

# CRIMINAL JUSTICE INSPECTION NORTHERN IRELAND

NORTHERN IRELAND ALTERNATIVES (COMMUNITY BASED RESTORATIVE JUSTICE): ACCREDITATION LAUNCH, 26<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2007

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I am delighted to be invited to say a few words on this happy occasion.

I have been in touch with Alternatives since the time, four years ago, when I was setting up the Inspectorate.

One of the most interesting aspects of this exceptionally interesting job was always going to be deciding what to make of the community restorative justice schemes.

Inspecting them was not, at that stage, part of the legal remit of the Inspectorate – though it now is, as a result of Lord Trimble's amendment to the Justice and Security Bill which has just been enacted.

But it was on our agenda very clearly in the form of Recommendation 168 of the Criminal Justice Review, which found that there was a positive contribution to be made by the schemes *provided* they operated in accordance with sound principles of legality and human rights and were inspected by CJI to make sure that they were complying.

The admirable Lord Clyde, as Justice Oversight Commissioner, was impressed by what he saw of the work of the schemes, and in his reports he regularly urged the Government to press ahead with establishing a Protocol to govern their relationship to the criminal justice system.

It took a long time to finalise the Protocol, with two rounds of public consultation on successive drafts. But that is understandable, because what was being attempted was something entirely new and by no means straightforward.

Even if there had been trust and consensus among the various parties it would not have been easy. Criminal justice is always a government monopoly, and though government often employs private contractors to do specific tasks for it (like escorting prisoners, or even running prisons) the idea of licensing a freelance partner to handle an area of criminal justice business is quite challenging.

And the reality was that there was no consensus and trust was in short supply. This initiative was happening in a situation where everything was acutely contested, not least because many of the leading people involved in the schemes were known to be ex-prisoners.

I have yet to report on CRJI – I hope to publish a report next month - so I shall focus in what follows on Alternatives.

CJI conducted a preparatory inspection of Alternatives in March and April this year. The report is available on our website [www.cjini.org](http://www.cjini.org) and I have a few copies here, if anyone would like one.

We visited each of the schemes and talked to staff and volunteers and also to the 'users' of the service – in this case mainly young people and their parents, but also the victims of offences, teachers and community leaders, including local politicians.

We looked at all the files held by the schemes to assess the standard of record-keeping, and we studied the training materials that are used by the schemes. We examined constitutions, minutes and annual accounts to see how effectively the schemes were managed. Overall, a pretty thorough health check.

The overall conclusion was that the schemes were unproblematic. They were still handling a small number of paramilitary threats, particularly in North Belfast, but most of the work was not related to the paramilitaries in any way. It was therapeutic work with young people (sometimes as young as 11), victim support, neighbour dispute resolution and general community development.

We were particularly impressed by the contribution Alternatives made to a large range of community development and community safety initiatives, such as the Greater Shankill Community Safety Network and the Kilcooley Intra Community Project in Bangor.

Nobody going round and looking at the Alternatives schemes could fail to be impressed by the quality of the work that was being done and the commitment of the staff and volunteers. I was astonished by some of the people I met.

I have some experience of working in the voluntary and community sector, and I can tell you that the proportion of those working for Alternatives whom I would class as 'stars' was exceptional.

The range of work they were doing was impressive. Most of it was not really criminal justice work, and the issues that had seemed so difficult when considered as questions of principle in the Protocol scarcely arose in practice.

The Protocol might be useful to provide public reassurance, but in practice what the schemes were doing was benign and uncontroversial. They all worked well with the police in their areas, though the Protocol will usefully firm up the rules for passing on information.

If anything there is a danger that the Protocol might over-formalise the relationships and slow down the handling of cases. Speed is one of the great advantages the CBRJ schemes can offer. But I am pleased to see that the PSNI have worked out a set of practical guidelines for operating the Protocol which will make sure that it is kept as simple and un-bureaucratic as possible.

Let us face it, CBRJ is still controversial. Not everyone is yet convinced that the schemes are a force for good in their communities. There are still lingering suspicions arising from the fact that individuals involved in the schemes have had links with paramilitary organisations in the past.

Accrediting Alternatives is all part of the major process of recognising how things have changed and are still changing in Northern Ireland. People are still the same people, but they are now in a different context. Many people did things in the Troubles that they would never have done in a different world, and will never do again.

If such people show that they are committed to helping their communities they deserve to be backed – provided, of course, that they have not offended recently and that the nature of their offending does not disqualify them from, for example, working with children and vulnerable adults.

In writing this report we were not making any special concessions to people in the interests of peace and reconciliation. That may be a fine thing to do, but it is not the job of this Inspectorate. We were simply concerned to do justice to an organisation that all the evidence showed was lawful and eligible for accreditation.

I have great respect for Alternatives, and I wish them well. That does not mean, of course, that CJI will not inspect them rigorously. We take nothing on trust. But we shall inspect them, as we do every organisation, in a supportive way. We want them, like all the organisations we inspect, to succeed.