

Irish Youth Justice Service Conference 2010

Address by Michelle Shannon, National Director

Good morning Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for attending our Conference today, particularly those of you who have travelled long distances to be here. I would like to take this opportunity to extend a warm welcome to all our speakers and I look forward to hearing what you have to say.

The decision to establish the IYJS was announced by government at the end of 2005, and we have been fully operational for over 3 years now and it is time to take stock of what we have achieved to date, and prioritise what we need to do now as we consider our strategy for 2011 and onwards. I hope that what we learn from the discussion later today will confirm that we are on the right track and help us prioritise our work. The current economic climate and the efforts to bring about greater efficiency in the youth justice system as part of wider public sector reform, makes it more important than ever that we strive to deliver an effective system with good outcomes for children.

IYJS was established to bring about better coordination in the youth justice sector, develop policy in the area, manage the detention schools and link in with general children's policy as set by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The framework in which we have delivered on our remit i.e. the National Youth Justice Strategy, outlines some of the priorities we had identified and has brought real focus to our work in achieving our mission.

Our mission is to

"create a safer society by working in partnership to reduce youth offending through appropriate interventions and linkages into services"

We knew from an early stage that we could not deliver this ambitious task on our own. Our priorities were often way down the list of those other agencies we were depending on for support. We needed their buy-in in the first instance, and we have

worked hard to achieve that. The National Youth Justice Strategy spans the entire youth justice system, from those children who enter the system at the Diversion Programme Stage, those who attend Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs), children who are prosecuted, those dealt with by Young Person's Probation (YPP), and the children detained in the Children Detention Schools. It identifies the tasks the various Government Departments and agencies have to deliver to assist us in achieving on our mission. The strategy identifies a number of key actions. It also recognises the importance of linkages with the community at all stages.

Implementing the strategy involves taking a critical look at how we deliver services across the system, how to engage the various agencies, and develop better structures and use of resources. We are also looking at ways by which we can improve the outcomes for the individual children who come into conflict with the law and how we can impact on local crime problems. Responsibility for youth justice matters by Minister Andrews, who sits at the Cabinet table, and oversight of the implementation of the National Youth Justice Strategy by a group which reports to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion ensures that Youth Justice stays on the government's agenda. Significant resources have been allocated to the area in the past few years and we in the IYJS believe that we are starting to make a difference.

You will hear later in more detail about some of the recent initiatives and tasks we have undertaken. I will briefly mention some to the achievements and ongoing work which I think will assist us in our mission to reduce youth offending as we move towards the next youth justice strategy. Our next Strategy will form an integral part of the new Children's Strategy and we hope that this will give rise to even greater coordination between the various players in the system.

In delivering on the current national strategy, much of our focus has been on securing better engagement by key agencies and linking in to various social policies.

Engagement of key players

Better engagement is evidenced through a raised profile for youth justice work among a number of agencies.

An Garda Síochána is the first point of contact for young people with the criminal justice system - Since the National Youth Justice Strategy was launched we welcome the commitment of An Garda Síochána to delivering on their objectives. In particular, the implementation of the Garda Youth and Children Strategy and the emphasis placed on tackling youth crime in the Garda Strategy Statement 2010-2012. This is also reflected in the Policing Plan for 2010. Seven additional JLOs have been assigned each year under the National Strategy, with further assignments due in the current year. We have worked with the Gardaí and the youth organisations to make the GYDPs more effective and we have begun to focus the projects' activities on dealing with the local crime problems. The measures which we are putting in place in this area will, in the future, allow us to better measure the extent to which we are helping to reduce offending.

The Garda Youth Crime Case Management System, which is currently being extended across the DMR, is a prime example of the Gardaí taking a lead role in managing the cases of some of the more persistent young offenders. This system, which is based on a highly successful pilot in Dublin 1, involves one officer taking responsibility for the management of a young person and their interaction with the criminal justice system. This approach highlights the potential value of coordinated local youth justice teams.

The Probation Service has always been central in the management of offenders in the community, and with the creation of Young Person's Probation (YPP) a special Division of the service to deal with young people under 18, we now have a cohort of well trained court officers who can be proactive in court and make strong recommendations as to how individual young people may be managed, and advise the court of the various community sanctions under the Children Act. Sanctions are now available on a nationwide basis and there has been an increase in usage by the courts.

Overall there is now greater dialogue between the criminal justice agencies and we each have a better understanding of the problems as we work towards common goals. Youth justice and responsibility for young people who offend extends beyond the criminal justice system and we are particularly glad to have commenced a dialogue with the HSE on a number of matters, as the early provision of child welfare services

in the community to young people presenting with various problems may well help to divert them from further involvement in crime and the criminal justice system. The development of a education strategy by the Department of Education and Science for the children in detention is to be welcomed, and will ensure that there is adequate provision for the education of detained children who have often been excluded from mainstream education earlier in their lives.

Service Delivery

Over the past 3 - 4 years we have taken a critical look at how services are delivered. We want to build up a youth justice service which we can be proud of and which inspires public confidence. The government decision to develop detention school services on a single campus at Oberstown, has given us an opportunity to look at how to deliver the best and most appropriate interventions for the small number of children who require detention. The closure of Finglas Child and Adolescent Centre (FCAC) which is planned for the end of March 2010 will give us an opportunity to commence restructuring the detention school service, and this will involve a significant change management process which we hope will pay dividends before too long. I appreciate that the closure of the centre and the redeployment of staff may not be what everyone wished for but it does allow us to enhance the assessment service provided to all children in detention in accordance with the Expert Group's Report.

We have found many examples of good practice in the detention schools and we are working with the Directors and senior management to streamline policies and practices and work towards an integrated service. Some key policies which are being developed include the safeguarding policy, and an important vetting policy for staff. The roll out of a new behaviour management training has set the scene for future integrated working across the detention schools. We are confident that we can develop shared services in a number of areas on the Oberstown Campus and I appreciate the efforts by the senior management team in bringing this about. Independent inspection of the detention schools by the Social Services Inspectorate of HIQA is a desirable way of measuring our performance and I am glad to say that the schools scored quite well on the their first inspection.

In examining the delivery of service we must also make it future proof and prepare for dealing with children with more complex needs, and we will bear this in mind as we prepare for taking responsibility for the 16 and 17 year old boys from St Patrick's institution.

Our work to make the GYDPs more efficient extends to the administrative arrangements for the projects and we have got the excellent cooperation of Garda management and the youth organisations in bringing this about. We also take account of good practices in other jurisdictions, as will be presented here today by our guest speakers from the UK and Denmark, and we have developed strong links with our colleagues in Northern Ireland through our participation in a working group established under the Belfast Agreement.

Improving Outcomes

We have put several measures in place which we think will lead to better outcomes and which will help us reduce offending through the use of targeted and evidence based programmes. I mentioned earlier some of the work we are doing to make local GYDPs address local crime problems and we are also taking the time to ensure that the youth workers in the projects have the capacity to deal with the complex behaviour young people present with. The Minister also mentioned YJForum, the OnLine Learning Community which we are developing and this will be instrumental in enabling us to disseminate good practice among the projects and for professionals to share their learning.

We are in the process of introducing a standardised risk assessment tool across the whole youth justice system which will allow us to target interventions and measure change in the behaviours of the young people concerned. The work that the Probation Service has undertaken in this area for the past number of years has given us a sound professional platform to build from.

The provision of new and upgraded accommodation for the children in detention will facilitate their reintegration into society. The development of programmes which include restorative practices as part of their intervention will give young people a better understanding of how the victim feels and the impact their offences may have

had. Through the Probation Service - YPP involvement with parents, we can see how parental responsibility can be improved.

Overall, there is a lot going on and I'm confident that these measures will bring us a little further towards our mission of reducing offending. Looking to the future, much of the work we have started will continue as we devise a new strategy for 2011 and onwards. We will be building on the cooperation between agencies which is now firmly in place. Some areas we wish to progress include for example

- the use of restorative practices by a greater number of practitioners in the youth justice system,
- the dissemination of good practice,
- translating national policy to local levels by the establishment of local youth justice teams and targeted interventions,
- continuing to promote alternatives to custody and the work of YPP,
- delivering more effective programmes to children in detention to assist their reintegration in to the community on release,
- developing an integrated detention service,

and finally one of our biggest challenges to date,

- improving the quality and availability of data we have on children who come in contact with the criminal justice system.

Without the commitment of the management and staff of the statutory and voluntary bodies who have a role to play in delivering on the NYJS we would have very little progress to report. Without naming them, I am grateful for their support and cooperation. I hope that you will all have an opportunity in the workshops to give your views on what we should prioritise and where you think we should go from here.

Thank you.

ENDS