

## Evaluation Report 2015-2018



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## Background

Association for Real Change (ARC) is committed to supporting people with a learning disability to lead meaningful lives. In Northern Ireland, ARC works with a range of cross-sector stakeholders to influence positive change in policy and practice.

Through talking to people, ARC NI became aware of the multitude of barriers that exist for people with a learning disability to engage in work, but furthermore, very rarely were people with a learning disability given the same right to explore the fundamental career-planning questions such as, 'What would I like to do, what skills do I have and what skills might be required for my dream job?'.

ARC NI received funding between 2015-2018 under the Northern Ireland European Social Fund 2014-2020 Programme for its project 'OPTIO' which aimed to support groups of people with a learning disability to explore their skills and desires for work, to increase their opportunity of future employment. ARC NI stated it would:

- Engage a total of 94 people in a 9-week training course, with each session lasting approximately four hours (Stage 1); and
- Engage a total of 80 people in a 12-week workshop, with each session lasting approximately four hours, culminating in a one-day pop up Enterprise Challenge (Stage 2)
- Support 64 people to gain a qualification

One to one support, planning and reviews meetings were also offered at the start; mid; and end of project points to each participant.

## What did we do?

ARC NI introduced the OPTIO project to its membership which consists of 41 cross-sector learning disability service providers through email shots and in secondary meetings, advertising the opportunity of a facilitated group. Information leaflets were also posted on the ARC NI website and Community NI, the web portal for the community/voluntary sector.

When a service provider confirmed their interest, the OPTIO Coordinator met with potential participants within the provider's service and explained what OPTIO was, the required time commitments and what participants might get out of engaging. The individuals then confirmed if they wished to take part, completing forms required by the project.

Stage One of the project was delivered, offering participants the opportunity of engaging in OCN accredited units namely, Promoting Self-Improvement; & Skills in Customer Service. This was the learning and exploratory element of the project, allowing groups over nine weekly sessions to develop their confidence and knowledge in key areas relating to enterprise.

Following completion, the group then paused, reflected on their achievements and documented their aspirations for 'next steps towards employability' in an individual training

plan. This was facilitated through 1:1 dialogue by the OPTIO Coordinator with each individual and their support worker. At this point, participants were also asked if they wish to continue to Stage 2 of the project.

Stage 2 offered individuals over 12 weekly sessions the opportunity to work collectively as a team, designing and implementing in practice the skills developed through Stage 1 and culminating in a one-day pop up enterprise challenge. The OCN Unit 'Taking Part in an Enterprise' was also offered to participants. ARC NI partnered with East Belfast Enterprise who co-delivered tailored sessions for each group, offering advice, guidance and support to participants in executing their enterprise.

The 13<sup>th</sup> week was the pop up enterprise challenge. ARC provided a kick start loan to each group with the agreement that it would be paid back from any profit made. Each group would be notified of any surplus profits with individual participants voting to decide if the money was reinvested back into their continued enterprise, or if funds should be equally split across participants in the form of a one-off payment. All decisions were recorded.

Individual participants concluded their engagement with the project in a 1:1 meeting with their support worker and facilitated by the OPTIO Coordinator to revisit their training plan and document their desired next steps.

Throughout the project a range of monitoring and evaluation tools were implemented, to measure the impact of OPTIO on a participant. Some of the tools were self-assessments and others were based on staff observations. Five particular soft skills were identified as relevant and mapped per participant per session to document progression. These were Aspiration; Participation; Confidence; Listening; and Team Work, with each being scored out of a maximum of ten.

### **What was achieved – immediate indicators?**

Eight groups were facilitated, registering a total of 92 participants in the following services:

- Orchardville TRC (BHSCT), Belfast
- Livability (formerly Prospects), Newry
- Edgcumbe Day Centre (BHSCT), Belfast
- Glencraig Camphill; Holywood
- The Beeches, Aghalee
- Dromore Day Centre (WHSCT), Dromore
- Focus Club (BHSCT), Belfast
- Fresh Focus (WHSCT), Fermanagh

15 participants (16%) left the project early with the remaining 77 and completing both Stage 1 and 2 (84% retention rate). The breakdown over the three years is as follows:

2015/16 – 28 participants recruited with no early leaver

2016/17 - 23 participants recruited with 10 early leavers

2017/18 - 41 people recruited with 5 early leavers

A total of 61 participants achieved accredited OCN qualifications, specifically 33 participants achieved unit(s) at OCN Level 1; 28 participants achieved unit(s) at OCN Entry Level. The remaining 22 participants achieved a non-accredited certificate. ***Please note some early leavers achieved accredited OCN units***

Eight social enterprise businesses were developed, each achieving a profitable one-day pop up challenge. The total profit generated collectively by these new businesses totalled £1,335. Furthermore, all social enterprise businesses developed connections with their local peers that could be further nurtured for continued social enterprise activity with examples including the Kennedy Centre; Newry Market; Forest Side Shopping Centre; Bow Street Mall; Dromore Market; Erneside Shopping Centre; St. Johns Enterprise College. All profits from each group were voted by participants to be reinvested into their continued social entrepreneurial activity

Finally, whilst all participants who completed the project (77 people) developed a range of soft skills, we monitored five in particular namely a change in aspiration; participation; confidence; listening; and team work using a star diagram to evidence impact. 92% of the OPTIO participants progressed at least 5 points or more (>50% progress), over at least 3 different soft skill areas. This demonstrates the journey individuals travelled during the OPTIO project, where the concept of seeking employment proved too much at the beginning of the six months, to conclude with an increased self-belief by the participants of their ability to be able to offer something to the employment market.

Whilst it is too soon to report on all of the long-term impacts the OPTIO project enabled, initial review of 2015-2017 results would seem to suggest of the 51 participants, 51% have progressed, specifically;

- 9 have moved into further education
- 17 have moved into voluntary roles

### **Lessons Learnt**

Whilst this project focused on building the capacity of people with a range of learning disabilities, including complex needs, we had hoped that some participants would move into paid employment as a result. This did not happen immediately but has the potential to lead to employment opportunities in the future. From the 35 participants of 2017/2018 for example, 11 people are exploring future employment opportunities - two of these people hope to set up their own business. More encouraging is the positive commitment from all 35 participants to continue to grow the enterprise established through the OPTIO project – the potential of 4 self-financing businesses offering a service to their local community and providing meaningful and hopefully paid employment for the entrepreneurs if the development is sustainable.

Our reflections identified a number of challenges for reasons why this immediate progression into employment was less likely an option for the intended target audience for OPTIO. Firstly, our role was to parachute into an existing service provider, deliver a project of learning, pilot a pop up enterprise challenge and then exit, leaving each participant with

their documented career/choice plan. Progress in securing an employment opportunity was dependent on either the individual having capacity to self-progress, or the service provider's staff member to support. The purpose of the staffs' role was to provide care and support to a person with a learning disability.

Secondly, the majority of individuals who were supported by the project, are the furthest removed from the employment market and in reality, may never move into it due to the multitude of barriers they experience. That said, the project offered individuals, the opportunity to consider what an employed role would look like, the first time this question was posed for the majority of participants. The retention rate (84%), the qualification achievement rate (79%) and the evidence of soft skills developed as a result of the project therefore achieved the main aim.

Inspection at mid-point in the project proposed that a risk to an all-inclusive approach for any/all abilities to engage, could be the limiting progression of each individual participant. We felt unethical in applying any eligibility criteria and in response, strengthened the Scheme of Work relating to qualifications and differentiation being offered within each group. We also worked better in partnership with the service providers where the group was located, briefing and enabling the supporting staff to play an integral role within each session's delivery and set follow up work to be achieved in advance of the next session. This worked well with many participants achieving their first accredited course/unit.

That said many of the participants that were recruited onto the project had little desire to move into full time traditional employment. They were simply eager to be involved in a different project, growing their confidence and self-belief. This was ARC NI's vision of developing sound building blocks, however we acknowledge a more targeted approach in recruitment, reaching the more able learning disability population, may have achieved different results with this as a focus.

The number of sessions delivered throughout Stage 1 & 2 were designed largely around meeting the OCN learning outcomes of units offered, with a huge amount of flexibility built in by ARC NI and EBE, to enable each individual to achieve their best. Should the project have continued, ARC would adapt a different approach, exploring what the individual and the groups' aspiration was, before the programme began and tailored sessions accordingly. This may have produced different results, but is hard to be conclusive about.

## Success Stories

### 1. Personal Case Study

Liam is a young man with an abundance of energy and a zest for life. Liam has a multitude of skills, talents and strengths on top of an engaging and infectious personality.

Liam became involved in the OPTIO project through the **Fresh Focus** programme, which is an independent day care provision supported by the Western Health and Social Care Trust for adults with a learning disability. Fresh Focus empowers people through inclusion, integration, confidence and self-advocacy in the local community.

Liam has interests in so many things and to name a few these include, farming, working with natural products to make crafts, learning and IT skills.

Unsurprisingly, Liam excelled in all areas of the OPTIO Project and demonstrated his personal preferences for learning. Liam was quick to recognise his strengths and also actively contributed to identify skills that would create improved opportunities in the work place.



An example of this was during the mid-evaluation interview Liam asked for an increase in computer use, both to develop his skills and add to his learning of the subject matter. This became part of most sessions aiding with market research, exploring enterprise ideas and developing a business plan.

Liam relished role play activities to practice his customer service skills and making good first impressions through interviews to stretch his own skills. Liam's confidence grew taking presentations, written work and set up an enterprise in his stride.

While personal development was important to Liam, he also showed his willingness not only to work as part of a team but also to support other members to achieve their full potential. Liam is patient, shows empathy and very optimistic which has a positive outcome on others.

The end result of Lakeland Crafts enterprise was a 227% increase on the investment to start the business. Liam, along with this team of enthusiastic entrepreneurs are keen to develop this business and have had their first order placed the day after they launched their enterprise at the Erneside shopping Centre.

Liam has gained a level 1 OCN qualification and much more. Liam, on the final evaluation of the course, stated that he wanted to "work hard to make Lakeland Crafts a success" and also had an interest in starting a new career in Counselling. Liam wants to engage in further study to gain the skills necessary to support other people through difficult times – "when people are down I want to be there for them to pick them up again."

## 2. Group Case Study

The **FOCUS Club** is an outreach project for adults with a learning disability supported through the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust. The FOCUS Club promotes choice, self-advocacy and citizenship for all its members and provides a range of activities.

The FOCUS club had a commitment to trying new things, building skills, taking part in the community and creating new meaningful opportunities which fitted perfectly with the overall aims of the OPTIO project.



The Focus Clubs positivity, energy and motivation created the perfect environment to engage on a journey of self-discovery in terms of skills, ambitions and possibilities. Each participant engaged in a way that made them comfortably challenged to reach their individual potential and growing confidence, participation, self-belief, courage, leadership and self-determination were witnessed as a part of the journey.

9 participants started the OPTIO project and maintained a 100% retention through the duration of the project. The OPTIO Project provided flexible support to address the diversity of skills and knowledge of the participants.

2 participants achieved a Level 1 Qualification

2 participants achieved an Entry Level Qualification

5 participants achieved a non-accredited Certificate

3 participants are currently exploring future employment as a direct result of the project.

In addition to this great achievement the FOCUS Club have established their enterprise “The FOCUS Factory”. The initial investment resulted in a 116% profit which has been reinvested into the enterprise and a business plan is already in development for the coming year. This plan includes the organisation of a local community event and two further enterprise events all of which will generate money, result in community engagement, develop partnerships with local and regional businesses and further enhance the skills, knowledge and opportunities of the entrepreneurs.

The support from the Focus club staff was invaluable was essential during the project and continues to be indispensable for the future development of the work started. Staff feedback stated, *“The whole experience was a fantastic confidence booster for members. It has opened up new opportunities and given them the confidence to think outside the box.”*

### 3. Enterprise Partnership

**Camphill Community Glencraig** welcomed the opportunity of engaging in the OPTIO project as they hoped to build on existing product development and develop a social enterprise.

Developing their enterprise ideas through OPTIO sessions, the group of seven adults with a learning disability called their social enterprise Loughshore Crafty Creations, designed their brand, invested in business cards and identified their chosen products to make and distribute, including hand crafted decorative mirrors, bird balls and perishable goods.

Through discussion supported by East Belfast Enterprise, they decided to have two strands of sales, upsell to local shops (business to business) securing advanced orders; and a pop up stand within a public setting. Forestside Shopping Centre was approached and offered the social enterprise two stalls on a set date in March 2017.

The results proved phenomenal with an achieved net profit totalling £275.54. Participants developed confidence in facilitating meetings with local business and pitching their products, securing both deals and receiving constructive feedback as entrepreneurs' to improve their business to business pitching skills. Loughshore Crafty Creations also thoroughly enjoyed selling to the public directly at Forestside and felt a real sense of community integration.



Following their enterprise challenge, Loughshore Crafty Creations were offered the opportunity of a stall the Balmoral Show in May 2017 which they gladly accepted, continuing their social enterprise activity.

Anna Picmanova, Workshop Coordinator of Camphill Community Glencraig said “The OPTIO Project helped not only the participants develop as credible entrepreneurs' both as individuals and a team, but also helped the staff at Glencraig support the development of a sustainable social enterprise.”