

Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland **A Cross Border Approach to Meeting Carers' Needs**

In Spring 2005, the Meriden Programme was asked to participate in an innovative programme for carers from both sides of the border in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Programme is being run under the auspices of a group called 'CAWT' (Co-operation and Working Together). This group works to achieve health gain and social well-being in border areas. The current cross border Programme for carers is funded by the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, and aims to bring together both professionals and carers from both sides of the border together to learn from each other and build constructive partnerships. The project covers the Health Service Executive areas of the north western regions of Sligo Town, North Sligo, South Donegal, North Leitrim and West Cavan in the Republic of Ireland and the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust areas of North and South Fermanagh in Northern Ireland.

The primary aim of the Programme is to provide carers of people with mental health problems with information, knowledge, skills and confidence to deal more effectively with their role, and to improve the quality of life for both carers and people with mental health problems. This is achieved through running eleven session Carer Support Programmes covering topics such as education and information-sharing about mental health problems, communication strategies, problem solving techniques, how to deal with crises and relapse management, concepts of recovery and hope, and encouraging carers to look after their own health and well-being.

A second aim of the Programme is to bring carers together from the two sides of the border in Ireland – people who would not normally meet and work together. The basis of the Programme is that professionals and carers from both sides of the border would jointly run the Carers Support Programmes.

The Meriden Programme was approached and asked to design the training programme for carers including the development of a manual describing the eleven week programme in detail. The modules on the Programme include:

- Introduction – the experience of mental health problems in a family
- Experiences of caring
- Education and information sharing – diagnosis and treatments
- Communicating in families
- Communicating with professionals
- Problem solving
- Dealing with crisis and relapse management
- Recovery and hope
- Taking care of your own health

The second role we undertook was to provide the initial training for a group of carers and professionals drawn from both sides of the border who would deliver the eleven week support programmes to further carers. The training for trainers took place in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, at the beginning of June 2005. Thirteen extremely interested carers and professionals came together and worked exceedingly hard for a three-day period in familiarising themselves with the content of the training manual. The programme is on a tight time schedule dictated by the European Union, and so the demands placed on participants were very high. There was a wonderful atmosphere of participation and trust right from the first morning of the course. The overriding feeling was that services for carers on both sides of the border were poorly developed and both professionals and carers wanted to do what they could to bring about a change in this situation. The Meriden Team consisted of myself, Steven Cox and Peter Woodhams, the carer who chairs the Meriden Steering Group. One of the conditions of the Programme all the way through is that carers are involved as trainers in the programme.

The plan following the training was that the first cross border carers' support group would take place beginning in June 2005. Planning for this brought up interesting issues about the on-going political situation in Northern Ireland. While things have obviously improved dramatically, there are still issues that interfere with initiatives such as this. One example was that the support groups had to be suspended during the marching season in Northern Ireland, as carers would not go out to attend groups at night during this period. Issues such as this serve as a reminder that there is still some work to do in developing true reconciliation among the different groups in Northern Ireland.

Other issues arose on the programme such as the difference between services on both sides of the border. It became clear that, while services were not fully developed for carers on either side of the border, they were a lot more advanced in Northern Ireland than in the Republic of Ireland. This gave rise to quite complex issues for the professionals involved on the course in terms of recognising that they were working in a service which was not providing evidence based care as yet, and clearly was not fully meeting the needs of those with serious mental health problems.

All in all, the experience was extremely positive. I was left with an overriding sense of admiration for the people who were trying to bring about change in difficult circumstances. As I'm writing this, the first cross border group has already had a couple of sessions, and will continue into the autumn. The programme is being fully evaluated, and I will provide updates in the December edition of the newsletter as to how the programme is progressing.

Gráinne Fadden

Delivering Training as a Carer on the Team

I was privileged to be a member of the Meriden Training team (along with Dr Gráinne Fadden and Steven Cox) which was commissioned to deliver the training Programme which Gráinne has described above.

The concept was to deliver a training programme based on the Meriden approach to training trainers in order to give the delegates the skills and knowledge to be able to deliver a Carer Education Programme, which had been developed by Gráinne and the Meriden team as part of the commission. The fact that this carer education programme was then to be rolled out by the delegates to carers on both sides of the border was the really rewarding part of the project to me and the other members of the team as it was clear that no such carer education opportunities had been offered to carers hitherto on either side of the border.

The course went really well with each of the 13 delegates (including 5 carers), fully participating in all the component parts of the course. As a result we were satisfied that by the end of the course that the delegates had developed the necessary skills and knowledge (supplemented by their own on-going work) to be able to co-facilitate the devolved Caring for Carers Programme.

Being a member of the team delivering the training was for me both challenging and emotionally demanding, but working with the group as a whole and the carers in particular was highly rewarding. It was interesting to hear the delegates' comments at the conclusion of the course that they really valued the different inputs of the training team recognising the professionalism and expert knowledge of Gráinne, the vitality, humour and enthusiasm of Steven and the contribution I was able to make as a carer. In particular the delegates commented on how well we had worked as a team (as a model of partnership working) and they were impressed with the extent of the carer contribution to the training. It was an additional bonus to me that as part of the 'winding down' process after the course, I was able to

experience some of the views, bars and restaurants of Sligo on the delightful west coast of Ireland!!

The development by Meriden of this Carer Education Programme is an innovation that may prove to be of significant interest to other localities who are seeking to develop the education and support services they offer to carers. A programme such as this goes a long way towards meeting the needs of carers.

**Peter Woodhams – Carer
Chair – Meriden Advisory Group**