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Getting the 'Right' Youth Justice

...engaging with the findings of
the review of the Youth Justice
System in Northern Ireland

Changes needed to the Youth Justice System
Young people, Include Youth & Youth Safety Network

Conference
REPORT

Changes needed to the Youth Justice System Young People, Include Youth and Youth Safety Network

Include Youth's Young Voices Project supports young people to engage with policy decision-making processes. It is a participation project which consults with young people at risk of becoming, or involved with the criminal justice system and on policing and criminal justice issues.

The Youth Safety Network is a consortium made up of Challenge for Youth, The Terry Enright Foundation and Northern Ireland Alternatives. The Network aims to promote the safety and well being of young people, their families and their communities through a process of engagement participation and service delivery.

Mat Crozier:

“ Each young person is going to be telling us a bit about what their experiences are and making some suggestions and what changes they feel will help to improve the services and processes for young people who become involved in the youth justice system or young people who are at risk of being involved. These will be reflecting largely issues that are identified in our young person's submission to the youth justice review which was made up of young people's views on their experiences of the services and processes, drawing on the views of young people working with four organisations Include Youth, also Challenge for Youth, the Terry Enright Foundation and NI Alternatives. So with that I am going to introduce my first member of the team, as you called it Debbie, my first team member is Daryl. ”

Daryl:

“ Good morning everyone. My name is Daryl and I want to take this time to tell you a bit about me. The first time I did crime I was nine. I was in primary school but I didn't really like it much because I didn't really fit in and I was bullied by the other kids so I never really went. They were all like, "You're not like us so we don't like you, simple as".

One day I was on the mitch from school and I saw another fella in school uniform. I asked him was he on the mitch too, he says he was and we started hanging about together. He was 13 and I was only nine. I met four or five of his mates after that and that was when I started doing stuff. That was when I started stealing, not for myself but for them. At first it was glue, gas, air fresheners, sweets and Dairy Lea Lunchables because you could get the free cinema tickets with them and we would go and watch movies high as kites. The first time I got caught I was nine, I went into Tesco's to try and steal air fresheners for us all to get high, but I got caught and they phoned my ma and da, not the police first of all, I don't know why but after that my ma grounded me. The first time I went to court I was 11 and I cried because I thought I was

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getting locked up, to me the judge was old and he hated me. He gave me a 24 hour attendance centre order that brought me to an alternative education project that just made things worse, because you would be with all your mates and then afterwards, after the class you would all go all nuts.

My parents rang Social Services to ask for help because they didn't know how to deal with me, they tried a few different things that didn't really work like. So they decided it was in my best interests to be put into care. The social worker told me I was going on a holiday. He says we would collect my stuff for going away because my ma and da had it all packed and ready, although I found out later it was lies. I thought I would be going to a place where there would be sand and sea but he took me to a children's home and I was there for the first time for nine months. When I was being put into care they should have told me up front that you are going into a children's home and tell you how long that you were going to be there for. The social worker says to me that you will be in a children's home for two months and then you will go home. But after that it just kept going on and on, every two weeks there was a LAC Review but the dates about when I could go home kept changing and I never knew when something would be decided. So I stopped going because it was just a load of people sitting around a table talking about me.

So I done a full year at school and I was doing well, I wanted to succeed at school, I didn't like it but I knew it had to be done. I had known it was important from an early age. But rumours started going on about that I was in a children's home amongst the teachers and the other kids. Teachers would always keep a close eye on me, blame me for everything, I was the fall guy, I got the blame for everything and get put into detention even if I didn't do nothing. So I didn't apply myself in second year, I missed days, I didn't like school anymore, I got lifted for stuff against the school so I got thrown out and spent six months in a Juvenile Justice Centre.

I used to learn quickly at school, it was easy for me to do. I did well at it. I even learned German, I was always good at maths. Numbers were just easy in my head, I had a maths tutor who was German and because I learned my maths so quickly he taught me German in the time there was left.

But what would have helped if I had been put into a different school when things started to go wrong, an ordinary school which was an actual school. I went to alternative education and that messed me up. You go into school and you know everyone there was like you because they had all been thrown out of a school just like you. You get told that you went to a spastic school or you went to a school on a custard bus. So you go into school and you know you are like that and you start to have the kind of head for it. You end up going out stealing, taking drugs and sniffing. The doctor said to me one day, "That's the quick way to death". I didn't care because I didn't understand what it was doing to me physically or mentally.

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I could be at university now. I would love to go to university. But I have always wanted ever since I was a kid, I seen others doing well and I want to do something that will be bettering me and that will be doing something for other people as well.

Here is a view aspects I have wrote down that I think would help a young person when they are younger: Number 1, do something about peer pressure, you look up to those around you not those in front of you. I looked up to my mates and that got me into trouble.

Number 2, respect young people. If you respect young people they will respect you back, but always remember that you are the professional and you are there to help the young person.

Number 3, support young people. Give young people as much support as you can give them. From something as little as a phone call to see if they are okay to a visit to check to see if everything is okay. Give them support and education in anyway that they need.

Don't just go mad with a young person when they get into trouble, understand why he is doing the things he is doing and work on the reasons.

Number 5, don't scare children, don't put kids in a position that they are scared to tell you what they are feeling. Always put them in a safe environment where they feel safe and comfortable in talking to you.

That's it people, I would like to thank everyone for listening.”

David:

“ Good morning everyone. My name is David, I am 16 years of age, 17 next month just to remind those of you who know me.

I was placed in care at the age of 15 in February 2010. I was placed in care because of a breakdown in my family home. I had never really been in trouble with the police before going into care. When I went into care I admit I was scared but I settled well. Now at the age of 16, 20 months after going into care I am waiting on my youth charge being dealt with probably by youth conference. All but one of these eight charges involved incidents in the care home environment, incidents which, if I was at home, would not have involved the police. Each of these incidents added to the breakdown in relationships between me and staff or me and other young people.

I have been involved on and off with East Belfast alternatives for the past couple of years but I started to work more closely with them 16 months ago. In my time with East Belfast Alternatives I have completed a number of personal development programmes, these have involved harm awareness, anger management, equine assisted therapy sessions, that's practical therapy with horses for you who don't know to name a few.

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I think community based restorative justice works in most cases, it works for me. I think restorative justice is a good program to be on if you commit an offence or if you are a victim. It gets and keeps the victim involved.

Through community based restorative justice I have been able to apologise face to face to my victim and offer to do a project for them. This kind of thing isn't easy, talking to your victim.

Restorative justice is a project that gives you a second chance, it rebuilds broken relationships. I think courts are a wee bit more harsh and can make young offenders scared, which doesn't really solve anything longterm. For me it has been good working with Alternatives, they are good at helping me to correct my problems and looking at things that have went wrong.

Relationships are important to me whether in the community or privately. My relationship with Alternatives is very good and I am doing things for myself. My relationship with my family is at a good, stable level and building. My relationship with my community is much more positive now, I have done a lot of good work in my community and I'm not just viewed as a pain anymore.

I have built up and am building up good relationships with the police now, these have been built up through Alternatives. In fact I was asked to pose for photos for a police magazine recently. They paid me with a £10 voucher for Tesco's, my first paid modelling job.

I also have a good relationship within myself now, I am doing well for myself now. I have a load of weight off my shoulders, I am moving on.

I think community based restorative justice would definitely work in care homes, it can fix the breakdown in relationships, it will look at the harm caused rather than just the rules that have been broken because you know sometimes the rules can be wrong.

Relationships are important to me because you need them. I have helped paint, furnish and clean a new community drop-in. I have been out tidying gardens and pathways for local old and disabled people. I recently applied for and received £300 for a community garden we are developing and I am currently involved in cleaning a local war memorial in time for Remembrance Sunday. One local old person had been trying to look after this memorial but I have been able to link with him and get the place power washed, railings rubbed down and painted and the granite stone cleaned.

I am volunteering now for Alternatives out working in the community for the community. I have got myself on track and I have got a place to live. I want to get involved in community work. I hope to work for Alternatives in the future, to work for them rather than with them. That will teach them to repair relationships. Thank you for listening. ”

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Mick:

“ Hello everyone, good morning, I hope you are not falling asleep yet. Well my name is Michael, 20 years of age, I am going to read a bit about myself and my views.

The first time I was in court I was 15 at the Youth Court. At first I thought it was all right and I knew most of the other young people there just from running around. Then one day it was a contest, I had no idea what was going to happen that day and I didn't even know what a contest was. I had to put my hand on the Bible and swear to tell the truth. I didn't know what was happening and it was really confusing, I was wondering what would happen if I got it wrong, if I made a mistake or didn't tell the truth. Would I get in trouble, would I go to hell, what's the outcome. I wasn't informed by anyone what swearing on the oath meant. No one from court or my solicitor told me, you need to make that clear to people. Make people knowledgeable about what's happening in court because it is confusing.

Judges are like all of us, you get different personalities or they can be in a bad mood one day and okay the next, so the sentence you get can depend on who you get on the day.

I was in court when I was 15 in 2006 and I finally got dealt with this year. I don't know why it took so long. I thought that some cases just get forgotten about, lost in paperwork, that's my only explanation. Even my most recent case from May 2010, is set for contest in February next year, that is nearly two years later. It is always in the back of your head but I just try not to think about it and hope that all goes well.

Every time I went to the Youth Court I hoped I'd get sentenced and sent to Woodlands because I knew if I stayed out that I would get into more trouble and I did.

In Woodlands you have a routine and that stops you getting into trouble but if I had a routine before I wouldn't have got into trouble in the first place. I got into trouble when I was drinking, drink in, wits out. Now I have a routine and it is easier for me.

I'm 20 now but kids at 16 don't look as far ahead as their future. They don't think what it is going to be like. When I was 16 I just wanted to go to jail just to fit in with the crowd and to get a name for myself, I wanted everyone to think aye, he's mad and stuff. But times change and you get older, people grow up, settle down, move away, some even die. It is a struggle, you just have to keep on the right track.

I did stuff just to put money in my pocket but it is not worth it, crime doesn't pay, it pays for now but not for the future, it is a barrier to the future.

Activities would help to stay out of trouble, something people could do during the week or even at weekends, going to the gym or something, but I didn't have a routine at 16. I stopped

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going to school in third year, didn't get on with everyone else in the class. So I just didn't go back. People melted my head and it affected me outside of school, it was a form of bully. People probably knew they could get a reaction from people. I got jumped by about 10 people outside of school because I had been in a fight with one of them. I went to the Principal and told him and there was a meeting with the other fella, my mother and his. The Principal just didn't take it on board, he didn't take it serious enough so I thought if he didn't bother then I wouldn't bother either and I didn't go back to school.

It was straight after I stopped going to school that I got into trouble. I went into town one day by myself and the got talking to another fella I had never met before outside the City Hall. I got to know him and started doing things with him, a lot of drinking, taking drugs and a lot of crime. The Principal should have had more time for me, he should have listened to me and acted upon it instead of doing nothing. He should have had a word with people, with teachers and other kids. I was the class clown, I made people laugh, it is just part of my personality, it is just my genes but I did want to learn at the end of the day. But it was just other things disrupting my education, other kids were acting the eejit and at that age you don't stand up for yourself, you don't have the courage to tell people to stop, you don't have the confidence. I felt intimidated so I didn't go back to school. I think if you can just help one person then that is the job done. I was asking the Principal for help and he said "Aye, I'll have a word", but he did nothing about it so I just said I will just go home and play my Play Station then.

Knowing what I know now, if I was to give advice to myself when I was 16 that could have helped me, I would say keep studying, cut back on the drink, don't get into trouble with the police. Try get into tech or a job because it is a routine and it helps. It doesn't have to be a job for the rest of your life, just for now. I used to want to be a doctor but I didn't have the patience. ”

Mat:

“ Thank you Michael. Sam, who is presenting next is speaking on behalf of Leighton. Leighton presented at the conference last year for those of you who were there, if you remember. He couldn't be here this year because recently he has been put back into Hydebank again. I was visiting there a few weeks ago and he asked me what work I was doing, I told him I was working with young people to get them ready to speak at the conference. He asked me would you like me to write a piece for the conference that could be read out on the day.

Since he has been gone back in, he had been very annoyed with himself, and he was thinking very hard about what he needed for the next time he gets out to try and help him stay out, so it was that which he wanted to write something about which I thought was fitting for today.

He had made some very significant progress in his life when he was out previously and he is determined to refocus himself when he comes out. So he has this list that he did up for himself which is also relevant for the conference today, and he asked if his friend Sam would read it out for today. So Sam kindly agreed to do this. Next up we have Sam.

Sam:

“ Good morning everyone. I am Sam and this is Leighton's 10 point plan for preventing reoffending on release from custody:

Point 1, housing. If a young person comes out of custody and has nowhere to live they will end up doing crime again. But they can't just be put anywhere, give them a chance to see where they want to live, ask them where they will feel safe and settled, that might depend on whether they are Protestant, Catholic, black or white, whether under paramilitary threat or whether they feel safe in the community they come from.

If they go into a hostel it doesn't help if it is somewhere with strict rules, if they don't need them. Rules can help you keep a routine but if it is too strict it doesn't help, and nobody wants to live in probation hostel with sex offenders living there. Young people should not be put in a probation hostel unless they are a risk to the public or to themselves, especially if they are under 18.

Point 2, family support. A young person needs to have somebody close to them to talk to when they are feeling upset. If the young person has no family they'll feel heart broken, they feel like they have no one to talk to. A lot of young people may not want to talk to their social worker, so try and encourage the family to stay in touch, to meet with the young person. You have family organisations that can help, like family centres, like the one on the Albertbridge Road. You have to keep family relationships going, it is important.

That brings me onto the next point which is friends. People that a young person runs about with plays a big part in their life. There is peer pressure, people can call you names if you don't do something or if you don't do a crime. I listened to my mates and look where it landed me, back in jail. If I could turn back time to the night to the night when I came back into jail, I would have gone a half an hour earlier like I was meant to and not listen to my mates, then I wouldn't be in jail now. You need to get young people into some sort of club so they are not running about causing trouble. That can be where family comes into it as well, because you can spend time with them, whereas if there was more to do in the community you could spend time with people there who don't want to get into trouble. You could have a club for people who have been in trouble but don't want to reoffend, that would help. Only true mates can help you, if your mates are true mates they won't make you do things.

The next point is drink and drugs. A young person needs to be told what damage drink and

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drugs can do and how it can damage your health. They do listen when they are told but they might not take it in, but they do take it in at the time but not when they are doing it with their mates and taking drugs. I didn't understand the mental problems I would get with taking drugs and I have had mates who took drugs and are now in a coffin. So give them as much support as you can.

Young people should always have someone to talk to morning, noon and night. Probation turn their phones off at night and you can't get your social worker after 5 o'clock. That's where family come in again. Like Lifeline, open 24 hours, who have helped me when I have been stuck. It is a free phone call and there is always someone there 24/7.

It is up to the young people themselves in the long run. They have to choose to do it themselves, but you need to try anything that might help. That could include counselling, drug awareness, show them the damage that drink and drugs can do and have someone to talk to any time they need it, someone they know and trust.

The next point is working together. Everyone who is working with the young person at the time when they come out of jail should meet once a month to talk about what's happening with that young person and to see what is working and what is not working, what's going good and what's going bad and what help is needed. Like the Priority Youth Offending Program, it worked for me when I was on it.

Make a plan every month, when the person first gets out, plan what is going to happen in the first month, set a routine for the young person and talk about what is going to do. In the next month look at the plan and see where it can be changed to make it better. Then the young person knows where they stand and all the people working with them. More communication is needed.

The first few hours in the first week are going to be hard, that's when they are going to be most tempted because they haven't done anything in ages, they haven't got drunk or taken drugs or done any crime. So to help that time they need to be kept busy, big time. If the young person wants to change their life they have to learn the confidence to say no in the first few hours of the first week from release, it is crucial.

The next point is training. A young person needs structures in life, there is no point just sitting around with nothing to do because they just end up getting into trouble again. So training can give them something to do, it is something for now and for the future. A young person might not have had the confidence when they were at school, so they might need help to reach the goals they have. Something like the Give and Take Scheme could help. Staff there don't rush you, teachers don't rush you and they start at your level. If you can't do something they don't rush you into it, they take it at your pace. Give and Take helped me stay out of jail for 19

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months and if it wasn't for them I wouldn't have the qualifications I have now. I was give a mentor with Give and Take, Paddy Murphy and I could trust him with everything I told him, confidentiality is important.

I have done a lot of work with Matt Crozier on the Young Voices Project, this has helped me a lot. It helps me see the other side of crime, the other side to the side I was used to, making money, getting a buzz, making a name for myself. On Young Voices I have met politicians, police, social workers, people from Queens University and the Youth Justice Review Team, that has helped me see things from a different perspective and it makes young people feel good to meet people like that, at least they know they are being listened to. We told them our stories, we are educating them, helping to understand the young people's side, it is us trying to make the world a better place. You need something like Young Voices for young people in trouble to be listened to.

Point 7, give a young person a chance. Let the young people do things at their own pace. It is hard if someone is always torturing you saying do this, do that, it can be hard to change and you need to let a young person to do it at their speed when they want to stop offending. And if they miss a couple of appointments don't harass them, give them a chance to make up for it or else it just pickles their head and they say "See you later". If they miss their appointment because they are sick you can get a sick line. If it is family issues, you can check with the family. If something has happened in a children's home or foster care you can ring to see what has been happening. Or if they are just messing you about they might need to go back into jail, but if they want to stay out they will stick to their appointments if they can, they will do the right thing.

Point 8 is trust. Build trust with the young person you are working with. If someone has no family to talk to because they were brought up in children's homes or foster placements, you are going to have to build trust with that person before they will talk to you. If you don't build trust, they won't talk and they'll build everything up one day and they will explode. You will have selfharm, suicide, drink, drugs and crime. But don't pester the young person to talk because you need to trust someone before you talk to them. Only pass on information if you have to, like if they are going to harm themselves or others. You don't need to pass on everything that a young person says all the time to all the other people working with them.

Point number 9 is money. This is where trust comes in again, if you think a young person in care is high risk you might need to supervise their money, to make sure they don't spend it on drink, drugs or solvents. But if they are not high risk, give them the money and try to trust them, give them a chance. If they throw it back in your face and show they can't handle money you need to be more strict. Show them the trust first and give them a chance to learn to handled their money themselves. They might need help, so do a money management program with them and help them to learn to look after themselves. Like Barnardos or

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(inaudible) where they have their own flats but there are people there to help you out when you're stuck.

The last point is space. The young people need to have their own space. The first couple of weeks out of custody you might need to supervise them a bit but then start giving them a bit more space. If everyone is in your face all the time they'll go mad. They might need a bit of a dander, maybe you could go with them, but they just need their head showered or else they'll go mad.

Thanks very much for listening. ”