

Limerick City Children's Service Committee

Submission on Restorative Justice to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality

1. Introduction

The Limerick City Children's Services Committee (CSC) was established in 2007 and consists of senior level representatives from agencies¹ that have a remit for delivering services to children and their families. It is charged with improving the well-being and safety of children by:

- Supporting and strengthening families,
- Facilitating collaboration between services in Limerick to provide a safe and nurturing environment for all children
- Progressing strategic planning and policy in relation to children's services in the city.

The CSC has been granted funding as part of the Programme Innovation and Development Fund (PIDF), which is an investment programme of Atlantic Philanthropies and government. It is being governed and managed by the Social Inclusion and Regeneration in Limerick (SSIRL) Board and Management Team, under the auspices of the University of Limerick.

One of the key components of the programme is the **development of Restorative Practices in Limerick City**. To this end the CSC established a multi-agency Restorative Practices Sub-group comprising of representative's from the Departments of Justice, Defense and Equality and Education and Skills as well as key stakeholders in the community and voluntary sectors. Young Person Probation and the CSC are the lead agencies for the project. Céim ar Chéim a Young Persons Probation Project, employ and host the Restorative Practices Development Officer.

The vision of the Limerick City CSC's Restorative Practice Sub-group is that **Children and Family Services in Limerick City** are **informed, shaped and underpinned by Restorative Practices**, which promote community, participation and positive relationships.

We aim to **embed and nurture Restorative Practices**, in all areas involving children and families in Limerick City, with a specific focus on the communities of Southill and Moyross and six DEIS post primary schools across the city.

The CSC views Restorative Practices, of which Restorative Justice is a part, as a way of working from a value base or ethos rather than a specific intervention, curriculum or programme. To this end we recognise the principles that underpin Restorative Practices a philosophy, from which skills and processes can be developed to prevent conflict and resolve it positively when it arises.

¹ Child and Family Services, Health Service Executive, An Garda Síochána, Probation Services, Department of Education and Skills, National Educational Welfare Board, Limerick City Council, Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, PAUL Partnership, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN).

The CSC considers it important that the national dialogue on Restorative Justice be considered in the context of the broader family of Restorative Practices. Our submission aims to highlight the effectiveness and benefits of Restorative Practices based on the experience in Limerick City.

Using our experience we reflect on some of the potential links between Restorative Practices and Restorative Justice, both of which, have at their core the aim of building relationships and resolving conflict.

A critical factor in the success of Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices in Limerick City has been that the two have been developed in parallel using an interagency approach. A model that has potential benefits for the development of Restorative Justice nationally.

2. Restorative Practices for Prevention

Restorative Justice in its purest form is an effective way of repairing the harm caused by crime, satisfying the need of a victim of a crime, to have questions answered, be included and have their voices heard as part of the justice process.

Restorative Practices provide a framework for relationships to be developed and where conflict occurs to be transformed positively.

Restorative Justice and Practices are part of the same family, sharing underpinning **principles** (inclusivity, voluntary participation, accountability and fairness), **values** (dialogue, respect, compassion) and **goals** (understanding how people have been affected by behaviour, repairing of harm, and strengthening of community), (Watchel, O'Connell, Watchel, 2010), (Zehr, 2002), (Umbriet and Armour, 2013).

Restorative Justice is widely viewed as a new way of looking at the harm caused by crime. Involvement in criminal behaviour is one of the many well-documented consequences of early school leaving. This link between early school leaving and involvement in criminal behaviour demonstrates sufficient evidence for investing in ways of working and being with young people that support their completion of formal education and therefore reduce the potential and likelihood of engaging in offending behaviour (Carroll and Meehan, 2007).

Evidence shows that the consistent and persistent use of Restorative Practices in schools has reduced the risk factors and number of exclusions, suspensions and potentially early school leaving. In addition, incidents of physical, verbal and disruptive behaviour have been reduced. Teachers and students report calmer school environments and less teacher absences due to illness (Barnet Youth Offending Service, 2008, City of Hull: Riverside Project). Locally, Ceim ar Chéim who take referrals from Probation Service of young people who have been excluded from school or left school early implement Restorative Practices as a core philosophy in working with young people participating in their education programmes. They have been in operation for 13 years and have had in excess of 500 young people completed their education programmes. Over this time they have had never had to exclude or suspend a young person, have had a 100% retention rate and academic achievement. The young people referred would all have previously demonstrated behaviour that was deemed inappropriate and challenging in traditional school environments.

In order for reactive (after harm has been caused) restorative approaches to be effective, research (Hopkins, 2007) and experience in schools has shown that that these restorative approaches need to be embedded in restorative environments and cultures.

Recommendation

The CSC recommends that

1. The use of Restorative Practices in schools and communities be introduced in areas where existing Restorative Justice Projects are in operation and where new Restorative Justice Projects are being considered.
2. The Departments of Justice, Defence and Equality, Education and Skills and Children and Youth Affairs collaborate on policies to increase the importance and focus for support at financial and policy levels for the development and implementation of Restorative Practice.

3. Working in partnerships to create safer communities

One of the goals of Restorative Justice can be to restore a sense of community in the offender, the offender's family, the victim(s) and the community at large while at the same time holding the offender accountable for the offence. Restorative Practices have at their core the **restoration and development of social capital, social discipline**, emotional well-being and civic participation through participatory learning and decision making. (Watchel, 2005).

Evidence from Ireland indicates that Restorative Practices have made contributions towards developing conflict resolution skills, improving people's willingness to report crime or anti-social behaviour, community building and collaboration across agencies. (Fives et al, 2013), (Cullianne, 2013)

Both the Irish Prison and Probation services have the creation of safer communities as a central part of their mission and visions and both have Restorative Justice as a key component of their strategic plans.

Projects and services in Limerick City (financed through Department of Justice Defence and Equality) are working together with their colleagues in the voluntary sector to embed Restorative Practices in the community, education and justice sectors. This is with a view to preventing and responding to conflict or crime. The Young People's Probation Service, Le Chéile Mentoring and Justice Services, Céim ar Chéim Young People's Probation Project, Corpus Christi Garda Youth Diversion Project, Southill Outreach, Southill Area Centre, and Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board have all committed resources by contributing staff time to train teachers, health care professional, youth workers, parents, social care workers and others in Restorative Practices.

It is important to understand that changing the culture of schools, communities and organisations requires long term investment and a consistent will to implement changes that may sometimes bring resistances and take time to demonstrate effectiveness.

Sherman and Strang (2007) propose a number of strong arguments for supporting Restorative Justice at both a policy and practice level: reduced numbers of people in custody, cost savings through diverting cases from court and potential for reducing health related costs associated with the psychological trauma for victims of crime. The cost of a prison place in 2012 was €65,404.

There may also be parallel arguments for cost saving related to Restorative Practices, which can prevent crime by preventing or addressing conflict at an early stage. Restorative Practices also generate an openness, understanding and willingness to engage with Restorative Justice in the event that a crime occurs. Local experience from Céim ar Chéim supports this, as young people who are consistently exposed to Restorative Practices through the project have demonstrated increased emotional awareness, and increased levels of empathy, which have enhanced the success of Restorative Justice interventions. In addition creating space for conflict to be resolved at a community level may facilitate critical services such as An Garda Síochána to be freed up, to address offending behaviour.

Recommendation

The CSC recommends that

1. Restorative Practices and Restorative Justice Initiatives work in collaboration with each other to maximise impact, effectiveness and cost efficiencies.
2. Restorative Practices be included in professional training and continuing professional development for all staff working with children and young people in education justice and community settings.
3. Consideration be given to replicating the effective model of interagency cooperation taking place in Limerick City. This model demonstrates the collaboration between specific Restorative Justice Initiatives and Restorative Practice Initiatives maximising the benefits of both.

References

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