

Policing Commission – Submission by Youth Work Ireland

Introduction

Youth Work Ireland is a federation of 21 local community-based youth services. The majority of our members deliver Garda Youth Diversion Projects and work with many disadvantaged young people in local communities around the country. This work is carried out as part of an integrated youth service model. The key advantage of our approach is it provides critical local infrastructure. This infrastructure often consists of buildings, management, child protection, support systems, outreach staff, insurance, drop in centres many of which are operated in more remote areas. We see this as an ideal framework for delivering better results in terms of young people and pro social activity in the community particularly consistent with Better Outcomes Brighter Futures the national policy framework for children.

Historically, before any organised community-based funded services we ran and supported an extensive network of youth clubs often located in remote areas where there was and continues to be little state activity. Today we work with over 100,000 young people with nearly 1,000 staff and over 7,000 volunteers in approximately 500 youth clubs and projects. In time we have expanded this reach with funded projects in a variety of areas particularly delivering projects in disadvantaged areas with youth workers on Special Projects for Youth, Garda Youth Diversion Projects and a range of other supports. We now deliver “Friends” a comprehensive national programme around mental health and Youth Counselling.

Overview

We believe there is still an important need to improve relationships between the Gardai and young people particularly in disadvantaged communities. Poor relationships often surface at particular points in time such as week-ends and Halloween when there can be particular pressure on all emergency services. However improved relations between the General will be dependent on a year-round effort by both sides which much be grounded in mutual respect and ongoing engagement.

Surveys have shown that trust in the Gardaí is often lowest amongst young people. We very much welcome the opportunity offered by the Police Commission to submit views and for a variety of stakeholders to influence the process of policing reform which is badly needed. The Chairperson said in her opening statement that “A community’s trust, respect, engagement and support of its police are, without question, essential to modern, effective, and ethical policing”. We believe this is very much the approach to take. The Commission’s terms of reference also sought proposals to address “an ethos and culture that values accountability and embraces change, and engages pro-actively, routinely and continuously with, and is responsive to the needs of, the diverse communities it serves” again a sentiment we strongly support. Similarly, when investigations and inquiries have been conducted in to Garda practice and conduct the results have often left much to be desired and such a process on an ongoing basis can undermine confidence in the force particularly amongst some groups of young people who already have a strained relationship with the Gardaí.

The key areas we wish to examine briefly in our submission are the general system of youth justice and the role of the Gardaí and The Garda Youth Diversion Projects.

Youth Justice

Since the 2006 Report on the Youth Justice Review, Ireland has had a more formalised approach to issues of Youth Justice in keeping with international best practice. Central to this has been the need for coordinated strategic leadership and youth justice policy through the establishment of the Irish Youth Justice Service. The implementation of the provisions of the Children Act 2001 in relation to community sanctions, restorative justice conferencing and diversion projects and the transfer of responsibility of residential industrial and reformatory schools (now called children detention schools) to the Irish Youth Justice Service from the Department of Education and Science. Many of these developments are beyond this submission although a more general review of their impact may now be warranted. We would like to focus on particular aspects related to Garda practice and management.

The Irish Youth Justice Service has developed the Youth Justice Action Plan 2014-2018. The title of the document appears to place a major emphasis on crime and young people as offenders rather than some of the international thinking on prevention and community-based solutions. Indeed, the Plan does evidence the success of such a preventative approach in its forward. Central to the operation of the Youth Justice system in our view is the JLO system. This is in keeping with best international practice in terms of diverting young people away from the criminal justice system including the courts and detention. These should only be used as a last resort. For low level offences community-based sanctions, restorative justice and other means should be prioritised. The IYJS was not named in the Terms of Reference of the Policing Commission. Three of the plans high level goals are of relevance here;

- High Level Goal 2: To strengthen and develop our evidence base to support more effective policies and services, having regard to the voice of young people
- High Level Goal 3: To review and strengthen targeted interventions to reduce offending and divert young people from the criminal justice system
- High Level Goal 4: To promote and increase the use of community measures, including restorative justice, for young people who offend.

According to the Garda website there are 119 JLOs in Ireland. This number has remained broadly stable for many years undoubtedly due to financial constraints. We believe it is now high time to grow the number of JLOs to enable a greater level of community engagement between young people and the Gardaí in the spirit of best practice in community policing and the diversionary approach. The Youth Justice Action Plan also indicates that the vast bulk of youth crime is “low level”. Much of the Plan is predicated on achievement of the targets in “Better Outcomes Brighter Futures” which in turn require considerable effort by voluntary and community actors.

The Youth Justice Action Plan is coming to an end, overall, we believe a key measure for the future is a greater emphasis on community-based policing and the role of the JLO. This will necessarily involve increasing the numbers of JLOs and linking them more effectively to community-based organisations particularly youth organisations. Greater utilisation of the Garda Reserve and civilianisation in more routine Garda matters might also assist in freeing up the necessary resources here.

Garda Youth Diversion Projects

There are about 100 Garda Youth Diversion Programmes in the country and a large amount are run by Youth Work Ireland members. The support for these projects is an important aspect of youth work particularly with the hardest to reach and in very disadvantaged communities. However, it is important that youth work values are central to these projects. This should involve recognition of some of the key values of youth work explicitly by the IYJS and the Gardai and these principles being

reflected in how projects are run. The Youth Work Act 2001 and the National Youth Strategy reflect many of these. Such values include

1. Voluntary participation
2. Informal education and learning
3. Participation by young people in the nature and direction of the work
4. Led by voluntary organisations
5. Contribute towards active citizenship
6. Fosters critical thinking

There has been significant change in the operation of GYDPs in recent times and indeed in the operation of youth projects generally. Some of these may mean less of a community focus in the operations of GYDPs. This community focus is a critical importance to local youth services and maintaining such a community focus would be of assistance to all stakeholders in any new management arrangements.

The Youth Justice Action plan as we have seen requires greater effort with regard to the participation of young people in the services offered. We feel this has not been strongly in evidence and more work is needed in this regard by the IYJS and the Gardaí.

Recommendations

1. Increase the number of JLOs by 20% and focus them on disadvantaged communities
2. Maintain the local community focus of GYDPs in any new management arrangements
3. Establish a youth participation system as part of the oversight and management of the IYJS and GYDPs in association with youth organisations and with a focus on young people in contact with the projects