

# 11th Annual Irish Criminal Justice Agencies (ICJA) Conference Report 2025



## Youth Justice in Motion: Prevention, Intervention, Contribution

10<sup>th</sup> October 2025, IMMA, Kilmainham, Dublin 8



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# 1. Welcome & Opening Remarks

*Mary Griffin, Chairperson, ACJRD*

I am delighted to open the 11th Annual ICJA Conference by extending a warm welcome to all of our attendees, distinguished guests and speakers, representatives from criminal justice agencies, academics, and colleagues from the community and voluntary sector. It is wonderful to see so many committed individuals gathered to reflect, share learning, and look ahead to the future of youth justice.

Can I take the opportunity to extend special thanks to Oberstown Children Detention Campus, our conference lead and funder this year. Their support makes this important annual gathering possible. The ICJA Conference, managed by ACJRD, is a significant event in our calendar, a moment each year for reflection, exchange of ideas, and collective consideration of what lies ahead.

Our theme this year, *Youth Justice in Motion: Prevention, Intervention, Contribution*, reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of youth justice. It underscores that justice for young people is never static. It shifts in response to new research, emerging challenges, policy reforms, and, most importantly, the lived experiences of young people themselves.

This theme encourages us to think about the entire youth justice journey, from early prevention work to meaningful interventions, and ultimately to recognising and supporting the important contributions young people can and do make to their communities and to the justice system.

A few words about ACJRD, the organisation behind this conference. As a registered charity, ACJRD is dedicated to promoting the study, discussion, and development of criminal justice policy and practice in Ireland. We bring together practitioners, policymakers, and academics to have informed, thoughtful discussions that contribute to the effective, fair, and transparent operation of the criminal justice system. Collaboration is at the heart of our work, and we continue to partner with stakeholders across the sector to support evidence-informed decision-making. I encourage everyone to consider becoming a member to support and participate in this important work.

Everyone has a conference programme with today's agenda. I will chair the sessions up to the coffee break after which we are delighted to welcome Gerry Curran, Courts Service Media Relations Advisor and NUJ President, who has kindly agreed to facilitate the remainder of the conference.

As always, our conference operates under the Chatham House Rule, encouraging open and honest discussion. Please note that photos and videos will be taken throughout the day for use in ACJRD publications and on social media – anyone who prefers not to appear should let a member of staff know.

Enjoy the day.

## 2. Launch of Conference

*Kevin McCarthy, Secretary General, Department of Children, Disability & Equality*

Good morning, I was really delighted to accept the invitation to be part of today's Conference and really pleased to see that today's themes are focused on the three pillars of Prevention, Intervention and Contribution.

Firstly, I want to thank the chairperson Mary Griffin and her team from the Association for Criminal Justice Research and Development for arranging today in this wonderful venue. I also want to thank Koulla Yiasouma, the Chairperson, and Damien Hernon the Director of the Oberstown Children Detention Centre, who have worked with Mary and her team in planning and hosting today's event.

As Mary has outlined, we have really promising programme, with a lot of insightful contributors, looking at a full span of youth justice. Preventing young people from coming into the youth justice system clearly is a key goal for all of us. Equally though we must recognise that, unfortunately and inevitably, there often is a need for youth justice interventions of some kind or other. Today gives us an opportunity to consider how best we can address the needs of those who may need an intervention.

It is equally important to consider what contribution those who benefit from appropriate and child-centred interventions can make. To consider how the young people at the heart of our work can grow as productive members of our society. We want to help them to come to a place where they can stand with their heads held high as they move forward and hopefully leave behind mistakes and missteps.

So, I'm really looking forward to hearing today's deliberations on those fronts.

### **Programme for Government**

The Programme for Government is the overall framework within which the Government prioritises its resources – and the current Programme sets out some very clear commitments in relation to Youth Justice. It also

makes commitments to supporting Ireland's youth outside of the justice system and it seeks to support communities to grow together and be safe and secure.

It recognises that there are communities that are dealing with increased levels of anti-social behaviour and commits to *"invest strongly in preventive measures, including in youth justice programmes"* – as well as seeking to strengthen laws where appropriate.

It commits the Government to supporting the rollout of the current Youth Justice Strategy and to developing a successor strategy.

Given the week that's in it, I'll touch on some broader Budget 2026 measures in a few moments. But I want to focus first on my own Department's role.

### **DCDE and Oberstown**

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality has lead responsibility for the Oberstown Campus. And I can say that we are very proud to be associated with Oberstown and the people who work there.

And we're particularly very proud of the track record of Oberstown in seeking to be at the fore of international best practice in models of youth detention. Oberstown's model of care, the CEHOP model, is implemented and supported within a children's rights framework.

As a reminder, the name for the CEHOP model refers to Care, Education, Health, Offending and Preparation for release.

Oberstown has achieved significant progress in recent years in embedding a children's rights approach and improving the standard of care and education provided. They have done this in accordance with the principles and provisions of the Children Act 2001.

The adoption of the CEHOP model from 2016 onwards and the more recent (2021) adoption of

the Children's Rights Policy Framework have been critical to this.

These are formal markers of progress that are underpinned by a deep cultural commitment that has been engendered through sustained leadership and effort at all levels of the organisation, supported by investment.

I want to pay tribute to Damian and his predecessors, the Board, and all of the team there for their leadership and care in achieving this.

The positive results of this are visible in improvements across many aspects of life for young people on the campus. As Department we're absolutely committed to supporting this continuing and essential progress, so that Oberstown can fulfil its statutory functions, achieve its strategic goals, and be positioned to meet the foreseen and unforeseen challenges that will be encountered in the years ahead.

### **Youth Justice Strategy**

Of course, Oberstown is only one part of the continuum of Youth Justice. The Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 is a whole of government plan that takes a strategic approach to all issues connected to children and young people at risk of encountering the criminal justice system.

The key principles of the Strategy are linked to the standards endorsed by the international community to uphold children's rights and include early intervention and preventative work, family support, diversion from crime, court processes and facilities, supervision of offenders, detention and reintegration, and support post-release.

### **Prevention – Youth Diversion Programme**

Focusing for a minute on the theme of Prevention, the Youth Diversion Programme is an important means of offering a pre-prosecution alternative to managing offending behaviour by children.

The diversion programme has proved to be very successful in diverting young people under 18

away from crime by offering guidance and support to them and their families.

This success was built on a considerable increase in funding in recent years to expand the availability and range of services carried out by Youth Diversion Programmes.

Just over €17 million of funding was allocated to youth justice initiatives in 2020 - which has increased to over €36 million in 2025.

I also understand that a significant allocation of funding for Youth Justice has been announced in Budget 2026 by Minister O'Callaghan. Over €7 million in additional core exchequer funding, which is a 22% increase, has been allocated, enabling the roll out of a comprehensive nationwide network of Youth Diversion Programmes covering every part of the State. This is highly valued.

As policy and practice with respect to youth justice have advanced, fewer children are detained and those who are, have typically committed serious offences.

By way of example in 2016 a total of 253 children were remanded in custody or sentenced to a period of detention. By last year - 2024 - the equivalent figure was down to 120 – or less than half the 2016 level.

### **Intervention - Bail Supervision Scheme**

Similarly, the Bail Supervision Scheme has a vital role to play in our approach. This is also operated by the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and provides a court with the option to grant bail to a child, rather than detaining the child, during remand proceedings. This option is to release the child on bail with conditions set by the court. As most of you will know, currently this scheme operates in Dublin, Cork and Limerick only.

This scheme was evaluated in recent years, and the results demonstrate increasing compliance with bail conditions, a reduction in breaches of bail or new criminal activity, and a return to education. By any measure a success.

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This approach not only reduces the need for detention places, but it is in keeping with the principle that the detention of a child should only be imposed as a last resort.

However, instances of children being detained for less serious offences appear to arise disproportionately from proceedings in Courts sitting outside the major urban centres. This is likely to reflect fewer alternatives to detention being available to these courts and again demonstrates that, where the Bail Supervision Scheme is available, it is being used effectively.

On average, 10 children are supervised under the Scheme at any given time. It is worth noting this is equivalent to freeing up more than one full unit in Oberstown.

### **Current Capacity Pressures**

That extra leeway provided by the Bail Supervision Scheme is particularly important because Oberstown has found itself operating regularly at full capacity over the past 2 years, despite the overall trend for detaining fewer children, and only those convicted of the more serious offences.

The pressure on capacity has increased markedly since mid-2022, with the campus full or almost full for most of 2024 and to date this year. During this period, the Director used powers afforded him under sections 202 to 207 of the Children Act, which provide for various forms of permitted absence and temporary release, to actively manage capacity pressures.

*[It should be noted that these provisions only relate to children on detention and the Director has no powers to give temporary release to children on remand which is typically one-third to a half of detainees at any given time.]*

The Department is acutely aware of this pressure, and we are working closely with Oberstown in seeking to manage and address it. We host monthly meetings with Oberstown on capacity issues and on related challenges such as those relating to recruitment and retention of staff.

These immediate capacity issues also need to be seen in the light of projected future demand.

### **Research - Round Table**

Under the Youth Justice Strategy, the Department has committed to implementing “*a research-based assessment of likely demands for Detention places and services and the consequent resource requirements over a 5-year period*”.

The aim here is “*to inform future strategic options as well as ongoing planning, budgeting and service development and that the outcome of this assessment should inform the approach to the long-term use of the Oberstown Campus*”.

In 2024 the Department hosted a Stakeholder Roundtable on Youth Detention. Many of you were in attendance and contributed. As a reminder this focused on the Children Act 2001, Oberstown Campus and included an open discussion on detention as a last resort.

Since that roundtable our research and evaluation unit has commenced work on a Demand Forecasting Report for Oberstown. I am glad to say that this is nearing completion, and we hope to be able to share a draft of the report with many of you in the coming weeks.

I want to acknowledge the assistance of our colleagues in Oberstown who provided the base data and other inputs into this report.

While compiling this Demand Forecast Report our research team have been able to gather a lot of really useful data in one location which will be of great benefit to everyone involved in Youth Justice.

With a view to taking the discussion forward and making use of the expanded evidence base we now have available to us, we intend to host a follow up roundtable in November or December. We look forward to inviting your views and contributions at that on future capacity needs in the context of overall Youth Justice policy.

### **Budget 2026 and NDP**

I'm glad to be able to say that the 2026 budget published this week provides for an increase of



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approximately 10% for the operating costs for Oberstown. This comes on the back of the recent announcement of the five-year allocations of capital funding under the National Development Plan.

Over the next five years Oberstown will receive a large increase to their Capital Budget - which will total €26 million. That will support various projects on campus, including energy efficiency upgrades. Most importantly it will enable us to increase the number of units in Oberstown as well as to further improve the educational facilities on the campus.

We're in contact with the OPW to ensure that these works can commence and be completed as soon as practicable.

It's important to note too that Budget 2026 provides important supports for other key stakeholders in the Youth Justice system, like Tusla. We want to make sure we keep that stakeholder engagement and interagency cooperation at the heart of our work and investment.

### **Girls, Gender and Justice**

Aside from the capacity issue another prominent question that has arisen since the opening of Oberstown is the case of girls in the youth justice system.

Girls are one of the most vulnerable groups involved in criminal justice systems because of their age, gender and small numbers. While the numbers might be low, research has found that girls in the justice system often experience complex layers of marginalisation, trauma, and unmet needs that go unseen and unheard.

We know that many of the issues girls face are different challenges to those experienced by boys. It is a fact that girls represent a very small minority of those involved in the criminal justice system. They commit far fewer offences than boys.

In Ireland, girls account for just 13% of referrals to the Garda Youth Diversion Programme, and their numbers in detention are even lower and tend to be for less serious offences. I think it's very welcome there will be a dedicated thematic session this afternoon on girls, gender and justice.

### **Contribution**

Girls or boys - the Youth Justice system in Ireland is primarily about allowing the young people to become the best versions of themselves and to go on to make positive contributions to society and their communities. Not only do we want to see them reform and reintegrate into society, but they can also help us to shape the justice system in a real and meaningful way. In fact, it is essential to have the voice of the child at the core of this process.

Oberstown are one of the leaders in children's participation in their own rehabilitation – and they seek to enhance and mainstream the participation and influence of young people in decision making at all levels. It is important to acknowledge again that Oberstown has a very child-centred, individualised and rights-based approach to the children in their care.

But this is a highly dynamic environment, and it is important to keep open our discussions on where further improvements to our work can be made.

So, it's great to have this opportunity to engage with colleagues from all the agencies and actors across the youth justice sector.

It's important that we take time to consider how the system can best respond to the needs of young people through early prevention, effective interventions, and to reflect on the contributions all of us can make in our various roles as agents of change.

I wish you all a productive and engaging day and my thanks again to all the organisers.

## 3. Youth Justice in Motion

### 3.1 Youth Justice – What's it all about?

*Koulla Yiasouma, Chairperson, Oberstown Children Detention Centre*

This very personal and possibly subjective session will be based on my analysis of the subject matter, based on my observations over the last 40 years or so working cross these islands. I hope to sow the journey from never being spoken about to being a dream and beyond.

The state has been on quite a journey in the area of youth justice particularly with regards to custody which Damien will speak more about.

One of the things I hope that we reflect on today is identifying what the Youth Justice System in Ireland is, and who it is. I am just going to give a reminder of the guiding principles for the whole system.

the best interest of children to remove them from the CJS completely. However, we are where we are.



4 general principles all of which apply equally

**What is best interests (GC 14) -** The best interests of the child was first referred to as a concept in 1959, Declaration of the Rights of the Children.

*The concept of the child's best interests is aimed at ensuring both the full and effective enjoyment of all the rights recognized in the Convention and the holistic development of the child. The Committee has already pointed out that "an adult's judgment of a child's best interests cannot override the obligation to respect all the child's rights under the Convention."*

*It recalls that there is no hierarchy of rights in the Convention; all the rights provided for therein are in the "child's best interests" and no right could be compromised by a negative interpretation of the child's best interests.*

#### Exceptions:

Article 9, 10, 18, 20 parents and family unless in the best interests of the child

Art 40 tried and held separately from adults unless in the best interests of the child. Rights are nothing unless there is clear guidance and evidence of making them a reality in the lives of children.



It's THE framework and *best interests* is one of its guiding principles. A rights compliant system is about societal and systemic change. We need to eradicate child poverty, ensure that all children have the same opportunities, receive health care when they need it, are supported to have the best educational experience and the **age of criminal responsibility** needs to be at an age that places responsibility for children regardless of behaviour firmly in the place where it belongs, not consigned them to a criminal justice system that tries but ultimately is unsuccessful. It is in





### Youth Justice Rights instruments

There are a raft of rights instrument that outline the framework by which we ensure a rights compliant Youth Justice system.

- The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (Beijing Rules), 1985
- UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (Riyadh Guidelines), 1990
- CRC, 37 and 40 specifically address children in youth justice.

The State has most definitely been on a journey of seeing these young people as “juvenile delinquent” to the “child involved with the criminal justice system”.

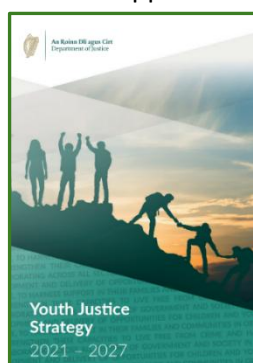
And for that GC 24 must be the template - more of which in a minute.

- Children first, with due respect for their rights
- Effective Governance & Monitoring.
- Involve children and young people
- Effective services for children and young people
- Community-based organisations
- Support children and young people to

refrain from offending and make positive life choices, while also upholding the rights of victims.

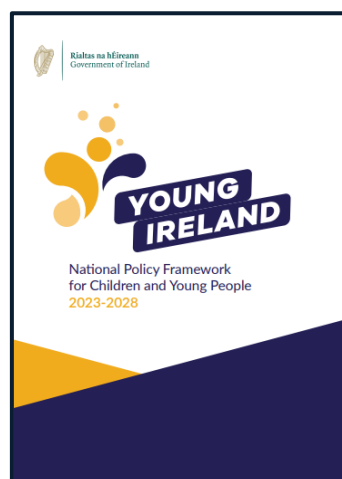
So how has the state sought to implement the rights of the child? Specifically for Youth Justice we have the Strategy with the Vision of:

*Collaborating across all sectors of government and society in the development and delivery of opportunities for children and young people, to harness support in their families and communities in order to strengthen their capacities to live free from crime and harm.*

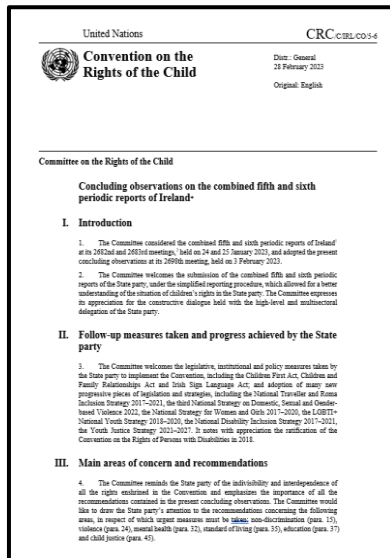


- Young people in conflict with the law will be treated as children first, with due respect for their rights, in a way that strengthens their capacity for positive participation in community life, and reinforces respect for the human rights and freedoms of others
- We will provide effective Governance, Monitoring and Support for policy implementation and the continuing evidence-informed development of practice and programmes.
- We will involve children and young people as active partners in the development of systems and programmes
- We will provide services for children and young people who come in contact with the Criminal Justice System, or who are in situations more likely to give rise to offending behaviour, to support their development and desistance from offending behaviour. We will also ensure ongoing assessment of effective practices as part of dedicated youth justice monitoring systems.
- Community-based organisations play a vital role in delivering particular services to children and young people.
- We will conduct Criminal Justice Processes to, as far as possible, support children and young people to refrain from offending and make positive life choices, while also upholding the rights of victims.

### Implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child



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But bearing in mind the first of the principles of the Strategy that young people involved with offending are children first we have to look to overarching frameworks.

GMI - Young Ireland - AN IRELAND WHICH FULLY RESPECTS AND REALISES THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

1. Active and Healthy
2. Achieving in Learning and Development
3. Safe and Protected from Harm
4. Economic Security and Opportunity
5. Connected, Respected and Contributing to their World

Action 40.4. 50, 51 and general recognition of the Youth Justice Strategy and then of course the Concluding observations from the UN Committee when it examined the State last year.

### Concluding Observations

Recalling its general comment No. 24 (2019), the Committee urges the State party to bring its child justice system fully into line with the Convention and other relevant standards and:

- (a) To raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age;
- (b) To ensure that children below the age of 18 are not prosecuted as adult offenders, without exception;
- (c) To consider replicating the child justice court model in Dublin throughout the State party, with a view to ensuring that all children in the State party have access to a child justice court and/or specialized judges and prosecutors;
- (d) To provide systematic training on children's rights and child-friendly proceedings for the judiciary, lawyers, law enforcement officials and

other relevant officials working with children in the justice system;

(e) To avoid the use, and limit the duration, of pretrial detention by ensuring that children arrested and deprived of their liberty are promptly brought before a competent authority to examine the legality of deprivation of liberty or its continuation, and that pretrial detention is regularly and judicially reviewed;

(f) To actively promote non-judicial measures, such as diversion, mediation and counselling, for children accused of criminal offences, and, wherever possible, the use of non-custodial sentences for children, such as probation or community service;

(g) To ensure that detention is used as a measure of last resort and for the shortest possible period of time and that it is reviewed on a regular basis, with a view to its withdrawal, and address the overrepresentation of children belonging to minority groups in detention;

(h) To develop measures, in consultation with affected children and their families, to prevent racial profiling by law enforcement authorities;

(i) To strengthen measures to provide community-based social reintegration services for children leaving the justice system;

(j) To consider opting into, or transpose the most important elements of, the European Union directive on procedural safeguards for children who are suspects or accused persons in criminal proceedings.

### Evidenced Based Core Messages for Youth Justice

Adversity	Adolescent development	Universal Services	Individualisation
Diversion	Positive relationships	Detention	Continuing support
	Involving young people	Developing an evidence base	

All of these are in the best interests of children but it is individualisation that make it about the child.

*"An individualised, rights-based and child-centred approach is key to preventing young people from getting into further conflict with the law."*

So if we are to do all of the above including to be trauma informed we are getting closer to the practical implementation of children's rights

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which are systemic changes that enable us to respond to the individual needs of the children we have before us.

Article 53 of the Justice Act demands that each and every agency in the youth justice system has clear procedures backed by with recording, monitoring (supported by data and direct feedback from young people) and training of all its staff that ensures not only do they understand the child in receipt of their services but that they are able to respond to them.

In custody it might look like.....

In policing it might look like .....

In PPS .....

In courts .....

In Community based services

The child and their family will confirm if their best interests have been taken into account – partnership with them.

Balance – the aversion to include best interests as I have said is because it will deny the rights of victims. We know that children are less likely to commit further crime if their rights are protected and they get a better start in life. However, there will be some occasions where a child poses a particular risk to a family member, another individual or even a community. In such cases I struggle to understand how it can be in their best interests to put them in a situation where they may hurt others or instil the belief that they shouldn't care about others. To be clear not every child who commits a serious crime is not likely to repeat such behaviour but it is important

that we make every effort to try and understand the individual child. But to a degree this is a spurious argument most children involved with the criminal justice system are not involved in the most serious offences.

We know what the evidence is telling us, we should know what children and their families are telling us they need and we should be working with everyone particularly practitioners and civil society to make it happen.



### Rights to Reality

*"Pulling back the curtain to reveal words of positivity, colour and brightness."*

The Oberstown vision is to provide young people with the highest standards of rights based, child centred care that meets their needs and enables them to maximise their potential.

"....I could barely read and write when I got into Oberstown. I got my Junior Cert in there. I still paint now but not as much."

Thank You.

## 3.2 A 40-year Journey Towards Prevention, Intervention and Contribution

### *Damien Hernon, Director, Oberstown Children Detention Campus*

It would be remiss of me not to comment on the wonderful venue IMMA/RHK: some similarities in its previous purpose and function to ours in Oberstown, looked after people: former military hospital and iterations since then.

Our relationship goes back a number of years with IMMA "The Ride Away from the Storm" was a 2022 exhibition at the [Irish Museum of Modern Art \(IMMA\)](#) in Kilmainham, Dublin, featuring original artworks created by young people from [Oberstown](#).

Thank you for having me; I am delighted to be here on behalf of Oberstown, on behalf of all the young people who have ever lived there and on behalf of all the staff that have ever worked there and those who continue to work there. This event is an opportunity to showcase our young people and our staff in terms of the progress made within the area of youth detention.

Oberstown is an extraordinary/curious place: unless you've ever been/worked there you might struggle to get it/you might struggle to get us! Today I want to bring you on a youth justice journey of how Oberstown has got to where it is today; mindful that I only have 20 minutes, so it will be the abridged version. I'm going to focus on a 40-year journey, even though it is much longer and maybe figure out or ask the question of what the next 40 years will bring.

Best place to start is the beginning,

This allows us to consider the context.

This allows us look backwards.

This allows us to come up to speed with current developments.

Up until very recently the juvenile justice system in Ireland had primarily been governed by legislation dating back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which predated the creation of the Irish State. The 1908 Act "so unruly and depraved" describe the context. This dated legislation was replaced in full with the Children Act 2001, which was fully enacted in 2006. The underlying ethos of the Act is the principle that detention should only be used as a last

resort, and shortest time: and it's great to see that this is the focus of one of the sessions later on!

In this respect the Act upholds the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which provides that detention of those under the age of 18 "shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time."

Oberstown Children Detention Campus is a reconfigured service developed over the past number of years following an amalgamation of three detention schools operating as individual CDS. With capital investment of 55 million Euros in 2013 and legislative changes in June 2016, the establishment of one campus came into effect.

A Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System (July 1985), known as the Whitaker Report, called for St. Patrick's to be closed down citing unsuitable physical conditions of the building and an inappropriate prison regime. 'Monument to the failure of the State'. The Report was shocking with an adult regime, no specialist staff, pain compliant, bullying, intimidation etc.

Probably the catalyst for change: referred to throughout the early engagement and process

2007 Interdepartmental group on child detention; decision to amalgamate the current schools into one campus Oberstown Children detention campus.

2012 funding secured to the tune of €55/€56 million

IYJS subset of Dept of Children

Subsequent strategies to ensure the delivery of the Campus and the States objectives within youth justice

Build programme 2013; moved in 2014!!

At this stage we can all appreciate how difficult the amalgamation was: Environment; Systems; Human Behaviour.

There is a different picture today and this event is evidence of the distance travelled and the phenomenal attendance here today.

### Key Enablers: Political/Financial/Legislative

Key milestones changing face of youth detention:

- **March 2015:** Responsibility for all new 17-year-old committals is [transferred to Oberstown](#) from the prison system.
- **July 2015:** [Children \(Amendment\) Act passed](#), which removes legislative obstacles to ending the detention of children in St Patrick's Institution.
- **June 1 2016:** [Children Act 2001 \(Amalgamation of Children Detention Schools\) Order 2016](#), Oberstown Children Detention Campus
- **April 2017:** [St. Patrick's Institution closes](#), is removed from statute, and all children under 18 are henceforth committed to Oberstown.

CEHOP Framework: game changer, all on the same page and a process by which to review young people's progress and their milestones within the CEHOP.

- Care – individualised
- Education – meet young people where they are at and create individually based opportunities
- Health – address health issues, create clear thinking, address pain
- Offending Behaviour – a suite of programmes, including offence specific programmes, in place in collaboration with external partners (Solas, Crosscare, Consent Ed, NIAPP, and ACTS) to help young people address their offending behaviour.
- Preparation for Leaving – work with stakeholders to progress into the future.

Young People are our core business purpose; front and centre of our strategy.

Children's Rights Policy Framework came into being July 2020 and has been reviewed this year. There are 12 rules within the framework which set out a high level statement or standard against which the campus is inspected on an annual basis by HIQA.

Board oversight with regard to the policies.

A robust set of procedures has been developed by the Office of the Director, to support implementation of the rules and policies by staff.

Consultation/Participation

Lundy Model: space, voice, audience, influence

### National Impact

Oberstown Campus Council: supported by advocacy officer

Raise issues of importance for the young people that get discussed at different levels within the organisation: socially acceptable way of doing business: space, voice, audience, influence with regular access to the Director and the SMT.

Evidence of same: food convention; Huge piece of work/huge impact widely felt and ultimately a systems change leading to better outcomes.

Young people committee on BOM: monthly meeting with BOM; issues of importance into another process.

Interviews of senior management team prior to appointment; DH/MG - I was interviewed by young people as part of the recruitment process. The input of young people is valuable and important.

### National

Oireachtas committee on Children chaired by Kathleen Funchion, recently elected MEP visited the campus and met with campus council and wrote back to them, highlighting the areas they raised as important.

These are matters that matter to the young people the 5 points raised really add value to their lives.

Bloom: The Rise Garden/describes their journey/space/audience/voice/influence change the narrative/acknowledge the progress.

The President's Award Gaisce; active participation choose the path/ the story they want to tell/journey of discovery/reward.

Judiciary: stakeholder events represented by our advocacy officer/increase judges understanding of who they are/increase Garda understanding of who they are.

IMMA art exhibition; participation through art/online repository/building prestigious/their story their issues/influence; describe the painting; Martin's story.

National media coverage: change the narrative/acknowledge the progress.

Breath of Fresh Éire consists of three art installations, created by the young people of Oberstown and



overseen by artist Joe Caslin. The three parts of the project are:

Life's Patterns, a series of ten individual art pieces drawn by Gardaí and the young people at Oberstown;

A Breath of Fresh Éire, a large piece of artwork painted by the young people and community Gardaí.

Outreach, a large mural, created in collaboration by Gardaí, artist Joe Caslin and the young people at Oberstown.

The project aimed to foster a sense of understanding and connection between the young people, An Garda Síochána, and the wider Balbriggan community.

i/c OCO newly launched Court Accompaniment Service, support young person defendants with understanding of court process etc off the back of a discussion with our young people.

#### **Participation at International level**

Relationship with NHC/YOPE towards the Walk in My Shoes programme.

The process/facilitated by young people/staff/Dutch visitors lived experience/describe the impact the influence.

Greater understanding of our young people across various grades of staff; quite moving.

Also completed with Board of Management: hugely impactful.

Data mosaic: data capture violence against children in places of detention across 3 countries: towards improved data collection/lived experience and policy change.

PPRO: describe court process/developments and responsibility.

World Congress on justice with children: Oberstown involved in the delivery of 3 workshops based on progress within the children detention setting.

#### **Where to next**

Imagine a world where we got this right.

Imagine a world where PIC got the same attention.

Imagine a world where society would be better served by looking after our young people through earlier intervention; where we had universal availability of services; where the alternatives to detention were real and concrete.

Whole system approach/10's versus 100's.

Once these are all in place we could have a really valuable conversation about prevention/intervention/contribution and the impact on all of society.

Finally

'That which isn't good for the hive, isn't good for the bee'.

Interdependence: young people are part of a larger society and their success or failure is linked to the health of the community.

Collective responsibility: young people's well-being depends on the community's ability to provide support opportunity and a safe environment.

Harm to society: if the community/society struggles, this can negatively impact young people, which in turn can lead to negative outcomes further harming community/society.

In summary, a youth justice system that focuses solely on individual consequences without addressing the broader community context is missing the point; as the fate of the individual is woven into the fate of the community.

Imagine if we got it right/imagine if we did it better as a whole system approach.



### 3.3 Way2Work Ireland

#### *Derek Byrne, CEO, Way2Work Ireland*

I spent some time in Trinity House and have some amazing memories of being there and I remember the hope that it gave me. I worked in the social care sector and saw young people with no options or education. This was where the concept for Way2Work was formed.

#### **Who are we?**

- A not-for-profit organisation built initially in partnership with Tusla to support the creation and nurturing of ambition.
- Set up in 2019 with the idea of creating sustainable pathways into employment for young people leaving the care system.
  - The criteria for application is ambition and motivation to achieve.
  - Age group: 16-23 years old.
  - Location of Operation: Leinster, Munster and Connaught.

#### **Way2Work offers two programmes:**

##### **Mentoring Programme:**

- One-to-One Mentoring
- Bespoke Goal-Setting – led by the young person
- Career Guidance and Advice
- Professional Development
- Skills Building and Training Opportunities
- Access to our growing employer network, currently 350+ employers nationwide. These provide great opportunities for young people – for example in aerospace.

##### **Training Programme:**

- Young person is referred for training in preparation for accessing the employment market or further education
- Training provided is based on the young person's employment goals and requests
- Training booked externally with third-party suppliers
- Each young person has a budget of up to €1000

- All training areas are accessible – Way2Work can expand into new areas as needed/requested

#### **Way2Work – Industries of Success**

- Construction
- Motor
- Aerospace
- Retail
- Beauty
- Hospitality

#### **Positive Outcomes for the Young Person**

- Purpose in life
- Confidence
- Self esteem
- Improved mental health and resilience
- Positive employment and social network
- Harm reduction
- Further opportunity
- Financial stability
- Autonomy over one's life

#### **Positive Outcomes for the State**

- Education
- Health / addiction
- Justice system
- Probation
- Social services

#### **Way2Work's Reach**

- Tusla Aftercare and Residential
- TESS: North Dublin DEIS Schools
- SCSIP team: national
- CHI
- Oberstown Campus

#### **Experience**

- Personal background
- Experience in Oberstown
- What I learned
- What we can achieve for the YP in Oberstown

## 4. 25 Years of the Children Act – Taking Stock

*Facilitator: Gerry Curran, Courts Service Media Relations Advisor & NUJ President*

### 4.1 25Years of the Children Act

*The Hon. Mr. Justice Paul Kelly, President of the District Court*

On the 9<sup>th</sup> February 1924 a report appeared in the Wicklow People about a case in the local District Court. A young boy appeared before the court for stealing a watch that he then sold to a shopkeeper for a shilling having told him that he found the watch on the road. He wanted to use the shilling to pay for a night's lodging. The Judge was told by the solicitor that he came from a family of eight and pleaded with the Judge not to send him to an industrial school, as they were called at the time. The judge made the decision to send the boy, who was due to turn 14 the following week, to an industrial school as it would be better for his mother seeing as she wouldn't have to take care of him.

This is an example of how child offenders were dealt with in a different era, under the Children Act 1908. Even though that Act was the first recognition of the need to differentiate between child and adult offenders, and to promote rehabilitation for children, it still allowed for cases to be dealt with in the way that unfortunate boy was. It limited the length of custodial sentences, emphasised non-custodial sentences, and protected the privacy of children.

Fast forward to 1970 when the Kennedy Report led to increased focus on the welfare of children in conflict with the law, and the provision of resources for their treatment in the community. Loughan House (1978) and then Trinity House (1983) were established to deal with children deemed to be “unmanageable” within other care environments. Over the following years, more reports and task forces recommended a focus on needs of young people, support for youth services and training for Gardai and youth workers. The Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act 1983 offered a further alternative to young offenders aged from 16 to 21.

The Whitaker Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System in 1985 set a new imperative for modernising the Irish youth justice system. It advocated diversion, supervision, community penalties and restorative justice.

The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) sets out the basic human rights to which every child is entitled. These include:

- Survival rights such as nutrition, shelter and access to medical services.
- Development rights such as education, access to information and freedom of thought.
- Protection rights such as protection from abuse, neglect and exploitation.
- Participation rights such expression of opinions and taking part in social and cultural activities.

It came into force in 1990, and was adopted in Ireland when ratified in 1992. This led to an overhaul of the legislative framework, prompted also by several decades of parliamentary review and inquiry into the previous reformatory and industrial schools' system.

In 1992, a parliamentary committee recommended legislative overhaul in line with international standards on youth justice. It recommended a graduated response using a range of options from cautions all the way up to detention as a last resort. It also sought an increase in the age of criminal responsibility from 7 to 12, as well as the specialisation of youth justice – among Gardai, prosecution and probation services and juvenile courts with trained judges. All of these measures reflected the imperative of the UNCRC and other international standards.

The Children Act 2001 enshrined in legislation most of the aforementioned measures. In the 25

years since, it has continued to evolve. It is worth looking at the long title of the act which sets out its rationale and purpose:

“AN ACT TO MAKE FURTHER PROVISION IN RELATION TO THE CARE, PROTECTION AND CONTROL OF CHILDREN AND, IN PARTICULAR, TO REPLACE THE CHILDREN ACT, 1908, AND OTHER ENACTMENTS RELATING TO JUVENILE OFFENDERS, TO AMEND AND EXTEND THE CHILD CARE ACT, 1991, AND TO PROVIDE FOR RELATED MATTERS.”

The Act provides many important protections for children in conflict with the justice system. We don't have time to go through them all, but I would highlight the following:

S52: increased the age of criminal responsibility to 12, except for murder, manslaughter, rape and aggravated sexual assault where it arises from 10;

Part 6 provides detailed protections for the treatment of children in Garda stations;

S71 established the Children Court, in which I am proud to sit, and s72 provides for the specific training of judges who sit in the Children Court;

S77 – 80 allow for the involvement of Tusla, and the convening of family conferences and the making of action plans tailored to the child;

S96 specifically provides that an order for detention of a child can only be made as a last resort;

S111 allows for Parental Supervision Orders – never used? While s113 allows a court to make a compensation order against parents of a guilty child – rarely if ever used, as most parents of children before the Children Court are from disadvantaged backgrounds;

#### **Detention Schools**

“s158.—It shall be the principal object of children detention schools to provide appropriate F151[appropriate educational, training and other programmes and facilities] for children referred to them by a court and, by—

(a) having regard to their health, safety, welfare and interests, including their physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing,

(b) providing proper care, guidance and supervision for them,

(c) preserving and developing satisfactory relationships between them and their families,

(d) exercising proper moral and disciplinary influences on them, and

(e) recognising the personal, cultural and linguistic identity of each of them,

to promote their reintegration into society and prepare them to take their place in the community as persons who observe the law and are capable of making a positive and productive contribution to society”

s252 mandates the anonymity of children before the Children Court;

s258 gives a very valuable benefit by in effect wiping any conviction for offences committed by a child from their record if they stay conviction free for 3 years after turning 18.

All of these are extremely valuable and beneficial for children and their families. However, possibly the biggest single advance brought about by the Children Act was the placing on a statutory footing of a structured and supported Youth Diversion Programme. Part 4 of the act lays out in detail a system of engagement by specially trained Gardai with young offenders and their families and communities.

It uses a system of trained Juvenile Liaison Officers, based in each Garda district who can meet child offenders in their family and community and tailor a series of diversions from criminal behaviour and influences, and direct them into pro-social activities and CBOs. The success of this programme is demonstrated by some statistics:

2011 -referrals 27,384, involving 12,809 children; 9721 (76%) children admitted to the programme; there were 6944 informal cautions, and 903 Restorative Justice cautions

2012 – referrals 24,069, involving 12,246 children; 9776 (80%) admitted. 6256 informal cautions, 1036 RJ cautions.

Approx 75% were male, 25% female.

By 2023, the figures were:

Referrals: 15,813, involving 7843 children; 1200 deemed unsuitable, and therefore prosecuted in court.

Roughly speaking, over the past 15 years, the percentage of children referred to the programme who emerge without being prosecuted is approximately 85%. The numbers of children being prosecuted remains low overall – the 2024 Courts Service Annual Report shows that there were 350, 852 offences prosecuted in the District Court, involving 207,610 individual offenders. While I don't have a breakdown of the number of children prosecuted, it is likely to be close to the number deemed unsuitable for the diversion programme in 2023 – 1200. The Children Court made 3922 orders in respect of children in 2024 – in many cases, children were subjected to multiple orders. What is most significant I submit is that of that 3922 orders, a mere 150 were Detention Orders! These figures not only demonstrate the effectiveness of the diversion system, but also the compliance by the Children Court and its judges with the letter and spirit of the Act.

However, the most significant change over the past 25 years has been in the thinking and mindset of the court system generally, and the District Court and its judges in particular. The 21st century has seen greater focus on human rights, civil liberties, protection and welfare of children, support and recognition for victims, and reliance on experts such as psychologists, social workers, probation officers and assessors of various types. In the field of juvenile crime, judges are using community sanctions, restorative justice and health and welfare based

interventions as alternatives to custodial sentences. Examples include substance misuse programmes, driver re-education programmes such as Pro Social Ireland, Extern Bail Supervision scheme, and a plethora of community based projects catering for child and young adult offenders. The Children Act 2001 transformed the approach to juvenile justice, with its emphasis on welfare and education, and obliging judges to use detention only as a last resort.

Returning to the boy from 1924 with whom we started, we can compare how he would be treated today very favourably with how he was in 1924. He would have been first of all referred to the Garda Youth Diversion programme, which may well have diverted him from the court process. And if, notwithstanding all of that, he ended up in front of the Children Court, neither I nor any of my colleagues could sentence him to detention without first exploring all other community sanctions, welfare and education supports. In that regard I suggest that the Children Act, our society, and our DC have continued to evolve successfully as the Act reaches its 25th birthday!

But – there remain challenges, and room for improvement:

EG: enable full use of all the community options – day centres, intensive supervision etc;

Increase support for GNYDB, CBOs, and youth organisations; consider a remand detention centre?

## 4.2 Youth Justice: A Children's Rights Perspective

### *Dr Niall Muldoon, Ombudsman for Children*

Good morning to you all,

It's a very great pleasure to have been able to accept the invite to such a beautiful setting and to be afforded the opportunity to contribute to this reflection on the 2001 Children Act, on where we've come from in respect of the many issues around youth justice and where we still need to go.

In doing so, it is perhaps important to point out – because I am sure there are many who are unaware of the chronology – that when that 2001 legislation was passing through the Houses of the Oireachtas, the Ombudsman for Children's Office did not exist. The Children Act of 2001 Act predates our own founding legislation by a year and predates our full establishment as a working Office by three years.

In saying that, I believe that the impetus behind the Children's Act and the creation of my Office was much the same. Broadly speaking, both are reactions to a decade of damning revelations that exposed cracks as wide as craters in the Irish child welfare and protection systems.

Quite simply, it became clear that things couldn't continue as they were. On many fronts, the State was shamed into action and into implementing reforms, legislative and otherwise, to improve the treatment of children. In 1999, let's not forget, the then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern had felt compelled to apologise to victims of childhood abuse for what he described as the collective failures of the state in respect of our former industrial and reformatory school system, a core pillar of our youth justice system for almost a century.

There was no denying those failures.

Even at this remove, it seems somewhat remarkable to consider that the 2001 Children Act was effectively a replacement for the

Children Act of 1908, which of course pre-dated the establishment of the state. Little wonder then it was heralded by at least one academic author as a '*fundamental revolution in the law relating to juvenile justice*'.

After such a passage of time, how could it not?

- It shifted the focus towards the prevention of criminal behaviour.
- Conferred rights on children comparable to those of adults by allowing them to participate in any proceedings against them.
- And, in a break from what had been the convention for much of the previous century, it deemed the detention of children to be an act of last resort.<sup>1</sup>

I have no doubt that had the Ombudsman for Children's Office been up and running at that point we would have recognised it for it was – a landmark piece of legislation and a major advance on what had gone before. We would have recognised it, too, as a piece of legislation that, critically, took cognisance of international standards and was informed by the relevant provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Ireland had become a signatory state in 1992.

But twenty-five years is a long time ago and our society has, in many ways, greatly transformed from what it was at the start of this century. Of course, nothing is static and as the title of this conference implies, youth justice too needs to "Take Stock", because it is an area where policy approaches are required to constantly evolve. The speed of societal change is increasing every decade – we waited nearly 100 years to change the previous legislation and now we are doing the same within 25 years BUT our children and the lives they live are changing every ten years now. We just have to reflect on the journey of a child born in 2001 (possibly qualified from college and

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<sup>1</sup> Eoin O'Sullivan, Residential child welfare in Ireland, 1965-2008: an outline of policy, legislation and practice: a paper prepared for the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, CICA Report Vol. IV, pp.251-252; see also 'The Main Principles of the Children Act 2001', in John Reddy, *The*

*Youth Justice System in Ireland: A Review* (2022) p. 16. Accessible [https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/37979/1/Review\\_of\\_Irish\\_youth\\_justice-2022.pdf](https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/37979/1/Review_of_Irish_youth_justice-2022.pdf)



in work or further education) and compare it to the child born in 2011.

This child, who is now 14, has lived with IT all their lives and may have an AI companion, had Covid as a buddy for the last life years of primary school and see a world which is becoming more angry, right wing and has a lot of noise about OTHERS (however, they are defined). The certainty and security of **mostly** peace loving, democratic and reputable countries in both Europe and the Western World is no longer there for this child. And locally, they may be part of the growing number of children living at risk of consistent poverty (which involves 20% of our child population) while also seeing a small minority in the country hoovering up more and more of the wealth and access to life's necessities such as a worthwhile job with sufficient pay to put a roof over your head and help you grow a family – is getting less and less likely to many.

Thus, it is crucial that we get a reviewed legislation which recognises that child's reality and also considers the future for his or her children.

The perspective that the Ombudsman for Children's Office has always sought to bring to bear on these approaches is informed by our own legislative mission as an independent statutory body. Essentially, this mission is two-pronged. Firstly, it is to promote the rights and welfare of children. And secondly, it is to investigate complaints by, or on behalf, of young people under the age of 18 against Irish public bodies.

Guided by this mandate we have, over the course of our twenty or so years, taken a very keen interest in how children are dealt with by our justice system and our contributions have, I believe, been both constructive and firm.

For instance, the plight of children detained in the old St. Patrick's Institution was a source of constant concern to our office, and my

predecessor recorded her horror at the degraded conditions in which children were kept after visiting in 2009. One child, when asked to describe the experience of being locked up for 23 hours in a cell on protection, responded: Fucking freezing! A padded wall, no clothes, only a pair of Y-fronts...for days.<sup>2</sup>

Our office, over the years, was consistent in our calls to cease the detention of children in adult prisons and had ongoing engagement with Government to progress this. Hence, it was a momentous moment when St. Patrick's did eventually close in 2017, although it was much later than originally planned.<sup>3</sup>

The headline in the Irish Times at that time was "Grim chapter in criminal justice ends as St Patrick's closes" (7/4/17 Irish Times)

and it highlighted that the IPRT stated that "in 2011, the prison gained the ignominious position of becoming Ireland's most violent, with one-quarter of its population on 23-hour lock-up". This was then followed by a quote from the Prison Inspector, Judge Micheal O'Reilly's Report in 2011 where he said that locking away 16- and 17-year-old children for 23 hours a day "offends against all that should be expected of a civilised society in the 21st century".

The first Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (and my predecessor as Ombudsman for Children), Emily Logan was quoted as saying that

"Deprivation of liberty is a punishment in itself and the move to a care environment will bring Ireland in line with international human rights standards, a move that will benefit children, families and society more generally,".

The move to Oberstown Detention Campus was a major about turn in regards to how we view our children and the focus there on the whole of the

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<sup>2</sup> Address by the Ombudsman for Children to the Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children, 17 July 2013. See <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2017/11/PresentationtotheOireachtasCommitteeonHealthChildrenJuly2013.pdf> ; for earlier report on St. Patrick's, see **2007 PCO report on St. Patrick's Institution** [https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2017/09/Executive\\_Summary-FINAL-VERSION.pdf](https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2017/09/Executive_Summary-FINAL-VERSION.pdf) and **2010 OCO report on St. Patrick's** . The closure of St. Patrick's Institution to young

people under 18, it was reported, would be achieved in 2013/2014. While it is important to recognise the progress made, it is equally important to insist that conditions improve for young people in the interim

<https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2010/10/St-Pats-Report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Irish Times, 7 April 2017. Accessible at <https://www.irishtimesm/news/crime-and-law/grim-chapter-in-criminal-justice-ends-as-st-patrick-s-closes-1.3039455>



child with a core belief in children's rights is really crucial. Their model is built around "care, education, health, offending behaviour, and preparation for leaving" – which is a far cry from the St. Patrick's Institution way of working and which was reported to have led to a 70% re-offending rate!!

2017 was also the year that, during my own tenure as Ombudsman, our Outreach team began conducting monthly visits to Oberstown Detention Campus to speak with the young people who are in remand or sentenced. These visits have presented us with opportunities to inform those young people of their rights while, simultaneously, affording them an opportunity to bring any complaint they might have to our attention. Our focus is always on ensuring that the voice of the child is heard and that, where possible, a local resolution to any complaint can be found.

However, through these visits and through these contacts with the children within Oberstown we became aware of deeper problems with the operation of the justice system. We became aware that young people going before the courts were not always able to fully understand the legal process, or what was happening to them. Some had learning difficulties. Others had communication difficulties which, in some instances, left them misunderstanding the conditions of their bail and prone to recidivism. We learned from our engagements with TUSLA and from the management team at Oberstown that, unlike in many other countries, Ireland didn't have a service where intermediaries are on hand to help young people navigate the court process.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, back in 2023, we raised this with the Judiciary and with the Department of Justice whose response was extremely positive and resulted in the roll-out of training and new supports for young people coming before the courts.

Thanks to the launch, by Minister Jim O'Callaghan of The Protocol to Expedite Rape and Murder Cases Involving Victims and Defendants Under 18

Years of Age, back in 21<sup>st</sup> of February, it was very heartening to be able to record in our most recent annual report the introduction of a new system of court accompaniment for child defendants, which this year has been rolled out to the 100 plus youth diversion projects throughout the country.<sup>5</sup> It is my understanding that approximately 500 people will be trained to do this work by the end of this year. The response from the Department of Justice on this is one we will hold up as best practice as it is an example of how taking a child centred approach can improve services and help children.

On a much broader level, my Office has been engaged with offering observations on a package of proposed amendments to the 2001 Children Act. It is positive to see the Bill included in the legislative programme for this Dáil term and this piece of legislation needs to progress as quickly as possible. However, from my Office's perspective there are a number of outstanding issues, and while I acknowledge that it has taken many years for this legislation to progress through the houses - it cannot now be rushed through without resolving those issues.

We have recommended some amendments which, we believe, would strengthen the legislation from a children's rights perspective.

Our recommendations included, for instance, calls for...

- The new court accompaniment service to be put on a statutory footing – which, thankfully, we have already achieved – Bravo to the Dept of Justice.
- For the raising of the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years (from 12 years), which would ensure that Ireland abides by the concluding observations given by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023. It must also be remembered that we also have an exception to the age of criminal responsibility, whereby we say it is ok for children aged 10 or 11 to be charged with murder, manslaughter, rape or aggravated sexual assault.

<sup>4</sup> Falling Behind: OCO Annual report 2022, p. 48

<sup>5</sup> OCO Annual Report 2024, p. 28. Accessible at <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2025/05/OCO-Annual-Report-2024-Tomorrow-Starts-with-Us.pdf>

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- For the introduction of a statutory right to integrated, and appropriate, aftercare for children leaving detention.
- For an amendment to the *new Deferred Sentence Supervision Orders to reduce recourse to adult imprisonment.*
- *And for the extension of the principles and sanctions of the youth justice system to apply to young people up to the age of 24, the call for which has already been led by the Irish Penal Reform Trust.*<sup>6</sup>

This is a vital opportunity to improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in Ireland. Another chance might not come around again for two generations.

When I reflect more generally on the trajectory of our youth justice system over the last quarter of a century, I have no hesitation in acknowledging that impressive progress has been made.

Most striking of all has been the great reduction in the numbers of young people in detention facilities. Community-based sanctions are now preferred and there is no doubting the better appreciation there is of the developmental needs of our young people throughout the justice system.

But, to borrow an expression from another era and a different field, if a lot has been done, there is still, much more to do.

Every year and in almost all spheres of public administration, my Office decries the absence of inter-agency and inter-departmental collaboration or co-operation, and this endures, despite commitments in the Youth Justice Strategy report to a 'system-wide collaborative approach'.<sup>7</sup>

There continues to be an overrepresentation of children from minority or marginalised backgrounds, like Traveller and Roma, in our youth justice system which points to wider societal issues and the need for more targeted preventive measures.

Demographic information for Oberstown 2023

- Average age 16 years
- 53 (41%) from Dublin
- 12 (9%) of non-Irish origin
- 27 (21%) from the Irish Traveller Community (they are less than 1% of total population)

### *Onward placements 2023*

A total of 116 young people left Oberstown in 2023

- 74 (64%) – Home; – 16 (14%) – Residential care;
- 14 (12%) – Relative/Foster Care;
- 12 (10%) – Prison

All of this suggests that our best investment, as a State, would be in family and societal support for our children in order to prevent their ending up on Oberstown at all.

Then there are the series of specific considerations that I have just mentioned and which have informed my Office's submission to the proposed amendments to the 2001 Children Act.

All of that is before we consider the mounting challenges that our children face that I have touched on with the 14 year old – not just from the old enemies such as poverty and disadvantage, but issues like AI and online misinformation, from toxic social media discourse and hate speech that hold the potential to propel our children and teenagers into conflict with the law.

So there is big job of work to be done, and my Office is committed to working with all the stakeholders and agencies represented here to ensure that the whole array of rights that we say that children possess are dutifully observed. My Office is at the start of a journey towards the full and direct incorporation of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into law in Ireland and we would love you all to consider getting behind that ask.

This is one of the key ways that we can ensure that children's rights are fully respected and considered. And it also has the potential to

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<sup>6</sup> OCO, Observations on the General Scheme of the Children (Amendment) Bill 2024, 28 August 2025. Accessible <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2025/09/Observations-on->

[the-General-Scheme-of-the-Children-Amendment-Bill-2024.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> Youth Justice Strategy 2021 – 2027, p. 5

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transform the culture within our Government and society to a more child centred one.

Ireland ratified the UNCRC in 1992 essentially meaning the State committed to promote and consider children's rights, but over 30 years later it has not been incorporated into our laws. Full and direct incorporation would mean that the State would be obliged to consider children in any law or decisions that affects them. A simple example would be the pandemic when schools closed, playgrounds closed, developmental checks were stopped in some parts of the country and child protection referrals dropped off. It was weeks and months later that the State started to consider how their decisions were impacting children, and to begin implementing accommodations to ensure that children had access to healthcare, education and all of their

other rights. Had the UNCRC been fully and directly incorporated into law at that time NPHE or another similar agency would have had children's rights on their list of consideration. We can see now the impact that not fully considering rights has had with the clarity of hindsight on children's mental health, school attendance, social interactions and much more.

This has been done before, most recently in Scotland and were we to do so here it would, I believe, prove transformational and would impact in a tangible way the lived experience of children in Ireland, including those who are the focus of our conference here today.

So, thank you all for your time, and I look forward to our discussion.

## 4.3 Principled Responses to Serious Violent Offending

*Prof. Nessa Lynch, University College Cork*

This presentation discussed the gaps in the Irish child justice system relating to responses to serious violent offending. Responses generally involve an exclusionary approach, removing the child from some or all protections of the child justice system. The presentation considered recent Supreme Court decisions which have highlighted these legislative gaps, and placed Ireland's system in the global context. The presentation concluded by offering some reflections on the shape of a principled response to children who commit serious violent offences.

### **The Children Act 2001 and serious offending**

The Children Act 2001 (as amended) provides the legislative framework and guiding principles for Ireland's response to children in conflict with the law. In Ireland, as in comparable jurisdictions, serious offending (defined here as murder, manslaughter, serious sexual violence and terrorist offences) by children is comparatively rare, though such instances tend to receive significant media attention. The Children Act is considered to be generally progressive and evidence-based, including a comprehensive Garda Diversion programme, the establishment of a Children Court and detailed trial, sentencing and detention provisions. The Children Act largely aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child including its definition of the child as a person under 18 years, its emphasis on diversion and community-based measures, and its provision for rights-based detention. The legislation emphasises the child's best interests and their right to be heard and sets out progressive sentencing principles that emphasise rehabilitation and reintegration. The Children Act requires that detention be child-centred and take place within a single national facility (Oberstown) where all children under 18 years are accommodated, regardless of the gravity of their offending.

However, the Children Act does not provide a comprehensive or coherent approach for children who are accused of serious offending such as homicide. In these cases, children are excluded from some or all of the protections of the child justice system and left in an unprincipled and

uncertain legislative gap, particularly regarding sentencing. Further, although the general age of criminal responsibility is 12 years, there is an exception for children accused of murder, manslaughter and serious violence, where children may be prosecuted at age 10.

### **Three Contextual Lenses**

Analysing and addressing this legislative gap in Ireland benefits from three contextual lenses:

First, to the *global context*. Ireland is certainly not unusual in grappling with cases of serious offending by children. In comparable common-law jurisdictions, apex and senior court decisions have shown the limits of the courts in shaping principled responses for such cases, in the absence of clear legislative frameworks. This includes New Zealand (*Dickey v R*), Canada (*R v DB*) and the United States (*Roper v Simmons*; *Miller v Alabama*). Across the European Union, Ireland would be an outlier in imposing indeterminate sentences on children, and out of step with the majority in relation to the place of detention for children who turn 18 during a sentence. Most jurisdictions in Europe have provision for young adults to be detained in separate facilities or to continue to be detained in child justice facilities.

Secondly, the *science of brain development* is highly influential in analysing the current state and thinking about the shape of a principled response. There are two intertwined aspects of the brain development evidence which are relevant in assessing culpability and the need for special considerations. First is the significant body of research studies which demonstrate the characteristics of the adolescent brain. This includes impulsivity, and susceptibility to peer influence. Importantly, the adolescent brain is plastic and amenable to rehabilitation and to change. The second factor is the prevalence of neuro-disability in the population of children in conflict with the law (this includes conditions such as traumatic brain injury, autism, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder and ADHD).

Thirdly, Ireland has obligations under the *international human rights framework* and most notably the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets out the shape of a principled and human rights compliant child justice system. The Convention requires that children benefit from all their rights in all circumstances. Children should not lose the protections of a specialized child justice system because of the seriousness of their alleged offending.

### **The incoherence of the system**

Recent Irish Supreme Court decisions (*DPP v PB*; *DPP v CC*) have demonstrated the incoherent and unprincipled gap for children convicted of murder, which can be extrapolated to other types of serious offending.

In *CC*, the child was convicted of murder following a retrial as the first trial collapsed. *CC* murdered a stranger female victim during a robbery attempt. He was 14 years old at the time of the offence and had a severe substance addiction and other traumatic life history. At trial, he was sentenced to life detention with a review period of 13 years. This was upheld by the Court of Appeal, who noted that despite his young age, that *CC* knew right from wrong and that the end sentence was not out of sync with similar cases. The Supreme Court traversed the uncertain legislative position for such cases and concluded that it was not possible for the Court to design a sentencing system without legislative backing. It concluded that the practice of setting the review period was unconstitutional, but that there was no law that prohibited a child being sentenced to an indeterminate period of detention. The Court's view was that children's sentences should generally be less than that of an adult but drew a distinction between behaviour that was impulsive or childlike, and adultlike behaviour.

In *PB*, the child had been convicted of murder at age 17 but had turned 18 during the period of the appeal. The question was whether the child's right to anonymity would persist past the age of 18, and while the appeal was proceeding. The Supreme Court interpreted the Children Act in a rehabilitative and reintegrative way, holding that the child's identity should continue to be suppressed, and that he should not be disadvantaged because he decided to appeal.

Overall, these decisions show the incoherence of the system. Children should not be excluded from

the principles and framework of the Children Act because of the seriousness of the offence.

### **What would a principled approach look like?**

The legislature has responded with partial fixes of gaps in the system, enacting the Criminal Justice Amendment Act 2024 to address the issue of children who turn 18 between conviction and sentence and confirming they are sentenced as children. Proposed amendments to the Children Act (Children Act Amendment Bill) 2024 would provide welcome amendments around name suppression and the principles of the Act.

Incremental progress (whether through legislative reform or precedent) is important, and can mitigate immediate injustices for children. However, incremental reforms may hide the need for a significant rethink on the shape of a principled and coherent response to accountability for children who commit serious offences.

A principled approach involving age appropriate accountability might be premised on some of the following principles:

First, universal jurisdiction for children. Ireland has a generally well-regarded specialized Children's Court, with specialized staff, procedures and judges. Yet, some children are excluded from this court when they are accused of serious offending. Why not include all offences by children within this jurisdiction, with appropriate amendments for serious offending?

Second, the current upper age limit for the youth justice system does not reflect the societal realities or brain development evidence for young adults. The evidence suggests that brain maturation is a gradual process, extending into the early twenties. Further, societal trends mean that young adults transition gradually into adulthood, with state and parental support extending into the mid-twenties (at least). Consideration must be given to making provision for those who age out of the child justice system to be retained in child detention or in separate age appropriate custodial settings. This provides the best possible opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration.

Thirdly, the rethinking of the legislative approach to children accused or convicted must involve the re-conceptualisation of the public interest in such matters. In cases involving children, the public

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interest is less in the quantum of punishment and more in the long term rehabilitative and reintegrative progress of the child.

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## 5. Thematic Sessions

### 5.1 TS 1: The Continuum of Young Lives

*Chairperson: Ian Marder, Maynooth University*

#### 5.1.1 Mol an Óige; valuing youth contribution in and to communities

*Gráinne Berrill, Director, National Office for Community Safety*

##### The Youth Justice Continuum and Collaborative Foundations

Session One introduced the concept of youth justice not as a single system, but as a constantly shifting continuum within the broader trajectory of young people's lives. It encompasses interconnected parts such as education, family, community, policing, courts, and social care. A central theme emphasized the importance of dynamic, flexible responses to reflect that young people move in and out of these systems unpredictably. The presentation highlighted the critical value of collaboration and partnership projects, with specific mention of partnerships between Gaisce (the Irish President's Award) and Oberstown detention centre as a key example of this approach.

##### The National Community Safety Infrastructure and Strategy

The main body of the talk focused on the new National Community Safety infrastructure and the work of the National Office for Community Safety, an office of the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. This infrastructure, formalised under the forthcoming national community safety act, mandates a "bottom-up community approach" to safety. Key tasks for the National Office is to develop and implement a national strategy for improving community safety and establishing a network of Local Community Safety Partnerships.

Recently commenced legislation mandates public service bodies and community organisations (e.g., Gardaí, Tusla, HSE) to work together to make communities safer. This new whole of government, whole of society approach acknowledges that every community is different

and faces unique challenges. Initially, three pilot partnerships were established, with plans to roll out 36 across the country in the coming months. Each partnership is tasked with developing its own local community safety plan. A crucial element within these new structures is the explicit need to incorporate a "youth voice."

##### Case Study: Drogheda Implementation Board and Local Community Safety Partnership

The work in Drogheda served as a key precursor and an example of successful implementation. The Drogheda Implementation Board oversaw recommendations from the "Drogheda: Building a Bridge to a Better Future" report, eventually transitioning its work to the new, permanent Louth Local Community Safety Partnership. This partnership is a collaborative initiative bringing together local agencies, community members, youth representatives, and businesses to address local safety concerns that encompass a wide range of issues beyond just crime, including anti-social behaviour, mental health, and youth services.

##### Empowering Young People and Building Social Capital

From the Drogheda initiative, several youth-focused projects emerged. The "Drogheda services for young people" established a collaborative network of local youth services with co-delivery of a number of on the ground initiatives a core focus of the work. One of these, "Drogheda YouthConnect Fest," which included a broad range of activities, engaged Youth Diversion Project participants in voluntary community-based activity. This included a youth-led fashion show which showcased participants' skills to the broader community. This event successfully engaged young people and led to the formation of a youth committee to drive and lead future events.

The impact of these initiatives was profound, focusing on building community efficacy through local leadership and adopting a trauma-informed community approach. A further event showcasing a film produced by young people through the

"Fighting Words" project allowed over 300 attendees—including school principals, probation officers, and local Gardaí—to hear and see the lived realities of the young participants, which in turn empowered those young people and made them feel valued.

#### Conclusion and Future Outlook

The National Office for Community Safety is one pillar of a new national and local community safety infrastructure. The importance of helping young people maximize their potential and build social capital through community activity, connection, and collaboration was emphasised. The youth justice strategy also mandates a whole-system approach guided by the core principle: "Ar scáth a Chéile a mhaireann na daoine" (People live in each other's shadow/protection), underscoring the necessity and power of collaboration to empower young people to contribute to and be valued by their community.

### **5.1.2 Navigating the Continuum; Complexity, Integration & Volunteerism**

*Ronan McLoughlin, Assistant  
Principal, Young Persons  
Probation, The Probation Service*

#### Navigating the continuum complexity, integration & volunteerism

"The nature of youth justice is influenced by how a particular society conceptualises youth offending, which subsequently influences the philosophies systems, structures, strategies, processes and practices that form the framework of a given youth justice system" (McLoughlin, 2024 p4)

#### The Evolution and Complexity of Irish Youth Justice

Ronan McLoughlin, representing Young People's Probation (YPP), highlighted that the youth justice system is a complex, multi-system environment facing increasing pace and change. It is the responsibility of professionals to connect these systems effectively so that the child experiences coherent support. Evolving from legislation dating back to the 1908 Act, the current approach from the 2001 Children's Act focuses on the highest-need and highest-risk young people in the state, asserting that these children must be afforded all their rights. A core guiding principle remains that

detention is a last resort, favouring community-based sanctions and home supervision. The complexity of youth offending requires dynamic, flexible, and specialist responses that balance the needs and risks of the young person with the imperative of keeping the community safe. Understanding the root causes of offending is paramount to effective intervention. The complexities can be seen like a dichotomy of many influencing factors for example: Mental Health, cognitive & Neurodevelopmental needs, speech & language deficits, coercion/grooming, risk taking, poverty, marginalised communities, substance misuse, domestic violence, education, health, youth diversion, courts, young people's probation, Oberstown, community and youth services.

#### The Structure and Role of Young People's Probation

YPP was established in 2006 to fulfil statutory responsibilities under the Children Act 2001. YPP is structured into three main teams working across courts, community supervision, and detention/post-detention support. The service emphasizes collaborative work with colleagues across various agencies and coordinates with 15 community-based organisations nationwide, using the shared language and principles of "Children First." While the rights of the young person are paramount, YPP constantly seeks a balance with community safety concerns.

#### Legislative Context and the "Continuum" Model

The legislative and policy context driving YPP's work includes key acts such as the Children Act 2001 and the Youth Justice Strategy 2012-2027. The Children Act "is structured to reflect youth justice as a continuum where responses to increased risk and offending are met with increased systemic responses. The system is comprised of Oberstown Detention Centre, Young People's Probation, and the Garda National Youth Diversion Projects. The principle here is clear: diversion from courts is the first step; probation works to divert from detention.

#### Key Data, Challenges, and Future Approaches

In 2024, approximately 750 children in the state were involved in offending. A significant success highlighted was that only around 9% of these children moved up to the highest tier of the system (around 93 new admissions to Oberstown), a testament to effective early intervention. The data indicates that most of

these young people come from single-parent families and disadvantaged backgrounds.

To address these complex issues, YPP is developing new approaches and frameworks, such as working with NIAAP (National Integrated Interagency Action Plan) and YJARC (Youth Justice Action Review Committee), and working closely with Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) on issues like mental health and family situations.

*National and international collaboration is essential for capacity building and sharing knowledge. Examples include the Copper project with international partners and learnings from Japan regarding the essential role of volunteers in early probation stages. The ongoing evolution of Irish youth justice requires continuous assessment and the integration of new approaches while upholding the core principles of the Children Act.*

### 5.1.3 A Breath of Fresh Eire

*Chief Superintendent Paul Franey,  
An Garda Síochána*

Chief Superintendent Paul Franey, previously the Superintendent in Balbriggan, framed his presentation around the "continuum of life" and the policing challenges within a rapidly growing, young, and diverse community. Paul was sent to Balbriggan in 2000, he described a situation where a lack of trust was evident, symbolised by a "Black Lives Matter" protest in front of the station where young, angry individuals felt unsupported by the Gardaí. Recognising the opportunity to make a difference, Franey initiated two key projects aimed at building relationships and trust.

#### Project 1: University of Limerick Research and Garda Training

The first project aimed to explore the relationship between the Gardaí and young black people in Balbriggan in partnership with the University of Limerick (UL) and Foroige. Franey admitted he initially did not fully understand the lived realities of these young people. The initiative began with building trust to get people into a room (initially via Zoom).

UL researchers interviewed approximately 40 Gardaí to understand their perspective on the community. Engaging young people proved more challenging but, with time and effort facilitated by community leaders and Foroige, a presentation of the findings was achieved. The outcome of this collaboration was a short video developed by the young people through Foroige. This video focused on effective community engagement techniques—how Gardaí should approach, explain, and communicate clearly—and has since been shared across the organisation and provided to the Garda College for consideration for use in training.

#### Project 2: The "Breath of Fresh Eire" Arts Initiative with Oberstown and Gaisce

The second initiative was a collaboration with Oberstown detention centre and Gaisce, leveraging the power of art to bring people together. Inspired by an art project at IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art), Franey proposed that young people from Oberstown could create a piece for public display in the Balbriggan station.

Gardaí went into Oberstown to build relationships on an even plain, leading to the "Breath of Fresh Eire" project. Franey was struck by the talent of the young people. The project used storytelling to create a safe space for interaction. Participants were given topics covering shared human experiences like football, horses, and grief. A powerful element involved a young person telling a Garda's story and vice-versa, allowing participants to identify with each other as "just people."

#### Impact and Key Takeaways

The project successfully reconsidered how Gardaí and young people view each other, building relationships on common ground. The key takeaways for the policing service centered on the vital capacity to listen and understand the community.

Franey posed a critical question to the service: Are we championing this necessary community engagement work? A proposal was made regarding the development of training material for Garda to assist in fostering a deeper understanding of how young people develop and how best to engage with them. This initiative highlights an important conversation within the youth justice continuum required to achieve positive change for the future.

Audience Discussion: The Gap in Forensic Mental Health Services for Young People

*Audience Member:*

A piece of the jigsaw around a dedicated forensic mental health service for young people isn't even on the table. We have the facility built in Portrane, but it's sitting there empty. Is this an issue you are seeing frequently within probation, mentally unwell children falling through the cracks? There's a strong suggestion here that an all-Ireland facility is urgently needed to address this gap.

*Ronan (Speaker):*

Before taking up my current role in probation, I worked directly on the forensic CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) team and was involved in the early stages of developing that specific unit in Portrane. We conducted research, looking at successful forensic teams both here in Ireland and across the UK.

Yes, there is a need for an all-Ireland facility. It is very frustrating that progress on the unit seems to have stalled in the last few years. While I don't believe we necessarily need the full proposed number of beds, there is a significant gap in intensive treatment options. This is especially true for young people coming through the probation system who desperately needed that specialist treatment but, due to the lack of appropriate facilities, have subsequently fallen into the adult mental health services.

Audience Discussion: Sustaining the Impact of Engagement Programs

*Audience Member (To Paul Feeney):*

The two pieces you showed were truly inspiring. How do you ensure that the impact of these programs lasts and extends further than just the direct participants themselves?

*Paul Feeney (Speaker):*

The key take away is people talk to people. It is

an engagement piece, facilitating crucial conversations among peer groups, involving both the young people who participated and the Gardaí.

The long-term impact we aim for is fostering a better general understanding of how young people develop developmentally, and crucially, improving everyone's capacity to engage appropriately with individuals who have additional needs.

Audience Discussion: Suggestion for a 'Walk In My Shoes' Programme at Oberstown

The discussion included a suggestion concerning the current "Walk in My Shoes" programme at Oberstown Children Detention Campus.

## 5.2 TS 2: Girls, Gender and Justice

*Chairperson: Maggie Clune, PACE*

### 5.2.1 Girls in Detention: Characteristics of the Oberstown Children Detention Campus

*Michelle Griffin, Head of Care, Oberstown Detention Campus*

Throughout the presentation, emphasis is placed on the specific vulnerabilities of young girls in detention and the structural inequalities that perpetuate their marginalisation within the detention setting. Their heightened vulnerability stems from a combination of factors, including age, gender, and their relatively low representation within the youth justice system. Despite this vulnerability, there exists a considerable gap in understanding the specific needs of these girls while they are in detention, which impacts their overall rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

According to statistics, girls represent 3% of total admissions to Oberstown Children Detention Campus from 2015 to 2025. In the previous year, Oberstown admitted 120 young people, of which only two were girls. Over the past decade, a total of 44 girls has been admitted, demonstrating their underrepresentation in the system. Furthermore, 77% of females were sent on remand, compared to 48% of the general Oberstown population.

At Oberstown, there is one dedicated unit for girls and five units for boys. The boys' units are often full, with 8 to each unit, whereas it is unusual for there to be more than one girl on campus at any one time. This imbalance can result in isolation for any girls housed within the facility. Additionally, a significant percentage of girls, approximately 30%, stay for less than a week, raising critical questions about the effectiveness and purpose of such brief detentions. It is essential to consider whether these brief stays achieve meaningful outcomes for the girls.

Demographic insights further reveal that 41% of the females identify as Travellers, compared to 23% of the general Oberstown population.

Additionally, 27% of female admissions come from County Dublin and 20% from County Meath — two counties that have access to well-resourced services, including the Bail Supervision Scheme in Dublin and youth diversion projects across both counties. The emotional dynamics at play also indicate that young girls often experience loneliness in a predominantly male environment, subsequently exacerbating feelings of isolation and emotional distress.

In addition, many existing programmes at Oberstown are not designed with the specific needs of young girls in mind. This lack of gender-specific programming creates a gender-intensive environment that may not adequately support the unique experiences and challenges of female detainees. For instance, girls placed in Oberstown often live alone, accompanied only by staff members, while boys share living spaces with peers, giving them the opportunity to build meaningful social relationships through daily interaction. Girls' interactions with male peers are typically limited to structured environments such as school hours or organised activities, reducing their opportunities for informal, everyday socialisation. In contrast, boys benefit from consistent peer engagement throughout the week, both in living quarters and recreational settings.

Furthermore, trauma, cultural, familial, or personal factors may influence a girl's ability to interact with male peers, which can further isolate them. Meanwhile, boys often participate in a wider range of group-based activities that are socially and culturally aligned with their interests and developmental needs. This disparity in social opportunities highlights a gendered gap in the care and support structures within the Irish justice system, potentially affecting girls' rehabilitation and sense of belonging.

Between 2015 and 2025, the most common headline offences for girls admitted to Oberstown included theft and fraud (34%), assault (30%), and breach of bail (7%). These figures show that girls are overrepresented in certain offence categories



when compared to the general Oberstown population, where theft and fraud account for only 23% of headline offences. Similarly, while 28% of the general population admissions are due to assault, this rises to 30% amongst girls. Notably, females are more inclined to admitted to Oberstown for breach of bail (7% compared to 1% overall). Other headline offences for girls include criminal damage (7%), firearms and offensive weapons (7%), public order offences (5%), attempted robbery (2%), and road traffic offences (2%). These statistics suggest gendered trends in the types of offences that lead to detention and emphasize the need for a gender-sensitive approach within the youth justice system in Ireland.

In conclusion, there is a compelling case for the need to reform the youth justice system in Ireland to better accommodate the unique experiences and challenges that girls face. By creating data-driven observations about demographics systemic gaps in knowledge and, programming, it is evident that current practices often fail to meet the unique needs of girls in conflict with the law. The promotion of gender-sensitive responses is vital, as is the exploration of alternative solutions to detention that prioritise rehabilitation and support for girls.

### **5.2.2 Criminalised, Marginalised, Judged: Young Women and Trans Institutional Stigma**

*Dr Gilly Sharpe, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Sheffield*

The presentation on the systemic issues faced by girls and young women in the youth justice system underlined the duality of visibility and invisibility that these girls experience. While they constitute a minority within the system, their presence can be hyper-visible, leading to societal shock and stigma when they engage in criminal behaviour. This dynamic results in compound marginalisation, as criminalised young women often become targets of judgement based on cultural stereotypes and societal expectations surrounding femininity.

Gilly Sharpe's longitudinal research initially involving interviews with 52 girls and young women aged 13-17 years, along with a similar number of youth justice professionals, revealed

that these young women were criminalized during a period of youth penal excess in England in the mid-2000s, which coincided with high rates of school exclusion. Notably, the data indicates that there were approximately 22 times as many girls criminalized in England 2006 compared to 2021, pointing to generational injustice in the treatment of young women within the justice system.

During the period of austerity in the 2010s, conditionality and judgments regarding eligibility for services were characterized by cuts to youth welfare and financial support systems, resulting in harsh and misogynistic welfare policies. Many of the young women researched were transient lawbreakers, with their criminal activity often impacted by their socio-economic conditions and lack of support. The focus on trans-institutional and longitudinal experiences revealed that gendered criminal stigma functions powerfully in society, interacting with stigma faced by offending women who frequently simultaneously experience stigmatisation in relation to care experience, young motherhood, substance misuse and welfare 'dependency', for example. This stigma is often associated with long-standing imputations of immorality and deviations from societal expectations of femininity.

Criminalized women may internalize stigma, resulting in feelings of shame, guilt, and self-disgust. The stigma intensifies for those who are mothers, further complicating their experiences. Research by Unlock has estimated that women are twice as likely as men to have their criminal records disclosed through background checks, due to disproportionately seeking work in people-facing employment settings, leading to additional hurdles in accessing employment and other services.

The operation of stigma is seen in various social policies and agency practices, where micro-aggressions in everyday interactions contribute to a culture of judgment. Professionals and laypeople, including teachers, social workers, courts, and welfare benefits assessors very often make value judgments that can perpetuate negative evaluations of these young women. The disproportionate contact that working-class women have with welfare assessors, health professionals, and social services affords repeated opportunities for scrutiny and condescension.

As a result, the social and emotional consequences of negative comments and actions can inflict enduring reputational damage on young women, convincing them that they lack value. Overall, this stigma can restrict access to services, employment, and income, leading to far-reaching repercussions for (formerly) criminalised young women's well-being and future prospects.

Stigma is not merely a byproduct of individual behaviour; it is produced at both structural and cultural levels, creating a political economy of stigmatisation that classifies lawbreakers as "other." These structures include an ideologically-driven welfare system, low minimum ages of criminal responsibility, and criminal records disclosure requirements that portray individuals as wilfully non-compliant and undeserving of support.

In conclusion, the stigmatisation of criminalized girls and young women constitutes an additional and enduring form of punishment, keeping marginalized women in their classed and gendered place. This stigma operates across various institutional domains as well as longitudinally, interacting with broader structural inequalities along the axes of gender, class, race, and socio-economic status. Subsequently, it is fundamental to recognize these complex dynamics to better understand the experiences of young women, including those with limited involvement in crime and the justice system. and to advocate for reforms that address criminalised young women's exclusion from, and marginalisation within, a range of institutions including - but also beyond - the youth and criminal justice systems.

### 5.2.3 Girls and Youth Justice: The Need for a Gender Specific Response

*Saoirse Brady, Executive Director, Irish Penal Reform Trust*

The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) envisions a society where justice is both humane and equitable, with prison reserved as a last resort. Their mission revolves around advocating for a criminal justice system that not only prioritises alternatives to incarceration but also upholds fundamental human rights and fosters the successful reintegration of individuals into society. Throughout the presentation the

experiences of girls in the youth justice system highlighted several critical issues regarding the need for reform and a more equitable approach. The IPRT recognises that girls represent a minority number within detention facilities and other areas of the criminal justice system, necessitating a closer examination of their unique experiences.

When girls are diverted from going through the formal criminal justice system, they are most often given informal cautions. Specifically, the data shows that 39% of all diversion cases involving girls resulted in them receiving this form of caution. One in four referrals to the Garda Youth Diversion Programme (GYDP) in 2023 were female, and girls were less likely to be referred multiple times. This suggests that informal cautions are the most common method of diversion used for girls, reflecting a preference for less formal interventions. In contrast, their male counterparts often receive different forms of response within the system. In terms of probation, only an average of 8% of referrals to the Young Persons Probation (YPP) service are girls, with no detailed age breakdown available for referral reasons. When it comes to detention, girls remain a small minority with only six out of 46 spaces in Oberstown Children Detention Campus are designated for girls, and the annual average of girls detained there is just three. It is critical to recognise that the youth justice system aims to keep girls out of the formal process when possible, yet they still often find themselves intertwined within a framework which does not adequately support their specific needs.

During the presentation, it was highlighted that many of the young women in the justice system experience significant socio-economic challenges, often stemming from poverty, homelessness, and child poverty. These difficulties are frequently compounded by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including the loss of a parent, experiences of abuse or neglect, and growing up in unstable or unsafe environments. Such vulnerabilities are further intensified for girls from ethnic minority backgrounds, particularly those from the Traveller and Roma communities, as well as migrant families, who may face systemic discrimination and barriers to accessing services. These intersecting challenges like poverty, deprivation, ethnicity, and trauma create a complex context in which young women can become entangled in

the justice system, often through low-level, non-violent offences linked to survival, such as theft.

The presentation highlighted the lack of appropriate, gender-specific services tailored to the needs of girls, which increases their risk of criminalisation. Many girls involved in the justice system also live with disabilities, neurodivergence, or mental health challenges, often without a formal diagnosis or adequate support. This lack of recognition and assistance means that behavioural expressions of trauma or unmet needs may be misinterpreted as criminal behaviour rather than cries for help. The profile of young people in youth detention reflects these realities: many come from care-experienced backgrounds, have lost parents, and show signs of emotional or behavioural difficulties.

International human rights frameworks provide clear guidance on the treatment of girls in the justice system. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 10 states: “Since girls in the juvenile justice system may be easily overlooked because they represent only a small group, special attention must be paid to the particular needs of the girl child, e.g. in relation to prior abuse and special health needs.” Similarly, the Beijing Rules affirm that “young female offenders placed in an institution deserve special attention as to their personal needs and problems,” and must receive care, protection, and support equal to or greater than that provided to young male offenders. The Bangkok Rules stress the importance of maintaining girls’ family and community ties and advocate for diversionary measures and sentencing alternatives wherever possible, especially in recognition of the social contexts from which many girls come.

The presentation also brought attention to the powerful role of stigma in the lives of girls who are criminalised. This stigma can arise not only from their personal criminal records but also from familial associations particularly if they have partners or relatives with criminal backgrounds. Such stigma contributes to cycles of disadvantage, marginalisation, and social exclusion, making reintegration into society more difficult and undermining opportunities for education, employment, and healthy relationships.

Despite these complex needs, girls represent a small proportion of those in detention. For example, in the UK, girls account for less than 2% of the overall youth detention population. However, their distinct needs are frequently overlooked and not addressed within mainstream justice policies, including the Women’s Justice Board, which does not specifically include girls in its remit. A 2024 review by Susannah Hancock, published its final report in 2025, calling for an immediate end to the use of youth detention for girls, citing the lack of appropriate facilities and support structures. This includes the development of new ‘community secure provision’ and non-custodial alternatives such as secure care or intensive fostering. It was also recommended that a strategic lead be appointed across government departments and agencies to ensure that reforms for girls in the justice system are evidence-informed, trauma-responsive, and gender-sensitive.

In terms of solutions, the presentation emphasised the need for a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach that includes prevention and early intervention, diversion and alternatives to detention, and a child rights- and gender-specific approach to justice. A new article by Orlaith Rice, Colm Walsh & Megan Kelly, published in October 2025 was referenced which conducted a rapid review of the youth justice system in Northern Ireland. There are plans to conduct a similar review in the South. The authors kindly shared their findings and recommendations which emphasised a whole-of-government approach to putting in place gender-responsive strategies and actions for girls in the youth justice system.

In conclusion, IPRT’s analysis of the unique position of girls in the youth justice system underscores the urgent need for reforms that are grounded in the lived experiences of these young women. Addressing issues related to diversion, probation, and detention must go hand in hand with recognising the interplay of socio-economic hardship, ethnicity, trauma, disability, and gender in shaping girls’ involvement with the justice system. Achieving a more equitable and effective justice framework will require policy change, cross-sector collaboration, and a commitment to uphold the rights, dignity, and potential of every girl affected by the system.

## 5.3 TS 3: Digital Justice and Online Harm

*Chairperson: Dr Orla Gallagher, Irish Prison Service*

### 5.3.1 Digital Justice & Online Harm

*Niamh Hodnett, Online Safety  
Commissioner, Coimisiún na  
Meán*

Coimisiún na Meán's mission "is to regulate, support and develop a media landscape that underpins fundamental rights and fosters an open, democratic and pluralist society."

The Commission focuses on six priority areas. Firstly, it works to ensure that children can engage with content safely. Secondly, it purports to strengthen public safety, endeavouring to protect citizen's right to freedom of speech while protecting the public from harmful material. Thirdly, the Commission aims to support democratic values, ensuring they underpin civic discourse and reduce the impact of disinformation. The fourth priority area is diversity & inclusion. The Commission noted that this area has come under threat due to the rise of polarisation online, which it continues to combat. The fifth area of focus is trust. The Commission endeavours to create an online sphere that consumers can trust and feel protected from exploitation and fraud. The sixth priority area is ensuring that Irish culture and media is sustainable, pluralistic and participative, and that it reflects society.

Online platforms now have new obligations relating to harmful and illegal content which they must abide by and must continuously work on ensuring that their services prevent harmful content. The platforms are regulated by three limbs of the Online Safety Framework. Firstly, the Online Safety Code requires online platforms to follow strict regulations to ensure that they are free from harmful material. The Code applies to video and associated content and implements relevant provisions of the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive. The Code has the power to impose significant financial sanctions on platforms which fail to take sufficient steps to protect their users from harm. Secondly, the

Terrorist Content Online Regulation grants competent authority to An Garda Síochána to investigate reports of terrorist content. The Regulation applies to content that promotes the commission of terrorist offences or membership of a terrorist organisation. Furthermore, the Regulation provides that where a platform is subject to terrorism online, they shall be subject to additional supervision by the Commission. Thirdly, the Digital Services Act monitors and regulates the areas such as the algorithm and addicted design, ensuring that non-addictive and non-harmful material is ensured online in the European Union. The Act is wide-ranging and exists to ensure a safe and trusted online environment.

There are, however, multiple issues which do not fall under the Commission's remit. The dark web is not subject to any of the provisions pertained in the Online Safety Framework. Despite this, mainstream social media platforms are subject to their regulatory oversight, and the Commission continuously endeavours to regulate and prevent material which targets online users and attracts them towards the dark web.

There are complementary obligations under different legal instruments. Under the Online Safety Code, harmful content, including cyberbullying and media promoting self-harm and xenophobia, are restricted. Effective age assurance is required for pornographic and violent content. The Code also requires platforms to provide for parental controls, restricting the content that children can see and who they can contact. The Terrorist Content Online Regulation requires services to remove content when ordered by An Garda Síochána, or the equivalent in another Member State. All platforms found to be exposed to terrorist content must take proactive steps to mitigate the level of exposure. The Digital Services Act provides clear content rules, notice and action mechanism for online content, and requires internal complaints procedures and alternative dispute resolutions for complaints. The Act also provides that



platforms must assess and mitigate systemic risks, including to public order, elections and civic discourse, public health and minors.

Coimisiún na Meán has supervisory and empowerment powers. It has the power to track and monitor compliance, proactively and on foot of user complaints. The Commission also has supervisory engagement, can drive behavioural changes, and issue compliance notices, investigations and sanctions. It can also impose criminal liability for certain offences.

The above provisions provide numerous benefits for young people. They provide young people the right to report and appeal harmful material, which is easy to find and easy to follow. Young people are also supported by advertising protections, which provide that they have the right not to be subjected to targeted advertisements. Advertisements must also be clearly labelled, and goods including alcoholic goods and services are prohibited from targeting children. Young people are also protected from harmful material such as dangerous challenges, terrorist content and content encouraging eating disorders.

The Commission has noted a rise in youth radicalisation, with organisations using digital tactics. It has been reported that minors are recruited via their peers, immersive platforms and viral trends. This grooming spans ideologies and is aided by algorithmic amplification and generative AI. This material begins as benign content, but quickly escalates to extreme content. A whole society approach is required to monitor this material. Parents should endeavour to become digitally literate, and young people should be empowered to communicate with their parents and/or trusted adults. Digital literacy should be provided for in lesson plans in primary and secondary schools nation-wide.

Coimisiún na Meán has responded to this research through *inter alia* taking a pan-European approach and working with other Commissions to restrict this material, starting online campaigns promoting awareness of harmful material and the psychological impact of extreme material, and

collaborating with all stakeholders to promote a safer Internet for all.

### **5.3.2 Adolescent Sexual Harm: Risk Factors, Interventions, and the Online World**

*Aaron Swift, Principal Specialist Psychologist, National Inter-Agency Prevention Programme*

TUSLA's National Interagency Prevention Program works to prevent sexually harmful behaviour by children. The service accepts referrals for children between 3 and 18 years old and can also cater for children who are neurodiverse and/or present with mild intellectual disabilities. Children as young as pre-puberty are being exposed to harmful sexual behaviour online. A safety plan is developed for all children who work with NIAPP. Approximately 10% of the children involved in the program become involved with the courts.

Harmful sexual behaviour has been defined as "sexual behaviour by under 18's that is developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self and others and/or abusive towards another child, young person or adult." It was also reported that accurate data on the prevalence rate of harmful sexual behaviour does not exist in part due to the broad spectrum of behaviours that exist.

The United Kingdom Department of Education reported in 2022 that 40% of reported sexual abuse concerns related to children's behaviour. It is estimated that 25-50% of all incidents of harmful sexual behaviour towards children is conducted by children and young people who are well known to each other.

Historically, harmful behaviour conducted by children was viewed using adult offender concepts such as 'rapists' and 'paedophiles.' However, currently there is recognition of the roles of adverse childhood experiences in the program. The children in the program have complex and diverse needs. Recent attempts have been made to understand the multiple pathways, and an emphasis has been placed on prevention.



The Meta Analysis (McKribben et al, 2023) illustrates the mechanisms of children engaging in harmful sexual behaviour. Firstly, a driver, e.g. childhood sexual abuse or early exposure to harmful pornographic material, occurs to the child. Secondly, numerous events take place and act as amplifiers, increasing the need for the child to act in a harmful sexual manner. Thirdly, there is an opportunity or a person, where the child can engage in a harmful sexual manner with. When the three elements come together, sexual harm may occur.

Domestic violence was highlighted as a key driver. Being a traumatic childhood experience, it is pervasive and difficult to prevent. While the majority of victims will not harm others, amplifiers act as an aid for victims to sexually harm other children. Children who experience amplifiers including witnessing sexual coercion, witnessing multi-generational abuse and an avoidant parental attachment style are more at risk of developing this harmful behaviour.

Pornography is one of the main drivers. Its amplifiers include poor parental supervision, living in a sexualised environment, watching violent pornography and fathers validating pornography use. 10% of 9 year olds are being exposed to pornography in the UK according to research. Globally, the average age of children viewing pornography for the first time is 13 years old. Another driver is hyper masculinity identity. Amplifiers can include feeling deeply rejected, self-portrayal as a victim, having strong misogynistic fantasies and sexual compulsivity.

All the drivers and amplifiers are pathways for damaging the development of children. In the modern age, children are being expected to go out into the world and perform complex situations such as sex and relationships and their understanding and preparedness can be heavily distorted if exposed to trauma or harmful messaging. For example children who grow up with domestic violence may find it harder to understand consent and find it difficult to read the subtleties of everyday life.

Research shows that neurodiverse children are more at risk on the online world. Due to difficulties navigating social interactions, many neurodiverse children seek online activity and spend more time online than neurotypical children. Neurodiverse children are also more likely to be exposed to harmful material due to the nature of intense interests in certain topics.

The program focuses on intervention where there is a risk of harmful sexual behaviour. There is no 'one size fits all' mechanism for protecting children from engaging in harmful sexual behaviour, and they have a transformational program set out over four stages. In stage one, a safety plan is created. The social worker focuses on the child's motivation for committing the behaviour and the type of engagement. The second stage consists of building resilience and creating secure relationships with the child's family. In the third stage, the social worker focuses on education, skill development and addresses the child's needs. The final stage consists of moving on past the behaviour and closing the chapter.

The team work with several groups. There are junior boy's and senior boy's groups. There is the option for individual sessions with both males and females, depending on the child's needs.

### 5.3.3 Digital Justice and Online Harm

*Wayne Denner, Online Safety Educator*

There is no simple solution to fix youth digital safety.

However, it is essential to listen to what young people are saying.

Reports from call centers report that young people report posts on social media platforms multiple times, but no action is taken. Children feel that their reports against harmful material online are being ignored.

Others have said that when their parents try to engage with their children about

their usage of the digital world, they struggle to explain the issues to them.

*"My parents ask if I'm okay online. But when I try to explain, their eyes start to glaze over..."*

Parents feel lost in the online world and unable to communicate with their children about social media. Children feel a disconnect from the social media companies and feel helpless when harmful material is published about them.

50% of young people do not report their accounts being hacked and harmful material about them, as they believe that no remedy will be offered by the platform. Children believe that schoolwide and nation-wide bans will not effectively combat the issues created online.

*"We don't want apps banned. We want them to stop pushing harmful stuff at us."*

Digital daily harms include aggressive algorithms promoting unhealthy content towards children and adults alike, recommendation engines which actively promote targeted advertisements for children, and broken reporting mechanisms. Such harmful material includes pornography which has always existed, but is now much easier to access, and often, it is being encouraged by the algorithms.

*"I reported it 15 times. It's still there."*

The algorithm identifies a user's age bracket, location, viewing history, friend networks and purchase patterns, which it then uses to push further content onto the user. The algorithm does not, however, see the user's context for viewing material, their intentions for searching up content, their potential as human beings or their humanity. The algorithm creates and operates in a vicious loop. Firstly, it predicts the content that the user might like based on their usage. Once the user views the content, the algorithm will show them content of a similar nature. Once the user views this content, the algorithm

affirms that they like this content and further promotes this content until their feed is consumed with materials of this nature.

*"I wanted to learn about social justice. Now my feed thinks I'm an extremist."*

In the past, one biased human could harm dozens of people. However, this would take a considerable amount of time. The human could also be challenged on their views, and there is evidence of their rationale for attempting to harm others. Conversely, a biased algorithm can harm millions of users instantaneously. The algorithm operates in secrecy and no context is given for the reasoning behind their actions.

*"I reported abuse against me. Got an automated reply: 'We reviewed your report. No violation found.' In 30 seconds."*

Parents require a number of tools to ensure that their children are protected online. Firstly, they need to be taught about the digital world in plain language, and technological jargon should be avoided. They need to understand what children actually view on social media. They also should have permission to know everything to enable them to parent online effectively. Parents should be empowered to ask their children questions, confident in the fact that they do not need all of the answers.

In order for parents to monitor their children's use of the online world, they should follow the ABCs of the digital world. They should manage their child's Access on social media. Parents can then set Boundaries with their children and with their devices. This ensures that children create a healthy relationship with their parents about social media, but also with the digital world. Finally, parents should start Conversations, and create open discourse about the online world, its benefits and its risks.

As technology is evolving and its capabilities are advancing, now is the time

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to shape the digital world of tomorrow. There are two paths which society can take. In the first path, society can let technology shape our young people, react to harms after they happen and leave teenagers to navigate the digital world alone. In the second path, society can shape technology around young people, prevent harms before they happen, and navigate and work together for the greater good.

Public and private sector need to work together. Combined, both sectors should identify each other's role to ensure everyone knows what they are doing and then take action to ensure a future which protects young people while ensuring they leverage it to maximise life, work and sport opportunities.

## 6. Feedback from Thematic Sessions

Following the Thematic Sessions the Chairs summarised the speaker inputs to the full conference group. This feedback is not being replicated here as it would repeat the Thematic Session notes.

## 7. Contribution

This session included three videos from young contributors from Oberstown whose voices, actions, and insights offered a compelling vision of what justice can look like when it is built with, young people, not just for them.

Kim Bartley, Frontline Films: *“The Oberstown podcast project started as a project funded by the Nurture Fund. Over the past two years it has given the young people in Oberstown an opportunity to have their voice heard and to share their experiences with other young people on campus. To feel heard has been a hugely nurturing experience for them.*

*The young people walked into the podcast room for the first time, sometimes never before having listened to a podcast. Little by little the cocoon that Oberstown created in the podcast room with low lighting and soundproofing became a very*

*special place for people to share their stories and those stories are then shared with other boys and other units and staff have taken part and the young people blossomed within podcast room.*

*The videos you will see are a mix of recordings made over the past 18 months and some pieces made specifically for the conference because we asked the boys what they would like people to know about them. - we could’ve filled the whole day with their voices but I hope this gives a real sense of how much the young people whose voices you are about to hear have grown and gained from the nurturing environment in Oberstown.”*

The videos are not publicly available – please direct enquiries to Oberstown Children Detention Campus.

## 8. Youth Justice Futures – What if Ireland Got it Right?

*Reflections from the day with Judge Paul Kelly; Damien Hernon, Oberstown Children Detention Campus and Ashling Golden, Solas Project - A Summary*

The discussions surrounding youth justice in Ireland reflected a strong commitment to enhancing community care and relationships within the justice system. Over the past several years, there has been a significant focus on the importance of support and care for staff, youth workers, and the wider community involved in youth diversion programs. It was emphasized that while physical infrastructures and new projects may be beneficial, and may still require more secure funding and positioning, the core of success lies in a genuine commitment to nurturing relationships and providing adequate support.

Statistics indicate that a substantial percentage of youth involved in the justice system come from areas marked by socioeconomic deprivation, with approximately 90% of these young individuals originating from specific neighbourhoods known for a lack of resources and opportunities. This correlation highlights the necessity for targeted interventions, as many organisations within these communities struggle to secure consistent resources, which diminishes their capacity to provide essential services.

The conversations showcased a pressing need for collaboration among various organisations working within the youth justice system. The establishment of initiatives such as community-based organisations (CBO) summits serves as a promising start to facilitate dialogue among service providers. By addressing common issues and identifying potential synergies, these gatherings can enhance cooperative efforts, ultimately leading to more effective support for young individuals in need.

Recent advancements in Ireland's youth justice policies, particularly regarding the E-Trust system, have garnered recognition for their positive impacts on budgetary allocations and legislative support. The effectiveness of these measures underscores the importance of reinforcing intersectionality within society, ensuring that all members, particularly vulnerable youth, are attended to. By nurturing a sense of responsibility within communities, a strong foundation for future progress can be established.

Further reflection on the youth justice system reveals that many strategies have proven to be beneficial. The Drug Treatment Court model, for instance, illustrates a holistic approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by young individuals dealing with addiction. This approach integrates health services, education, and housing support, exemplifying an effective method of delivering comprehensive care while holding youths accountable for their actions. In confronting the complexities of youth justice, it is vital to consider the developmental differences among young people, particularly regarding gender. Studies indicate that girls often mature earlier than boys, and there is a need for tailored services that account for these differences to prevent involvement in the court system. By extending services to different age groups, particularly for those aged 18 to 24, it is possible to create targeted interventions that support young people during critical transitional periods in their lives.

Looking towards the future, the discussions revealed a consensus on the importance of investing in early childhood education, family support systems, and culturally relevant educational programmes. These investments not only enhance academic success but also promote holistic development. Strategies aimed at fostering a love for learning and cultural engagement are critical in nurturing resilient and well-adjusted individuals who can contribute positively to society.

Ireland's journey in youth justice paints a hopeful picture for the future, one marked by an emphasis on community, cooperation, and comprehensive support structures. Continued investment in these areas, alongside a commitment to addressing the systemic challenges faced by marginalized youth, will be essential in fostering a more inclusive and effective youth justice system. As Ireland reflects on its practices and successes, the imperative remains clear: a collaborative and compassionate approach can pave the way for a brighter future for all young individuals in the country.



## 9. Conference Closing

*Mary Griffin, Chairperson, ACJRD*

As we draw this year's ICJA Conference to a close, I want to thank you all - our speakers, panellists, contributors, and every participant here today - for the generosity of your time, ideas, and commitment. It has been a day rich with insight, honesty, and above all, a shared belief that youth justice in Ireland can be, and must be, a story of prevention, intervention, and contribution.

Throughout the morning, we traced the arc of that story. We began by looking back, at how far we've come since the Children Act first sought to reimagine how the State responds to young people in conflict with the law. We reflected on progress made, but also on where the system still falls short, where serious offending, gender, trauma, and new digital realities continue to test our responses.

In the afternoon, we moved forward, hearing from practitioners, researchers, and policymakers who challenged us to think more holistically about the *continuum of young lives*: how education, community, family, and opportunity are every bit as central to justice as courts and custody. We also heard powerful contributions about girls and young women, about digital harm and online vulnerability, and about the young people themselves, whose creativity and courage remind us that they are not problems to be solved but partners in shaping solutions.

And now, as we close, we've been invited to imagine something profoundly hopeful - an Ireland that "gets it right." An Ireland where prevention begins in communities that care, where interventions are grounded in dignity and rights, and where contribution means every young person has a place and a purpose.

That vision is not beyond us. In fact, it is already visible in so many of the people and projects represented here today - in Oberstown, in Solas Project, in Way2Work, in the Garda Youth

Diversion Projects, in our courts, and across countless local initiatives that quietly change lives every day.

Our challenge now is to connect those sparks - to build a system where compassion and accountability walk hand in hand, where policy keeps pace with practice, and where hope is not a slogan but a structure.

A very special thank you to the lead partner and funder for the 2025 ICJA Conference – Oberstown Children Detention Campus.

On behalf of ACJRD, thank you for being part of this conversation and for your ongoing work to ensure that Ireland's youth justice system continues to move, to evolve, and to truly serve the young people at its heart.

Please join us at our other events, announced through our newsletters which you can get by signing up to our mailing list. You can give your name / email address to any of the staff and volunteers or you can find it on our website.

Upcoming events include a Careers Webinar for Students interested in the Criminal Justice Sector in November including practical insights from three senior leaders and our December Networking event which focuses on High Volume but Low Level Crime. We are delighted that Judge Michael White has agreed to deliver the 2026 Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture which will take place in early 2026.

Thank you to staff and volunteers – Niamh, Orla, Lauren, Kissmat, Ruairi, Cathy, Patricia, Sinead and Iarlaith for their help during the day and to IMMA, Lily and Wild and AV Partners for the great venue, food and tech.

*Go raibh míle maith agaibh, and safe journey home*