work outstanding from the ‘70s. During the ‘70s and ‘80s people had been largely ignored. I remember in lower Lenadoon a community co-op was set up involving local men who were joiners and plumbers, and they went around doing repairs because nobody else was coming in to do this. There was wee bits and pieces of things people were trying to do, but most of it was without much success.

[S] And the sense of ‘community’ had taken a hammering too. Some people would have called our area a ‘Protestant community’, but others would have said ‘No; it’s just a place where Prods live.’ When the contractors came in to refurbish the estate you were living in the house at the same time as they were pulling it apart. And half the time – like when they put new windows in – it was a jerry job they done.

[L] Same with us. In the ‘70s and ‘80s we lived in the houses while they ripped out the fireplaces, because they had to install new flues. I remember sitting through it all with my kids; and being asthmatic myself and suffering from migraine I thought the guy was drilling into the back of my brain. And you and your kids had to live and sleep through each of these refurbishment schemes – when it wasn’t a new flue, it was new electrical wiring or whatever – and it was horrendous. Then Gerry Doherty, who worked for Lower Lenadoon Housing, went around saying to people: ‘Look, I know you have residents’ groups which are being totally ignored by the Housing Executive, but we’re going to try again. We’re having a meeting, do you want to come along, it’ll only take half an hour.’ Half an hour? I haven’t gone home since!

[L] After you had that dividing line established, and two polarised communities, your focus was on your own community then, and it was a matter of getting through your day. I lived in the Falls Road in the ‘70s and there was a shooting, or two, every day. If you went into the town at all there was a shop getting blown up, and your priority was on just getting by. It was all about individual survival. And things stayed like that up to about 1980/81, and it was only then, in Lenadoon anyway, that people began to come together and think about getting something done to their communities – particularly in regard to housing issues. They began to say: ‘Look, we’re being treated like shite here, why don’t we stand up for ourselves?’ And it was people like Gerry Doherty saying: ‘Well, form a residents’ association, and demand your rights!’ For people took it for granted that if the Housing Executive told you that this was the way it was, or this is the scheme you’re getting, that you had no say in the matter. It was only really around the ‘80s that people started to organise into small groups to challenge such attitudes, and then when they got wee small victories they began to grow in confidence.

[S] I think for Suffolk it was a harder struggle because our community was

just continually going downhill. As the Troubles worsened many people just moved elsewhere, and many of those who remained thought that there was no long-term future here for the community, with the result that a lot of families with small children began to move out too. The estate went through a good few years of being very badly run down, badly dilapidated, and riddled with empty houses. People were moving out but no-one wanted to move in. Among the few people who were coming in were 'problem families' who couldn't get houses in other areas. And at one time it was the only place in Belfast where a single 18-year-old person could be offered a 3-bedroomed house –because the authorities were desperate to get the houses occupied.

[L] In Lenadoon I think community action finally took off because people had just been pushed too far. To my mind, it was another one of these mad refurbishment schemes which was the final straw for many people. You're sitting there watching them digging out the fireplace wall, putting in the new central heating, rewiring.... Actually, there was more cowboys around the place than in a John Wayne movie.

[L] And most of the big ACE [Action for Community Employment] schemes weren't making any real impact. The Catholic Church was involved in most of those schemes and the government brought in vetting to keep out groups which were seen as too Republican. But it was also a threat to other groups, like ours in Horn Drive, and because we had no church connections they were always up checking our books.

[S] I think that engaging in community work is even harder in Protestant areas. Not many people will help you, although you'll get an awful lot of armchair critics. Even my husband would say to me: 'What are you running out again tonight again for; nobody I talk to thinks it is worthwhile.' And I would reply: 'Well, I do.'

[L] The ACE schemes were given to the Catholic Church within Nationalist areas, for the Church was seen as a 'safe' pair of hands. You look at Cathedral Community Enterprises and they had 300 workers – at one time it was the biggest employer in West Belfast outside the Royal [Victoria Hospital]. And yet you had small groups within our area – S\_\_\_ in Horn Drive had about 10 workers, we had 10 – and we were achieving more with 20 workers than a scheme with 300. And people started to see a benefit in what we were doing, and began to avail of it. And you got more and more confidence as you went along, and got to know not only who the statutory bodies were who should have been delivering services, but how to challenge them for not doing so. Of course, there were people in our community too saying: why are you doing that; there's people paid to do that, aren't the politicians there? But you knew that if you left it to politicians or to paid people, it would never have happened. And you just got stronger and were able to share your experiences with weaker groups and help them gain confidence too.

[L] I think that's what led to the talk about a community conference, out of

which emerged Lenadoon Community Forum, which tried to bring together all the different wee groups working in the area.

[L] I found that while people talked about Lenadoon as if it was a single community, in reality it wasn't. There were people at the bottom of Lenadoon who wanted no connection with people in the middle or the top, and vice versa. And that attitude still exists.

[S] And while Lenadoon was expanding, Suffolk was getting smaller, diminishing all the time. People had given up and left, and those houses became derelict.

[L] Throughout the '70s the biggest issue in Lenadoon was the British Army kicking doors in every day of the week, or the RUC coming in. But by the '80s you saw other issues emerge: issues in and around poverty and how to improve your community. That's when we sat down and developed plans for the elderly, the youth... whatever. Anti-social behaviour near enough became the dominating issue in the community. However, for people who lived in the lower end – where the Housing Action Committee was the most active community group – when they came to talk at community meetings, the interface was listed as an issue for them. Not for 80% of people at the other end of Lenadoon, because they lived away from it. In fact, if you had knocked a door there people probably wouldn't even have mentioned Suffolk, or Protestants. In order of people they had difficulties with, it would have been the British Army, the RUC and the local hoods – and Suffolk or Protestants never came into the equation. It was only when Lenadoon Community Forum was established that people actually began to hear about what was going on in different parts of the estate, and saw the range of issues and concerns. And it was only when the Forum decided that we would try to develop a community-wide plan, that it was acknowledged that the interface was an issue for a considerable number of the people in the lower part of the estate.

[S] I think in Suffolk it couldn't have been more different. The interface dominated every aspect of daily life in Suffolk, completely. I was on the Leaders' Board of the Methodist Church and I remember one night there was a crowd came across the road and petrol-bombed it; there were 20-25 petrol bombs, and it had a low, felt roof and it was littered with petrol bombs, and others went through the window and landed on the wooden floor. And there was actually a number of people came across from the Catholic side and they climbed onto the roof and put the fire out before the fire brigade got here.

[S] Even when Suffolk Community Forum was eventually created the interface was still the dominant issue.

## First tentative cross-community steps

Given the trauma of the Troubles it was understandable that cross-community contacts were slow to develop, and always very tentative.

[S] Twenty years of very gradual process preceded our current cross-community work. In the late '70s the local Methodist minister and his elders decided that they would make contact with the people in Lenadoon, though this was quite an unpopular idea in Suffolk. It began very informally; a coffee shop was started, then a thrift shop, and I ran that thrift shop for about five to six years. And there were women who would have come across with their prams and all they were doing was sitting having a cup of coffee and hunting through all this jumble and stuff, but at least it was starting to develop contact. Before the minister left in 1980 he had formed Suffolk Community Services Group, which ran a citizens advice bureau, youth projects and all sorts of other things – a lot of good people from the community volunteered. A small local ACE scheme was also started in 1983.

Then other, more concrete, contacts began to be made.

[L] We had the Lower Lenadoon Housing Committee going and Chris O'Halloran, a community worker employed by Suffolk, asked whether we would like to meet with the Suffolk community. And that night at our meeting there was horror. 'What! Go over there!' That's the truth. And I said: 'Well, there's nothing going to happen if we go over and find out.' Anyway, we eventually met in the library.

[Chris] Some of those early meetings were secret, because people didn't feel okay about everybody in their own community knowing what they were doing. People were going to those meetings not necessarily believing that anything positive would result, and this was partly why they didn't tell anybody. But despite their doubts they said: 'We'll give it a go, and see what comes out of it.' And I remember people starting to feel hopeful and enthused.

[L] Once we got comfortable with talking together we said: let's organise something that we can do jointly. And the first joint thing we did was a protest about the lack of traffic lights on the Stewartstown Road – Lower Lenadoon Housing Committee and the committee of Suffolk got together on that. We asked people from both sides of the road to come out and protest, and bring their children along. And they did; I was amazed. We blocked the road for fifteen minutes, and the police came up and told us that what we were doing was illegal. And we said: 'We know, but we want lights here; it's too dangerous, and there's been a couple of kids knocked down already.'

[Chris] We then decided to get the University of Ulster involved. They have a transport studies department, and we contacted them to find out how you

qualified for a pedestrian crossing. They told us that you have to have so many cars and so many pedestrians per hour crossing a particular part of a road at peak times before traffic lights can be considered. So we got some of their students, as a research project, to come to the Stewartstown Road with clickers and clipboards to measure the volume of traffic and the number of pedestrians. And it was agreed between both community groups that they would try to get as many people as possible out that day to cross the road, to bump up the numbers. However, on the day itself it was blowing an absolute blizzard! And those people who would normally have been crossing the road with their buggies to go to the post office, etc, looked at the snow and went: 'Awh, no; I'm not going out in that!' And so a hard core of people spent the entire time rushing backwards and forwards across the Stewartstown Road! I think the students knew what was going on but I suppose they realised that it was the worst day they could have picked to do their survey.

[L] After about a month we got word that they were going to put the lights up and we felt our joint effort had achieved its first success. And after that it was wee meetings here and there and then the Glen parents came together, and it seemed to build up from that. Another time, the minister over in Suffolk, David Robinson, sent over to me one day and he says: 'Look, we're having a barbecue tonight but we haven't enough young people, could you gather up some of your ones?' And they all went there and had a great craic. There was one fight, involving a young male from each side, over a girl. But we got it sorted out and the rest of the time it was great, there was no problem. And then one Saturday we had a football match, and we invited the Suffolk ones to the pitch here. Now, I had to go round and see all the 'main men' in the area. I told them: 'We're having a match, we're playing a team from Suffolk, we want no trouble, we don't want any name-calling or whatever.' So a lot of men came out to stand around and watch not only the match but the spectators. I remember we got our new rig – Doon Star – and Suffolk beat us! We couldn't believe that! But it all went well, and then we had a return match down there, and it too went well. But that's the way it all started off.

[S] I was asked to organise a festival for Suffolk, so I got some of the women to bake and make mix-ups; we had tug of war, a sports day, and everybody thought it was great. It was our first festival and for one event we needed a few extra chairs. So I ran over to Horn Drive and big D\_\_\_ said: 'No problem, we'll lend you some of ours'. But nobody wanted to accompany me to collect them! They said: 'Are you mad going over there?'

[S] It wasn't easy. We were taking a lot of flak from certain sections within our own community for doing such things. The fact was that the whole cross-community thing wasn't popular, and was looked upon with great suspicion by many people in Suffolk. As well as that, 30-40% of our ACE employees were Catholics, such as Chris, who we had brought in as a community development worker. I mean, we had our creche petrol-bombed up here when there was rioting across the interface; we had a cafe which was petrol-bombed on at least two occasions – and this was by people from within our

own community. We had the premises we used for our meetings broken into, petrol sprinkled all over the place, firefighters left lying around, and warnings that all our Catholic workers would be considered 'legitimate targets'. We spent a long time up here trying to get things going, but you were always watching your back within your own community as well. And that for me, on a purely personal level, was quite a lonely sort of a journey.

Then that journey, for both communities, took a new turn.

[L] We had established Lenadoon Community Forum in 1992 and we were dealing in big, area-wide issues then, rather than each wee individual group doing their own thing. We'd had a number of community consultations and started looking at a community plan, and, as I said earlier, interface issues came up from different people, particularly those working at the lower end of the estate. And it wasn't long after that that Chris re-engaged with us.

[Chris] I had returned to the area in July 1995, tasked with identifying the main issues of concern to interface communities in different parts of Belfast. It wasn't a community relations project, it was about community development. At that time I had contact with two groups in Lenadoon and two in Suffolk. I had worked out a list of questions which I wanted to put to different groups, all related to interface issues. Now, there was no intention at that time of using this to promote inter-community work. I approached the group in Lenadoon, asking whether I could carry out a structured interview with them. I was more or less told that people didn't have the time, they were far too busy. Nevertheless, I gave them an outline of the topics I had hoped to cover, and happened to mention that I had already undertaken an interview with people in Suffolk. That immediately changed things. There was a desire to know what people in Suffolk had said. And they told me that if I could share with them what had been said, well then, yes, they too would be prepared to be interviewed. I went back to the Suffolk group and they also expressed a desire to know what was being said in Lenadoon. And so a process of exchanging interview material, and the responses to it, commenced. It was ongoing for a good six months, with more material being added until eventually I was coming back to each group with almost small books! My memory of those meetings, with both Lenadoon and Suffolk, in terms of exchanging that information, was that they were often quite tense; people weren't always happy with the answers I was relaying back in response to questions they had asked of the other group. And a lot of that was partly because it was going through a third party, and people couldn't eyeball each other.

[L] People were saying: 'That isn't the way of it, they've got that wrong. But then again, they can't hear us saying that because we haven't met them to talk it out; and they're probably thinking the same way about some of the things we have been saying.' And so, eventually, I think it was D\_\_\_, turned round and said: 'Look; why do we have to go through Chris? Why don't we just have a meeting altogether?' And that was eventually arranged.

[L] The first time we came together was in the Beechlawn Hotel and we went into separate rooms at first, and then we went through issues which had emerged through the exchange of papers, particularly common issues. A lot of it was around the ACE cuts, housing, the dirt of each area, and at the end of the day people were going: 'Jesus, things are as bad in Suffolk as they are over here: we've that problem too and we've this one as well.' When you left the politics and the cultural differences out of it and just looked at these issues you could say: 'Look, here's things we could campaign jointly on.' And then we began to meet fairly regularly.

[S] After the first two or three meetings in the hotel it sort of became apparent that it wasn't a 'them and us' situation: they were no different from us, and we had an awful lot in common. The perception in Suffolk was that it was the residents of Lenadoon who were causing us trouble, but they told us that most of the time it was ones from Andy'town and Twinbrook who came down looking to start things, and then left them to suffer the consequences.

[S] The Suffolk ones were hearing things like: 'No, Lenadoon has no interest in taking over your community', and many found it hard to get their heads around this, for up until then this is what they had firmly believed.

[L] I know one of the things which surprised the people of Suffolk was that there were still Protestants living in Lenadoon – indeed, they *still* continue to live there. Also, the fact that in Lenadoon there was no conspiracy to come over and take Suffolk by stealth; the priority within Lenadoon was the almost daily battles with the police or British Army, or trouble from the local hoods. You had to endure the hoods at night, and during the day you had the hoods in uniform kicking your door in; you were getting your house searched, getting your house ripped apart. We had enough problems of our own without wanting to take over Suffolk!

These productive contacts encouraged those who believed that joint work could promote positive changes in the area.

[S] Those of us who were involved in community work in Suffolk now started to see possibilities opening up, although we still had no idea how they might evolve. And we were saying to the people of Suffolk: 'Look, we're not asking you to trust the people in Lenadoon – and we understand why at this stage you don't want to – but there are things here which could potentially benefit our own community, and it's important that we don't miss any opportunities.' We had also just completed a survey within Suffolk, which revealed that the community was actually dying on its feet. Youth Action had surveyed all the 18 to 25-year-olds in the estate, and 85% of them were saying: 'I can't wait to get out of this place, I've no interest in staying here whatsoever, there's no future here.'

[S] And then, we had hardly begun this process of engagement when there was Drumcree III, and 1997 was the worst year of violence out here that we had ever experienced.

## Drumcree III: two steps back

In July 1995, the police in Portadown were involved in a stand-off with local Orangemen after the latter were prevented from marching from Drumcree church along the ‘nationalist’ Garvagh Road (formerly a ‘traditional route’ before demographic changes meant that the road now went past a Catholic housing estate). A compromise agreement with local residents eventually allowed the marchers through. The following year (‘Drumcree II’) the Orangemen were again prohibited from marching and a more serious stand-off resulted. Three days of Loyalist rioting across Northern Ireland led the RUC to reverse their decision, and they forced the marchers through against the opposition of the residents. Days of rioting then ensued in Nationalist areas. In July 1997 (‘Drumcree III’), the Orangemen were again escorted down the Garvagh Road, after 300 Nationalist protesters had been forcibly removed, an action which sparked off severe rioting in many Nationalist areas, including Lenadoon.

[L] Then we had Drumcree III. There must have been 200 British Army soldiers positioned along the interface between Suffolk and ourselves, and people came from all over Lenadoon and further afield to fight them; thousands came, and the place was like a battleground. The Army fired some 2000 plastic bullets in one single night into Lenadoon, and for three nights Suffolk was under constant bombardment. I accept that all that happened was distasteful, it was probably the worst Suffolk went through in 10-15 years. But, from the point of view of our community, the violence was largely directed at the British Army and the RUC, not the Protestants of Suffolk, although I suppose to the residents of Suffolk it didn’t look like that. Indeed, at times you would have thought that the whole of Suffolk estate was in flames.

[S] I remember being told to be up behind the shops at 7 o’clock: ‘You’re defending your estate tonight; be there or you’re getting slapped!’ And I vividly remember we were hanging over the fence watching the British Army, and a fella came out from the Catholic side and threw a petrol bomb at them and the Landrover just drove straight over him and knocked him down, deliberately. A lot of our boys cheered. I didn’t cheer; I was just amazed that the Army just drove straight over that fella. The guy tried to get up; he was crawling and he tried to get down the front of the shops, half unconscious, but he was crawling towards us, and I just knew he was getting it. There must have been 50 fellas hiding behind that fence and when he got to the fence everyone just jumped over and laid into him. How that fella lived I don’t know. How there wasn’t deaths I don’t know.

[L] Lenadoon was engaged in a full-scale battle with the Army. It was a no-go-area: every street was blocked to prevent the police and Army getting in. And the crowd took local people’s cars out of their driveways and burnt

them! Horn Drive looked like Beirut. They were throwing everything at the Army, and they ripped anything up, including people's garden fences in Horn Drive and Doon Road. Ultimately what put an end to it was when the IRA came out onto the street with guns. Alex Maskey issued a statement in the local press; I remember the big bold headline: 'Leave Suffolk Alone!' Now, people from here were really attacking the British Army, but as the soldiers were lined up outside Suffolk it must have looked as if people from here were attacking Suffolk. I suppose if I lived in Suffolk I too would have seen it as people trying to burn me out, that's the way I would have felt.

[S] We were highlighted on the main British news for three evenings in a row. It was a terrible time for this community. A lot of residents were very concerned about the future of the community because people were now saying that there was no way they were prepared to go through all that again.

[L] Even though things eventually did die down it looked as if the whole interface thing was finished. People were interviewed in the media, saying that, after what they went through, how could they ever be expected to trust the other side. So it did look as though the whole thing was near to collapse.

## Reestablishing contact

The old maxim of 'one step forward, two steps back' seemed to have proven itself again. And yet, neither side wanted to see all their efforts end in failure.

[L] We had a month's cooling-off period, where we realised that if we tried even communicating with each other things would be said that we mightn't be able to repair. So for a month we went back into our own communities, did our own thing, and eventually another meeting was convened to try and calm things down.

[S] Before we reached that stage, I remember attending a public meeting which was bunged with people from Suffolk, and when the topic of our inter-community meetings came up I recall different people in that room saying: 'No chance, we're not interested in them. See, you lot started to meet them and look what's happened; we told you you couldn't trust them.' It was as if nothing was going to be of any use, nothing would ever come out of these meetings. There were only two people in that room who said: 'Look, I understand how you're feeling, but realistically the time to keep meeting is when things are going badly. It's easy to meet when things are going well. We've hit a real problem, a real crisis. And yes, what you are all saying is right, but if we end this contact we don't know what opportunities we might be throwing away.' But the mood certainly didn't bode well for the future. Having said that, although those with objections were the most vocal, other people said to me afterwards that they were in favour of maintaining some sort of contact but felt too anxious about coming out publicly and saying so.

However, meetings *were* resumed, with some trepidation and anxiety.

[L] A few hours before one of the meetings I remember getting a phone call from a person on the Protestant side saying: ‘You maybe shouldn’t come into Suffolk tonight, there’s no guarantee that you’re going to get out alive.’ And people in my own community were saying: ‘It’s up to you, you have to make up your own mind on this.’ And as I approached the pedestrian crossing on the Stewartstown Road I felt like yer man in ‘High Noon’: do I go across or not? But I did cross it. During the meeting itself, apart from my heart being in my mouth the whole time, I remember sitting well away from the door, but with my eyes on it the whole time, thinking: see the first time that door opens I’m jumping through that window over there!

[L] The one thing we realised was that the problems associated with Drumcree were likely to surface again the next year, and the year after. Now, we could sit and ignore each other, but we’d be in the same position when the next Drumcree came around. Surely it was better to have some channel of communication so that, should it threaten to re-occur, we might at least be in a position to do something about it. And some things came out in the dialogue. People from Suffolk were saying: look, we had [Loyalist] paramilitaries come up here from Taughmonagh and Dunmurry because we had heard reports that Nationalists were coming from all over West Belfast to burn us out. And people in Lenadoon were saying that the reason so many came from Andy’town and Twinbrook was because they had heard that Loyalist paramilitaries were coming up armed to the teeth. So two identical rumours were creating fear on both sides. We agreed that the only way we could dispel such rumours was to ensure that we had contact across the interface. So we organised a basic mobile phone network: a few mobile phones on this side, a few on the other – to build up a bit of trust, and try and nip any trouble in the bud. Furthermore, both sides agreed that even if we never undertook any joint activities again, at least we could try to reduce the violence and damage which might arise from the following year’s Drumcree events.

[L] In advance of the next year’s Drumcree parade we worked for a good period of time on a statement which basically was a joint appeal for there to be no violence at our interface. Rather than saying that we believed that the march *should* get down the Garvaghy Road, or that it *shouldn’t* get down, we just stated that we respected the rights of both communities to protest peacefully at *whatever* decision was made, but we asked for no violence. For people in Suffolk were very strong in saying that if the parade didn’t get down then they were going to block Black’s Road. And I was saying that if the parade is forced down Garvaghy Road and people there get hurt again, then I and others will be out protesting in support of the people of Garvaghy Road. I have a right peacefully to do that; likewise, people in Suffolk have a right to block Black’s Road peacefully too. So we said that people from both communities were entitled to make their protests, but we made it very clear that we didn’t want any violence. That was in our joint statement. That went to all the media and to the Parades Commission.

[L] And what helped us was that the following year we were so much better prepared. Indeed, all we talked about for the six months prior to Drumcree IV<sup>†</sup> was Drumcree: what's going to happen, what can we have in place, what could we do about this and that? Getting a joint statement out helped, as did our efforts to scotch rumour-mongering. And I think that when Drumcree IV was successfully handled people began to believe that both communities *could* take things forward. So, from a situation where we had feared that everything was about to collapse around us, we now started to build up our hopes again. In fact, it was only then that I myself began to *really* believe that there was potential for other stuff.

## An ambitious step into the future

The re-energised meetings eventually resulted in the formation of the Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group (SLIG), a sign of growing confidence. The mobile phone network had revealed the benefits of joint work across the interface and the relative peace of Drumcree IV had been a welcome boost. But the impetus behind the group's most ambitious venture was provided when the Housing Executive decided that they were going to demolish a number of the buildings on the front of the Stewartstown Road, including the premises used for meetings by Suffolk Community Forum.

[S] There were two issues. One, the front of the Stewartstown Road was absolutely desolate and unwelcoming....

[L] Yes, people used to comment about how bleak it was coming up that road on a winter's night, with a big fence and complete darkness – it looked really scary. And people were actually living behind those fences.

[S] ... and two, Suffolk Community Forum needed somewhere to meet, and the new Interface Group also needed somewhere to meet. And one possibility which occurred to us was to construct an entirely new building – one which was owned by both communities, and would hopefully prove to be self-sustaining – within which these different projects might be accommodated.

And gradually a radical initiative began to take shape. A company would be formed, called the Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project. Its management board would have four directors from Lenadoon Community Forum, four from Suffolk Community Forum, and four independent Directors would be brought in because of their individual expertise. The Company's aim would be to build a two-storey block of shops and offices – replacing some of the derelict property then standing on the Stewartstown Road – the shops being on the ground floor,

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<sup>†</sup> Drumcree IV (1998), when the march was banned, saw even more disruption and violence across Northern Ireland (including the murder of three children), but Lenadoon remained relatively peaceful. In subsequent years the protests dwindled, and to date the Orangemen are still unable to parade down the Garvaghy Road.

for which a commercial rent would be charged. On the upper floor one wing of the building would provide office space for local community projects and initiatives (which would be charged a community rent), while the other wing would be available to statutory and other organisations able to pay the commercial rate. As long as the company didn't go bankrupt or get into debt, any profit would be divided into three parts. One third would be given to Lenadon Community Forum – to fund projects or services within Lenadon – another third would be given to Suffolk Community Forum – who would do likewise within Suffolk – while the final third would be retained by the Company to continue to develop its needs. Of course, this final shape did not materialise overnight, but was the product of months of intensive discussions.

[L] The process which brought our Company into being was one of the longest, most painstaking processes I have ever experienced. We even spent six months in mediation as part of it.

[L] Yes, at one point when things weren't proceeding too well Chris came up with the idea of us going to mediation. And we agreed. In other circumstances, setting up a company would have been straightforward. But in our case we had to unpick absolutely everything. We had to analyse *every* possible aspect of the building: its non-political use, flags and emblems, who could come into the building and who couldn't. We had to devise criteria for use, under every conceivable scenario; we had to work out our mission statement, our core value statement.... On top of all that we had to learn how to run a company and take on the role of board members. We also had to determine how to build trust and relationships between our two communities – and even between ourselves on the interface steering group. We were six months in mediation, and none of it was simple or straightforward.

There was one aspect of this process –pertaining to a serious breach of professional confidentiality – which later caused some concern.

[S] In some ways this is quite humorous, but in other ways quite worrying. About three years ago I was doing a community training course during which we had to sit in a one-to-one situation with a complete stranger and tell them all about yourself. The girl I was paired with was a community worker from Omagh, and when she heard where I was from she said: 'Oh, I know all about your project: youse went into mediation, and youse did this and this.' And I said 'Yes, we did.' And when she learned my name she said: 'You said such and such a thing, and someone from Lenadon said this, and at the end of it you all agreed to this and this...' She told me our whole story! I was astonished, and asked her: 'How do you know all this?' And she said that her own group had brought in the same mediation agency to do some training with them, and they had used our process as the role model. And this girl said: 'And I got to play you.' And I started to laugh and said: 'Please don't be offended by this, but I was hoping for Meryl Streep!' But then I thought afterwards that it was a bit worrying that they actually... not only used our

story without permission, but used our real names, used everything, all the details of our discussions!

## **Bringing the communities on board**

Having agreed on what they were about, it was now time for the members of the Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group to sell the idea to their respective communities.

[L] Suffolk Community Forum did a presentation to Lenadoon Community Forum about the proposals for the new development. Now, at that meeting what was said was: thank you for the presentation, but in order to ensure that we have the endorsement of the community, we would need to hold a public meeting involving the lower end of Lenadoon estate, because they're the ones who take the brunt of anything that happens at the interface. And so we went into Horn Drive Community Centre and held a public meeting there, seeking their endorsement and support. Now, many of those people had themselves been burnt out of homes elsewhere in Belfast and hadn't come to Lenadoon by choice, so emotions were still raw and memories of what had happened to people were still very much alive. And when it was put to people there about forming a joint company and trying to secure funding to create new shops and office space, there were a few comments like: 'Sure in July we can't even go over to the post office.' That related to an incident when residents of Lenadoon had been prevented from using the Post Office on the front of the road. Indeed, members of the Interface Group had to stand there to ensure that pensioners and others were able to get their money, and then to see them back safely across the road again. So during the public meeting these were some of the things being raised: 'We can't even use the chemist's or the post office, particularly around July time, and you're asking us to endorse youse to go in with them?' It got a bit hot and heavy at times.

[L] I remember at the Horn Drive meeting one of the main points made by the few who were opposing the proposal was: 'Look at the houses destroyed over there; we're in dire need over here for housing and look at the houses that are lying vacant or being knocked down over there.' The housing issue was a big thing, which nearly threw it all out for us, because people were saying: 'You want us to work with them ones, yet they wouldn't let people move into good, solid houses because they don't want Catholics on that side of the road.' It was certainly a big bone of contention.

[L] I think at the end of the evening we realised that we hadn't got total support within the community but we just felt: let's give it a go and hopefully we can eventually convince people. It was the same when we were setting up Lenadoon Community Forum; there was quite a number of people who said it would never work, it had been tried before and hadn't worked, and they didn't come along with us at the beginning. And then two or three years down the line they realised the benefits. And I think it was now the same

with the people of Horn Drive. We weren't totally convinced that we'd be able to do it, but we felt that there was enough of a mandate to go ahead and try it anyway, and I'm really glad that we did.

[S] I think there were a group of key people here in Suffolk, most all of them women, who were prepared to take a risk, who were prepared to say: well, I don't know whether this'll work or not but it's worth giving it a go. And these women were all very vocal and made themselves very unpopular with some of the things that they said and some of the things that they did, but they were prepared to step out and try something. Most of them, like myself, were probably complete pains in the backside, and we got up people's noses and irritated the life out of them.

[S] But ultimately, I believe that within Suffolk we couldn't have gone ahead without the support of the community. I remember going to the public meeting down in the old community centre and the hall was packed and we were trying to persuade the people of Suffolk to go ahead with our proposal to form this joint company. And at the beginning some people were saying: 'No chance.' One guy even said to me: 'Over my dead body!' Another guy said: 'We've spent the last 25 years trying to keep that lot out of this community and you want to invite them over!' It was a huge step that we were asking people to take. Even towards the end of the meeting I had no idea what the outcome might be. Now, there were paramilitary members there – quite legitimately, because they were residents in the community – and we weren't sure what they thought about it all. But when I asked for a show of hands, *every single person* in that room put their hands up to allow it to go ahead. I mean, there was one hundred percent support from people, even from doubters and those with bitter memories. It was an amazing leap of faith by the Suffolk community.

[S] I think some of it was around the fact that we were doing our best to be totally up front. We were aware that, in the past, people in the community had been excluded from decision-making – it had always been left to one or two individuals – and we were determined that nothing like that would happen again. Furthermore, over the years the people who had been making key decisions about Suffolk weren't actually from Suffolk. This was the first time that people from their own community were doing it; those in the leadership of the Forum at that stage were all from Suffolk, and we were able to genuinely say: 'Look, we understand the reasons why you might have your suspicions about this but we're from this community too, and there's no way we would want to do anything that would harm our own community.' And in support of our argument we were able to produce the results of the survey which showed that our young people couldn't wait to get out of the place. And I remember standing there, saying: 'Look, if we *don't* do this I genuinely believe that this community is going to disintegrate. And it may not work, there's no guarantee of success, but I genuinely believe that this is one of the best opportunities we have had.'

## Funding highs and lows

Having obtained the endorsement of both communities, an entirely different challenge now lay ahead: the procurement of funding. It had been realised from the outset that if the project had been limited to only one side of the interface, then no funder would have shown much interest in it. However, the fact that this proposed enterprise was owned by *both* communities and would help to turn part of a violence-prone, sectarian interface into a ‘shared space’ was surely something which would have appeal. The search for backers began well.

[L] The first funding source was the IFI (International Fund for Ireland) who generously put up half the money needed; the Belfast European Partnership Board also made a contribution and the Housing Executive gave us the land in kind. Now, this was for the ‘bricks and mortar’ part of it. In terms of operating costs, IFI also provided a manager’s salary for the first two years, and that allowed us to employ someone to manage the project while funding was being drawn in from the commercial units.

[S] Those bodies who got behind us were really positive about the project. We were told by one of them that this was the first time in Northern Ireland that such a process had brought two communities together like this, and that this was the first community-owned company of its kind in Northern Ireland. As the funder said, we had created the ‘footprint’ for others to follow.

[L] In relation to the IFI and the Housing Executive, you couldn’t have asked for two better champions of what we were about. They were fully behind us, they could see the vision, they could see what we were trying to achieve and were more than willing to assist us. But you couldn’t say that about all the funders, some of whom had to be dragged along.

The IFI had only provided half the money – as was their policy – and approaches were made to government – in the form of MBW, now known as BRO<sup>†</sup>, for the other half. However, this proved more than problematic.

[L] The civil service gave us no amount of hassle, putting us through endless hoops and obstacles. They openly called our initiative a ‘white elephant’, questioned what was in it for Lenadoon, or Suffolk, and passed the opinion that it wouldn’t be used, it would just stand idle. And, okay, such questions had to be answered, but at the same time they put deliberate obstacles in our path. And they dressed up some of these obstacles under the cloak of ‘accountability’. But, to my mind, the only people who have any real

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<sup>†</sup> Government support for regeneration in Belfast is co-ordinated through the Department for Social Development (DSD), which as established in 1999 as part of the Northern Ireland Executive. DSD in turn operates through the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO), which itself is an amalgamation of the former Belfast Development Office and the Making Belfast Work initiative (MBW) set up in 1988.

accountability these days are community groups – indeed, probably more than most civil service departments. I think it’s all about them retaining control. Civil servants see a threat from communities and groups like us, pushing and leading from the bottom up, and they don’t like it. They particularly want to retain control over the purse strings.

[L] Quite apart from the hassles they gave us, they didn’t seem to be clued into interface realities at all. I remember, after we had applied for further funding to develop the project into its second phase, a representative from BRO said at a meeting: ‘You’ve cured the interface, so why would you need more funding?’ As if it was some sort of disease to be ‘cured’! The stability of an interface depends upon the hard work of the two communities to keep it that way; an interface remains, even at the best of times, potentially volatile. We have seen the worst of times at the interface, and for a number of years we’ve seen the best of times. But that was only because the two communities came together and discussed problems in a truthful and open manner.

However, despite the doubters the project soon began to prove its worth.

[S] We said to people in the community that this initiative was about spreading the feel-good factor, and it was about recognising that people in this community took a huge leap of faith by allowing this all to go ahead in the first place. And that leap of faith soon began to be rewarded. As we pointed out, the Company shares its profits with the two Community Forums; and in Suffolk, with our share of the profits from the first two years of full operation, we’ve supported things like the BB company and the pensioners’ group, the football team, the band, the after-schools club, the darts team and other groups, and that has encouraged people to think: okay, it maybe was a big step in trust to take but look at what we’re now getting out of it. This year, unfortunately, for all sorts of reasons there hasn’t been as much profit to be shared around, but we are confident it will build up again.

[L] Indeed, we felt so confident that we put together plans for Phase II, in which the building will be extended to incorporate a 50-place child-care facility, two more shops and office space above. And, to our annoyance, BRO, who reluctantly came on board for Phase I, but are involved in Phase II (they are administering the Integrated Development Fund monies we secured), are trying to tie things up in such a complicated way that we will not be able to get our hoped-for percentage of the profits. They say that if the two forums receive any of the profits, then they will reduce their own funding to the Forums accordingly. I mean, it’s bureaucracy gone mad. We’re trying to be innovative and forward-looking, and they’re trying to tie us hand and foot.

[S] There are other funders who have shown an interest. At the beginning of the year we were approached by Atlantic Philanthropies, who had done some research on us. Their ethos is to hand-pick the groups they want to support, and before they will even think about doing so they want to see that the group already has an established track record, that it has a vision, that it has proved

that there are people on the ground who can deliver. If they decide that we meet all those criteria, then they will potentially fund us. They have still to make their final decision.† But in the meantime they decided to fund us over the summer, through Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group, to produce an extensive peace-building plan. And working on that has been one of the most positive experiences I have ever had in Suffolk. Initially I was actually quite fearful of it, because it involved the most intensive consultation we have ever done in Suffolk. We consulted to death – that’s how I put it. We met with the football team, the band, the pensioners’ group, the residents’ association, the community centre committee, the board of governors down in the primary school; we had a huge focus group up here involving all of the groups who work with youth, the Boys Brigade and others... Some of the individuals we met had actually given me and others a lot of flak over the years and I was anticipating a lot of hassle. The purpose of the consultation process was to see how we could promote contact between the two communities, even for groups like the band, asking them: how do you see yourself linking into peace-building, into shared space, shared resources... And everybody was saying: ‘Yes, I think that’s the way we must go forward.’ Every group, from the Protestant Boys Flute Band to the pensioners said: ‘This is a brilliant idea; we’d love to be involved in it.’ Of course, understandably, despite the generally positive mood, some people did have reservations – yet even they were prepared to give it a go.

[S] For me, just to hear the views of other people in Suffolk about the interface group and what it was doing, I kind of thought that even five years ago, if we had gone and talked to those groups we’d have had a completely different response.

[L] See even if Atlantic Philanthropies decide not to fund us, I still got so much out of the summer consultation process. We went away on two different days together – eight or nine people from Suffolk and the same from Lenadoon – but most of the people from Suffolk I had never had any contact with before, and likewise most of our people were new to the Suffolk ones. We were trying to bring in new people from the groups we had consulted with, letting them have a say on what they thought could work, what they thought couldn’t work, what maybe in two years you could do, and what had to be put on the long finger. And there were people there who were diametrically opposed – some openly saying that they were Republicans, others saying that they were Loyalists – and it was the first time they had even been in the same room. And yet they were quite happy and confident enough to say: ‘This is what I am, this is what I am about, but I do want to sit down together; I am realistic enough to know that there’s a settlement on its way and one way or the other we have to get on together, so I want to be involved in that process.’ And, on a personal level, that has been so important to me. If I meet any of those people now, I can stop and have a one-to-one conversation with them.

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† Just before this pamphlet went to print Atlantic Philanthropies informed SLIG that they were willing to fund part of their programme.

[L] How it operated was that the two communities worked, separately, on their own peace-building plan. We never saw Suffolk's plan and they never saw ours. So then the day came when we all met up together. And when I say 'we' I don't just mean the members of the Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group, but all these new people we had invited on board through the consultation process. We spent an hour or two getting to know each other, then we [Lenadoon] went into a room and were given Suffolk's plan, while Suffolk went into another room where they got ours. We all came together in the afternoon and tried to determine from both plans just what was realistic. And the surprising thing was that we got more agreement than we thought possible. I thought we would get maybe one or two wee ideas, but it actually turned out that there was half a dozen things which people were ready for now. There were other issues, of course, which people said were too raw – for example, housing – which we knew were impossible to work on at present. But it was a very positive experience, and let us know that we had finally turned the corner, that the project has proven its worth to both communities.

[S] The other thing I am really excited about is the proposed child-care facility; I think that is going to make a huge difference to the front of the road and to the two communities. Initially we were going to bring in a private child-care company, but then we thought: why would we want to do that? It would obviously guarantee us a rent but local people would have had no input into it at all, local children might have had no access. So we spent some time developing another private company, involving community people – a completely independent child-care company. We had to submit a tender and we got the tender and are going to be moving in as the tenant in September. And we also managed to get more of the younger generation on board.

[L] If you can generate employment – even if you cannot guarantee that it won't all be local jobs – but if you have people from Suffolk and Lenadoon working in there together then it's another opportunity for them to mix and even socialise. And parents coming to leave or collect their kids will meet other parents, even if at first all that is exchanged between them is an initial 'hello'. But maybe the next time they're sitting in the coffee house having a cup of tea, they'll recognise each other and ask: 'How's your wee one getting on?' or whatever. It's not something you're forcing on people, but is something that hopefully will grow.

That is, as long as certain funders and their expectations don't get in the way.

[S] Last year some BRO officials came up to the site, seemingly to plan a 'launch' for Phase II. They wanted this big blaze of publicity and were going to invite a government minister up, with TV cameras present. But they never asked us what *we* thought about the idea. And it caused a whole furore in Suffolk, because if they invited a government minister they would also have to invite the local MP, who is Gerry Adams. Now, we recognise that Gerry Adams is the elected representative for West Belfast, but, at the same time, there are grassroots realities which cannot be brushed aside. Nobody would

dream of asking Gerry Adams to open up a new development on the Shankill Road, and Suffolk is no different. All the patient work we had undertaken could so easily be undone. So the Suffolk representatives said to BRO: ‘Look, you didn’t consult with us about this, but we have to tell you that if you go ahead and do this either we will boycott the launch or walk off the site.’ And they weren’t too happy about this at all.

[S] Not only that, but I have been to conferences of late where people from the DSD stand up and talk about our project, as if they had built it single-handedly! And I have also had to challenge them on other issues, like when they cut funding for our youth worker post in Suffolk. At one particular conference this senior civil servant was up talking about the future and the way forward, and stressing how important it was to invest in young people. So I stood up and said that I was very glad to hear that this was DSD policy but could he therefore explain why his department had cut the salary for the only youth worker post that we have in our community, especially when he was so publicly emphasising the importance of assisting our young people. His only response was: ‘Can you come and talk to me about this afterwards.’

## Still work to do

None of the members of the Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group would claim that the interface problems have all been resolved – or ‘cured’, as the civil servant described it. But it is a much different place from what it was before.

[S] You just have to look at the last lot of years, to see the reduced level of violence. There’s still incidents, of course, there still needs to be work done on the interface, and undoubtedly the mobile phone network will remain very important for some time to come.

[L] I think the unexpected upsurge of trouble last year on the Eleventh Night stunned everybody, because we had had four or five years of peace and I suppose we were getting complacent. Not only that, but, as has already been said, in our early days we spent a lot of our interface meetings preparing for the summer, and a lot of meetings *afterwards* discussing *what happened* over the summer. And we had eventually felt that we could move away from that, to discussing new relationships, to discussing Phase II, the new child care facility, how to develop the interface group, how to secure funding, etc.

[L] The interface still has its tensions. But that is something we might never ever change. I think there’ll be something along every interface. Maybe in ten years’ time it won’t be like that, but you still have the ‘marching season’, and potentially Celtic–Ranger matches, and there’s always those things. Don’t forget, all it takes is two or three lunatics who want to throw a stone or whatever to set it off. But at the moment we’ve more tensions *within* our own community, in terms of anti-social behaviour, a hundred times more than we

have at this interface now. If I said to you now to go and knock a hundred doors in Lenadoon and ask what's the biggest issue for them at present I would say that at least 95% will mention anti-social behaviour. I mean, what I witnessed in our own area last Friday night was nobody's business; people were kicking and fighting each other; it was horrific. And it was all young people who had too much drink in them – both fellas and girls. The violence that went on there for over an hour was frightening, it was really, really scary; it was as bad as I have ever seen during a riot with the British Army, the RUC, or between Suffolk and Lenadoon. I mean, two bottles of cider now is the same price as two bottles of coke, so you're getting young people, in all communities all over Belfast, who can now easily afford to drink five or six nights a week.

[S] I think the interface will always be an issue in Suffolk. Because it's such a tiny community you can't stand anywhere in Suffolk and not see the edges of it. For instance, there was a meeting in the community last week about strengthening the fencing down at Carnanmore, so for the people in Suffolk those are still ongoing issues. We always say that no matter how successful this gets you could never sit back and say: well, we can relax now, we don't need to worry any more, because the interface is going to be an issue with people here for a long time to come.

[L] What I witnessed on Friday night could very easily have spiralled into interface violence. But it's symptomatic of what is happening across most urban areas.

[S] Recently there a group of the fellas from Suffolk were over across the road talking to a crowd of girls from Lenadoon, and I thought to myself: well, that's one way of sorting out the interface!

[S] My daughter is 18 and went to an integrated school and she ended actually going into Lenadoon. Unfortunately one wee lad beat her up, but the young people *are* beginning to mix.

## Looking to the Future

There is now a definite mood of optimism among the members of the Suffolk-Lenadoon Interface Group, not to mention a feeling of tiredness.

[S] I guess those of us here would like to think that, in the future, we can all look back and say: 'Yes, we helped to make a difference.' And when you look at where we started from and what we've done, I really do believe that we did. At the same time, it has been a struggle. We had a child-care meeting the other night and you know the way people will say to you: 'where would you like to be in ten years' time?' And I replied that in ten years' time I don't want to be in the middle of this any more, I want to be sitting at home in the evenings watching TV. And I know others think like that too. Indeed, I feel

that a large part of what we are doing at present with the interface group is making sure that other people are skilled up and ready to take over. To secure the future, those of us who have been involved for a long time need to start now to train up the next generation to come behind us, and, as they say, take on the baton. When we took on three outreach workers there in January, we told them to look upon this as a long-term process. It took a long time for the bad situation to evolve and you're not going to solve the problems in a couple of years. People often look at our project and say: 'They've been really successful up there', but they don't realise how shaky it all still is in reality, because of the insecurities around continued funding and stuff like that.

[L] One of our interface workers deals full-time with Suffolk, while two part-time workers service Lenadoon. What they're trying to do is – initially – 'single-identity' work and then hopefully start to bring young people, parents, women, elderly, together... that's where you build your tiers for the future. But as for me, I'm ready for a bed over in Knockbracken – for therapy!

[L] Ten years ago who would have imagined us being here? So, in another ten years' time maybe the word 'interface' might have disappeared, it'll be a shared community. But you're right, it's not like a time-limited project. And among our group we know that there's no threat from Lenadoon to Suffolk or vice versa, but within both communities there are those who still view one another as the enemy. So there is more work to be done there, we haven't resolved the problem. What we have done is to have built relationships among ourselves and, of course, we have erected this building as a product of that relationship. But we now have to bring the rest of the community more fully on board. And that is an ongoing process; there's always new issues, there's always new things which arise. This group consists of a core group, and we will support our outreach workers to get out there and get more of the community involved in different projects... it could be a children's group, it could be on women's issues... anything that involves the community.

[S] Our outreach workers will be engaging in a whole range of activities. For a start, they have to produce a magazine within each community, and each issue has to contain something positive in it about the interface work that's going on, to help promote it.

[L] What you have to do is show people that this space here is safe for everybody; whether you come from Suffolk or Lenadoon, there's no threat to you here. We hope that as time passes and people build relationships, they will begin to develop joint activities with each other.

[L] It's about building up the capacity, building up the confidence of the different strands: young people, women, pensioners, and then to begin organising some joint activities. M\_\_\_\_\_ is currently working with a pensioners' group regarding a joint Christmas carol concert, involving some P7 children from both primary schools.

[S] I think a lot of people in Suffolk finally cottoned on to the fact that this could work, and even individuals who were staunchly Loyalist, or those who just didn't trust the 'other side', also began to see the benefits of getting involved in something like this. And we were delighted to have people like that behind us. Not only that, but during the summer consultation process, when we got together from both communities, some of those individuals were there too, people who had never sat down with anyone from Lenadon before, but who came out of it saying: that was brilliant.

[S] I have to be honest, I am not a Loyalist, although I am a Unionist. But I have noticed that S\_\_\_\_, the leader of the Protestant Boys Flute Band, after Drumcree and all that – when the parading issue became even more contentious – has tried to turn the local parade into more of a carnival. Now, he's no less staunch about his culture but I think he sees that as the way forward. So I definitely see progress over that issue. Now, I am not saying that you won't still get the odd asshole shouting and bawling out through the windows of the bus or whatever, or people waiting at Blacks Road looking to be offended, but I have seen real progress.

[S] We have been there and back. I can remember when we first all met up, we were never totally at ease for a long, long time. And we have to be aware that others in the community feel now as we did then, so we must be patient.

[L] Hopefully what we have created as a result of our patient work over the years is a model for other groups to follow. We get loads of people coming here from different parts of Belfast, and further afield; this initiative is now recognised by people all over the place as a role model of reconciliation and good practice – even though 'reconciliation' as such was never our priority; our priority was simply to improve the wellbeing of our two communities.

[L] I think what contributed most to our success was that it was from ground level up. This wasn't a government initiative, this was two communities saying: look, we have tolerated a lot here over the years, and it's in both our interests to do something about it. It was obviously in the best interests of Suffolk to do something here, to change the terrible appearance of the front of the Stewartstown Road. And at the end of the day our two communities were living facing each other, so working together was bound to be to the advantage of both.

[L] I think we all realised that the only people who could do anything for the area were the local people themselves, because there was no urgency in government circles to invest any time or energy here. The only way it was going to be pushed forward was if those who actually lived here did the pushing, or got up and done something about it. And let's be honest, for a long time this initiative was seen by a lot of government people as a white elephant – indeed, that's the way they described it themselves. They said that it couldn't work. And *why* did they say that? Because *they* weren't involved, they never thought of it, so they didn't believe it would work. And I think it

maybe gets on the gaw of some of them still, that it *is* working, that it is functioning and that it is going places.

[L] To get where we are today has meant blood, sweat and tears. I don't think anyone should underestimate the process we all had to engage in. It wasn't a simple matter by any means. The whole process – the consultation process, going back to our respective communities, ensuring that we had their support and agreement – was time-consuming and difficult. And of course, especially on the Suffolk side, having to face so much hostility in the beginning, even threats, only added to the difficulties.

[S] But I think just to work through that process and to see the number of people willing to be involved, and prepared to try and think of new ways we could actually move forward, for me, was fantastically encouraging.

[S] I am very proud of what we all did, and achieved, because young people can walk in now and take it even further – and we have set the track down for them.

[L] I'm looking forward quite optimistically to the future. I wasn't sure when we started out with the Company whether we would fill all the shop and office units – there's that many business parks sitting there with half of their units not filled – but here we've actually a waiting list. So that to me is business people also saying that they want to invest in this, and *they* don't want to invest their money unless it's going to be a success. I think it's further proof that the Suffolk and Lenadon community are starting to revitalise themselves and regenerate, and by and large it has been community people who have led that.

[S] I was over at Stormont this morning and saw the Rev Paisley. I was thinking that I hadn't seen him in the flesh since I was going over to the Ormeau Park for his rallies in the 1970s. But I often wonder whether his attitudes – and those of other politicians – have changed much, if at all, over the past thirty-odd years, while I and others have undertaken such a personal journey of change.

[Chris] I think this project is a kind of object lesson in self-preservation. People had their backs to the wall here, as in other interface areas, and they had to be really creative in how they got themselves out of the situation they found themselves in, and they *have* been creative, hugely creative.