Welcoming New Communities Toolkit

This toolkit has been put together through the shared experiences of different grassroot organisations in Northern Ireland providing a range of services to different newly arrived persons. We refer to organisations working with 'newly arrived' rather than 'newcomer' to separate the growing need for services offered to service the immediate settlement needs in the province.

We chose organisations that were not large national bodies, which we gained access through snowballing and through contacts previously established with key members of civil society who are part of, or guide newcomer groups. Throughout our collaboration and research with grassroots organisations, it was clear that the services assisting newcomers were, compared to other civil society and third-sector organisations, underfunded, and lacked a systematic approach to help people integrate economically and socially.

The continued crisis in governance in Northern Ireland has left a significant gap in service provision; it also prevented forward planning across several sectors. This has impacted those organisations trying to provide useful and timely responses to vulnerable migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The added difficulty in NI is that there is no government-ordered response to refugee integration or assistance and civil society organisations (CSO) have had to step in where normally government agencies would respond.

We have also established that organisations which have emerged to cover the needed services for vulnerable newcomers have been earnest, hardworking and with the best of intentions to help those in need. But as we have found through our surveying of organisations, they often work across several different types of services and become overloaded in a bid to cover diverse needs of those they are trying to help. In addition, the physical dispersion of newcomers and the range of issues needing attention have oftentimes encouraged civil society to try and respond to all things, at once.

As a result, we have sought to draw together the knowledge of different organisations that provide front-line services to newcomers in an index that will facilitate referrals across the sector. Additionally, through our research and collaboration, we have seen traps organisations fall into when doing their level best to help and have provided best practices to try and avoid these pitfalls.

This toolkit should be used to refer to other organisations working with newcomers across NI, address service gaps to share the load and provide inspiration on how to work through similar issues you might be facing. The toolkit provides key recommendations based on the best practices that we have drawn together from our long-term collaboration with different organisations. The final section is a directory that describes the organisations that we have currently mapped and the services they provide and is a reference point for you to seek.

What We Found: Collaborating with Grassroots Organisations:

In working over an 18-month period with six different organisations through peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, the groups we collaborated with have upgraded their ability to think about the following key and most urgent areas of need:

- Strategic planning.
- Cooperation with other organisations.
- Equitable deployment of scarce resources.

Lessons have been drawn together through the seed funding provided during the spring of 2022 to allow our core groups to implement projects, some of which jointly with organisations they had not previously worked with. The lessons drawn from the projects and the longitudinal work done with our partner organisations were crucial in the identification of the need for this toolkit. Our collaboration with community organisations found three barriers when they tried to deliver services:

1. <u>Most organisations have a low human resource capacity and are often overworked.</u> These organisations do not have time and resources to apply for big projects and limited opportunities to cooperate on applications for grants that are advertised for community work.
2. <u>Many organisations lack auditing structures.</u> The lack of institutional parameters effectively bars them from access to funding opportunities offered via the established channels in the province.
3. <u>The newcomer communities in Northern Ireland are poorly visible.</u> Intercommunity relations which fund mainly Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist (PUL) and Catholic, Republican and Nationalist (CRN) organisations diverts only very limited funding to communities that are generally perceived to be residual to the Northern Ireland conflict and society.

It is crucial to note that challenges faced by the established PUL and CRN oligopoly, were faced by other non-dominant groups in Northern Ireland, who similarly find it is extremely difficult. Even well-established community groups like Chinese and Indian communities, face a similar set of issues as newcomers and operate on the margins of society. Non-dominant communities normally follow this pattern:

- <u>Obtain insider access to the communities in which they work</u>. Newcomers tend to remain invisible in NI society as they rarely themselves lay claims to the system, and as such purposefully distance themselves from political participation, activity and engagement with the local networks.
- <u>Resultantly, some newcomers try through multiple attempts to gain hearing from policymakers</u>. If unable to gain significant concessions from policymakers, withdraw to community work and work in siloed fashion.

We began our engagement with CSOs at a point where they were seeking to create opportunities for greater systematic planning of their activities, broaden their services and draw attention to issues that impact those they work with. However, as identified above, a cascading experience of difficult access to and eventual lack of support from communities, society as a whole and political representatives became focal points for our understanding of success in some groups, and frustration in others. What emerged out of our interactions with several CSOs

became a list of best practices that allowed most community organisations we have spoken to navigate case specific, yet systemically similar problems that they all faced. These have been condensed into the following recommendations:

Finding 1: Collaboration is Crucial

Fundamentally the work in civil society in NI on newcomers is isolating; in the context of the post-conflict society, most of the political and social energies are spent on ensuring the fragile peace between the different communities of NI. This meant that larger more established organisations, public civil service, and sources of funding were more concerned with the management of historical conflict, rather than on the development of support networks for newcomers across the province. A key lesson for organisations here in Northern Ireland is to build working relationships with other service providers in their region of operation, particularly if these have expertise that can be seen in addition to their own to allow better and more systematic funding applications and projects.

Finding 2: Work Across the Divide

Under these conditions it is crucial that organisations working on newcomers build alliances across all major communities in Northern Ireland, promoting inclusivity and ensuring that they gain access to locations where majority Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist (PUL) and Catholic, Republican and Nationalist (CRN), reside. Newcomer organisations are politically in a fragile place, often caught between two opposite social forces and must weave their way between often unexpressed preferences of the two Northern Ireland's competing communities. It is crucial that newcomer organisations remain a neutral force in NI, maintain good relations with the major political actors and are linked to civil society stakeholders.

Finding 3: Narrow Method of Work

Many organisations we have worked with become very quickly overwhelmed when trying to deliver different services than the ones they were initially set up. This is often resulting in personnel and volunteers quickly becoming overworked and at times, leaving the sector. Limiting organisations' area of scope to key expertise and providing referral service for those in need is crucial to maintaining the organisation's ability to continue and effectively manage human resources. Narrowing work helps plan and schedule delivery of service, as well as writing reports to ensure accountability for funding that they have been allocated.

What Can We Learn from Our Cases:

Considering our partners found the most useful parts of the programme was the peer knowledge exchange we have collated the most useful experiences in addressing the most common problems faced. We present three best practices that community groups have employed to navigate the problems outlined:

Working in "Green" & "Orange" Landscape: Jubilee Community Benefit Society (JCBS)

Founded in August 2017 and based in Larne the farm was established after 3.5 years of consultation. JCBS practices and promotes 'care farming' (farming as a therapeutic tool to help well-being), community-supported agriculture (CSA), and conservation education and engagement. In 2018/19 it raised £309,000 from 155 individuals and organisations to purchase and equip Jubilee Farm, the first community-owned farm in Northern Ireland since functions as a place of meeting, cooperation and promotion of sustainable community focused farming. The is specifically catered to refugees from diverse backgrounds and provides a space for them to meet, learn and practice activities that they might have used or learn new ones.

However, not all has gone smoothly for the JCBS, particularly in that surrounding communities and few local politicians in the area sparked controversy that the farm and the services should be orientated towards helping the local community and not 'foreigners'. JCBS recognised quickly that rhetoric like that would be problematic to their activities and sought to organise a series of local town hall meetings to take the sting from the growing discontent of the local community, the primary content of which:

- Dispel the rumours around the purpose of the farm that carried anti-newcomer connotations.
- JCBS was able to underline the growing positives of the community farm, particularly the sustainability of their farming methodology as well as the knowledge exchange that newcomers were able to provide. JCBS produces and sells stock and performs delivery, a tangible service to all communities.

Lessons Learned:

Not only is NI still a deeply divided society, it is also experiencing significant demographic changes, shifting the ethnic and racial make-up of the province. For any organisation that works with newcomers they should expect to deal with local disgruntlement from citizens of NI, particularly against the background of persistent negative discourse around refugees and asylum seekers. A clear action-plan emerges for organisations to follow the JCBS example.

- Get ahead of the message. The rhetoric around newcomers being as it is, will require a proactive approach by organisations who work with them. This is not advocacy, but crucially important messaging and interaction with local surroundings.
- Map the vectors in which the local community congregates most. Local community centres, places of worship and sporting and cultural event spaces.
- Contact local government counsellors to help with the above and outline the goals of the organisation.
- Post easily accessible principles of the organisation and mission on the website.
- Expect multiple presentations and visits to different locations in local communities to outline the organisation and its needs.
- Focus on the charitable aspect of work in messaging the local community, also consider the added positives that will come from economically and socially integrated newcomer communities.

- Create avenues for newcomers to interact with residents, offering chances for transparency and cooperative engagement in the work your organisation is pursuing to build bridges.

Becoming Professional: The JoinHer Network

JoinHer is an open and impartial Network led by an internationally diverse group of people, principally women, who have come together to change and influence women's lives for the better, focusing on a participatory and collaborative approach. JoinHer supports women and minorities in Northern Ireland to create collaborative partnerships to promote a variety of different entrepreneurial programmes that are supported through professional and qualified people. The second important track that JoinHer runs is the development of training that promotes the important, original and diverse cultural space of Northern Ireland. Through delivering diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) training and the organisation of public events like Black History Month, JoinHer is able to develop strategies that make the organisation more visible in NI.

The problem that the organisation has faced is the context of Northern Ireland is shared by many: viable funding for cultural organisations is focused in the direction of PUL and CRN communities and ethnic minority organisations are left struggling to find sustainable income. As a new organisation it is crucial that the sustainability of the organisation is achieved through other means.

Lessons Learned:

JoinHer has responded to the reality of Northern Ireland's civil society funding and has sought to professionalise and seek self-sustaining methods of funding, identifying a gap in the current public and private spheres in Northern Ireland that are currently, particularly in DEI compliance. JoinHer has developed a series of training modules that it is offering to private clients, taking advantage of their diversity and expertise to provide sustainable means of funding but also promote the organisations central aims. Clear recommendations emerged from JoinHer's attempts to navigate the limited funding space in Northern Ireland:

- Seek to professionalise the organisation. JoinHer established a board to cover a diverse set of skills, discuss the areas for innovation and employed a part-time admin staff to ensure key staff had time to deliver training.
- Reach out to potential collaborators who can take part in the organisation's mission as occasional contributors or consultants based on needs. This can be particularly well achieved through large conferences and public events. Through its public events JoinHer has steadily grown an audience interested in its work and which has brought increased knowledge of the organisation through word-of-mouth.

Workload & Burnout: Starling Collective

Starling Collective is a Belfast-based community group focused on empowering and supporting refugees and asylum seekers by providing support for well-being and housing. Started by individuals with 25+ years' experience working in the sector, Starling provides a person-centred

advice and support service for destitute asylum seekers in the form of access to accommodation, access to financial support, and advice on accessing healthcare services. The Steering Group that helps decide on programme and strategic decisions for Starling is made up of people from the refugee asylum community. This Steering Group also helps design and implement desired and necessary work, which ensures it is driven by the participants with whom the CSO works. Starling has in its short time managed to successfully obtain project-to-project funds to support newcomers and its collaborative approach to work has brought significant success. The newness of the organisation, the relative broadness of scope in their work trying to service needs of beneficiaries has increased the potential level of burnout.

Lessons Learned:

Starling Collective, considering the significant overload instituted several decisions to streamline their approach to work, particularly they reframed their approach and more narrowly defined their areas of intervention. They, through the creation of a board and implementation of an 18-month strategic workshop firmly outlined operating procedures in which they would limit their services to areas of and seeking to expand their specialities. Additionally, Starling also recruited an on-boarded sessional administrative worker who was able to lighten the workload, allowing other staff to better focus on needed service provision. The example of Starling Collective underlines the backdrop of a lack of organised approach to service provision to different newly arrived persons in NI, young organisations are in very real danger of being subsumed by the needs of the community. The prescription to this problem is to design a workable long and medium strategy to the work and case management.

- Developing staff, working with volunteers can be important means of developing 'breathing space' for other staff to provide key work that requires skills and expertise.
- Develop a staff on-boarding system for volunteer and sessional workers. A pathway for new staff is crucial to creating greater institutionalisation in the organisation.