

## Building urban ecosystems for lifelong learning Good Practice Guide – Dublin, Ireland

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## **IO5 Good Practice Report**

### **Example of good practice: Building a collaborative learning environment**

#### **Platform “Building Restorative Communities in Dublin”**

##### **Building a Collaborative Learning Environment**

Nexus has been working within the North East Inner City (NEIC) of Dublin with a range of community based and youth work organisations and services since the 1990s. Over the course of this time, Nexus has developed strong relationships and important insights into the nature of the challenges facing community members. Many of these challenges are linked to the long term experience of social and economic disadvantage, marginalization and urban decay.

One of these partner organisations is Belvedere Youth Service (BYC). BYC has worked with young people and the wider community of Dublin’s NEIC for over 100 years. BYC has recently accessed funding that is allowing it to transform the organisation into a restorative practice (RP) hub. This ambitious programme is based on the idea that it will build new and refresh existing relationships with academic partners, community members, volunteers, corporate partners and other youth services to build a restorative community within the NEIC.

This restorative practice approach is closely linked to the key themes of connected learning, in that the methodology assumes that relationships can be built and secured through peer mediation and shared interests and purposes. The need for a more connected community network is a core principle of the overall programme, underpinned by a need to promote informal learning opportunities among community members. The programme of work is supported by a key academic partner, the National College of Ireland. Their commitment to the community is directly linked to promoting restorative practices, documenting and sharing the results as they emerge.

(Further detailed information on restorative practice and community development can be found in the scenario building report IO3)

The development of the online platform was targeted at supporting this programme of work. This has involved a range of new approaches and working methods, whereby BYC and its partners are working together to:

- Train and upskill workers
- Open up new channels of communication between local organisations
- Provide new skills and opportunities to young people and their families
- Develop volunteering programmes
- Support sports development and coaching
- Promote community arts initiatives
- Link funders to their projects
- Create community noticeboard

Key within all this effort has been the importance of collaboration, informal learning and networks.

This is where we sought to bring the potential of the online platform, in supporting the development of a collaborative learning environment.

##### **Building a design team**

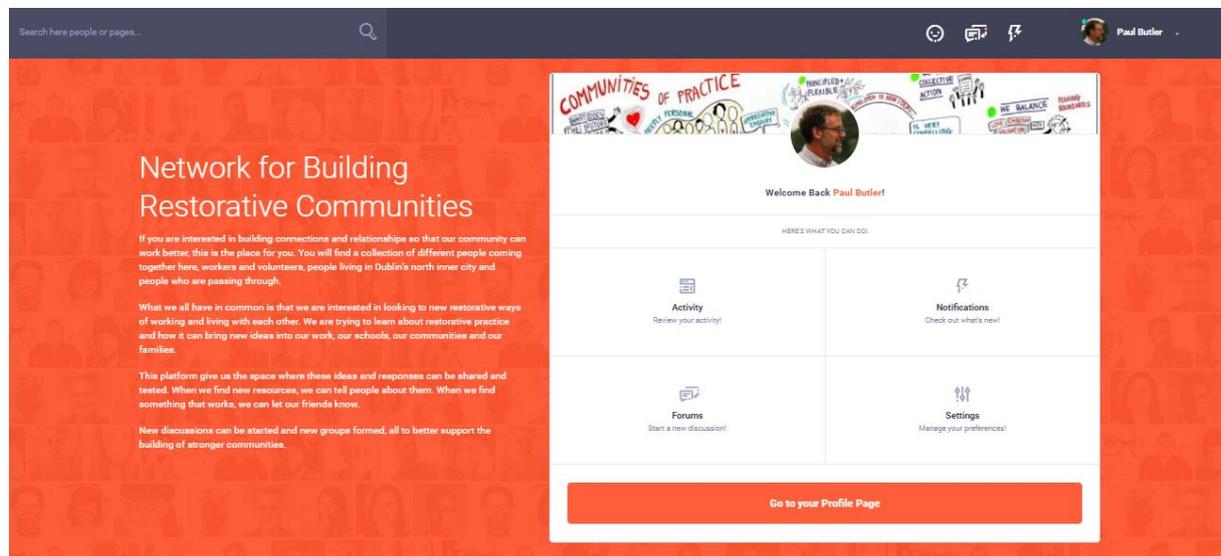
Initially, we put together a design team that drew on the specialist skills from the key partner organisations. Therefore, we brought together a group of youth workers, trainers and facilitators all

working within the community and central to the restorative practice project. By ensuring that the team had representatives from youth services, academia and research sectors, we guaranteed that we had the requisite skills and also the buy in from the organisations to ensure that the design process would bring everyone along through each step, from the naming of the platform, development of the specifications, through to its roll out with groups and community members.

In looking to highlight some of the means by which that we ensured that learning environment was built in a collaborative manner, this document looks to a number of different approaches that were used by the design team and in turn by user groups.

## Naming the platform

In order to develop a name that would have meaning for users, we carried out a word cloud exercise within our design team and each member brought it back to their organisations to validate the key themes that we were trying to get across, namely that the focus was that we were dealing with restorative practices, applying a community-wide approach and that we were working to build an informal network of partners.



The final name for the platform was agreed as a “Network for Building Restorative Communities”. Within the explanatory text, we highlighted that we were looking at the area of Dublin’s north inner city, but we were not excluding any users from outside and that our key aim was that we would create an open space where learning can take place, leading to relationships being built and cemented.

## Development of the Specifications

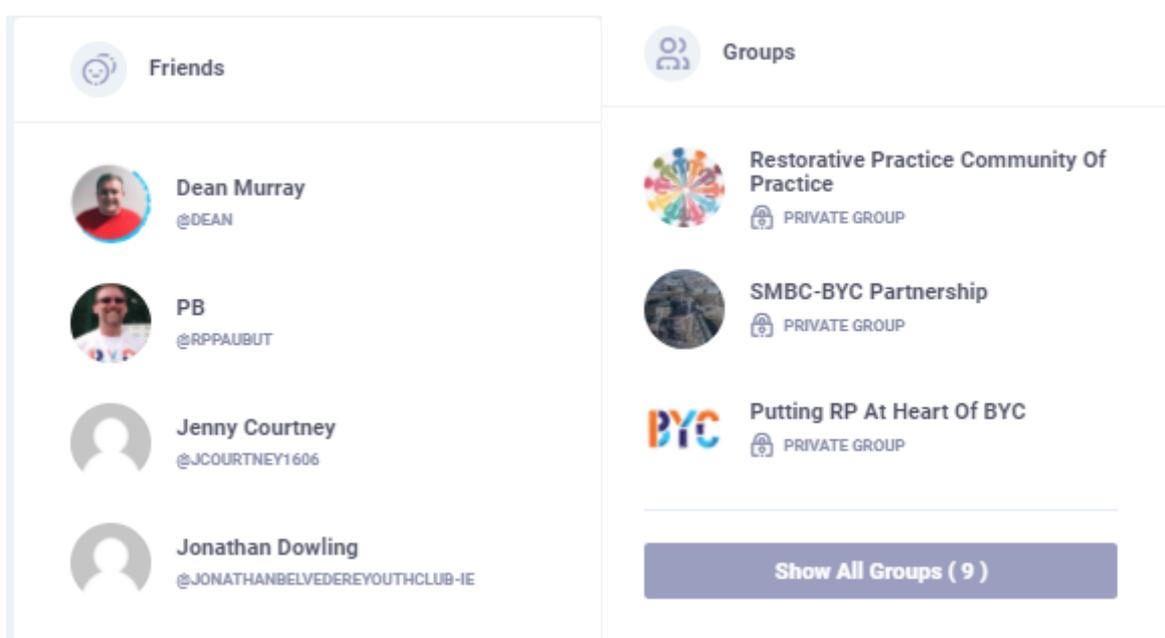
As a design team, we knew that the platform had to underpin the key working methods that would be used during the implementation of the RP Hub programme.

In terms of allowing for people to create a profile, we felt that we would add few mandatory elements at the initial phase to ensure that we did not put off potential users. Feedback from our organisations backed this position. This meant that as a user registered, they were only asked a minimal number of questions. They could then add more information about themselves and their interests as they joined groups or interest to them, for example, one youth worker was specifically interested in football coaching and volunteering. He was able to help set up this group within the testing phase of the platform. His feedback validated the design approach taken and highlighted that the minimal level of information required at the initial registration worked better.

## User testing

Once the first iteration of the platform was ready, the design team were able to bring the platform back to their organisations and test the functionality with their colleagues. Any technical issues were reported back to the software developers and in some instances, new features were added.

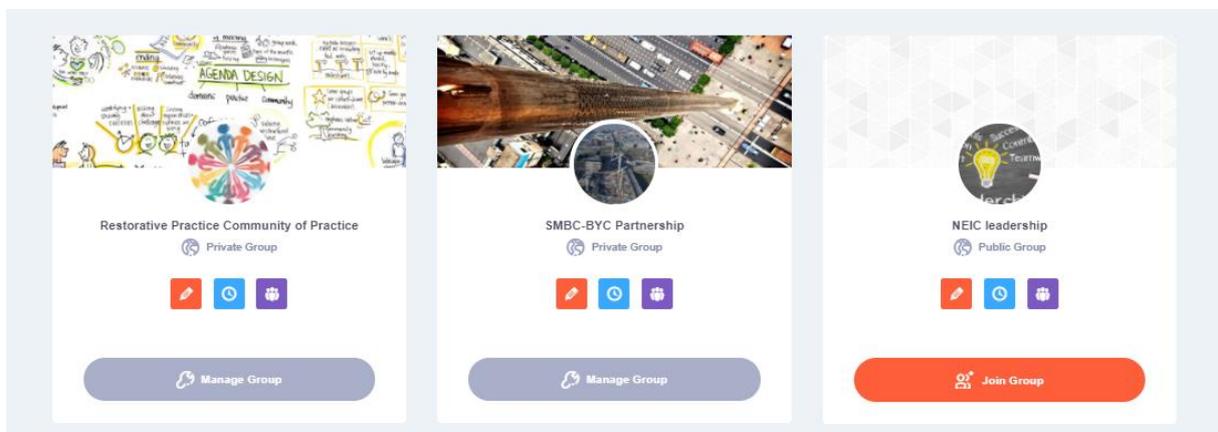
As the second and third iterations were also tested with the same groups, a further level of buy in was developed. A workshop was organised to demonstrate the final version with these groups and the new features were welcomed.



At this point the test group highlighted the importance of being able to create new friends within the platform and welcomed the profile page that showed the friends and groups that had been engaged.

## Promoting the platform

The design team took on the role initially as promoters of the platform. This allowed the team to develop and test their own facilitation skills. When they were present at a range of community events, some linked to restorative practice initiatives, the platform was presented and community members were invited to join.



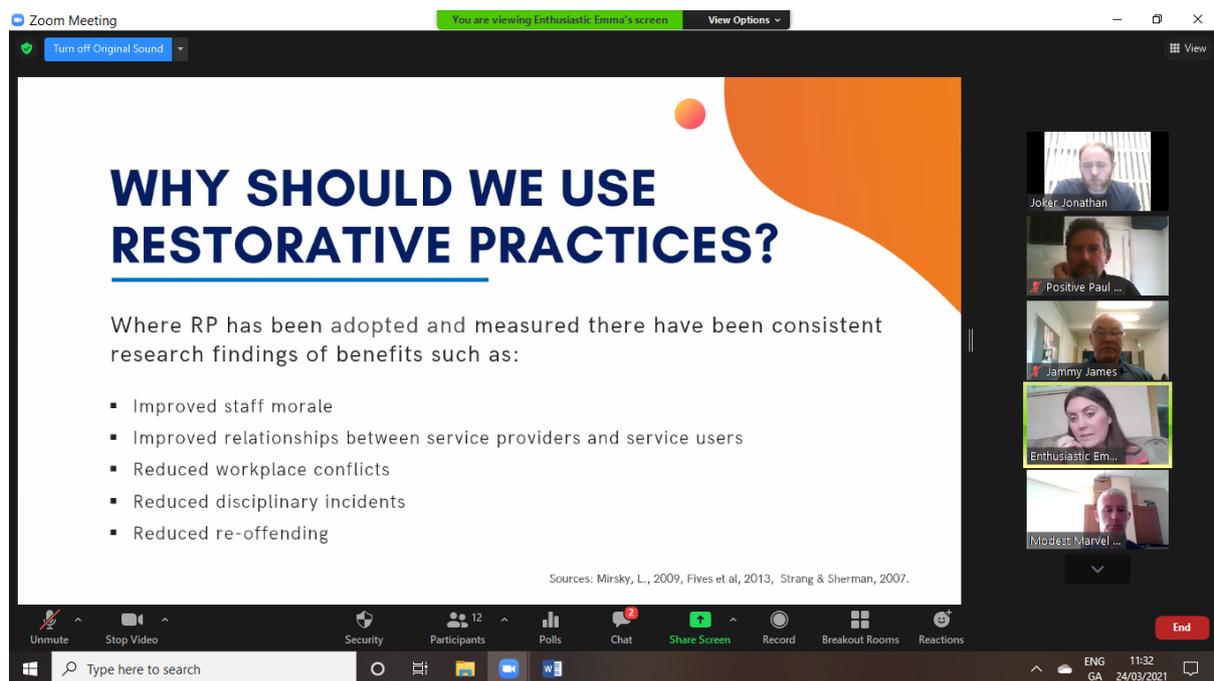
New groups were established based on common interests. For example, a community or practice that meets monthly began to make use of the platform as a means of sharing content. A group of

community leaders were also able to use the platform to gather resources and share research material that was assisting their local campaigns. A key corporate funder was also able to work with their supported organisations to access results and feedback on a regular basis.

A local sporting event that brought together the network participants (including youth services, university, sponsors and other local volunteers) was documented and the trophy presentation was recorded and shared within the platform.

### **Dissemination of learning with partners**

The platform was also presented at a dedicated Dublin Learning City Festival event, highlighting the importance of restorative practices in the building new communities and demonstrating how the platform has assisted these outcomes.



Representatives from leadership positions within the community attended this session, allowing for discussion by these stakeholders about the role of restorative practice within their organisations and the extent to which the platform can be used to support this roll out.

### **Transfer to other groups**

The potential for the platform to be extended to other groups will be further explored through 2021 and 2022 as the RP Programme is expanded.

The funding bodies in the local community are interested in using the platform in a manner by which beneficiaries (young people, their families, youth workers, volunteers) can create video testimonials of their engagement with the RP programme and present these testimonials within the platform where these can be shared widely with other partners.

As the programme of work moves beyond the community of the north inner city of Dublin, there will also be the potential to work with youth organisations and community arts organisations operating at a national level.

The academic partners have also indicated that they would like to be able to share their participation within the programme with a wider audience and have suggested that they would like the platform to be demonstrated at their annual conference in October 2021.

**Further improvements**

Many users have indicated that they would like to be able to use the platform on their smart phones. While the design team and facilitators have explained that the system is not ready to be used in this manner, this may be a feature that could be explored over time.