

Accord Northern Ireland Catholic Marriage Care Service

Company Limited by Guarantee

Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) *(continued)*

Year ended 31 March 2021

Structure, governance and management

Accord NI has centres across N. Ireland with its Regional Office based in Belfast. This year the company was fully operational with a central administration, account payment processes were effectively implemented and reviewed. In 2020/21, the company had 2 full time and 3 part-time employees, 56 volunteers and 6 in training. The Board of Trustees met on a quarterly basis and the day to day operations have been delegated to the regional director. Accord Northern Ireland CLG Catholic Marriage Care Service has 9 regional centres in Belfast, Derry, Armagh, Newry, Maghera, Omagh, Ballymena, Enniskillen and Downpatrick, an outreach centre, in Coleraine and a Regional Office in Belfast.

Objectives and activities

Accord is an agency of the Catholic Church providing a service to couples preparing for or seeking a deeper commitment within the Sacrament of Marriage. Accord's services are open to all regardless of faith, denomination or none. Services are provided, based on client need rather than ability to pay. In the marriage education programme we empower couples to explore and reflect on the essential elements of their marriage and the purpose and value of their choices within a committed relationship. Accord specialises in Inter-church marriage preparation and works with clergy from the other main denominations. Accord's post primary relationships and sexuality education service - 'Love Matters' - developed in partnership with the CCEA is under review. It is a programme for young people aged 11 to 16 years to help them develop safe and fulfilling relationships. Relationship counselling is provided for couples as well as individuals in a couple relationship in a caring and confidential manner.

People who benefit from our work are;

- Those whose ability to communicate in marriage is enhanced in marriage preparation;
- Those who learn through counselling to cope with, what on their own, would be over-whelming challenges in their relationships;
- Those who avail of the fertility and wellbeing service;
- The children, parents and teachers who benefit from the pioneering work in relationships and sexuality education in schools;
- Those who are helped through counselling to separate amicably and to minimize the consequential damage to their children.

Accord Northern Ireland Catholic Marriage Care Service

Company Limited by Guarantee

Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) *(continued)*

Year ended 31 March 2021

Objectives and activities *(continued)*

Accord's counselling service contributes in a very positive way to the happiness and well-being of many children, often very significantly, when their parents seek help in order to resolve their relationship difficulties. This is even more critical for children living in situations of domestic violence or abuse. The family is necessary for the stability of society as a unit in which children, the future generation, are nurtured, cared for and reared into adulthood. The reaction of parents to each other in their home environment and the example children see set by them shapes and moulds to a great degree the patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviour of young people. The family greatly contributes to and influences personality development for children. As they grow, children, draw into themselves attitudes and styles of life from around those persons living close to them, they mirror the behaviour of others and frequently act it out in their own lives. It follows from this that emotionally unhealthy or dysfunctional families find the task of rearing and enabling children to be balanced and happy is quite challenging and difficult. Because of the importance of the family for the life and well-being of society it is essential that Accord continues to work to provide the necessary supports to strengthen marriage and the family.

Accord's work falls within activities mandated by the Department of Health Family and Children's Policy Directorate. In addition, the aims of the organisation dovetail with and compliment the Government's Families Matter - Supporting Families in Northern Ireland (2008). This strategy supports the aims and objectives of another strategy - 'Our Children and Young People, Our Pledge' - which sets out the vision for improving support for families and children.

With 11 locations throughout Northern Ireland, Accord NI strives to be as accessible as possible and to reach out to those most marginalised in our society. The vast majority of people who avail from our services could not afford counselling within the private sector. An additional direct benefit is that helping families to remain together reduces the cost to the exchequer.

Public Benefit

The trustees of Accord (NI) have fully complied with the Public Benefit requirements as set out in the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland's statutory guidance on public benefit. The main purpose of Accord (NI) is to support the family and relationships and they do this by providing marriage and relationship counselling and facilitating pre marriage courses throughout Northern Ireland.

Strategic report

The following sections for achievements and performance, financial review and plans for future periods form the strategic report of the charity.

Accord Northern Ireland Catholic Marriage Care Service

Company Limited by Guarantee

Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) *(continued)*

Year ended 31 March 2021

Achievements and performance

The economic hardship and social constraints imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic changed life for everyone and caused significant distress to marriages, relationships and families. Many couples had to deal with illness and loss, the uncertainty of employment, home-schooling and unprecedented levels of stress and pressure. To help alleviate distress, a Covid-19 Emergency Couples Support Helpline became operational, manned by volunteer, accredited counsellors. This proved to be a lifeline for people during lockdown and the service was available Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm. This Support Helpline responded to 597 calls from individuals and couples experiencing difficulties in their relationships. Accord NI responded in the following ways:

For individuals living in fear at home, Accord NI counsellors were able to identify and handle domestic abuse. In such situations the priority is the safety of the fearful person and their children. Accord supported individuals to develop a safety plan and advised on specialist crisis support contact numbers. •

Accord NI advised that, in general, couples should try and keep the lines of communication open with their spouse/partner, be conscious of how they raise issues with their spouse/partner, and be willing to look at themselves and their behaviour in addition to their spouse/ partner's shortcomings.

When permitted and in compliance with Government health advice and guidance, Accord NI provided 861 face-to-face counselling hours. The organisation, during the time of increased restrictions, took steps to minimise the amount of its staff and volunteers that needed to be physically in offices. The Department of Health issued a letter to Accord counsellors confirming that they were carrying out an essential service as stipulated by the Department of Health NI; 'as a voluntary registered charity part-funded by DOH Accord provides counselling to couples and individuals experiencing relationship difficulties including domestic abuse. This work is especially needed in this unprecedented time of stress and anxiety for couples and families. We are particularly aware that the quality of couples' relationships is likely to deteriorate during this time with an increased likelihood that children will be exposed to unsafe behaviour in the home.'

Accord Northern Ireland Catholic Marriage Care Service

Company Limited by Guarantee

Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) *(continued)*

Year ended 31 March 2021

Achievements and performance *(continued)*

Accord NI embarked on a progressive programme to train counsellors in online couple counselling and provide a safe and ethical internet platform for delivery of this service, in addition to face-to-face counselling, when possible. Protocols for online counselling, and in preparation for the reopening of face-to-face counselling, were developed and all counsellors and administrators were trained to ensure public health guidelines were adhered to. This was also a time when many couples were suffering the disappointment of having to postpone their weddings. Accord Marriage Education Facilitators offered support and delivered marriage preparation to 905 couples. An adapted Virtual Interactive Marriage Preparation course was developed for delivery by zoom conferencing and facilitators enthusiastically engaged in the necessary training. Peer Support Groups have been established and extra administration has been put in place to accommodate hosting of courses. Every effort was made to accommodate couples marrying up to March 2021 who were unable to access a face-to-face course. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for counsellors, and facilitators was provided in the following areas; the adapted Virtual Interactive Marriage Preparation Programme, Couples & Relationships Telephone Support and Online Counselling. Research commissioned by Accord NI Catholic Marriage Care Service to analyse the current provision for Relationships and Sexuality Education in Catholic post-primary schools in the Northern Dioceses of Ireland, was submitted in a report in April 2020. Accord NI had three principal aims in commissioning the report:

To begin a cycle of review of the Accord (NI) Relationships and Sexuality Education programme and resources that were first developed in 2002. To analyse evidence sufficiently enough to be able to formulate workable suggestions for the way ahead in enhancing RSE provision in Catholic schools in Northern Ireland.

To complete a scoping report that identifies the main strengths and areas for development in the provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education.

To achieve these aims it was decided that the best approach was to undertake a qualitative study that carefully sampled the situation in seven post-primary Catholic schools. There are two main reasons behind this decision. First, qualitative research allows for a more in-depth exploration of the provision of RSE. Rather than quantifying survey responses or presenting measurable data about student and teacher attitudes to RSE, the attention is on recognising what different groupings within the school have to say about this important part of the curriculum. Second, a qualitative approach allowed the research to be framed as a listening exercise - conducted on behalf of the Northern Bishops. A key goal was to listen carefully to what teachers, governors, young people and their parents have to say about RSE in their Catholic school. This gave the research project an added pastoral dimension. As the research proceeded it quickly became apparent that the schools involved valued the opportunity to be part of a report that was going back to their bishops. Focusing on a sample of seven schools as part of a qualitative research investigation has generated a rich set of data. It provides a timely and accurate snapshot of RSE in Catholic post-primary schools in Northern Ireland.

Accord Northern Ireland Catholic Marriage Care Service

Company Limited by Guarantee

Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) *(continued)*

Year ended 31 March 2021

Financial review

Accord Northern Ireland Marriage Care Service obtains finance from a number of sources; primarily grant support from the Department of Health, marriage preparation courses, counselling contributions and diocesan grants. Given the unavoidable loss of contributions from clients and couples and in order to meet ongoing costs, Accord NI actively availed of funding from the Department for Communities to help alleviate financial difficulties.

As of 1st May 2016 the Accord Regional Office and the 9 centres ceased to operate individually and all resources were transferred into the bank accounts of Accord Northern Ireland Catholic Marriage Care Service. Since then, all funds have been lodged into and all expenses have been paid from accounts operated under the name of the Accord NI CLG.

Accord Northern Ireland Catholic Marriage Care Service

Company Limited by Guarantee

Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) *(continued)*

Year ended 31 March 2021

Plans for future periods

In order to facilitate an effective online counselling service and continue face-to-face counselling, Accord NI will implement a secure Case Management System, through Counsel360. This system will provide;

A Global Calendar to replace centre appointment books, enabling authorised staff to quickly see what counselling sessions are coming up, which completed sessions need to be updated and importantly see Counsellor and Centre availability.

Referral information, captured once and avoiding rekeying of the same information into multiple systems (on paper, in the appointment book, on spreadsheets).

All client and case related documentation scanned, uploaded and stored centrally in Counsel360, leading to a reduction in paperwork and filing storage required.

Counsellor login and updating of counselling sessions online via the system securely from any location with an internet connection.

Ease of reporting as all the data is in one centralised database.

Supervision sessions managed via the system to ensure best practice compliance.

Accommodation of both online counselling and in-person counselling sessions, and management of waiting lists.

GDPR compliance.

A review of the Accord Marriage Preparation Programme was completed and the pilot of a revised programme began but had to be suspended in March 2020 due to Covid-19. Final recommendations will be submitted to the Board of Directors for ratification, on completion of the pilot, and training will be rolled out for all Marriage Education Facilitators. A video to support priests completing the final stage of the Marriage preparation Programme is in production and will be made available through diocesan structures. Bookings for the Virtual Interactive Marriage Preparation Programme (12 programmes per month) will continue until public health guidance allows for the resumption of face-to-face programmes. Peer Support Groups are being established and extra administration is being put in place to accommodate hosting of courses. Work on the revision of the following policies is nearing completion; Child Safeguarding, Domestic Abuse, Adult Safeguarding and Complaints Handling.

Trustees' responsibilities statement

The trustees, who are also directors for the purposes of company law, are responsible for preparing the trustees' report and the financial statements in accordance with applicable law and United Kingdom Accounting Standards (United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice).

Accord Northern Ireland Catholic Marriage Care Service

Company Limited by Guarantee

Trustees' Annual Report (Incorporating the Director's Report) *(continued)*

Year ended 31 March 2021

Company law requires the charity trustees to prepare financial statements for each year which give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the charitable company and the incoming resources and application of resources, including the income and expenditure, for that period.

In preparing these financial statements, the trustees are required to:

- select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently;
- observe the methods and principles in the applicable Charities SORP;
- make judgments and accounting estimates that are reasonable and prudent;
- state whether applicable UK Accounting Standards have been followed, subject to any material departures disclosed and explained in the financial statements;
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charity will continue in business.

The trustees are responsible for keeping adequate accounting records that are sufficient to show and explain the charity's transactions and disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the charity and enable them to ensure that the financial statements comply with the Companies Act 2006. They are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the charity and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

Auditor

Each of the persons who is a trustee at the date of approval of this report confirms that:

- so far as they are aware, there is no relevant audit information of which the charity's auditor is unaware; and
- they have taken all steps that they ought to have taken as a trustee to make themselves aware of any relevant audit information and to establish that the charity's auditor is aware of that information.

The trustees' annual report and the strategic report were approved on 9 November 2021 and signed on behalf of the board of trustees by:

Archbishop Eamon Martin
Trustee

Mrs Deirdre O'Rawe
Charity Secretary