

Sustainability Learning Review 2015

NI Alternatives



The
ATLANTIC
Philanthropies

Introduction

Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) looks to address how low level crime and anti-social behaviour affect the lives of vulnerable people living within the most disadvantaged communities. NIAs' approach to restorative justice practice and principles focuses on mending the broken relationships that affect offenders, victims and their communities.

Northern Ireland Alternatives is a company limited by guarantee (NI038979) with charitable status (XR41050). It was formally established in 2000 and emerged out of the Greater Shankill Alternatives Restorative Justice Programme. This project was originally conceived as a community response to the absence of grassroots engagement with the formal justice system within working-class unionist areas. It was also promoted as an alternative to the brutalisation – through punishment attacks and exclusions – of the (mainly young) perpetrators of crime and anti-social behaviour by paramilitary organisations.

However, due to the success of the work in the Shankill area (as often demonstrated by independent evaluation), and requests from other communities for similar initiatives, NIA evolved as a means to help develop and support new strategic restorative justice initiatives at the grass roots level across Northern Ireland.

From this initial Shankill project, a further four projects have been developed. Each project is a registered company limited by guarantee and is owned by the subsidiaries of the parent company, NIA. These include:

- Shankill Alternatives established in 2000
- Bangor Alternatives started in March 2003
- East Belfast Alternatives in October 2003
- North Belfast Alternatives in November 2003
- South Belfast Alternatives in April 2010

NIA delivers a wide range of programmes from its five local offices in Belfast and Bangor. These include family support, victim support and offender resettlement services. Local communities are encouraged to engage with the formal justice system, and NIA's work is delivered in partnership with both statutory and voluntary agencies. NIA is fully-accredited by the Department of Justice, and receives regular and rigorous inspections from the Criminal Justice Inspectorate. Currently there is a protocol in place between NIA, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS), Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Youth Justice Agency (YJA). This allows for the diversionary allocation of cases involving young people to NIA, in the hope that a restorative intervention will be more effective in producing results for both victim and offender.

NIA is an organisation that has developed a holistic approach to restorative justice practice, conflict transformation and community safety which is often held up as a model of good practice, not just within Northern Ireland, but across the rest of the UK, Ireland and overseas.

The organisation has devised numerous programmes based on its own model of restorative principles that can be applied to individual or group circumstances, and tailored to meet local or particular circumstances. Much of the material is already accredited by OCN.

However, the progress of NIA and its satellite organisations towards acknowledgement and accreditation from both government and the political establishment within the context of a post-conflict Northern Ireland has from the outset been far from straightforward.

NIA was established through the support and financial help of Atlantic Philanthropies. Initial interventions by NIA into community life were

often devalued and viewed as a paramilitary power play for control of the justice system. As such they were presented as a loyalist mirror image of the work of the Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) that emerged the following year in the nationalist community.

It became apparent from an early stage that, whatever their individual nuances and interpretations of restorative theory and practice, both NIA and CRJI had a shared vision in the promotion of core restorative principles and a common aim in attempting to become established as purveyors of a legitimate, effective and alternative agency for empowering local people to create safer and more socially cohesive communities.

From the outset the approach of Alternatives was branded as 'novel and contentious' by the Northern Ireland Office. Several key influencers from government recognised the potential for positive change within the work of NIA and CRJI, but nobody was willing to publicly endorse restorative justice until the local parties in the Executive agreed to do so collectively.

This excluded NIA from applying for any mainstream government funding to support its activities. It was during this period that funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies was critical; not only as a funder but also as an influential advocate in assisting to persuade central government that restorative approaches to justice could increase confidence in the justice system within communities emerging slowly from the trauma of the Troubles.

The persistence of both Atlantic along with local restorative justice organisations was finally rewarded with accreditation from the Department of Justice in 2007. This recognition has undoubtedly assisted NIA in the development of protocols and collaborative

arrangements with the statutory justice sector as well as fund the expansion of Alternatives' restorative services.

However, it is unfortunate that mainstream acceptance emerged during the height of the economic recession and austerity cuts on a scale that could not have been anticipated. This has considerably reduced the potential impact of accreditation on NIA's growth and development, and has increased the need for it to explore other options in terms of guaranteeing future sustainability.

Sustainability and the statutory sector

As outlined above NIA underwent a change regarding its operational, funding and contractual relationships with those statutory agencies that hold a stake in the administration of the justice system.

These include agencies such as DOJ, PSNI, Probation Board, Youth Justice Agency, Housing Executive, Social Services, local councils, Policing and Community Safety Partnerships and schools. Many of these agencies have provided NIA with additional funding to increase the number of support services available to their client base. Again such assistance is at risk given the broader withdrawal of public funding into state services.

Core funding since 2009 for local operations at site level has been provided by the Department for Social Development (DSD) via its Neighbourhood Renewal Programme. This funding stream faces an uncertain future as responsibility for its delivery is scheduled to be transferred to councils for the start of the next financial year. This too could have a potentially a profound effect on both budgets and programme objectives.

Atlantic has sought to build upon the official recognition and endorsement of restorative organisations by persuading government agencies to establish a ‘roundtable’ framework in order to facilitate the building of even closer strategic and sustainability connections with statutory agencies.

The Restorative Justice Roundtable has helped to open doors and deliver gains for NIA, but its impact has perhaps not fulfilled NIA’s expectations due to a combination of factors. On the one hand the restorative methodology is still quite radical for large government institutions, thus making it difficult to embed into established ways of working, despite the local successes of NIA. On the other hand, there are again fiscal difficulties for agencies that are operating in severely constrained circumstances.

There is also a pressing need to maintain collaborative relationships with the justice sector in an attempt to keep restorative practice firmly on their agenda in terms of a possibly brighter financial future, but also in deference to the concerns, experiences and aspirations of the communities where NIA delivers its services. The residents of such communities are only just starting to acquire a stake in the justice system that will allow them to build safer communities in partnership with the statutory sector.

NIA has a role to play in creating transformation, and in terms of sustainability the organisation realises it must look at other means of driving forward such a project without relying entirely on government assistance.

Social economy opportunities

Prior to receiving official endorsement from the NI Executive, NIA’s portfolio of practice included the ability to deliver effective services

dealing with victim support, intensive youth support, family support, preventative group work programmes, restorative adult practices, mediation, restorative school support and anti-racism/anti-sectarianism training. In the recent past this work has been delivered with financial assistance from statutory agencies, and also delivered on their behalf to their respective client bases. However, the well-evaluated success of NIA’s service record can also give rise to other opportunities.

The management and board of NIA have investigated the potential of mobilising the organisation’s expertise and building upon its historic practices by developing its range of social enterprise restorative justice training and services. Initially targeted at the NI market with a view expand delivery to the UK, and Irish Republic at a later stage NIA aims to sell its new restorative justice training and services based upon its reputation for making a real and lasting impact on people’s lives.

The new enterprise will therefore focus on the delivery of restorative justice training and services to generate income for the charity, whilst the parent charity will retain responsibility for the delivery of victim support, family support and offender resettlement services.

The new social enterprise will operate under the auspices of the parent charitable company NIA. A business plan has been developed as part of the Social Entrepreneurship Programme administered by Work West Enterprise Agency on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. This process was completed in June 2014. In addition, Atlantic has provided funding for the employment of a Training Officer to assist with the implementation of key aspects of the business plan.

Services available for the market

The services to be offered by the trading arm are structured under three lines of service: generic restorative justice training, models of restorative justice training, and restorative justice services (mediation).

Generic restorative justice training

Modularised training for statutory and voluntary organisations allowing their staff to deliver programmes directly that involves some form of restorative intervention. This line of service comprises three separate product offerings:

- A half-day introductory session on restorative justice principles
- A full-day introductory session on restorative justice principles and practices
- An accredited 40 hour OCN Level 2 Certificate in Restorative Justice, delivered over a period of 12 weeks

Models of restorative practice training

NIA has developed a suite of programmes based on models of restorative justice relevant for specific client groups and contexts.

Programme areas where training will be provided include education based programmes, intensive youth support (CRYSP), and detached street work (street by street), mentoring programme and a series of other bespoke programmes.

This line of service comprises of five separate product offerings:

- Education based restorative justice programme – restorative justice training to teaching staff and students within post-primary education. NI Alternatives have previously provided this education based programme to the Boys Model School including training with staff on how to work restoratively with pupils.

- CRYSP (Community Restorative Youth Support Programme) – an intensive youth support product delivered to youth workers, community workers, probation agency, children’s homes.
- Street by Street Programme – a detached street work programme delivered to Police Community Support Partnerships, over a three-month period involving restorative justice training, quality assurance and evaluation. An annual Street by Street license will be available to provide ongoing support and quality assurance to groups.
- Mentoring Programme – restorative justice peer-mentoring programme.
- Bespoke training and consultancy – on restorative justice, delivered to all client groups on an ad hoc basis.

Restorative practice services (mediation)

There are few services and support options available to families who were subject to conflict in Northern Ireland. Families can go to Relate, but it does not offer a restorative approach. Many family conflicts end up at the solicitors and are not resolved amicably.

NIA is currently contracted by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to provide mediation services. This work may be related to conflicts where there are new social housing schemes or new families moving into areas. NIA currently offers two restorative justice services under this line of service:

- Basic mediation services
- Intensive mediation services

The new enterprise will hire the services of the charity’s existing practitioner staff team to deliver these services, retaining a 15% management fee built into the end price for this.

The strategy of the business

The trading arm of NIA will have its own distinctive strategy, albeit one that is complementary to the mainstream work of the organisation. The business aims to establish a strong presence initially in Belfast. However, there is a hope to roll out services across Northern Ireland, the Republic, the UK as well as internationally. It will look to build relationships with local stakeholders, and seek tenders to deliver restorative practice and services. It is also hoped that when full trading commences that the business can break even within its first twelve months.

An internal review of the business planning process has looked to reduce the impact of any threats and maximise opportunities via a range of approaches that include:

- Drawing on expertise, networks of contacts across various sectors, and a strong reputation to obtain new work
- Creating a competitive advantage through the provision of a unique service, by offering restorative practice programmes to establish a niche market share
- Focusing on justice, housing, and community as well as education sectors
- Maintaining excellent client satisfaction with existing customers to ensure retention and referral
- Marketing and promotional arrangements centre on NIA's enthusiasm to concentrate its initial efforts locally within the province, and then look to expand services and good practice in other communities across the Republic and the rest of the UK

NIA can also build upon its long-standing relationships with the NI Justice Sector. To date NIA has delivered training and associated support to the Prison Service, Probation Board, PSNI and Youth Justice Agency, and has generated income in the past via these connections. Research suggests potential export markets within prison services and police services across Great Britain and the Republic.

A market has also been identified for the delivery of community safety training and services to the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships that have emerged as a result of the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland.

NIA's ongoing mediation work on behalf of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has provided it with a model that can also be made available to local housing associations, with the latter now collectively emerging as the province's predominant social landlord. NIA has also previously provided education based restorative justice programmes to the Boys Model School in North Belfast, including training with staff on how to work restoratively with pupils. Although this work was non-fee-generating, the results have been positive and reflecting sustainable change. Using this as an example of best practice there may be potential for NIA to deliver education based restorative justice training to the post-primary sector in Northern Ireland.

The business plan has also identified a series of unique selling points have been identified that will differentiate the new social enterprise:

- Competitive pricing structure in comparison to NI and UK competitors
- A variety of conceptual and practical elements of training, which competitors tend to lack
- Breadth of service offered, with a view to building upon its existing suite of accredited and non-accredited training products
- Professionally recognised restorative justice qualifications
- Building of a strong brand identity congruent with that of the parent charity
- Relevant skills base of board members who will take a very active role in the business in this start-up phase
- Existing projects being delivered and sales pipeline in place

Legal structure of the trading arm

NIA is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. The new social enterprise is -for the foreseeable future at least – an integral part of the existing company, with services to be delivered under its auspices.

This situation will be reviewed by NIA's board should the turnover of the social enterprise prove profitable. For the time being the board will establish a small sub- group to give more detailed consideration to trading matters, which will have the power to make recommendations as well as inform the social economy decision-making process.

Progress to date

NIA has only recently appointed its training officer within the past few months. This officer works alongside the board and management team to provide a level of professional expertise and experience to exploit previously identified economic opportunities.

However, even prior to the appointment the organisation has been preparing itself for its new departure in a number of ways:

- The board has carried out a skills audit exercise, and consequently added two new directors to develop its skills base. One is from a marketing background, and the other works within the social housing sector.
- A service level agreement has been developed in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations to facilitate work with voluntary social landlords.
- Funding has been secured from The Rank Foundation to run a three-year pilot project within four North Belfast secondary schools that will further develop NIA's model of educational restorative practice for wider application.

- NIA has secured key contracts with the Belfast Outcomes Group/Belfast Trust that place it in the forefront of family support service delivery as well as the development of family support hubs throughout Belfast.
- The Street by Street model of voluntary detached youth engagement will shortly be offered to a range of organisations across Northern Ireland as a model for tackling anti- social behaviour following its recommendation by DOJ as an example of best practice.

The greatest current challenge for NIA concerns capacity. As at some stage the issue of 'scaling up' service delivery could potentially create a growing strain upon existing practitioners within the organisation. Not only will they have to manage existing work commitments but they will also have to take on 'new' work that could potentially enhance the agency's profile and reputation as a trading entity. This process will require careful management as the organisation positions itself to bring in the extra help demanded by a transition into a scenario of full trading.

The other main concern will be changing the mentality of expectation that NIA, as a largely grant-aided body with a community empowerment and restorative mission, should charge for some of its services, especially when people have become accustomed to their availability at little or no cost for so long. It will be necessary to market the distinction between core charitable services and income generating activity as loudly and as often as possible.

Notwithstanding these factors, there is no reason why the mainstream and sustainability strategies of the organisation cannot function in tandem, both motivated by the restorative philosophy that is relevant to the lives of people and the functioning of institutions across a diverse range of settings and circumstances.

