

# Building Bridges: An Independent Evaluation of Le Chéile's Restorative Justice Project. Research Findings<sup>1</sup>

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**Summary:** The Le Chéile Justice Project in Limerick is Ireland's only non-statutory service providing formal restorative justice interventions to young offenders. Established in 2010, the project co-operates closely with Young Persons' Probation, which refers children and young people in conflict with the law to the Project. This article presents the main findings from an Evaluation and Social Return on Investment analysis of the Project, conducted over six months in 2014 by the authors, working under the auspices of Quality Matters. It describes the impact and outcomes for young people, family members, victims of crime and the wider community, as well as making a brief comment on the Project's cost effectiveness.

**Keywords:** restorative justice, youth justice, Young Persons' Probation, rehabilitation, evaluation, social return on investment, reintegration services, management of offenders.

## Introduction

A growing body of research in recent years has highlighted the effectiveness of restorative justice for victims and offenders, including in the context of working with children and young people in conflict with the law. There is evidence to suggest that both victims and offenders consider it to be fairer than traditional, retributive justice (Trimboli,

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the research report by Quigley, M., Martynowicz, A. and Gardner, C. (2014) 'Building Bridges: An Evaluation and Social Return on Investment Study of the Le Chéile Restorative Justice Project in Limerick', Dublin: Le Chéile and Quality Matters (available at <http://www.lecheile.ie/downloads>) Any material is used with the kind permission of Le Chéile, who commissioned the original study.

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2000; Poulson, 2003; Doak, 2011). Restorative justice has also been shown to have positive healing effects on those affected by crimes (Doak, 2011), including improvement for those suffering from post-traumatic stress resulting from the experience of being a victim of crime (Angel *et.al.*, 2014).

Broadly speaking, restorative justice is ‘an approach to problem solving that, in its various forms, involves the victim, the offender, their social networks, justice agencies and the community’ (UNOCD, 2006, p. 6). It focuses on redressing the harm done to the victim, holding the offender accountable and involving the community in seeking resolution (UNODC, 2006, p. 6). The importance of this approach, however, stretches beyond those directly affected by the individual crime as ‘Restorative justice programmes can be used to reduce the burden on the criminal justice system, to divert cases out of the system and to provide the system with a range of constructive sanctions’ (UNODC, 2006, p. 2).

The use of restorative justice approaches is particularly appropriate in the youth justice context. International children’s rights standards require that children (i.e. those under eighteen years of age) who break the law should be dealt with using diversionary measures. These can be employed without recourse to judicial proceedings (for example, by the police) or in the context of judicial proceedings (Article 40(3) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007). Accordingly, States are required to adopt and develop a range of interventions which ensure that children in conflict with the law are dealt with in a way which focuses on their well-being, and are proportionate to both the child’s individual circumstances and the nature of the offence (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, p. 8). In recognition of the fact that children are most often accused of relatively minor offences, diversionary measures should ensure that they are removed from the criminal justice process and dealt with, for example, with the assistance of social or educational services (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007). Where court proceedings are necessary, the judges in dealing with children should be able to avail of a range of community based interventions. The primary aim of any intervention should be the child’s reintegration into the community (Article 40(1) UNCRC).

The Restorative Justice Project (‘the Project’) in Limerick is one such intervention. The Project is Ireland’s first and only non-statutory youth

restorative justice service and is run by Le Chéile Mentoring and Youth Support Services. It is closely aligned with and works alongside Limerick Young Persons' Probation (YPP), having been developed and established specifically to dovetail with existing statutory service provision. The Project is also embedded within a broader range of services providing restorative practice initiatives across the city, including justice, education and community and voluntary services.

The Project's primary focus is on providing a range of restorative justice interventions (see Table 1) to young people from the Limerick area who are engaged with the Probation Service. In addition to these, the Project's staff provide accredited training in restorative practices to professionals including Gardaí, education providers and staff of community-based services.

**Table 1:** Le Chéile Interventions by McCold & Wachtel (2002) Typology

<i>Model of Intervention Type</i>	
Restorative Conference	Fully Restorative
Victim Offender Mediation	Mostly Restorative
Reparation	Mostly Restorative
Victim Impact Panel	Mostly Restorative
Victim Empathy Programme	Partly Restorative

After almost four years in operation, and following a positive internal evaluation, Le Chéile commissioned an external evaluation of the Project. The review was commissioned by Le Chéile in March of 2014 and conducted by the independent research charity Quality Matters, over a six-month period. The following article discusses the main findings of the review in the context of the growing number of evaluations of youth restorative justice interventions.

### **Restorative justice with children and young people – principles and ‘what works’**

Howard Zehr asserted in 1990 that the traditional model of criminal justice responses to crime favoured retribution over restoration. He argued that this approach ignored the role and rights of the victim in the criminal justice process and that the harm caused to both victim and the

community more generally was not adequately addressed through the procedural state versus offender relationship. Referring to reconciliation programmes dating back to the mid-1970s, which created an early template for another way of managing the victim/perpetrator relationship within a criminal justice setting, Zehr (1990) set out six guiding principles for restorative justice, posed as questions:

- a) Who has been hurt?
- b) What are their needs?
- c) Whose obligations are these?
- d) What are the causes?
- e) Who has a stake in the situation?
- f) What is the appropriate process to involve stakeholders in an effort to address causes and put things right?

The principles these questions represent remain central to the use of restorative justice, which seeks to avoid or repair harm to individuals and/or communities, caused by the commission of offences. Since the 1970s, restorative justice has

emerged ... primarily as a response to calls from victim advocates for alternative approaches that expand victims' rights in justice processes and promote outcomes that address needs of victims, offenders and communities. (Choi, Bazemore and Gilbert, 2011, p. 35)

In the context of youth justice, restorative approaches have the potential not only to focus on the victim-offender relationship and victims' and offenders' needs, but also to provide a children's rights compliant system for dealing with those under eighteen years of age. As stated in the Introduction, States which – like Ireland – are bound by international children's rights treaties, are required to adopt and develop a range of interventions which ensure that children in conflict with the law are dealt with in a way which focuses on their well-being and are proportionate to both the child's individual circumstances and the nature of the offence (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, p. 8). Restorative justice processes, appropriately underpinned by children's rights standards, are at least in theory capable of ensuring that the process considers the best interests of the child (Article 3 of the UNCRC) and

that children are appropriately consulted on both the process and the outcomes of restorative interventions (Article 12 of the UN CRC; the right to be heard). The primary aim of any intervention should be the child's reintegration into the community (Article 40(1) UNCRC).

While the use of restorative justice with children and young people holds a lot of promise, one of the difficulties in assessing 'what works' is that many evaluations focus on particular programmes, in a particular setting, often with other programme-specific characteristics. At this level of evidence, 'there are many possible alternative, competing explanations for any observed difference in success rates between two practices' (Sherman, Strang and Newbury-Birch, 2008, p. 18) which can impact on our understanding of which of those approaches constitute 'good' or 'positive' practice. In fact, some authors go as far as to suggest that in some instances, there is no evidence of 'what works', but only evidence of 'what's promising' (Sherman, Strang and Newbury-Birch, 2008).

On the latter, Sherman, Strang and Newbury-Birch (2008) suggest that young people are more willing to engage with restorative interventions when they do not have to fully admit guilt at the start of the process. They go on to state that interventions used as diversion from prosecution attract more involvement from young offenders than those that are part of the criminal justice process. However, in individual projects, this may differ. In England and Wales for example, the completion rates for restorative interventions across forty-six projects funded by the Youth Justice Board have been found by evaluators to be high, at 83 per cent (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 39). There was no statistically significant difference between the different interventions, age of the offender or type of offence (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 39). An early evaluation of the Youth Conferencing Service in Northern Ireland showed that 31 per cent of referrals to the youth conference came from the Public Prosecution Service, with the remaining 69 per cent ordered by the youth court (Campbell *et al.*, 2005, p. 35). The rates of acceptance of the referral by the young person were reasonably high, with 68 per cent accepting the diversionary conference and 56 per cent accepting the court ordered one (Campbell, *et.al*, 2005 p. 35).

On victim involvement, the authors suggest that victims are more likely to engage if the process is facilitated and explained to them face-to-face by specially trained professionals and when the victims have control over things such as the time and place in which their meeting with the

offender takes place. They state that there is some evidence to suggest that personal victims are more willing to engage with children and young people than they are with adult offenders (Sherman, Strang and Newbury-Birch, 2008, p. 31). Again, individual evaluations of different projects paint a complex picture on victim engagement. Overall, the rates of victim participation for Youth Justice Board projects in England and Wales were found to be at around 67 per cent, although comparisons were made difficult due to different definitions and opportunities for 'participation' in the different settings and different types of intervention (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 31). It has also been suggested that the overall participation rates should be seen in light of the fact that many victims opt to receive information and an apology only, rather than engage in another process, so these rates are very much affected by victim choice (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 31). In Northern Ireland, the majority of referrals (75 per cent) resulted in a conference, with a relatively high level of victim participation (at 69 per cent), 40 per cent of those being personal victims (Campbell, *at.al.*, 2005, p. 45). Those victims who did not wish to participate in the conference most often quoted personal reasons for not doing so (Campbell *et al.*, 2005, p. 45).

Referring to possible outcomes of restorative justice, Sherman, Strong and Newbury-Birch (2008, p. 32) suggest that young people are more likely to apologise to victims in face-to-face meetings. The effects for victims may include improved health and well-being, less anger and less fear, and more inclination to forgive the offenders for the harm caused (Sherman, Strang and Newbury-Birch, 2008, pp. 33 and 35). Overall, victims involved in direct meeting with young offenders regularly report high levels of satisfaction with the restorative justice process. Offenders tend to report the feeling of having been treated more fairly than in the more conventional justice system (Sherman, Strang and Newbury-Birch, 2008, p. 34). In England and Wales, almost 90 per cent of young people stated that the process made them take responsibility for their actions, with 71 per cent declaring that they gained a greater understanding of the impact of their behaviour on the victim (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 40). Victims tended to agree that the intervention has helped the offender to take responsibility (76 per cent), with the majority (69 per cent) being satisfied with the outcome of a restorative intervention (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 41). In Northern Ireland, the evaluation of the Youth Conferencing Service found that 91 per cent of young people and 81 per

cent of victims preferred the youth conference over court process, with 81 per cent of young people and 43 per cent of victims reporting feeling better after the conference (Campbell *et al.*, 2005 p. 95). Eighty eight percent of victims stated that they would recommend the conference process to others in a similar situation (Campbell, *et al.* 2005 p. 95).

Looking at reconviction rates after restorative interventions, Wilcox and Hoyle (2004, p. 8) acknowledged the difficulty in calculating those without an appropriate control group. They compared the data available from the projects to the more general Home Office statistics regarding young offenders sentenced during 2000. The authors found that the unadjusted reconviction rate for those taking part in restorative justice projects was 46.6 per cent as compared to 26.4 per cent in the Home Office sample (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 8). After weighing the restorative justice sample for the numbers of previous appearances in courts, they found the reconviction rate to be 28.6 per cent (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 8). However, they also found that in the restorative justice sample, 37 per cent were reconvicted of less serious offences, with 23 per cent convicted on more serious charges (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 8). Levels and severity of reconviction may have been influenced by the fact that three quarters of children and young people starting restorative interventions were in the early stages of offending (Wilcox and Hoyle, 2004, p. 19). An analysis of re-offending rates for the youth conferencing in Northern Ireland in the 2006 cohort of those referred to the Service found that these stood at 47.4 per cent for court- ordered conferences and 28.3 per cent for diversionary conferences (Jacobson and Gibbs, 2009, p. 10), although it has been acknowledged that this data is based on a small sample and not controlled for other factors, such as previous history of being in conflict with the law. Reviewing the available evidence on the impact of restorative justice programmes on re-offending rates, Campbell *et al.* (2005, p. 24) concluded that 'it is difficult to determine the overall effectiveness of restorative programs in preventing re-offending'. The differences in evaluation contexts and methodologies preclude much of the comparative analysis of the outcomes of different programmes. However, some factors such as positive experience with the restorative process, absence of 'negative shaming' and offenders' belief that the process was just, can increase the effectiveness of restorative justice in this respect (Campbell *et al.*, 2005, p. 26). Additionally, the authors state that other benefits of the

interventions may be equally important, so lower re-offending rates on their own should not necessarily be the main goal of restorative practice (Campbell *et al.*, 2005, p. 24).

### **Le Chéile's Youth Restorative Justice Project**

The Le Chéile Mentoring and Youth Justice Support Service was first established in 2005 with the specific remit of supporting young people involved with Young Persons' Probation (YPP) and supporting the provision of mentoring under the Children Act 2001. In 2010, following initial discussions between Probation and the Limerick Regeneration Agency, Le Chéile opened the doors of Ireland's first young persons' Restorative Justice Project. The Project was born out of recognition of the intensity of intervention required by certain young people engaging with YPP, namely persistent and serious young offenders. This Project was seen as an important step towards the social regeneration of Limerick, through working with the young people most marginalised by economic and social disadvantage, as well as those harmed by crime. The restorative ethos of the Project formed part of a wider regenerative approach through restorative practices aimed at strengthening the community and reducing anti-social behaviour.

The Project works hand-in-hand with numerous state and voluntary agencies and is closely aligned with the YPP in Limerick. The Project receives all of its referrals from, and works in tandem with, YPP throughout their engagement with young people. This work is delivered through five key models of intervention: restorative conferencing; victim empathy programme (VEP); victim offender mediation (VOM), reparation and victim impact panels (VIPs). The last of these, Victim Impact Panels, are an innovative method of engaging young people in a restorative process through the participation of a proxy victim. This is a volunteer who has been a victim of crime, but not the crime committed by the particular young person, who takes part to explain the victim's perspective. While this model has been used in other jurisdictions to deal with cases of road traffic offences, the authors found no other examples of its use with young offenders.

The Project is funded by the Limerick Regeneration Agency with matched funding from the Irish Youth Justice Service (the latter of which currently provide funding indirectly, through the YPP). The Project has

also received funding through the National Lottery Fund (Department of Children), the Ireland Fund and the Commission for the Support of Victims of Crime.

A particular feature of the Project is that rather than working in isolation strictly within the bounds of the criminal justice system, from its inception it has formed an integral part of multi-agency arrangements and broader restorative practice within the city. These arrangements are vital to the effective functioning of the Project and to the realisation of its aims. While the Project works in partnership with statutory services, its existence as a voluntary organisation allows for a level of adaptability and flexibility, free from the restrictions of larger organisations working within a fixed statutory framework.

Sixty-one young people have been referred to the Project between 2010 and 2014. Of those, two were assessed by Project staff as unsuitable or inappropriate referrals and fifty-nine have been accepted into the Project. Out of the fifty-nine young people who have been accepted into the Project, eleven did not engage at all. A further seven engaged in one or two sessions with staff although failed to complete a programme of work. This means that forty-one young people have engaged beyond the initial stages of the intervention. It should also be noted that a number of young people engaged in more than one model at one time or consecutively. Young people's engagement with the programme is described below:

- a) forty-one young people engaged in Victim Empathy Programme;
- b) three young people engaged in Victim Offender Mediation;
- c) five attended Victim Impact Panels;
- d) eight young people took part in a Restorative Conference; and
- e) fourteen young people undertook Reparation.

### **Evaluation methodology**

The methodology designed for the evaluation of Le Chéile's Project employed a staged approach. First, a review of literature was conducted, covering legislation and policy context, international standards, and evidence of 'what works' in restorative justice with children and young people. Additional research was also conducted to support the Social Return on Investment forecast, which is only discussed briefly in Conclusions. The main literature review provided the context for the

evaluation as well as the basis for the formulation of evaluation questions. Next, a stakeholder mapping exercise was undertaken to select interviewees who together could provide as broad as possible a view of the work of Le Chéile’s Project and its effectiveness.

Qualitative interviews and focus groups were then held with a range of stakeholders including children and young people, members of their families, the victims, representatives of criminal justice agencies and other professionals, including from ‘reparation host agencies’,<sup>3</sup> and Le Chéile volunteers. The number of interviewees from each group is included in Table 2 below. A review of quantitative and qualitative data held by Le Chéile was also conducted as part of the research.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2:** Interview Participants

<i>Interview group</i>	<i>Number Interviewed</i>	<i>Sampling</i>	<i>Approximate Sample Percentage</i>
<b>Young people</b>	9	Total population	21%
<b>Family members</b>	4	Random	10%
<b>Victims &amp; victim proxies</b>	6	Random	16%
<b>Gardaí</b>	4	Purposive	38% (of VLOs)
<b>Probation</b>	2	Purposive	40% (of Limerick YPP staff)
<b>Host agencies</b>	1	Purposive	n/a
<b>Le Chéile staff</b>	3	Purposive	100% (of current Project staff)
<b>Other (including training attendees)</b>	13	Random	n/a
<b>Total</b>	42		

**Research findings**

*Young people*

As a core part of the evaluation, researchers sought to include the views of young people on their experiences of the Project and nine young

<sup>3</sup> These are community and voluntary groups which assist young people and Le Chéile in providing activities as part of reparation.

<sup>4</sup> Full details of the methodology can be found in Quigley, M., Martynowicz, A. and Gardner, C. (2014) ‘Building Bridges: An Evaluation and Social Return on Investment Study of the Le Chéile Restorative Justice Project in Limerick’, Dublin: Le Chéile and Quality Matters (available at <http://www.lecheile.ie/downloads>.)

people were interviewed in the course of the study.<sup>5</sup> In all instances, they were asked about their experiences of the programme, as well as the impact the Project has had on their lives.

Young people recalled very positive experiences of engagement with the Restorative Justice Project. Those who participated in this study reported being appropriately prepared for what was going to happen during the restorative intervention, although some young people would have wanted a bit more information about the possible outcomes of the meetings. Overall, however, young people stated that they were able to ask questions and that they were listened to by the Project Workers, with their views considered throughout the process. As one young person said,

*Everything I said they listened to and took it on. They didn't put words into my mouth, they never did things that I wouldn't like them to do. (Young Person 8)*

Young people felt respected and well supported by staff and one of the interviewees observed that 'you could tell they were interested in what you said' (Young person 3). The support of the staff was important as the experience of engaging with restorative interventions was, at times, highly emotional. As one interviewee reflected,

*it was a big deal; it's hard to talk about that kind of stuff, talking about it makes you remember what happened and that's not always nice. (Young Person 3)*

While young people were well informed about what the programme was

<sup>5</sup> All young people who have been in contact with Le Chéile in the years 2010–2014 were included in the potential sample of interviewees, and the researchers made contact with nine of those on the list. All of those who agreed to be interviewed were initially approached by Le Chéile staff, and only contacted by the researcher following that initial approach. It follows, therefore, that there may be a risk of positive bias within this sample. Positive bias refers to the potential for people who have more positive experiences than others to be more likely to engage in research about this experience. A positive bias in a research sample can therefore lead to more positive commentary from the perspective of this client group. It should be noted, however, that the positive experience is likely to not be the only determining factor in participation rates. Indeed, many young people that were out of reach by the time of the research, had simply changed their phone number and could not be contacted for this reason. Likewise, as with many criminal justice programmes, people may not wish to participate due to having moved on with their lives and not wishing to reopen the emotions of this period of their lives. Such need was therefore fully respected within the research process.

about, some reported that they did not really know what to expect of a Conference or a Victim Impact Panel. This was, however, more to do with their lack of experience of a particular situation rather than any omission in explanation of what the interventions are about; they had to experience it rather than form expectations before the meetings. Some were very clear about what they wanted out of the engagement with the Project, and mentioned wanting to understand why they behaved in a way they did and wanting to apologise to the victim. Young people recognised that even if initially difficult, the experience was positive for them and others, including the victims, as this interviewee observed:

*I was glad I did it. It was good for me to meet the victim and understand how my actions affect others. I think it was good for the victim as well, to see that I didn't plan any of the crime; that it was just random, like. (Young Person 6)*

In terms of outcomes, young people reported that the Project has had a positive, and in some cases profound, impact on their lives. Young people reported increased levels of empathy towards victims of crime and family members (which was supported and shown to be statistically significant by quantitative data recorded by the Project) and improved family relationships. Participants in the interviews spoke about how restorative justice had helped them to understand what their previous behaviour had meant to their victims. As one participant of the Victim Empathy Programme explained:

*You know more how the victim felt. If I was thinking about how the victims were feeling before then I probably wouldn't have done it [the crime]. (Young person 1)*

He went on to say that prior to undertaking the programme, he gave victims 'no thought'. The young person reported that he didn't think he would have gained the same understanding had it not been for Le Chéile and that participation in VEP gave him 'the push [he] needed' to change. Another participant reflected:

*... you think you are doing nothing wrong and it [the Victim Empathy Programme] gives you an insight into the lives of the person you've done it*

*to, how much it hurts them and how much you have scarred them.* (Young person 4)

All but one of the evaluation participants stated that taking part in the Restorative Justice Project had led to significant changes in relation to their ability to empathise. For two participants, it was also important for them to be able to share their learning with their friends:

*Yeah, that was a big thing I learned. It was about the effects of what I had done. It helped me to change the way I acted and what I would do when I was out with my friends. I started telling my friends about what I learned and talking about why we shouldn't do certain things. Some of my friends listened to me and others didn't.* (Young person 5)

There was a close relationship between reported changes in young people's behaviour and their perception of improved family relationships. Young people spoke about their parents 'not liking' their getting into trouble (Young person 8) and being 'given out to' by family members (Young person 4). While the family situations for five young people remained unchanged (especially where the young person reported a positive pre-existing relationship), for three others the change was quite dramatic (one other reported a small improvement), as this interviewee observed:

*My mother and my family seen me as a different person. My mother used to give out to me and tell me not to get into trouble, now she knows that this thing changed my life and I don't want to do the things I used to [do].* (Young person 4)

In addition to the changes described above, young people reported decreased substance use; better involvement in education; increased pro-social peer relationships and an overall reduction in their involvement in offending and level of engagement with criminal justice agencies.<sup>6</sup> As one interviewee stated,

<sup>6</sup> Due to the number of young people who have come through the Project in the first four years, and data protection considerations, the evaluation did not include a full reconviction study. The conclusions regarding decreased engagement with the criminal justice system are based on self-reporting by the young people who were interviewed, eight of whom stated that they had moved away from offending by the time the evaluation took place.

*I was in trouble two years ago, now you keep yourself to yourself. It kept me out of prison.* (Young person 8)

### *Victims*

In total, six individuals who were direct victims or acted as a victim representative in a restorative intervention were interviewed as part of this evaluation. Achieving high levels of victim participation has been noted as a common challenge among restorative justice projects. The findings of this evaluation were no different; however, it was noted that the Project has taken steps to promote victim participation as well as putting in place processes, such as Victim Impact Panels, which support the provision of restorative interventions even where there is no participation from direct victims of a particular offence committed by the young person.

Those victims who participated in restorative interventions, or who took part as victim proxies (representing the victim perspective in a Victim Impact Panel), found restorative justice to be a more inclusive, respectful and meaningful approach than the traditional criminal justice process. When asked to compare their experience of the Project with their involvement in the criminal justice system, one interviewee reflected that:

*With the restorative process, it was completely different [as compared to a negative experience in court] and people asked me how I felt about the process ... and the young person is involved and everybody gets involved in it ... It's our crime, it doesn't belong to the state, it never was, it's ours.* (Victim participant 1)

The traditional criminal justice process was criticised for not giving the victims the chance to participate, and sometimes making them vulnerable in the process. As the interviewee continued,

*I had an experience [of being in court] ... I didn't understand the court process really, I thought I had a solicitor there for me but when I went in I had nothing. I was interrogated by a solicitor ... When I went to the court there was no one there for me, I remember being interrogated ... and I said, 'where's my solicitor?' I really felt stupid. Now, no one explained that I didn't have a solicitor, they forgot about me. I was apparently a state witness ... I was being disciplined for being silly. I was the victim and I felt so vulnerable ...* (Victim Participant 1)

Half of those interviewed took part in Victim Impact Panels as proxy victims to explain to young people the impact of offending on the lives of those affected by their behaviour. They praised their preparation for these panels and commented on the professional approach by Le Chéile staff in the sessions. Some victim interviewees noted the importance of victim participation and wanted to see more engagement with the Project from those affected by crime. Victims reported decreased fear of crime and associated anxiety after participating in restorative interventions as well as noting a sense of ‘closure’ with regard to their own experience of victimisation.

### *Parents*

Parents of the young people involved with Le Chéile all described very positive experiences of the Project, which they felt was respectful and inclusive of them as family members. As one of them stated,

*I didn't even realise I needed so much help with my own son at the time, it helped everyone, there was so much trouble in the house over what he was doing. (Family Member 3)*

Parents reported positive changes for themselves, such as greater understanding of what was going on for their children, often linked with improvements in their own parenting skills and approaches. An outcome of this was parents reporting lower levels of stress or anxiety. Parents also stated that the Project assisted them in learning more about issues such as the reasons for offending and the nature of addiction which led to a greater understanding of their children's needs. This has helped them to deal with and respond to challenging behaviours in a constructive way rather than reacting out of frustration.

The second main benefit cited by parents was the change in the behaviour of their children. This was seen as reducing stress and conflict within the home, often having a further impact upon other family members such as siblings.

### **Conclusions**

In the course of the evaluation, both young people and victims reported more confidence in the restorative justice process, and reflected on how their voices were heard and respected within it. This further supports the already existing evidence that restorative interventions are more inclusive

than the traditional criminal justice system. The professional and thorough preparation for the various forms of restorative interventions was praised by all participants, who regularly reported that engagement with the Project had a considerable – and in some cases profound – impact on their lives. The holistic approach implemented by the Project to working with young people and their families, as well as community representatives, ensured that the positive outcomes were not limited to a particular young person, but that they were in a sense ‘future proofed’ through improvement of family relationships, addressing the young person’s needs (whether educational, related to substance abuse or increasing their confidence to change their peer group) and increasing the young person’s understanding of the impact their offending can have on family and the wider community. As the Project largely focuses on working with serious and persistent offenders its key outcome is addressing young peoples’ needs and diverting them away from custody. In this respect, the Project plays an important role in ensuring that imprisonment is only used as a matter of last resort, and in ensuring appropriate reintegration of young people into the community in line with children’s rights standards.

While not discussed here in detail, it is important to state that the Social Return on Investment (SROI) forecast showed that the Project had a return of €2.92 for every €1 invested, with a potential to go to €3.50 with the increased number of young people availing of the programme currently. The cost effectiveness of restorative justice programmes provided by voluntary organisations cannot therefore be underestimated, and should be an important consideration for the State in planning and funding initiatives in the community and voluntary sector in the future.

Overall, the evaluation of the Project concluded that the model employed by Le Chéile, in co-operation with Young Persons’ Probation and other partners in Limerick, is primed for replication across Ireland. It is hoped that the learning from the Project will support the development of similar initiatives that clearly benefit not only the young people and victims, but also their families and the community as a whole.

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