



## **INTRO**

Young Voices is a youth participation project of Include Youth's.

Include Youth is an independent organisation which actively promotes the rights, best interests of and best practice with young people in need or at risk.

Young Voices specifically targets young people involved in the justice system. The project works with young people in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre, Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre and those with experience of offending outside of custody, as well as having a community based strand of the project, focusing on policing and related issues.

What I've been asked to do today is to provide a young person's perspective on their experiences of custody in Northern Ireland.

In terms of custody for young people in NI we have 2 centres which provide this:

### **Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre**

– this is operated by the Youth Justice Agency and provides custodial facilities for children and young people referred to it by the court system. Its aims are to provide a safe, secure and stimulating environment for up to 48 boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 17 placed in custody.

**AND**

## **Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre (and HM Prison) - YOC**

The YOC accommodates all young male offenders aged between 17 and 21 years on conviction, serving a period of 4 years or less in custody as well as all female prisoners including young offenders.

Some 16 and 17 year olds are also held in Hydebank rather than Woodlands, on separate landings and arrangements can be made to accommodate younger people at Hydebank - legislation permits inmates of 15 years old to be held there if their crime is deemed to be of a very serious nature.

To inform what I am going to talk about today I spoke to the Young Voices groups in the JJC (Woodlands), who were 14-16 and the in the YOC (Hydebank), all 16 or 17 - in both centres all were young men. Some of these young people had experience of just one of the centres and some had experience of both, allowing them, and me, to compare their experiences in the 2 centres. I'll also draw on feedback that is included in a recent report that we produced earlier this year, looking at issues raised in an Independent Monitoring Board report.

So what I'm going to do is simply relay some of the things the young people told me, along with a bit of my own reflection and my thoughts about these.

I'll be using quotes from the young people I spoke to, to illustrate the points I make and also provide a snapshot of their experience. I'll have these up on screen and I'll refer to some directly and others I'll leave you to read for yourselves.

## **PART 1**

So, I asked young people about to take me through their experience of being locked up, starting with telling me about the first time they were brought into custody (i.e. Hydebank or Woodlands, rather than police custody). I wasn't asking simply for "what happened", but more about how they felt at the time, what it was like, their perceptions, and how this might have impacted on them:

### **In the JJC:**

*"It was all right...I was 16, I thought it'd be worse, locked in a room all the time, but it was sweet"*

*"I was 15, I thought it was all cells – then I came in the front door of the [residential] unit and I thought it'd be easy, watchin' TV and all."*

*"I thought it'd be all screws. That they'd come and crack you, beat you for no reason – but staff are dead on"*

*"It was sweet, it didn't bother me – just because I knew people who'd been there and people in there"*

*"People told me you get beat, get something stuck up your hole if you bend over to get the soap and all."*

### **And on their first time coming into Hydebank:**

*"I though "F\*\*\*! I want to go to [Woodlands]!" I'd heard about it, about up here and stories made up about it – like about Prods getting bullied, crap like that, but it wasn't that bad when I got here"*

*"I dunno, I didn't know what it'd be like – I didn't really have any fears or worries, it was just the point of being here that I didn't like – but I thought it'd be worse, no TV in your room and all."*

*"I was s\*\*\*\*ing myself"*

So initially, in relation to both centres, there was a certain amount of trepidation, uncertainty, fear, and on discussion these were reported to be based on rumours and Chinese whispers, as well as Hollywood / TV portrayals of prison. But these tended to even out and dissipate on the whole, and I was told that they got used to the daily life and regime in both custody settings.

Now, on the one hand this is comforting to hear – that young people’s fears are largely allayed and they were relieved that the *majority* of rumours they had heard turned out to be either exaggerations or simply false.

BUT, on the other hand it gives me concerns:

- a) That one of the reasons that they become less fearful and more comfortable is *because* of the nasty rumours they have heard about custody – i.e. “*it might be bad, but it’s still not as bad as it could be*” type thing, making them more likely to accept standards and practices that many of the rest of us might not;
- b) That if young people too easily become accustomed to a secure environment, they may find it harder to readjust to living in the community again. It also may say something about the nature of life in the communities or settings/homes they come from.

*“It becomes normal being here, so it doesn’t work just locking you up.”*

*“You get used to it, prison becomes like your second home.”*

*“At times I actually enjoy jail, it becomes a way of life, you get your 3 meals a day and all, you get used to it.”*

I asked young people in the Woodlands Young Voices group about what the *worst* thing was for them about being in custody in the centre

*“You can't do stuff you want to do, see girls, have a drink, smoke, take drugs”*

*“Missing my wee brother and my sister”*

*“You don't have as much family contact”*

*“You're only allowed a few [visitors] in at a time”*

*“Not being able to go to tech, getting thrown off my tech course – you're only allowed off so many weeks, so cos I'm in here I won't be allowed back on it. They should keep tech open.”*

*“No craic – well you do have craic, but it's not the same as being with your mates on the street. If you don't have a laugh it wrecks your head.”*

I also asked the Hydebank Young Voices group about what the worst thing about being in custody there was for them:

*“It's melting, locked up most of the day – some of screws are ok, but some are eejits, think they are something.”*

*“That's the f\*\*\*ing worst – you get locked in for 24 hours, out for dinner just.”*

*“Some staff abuse their power in here. You can get made to feel really small by the screws, call you names and all.”*

*“You can get locked 23 hours if the staff don't like you”*

*“The worst thing about being in here is not being allowed to smoke”*

So you can see a distinction in the nature some of these remarks – this could be put down to age differences (although the age ranges weren't *that* far apart), but I think they also point to a different institutional

mindset (if there is such a thing) and a different type of regime, both of which are looking after children.

Leading on from this there were a number of comments made about how the young people felt they are cared for in the 2 centres and what services are available to them. Again, I'll use some comparisons here.

Most of the young people I spoke to felt that education opportunities and health care were better in Woodlands than they did in Hydebank:

### **YOC**

*“Health care is sh\*\*\* in here – I took a Chlamydia test 2 or 3 weeks ago and they haven't even got back to me yet...I'm still sitting here worried, not knowing”*

*“You can't always get to see a doctor when you need to – you have to request it in the morning and it could be a couple of days before you get to see one.”*

### **JJC:**

*“There's a nurse in here, you get to see him whenever you need to”*

*“You get looked after in here.”*

### **YOC**

*“I haven't been down yet, to education – I've been in 3 or 4 weeks.”*

*“I've been in 3 ½ months and I haven't had any education. I'd like to, I can't read or write.”*

### **JJC**

*“The teachers here make time for you, give you help when you need it.”*

*“I wouldn't have got any GCSEs if it wasn't for being in Woodlands”*

*“Young people at 17 need more education, need to be helped ... the school in here's better.”*

### **Relationships:**

In the main, young people felt that the relationships with staff were better in Woodlands than they were in Hydebank, where the young people felt that staff didn't have appropriate training in working with young people:

### **YOC:**

*“Some wind you up so you'll crack, so they can lock you in your room. They'll say things to get you, to wind you up, like about your Ma, that they know'll annoy you”*

*“They should use your first name – it's like talking down to us using our second name... but we have to call them “Sir”, or “Mr Whoever””*

“

*It's about playing ball just – if you keep sweet with them, then they do with you too...but at the same time you can never win, because at the end of the day you're always going back to your cell and they can take your TV, leave you in there, just to show you who's boss.”*

### **JJC:**

*“The staff are good, dead on...they don't be cheeky, they don't push you to try and get you an adverse [report]”*

*“They don't provoke you – they do that in the children's home, wind you up to get you to crack up”*

*“Staff work with you more down there [JJC] – here they don't give a f\*\*\* [YOC]”*

*“But here [YOC] they're not trained it dealing with children, juveniles.”*

This was said to lead to a bad atmosphere, more stress and less compliance amongst young people.

*“See the way they [staff] get on in here sometimes, it makes you...see some people in here, the way they are it might make them throw a rope up.”*

*“See if you get treated badly, like getting locked in your room all the time, you get angry and it makes you worse”*

Whereas if there is a good relationship between staff and young people, both are said to reap benefits:

*“Here [in Woodlands] you get treated with a bit of respect - so you give respect back.”*

*“You listen to staff in here ... because they treat you with respect...I reckon everybody in here treats you with respect. You listen to them because they're trying to help you, because if you don't listen you learn nothing. That's what they're here for, to help you.”*

*“Get treated better here [JJC] more like a juvenile, not like up there [YOC] – you get treated with a bit of respect, so you give respect back – up there some think they're better than you.”*

### **Complaints:**

In terms of complaints, young people are unlikely to make a complaint in either setting – this is partly down to the culture or mindset they come from, in that complaining, being a “tout” is, something you just don't do. But for those in the YOC, there was also a perception amongst young



people that they would receive adverse treatment if they were to make a complaint:

*“You’d get treated badly if you made a complaint...all the screws would make a w\*\*\*er out of you.”*

*“See if you made a complaint about one, they’d tell the one you complained about and you’d just get locked in your cell all the time”*

*“I wouldn’t complain no matter what, they could do anything to me and I wouldn’t complain – you just don’t. Well unless they raped me.”*

*“You can’t complain, who are you going to complain to – this isn’t like Woodlands, all nice!”*

*“We’re not touts, we’re not gurney bastards, you just take it on the chin. Unless you got raped or thrown down the stairs like - you just get on with it.”*

*“Everyone would think badly of you if you made a complaint...you couldn’t hold your head high in here, you couldn’t even walk out on the landing without being called names”*

I also explored life in the 2 centres more generally, asking the young people to make some comparisons and the thing that most young people preferred about Woodlands was not being locked in their rooms for much of the day, as they report can often happen in Hydebank, for a variety of reasons, with considerably more access to activities for young people.

*“You get out more in Woodlands than you get out here [YOC] – out of your room and outside”*

*“The whole jail’s short staffed and that means we get locked in our cells more – if there’s only one [staff] on the landing, they’re not meant to let you out.”*

*“You should be out for at least an hour everyday, even if you’re locked – but you might not be if staff don’t like you.”*

*“At Woodlands you can go to the gym everyday, football, swimming everyday – here [YOC] it can be once a week just”*

*“In the JJC you get to go swimming, you're out longer, out in the living room, watch TV.”*

So to sum up how young people compare the 2 centres in general:

- Education and health care is preferred in Woodlands
- Young people prefer that in Woodlands they are never “locked” for the majority of a day
- They feel the relationship with staff is better
- Woodlands staff are better equipped to work with young people and are additionally more respectful
- They feel more confident in making a complaint in Woodlands
- JJC facilities are said to be better and more regularly accessible

However, *despite* this, many young people in Hydebank surprise me by saying they would *prefer* to be in Hydebank rather than Woodlands. In exploring this with them, by far the commonest reason for this was an objection that they have to what they see as, in their words, being treated like a child in Woodlands.

(JJC can have young people from 10-17, so some of the older young people feel that they are regarded and dealt with in the same way as younger residents)

*“In Woodlands you get treated like you're just born, a wee child – anything sharp's gone, taken from you – you're not allowed pens and pencils even”*

*The staff there [JJC] aren't disrespectful, just... you feel like a wee kid*

*The main thing I didn't like about Woodlands was being treated like a child.”*

*“See if you say a bad word in Woodlands, you get an adverse [report]. In Hydebank you don't get given an adverse for swearing or stupid wee things, you don't get treated like a child.”*

In young people's minds these small things are important – to us, its about children's rights, safety, dignity and respect – but these yp are not accustomed to these things outside of custody anyway, so this sort of regime is just run of the mill for them – and at least you get to feel you are grown up and are allowed to swear!

But what we have to ask is if this more important than UNCRC articles:

- article 3 (best interests)
- article 24 (health care)
- article 28/29 (education+providing an opportunities for you to develop all your skills and talents)
- article 19 (protection from harm – i.e. other inmates, due to staffing ratios in prison as opposed to JJC or in some instances staff)
- article 37 (fair treatment under the law)

Another reason young people prefer Hydebank is the staff ratios in Woodlands – i.e. there are more staff for less young people, so they can “get away with more”. One of the main things they want to get a way with is smoking, which is no longer allowed on juvenile landings, since under UK law you now have to be 18 to buy tobacco.

*“You're never on your own in Woodlands, staff are always there, you can't get away with anything.”*

*“I'd choose Hydebank over Woodlands if the judge gave me a choice – cos you can get a smoke here and you get treated like an adult”*

Another thing that they get away with is fighting, including the targeting of young people, who are either disliked or who have been charged with “disapproved of” offences, largely of a sexual nature.

Going back to the being treated like a child perception – I've explored this a lot with young people and reflected on it a lot – and the conclusion I have come up with is this: Virtually *all* young people, particularly at this age, want to be a stage or age above that of what they are – examples of this range from people trying to get into pubs underage, to wishing to be taken seriously by adults, in any field or profession.

So by being in Hydebank rather than Woodlands, young people feel like they are being given status and recognition as “proper” criminals now, tough enough to take the punishment of a *real* prison, instead of some namby pamby secure but bar free home, run by people trained in social work, youth work or care, instead of staff who by necessity are tough and strict, due to the danger they are faced with, in the form of these young

lawbreakers. It's almost like they see Woodlands as primary school, kindergarten, but the Hydebank is "big school".

This kind of thinking is something we don't want to encourage, as I can see it solidifying and reinforcing young people's offending identity and their sense of belonging, within a criminal subculture. Following this logic, they would then see adult prison, i.e. Maghaberry or Magilligan as equivalent to 3<sup>rd</sup> Level education, university and aspire to it for the future. In another consultation, one young person said to me:

*"In any community you've basically got four types of people: There's Police, paramilitaries, your ordinary 9 to 5 people, and then there's us, hoods."*

And I think that if we are to find way of deterring young people from crime, it is this self image, this identity that we need to disassemble, and make urgent steps to replace it with a new identity, from which they can get confidence, status and a sense of belonging, which they are currently getting from involvement in crime. BUT this is impossible if we continue to incarcerate children and young people in conditions and regimes whose main purpose is to punish and imprison in a harsh, unchildlike environment, rather than educating, supporting and developing them. This is something that the young people in Hydebank have told me repeatedly - that, while the Young Offenders Centre is not all bad by any means, with many good staff committed to helping young people, the setting and approach in the centre does little to reduce the likelihood that they will reoffend on release.

*"Jail just makes you more determined not to get caught and when you get out, ones look up to you, buy you carry outs, girls love you."*



*“They think thinking will make a difference, make you see the “error of your ways”, but you’ve got a long long time to think and you think about what you're going to do when you get out.”*

*“In here [YOC] it makes you worse...angrier, more likely to do crime when you get out – it does your head in here, makes you feel more against the police, more against the system.”*

Many people may say that prisons / youth custody, should be an unpleasant place or experience, in order to put young people off offending - but I would suggest that this is based more on a desire for retribution and punishment than it is a reality, or an informed opinion about what can reduce crime. In Northern Ireland we have had *severe* retribution for young people who commit crime, in the form of paramilitary punishments – I know young people who have been knee capped, beaten with bats with nails in them, crucified – i.e. nailed to a fence, had beer kegs dropped on their face and legs – but what they *all* tell me, is that this only makes them more determined to “not be beaten”, to not let “them” win and they become more determined to offend, and at the same time more canny, careful and clever, about their crimes. This is useful defiance and rebellion, which I think should be admired and efforts should be made for it to be rechannelled, rather than trying to repress and impede it through vengeful or punitive means. And we *do*, as a society admire rebels, from Charles Darwin to Emmeline Pankhurst and from Wolfe Tone to Roy Keane.

I have no illusions that reducing reoffending is a straight forward and easy task and that a lot of the problems associated with this are in the *communities* where many young people live, relating to families and the care system and the services they get, or don't get, on release.

BUT if learned behaviour pre prison - about the need to be tough, about violence being a legitimate means to resolve or solve problems and about being an individual who is unwanted, aberrant and hence rejected from normal society and societal processes – if this is reinforced when in custody, it will simply make it harder for incarcerated young people to unlearn these approaches to life when they are released, making it harder in turn for them to shake off offending lifestyles.

And I think if we are to find the means to reduce youth offending, either before OR after an individual has committed their first offence, we need to *talk* to the young people concerned, those who know most about youth offending, the young people who have actually been involved in crime.

So to finish I'll leave with 2 quotes from 2 of the young people I spoke to in Hydebank Wood, which I hope demonstrates this:

*“Why not work one on one, or two on one to try and rehabilitate them – find out why they committed the crime. In prison they should try to figure out why you did it, but they just lock you up and hope you’ll think about your actions.”*

*“They spend £37000 grand a year keeping one person in jail, but they could spend 15 grand a year getting someone a job and it would work better, it would stop them doing anymore [crime]. They could try to get you more qualifications, offer more things for you to do, other classes.”*

**Mat Crozier, Young Voices Co-ordinator, Include Youth, November 2009**