

Sustainability Learning Review 2015

Linking Generations NI

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The
ATLANTIC
Philanthropies

Purpose of this paper

This paper has been written to inform the discussion within The Atlantic Philanthropy Grantees group, which is convened by Queen's University Belfast (QUB). The purpose of this grouping is to share learning, themes and issues relating to sustainable models of practice. It has been written following the loosely suggested structure and after several reflective discussion opportunities with Brendan Murtagh from QUB and other members of the above group.

Definitions

This paper has asked us to state what we have used to achieve sustainability. We have defined sustainability in two ways. Firstly, it is the continuation of intergenerational practice and an increasing awareness of the negative impacts of ageism and age-segregation in society. Secondly, it is the continuation of LGNI as an organisation which pushes these issues in front of people in neighbourhoods, organisations and government. In achieving our vision, we view both as equally important.

Introduction and background to Atlantic-funded activity

In 2009 and again in 2011, Linking Generations Northern Ireland (LGNI) received two- and three-year funding, respectively, from Atlantic. The grant in 2009 enabled initiation work. The more substantial three-year grant in 2011 created a full-time manager, a part-time office administrator and two additional development worker posts for the following purpose:

'To promote intergenerational practice in Northern Ireland by supporting the Linking Generations project, which will bring generations together to build more age-friendly communities – appropriate to all ages – which will foster mutual respect, respect, diversity and acknowledge that each person has a voice and a contribution to make.'

Key Impacts and Successes

The project was externally evaluated by Juniper Consulting in 2014. The key findings were as follows:

- There is recognition at all levels (from community to government) that LGNI is the leading organisation in NI for the provision of advice, support and good practice in relation to Intergenerational Practice (IP)
- That awareness and support for IP is increasingly growing in NI, with many organisations broadening their focus to include intergenerational approaches in their work
- LGNI successfully collaborate with a wide range of organisations across the community, voluntary, statutory and private sectors to maximise our resources, reach and impact
- That the role of IP is increasingly being recognised in government policies, from "Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities", to "Together: Building a United Community" and the draft "Active Ageing Strategy".

Over 80% of participants of projects supported by LGNI during the Atlantic-funded project agreed that their participation had:

- Helped them to get to know each other better
- Increased their respect for the other age group
- Learnt that they have things in common
- Learnt about each other's concerns
- Meant they learnt new skills
- Helped them to feel more a part of their community where they live or go to school
- Helped them to feel more confident
- Helped them to feel better about themselves

The future environment for LGNI

Our vision

Northern Ireland will be age-friendly. For LGNI, this means that age groups will not be segregated and ageism will not exist. All-age approaches will be commonplace at community, organisational and policy level.

Obstacles

It's new! But it's not new! The research and practice time lapse problem.

Although the concepts of intergenerational practice (IP) have been with us for decades, this LGNI vision for social change continues to be thought of as innovative. We continue to offer an alternative argument to the constructs in which people are thought of as having the same needs on the basis that they are a similar age.

Apart from this rather obvious aspect of challenging age-segregation, IP also offers renewed opportunities for the social intergenerational exchange of skills, knowledge, experience and resources. This reciprocal sharing of resource is a factor that we view as key to coping with the challenges of our ageing society.

Perhaps partially because of its reputation as being 'new', IP is still viewed from some quarters as a superficial, 'fluffy' type of practice. We will continually need to assert the hard-edge outcomes that intergenerational approaches deliver for communities and society.

There is a continuing need to embed and sustain IP in NI through continued support and investment. This is an increasingly difficult argument in the current political and economic climate, where quantitative results continue to be viewed as 'better' evidence than qualitative ones.

Tightening the reins

Our history has been grounded in Atlantic Funding and because of this we recognise we have been a little spoiled. Our practice has enabled us to investigate the roads less travelled. This has presented incredible opportunities for us to investigate what works and where the richest rewards lie for IP.

We have proved the benefits of IP within community safety, peace-building and community development. We have raised the profile of IP and of LGNI throughout the statutory and voluntary sectors in NI and also further afield in the UK, Ireland, Europe and America.

We have been able to explore opportunities for our work within a range of areas such as health and well-being, community planning, peace building and employment and the workplace. We were able to test innovative projects and through this testing we are constantly learning and developing our strategic direction and models of working.

In moving out of the brilliant flexibility that Atlantic offered, we recognise we now must reign in our strategic approach to a tighter model. It will not be possible, in the short term, for us to continue to develop such diverse work streams with our small staff team. (As at June 2015, we are: one full-time manager, two 30-hour development workers, and one 21-hour development worker.)

The experiences that we had through our Atlantic funding has illustrated clearly to us that the application of IP is incredibly broad.

Since 2013, we have focused in on strategic policy based outcomes, such as community safety, good relations, digital inclusion and

community development and we have had success attracting government funds in order to deliver on their commitments to:

- Tackle fear of crime, (Department of Justice, Community Safety Unit Funding from Sep 2013 to Mar 2015). We worked with Policing and Community Safety Partnerships across NI to support them to take intergenerational approaches to tackling community safety issues.
- Develop age-friendly environments (Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership, via Public Health Agency and Belfast Age-friendly). We worked in Cregagh Primary School to develop an Age-friendly school, where older people participated in educational and social activity throughout 2014.
- Tackle social isolation of older people (Public Health Agency). We engaged over 1,000 people across NI, by granting about £150 to 38 groups across NI to enable them to plan events to celebrate 29th April, EU Day of Solidarity between Generations, 2015.
- Promote digital inclusion. We became the lead partner in the Big Lottery-funded Digital Age Project when the WEA ceased to exist in 2014. Based on this work, the Department of Finance and Personnel supported us to deliver pilot intergenerational digital inclusion activity in 4 primary schools between Jan and Mar 2015.

One of the challenges in attempting to deliver these services for government is the fact that the policy is age-segregated. For example, the continued weighting of community safety initiatives targeting young people (stereotypically associated with ‘anti-social’ behaviour) or older people (stereotypically associated with being fearful and vulnerable); the concept that ‘age-friendly’ initiatives should be about creating environments that function better for older people (as opposed to

environments that work for all ages together); or the emphasis in public health funds on tackling social isolation of older people (despite the fact that people of all ages experience social isolation).

It is not only government funding pots that specify outcomes for particular age groups; many charitable foundations do the same, for example Children in Need and the numerous Lottery Funds which are interested in outcomes for either young or older people.

A good example of how this translates in to practice is that an organisation tackling substance abuse has two separately funded programmes: one for people under the age of 25 and another separately staffed project working with those over 50.

In conversation, we have had funders explain to us that whilst our work may be tackling an issue such as, for example, social exclusion, among older people as well as younger, their interest is just older people. This means that we would be asked to report on just one age group, which is entirely at odds with our vision and ethos.

This translates in to a challenge within what we anticipate will be a more restrictive funding mechanism, that we now must be more selective and decisive about how and where we work. We think we need to develop a model of practice that could tap in to all of the potential outcomes and appeal to a range of potential funders.

Perhaps one stream of funding would be reported to on the outcomes for youth and another on the outcomes for older people. This is clearly not ideal, but in the short term, until IP becomes a more established practice, our options are restricted.

In thinking about what this new model of practice might be, we think that it needs to be flexible enough to fulfil a range of outcomes for a range of funders and also be a model that can be expanded or contracted depending on the funding available.

It needs to be innovative, provide value for money and tackle pressing social issues, as well as creating a strong route to achieving our vision of an age-integrated society.

Transitions and changing governance arrangements

LGNI was originally formed as a single project in the (previously known as) Ards Borough Council area. As it grew, it garnered attention and support from Age Concern NI initially and then the Beth Johnson Foundation (BJF). In 2009, BJF was granted the Atlantic funding for our activity and again in 2011.

LGNI members of staff are employees of BJF and LGNI operate under their board and governance arrangements. We have an advisory group in NI, which meets about twice a year. The then chief executive of BJF, Alan Hatton-Yeo, is a renowned expert in IP and we have benefited greatly from his connections, expertise and support.

However, these arrangements are likely to change in the near future for a variety of reasons. Alan Hatton-Yeo has moved to a new role outside of BJF and the Charity Commission will be requiring us to constitute in NI in the near future.

We anticipate that BJF will be continuing to support us through this process and we recognise there are a number of mutual benefits for us to continue to be part of a UK wide organisation with a considerably larger turnover than ours.

Funding

There is no getting away from the fact that we need funding to enable us to achieve our goals. Whilst we recognise there may be some limited opportunities at local council level and in the private sector to sell our services, these opportunities are not likely to enable us to work on the larger scale that is required to tackle age-segregation at the structural levels.

We do, of course, want to pursue these options, which we anticipate will mostly be connected to delivery of short term project-type interventions in neighbourhoods. This type of work is an essential foundation to achieving our vision. We are also interested in social economy business ideas, with ideas continually ticking away in the back of our heads.

As yet, we have not had freedom to explore such options and the danger of receiving delivery-heavy funding is that time to develop such ideas may not be available.

Opportunities: sustaining intergenerational practice

Our unique selling point

As a response to these challenges, we have identified what we believe is a model of practice within which we can sustain intergenerational approaches and reduce ageism and age-segregation. Central to this model is the fact that we are the only organisation in Northern Ireland solely advocating intergenerational approaches as a tool for social change.

This means that we are not currently in competition with any other organisation in Northern Ireland. The only other organisation in the UK and Ireland which has this similar sole aim is Generations Working Together, in Scotland.

Collaboration not competition

As an organisation not in competition, we are a much more attractive as a potential collaborator. We seek to add value to others' work and to strengthen all-age approaches through working with others for a short period. Much of what we want to achieve will be done by others with initial support from our staff.

There have been a host of examples whereby LGNI staff members have worked alongside a group/person to support an initial intergenerational activity/approach and the practice has then continued beyond availability of our resource to connect with the group/person. This enhances the potential for the sustainability of intergenerational approaches. We find that people need small support initially to develop linkages across age-segregated groups, organisations or institutions and that once people have developed relations and both sides see the value of the practice, the need for our services reduces.

Our services are about supporting others to recognise the value that IP can add to their work. For example, the development of young people can be achieved with harnessing the resources of older. Loneliness can be tackled by generations working together. Mental health, substance abuse and a host of other approaches to creating more positive health and well-being can be enhanced by viewing the problem through an intergenerational lens.

Pressing social issues such as the care of older people and the development of social responsibility among future generations are ripe for the intergenerational approach. We need government bodies, policy and charitable funders to recognise the connections we are making and the prudence of the intergenerational approach.

The tactic described above is about collaborative work. As well as pooling resources and enhancing our reach, we think collaboration

has the potential to show other (currently age-specific) organisations how IP can bring magic to their work. The fact is that whatever work we do, we do in collaboration: the very essence of our work is about creating linkages between people, groups, organisations and institutions.

The new model

The other key challenge outlined above is to develop models of working which can fulfil the range of criteria discussed. Firstly, through a combination of our experience, linkages, passion and conversations, we are in the early stage process of developing a work model which is about tackling the age segregation in two of the biggest age-segregated institutions in NI: schools and accommodation for older people. Secondly, we recognise that there are strong connections between IP and the ethos of Age-friendly environments.

As the ageing issue begins to have impacts in NI, and the draft Active Ageing Strategy finally sheds its draft status, we are optimistic that age-friendly policy will begin to seep into local government community planning and that this will create a market for our expertise. Both of these approaches will enable us to continue to work towards bringing generations together at neighbourhood, organisational and policy level.

Summary of sustainable practice

What is currently sustained?

LGNI have established a lasting legacy. If we were to end our services now there are several factors which may enable sustainability of an intergenerational approach in some arenas. We delivered 20 training courses (of five-hour duration) across Northern Ireland, with an average attendance of 16 people at each session. More than 100 organisations have received support from us, with 22 groups receiving intensive support to deliver an intergenerational initiative.

We have worked alongside Policing and Community Safety Partnerships to promote and support intergenerational approaches to community safety. We have worked with sheltered housing accommodations to provide intergenerational digital inclusion activities. We have worked in schools to provide linkages with community and local older people.

All of this activity leaves a memory of this approach. The term 'intergenerational' is now more commonly used in a wide range of arenas compared to a few years ago. Some organisations and groups will continue to use this approach if LGNI were to end our services. But we think that continuing to provide our services is necessary in order to mainstream the all-age approach.

What do we think works?

- **Developing an approach which is unique so that competition is not an issue and seeking to add value to other's work**

The community sector in NI is not centrally funded. This means that there are hundreds of organisations which seek to do similar, or the same, type of work (although each organisation of course has its uniqueness). This, and other features of the sector, means that there is considerable competition for funding. Collaborative practice and genuine partnership working is still relatively rare. We will seek to continue to promote our activity as the provision of an approach which can add value to others' work and is not in competition. At present, we are the only organisation in NI which has the promotion intergenerational practice as a sole aim.

- **Always striving to use a fully participative approach so that the legacy continues beyond our investment.**

We understand that a participative approach consumes resources, but nonetheless we

recognise that there really is no other path to achieving outcomes that are meaningful in peoples' lives. If participants in intergenerational activities have meaningful experiences, then the practice is more likely to be sustained. We must maintain this as an essential quality of our work.

- **Working at three levels: community, organisational and policy**

We have identified that activity at all three strata of society is important if we are to make a sustainable impact. We learned that the incorporation of commitments to intergenerational practice in government strategies (such as the 2012-2017 Community Safety Strategy) can, and in this instance, did, translate in to neighbourhood level activity. We will continue to plan on the basis that interventions at all three levels are required.

- **Keeping our organisation lean and talented, focused on ethical practice**

We pride ourselves on the commitment, talent and enthusiasm of our staff team. This is our most precious resource. Being a small staff team (at present just one full-time and three part-time) enables effective communication and the sharing of ideas. We want to protect these features of our organisation into the future.

