



# STEERED AWAY FROM A LIFE OF CRIME?

The Garda's youth diversion projects work quietly with children on the cusp of offending, helping them stay at school and out of custody



**Ann Marie Hourihane**

It must be the quietest milestone to be celebrated this year, but it is one of the most impressive. There are now more than 100 Garda Youth Diversion Projects around the country. They have never opened their doors to the media before.

The projects were designed to prevent children getting into crime. Or, as the director of the programme, Supt Colette Quinn, puts it, to prevent and interrupt destructive and criminal behaviour and to give young people an alternative.

The idea dates to 1963, when four gardai decided to intervene in the soul-destroying cycle of youth crime. "I believe Charles Haughey initiated it," says Quinn. The late taoiseach was minister for justice at the time. "Two guys were sent to Manchester to see what they were doing [about the problem] over there."

The first of the modern projects was the Graft scheme, in Clondalkin, Dublin, in 1991. The Children Act (2001) put the projects on a statutory footing, and the scheme became part of the new Irish Youth Justice Service a few years later. The projects are administered by the Garda and run by Youth Work Ireland, Foróige and Catholic Youth Care, as well as by smaller organisations.

Quinn puts the programme's annual budget at "about €13 million" – not much when compared with the cost of keeping a person in jail periodically over their lifetime, or even the cost of keeping a young person in custody for a year. All the adults people involved in the programme that I speak to – and, shockingly, some of the children – make this money-saving point.

Three-quarters of the children referred to the projects are boys. More than half of the children have been issued with cautions, formal or informal. A formal caution brings a period of supervision with a junior liaison officer, a garda who deals with children who come up against the law. There are 123 of the officers, of whom eight are sergeants; the rest are of garda rank.

Half of the incidents that bring young offenders to the projects relate to alcohol – "the underpinning problem", says Quinn.

At a time when public-service morale is subterranean, any outsider would be struck by how motivated everyone involved seems. "There's not one of my staff that doesn't go over their hours," says Quinn, who adds that she doesn't have to explain anything about the projects to Minister for Justice Alan Shatter, because "he gets it. He values it."

Quinn would like a co-ordinated approach to reach across the public bodies concerned with troubled children. And she has exactly such an integrated, dynamic organisation in mind as a model: the Criminal Assets Bureau. "You can see that interagency collaboration is very effective there. It would be great to see that co-operation working in the best interest of the child, so that we were all working together instead of independently."

## Usain O'Connor

I tell the children they can choose their own pseudonyms, as I won't be using their real names, and suggest they might like to choose someone they admire. That is how we end up with Usain O'Connor. How would he describe himself? "I'm a mad fisherman, and I fish every day of the week. Eel, pike, perch, trout, roach, carp. My father taught me. I'm here because I got suspended from school for messing and fighting. This is my second year here. I'll be 16 in eight months' time."

Usain says at school he was called names. What kind of names? "Innocent," he replies flatly. "Handicapped. School has always been difficult since the start."

He was accommodated by the school in a reduced-hours programme. So what happened then? "They brought me into the project. Bit

of help. It's good." Usain was brought to the project because of his stealing, his poor school attendance and his classroom behaviour. It wasn't an unwelcome development. "My family were happy about it. I'm the eldest. There's seven and myself."

Usain has now sat his Junior Certificate. With other boys from Ballinasloe Junction Project, in Co Galway, he has been given a place to study for his Leaving Cert with Youthreach, another State-funded programme for children with educational challenges.

## Mac

Mac is 14 years old but looks a lot younger. He likes soccer and says he plays in midfield. Might he be a soccer player when he is older? "Never," says Mac. He is not an optimist.

Mac is now the youngest of five. His youngest brother died. I get confused about this and call him the second youngest. I apologise. "You're all right," says Mac courteously.

When I ask why he is participating in the Project, Mac is pretty clear. Like Usain, he's on a reduced-hours programme at school. "I get out at 12.30pm. I hit the teacher's son." Mac's view of school is bleak. "It's not really great. I don't do any work. School is boring to me. It's good for other people. Better people like it. Better people than me."

Mac likes work, he says. He enjoys building and would like to be a carpenter. His mother works in a nearby clothes shop. "She cleans rooms," he says. His father goes hunting "rabbits and things".

The Ballinasloe project is good, he says. "It's pure different. It brings you out cycling. We went to Croagh Patrick. Before, I'd watch television. Play a game. Wait for my friends. It wasn't great."

Do other family members get in trouble? "Older brother. Doesn't get in trouble no more." He does not elaborate.

## Matthew

Matthew is a young man of 19, sober and industrious. He has come to the Junction Project office after finishing work, because he wants to praise what it did for him when he was a young teenager. "It's very good for keeping you on track. Only for here I wouldn't have finished school. I went to level 5 in Fetac" – the Further



Education and Training Awards: there are 10 levels- "in Galway and did carpentry. They constantly encourage you about things here. I was finding school very hard. When I came here I did the Junior Cert.

"The youth workers here were concentrating on the pupils; the classes were smaller. When I said I'd have no thoughts of doing something, they'd say, 'Just try it once. See what you think.' So that's what happened. I just got loads of encouragement.

"I'm in Canal House," he says, referring to a training centre that also helps people who have come through the probation system. "I'm in the further-learning section at the moment. I go there every week, Monday to Friday. I get €164 a week. If it wasn't for this place I'd probably be in the probation part of Canal House, but instead I'm in the further-learning part. I have friends in trouble. Up in court for robbing, all that kind of stuff. Drinking. Drunk and disorderly."

Matthew's experience of school was grim. He saw a difference in the way Traveller children were treated. "Well, some of the teachers wouldn't work as much with you as maybe with the other kids. I would say to people that this scheme is worth the money. It's cheaper than locking people up."

## Valerie

This girl chooses her pseudonym partly because "it's nice and normal". Valerie's history is perhaps the most extreme of the children I talk to, yet she seems the gentlest of girls. Her relationship with her youth worker, Edel Kelly, who runs Ballinasloe Junction Project, is also the closest. "She is like a second mother to me," says Valerie. Would she like to have children of her own one day? "No. Not after what I've seen. No."

In her early teenage years she was "robbing, doing drugs and cannabis". In her final year of primary school her father, to whom she was very close, died. Valerie's extreme behaviour continued until she came up against the Garda. "They brought me to the station. I was shoplifting. I was robbing houses. I got a two-year probation."

Her criminal behaviour, she says, was an effort to please her peers. "If I wasn't part of that group then I had no friends. I didn't feel part of the group unless I did it." But her criminal behaviour did not relieve her feelings, and when she was 16 she started "to get suicidal and harm" herself.

"I hated school, and I dropped out of it. They just saw me as a bad person, as a thing. In here it's not like that. Paul and Edel, they don't let anybody go. It's the only place that gives you a second chance."

To Valerie the Ballinasloe project was a lifeline. "Edel is the second-best thing that happened to me, after my mother. Edel would ring me at night. She used to bring me places, on outings and things like that. I wouldn't be

alive without her, and my mother."

Valerie's mother, overwhelmed by her circumstances, is being treated for a mental-health condition. Valerie's half-brother and half-sister, who are five and three, are in foster care. But things have got steadily better for her, and she is now training at Canal House in Ballinasloe, which she enjoys. "I'd love to do youth work. I'd like to try and help other young people."

She also has a boyfriend. "He doesn't drink, and since I started going round with him I don't drink either. He feels I should have got a better life growing up. And I'm glad he feels that way."

**“I hated school and I dropped out. Here, they don't let anybody go. It's the only place that gives you a second chance**

### Small change, big difference Guiding young people with the lightest of touches

Three boys are marking out potato drills in the Roscommon sunshine. Afterwards they cook burgers and hot dogs on a small fire. This takes place on the allotment that a local farmer has donated to the Junction, the Garda Youth Diversion Project in nearby Ballinasloe, Co Galway.

Two youth workers, Edel Kelly and Paul Riddell, hover over the boys, watching the fire, seeing that the potato drills are straight. They're steering with the lightest of touches. "Youth workers are informal educators," says Riddell. "A lot of people forget that."

On the day I visit this branch of the project it is looking after 10 young people aged between 12 and 17, all of whom had been referred to the programme by the Garda.

Then there are between eight and 10 teenagers who are secondary referrals—children at risk of offending who pretty much refer themselves, or are referred by their friends, even though their behaviour is so far undetected. "But we know about them," says Kelly. "That's the advantage of having conversations with young people."

Most of the young people here have been failed by our education system. I ask Kelly whether any of the boys I interview have ever had a school assessment for learning difficulties or intellectual disability. "Not that I'm aware of," she replies evenly.

She has been a youth worker for 14 years, and with the Garda Youth Diversion Projects for 10.

Riddell is from Ballinasloe, where his family had a shoe factory. He opened a bar and ran it "until the VAT man caught up with me".

Riddell believes in second chances. He believes in the diversion project. "I like the way it has developed in the past couple of years. I'm no angel, but I believe these young lads deserve a second chance."

Most of the children arrive at the Junction having been suspended from school with low self-esteem, high impulsivity and a black vision of their future. "What we constantly try to do," says Kelly, "is to promote a new way of thinking."

The adults also try to think of new things. Kelly has been involved with young people receiving restorative cautions, in which

they must confront the victims of their crime. She thinks these are the most effective. "Particularly with businesses [that have been robbed]. That's the way I can see the system going."

A year and a half ago Kelly and Riddell volunteered the Junction as a trial site for a review by Sean Redmond, who was head of young-offender programmes at the Irish Youth Justice Service.

Although Kelly and Riddell do not say so, taking part in the trial opened all participating workers to much scrutiny. In the end the trials were a great success, and the number

of participating sites has been extended. Kelly is proud of having been a trial site. "It made us," she says.

On this project Kelly is the youth-justice co-ordinator and Riddell is the youth-justice worker. There is a third member of staff, Katie O'Connor, who works one day a week. O'Connor has been working with two young men who have built a sulky, a light chariot for harness-racing. This is part of their project for Gaisce, the President's Award.

Crime in Ballinasloe has fallen significantly since the Junction started. Total youth offences fell 14 per cent between 2010 and 2011, and 20 per cent between 2011 and 2012. But the cuts that have bitten savagely elsewhere have halted the opening of more projects. The money allocated for O'Connor's salary will run out next month.

The popular diversion summer camp was cancelled this summer because of a lack of funds. The money for Riddell's job, which comes from the European Social Fund, is due to run out in February 2014.

In his youth, Riddell was a footballer. He played outhalf for the Garbally and Connacht rugby teams. He played Gaelic football for Galway and soccer for Athlone.

"I'm passionate about working with the underdog. Rooney, Messi, Ronaldo: it's easy to manage those guys. Eric Cantona was sacked, he was banned in France, he was extremely difficult. But when he went to Old Trafford Alex Ferguson gave him the chance to be captain of Manchester United. That's what we're about. Small changes make a big difference to young people."



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**"What we constantly try to do is to promote a new way of thinking": youth workers Paul Riddell and Katie O'Connor with some of the participants in the Ballinasloe Junction Garda Youth Diversion Project at their allotment. PHOTOGRAPH: JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY**