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Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future PEACE III Project E-Zine

Bridge of Hope, a department of Ashton Community Trust, set up in 2001, is a community based victims and survivors service that works with individuals, families and communities affected by the conflict in North Belfast and beyond. Bridge of Hope's goal is to tackle the legacy of the conflict through a variety of holistic approaches to trauma recovery. It does this through the delivery of complementary therapies, life coaching, counselling, counselling support, legacy and conflict analysis, as well as accredited training and psycho education programmes. Across all of its work Bridge of Hope promotes the importance of resilience and positive mental health and well-being.

Over the years, Bridge of Hope has developed several legacy themed initiatives designed to connect with those hit hardest by the conflict. Successful programmes include 'Making Sense of the Past in the Present' and 'Who Am I?' which are currently being delivered by 'Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future' project funded by the EU's PEACE III programme. Bridge of Hope is also involved in the field of transitional justice and has developed a partnership with the Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University. This area of work examines how post conflict societies manage their transition away from violence and human rights abuses.

At a strategic level we are doing our part to help improve emotional wellbeing through our partnership working with statutory bodies. We are funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA) under the government's Protect Life suicide prevention strategy and by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BH&SCT) to support individuals experiencing poor mental health. We continue to voice the needs of local communities through membership of various bodies such as the Belfast Strategic Partnership which is tasked with improving health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities in the city of Belfast.

Review of Exploring the Past Together PEACE III project

Reflecting on the lifespan of the PEACE III Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future project, Legacy Co-Ordinator Niall Ó Donnghaile said;

“This PEACE III project has successfully connected with communities who are experiencing issues of marginalisation and isolation as well as a lack of dividends in this post conflict era.

“Over the course of the last two years we have engaged over 400 people through outreach activities. Over 200 individuals participated in our ‘Who am I?’ and Making Sense of the Past in the Present programmes. Participants came from areas including Greater Belfast, North Down & Ards, Derry and Cavan Monaghan. We also successfully completed two study visits to Berlin and held a successful conference in Belfast City Centre on the theme of ‘Building Peace to Last’.

“This is all on top of the ongoing grassroots engagement that took place during the course of the project.”

Niall continued:

“This work was borne out of communities determination to work together to address not only legacy issues but how they can learn from those themes to change and improve their lives in the here and now.

“All of our evaluations and feedback have indicated very clearly that communities see the merit of their participation in these sometimes difficult and testing legacy programmes.

“This sentiment was expressed time and again at our recent conference by not only those who participated in this programme but also by community, political, statutory and voluntary partners and stakeholders who were in attendance.”

Concluding Niall hoped to see this type of work continue:

“We are confident that our track record, not least our ability to sustain this work during the uncertainty of the flag dispute, indicates that this thematic engagement work between communities remains vital as we move forward as a society. Due to the fact that our work has grown from the bottom up we have been in a unique position to engage with and bring communities together. While appreciating the difficult economic climate, there is no doubt that the pioneering work of Bridge of Hope and Ashton Community Trust has borne fruit, and we want to see that work continue to blossom and grow.”

14/05/13

LAUNCH OF NEW PEACE III 'DEALING WITH THE PAST' PROJECT

A programme aimed at reconciling communities and reconnecting those individuals hit hard by the legacy of the conflict is being launched on Wednesday May 15.

The '**Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future**' project is being managed by the North Belfast charity Ashton Community Trust via its Bridge of Hope programme and will run until the winter of 2014. It is financed by the European Union's European Regional Development Fund through the EU's PEACE III Programme for Peace and Reconciliation managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.

The '**Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future**' project consists of a number of different conflict themed strands and is aimed at helping communities address some of the complex issues arising from the conflict.

The project hopes to reconnect individuals from communities which experienced a significant proportion of conflict related deaths, injury, trauma and violence. Areas such as North Belfast, West Belfast, Derry, North Down, and East Antrim are all being targeted.

The project is seeking to break down the barriers which have developed historically across communities. It is hoping to dispel myths and allow relationships to be built which will benefit not only the individuals concerned but also their wider social support network. The project will also create further opportunities for significant community dialogue as a way of beginning to explore past hurt and trauma.

It is intended to work with participants either on an individual basis through the "**Who Am I?**" or at a community/group level through the "**Making Sense of the Past in the Present**" programmes. The processes culminate with a learning experience to Berlin in order to compare and contrast issues associated with division and unification.

Overall, the project is set to engage with both nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist areas especially where there is a legacy of difference in relation to attitudes and perceptions surrounding the conflict.

"Despite these historical strands of perceived difference, in the history of our work we have identified there are in fact substantial commonalities affecting these same areas. These everyday common themes focus on social, economic, housing, dereliction, lack of inward government investment, employment and poor health," Head of Victims Services at Ashton Community Trust Irene Sherry said.

"Taking part in this initiative will offer individuals the chance to address the past in a substantial way and we feel will be welcomed especially by communities who are showing signs of wanting to move forward. This work will also have a positive influence on society at large, and will contribute to ongoing processes aimed at ensuring the past is not repeated."

Bridge of Hope is actively engaged in researching the conflict from a community perspective so that it can better advocate for services that meet their needs at a strategic level. Over recent years substantial pieces of research, cross community confidence building and dialogue sessions have been channelled through its offices, which, with the help of

participants, has undoubtedly helped steer wider society onto a path of greater awareness, reconciliation and healing.

Bridge of Hope's Transitional Justice Grassroots Programme, the first to look at the issue of transitional justice from a bottom up perspective, has involved individuals from Falls, Shankill, Mount Vernon, Tigers Bay and Greater New Lodge. It has resulted in an academic report written by University of Ulster academic Eilish Rooney and framework toolkit that other communities dealing with transition issues can apply in the local place.

03/09/13

ASHTON COMMUNITY TRUST IN BRUSSELS TO EXPLORE EU AREAS FOR GROWTH



Chairperson of Ashton Community Trust (ACT) Michael Liggett; ACT Head of Victims & Mental Health Services Irene Sherry; Head of Arts & Youth Development Katrina Newell; Sinn Féin MEP Martina Anderson; EU DG Regio Tamara Pavlin; ACT Chief Executive Paul Roberts; Director of Education Nerve Centre John Peto; EU DG Regio Stephen Langley and ACT Head of Employment & Training Services Pat Boyle.

A delegation led by the North Belfast based social regeneration charity Ashton Community Trust met with high ranking European Union officials in Brussels to progress its explorations of sustainable funding opportunities.

The team which included Ashton Chief Executive Paul Roberts and Irene Sherry, Head of Victims Services were invited to the home of the European Union in Brussels by Sinn Féin Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Martina Anderson.

The MEP and her team in Brussels planned the fact finding visit on Tuesday May 28 2013 to assist organisations like Ashton learn more about accessing EU funding for development.

Ashton Community Trust has years of experience in delivering PEACE programmes and are currently delivering a PEACE III project 'Exploring the Past Together For a Better Future' in areas hit hard by the legacy of the conflict. Ashton Community Trust is also behind Ireland's first Fablab in conjunction with the Nerve Centre in Derry as a result of PEACE III funding.

The high level intensive talks involved a range of officials attached to several of the European Commission's Directorate General (DG) departments. Officials included: Tamara Pavlin and Stephen Langley from DG Regio; Alastair Campbell Desk Officer NI Executive; Dr Román Arjona Chief Economist DG Research & Innovation; Stephen Duffy DG Regional and Urban Policy; Dennis Crowley DG Employment and Social Affairs and José Antonio DG for Regional and Urban Policy. The group also met with the Head of the Office of the NI Executive in Brussels Gerry Mulligan (ONIEB).

The meeting with Tamara Pavlin and Stephen Langley was extremely useful, especially for Ashton's senior managers who are currently managing PEACE III Programmes.

"In relation to this PEACE III programme we discussed how important the funds were and how necessary they were in carrying out much-needed peace building work especially in places where the conflict hit hardest. There were honest conversations too about the extensive administrative burden and discussions about how that could be alleviated in the future," Irene Sherry said.

"An overview of the priorities and outputs associated with the forthcoming PEACE IV programme was also insightful. At the meeting the message from EU officials seemed to be that the new programme will be more emphasised towards allocating funds that complement or act 'in addition to' existing initiatives."

Ashton Chief Executive Paul Roberts said: "This proved to be an extensive and productive series of meetings with European Union officials who are best placed to strategically inform social enterprises like Ashton to grow sustainably into the future.

"Now it's about bringing this information back into communities like North Belfast and Derry where we can sit down and investigate ways in which we can access opportunities to benefit individuals in area where such opportunities can benefit most. We are grateful to Martina and her team in Brussels for organising these meetings which undoubtedly have helped us gain more information about future EU funding pathways."

Sinn Féin MEP Martina Anderson said she was delighted to help both the Nerve Centre and Ashton especially in their latest PEACE III venture Fablab.

"I was pleased to be able to arrange meetings here in Brussels for the Nerve Centre in Derry and the Ashton Centre in North Belfast so that they can familiarise themselves with the full range of opportunities that are available to them from the next round of EU Funding.

“The Fab Lab concept, as developed by MIT and deployed at over 200 sites internationally, presents an unprecedented opportunity for the island of Ireland to harness the capacity of digital fabrication to build skills for employability; develop local models of entrepreneurship; build social capital and establish real and meaningful regional and transnational networks of practical collaboration and interaction.

“I believe that the Nerve Centre and the Ashton Centre are both well placed to open up the FabLab’s potential to assist established local businesses as well as those that are only in the conceptual stages of product and staff development through sharing of knowledge between businesses and community users of the Labs. I am confident that Ashton and the Nerve Centres are, with the proper support and financial resources more than capable of joining this international network.”

'EXPLORING THE PAST TOGETHER FOR A BETTER FUTURE' PROJECT COMPLETES SUCCESSFUL BERLIN SITE VISIT



A cross community delegation from Belfast and North Down recently completed an informative and stimulating visit to Berlin to explore issues of reconciliation in a divided country.

The site visit took place in October 2013 and forms part of the 'Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future' project managed by Ashton Community Trust via its Bridge of Hope programme. The overall project is financed by the European Union's European Regional Development Fund through the PEACE III Programme for Peace and Reconciliation managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.

The Berlin trip brought together 20 individuals to explore local peace efforts in a country that was controversially divided and then reunited in 1989 with fall of the Berlin Wall. Key to the visit was the opportunity given to participants to spend time to assess the implications of division and reconciliation after conflict.

The delegation visited a number of areas of interest including the Berlin Wall, Checkpoint Charlie, Holocaust Museum, Gestapo Headquarters, the Reichstag and a number of war memorials. Another highlight involved meeting conflict resolution expert Beatrix Austin from the Berghof Foundation, a specialist centre of conflict transformation.

Michael Goodman, Legacy Coordinator said the German site visit underpinned the whole ethos of the project's bid to better understand reconciliation after conflict.

"The trip provided valuable opportunities for the participants to connect with issues around the legacy of conflict and division. The visit to the Berghof Foundation validated our position that reconciliation is built from the ground up and is a two way process, it certainly can't be left solely to political leaders to cultivate. The site visit to Berlin was important for many reasons for participants. For us we believe it created the right space to explore reconciliation in a new but relevant context. It further confirms for us that this work at grassroots level is vital for the continued consolidation of civic peace building processes."

Head of Victims Services at Ashton Community Trust Irene Sherry commented that, "The Berlin visit proved to be a tremendous success and showed that despite the very obvious tensions on the ground in Belfast and other areas, there is a willingness and commitment at community level for people to sit down and discuss the problems we face. Bridge of Hope looks forward to building and further enhancing our relationship with the Berghof Institute in the lead up to and after our next visit in 2014."

The 'Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future' project consists of a number of different conflict themed strands and is aimed at helping communities address some of the complex issues arising from the conflict. The project hopes to reconnect individuals from communities which experienced a significant proportion of conflict related deaths, injury, trauma and violence. Areas such as North Belfast, West Belfast, Derry, North Down, and East Antrim are all being targeted.

BRIDGE OF HOPE'S VITAL WORK MAKES THE PAPERS

released on police bail pending further enquiries.

City Hall a cold house for one section of our people. When

peoples as we move towards a shared future. For me, that

must endeavour to convince unionists that in any new

Belfast by showing respect for our unionist neighbours.

home, we will ensure that our steps are ever forward.

BIKE 2 BELFAST

Charity Cycle in Aid of
Holy Trinity Counselling Services
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on
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Niall's bridge to the past

BY FRANCESCA RYAN
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THE psychological wounds left by the conflict here are still being treated by a number of organisations.

One of those is Bridge of Hope which, while North Belfast-based, caters to people across the city and beyond.

The victims and survivors service works with individuals, families and communities affected by the conflict with a view to tackling the legacy of the conflict through a variety of approaches.

Former Belfast Lord Mayor Niall Ó Donnghaile has been working as Legacy Coordinator with Bridge of Hope since January. We caught up with him this week for a chat about the legacy services and who can avail of them.

"The organisation is currently managing two projects, Who Am I? and Making Sense of the Past," he explained.

"I recently completed two Who Am I? residentials where people got to engage with others who had been through the same experience of conflict and discuss the impact it had on them.

"There was a broad range of ages represented but everyone enjoyed discussing the challenges they faced



HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL: Former Lord Mayor Niall Ó Donnghaile

after trauma and offering support."

Niall says the response of participants in the projects shows just how valuable they are and the difference they are making to people's lives.

"We got some really positive feedback," he said. "In many cases, people didn't necessarily realise what they were carrying with them but this challenges them to look at the adverse impact the conflict has had.

"Making Sense of the Past is more politically challenging, looking at where we are coming from and where we are now.

"I am enjoying it so far and it is great to see that people taking part are enjoying it and getting something out of it."

Niall also encouraged anyone who thinks they could benefit from the services to contact Bridge of Hope.

"We are here for people to avail of the services we offer, legacy being just one aspect of the organisation, as the support has to keep going for as long as people need it."

Groups or individuals are welcome to contact Bridge of Hope to discuss their services on 95 438707.

BRIDGE OF HOPE'S LEGACY PROJECT ENGAGES AT INTERNATIONAL TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE SEMINAR



Staff and former participants from the "Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future" project met Seminar participants from around the world at the McSweeney Centre for the part of the Seminar

Bridge of Hope, an EU PEACE III funded programme of Ashton Community Trust, recently met with participants from the Ulster University Transitional Justice Institute Annual Summer School.

The Summer School on Transitional Justice was established in 2007. It aims to bring together academics, practitioners and postgraduate students to create a dynamic learning environment in which participants can share their experience and learning on key areas of transitional justice. Bridge of Hope's Legacy Co-ordinator Niall Ó Donnghaile and Legacy Outreach Worker Stephen Cooke both met delegates at the discussion which was held to learn more about Bridge of Hope's innovative, grassroots Transitional Justice Programmes.

Speaking after the event in Ashton's McSweeney Centre, Niall Ó Donnghaile said;

"A key theme for the Summer School was connecting with and learning from grassroots and community based/focused organisations delivering programmes on the ground.

"Delegates who participated in the discussion and who came from countries, including the USA, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, were very keen to talk to Stephen and I about the nature of our work, particularly how we engage and support individuals and working class communities impacted upon by the conflict. The broad themes of Transitional Justice very much complement the nature of our own work and we were very keen to engage and hear the views of international stakeholders.

"It was useful for our own project to build international linkages and develop contacts to discuss potential for future engagement and sharing of information. We were very grateful for the opportunity to present to such a prestigious group, facilitated locally by Eilish Rooney and will be keen to feed issues raised back into our participants, particularly as we move towards our planned conference on Conflict Transformation, to be held later this year."

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN BELFAST AND BERLIN



Participants from Ashton Community Trust's *"Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future"* programme are gearing up for a unique exploratory and study visit to the German Capital in October. This programme is part of the Bridge of Hope project and is the second of these visits since 2012.

The programme, which is funded by SEUPB under the EU's PEACE III Programme, has brought people who took part in both the "Who Am I?" and "Making Sense of the Past" programmes together for what is sure to be a hugely informative experience.

Those travelling will visit historic sites of significance in terms of the conflict in Germany as well as meeting with academics from the Berghof Foundation who specialise in post conflict studies.

Speaking after one of the preparatory sessions with participants who are set for Berlin, Bridge of Hope's Legacy-Coordinator Niall Ó Donnghaile said;

"This visit is an integral part of our project and we believe it's vital that participants are given the opportunity to come together and engage with each other as well as share their experiences and expectations about this visit. The three engagement meetings allow for just that and it is clear from this latest meeting that participants are excited, engaged and more than open to learning new things.

"The study-visit to Berlin allows our participants to not only self-reflect on the impact of the conflict here but to also learn about conflict and indeed post-conflict scenarios within a completely different context. This project has a proven track-record of bringing about positive

grassroots engagement between communities but we also want to ensure that we maintain this work and build upon it. The study-visit to Berlin gives us the ideal opportunity to continue and more importantly develop that work.”

BRIDGE OF HOPE ENGAGES WITH OFMDFM ON LEGACY AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE PROGRAMMES



Representatives from Bridge of Hope and Eilish Rooney (TJI) meet with Junior Ministers Jonathon Bell MLA, Jennifer McCann MLA and their officials at Stormont

Bridge of Hope, a programme of Ashton Community Trust, yesterday met with Junior Ministers Jonathan Bell and Jennifer McCann and their officials at Parliament Buildings, Stormont.

The Bridge of Hope delegation was led by Head of Victims & Mental Health Services Irene Sherry and Billy Hutchinson who sits on the organisation's Legacy steering group. The purpose of the meeting was to outline to the Ministers the value and impact of Bridge of Hope's EU PEACE III funded Legacy Programme and the Victims & Survivors Service (VSS) funded Transitional Justice work carried out in partnership with the University of Ulster's Transitional Justice Institute (TJI). Eilish Rooney from TJI, who has worked in partnership with Bridge of Hope on their Transitional Justice work, was also part of the delegation which met with the Ministers.

Speaking after the meeting Ms Sherry said; *"This was a very welcome opportunity to engage with OFMdFM and update them on the grassroots and transformative nature of both our PEACE III legacy work and the pioneering Transitional Justice work with the University of Ulster. We were delighted to engage with the Junior Ministers and it was evident they are very keen to learn more about these aspects of our work.*

'We hope to engage further and continue to update the Ministers and their officials in relation to the positive impact both these programmes are having on people who we are engaging with. Bridge of Hope is very proud of our pioneering work in conflict transformation and we look forward to continued engagement with partners and stakeholders to ensure this work is developed and progressed in order to benefit the people on the ground who are most affected by the conflict and associated issues.'

CROSS COMMUNITY GROUP EXPLORE PEACEBUILDING PRACTICES IN BERLIN



Bridge of Hope's group gather at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin

Participants from Ashton Community Trust's *'Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future'* programme have completed a successful study-visit to Berlin, looking at the themes of peacebuilding and conflict transformation.

The project, which is funded by SEUPB under the EU's PEACE III Programme, has brought people who took part in both the "Who Am I?" and "Making Sense of the Past" initiatives together for this unique opportunity to visit the once scarred and divided Berlin.

During the visit the delegation connected with the Berghof Foundation and heard from renowned academic Beatrix Austin whose expertise centres on conflict transformation. This relationship with the Berghof Foundation is set to be further strengthened when Ms Austin addresses an end of project conference Ashton is hosting in the Europa Hotel on November 26.

Speaking about the recent visit to Berlin Bridge of Hope's Legacy Coordinator Niall Ó Donnghaile said:

“This was a jam packed schedule that focused on assessing the cost and legacy of division. The exploratory visit to Berlin offered us all the unique opportunity to reflect on the history of brutal conflict and division, but also to take hope from and hear practical examples of how to move beyond such conflict.

“Our delegation was made up of participants from both communities who themselves have suffered as a result of the conflict here at home. All of them have played a key role in helping to build our peace.

“While there we had the opportunity to visit many historic sites of interest as well as many scenes of conflict and memorials to those who lost their lives.

“In particular, the opportunity to meet with renowned academic Beatrix Austin from the Berghof Foundation allowed our group to come together in a respectful fashion and carry out practical exercises that looked at key themes of conflict, misunderstanding, mistrust but most importantly shared values and views.

“Already participants are keen to regroup and reflect on how they move forward after taking part in the visit and this is something that Bridge of Hope will be helping to facilitate in the coming period.”



Beatrix Austin (Left) engages with participants & (Right) the group gathers at the 'Berlin Wall'

BELFAST MEETS BERLIN DURING 'BUILDING PEACE TO LAST' CONFERENCE



Junior Minister Jennifer McCann (OFMDFM) Irene Sherry (Head of Victims and Mental Health Services – Ashton Community Trust) Billy Hutchinson ('Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future' steering group) Beatrix Austin (Berghof Foundation and Keynote Speaker) Eilish Rooney (Transitional Justice Institute Ulster University)

Bridge of Hope, a programme of Ashton Community Trust, is holding a conference today (Wednesday November 26) in the Europa Hotel to shine a light on conflict transformation and peace building experiences both here and in Berlin.

The conference is the closing set-piece of an EU PEACE III funded project 'Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future' that sought to reengage with marginalised loyalist and republican communities from right across the North over the last 3 years.

With the recent 25th anniversary of the Berlin Wall coming down, this unique conference will look at how both places have moved beyond violent conflict and are now in the transition phase.

The 'Building Peace to Last' themed conference takes place in the Europa Hotel and starts at 9.30am and will close at 3pm.

It will be addressed by OFMDFM Junior Minister Jennifer McCann and will hear from Eilish Rooney, senior lecturer at Ulster University and associate of Transitional Justice Institute as well as keynote speaker Beatrix Austin from the Berghof Foundation in Berlin. Other stakeholders including participants from both republicans and loyalist traditions will share their experiences too.

Irene Sherry (Head of Victims & Mental Health Services, Ashton Community Trust) said she hoped the conference will show the full extent of the capacity for different perspectives of the conflict to flourish in the same space.

“We are very proud of the work Bridge of Hope has been involved in over the last three years in bringing grassroots communities together, often in periods of great difficulty. This conference highlights not only the importance of that work taking place but also the many positives that derive from it. It was our firm determination from the outset that this project wouldn’t just involve grassroots communities but more importantly be led by them. This conference is a clear outworking of that process and is another central component in maintaining positive engagement and hearing each other’s voices and viewpoints.”

The conference is the culmination of the ‘Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future’ project in its endeavours to support marginalised republican and loyalist communities. Delivery of the project involved two initiatives 'Who Am I?' And 'Making Sense of the Past in the Present and finally exploratory site visits to Berlin looking at the themes of peacebuilding and conflict transformation.. Participation involved areas such as Gulladuff, Bangor, South Armagh, North Down & Ards, Derry, North Belfast and West Belfast.

Following the successful conference local television channel NVTV broadcast a very positive news piece. The clip can be viewed at <http://vimeo.com/114571727> (coverage starts around minute 34).

The award winning journalistic website The Detail sent along veteran reporter Steven McCaffrey to our PEACE III ‘Building Peace To Last’ conference in the Europa Hotel. Read his article below which points to the extremely positive cross community engagements that are taking place at grassroots level about the legacy of the conflict and how we move forward into a sustainable peace.

Some positive talking is going on in Belfast, just not at Stormont

26 NOVEMBER 2014



Secretary of State Theresa Villiers on a previous visit to the NI Assembly. / Press Eye

By Steven McCaffery

THE Stormont Assembly, as well as the British and Irish governments, felt very remote from the heart of the peace process today.

The message from 'up on the hill' was that the politicians were mired in fresh controversy over expenses bills.

This came as Secretary of State Theresa Villiers confirmed that her political negotiations with the parties, which she recently signalled were going well, may be going nowhere just yet.

The talks are aimed at reconciling Stormont's budget crises, while tackling wider political stand-offs over flags, cultural issues and the legacy of the Troubles.

Within hours the picture darkened further, with Sinn Féin claims that the two governments could be considering a narrower 'take it or leave it' deal that could collapse the Assembly.

Renewed crisis could be around the corner.

A few miles away from Stormont, however, people drawn from grassroots republican and loyalist communities met for an event at Belfast's Europa hotel.

The venue provided panoramic views of a city which has made huge progress in recent decades, but is now overshadowed by political stalemate.

"We're going through a rocky period," acknowledged one of the speakers at the event. "The politics is not looking good."

But he said the conference proved that those with "diametrically opposed views", could still find a way to relate to each other.

Victims, survivors, former prisoners and paramilitaries from a wide range of areas had taken part in the "Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future" project over the last three years.

The project brought people together to share experiences and views on the past and the future.

Their initial meetings had taken place in each other's communities, where they walked each other's streets and heard of their neighbours' experience of the Troubles, of unemployment and often of poverty.

A video featuring some of those taking part included young and old voices.

"Nobody wanted to be there," said one man speaking about those difficult initial encounters.

But many agreed that "after it, you did examine yourself".

Another reflected on his personal history: "Conflict hardened me."

A former paramilitary recalled the events that drew him into violence and spoke of experiencing 'atrocities in my community' and of wanting to inflict 'bigger atrocities' in return.

He added: "You start to question yourself. Was it right? Could there have been another way?"

Participants said they were asked to listen to each other with respect, despite fundamentally disagreeing on issues such as identity.

The PEACE III funded project was part of the Bridge of Hope programme, delivered by the Ashton Community Trust in north Belfast.

In addition to the cross-community contacts, it sought to also draw on the international experience of those working to rebuild community relations in Berlin. Some of the participants visited Germany to experience a society which had suffered its own historic trauma.

Berlin's efforts to deal with its divided history were previously reported on by The Detail [here](#).

Stormont Junior Minister Jennifer McCann addressed the Europa event, discussing what she said was the need to deal with the past in order to build a better future.

She left to attend the Stormont negotiations where dealing with the legacy of the Troubles is on the agenda, though they are the same talks that the Secretary of State now gives slim hope.

After the Junior Minister left, the leader of the Progressive Unionist Party Billy Hutchinson reminded the audience that the negotiations were not "all-party talks", as loyalists were not included.

He too spoke positively about the importance of grassroots work and the common experience on issues such as social disadvantage.

The keynote address was by Beatrix Austin from the Berghof Foundation in Berlin, part of an organisation that has been involved in international peace work for decades.

She drew comparisons between the Belfast experience and areas such as the Middle East and elsewhere in Europe.

But addressing what she termed the 'elephants in the room', she recalled how one of the organisers of the Belfast project had "put an empty chair up to the table where people were dialoguing".

The empty chair represented the absence of the government.

Ms Austin said: "Sometimes the governments, those actors who are in the background, that are not present in our dialogue, can really make us feel as though we're just not going to be quite enough, no matter how much we all try.

"On a very different scale, but again sometimes thwarting our best efforts, [is] the way in which support for peace building projects nowadays is organised...the reality of having to fund raise, of having to fit in with short term funding timeframes...they have challenging consequences for long term work."

The questions of money and dialogue, which were both on the agenda at Stormont, had found a different expression.

The Berlin expert said: "So what do we do about these elephants in our way? There are no easy answers but I think that acknowledging that they are there has to be one step. And then while holding these elephants firmly in view, in my experience, change more often than not still begins with people sitting together and becoming able to share openly, and to listen respectfully..." © The Detail 2014

13 December 2014

Bridging the divisions

Conference shines light on efforts to bring peace

BRIDGE OF HOPE, a programme of Ashton Community Trust, has held a conference in the Europa Hotel to shine a light on conflict transformation and peace-building experiences both here and in Berlin.

The conference is the closing set-piece of an EU PEACE III funded project, 'Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future', that sought to re-engage with marginalised loyalist and republican communities from right across the north over the past three years.

With the recent 25th anniversary of the Berlin Wall coming down, this unique conference looked at how both places moved beyond violent conflict and are now in the "transition" phase. The meeting was addressed by OFMDFM Junior Minister Jennifer McCann and heard from Eilish Rooney, senior lecturer at the University of Ulster and associate of the Transitional Justice Institute, as well as keynote speaker Beatrix Austin from the Berghof Foundation in



WORKING TOGETHER: Irene Sherry, Beatrix Austin and Cllr Billy Hutchinson at the event

"We are very proud of the work Bridge of Hope has been involved in..."

Berlin. Other participants included ex-combatants of both republicans and loyalist traditions who shared their experiences in collaborative workshops.

Irene Sherry, Head of Victims and Mental Health Services, Ashton Community Trust, said she hoped the conference showed the full extent of the capacity for different perspectives of the conflict to flourish in the same space.

"We are very proud of the work Bridge of Hope has

been involved in over the last three years in bringing grassroots communities together, often in periods of great difficulty," she said.

"This conference highlights not only the importance of that work taking place but also the many positives that derive from it.

"It was our firm determination from the outset that this project wouldn't just involve grassroots communities but, more importantly, be led by them.

"This conference is a clear outworking of that process and is another central component in maintaining positive engagement and hearing each other's voices and viewpoints."

For Further information Contact:

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www.ashtoncentre.com www.thebridgeofhope.org