



Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Introduction

The Restorative Practices Ireland (RPI) Quality Assurance Framework 'Aspiring to High Quality Restorative Practices' was published in 2021 as a contribution to achieving RPI's key objective of supporting the growth, evolution and sustainability of restorative practice in Ireland. It is designed to provide clear, practical information and to encourage and support individuals and organisations to achieve high-quality restorative practice consistently. It draws on published international standards (relevant sources referenced below) and the experience and insights of RPI members. It is a resource for individual practitioners, service managers, policymakers, funders and oversight bodies.

The complete Framework is available at <https://www.restorativepracticesireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CDI-RPI-QA-Framework-web-2-1.pdf>.

This document provides guidance on mechanisms that can help assure quality in restorative practice. The guidance is complemented by a series of RPI checklists which are available on the RPI website.

The quality mechanisms discussed relate to a continuum of activity, with some overlaps:

- selection, training, supervision and continuing professional development;
- accreditation of practice and commitment to standards;
- learning from practice through self-reflection, de-briefing, feedback from clients, independent observation and feedback, and record-keeping;
- review and evaluation;
- use of checklists; and
- having a coherent overall policy and transparency.

Selection, training, supervision, continuing professional development

Selection

In organisations that provide restorative services directly, selection of staff or volunteers is obviously critical. Robust systems are needed to ensure that only suitable people are carried through each stage of recruitment, training and probation. Personnel must have the skills, knowledge and personality that will allow them to function effectively. No-one should be

compelled to perform a facilitator or other key role in restorative practice. In organisations not providing restorative services directly, selection needs to take account of ability to apply restorative values and principles and contribute to the restorative ethos of the organisation.

Characteristics and skills required for facilitators in the criminal justice arena include many that apply to other settings and to wider restorative practice. The United Nations (2020) advises recruitment of staff and volunteers who are committed to restorative values and principles and are from all sections of society and possess a good understanding of local cultures and communities; facilitators for their part should be able to demonstrate self-awareness and lack of bias or prejudice. The European Forum for Restorative Justice (2018) stresses, among other things, the need for facilitators to be compassionate and non-judgemental, have good communication and listening skills, and be open to continuous professional development. A CDI quality framework for achieving outcomes highlights emotional intelligence, conscientiousness and agreeableness as desirable personal characteristics of relevant personnel (Murphy et al, 2011:29).

Training

The training of people is related to their role and function. While everyone can benefit from training in restorative approaches, language and skills, the facilitation of problem-solving circles, restorative meetings and conferences, reparation panels or victim-offender encounters requires an enhanced set of skills and aptitudes. Considerable attention need to be paid to training.

Initial training should equip practitioners with the core skills and knowledge required to carry out the functions of the role. In the criminal just area, the Council of Europe (2018) and United Nations (2020) emphasise competences of conflict resolution skills; the specific requirements of working with victims, offenders and vulnerable persons; and basic knowledge of the criminal justice system. They also recommend that facilitators should be experienced and receive advanced training before delivering restorative justice in sensitive, complex or serious cases.

Trainers should have a command of the subject, strong communication skills, confidence, charisma, energy and flexibility. Training of trainers and subsequent training delivery need to be quality assured. Training materials and approaches should take account of up-to-date evidence on effective facilitation practice.

Supervision

Supervision encompasses two dimensions: performance measurement and personal support. New approaches are integrated more quickly with regular, structured review, which affirms positive skills attainment, encourages trying out new ways of working, and also challenges those who are reluctant to step out of their comfort zone. Supervision needs

to be available on request and also at predetermined intervals. It is important that minutes of supervision are kept, tracking agreements and progress.

As regards performance measurement, management must take appropriate action when performance falls short of what is required. Their response may include advice, support, information, affirmation, guidance, further training, staff re-assignment or dismissal. The support dimension includes provision of emotional and pastoral support, checking in with individuals about concerns and issues they might have in relation to their role and identifying appropriate actions, while sharing experience in a safe, confidential environment.

The need for supervision is highlighted by many international bodies. It is a requirement, for example, in the Code of Practice of the Restorative Justice Council (2020), which recommends supervision at least once every three months and more frequently where practicable. The Council identifies supervision possibilities as one-to-one (face-to-face, by phone or virtually), group or external, and requires that supervisors are registered advanced practitioners with enhanced skills, knowledge and ability to provide supervision.

Continuing professional development

All practitioners need to engage actively in continuing professional development (CPD) and be supported in doing so. The Council of Europe (2018) calls for on-going, in-service training while the European Forum for Restorative Justice (2018) expresses an expectation that practitioners continuously seek further opportunities to learn and improve their practice and be supported to do so.

The Mediators' Institute of Ireland requires attendance at a number of sharing and learning events each year, where issues of practice are raised and discussed and where practitioners take turns to present cases. Registered Practitioners with the Restorative Justice Council must demonstrate that they have undertaken CPD in line with the Council's Practitioner Code of Practice: the minimum requirement varies from six to sixteen hours per annum depending on practitioner level. The Childhood Development Initiative requires its RP trainers to attend a minimum of two Communities of Practice each year in order to remain licensed.

It is important that participants find sharing and learning events to be positive experiences where they can feel safe in revealing aspects of their practice without fear of criticism or censure.

Organisations can also support their staff and volunteers through access to resources and research evidence.

Accreditation and codes of practice

Accreditation refers here to official approval or formal recognition by a recognised authority of a training provider, a service provider or an individual practitioner. Accreditation provides independent assurance of quality and engenders confidence. It usually requires demonstration of competence with respect to set standards and commitment to codes of practice, as with the Restorative Justice Council in the UK. For practitioners, it may entail completion of specific training, as in the case of restorative justice practitioners in New Zealand. Accreditation may also refer to endorsement of specific training courses or endorsement of organisations that work restoratively but do not deliver restorative practice services outside the organisation.

Codes of practice for restorative practice practitioners usually require them to do the following:

- to commit to work to the principles of restorative practice and to uphold its core values;
- to have completed appropriate training; to build on the initial training; and to
- adhere to national standards and best practice guidance (Restorative Justice Council, 2020).

The Mediators Institute of Ireland Code of Ethics and Practice (2021) sets out the fundamental principles of mediation and requires members to commit to certain standards of practice, including continuing professional development and practicing within approved areas of competence.

There is as yet no Irish system of independent accreditation of restorative practice trainers, services, practitioners or organisations. Organisations looking for restorative practice services and trainers must judge the quality on offer without the benefit of objective, independent assessment. Restorative Practices Ireland believes that an independent system of accreditation and endorsement in Ireland would enhance quality assurance and the credibility of restorative approaches. It is developing a voluntary course endorsement process as a first step. Even where practitioners do not wish to be formally approved by an accrediting body, they could be encouraged to follow best practice guidance and codes of practice. Monitoring adherence to these standards and codes should then form part of regular supervision and team reviews.

Learning from practice

Self-reflection

It is highly desirable that practitioners take time to reflect on their practice as a way of self-development and quality assurance. Everyone needs to remind themselves periodically of the principles and values underpinning their practice. This is true of experienced practitioners as much as novices. To be effective, self-reflection needs to be disciplined and

structured. It can be focused on specific aspects of practice but should always include consideration of the extent to which practice is consistent with restorative values and principles. Self-reflection should be a routine and regular activity but may also be in response to interventions that were perceived to have gone very well or were disappointing, focusing on what went well or badly and why. Self-reflection can require a high degree of self-awareness, clear recall and objectivity. Structured self-reflection can be assisted by use of checklists such as the RPI series of checklists.

De-briefing among practitioners

A useful adjunct to personal reflection is de-briefing with colleagues and other participants in a restorative intervention. It is extremely useful to take a few minutes to focus on what went well or badly and on how practice might be improved. It should be part of the restorative culture that constructive criticism is encouraged, welcomed and appropriately offered. Skills should be developed or taught that facilitate such feedback in de-briefings or in other forums where practice is reviewed. Managers should model these skills and attitudes to engender a culture that sees feedback as helpful. Ground rules can be agreed that make it safe to give feedback. A *'keeper of restorative values'* could be nominated to keep a check on language and interactions and give feedback, as practised in Céim ar Chéim in Limerick.

Feedback from clients

Restorative practice services should regularly and actively look for feedback from clients. This can be part of checking-in with people after use or as part of periodic reviews and evaluations. Feedback offers important opportunities for learning and service improvement and can also be valuable in affirming good practice. Structured feedback (e.g., through surveys, questionnaires or interviews) should also be established.

An organisation should also have clear procedures for receiving and dealing with complaints and grievances, which should be handled in accordance with restorative principles. The complaints procedures should obviously allow for processing of the complaint by someone other than the person originally involved in delivery of the service. Records should be kept of all feedback, including complaints, and analysed on a regular basis.

Observation

Independent observation of practice is highly desirable. Most services are under resource pressures and may find it difficult to assign an external person or internal volunteer or staff member to the task. However, observation is an important element of supervision, support and development and should take place from time to time.

Where observers are present at a restorative event, their role and focus should be explained to all participants and should only occur with their consent. Structured oral and written

feedback should be provided to those delivering the restorative intervention. The feedback should be in accordance with an agreed checklist of dimensions to be monitored. Observers should take care not to disrupt proceedings, distract participants or intervene. They should be discreet in taking notes. Recording devices should not generally be used and only with the prior informed consent of all participants and subject to agreed procedures for safety and confidentiality of the material.

Record keeping

It is important that services keep records of all significant restorative interventions and ensure confidentiality and privacy. Appropriate record-keeping can be seen as a standard in its own right, but reliable summary records have immense value in reviewing performance and ensuring overall service quality and relevance. The nature of required records needs to be worked out in association with staff, funders and oversight bodies and record-keeping needs to conform to data protection legislation and codes of practice. A balance has to be achieved between utility and burden of collection: data recording should be kept to the minimum deemed necessary for accountability and review.

In the criminal justice system, summary information recorded would typically include source and date of referral, type and date of offence or incident, assessment of suitability, number and nature of participants, nature of contact (notably dates, time and location) and nature of agreements. More detailed information would be kept in individual case files, including copies of documentation such as referral forms and agreements reached and intervention follow-up. Summary information could potentially also be kept on inputs (e.g., duration of preparation and intervention) and on process aspects of interest (e.g., level of involvement of participants).

Similar records should be kept in other domains which use restorative approaches, including circles, conferences and meetings that address incidents that cause harm or hurt. On the other hand, it is generally not necessary or practical to record details of informal uses of restorative approaches embedded in everyday working such as impromptu restorative conversations or even classroom circles that are used to check in with students at the beginning or end of school sessions.

Summary information can be extremely valuable in terms of quality assurance as regards frequency and type of intervention, profile of the harmful incident and harm-doer, number and profile of participants and extent of completion of agreements. It is not unusual, however, for information to be neglected even where actually collected. To make an obvious point, it is important that the information is analysed from time to time. This can be as simple as reading through reports at quarterly supervision to identify common themes or involve developing IT systems to support more rigorous interrogation of the information.

At an organisational level, records that inform the extent to which overarching objectives are being achieved are important. For example, the commitment to work restoratively may

arise from a desire to reduce formal disciplinary processes, decrease staff sick leave, or improve participation in decision-making processes. Tracking these will be necessary to assess effectiveness.

Review and evaluation

Periodic reviews and evaluations constitute systematic, in-depth examinations of processes, outputs and outcomes, and assess the extent to which objectives are achieved. They can be carried out internally or externally, but independent evaluation enhances objectivity and credibility. Rigorous evaluation is onerous and often expensive. Evaluations typically involve analysis of records, observing practice, eliciting stakeholders' views, assessing participation levels and agreements, and measuring outcomes. Ongoing review and relevant monitoring systems can help ensure that standards do not slip between evaluations and confirm that recommended improvements have been made. The Childhood Development Initiative's (2014) *A Community-wide Restorative Practices Programme: Implementation Guide* suggests ways in which such reviews can be carried out.

In the context of evaluation and review, observation can be written up as case studies, which, duly anonymised, can inform wider practice and become a valuable training and advocacy resource.

Eliciting stakeholder views can take place by means of face-to-face or telephone interviews, often using semi-structured interviews to collect information to a standard format while allowing for free expression of views. Key issues examined include consent, preparation, experience of the process, perception of impact and satisfaction with the process and outcomes. Interviewees in the criminal justice domain include victims, offenders, supporters and professionals. In other domains, the views of participants in restorative events would be sought by involving all participants in smaller events and a representative sample where numbers are large.

Assessing participation levels goes beyond examining numbers attending and considers the extent to which participants are involved and play an active role. Assessing agreements focuses on individual elements and issues of proportionality, fairness (to all) and realism. Compliance rates also need to be assessed.

Measuring outcomes is perhaps the most challenging aspect of any evaluation. Often in restorative practice the objective is to achieve change in relationships and engagement, which can be subjective and hard to measure. A complicating factor is that many desired outcomes need to be measured over relatively long periods (e.g., fewer discipline problems, reduced re-offending, increased community safety). More challenging still is the linking of wider impacts to specific restorative interventions, establishing a direct cause-and-effect relationship. Anti-social behaviour, for example, has many underlying causes and a restorative intervention with individuals or groups may not result in positive changes in overall levels in the short or medium term.

Evaluations usually include both retrospective elements (e.g., assessment of existing records) and prospective elements (e.g., observation of cases, interviews). Expert advice is recommended before commencement of an evaluation.

Restorative Practices Ireland is developing a separate guide to review and evaluation.

Use of checklists

Checklists are valuable, easy-to-use tools to review practice, assess performance and help achieve consistent and comprehensive quality. They can be used for self-reflection, post-event de-briefing or external observation. They can also be used in prior to undertaking restorative interventions. Checklists tend to focus primarily on process issues and adherence to restorative values and principles, but can also refer to skills.

Checklists need to be adapted to the restorative model employed and customised to different settings. A checklist for a restorative event dealing with a harmful incident, for example, would be slightly different if it involved direct or indirect contact and would be different again for a reparation panel (where decisions about location might be taken at corporate level and allow no flexibility, roles might differ, and victims are often not involved).

A series of RPI checklists is available on its website:
<https://www.restorativepracticesireland.ie/resources/>.

Policy and transparency

Restorative practice policy statement

Organisations or services that engage in restorative practice should have a clear policy statement that sets out objectives, principles and values. It should explain how restorative practices will operate and set out what service users can expect, and include a statement on the quality standards that will underpin practice. The policy should have clear visible support from top management and buy-in from all relevant stakeholders. Measures should be taken to ensure that the policy is widely available and that there is general awareness, understanding and acceptance of it. Ownership can be enhanced through involvement of stakeholder representatives in drawing it up.

Relevant messages should be prominently displayed so that people are regularly reminded of key aspects of the place of restorative practice in the organisation. Existing policies should be reviewed to ensure consistency with the restorative practice policy and its values.

The policy should be reviewed periodically to ensure its continued relevance and freshness, and to ensure consistency between the policy and evolving practice.

The exact format of the policy document and the way in which it is drafted may vary according to the nature of the business and the extent to which it is hoped to change organisational culture and behaviour. Some schools, for example, have used restorative practices to introduce fundamental change in the relationship between staff and students, and the way in which education is delivered, moving away from over-reliance on traditional authority roles. The policy document should articulate the vision of restorative practice in the organisation, however radical or confined that vision is.

Transparency

Review, monitoring and evaluation findings should be shared and published to the maximum extent possible. It is an instinct for organisations to restrict access where weaknesses are identified, at least while remedial action is being taken. On the other hand, everyone can gain from sharing and learning from the experiences of others. Transparency is desirable in respect of all restorative services in terms of regular reporting on cases, numbers and their characteristics, or other uses and benefits of restorative practice.

Too much good practice goes unnoticed. Publication and dialogue regarding insights and learning serve the valuable purpose of increasing public awareness and knowledge, as well as meeting public accountability needs. A self-perception that levels of use or outcomes are too modest should not prevent publicising or sharing performance information. Sharing can improve quality by inviting reflection and feedback. A commitment to sharing helps ensure commitment to good practice.

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