**Restorative Cities –**

**what can be learned from the experiences of others**

A report for The Mint House Oxford

prepared by Linda King September 2018

Methodology

A prepared set of questions was put to the managers of 7 Cities or counties working towards being Restorative Cities. Two other people were interviewed who had significant involvement in their Restorative City previously, but their authority is now much less engaged in the work than in the past. Those individuals are now managing a voluntary organisation helping to support restorative practice. Additionally, Chris Straker, who was involved in setting up Restorative Hull and who now works freelance supporting restorative cities and John Boulton, who through IIRP advises and trains those wanting to set up restorative cities, were also interviewed.

Information about the following Cities is included in what follows –

Brighton, Bristol, Gloucestershire, Hull, Leeds, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Southampton, Stockport and Swansea.

Getting started

The work in the areas looked at has been going on for as much as 10 years in some cases but in others for just a few years or even a matter of months. The original motivator might have been a need for significant change following a critical Ofsted report, or a serious case review that suggested radical changes were required. The originating department in some cases was the community safety partnership but in others it stemmed from schools. In some areas there was a grass roots move towards using restorative approaches that then caught on elsewhere. So, in some places it was initiated by senior managers, but not always. What does seem to be consistent though is that there has been someone who has enthusiasm and charisma who has got things off the ground and ensured that they were taken forwards. In some places this was the CEO. Most had at least part of a post whose remit was to carry the restorative approaches work forwards. Many of the people interviewed for this work spoke with evident passion and enthusiasm for the work they are engaged in and restorative approaches generally.

Emerging projects were sometimes keen to visit Cities that were ahead of them. They derived stimulation and ideas from hearing about other people’s experiences. In cases where the group who had gone on the visit elsewhere stayed together and met periodically to review how their own City was progressing, this was seen as particularly helpful.

Some kicked off their own work with a conference. One that had evolved from children’s services and included children in their conference thought that this was really helpful in engaging people. Conferences tended to be one of two types. The purpose of one was to bring local people and agencies together to galvanise them to action and to support the development of the Restorative City. The second was to broadcast more widely the ideas and success of ongoing work. It was felt by one respondent that a conference with the second aim had been undertaken too early in the life of the Restorative City as it took away energy and resources from project development at a time when it was not especially well established.

Whilst a few of the places interviewed had done some stakeholder surveys before they began or some audits, most had not.

For many, having set off, the work developed organically and where it rooted most readily. Some respondents felt that they were struggling to cope with the demand to deliver training and to keep pace with requests to expand into new areas of the council. Others were more structured. They had a defined strategy, a plan of how to implement it and regular reviews of progress and blockages.

The two trainers and Restorative City supporters that were interviewed felt that before setting off it would be beneficial to be clear about what the aim is, to ensure that participants share the same ideas about what a Restorative City is, have shared values and vision and undertake baseline audits to compare with later outcomes. They also felt that the intentions and thrust of the work needs to fit the circumstances of the particular area and that the same blueprint is not appropriate everywhere.

What is a Restorative City?

Some of the Cities call themselves restorative, as in, Restorative Bristol for example. Others prefer the term child friendly as in Child Friendly Southampton but emphasise that restorative practice is key to the achievement of this. Others say that they do not regard themselves as restorative anything, though restorative practice is clearly at the centre of how they operate. For some they publish a clear statement of intent. For example, the Restorative Bristol website states that their vision “is a city where individuals, agencies and services see restorative approaches as the first option for dealing with conflict” In Norfolk the vision is “ to secure a county wide approach within which all partners coordinate, prioritise and maximise their collective efforts to enable people of Norfolk to use non-blaming ways to resolve conflicts and repair harm through the use of restorative approaches to build and maintain effective relationships, prevent potential conflict and create restorative communities.

Most agree that they will never become completely restorative – there will always be more work to do.

Working restoratively was most commonly seen in adult and youth justice, schools, social care, housing, ASB and health. There was some concern that in recent times the National Probation Service or CRC are less prominent than the used to be. Some areas did not find it easy to engage with health. Others were using restorative approaches in the HR department of their council or places like museums and the arts. Several places speculated on whether the role of the Restorative City Manager was located in the right department or not. There were suggestions that this was of benefit to that department but made it less easy to engage with other departments.

Ongoing work

There was a large training element in most of the Cities spoken to. The length of this varied between 1 and 3 days. Some felt with hindsight that too many people had received 3 day training when most of them only required 1 day. Some followed up the training with periodic support to ensure that the learning was embedded in the way the department or school operated. Occasionally it seemed that demand for training was hard to meet or that training without a plan for implementing the necessary changes was not a good way to proceed.

Many areas used volunteers in some capacity to deliver interventions, especially in criminal justice or neighbourhood issues. They ran regular training events which all comers could attend, thus ensuring known dates for training, a short wait for those interested in volunteering before they received training and a more predictable supply of ready volunteers. Others trained by department or school. Areas then sometimes prioritised schools or departments who were open to working restoratively and pushed back those who were more reluctant or sceptical. This was seen as an attractive strategy where there were a lot of staff to cover and early success in roll out would generate more interest. Most, but not all authorities delivered the training themselves. Some would like to be able to offer more training than the 3 days to support complex cases  
  
The use of restorative approaches in schools was particularly prevalent. There were differing views on whether the extensive existence of academies made this more difficult or not. Several felt that it was easier in primary schools than secondaries for a number of reasons. These included that each teacher tended to have a relationship with a smaller number of pupils over a longer period whereas with secondaries there were more pupils for teachers to relate to. Some areas concentrated on working with schools that fed into each other where this was possible. Where children were trained it was felt that they understood the concepts more quickly than adults and were better at putting them into practice. Examples were also given of children and young people using the skills they had learned outside of the school setting. Engaging restorative champions was used by most areas.

Funding

The amount of money earmarked for the restorative cities work varied hugely across the locations interviewed. For some there was no additional money at all and at the other end of the scale one local authority had successfully bid twice for several million pounds worth of Innovations Fund money. Some had set up trading arms to deliver training but at least one area felt that the need to make money in this way was an obstacle to developing their overall approach.

Several areas were spending less on being a restorative city than they had in the past. Sometimes this was due to a change in leadership, to changes politically, or austerity measures generally. In some cases, there were concerns about how things would continue when current funding expires. Some places have argued that using restorative approaches saves money, particularly in reducing the number of school exclusions, paying for supply teachers (because there are fewer absences from teachers) or in drawn out grievance procedures which tend to fracture relationships further rather than resolving the situation. Several interviewees suggested that working out how much money each £1 spent on restorative approaches saves would be a good argument to persuade top leaders to adopt this approach.

Research and evaluation

There were relatively few examples of work being evaluated. Some respondents said that the benefits of working restoratively was plain for people to see and enthusiasm for it spread by word of mouth and so formal research was not necessary. For others developing their version of the Restorative City left them with little time for research or evaluation.

There is some work on findings at 2 schools in Hull which used base line figures in Spring 2007 and compared them to July 2008[[1]](#footnote-1). This showed reductions across a number of measures of behaviour including exclusions, break exclusions, racist incidents and physical violence. There was also a saving over 8 months of £60K due to a reduction in staff absences.

A study involving looked after children in a project in Norfolk between 2010 and 2012 reported fewer police call outs following the use of restorative approaches and also sought feedback from all those involved in the study[[2]](#footnote-2). A small study in Swansea reported on the views of practitioners and pupils regarding the training they had received and the benefits they saw of that way of working.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Chris Straker[[4]](#footnote-4) used qualitative and quantitative evidence in Hull and Wokingham to look at whether the idea of a restorative city was a significant shift in how things could be done in local authorities or not. His conclusion was that in order to effect a major change it there would need to be clear principles and values articulated; a strategy embracing them and involving all tiers of the organisation; families would need both to be involved and empowered and clear qualitative and quantitative evaluations undertaken.

Sustainability

This is a significant issue for all the places interviewed. In 2 cases, Hull and Swansea, the notion of a Restorative City is now considerably reduced from what it was at its height and probably only remains active in education. They both suffered when the CEO who championed the Restorative City moved on. Other places have also stalled when for example, the manager with development responsibility has been off sick for an extended period. There have clearly been some key individuals behind the setting up of the Restorative City but there is a real possibility of it dwindling when they move on unless the ideas have really taken hold and have become part of everyday practice. This culture shift takes some time to embed, particularly in some subject areas and it is easy to return to old ways of working.

Places that have seen substantial amounts of money given over to developing and maintaining restorative practice also voice concerns that it may not be sustainable if there are significant cuts.

Respondents were asked about whether they would be interested in attending a conference about restorative cities. Whilst there was some support for this it would depend on the theme and its relevance for the cities surveyed. Some spoke of having lots of interest from around the country and internationally about what they are doing, others were finding it harder to learn from others. A recent conference organised by the RJC and Nottingham Trent University suggested that there is an eagerness to share good practice and learn from others and that some people are looking for a focal point for this.

Suggestions for Oxford

For the Mint House it would seem sensible to decide amongst the following things –

1. Whether it thinks that there is merit and potential for Oxford to become a Restorative City
2. What the role of The Mint House might be in initiating or supporting this
3. Whether, alternatively, the Mint House might take on a role of supporting the development of restorative practice more generally across the country by organising conferences to support and sustain growth, practice and research.

Any of these would need a carefully worked out strategy to implement them that would include costings, outcomes and sustainability. It would also need to take account of the limited human resources available to the Mint House in undertaking any projects.

**Appendix 1**

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Chris Straker

1. Hull Centre for Restorative Practices. The City of Hull: Rivers Project [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Restorative Approaches and Norfolk Residential Services. Project Report 2010 - 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Restorative Practice in Swansea Schools: a small-scale evaluation. Swansea Metropolitan University of Wales Trinity St David [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chris Straker. The Restorative City: Emperor’s New Clothes or Achievable Paradigm Shift. MA University of Hull 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)