



The Journey So Far Early Intervention

*Paper 3: Early Insights from
The Atlantic Philanthropies Experience*

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The Journey So Far Towards Early Intervention in Northern Ireland

The Atlantic Philanthropies is an international foundation which over the last 34 years has made grants totalling \$8bn around the world. Atlantic's global objectives have been to challenge destructive and discriminatory practices and tackle the root causes of inequity, especially where systemic barriers were holding people back unfairly¹.

Over the 2004-15 period, Atlantic delivered a global programme which focused on children and young people. In Northern Ireland, this programme aimed to improve outcomes for children by shifting thinking towards early intervention and the prevention of problems. That work had far reaching effects – as an independent evaluation² pointed out, the programme was “*a substantial catalyst in encouraging government investment in evidence-based prevention and early intervention programmes, promoting evidence-based practice amongst service providers and engaging the academic sector in policy-oriented research*”. Building on that momentum, one of Atlantic's final grants in Northern Ireland has established a partnership with the NI government to deliver the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP) which will run over the 2015-19 period.

This paper captures the journey of Atlantic and its grantees towards early intervention in Northern Ireland, how the EITP came about and what it is hoped will be achieved. It is the first of a series of publications which will track the continuing journey out to 2019.

¹ <http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/our-story>

² The Atlantic Philanthropies' Disadvantaged Children and Youth Program: Overview of Program Evaluation Findings. Final Report 2009. Mathematica Policy Research Inc;

The Early Days

Atlantic had been making grants in Northern Ireland (NI) throughout the 90s, including support for integrated education, peace building and investment in local universities. However, as the millennium celebrations came and went, Atlantic was making several key global decisions – firstly it was going to become a limited life foundation, making its final grants by 2016 and ceasing all operations by 2020. Secondly, it was going to abandon its policy of strict anonymity, as it was felt that this would help to increase its strategic impact. Thirdly, it decided to re-arrange its grant-making into four global programmes and adopt longer-term, pro-active strategies within each.

One of those programmes targeted disadvantaged children and young people, and it would make grants in the US, Bermuda, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (RoI). Its first strategic plan was developed to cover the 2004-10 period and it specified common objectives for both NI and RoI, (although related spend and decision-making would flow separately through Atlantic’s Belfast and Dublin teams).

The programme strategy for NI and RoI was designed around a regional environment where more than a quarter of all children were living in poverty, more than half of pupils from poorer backgrounds were leaving school with few or no qualifications, and nursery school provision levels were amongst the lowest in Europe. In addition, there were high levels of juvenile crime, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, referral to care, social marginalisation, poor health outcomes and low school attendance levels - an inter-generational cycle of poverty, compounded in Northern Ireland by the legacy effects from 30 years of violent civil conflict.

Atlantic's Children and Young People's Programme

At that point, thought leaders in the fields of social work and economics were beginning to promote the concept of prevention and early intervention. The vast majority of social interventions around the world targeted families and children *after* they had run into serious problems and tried to mitigate the knock on social effects. A range of academics were making the case that better outcomes and greater efficiency could be achieved if public administrations targeted their resources at earlier intervention with families allowing potential problems to be *prevented* in the first place, rather than allowing them to happen and then tackle their effects.

However, the governments in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland had little experience of early intervention approaches and had no infra-structure that would allow the design, testing and roll out of such significant practice and policy shifts. Atlantic decided that with the relatively small populations on the island of Ireland and centralised state decision-making structures, it could champion early intervention and secure a high return on investment both in terms of children's outcomes and permanently shifting public policy thinking.

Atlantic's Children's Programme set three objectives for NI and RoI over 2004-10:

- ▶ to improve standards and practices;
- ▶ to strengthen the child and youth serving field;
- ▶ to give voice to children's needs.

All of these objectives were approached from a broad prevention and early intervention perspective and grants were made across three main levels. Most of the investment went into supporting "front-line" demonstration projects that could provide evidence of the fundamental difference that prevention and early intervention could make in the lives of families and children.

The second level of grant-making tackled a skill shortage in terms of gathering and deploying robust evidence of effectiveness. In essence, neither policy makers nor local academic institutions knew much about accurately assessing which forms of intervention worked best and which aspects would have the greatest positive effect if rolled out more widely in NI and RoI – especially in terms of quantitative methodologies.

The third level of grant-making focused on widely disseminating research and evaluation findings from the demonstration projects interventions, engaging with government and wider stakeholder groups to build momentum for change.

Over a decade, the programme provided more than \$200m of grants across NI & RoI, funding more than 50 large scale demonstration projects. Some of those tested out specific early intervention models, whilst others targeted discrete geographic areas and piloted comprehensive, integrated suites of early intervention across them. In NI & RoI, more than 100,000 children and young people, 24,000 parents/caregivers and 4,000 professionals benefited directly from the programme, and that number has since been multiplied significantly by resultant shifts in mainstream policy and practice.

The programme also supported the establishment of Expert Advisory Committees which brought together international academic and technical experts and plugged them directly into the programme as a sounding board around intervention design, existing evidence, evaluation and dissemination of learning. Atlantic also made direct grants to universities in both NI & RoI so that they could build up local expertise in undertaking robust quantitative evaluations of family support interventions. Amongst other evaluation studies, this led to more than 20 randomised control trials (RCTs) being undertaken across the programme - a highly effective quantitative approach to assessing intervention effect. Atlantic also established a non-profit Centre for Effective Services which operates on a cross-border basis connecting policy, practice and research to improve public services. Overall, this amounted to a sizeable new infra-structure around strategic learning in both NI and RoI, and a 2009 independent evaluation of the programme noted that “no other society has seen the scale of testing of children’s services that Atlantic initiated and supported on the island of Ireland”.

Atlantic also established prevention and early intervention networks in NI and in RoI. These brought together Atlantic grantees, experts, evaluators and policy makers in various formats, allowing dissemination and discussion of lessons being learned from the programme. These forums provided a channel for regularly engaging with key decision-makers within government and those responsible for relevant policy reform, as well as sharing learning between the grantees. The rigorous testing of intervention models not only allowed more credible advocacy when engaging government within these networks, it has also allowed some grantees to go on to market the models and secure their replication internationally.

Lessons Learned

Atlantic's grantees had accomplished a lot and had generated a lot of learning. Learning about what works for children, young people and families on the island of Ireland. Learning about the value of evidence-based practice. Learning about how to work with government and learning about how to work constructively across sectors. Atlantic was already putting a lot of time and resource into disseminating and leveraging that learning, but longer-term, strategic questions still remained.

The NI and RoI governments had both engaged with Atlantic's work, but to varying degrees and by 2012, neither had fundamentally shifted their intervention planning towards prevention and early intervention. Although supportive aspects were included in respective national children's strategies, state investment in and tangible movement towards early intervention was still relatively limited. The RoI government had co-funded three large scale initiatives with Atlantic which targeted disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Dublin, and one comparable neighbourhood initiative was being co-funded by the NI government.

Atlantic was still pushing towards a tipping point where the local benefits of high quality early intervention would be fully evident and become self-reinforcing. However, Atlantic's own lifespan was now coming to an end – there were only three years left in which to make grants in NI & RoI, and although the foundation was looking for final opportunities to make big bets for big change, it still wasn't fully clear how best to achieve the systemic, transformational change towards early intervention that it had been pursuing.

Detailed discussions with NI and RoI governments and wider stakeholders ensued, and appropriate approaches were adopted on each side of the border. In Northern Ireland, the government was already trying to change the way it did business more fundamentally under its ‘Delivering Social Change’ (DSC) banner. It was already piloting various signature projects which were adopting new cross-agency, partnership-based approaches to policy and intervention design which prioritised innovation and outcome-focused thinking. In the Republic, Atlantic and the Irish government jointly funded the Area Based Childhood Programme to build on Atlantic’s previous work. (<http://bit.ly/2odxmvK>)

Atlantic’s Belfast team began to test the water around the DSC agenda and ultimately concluded that this was the best route to progress its prevention and early intervention work and secure systemic change. Importantly, this was not going to be a case of ‘paying’ government to roll out a specific set of Atlantic intervention models more widely – this was going to be a partnership in which Atlantic assisted the NI government in choosing its *own* range of high quality, evidence-based early interventions, and in doing so the process would embed the necessary skills, paradigms and dispositions deep within ‘the system’. When the Atlantic resource came to an end, the key components of NI’s public administration would then go on to instinctively apply early intervention thinking to all its relevant planning and decision-making. This partnership approach was ultimately to become the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP).

The Early Intervention Transformation Programme

Public budgets had come under pressure since the 2008 financial crash, and the scale of co-funding that Atlantic was potentially offering quickly moved the debate up to Ministerial level across the Northern Ireland Executive. At first there was a lot of caution amongst the politicians and senior officials. Their basic perception of Atlantic was that it wanted to import American-designed interventions on a wholesale and unaccountable basis, regardless of local context & priorities (and then leave the government to pick up the bill when Atlantic pulled out). Across 2012 it took quite a lot of work to assure government that Atlantic's motivations were very different – it wanted to support the devolved government in NI to deliver better outcomes over the long-term and the best way to do that was to help change how the government developed its *own*, locally-tailored policy and practice, (drawing on learning from elsewhere only when it was appropriate).

Of course, there was also a flip side to these discussions. If Atlantic was going to put money on the table, how much would government match it with, and which pots would it come from? How could Atlantic be confident that the government would not simply absorb its funds and keep on doing things the way it always had? The answer to the latter question lay partly in the proposed partnership governance of the initiative – Atlantic would have to be a continually active partner in oversight and decision-making. That would also be backed up by staged grant payments that were contingent upon compliance with, amongst other things, full engagement with Atlantic's own programme of independently funded research and evaluation activities.

The answer to the question about state funding sources became very important in terms of the EITP's ultimate form and function. Although the key central Department in early intervention terms was Health and Social Services, many others potentially had direct involvement – for example the Dept. of Education and Dept. of Justice. To get fundamental buy in to early intervention thinking and to ensure this wasn't just viewed as a 'bolt on' short-term project, it was important that the state funding didn't just come from central reserves. Eventually the EITP drew in funding from five different Departments' own mainstream budgets – i.e. they had to fit the EITP work in alongside everything else they did. This meant that they had genuine 'skin in the game' and each Department was motivated to stay meaningfully engaged to protect their Departmental interests. An additional contribution from government also came from central funds through the Delivering Social Change initiative. The funding was also centrally pooled before being allocated to specific EITP projects, which necessitated genuine joint development work and decision-making across Departments (and importantly, with Atlantic).

Overall Atlantic agreed to provide 40% of EITP's costs, with the rest coming from government. That funding split was a difficult one to decide upon from Atlantic's perspective. On the one hand, Atlantic did not want to be the majority funder, as it increased the risk of the work 'falling off the cliff' when Atlantic's money ran out. But on the other hand, Atlantic would not have enough influence if it pitched too low, neither in terms of being able to ensure that EITP got off the ground nor in terms of steering its implementation over the longer-term. The 40% contribution level was felt to represent the best balance of these considerations.

After much further negotiation, the EITP was eventually scoped out to run over the 2015-19 period with a total budget of £25m (£10m to come from Atlantic). It was grouped into four workstreams:

- 1) to equip all parents in Northern Ireland with the skills needed to give their child the best start in life;
- 2) to support families when problems arise, but before they require mainstream statutory engagement;
- 3) to positively address the impact of adversity on children;
- 4) to deliver early intervention capacity-building right across relevant public sector and care provision professions.

Over an 18-month period, out to the end of 2015, partner Departments and agencies were encouraged and provided with expert technical assistance to develop a range of early intervention proposals. These were brought to the EITP Board for consideration (which included representation from Atlantic and all the funding Departments), at which point three key scrutiny criteria were applied:

- How strong and compelling is the evidence base which underpins the proposal? Is it enough to make the targeted outcomes credible and achievable?
- How will existing mainstream systems be transformed through the proposed work?
- How credible is the plan to sustain the proposed work in terms of finance and wider resource beyond the lifespan of EITP?

These criteria lifted the scrutiny process above and beyond the confines of normal Departmental business cases and began to embed new ways of thinking across all the Departments that had key roles to play in prevention and early intervention.

Ultimately fifteen different projects were approved under EITP ranging from those which from the outset are fundamentally changing universal service provision right across Northern Ireland (e.g. ante-natal education and care), through to much more targeted pilot projects testing out promising models to break poverty cycles early in children's lives (e.g. providing family and employability supports to young parents serving custodial sentences).

Atlantic is still directly represented on multiple levels of the various EITP governance structures, monitoring progress and scrutinising outcome assessments arising from the projects. Atlantic is also commissioning a wide range of independent formative evaluations and strategic learning studies in and around EITP, the findings of will be fed back into the system to drive through and reinforce shifts in thinking about how deliver effective policy and practice.

Conclusion

Early intervention has come a long way in Northern Ireland over the last fifteen years. Atlantic has been pivotal in taking a fairly new policy concept and first of all scoping out its local potential, then driving through cross-sectoral momentum to the point of mainstream government buy in to the concept.

However, it is still relatively early days for the EITP – even the projects which were quickest out of the blocks have not yet reached their mid-term points. Indeed, the largest projects are only now coming into their full implementation phases.

Atlantic has worked hard to ensure that all the right pieces are in place to enable the EITP to live up to its full potential and deliver the scale of systemic change that it originally envisaged. But it is a very broad and complex programme which involves new ways of working and new relationships for all involved - friction has arisen along the way and more is surely yet to come. The work is also affected by the myriad external factors that crop up along the way – changes in government, changes in the wider public administration, changes in economic circumstance.

The EITP is still very much a live entity that will require Atlantic and its representatives to continue their active engagement in. They will have to keep driving through those fundamental shifts in thinking and ‘ways of doing business’ if Atlantic’s investment is to have the long-term influence that is desired. In the next paper of this series we will chart what has happened in the intervening period and how much closer we have moved to that over-arching goal.

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This is the third in a series of papers drawing out lessons and observations from The Atlantic Philanthropies partnership work with the NI Executive.