

Early Intervention and Prevention

Discussion paper for Youth Justice Strategy Steering Group

revised April 2019

Introduction

This paper is intended to facilitate discussion within the Group and at the forthcoming Open Policy Debate on possible strategic objectives for the Youth Justice Strategy in relation to early intervention and prevention and to advance suggestions on how some of these objectives might be achieved. Some of the text of the suggestions combines a strategic objective and actions for illustrative purposes – these can be disaggregated for further iterations in the light of the discussions.

Following discussion and broad agreement on a set of draft strategic objectives, the next step will be to formulate a set of specific actions with specified responsibility for delivery within timescales as per the following template:

Theme	Strategic objective	Action	Who and when
Early intervention and prevention	A		
	B		
	C		
	D		

Principles

In line with the principles underlying the strategy, objectives will need to focus on assisting the development and operation of systems for early intervention and prevention which:

- are child focussed;
- are based on empirical evidence for effectiveness;
- include effective and collaborative mechanisms for consultation, listening to the voice of the child and to the practice wisdom of front-line staff;
- design coherent and integrated services to address the situation of each child and their family / household context to promote reduction of harm with holistic and non-stigmatizing responses; and
- provide effective oversight / governance to ensure coherence in the system.

Public sector reform context

Our Public Service 2020 (published in 2017) sets out a detailed reform programme for the public sector, with 18 actions across 3 pillars. The work of the Steering Group corresponds to 2 key themes that underpin the overall public service reform framework:

- a) ensuring an evidence and data-driven approach linking expenditure and reform by optimising the use of data; and
- b) delivering for our public, by improving services, making them more accessible, and – most importantly in the Youth Justice area – designing services and systems that are child-centred and provide a wrap-around, holistic response.

A key question for the Group is how to balance

- a) an effective, targeted response to families and children with high needs and high risk factors (based on empirical evidence – see discussion on research below); and
- b) an approach that does not stigmatize and avoids inappropriate/premature involvement with criminal justice agencies.

The choice can be expressed as follows: should early intervention and prevention initiatives be integrated into the work of criminal justice agencies, or located within a broader community and youth service and family support context?

Discussion to date suggests that as far as possible the preferred approach should be targeted and resourced streams within mainstream family and child support services and funding programmes, rather than standalone youth justice early intervention and prevention initiatives. Nonetheless, the issue remains of how to ensure that mainstream services in practice will have the capacity to address the high needs of those at most risk and to support their staff in this challenging work environment.

UN principles (Riyadh Guidelines 1990) emphasise the central importance of a child's well-being from early childhood and of using a whole of society approach to address factors underlying criminal involvement. The Riyadh Guidelines also emphasise the role of community-based services and the need to avoid labelling children who display problematic behaviours. Clearly, these principles would not support a policy of separating prevention and early intervention measures for children and families at risk from broader community and family support programmes, or locating them within standalone criminal justice system responses.

It would be more effective to locate responses to early problematic behaviour principally in mainstream child and family support and youth services, which

should be resourced to address risk factors and the situation of vulnerable children – with the collaborative support of other agencies as appropriate.

It is also relevant to note that the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing also recommends that the role of policing be defined as, essentially, the “prevention of harm” and points out that this is much more than the role of An Garda Síochána. Accordingly, it is appropriate to examine the funding and coordination arrangements for the broad spectrum of prevention and early intervention services – including questions of system design - within the context of the Youth Justice Strategy.

Consultation and Listening – the voice of the child and front-line staff

Children and young people who have experienced the criminal justice system have valuable insights into identification of risk factors and into the effectiveness of the services with which they have come into contact. There is an obligation across all sectors to ensure that the voice of the child is heard when policy is being developed and on the assessment of services and this consultative approach has been embedded in our way of working within different sectors. There would be real value in sharing the outcomes of such consultations with children, including in relation to schools, across different sectors.

In addition, front-line staff in schools and child services, as well as community practitioners are able to provide substantial insights about effective preventative measures. It is important that we have mechanisms in place to access the *practice wisdom* of front-line staff and other practitioners and that the learning from relevant consultations can be accessed by all policy-makers and service providers to inform the ongoing development of policy and of effective responses, including in the youth justice area.

For the Youth Justice Strategy, a particular priority is to ensure that the learning from consultations conducted in the Justice sector informs policies in other sectors in relation to children and families experiencing multiple disadvantage. See also further discussion on this issue under **Research and Data**.

A very clear message from practitioners and academic experts in this area is that having one stable adult relationship is often the key factor in preventing a young person at risk from getting involved in anti-social or criminal behaviour, or in motivating the necessary change in behaviour for a young person who has become involved. Transition as a child ages out of one service to another, or as new needs emerge, can be disruptive of existing stable relationships and this can be especially detrimental to those children and young people who are most vulnerable and most at risk.

The challenges of managing transitions while maintaining contact with a key adult in the child’s life should not be underestimated. Nonetheless, given the centrality of a stable adult relationship figure to mitigating harm, it should be a strategic objective of early and preventive services to maintain and protect

such bonds where they have been developed. Wider community-based initiatives, including schools and adult mentoring services could, with appropriate support and encouragement, play a vital part in this.

Possible Strategic Objectives for Youth Justice Strategy

A1 We will ensure that our existing approaches to hearing the voice of the child allow us to learn from and share the outcomes of such consultations in a systematic way across agencies and programmes to support effective prevention and early intervention measures.

A2 We will develop mechanisms to harness the *practice wisdom* of front-line staff and other practitioners and to share the learning across agencies and programmes.

A3 Within a collaborative approach to service provision, we will put systems in place to prioritise the development and maintenance of a key adult relationship for children and young people who are most vulnerable and most at risk.

Research and Data

It is not clear to what extent there is a collective consideration across agencies (including Justice sector) and research bodies, of the available evidence, and its implications for effectiveness in prevention and early intervention, or on identification of evidence gaps and future research priorities. While there may be substantial cross-over in data and learning between the Youth Justice system and other sectors, there does not seem to be a mechanism for its collective consideration and development of relevant research programmes in a systematic way across programme and organisational boundaries.

A specific issue for the Youth Justice Strategy is that we have accurate data in many cases on the young people within the system, including on their experience of the school system and other relevant public services, but we do not have the data to establish a correlation between specific life experiences and later involvement in the youth justice system. For example, we know that reduced school attendance is an experience shared by many young people on Garda Youth Diversion Projects and by most if not all children in detention. We do not have empirical evidence to establish if the correlation works in the other direction – if being on reduced hours in schools is or is not a strong indicator of later involvement in anti-social behaviour. Collaborative research which seeks to establish firm correlations between specific life experiences or interaction with other public services (of which this is just one example) has the potential to inform policy and resource allocation choices in a way that is transformative for children and families most at risk.

Research topics such as

- the situation of children in both the Care and Justice systems,
- the effects of early school leaving
- identification of 'early warning' signals of later involvement in the criminal justice system
- specific challenges of Traveller children and children from migrant backgrounds
- transition from primary to secondary school and to other education/training provision

may be of particular relevance in this regard.

Possible Strategic Objectives for Youth Justice Strategy

B1 We will support enhanced communication and cooperation between agencies and research bodies to maximise the use of data and research to inform Youth Justice Policy and the broader development of prevention and early intervention measures,

B2 We will develop a collaboration approach to development of empirical evidence for identification of risk factors, key 'warning signals' of later involvement with the criminal justice system and consequently key points for optimum early interventions.

System design and collaborative child-centred approaches

There are two distinct issues here:

- how to embed a collaborative and cross-agency approach within different programmes and agencies; and
- whether elements of how the overall system of youth service, child and family support is designed make for unnecessary overlap and require a disproportionate expenditure of staff and managerial time in meeting on coordination issues to mitigate.

While there are examples of good cross-agency collaboration in practice in many areas, it is far from clear that there is anyone or any agency that has a clear and comprehensive view of the extent to which a collective child centred approach is actually realised in practice and the nature and extent of the barriers to this. The available evidence from practitioners suggest that good cross-agency collaboration:

- works best in smaller communities, where service providers know and are close to each other; and
- depends on having a local champion in a key position and on the enthusiastic and voluntary cooperation of other staff (therefore models of good practice are liable to dissipate when the champion moves to another role).

There are child/family centred approaches based on collaborative case-working, such as the Meitheal model developed by Tusla, which could be developed further and which may be applicable to collectively enhance child centred services. The model being developed as part of the Dublin North East Inner City (NEIC) initiative to support better service coordination could be replicated and ways of embedding it in a systemic way explored. Practical actions that might contribute to more effective service delivery include:

- Streamlining financial reporting arrangements for services delivered by the Community Sector to provide a single reporting framework for organisations in receipt of multiple funds; rigidly separate reporting and accountability requirements have been raised as an administrative burden and cost and, moreover, as a positive hindrance to integrated service delivery by NGO service providers.
- Development and replication (as suggested above) of the model being developed as part of the NEIC initiative – key elements being an integrated area plan, funders’ grants aligned with the plan and oversight at local level and key determinate of future success being effective oversight at central Government level (see next section) and a duty on agencies/funders/service providers to participate.
- In smaller, more self-contained communities with a concentration of disadvantage and high needs (e.g. Moyross, Cherry Orchard), partnership with a preferred civil society service delivery agent by a range of statutory funders with a matrix of mutual funding and contractual commitments to deliver and integrated service might be the most appropriate approach. In this regard, the Commission on the Future of Policing (section 17 – full text of section set out as a footnote)¹ suggests

¹ 17. At a broader level, the Irish Youth Justice Service is responsible for leading reform in the area of youth justice. It administers a network of 105 youth diversion projects targeted at 12-17 year olds where there is a risk of the young people remaining in the justice system. The projects are based in community organisations which provide an integrated range of services for children at risk as well as their families. There is work underway to inform the future development of the network of projects which will enhance the preventative and family support work and embed a restorative practice ethos. The approach to embedding services in the community is consistent with our recommendations on local community input to policing in Chapter Thirteen, where we propose the development of effective local structures to build capacity for community participation. There could be merit in coordinating funding for these projects through one or more specifically tasked community based channels, as long as this had genuine buy-in locally. The Irish Youth Justice Service is staffed by officials from the Department of Justice and Equality and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, who are co-located but retain their reporting lines to their parent departments. With a view to maximising the outcomes of the service, consideration should be given to the most appropriate structures to deliver any future Youth Justice Strategy as well as ensuring sustainable funding sources.

There could be merit in coordinating funding for these projects through one or more specifically tasked community based channels, as long as this had genuine buy-in locally.

- Redesign of schemes to eliminate more obvious overlaps in support of more effective service delivery.

The final bullet point acknowledges that in some incidences the fragmentary nature of our system design imposes an unnecessary administrative cost, including a burden on front-line staff and area managers of coordination across organisation and programme boundaries that, if reduced, should free up capacity for better service delivery.

Possible Strategic Objective for Youth Justice Strategy

C1 We will provide integrated and mainstream prevention and early intervention services to address the circumstances of children and families experiencing multiple disadvantage and risk of involvement in anti-social behaviour and criminal activity.

C2 We will support the development of collaborative mechanisms and partnerships to ensure that effective practices are disseminated and supported in all areas of the State.

Oversight and Governance

Effective coordination and cross-agency working that relies on local champions and good will gives us exemplars of how we could do better, but does not address system design and oversight issues. Neither can we ensure that provision of an integrated service to meet needs in a holistic way is embedded in our administrative cultures with clear expectations that it is the norm and not an optional add-on that can succumb to the stresses of working within organisational silos in a pressurised environment with scarce resources. That is both an acknowledgement of those who champion models of best practice and of the real pressures facing service providers in meeting pressing and immediate needs, rather than a criticism, and points to the need for a systemic response.

Most early intervention and preventative services come under the aegis of the Minister for Children and Family Affairs, but other agencies and Departments have key roles also. Even if, as suggested above, some elements of system redesign are undertaken to address specific overlaps or fragmentation, there will remain other programmes and agencies with which effective coordination is essential, including the housing and education sectors.

Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 imposes a *positive duty* on a public body to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination; promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its

staff and the persons to whom it provides services; and protect the human rights of its members, staff and the persons to whom it provides services. The Act creates a review mechanism to oversee compliance. Some UK jurisdictions impose a positive duty on social service providers to collaborate in their work. While the administrative context is quite different here, nonetheless a statutory duty on publicly-funded youth, family and child support services to work together in the design and delivery of their funding programmes and services could have a very positive impact.

Such a statutory duty could be vested in the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. Elements for further consideration include:

- power to issue guidelines or codes of practice to relevant programmes and agencies;
- power to designate a mechanism for development and delivery of an integrated area plan (NEIC model) with which funders and service providers are under to duty to coordinate and comply with;
- power to designate a preferred community and voluntary sector partner in areas where that may be appropriate approach to achieving the desired outcome ('CoFP' model);
- independent review mechanisms;
 - at national level, the Ombudsman for Children;
 - at local level Ombudsman for Children? Local Authorities (given SICAP role)?, CYPSCs?

Possible Strategic Objectives for Youth Justice Strategy

D1 We will review service coordination and funding arrangements for prevention and early intervention to ensure the alignment and coordination of services in order to address more effectively the situation of all children and families, but with a specific focus on those who may be at risk in relation to anti-social behaviour and criminal activity.

D2 We will put mechanisms in place to drive a culture of cross-programme and cross-agency cooperation and collaboration in delivery of an integrated service to children and families at risk.

D3 We will ensure that relevant agencies and funding programmes coordinate the design of youth, family and child services and coordinate at the point of service delivery, with a strong oversight and governance role vested in the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.