Good morning and on the week just before International Restorative Justice Week which starts this Sunday, I welcome you all on behalf of the Restorative Practices Forum for Northern Ireland to our 25th Anniversary Celebrations. As this is a special occasion in the life of the Forum, I was doing a little research on special days and found that yesterday was world kindness day, and in America, today is ‘national American teddy bear’ day and also ‘loosen up lighten up’ day! On a more serious note, this week is Anti-bullying week which I am sure you will agree is a very relevant backdrop to this conference.

It is my role, this morning, to provide you with a whistle stop tour of the past 25 years, so sit tightly and fasten your seatbelts.

But before I whizz back 25 years, I thought it might be useful to share the Forum’s adopted definition of restorative justice. We have chosen to use the definition agreed by the European Forum for Restorative Justice which hopefully defines “justice” in its widest sense.

“Restorative justice is an inclusive approach of addressing harm or the risk of harm through engaging all those affected in a dialogue to seek a common understanding and agreement on how the harm or wrongdoing can be repaired, relationships maintained, and justice achieved”.

The Restorative Practices Forum began its life 25 years ago in September 1994 with a Restorative Justice conference, just two weeks after the IRA announced a total cessation of violence. My predecessor, Vincent Bent, organised this conference on behalf of Quaker Service, having become passionate himself about the concept of restorative justice seeing it as a model of a justice system which works towards restoring and healing.
Quaker Service then considered it important to share and discuss this idea with others working in the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland at that time. 60 people attended the conference in Portballintrae and I am sure many of you will recall some of the speakers, Pierre Allard, Simon Lee, Marian Liebmann, Nicholas McGeorge and Bob Johnson. Mary McAleese who gave us a warm welcome this morning, chaired the panel discussion out of which it was agreed to form a working group to examine and research ideas coming from the conference.

That working group comprised statutory and voluntary sector representation and some of the early members are still active members of the Forum today, namely David Eagleson, Martin McAnallen, Ken Nixon, Robin Scott, and David Smyth. In fact, the two David’s are both on the planning team for today’s event! Their vision was to inform those connected with the Criminal Justice System about restorative justice and to influence policy makers. The Working Group sought to establish restorative justice as an integral part of the criminal justice system and not just as an adjunct to it.

I must congratulate those early pioneers whose passion and commitment influenced the Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland and the development of restorative justice approaches for young people established within the Youth Conference Service following the 1998 Belfast or Good Friday Agreement. The Working Group also commissioned valuable research and actively promoted International Restorative Justice Week by organising events and seminars with highly respected speakers such as Howard Zehr, Dave Gustafson, Sandi Bergen and Terry O’Connell.
Ten years after the 1994 conference, as part of Restorative Justice Week, the Working Group organised a one-day conference entitled “Restorative Justice, the next decade” in 2004 with very similar objectives to today’s conference – to review progress and offer pointers to future development. The main topics of the day were the implementation of the Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland (2000) – expressed primarily through the Youth Conference Service, the centrality of victims and survivors, work done by the Police and community restorative justice groups as well as Dan Van Ness’s vision of how a restorative justice city might look in the future. Not such a pipe dream anymore!

In 2005, the Restorative Justice Working Group changed its name to the Restorative Justice Forum reflecting a change in emphasis for the group, acknowledging that the day to day work was being done by a number of organisations and that the group’s future role lay in networking, promotion and learning. It also recognised and started to reflect in its membership the fact that restorative processes were no longer limited to the criminal justice sector but were increasingly and successfully being used in education, social care, the family and the wider community to address conflict, build understanding and strengthen relationships with young and old alike.

The Forum continued to deliver a range of seminars, trainings and film screenings to promote and educate as widely as possible. In 2010, a report mapping restorative initiatives across Northern Ireland and a booklet for young people were launched at a seminar titled “Celebrating restorative practices in NI” in Malone House. By now, Northern Ireland was gaining an international reputation for high quality and innovative restorative approaches in a variety of sectors.
And in 2012, the Forum showcased restorative practices in Northern Ireland at Stormont.

That same year, the Forum established a small sub-group to progress planning of an all-island event. Colleagues in the South of Ireland were equally excited about working collaboratively to coproduce a joint conference. And so the first Restorative Connections conference was held in Dundalk in November 2013. The conference met its key objectives to

(i) Introduce and promote restorative practices with key decision makers across Ireland;
(ii) Provide space for discussing, analysing and exploring restorative thinking, practice and developments; and
(iii) Build long lasting relationships across Ireland to further develop restorative practice across all levels of society.

David Forde who was one of the opening speakers said that he hoped this conference wouldn’t be like many others he had attended, where people come up with great ideas and feel highly motivated to progress them, but after the event, these ideas gather dust on a shelf somewhere.

Not so with this conference. The 2013 conference was followed by three further very successful all-island workshops on issues concerning victims, on young people who repeatedly offend and finally, one on education.

We also established a firm partnership with Restorative Practices Ireland, with shared representation between the Northern Ireland and the Southern Ireland groups. This partnership continues today, and we are delighted that there are members of RPI celebrating with us today.

A second all-island conference, this time led by RPI and supported by the Forum, was held in Dundalk in 2016. Plans for this conference were driven through collaborations between RPI and the NI Forum, in recognition of the benefits of learning from each other, and to drive the shared commitment to provide opportunities for learning, reflecting, challenging and supporting.
In October 2017, the Restorative Justice Forum changed its name to Restorative Practices Forum NI to reflect a broader remit and wider representation of sectors. We updated our definition of restorative justice and practice to the one I read at the beginning.

Today, the Forum is comprised of 24 organisations and almost 40 members and growing, representing families, communities, residential care, schools, victims, the voluntary sector, as well as prisons, police, probation, youth justice and courts. All passionate about restorative practice reflected in an average attendance of 20 people at our meetings.

Our aim is to promote restorative justice philosophy and restorative practices across all aspects of life and society.

This conference will not only recognise how far we have come in a relatively short time, it will engage you in examining what more needs to be done and how, together, we can *Build a Lasting Vision for the Future of Restorative Practices*.

My organisation, Quaker Service, is delighted to have facilitated the Forum over its 25 years history and I personally feel privileged and honoured to have been adopted by this group of incredible people as its chair for the latter half of its lifetime. Restorative practice reflects my own values and faith. In the words of God, quoted in the book of Zechariah: ‘*Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another*’.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to especially thank the planning team chaired by Yvonne Adair. And I hope you all enjoy these two days – you are all in for a treat with a goldmine of brilliant speakers and highly topical workshops. You can now loosen your seatbelts and enjoy the birthday celebrations!