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Review of Regional Facilities-Youth Consultation Report

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Review of regional facilities

Introduction

Background

An independent review of regional facilities for children and young people was undertaken between January 2017 and October 2017. The report was published by Department of Health in March 2018¹. The review team recommended eleven changes to existing provision that would enhance coherent care through the establishment of an integrated campus (recommendation 1) with oversight from a new panel (recommendation 5) and help to reduce the numbers of young people who spent unnecessary periods out of the community in a secure setting (recommendation 10). In order to accomplish this, a complex array of secure and community based, specialist services and staff trainings were envisaged (recommendation 3, 4, 7, 8) as part this process of change.

In October 2019, the review implementation programme team, in consultation with the stakeholder reference group, requested that children and young people were engaged as part of the wider consultative process in line with recommendation 11c of the review report.

In response, five voluntary sector organisations along with Queens University Belfast designed and facilitated focus groups and individual interviews with relevant young people across NI. This paper is a summary of the findings of that process.

The aims and objectives of are outlined below.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the process to gather the views and experience of children and young people who have accessed services in either Woodlands JJC and/or Lakewood Secure Care to improve the outcomes of vulnerable young people in need of specialist support.

¹ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/review-of-regional-facilities-for-children-young-people.pdf>

The objectives were to explore young people's experiences of:

- Entry into and discharge from Lakewood and Woodlands
- The nature of the care and support provided by each centre
- The effect and effectiveness of this support
- The culture and discipline within the centres and its impact on them

Method

Recruitment of young people was undertaken via existing partner networks. Young people were identified through existing services/provision on the basis that they had direct experience of living in a secure setting (justice or care) and were willing to engage in a semi structured interview or focus group regarding their experiences of that environment, and had the capacity to express their thoughts on the suggested changes to regional facilities.

An information sheet was jointly developed by the delivery partners. This was subsequently used by each partner to ensure young people had access to relevant information prior to the interview and had the opportunity to consent to, or opt out of the process.

Each young person was provided with a written copy of the information sheet. Additionally, a staff member from the delivery organisation discussed the process, the rationale for the interview, how the data would be recorded, stored and what the information would then be used for.

An interview schedule was developed in consultation with each of the delivery partners (VOYPIC, Include Youth, NIACRO, Extern and Start 360). This interview schedule was facilitated in a consistent way across the focus groups and individual interviews (see appendix 1). Respondents were asked a series of open questions followed by closed, direct questions where the facilitators wished to elicit a response to a specific point raised. In each case, the themes included: young people's general perceptions of the integrated facility; young people's ideas about the population within that facility; their own experiences of living in a secure environment (justice or care); relationships that affected their time out of the community; factors that young people felt may have prevented their journey; and ideas that young people had to enable a smoother transition out of a secure and back into the community

Following interview, the data was recorded using a standardised template, collated, and sent to QUB for analysis. This interview data was then coded in a qualitative analysis programme (Nvivo 12) and analysed using thematic analysis.

Focus groups table

Thirty young people aged between thirteen and twenty-one were engaged as part of this process (see table 1). The respondents were from across three Trust areas (BHSCT, NHSCT, WHSCT & SEHSCT) and had experience in a justice and/or care secure setting. The workshops took place in a variety of locations including within JJC, in the community and within Lakewood. In addition to the focus groups, four individual interviews were also facilitated.

Table 1: Overview of respondents

Age	Gender	JJC	Lakewood	Trust	FG/Interview
17	F		X	NHSCT	FG
17	F		X	SEHSCT	FG
19	M	X		SEHSCT	FG
?	M	X		BHSCT	FG
?	M		X	BHSCT	FG
16	M	X			FG
13	M	X		SEHSCT	FG
13	M	X	X	WHSCT	FG
17	M	X			FG
17	M	X			FG
16	M	X			FG
16	M	X			FG
17	M	X	X	WHSCT	FG
17	M	X			FG
16	M		X	BHSCT	FG
17	M		X	WHSCT	FG
15	M		X	NHSCT	FG
15	F		X	BHSCT	FG
12	F		X	SEHSCT	FG
13	M		X	WHSCT	FG
15	F		X	SEHSCT	FG
16	F		X	SEHSCT	FG
17	F		X	NHSCT	FG
16	M		X	WHSCT	FG
17	M		X	WHSCT	FG
18	M	X	X	WHSCT	FG
18	M	X	X	WHSCT	FG
17	M	X		WHSCT	FG
15	M	X		WHSCT	FG
17	M	X		WHSCT	FG

18	M	X	X	WHST	Interview
21	F		X	SEHST	Interview
21	F	X	X	BHST	Interview
17	M	X		SEHST	Interview

Summary of the Findings

General perceptions

There were wide ranging views about the integration of the current facilities. Some young people were highly positive about the development and saw the potential transition as something that was long overdue.

“Should have been done years ago”

“Young people who hasn’t been in here (JJC) would think it’s good, ‘cos you could do activities here, it would be good for them”.

Others were less optimistic.

“Are you mental? I can’t think of any good things, there would be more complications and problems. “There would be more criminal activity, and peer pressure to do criminal activity”.

“I think it’s an awful idea because vulnerable, high risk people would be in with criminals. I think it should be totally separate, as the needs are completely different. I feel it would be more chaotic, as young people in JJC are more destructive. I feel that young people would be negatively influenced by each other in a joint facility. I can’t think of any advantages, and don’t think it would work”.

“I don’t think the two would go together, you come into here (JJC) to get punished.”

“They’re over there (LW) ‘cos they are headers, they are a danger, they cut themselves and all. They would send your fucking head away and you would end up doing it yourself”.

In particular, parents raised their own concerns about what the transition would mean for young people, the perceived impact on their children and expressed a lack of clarity around how different sites, each with their own distinct purpose, could even come together.

“I don’t think the two would go together, you come into here to get punished”.

“Lakewood is about keeping people safe – that’s why they are there”

“No it’s not a good idea, the last thing we want is them to be in with rapists and murderers, it’s (LW) completely different”

“18The impact of mixing criminals with other young people, they could latch on to someone committing criminal offences”

This lack of clarity underpinned many of the responses regardless of where the interviews took place. Some respondents felt that the transition was a cost saving exercise. Others merely asked the question ‘*what is the point?*’

Most however were cautiously optimistic. Despite raising concerns, there was a sense that young people would be open to the idea of change if some of the perceived challenges were addressed and questions answered. Much of these were related to the mechanics of the new regional facility and how it would be operationalised.

“Will we have to have full body searches in secure like in JJC?”

“Would I have the same keyworker if I moved from secure to JJC regime?”

“The staff are all trained differently so how would that work? Would the staff all change or would they get new training?”

Interestingly the idea of training was raised a number of times and across four focus groups. This possibly spoke to young people’s understanding of the gravity of change that would be required.

“But they are all trained in different ways, the staff from the two places, like how to use restraint and all”.

Based on their contemporary experiences, most respondents did not feel that a simple integration exercise would be feasible.

“The staff in the JJC could have an opinion about young people who have gone through the courts and then they may treat all the children the same way.”

The process would require more substantial cultural, procedural and operational changes in order to accommodate the transition. In essence, the transition would not be a joining of several sites but the formulation of one new site. The difference more than semantics.

Whilst suggesting that it could be a productive development with the potential to enhance the experience of and outcomes for those who access the facilities, there were genuine concerns around the feasibility.

In general, those who had spent time in Lakewood were more likely to be positive about the change and those from JJC less so. There was some evidence that at least part of the desire to maintain the status quo in JJC was about the potential young people had to lose what they felt were positive aspects of the regime-positive relationships with staff, productive routines, access to resources and activities throughout the day, a full education programme, family support and access to external services. Both groups however raised concerns around how this new facility would look and more importantly to them, how the population would be managed.

Population in the new facility

In general, there was no consensus or indeed clear pattern that emerged around what the population of the new regional facility might look like, how this might be organised or how perceived challenges might be overcome. Questions were raised in each focus group and these centered on how the facility might be operationalised with the population differentiated primarily based on age or need.

For some respondents age differentiation was the fairer option. This overcame some of the challenges noted above in regards to stigmatisation of the young people associated with criminal behaviour and/or mental health needs. Organising based on age could go some way to ensure that young people received age appropriate, developmental support. But it also overcame some priority issues for the young people; that is, making their stay in the facility safer and more secure.

“I think it should be by age”.

“The older ones could tell the older ones how it is”.

“You don’t want wee ones around you melting your head”.

“I wouldn’t want to be in with wee kids as they disrupt the unit”.

Others however did not feel that it was neither right nor appropriate to separate based on age alone given that those within the same unit could experience a myriad of issues regardless of age. Part of this was to help ensure some form of equity among the population of the new facility.

“Mixed age could be good, as younger ones would have role models. Everyone should be treated the same”.

Another part of this was related to the distinct needs each young person would present with. Sometimes a young person may require specialist support but respondents suggested that their needs could have a detrimental impact on others around them. Organising the population based on need (primarily behavioural needs) rather than age was another option.

“There should be a different unit for paedophiles in JJC”.

“I think secure should be in their own unit, and people who’ve committed crimes in another”.

And within this, respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of a tiered system with more intensive supports (and less privileges) at one end and less intensive supports (and more privileges) on the other end.

“Start with a high need unit and work down to having less need”.

“All those with serious charges should be kept together and the ones with the silly charges should be kept together”.

“This could be a stepping stone or staged process if it’s for first time offenders. – start off in a high needs unit and then work down”.

“Start with a high need unit and work to having less not but to do that you need an emotional health facility with drugs unit and have a routine of the JJC”.

A less vocal perspective came from a minority of respondents who indicated that it didn’t really matter how the population was organised. What was more important to them were the supports that were available to them through the facility. For instance, it appeared from several comments that this group believed that if they lived with a mixed age group of young people, it would be more important to them that they had access to high quality mental health services, drugs services, offence focussed or behavioural programmes that had a tangible impact on the issues they experienced, than the people they shared a house with. They were also keen that any supports could help prevent a return to an out-of-community placement and several were keen to share what they believed were key factors associated with stability in the community.

[Pre admissions alternatives \(earlier prevention\)](#)

Across the interviews, respondents were asked to consider environmental factors that could have prevented their entry into secure care or custody at an earlier stage. Several young people believed that despite everything that was put into place (by family by community and by mandated services), there was little that could have changed the outcomes that they experienced. The responses from these young people were characterised by low hope.

“Nothing would have prevented me going into secure”

“It’s not going to happen, people have crime in the head, and people don’t change.”

“I went to CAMHS from I was 11 so nothing will help”.

Some welcomed the experiences that they had out of the community and indeed believed it had helped to shape who they had become.

“I regret nothing, I don’t care. I wouldn’t be in this position I am in now unless I had been through it. I’m glad it’s all happened”.

Most however recognised that out-of-community care is not the preferable option for most young people and indeed could be distressing and counterproductive”

“[I] Went into Secure with 0 charges and left Secure with 25. Secure can sometimes makes you worse”.

The majority of respondents believed that there were particular points on their own journey that could have been successfully interrupted in order to prevent a secure or custodial placement. Many did not know what this was but inferred that the interruption was possible.

“Where was the support before I went in [to LW]?”

Interestingly, several respondents suggested that their entry (and re-entry) into secure accommodation and/or custody was partly (and potentially indirectly) because the basic needs that should have been met in the community were not-they were met in an artificial setting.

“People come back here because they feel safe here”.

“I feel safe in here. JJC works as you go the gym, swimming pool and do work”.

“There’s safety and structure in here”

And whilst this may have helped to create a sense of safety that is often soon lost as are the improvements in wellbeing, educational engagement, drug use, physical activity and

aggression.

“When I was in secure the gym helped, and I would do well. But then they put me back to the same home. Going back to the same situation made it impossible to stay off drugs”.

So the majority of respondents suggested that action would be more effective earlier and in the community. Much of this centered on how the effective approaches used (primarily in JJC) could be replicated in a sustained way, using the natural ecology and community supports. And there were no shortage of ideas in this area.

“In my experience my mood was so low before going to secure and I feel that I never got the help at the time and this might have prevented me from going to secure”.

“We need services to help families and young people. I looked everywhere and there was nothing. If parents were better equipped they could help young people”. (Parent)

“Issues start in care homes; there is no staff interaction, they weren’t there to help with homeworks, or talk to you normally. They were just there to tick boxes. Everything you say is handed over to your social worker, even if you need help with your mental health. I wouldn’t have run if staff talked to me”.

Some of this involved one to one support, tailored to each young person’s needs and varying from low intensity, low specialist mentoring services through to high intensity, highly specialised mental health provision. But a common thread was a planned, purposeful and sustainable approach to each young person.

“There could be more appointments with CAMHS”

“Yes, supported by an individual plan to meet my needs”

Interestingly, when young people talked about prevention, many spoke of their experience of care and how some of those experiences contributed towards their placement out of the community. For these young people prevention was integral to the review of regional facilities. It is not merely about a shift across a number of facilities but a cultural and operational shift across justice and social care.

“If staff in the children’s home had worked with me instead of ringing the police all the time for everything I did that was challenging– this could have made a difference. If staff could have been more understanding to what I was going through. Some staff even make a situation worse.”

“Children’s homes should not be ringing the police as often and should work with the young people for longer at the. Unless you have actually hit someone [physically harmed someone] the police should not be called for you just shouting”.

Of course external services are often essential for young people with complex needs. For many young people, these services are mandated. Even when these are not mandated, there is little choice in the type of service provided, the worker who supports them or how the process is implemented.

For some, it was about having access to a positive relationship, but for others there was a recognition that they required specialised supports to address thematic issues, most commonly cited as mental health and substance use issues.

Young people were aware of many services provided by well-known organisations. Some were reported as effective, some less so. The key point however was that young people want choice over what to access and when they can access those services, but also suggested that tiering (according to perceived need) did not equate to layering of services where more chronic need leads to more intensive and cumulative input from a variety of providers. Focus instead was more important for these young people.

Perspectives on the panel

Although a minority of young people were wary about the panel, its membership and a widening of people with access to personal information, respondents were broadly favourable towards the establishment of the panel and particularly enthused that their voices would form an integral part of decision making.

“I would want to go and talk to the panel myself and let them know what I think”

“Yes we should meet the panel face to face to help them understand the impact their decision will have on our lives”

“Yes, I’d explain myself. They need to hear all sides of the story, and they might understand”.

“I would want to be there”

“That’s a great idea as our voices are important”

The opportunity to have their voice heard was generally well received and something that not many young people reported having the opportunity to engage in thus far.

“My social worker kept it from me, I went to visit Secure to see what it was like... I was then kept in”

“Nobody explained to me what Secure was, I had no idea”

Additionally, the opportunity to have active engagement in the process was two-way. In addition to the panel listening to the voice of the young person, the young person would have the opportunity to more fully understand the process, the potential outcomes for them and what that involved.

“When you go to JJC you know how long you will be there. With Secure you don’t know how long and keep worrying about family. You need to have the opportunity for the young person to speak to a panel because they may have changed their ways in the meantime”.

This may help to prevent what some young people described as the ‘taxi drop’ whereby nominated professionals brought young people to secure and in the mind of the young person, left them.

“They should go in and help you get settled. One girl was getting signed out as I was getting signed in, it wasn’t good, just felt like they were swapping kids”

“My social worker just dropped me at the door (of LW)”.

Through the panel, the process may become more transparent to young people. Despite the relative advantages of the panel, some young people suggested that they would not wish to face the panel directly but instead, have their voice heard and ask questions via a proxy

“I would prefer VOYPIC would speak to the panel rather than me”

Relationships with staff and family

Both in the community and within secure settings, young people consistently reported that relationships were of critical importance. Functional, positive relationships with family and care home staff were conducive to their positive development and could help to prevent an escalation of issues. Within the secure setting, positive relationships with staff could make the experience more productive or enhance the traumatic impact of being removed from the community.

Continued access to family and to friends was important to the young people consulted. Despite this, their experiences of contact differed greatly. Some reported having relatively unfettered access (dependant on the approval of staff and social worker) whilst others reported highly restricted contact. Without context the reasons are unclear, only that the young people's experiences differed in a highly important area of their lives.

"Yes we get visits".

"Family contact is encouraged if positive & needed"

"You see people when you want, no limits".

"Visits are bullshit in JJC, I was only allowed to see my family". I would've liked to see my friends too.

"Visits are very rarely allowed"

As many young people have disrupted family relationships that are likely to have a continued impact on their outcomes when they return to the community, some young people suggested that family work is part of preventing a return to a secure environment.

"Lakewood tried to set up visits, but my social worker and family didn't bother, I had 4 visits in 3 months".

"There was nothing to help the relationship between the young person and the family"

Whilst in the secure setting, there was an overwhelming sense that young people appreciated a dedicated worker allocated to them, particularly when they had the skills to effectively engage and support them.

"Keyworker system is good No issues with keyworkers in JJC They build relationships well with us because they talk to us".

In contexts that experienced significant change, including changing of staff, this lack of stability caused distress for young people.

"They kept changing my key worker so it was hard".

Additionally, there appears to be a sense of loss for some of those returning to the community without the support of their key worker. The boundaries between secure and community are well defined and young people who have built up a positive relationships with a key individual often find themselves without that support in the community. Young people

suggested a transition between custody/secure and community wherein the key worker would continue to support them in a step down manner.

“Endings are important to us and need to be done right”

“When you leave the relationship completely ends”

“I have good relations with Lakewood staff and keep on touch with them even when I’m in here”

Preparing to leave

If significant concerns exist, serious enough to remove young people from the community then respondents suggested that the logical action in preparation for a return to the community would involve a steps down approach.

“You need to be able to leave the centre for a while before you actually leave”

The reason for this, young people believed was pragmatic.

“When you were in Secure, you couldn’t get into trouble. After this when going back into the community without that support I wanted to go back to Secure and intentionally got into trouble to be able to go back”.

There was unanimous interest in this type of approach with a variety of ideas from young people about how this might involve.

“Stepdown house would be great”

“Overnights back home are really helpful”

“If you had a proper exit plan you would have day visits then over nights and build up on this and this is really useful and helpful.

And what was clear is that this should be an integral part of the secure experience, taking a last resort with a clear reintegration plan in place from the outset.

“Young people need a clear plan from entry into secure care or custody”.

This might also help to address gaps between service provision in custody/secure and a perceived abrupt transition.

“The best way you can prepare a young person to return to the community is to help them maintain relationships and help with a worker once they leave”

“Having a person dedicated to you such as a Personal Advisor/ Keyworker when you enter is important but once you leave this support seems to stop and it would be useful to have the same person helping you back to the community”.

Whilst there were various conceptualisations of this step down approach each of which provide opportunities, the common concept included graded exposure to the community well in advance of a return, a mixture of supports that would be in place directly aligned to a tailored plan, and a dedicated person (ideally within the community) to help with practical supports and coaching. Some specific ideas include mainstreaming the approach and ensuring safety is paramount beyond custody/secure.

“Safety plans should be created when you leave Secure. A step down house would be great to help practice independent skills”

But it is also about connecting between services, ensuring that all those with responsibility are required to engage.

“JJC and Secure need to work more with your previous school to see what school work you have already done this helps you get back to school again”.

These ideas link to the young people’s ideas of the factors that continue to exist in the community that put them at elevated risk for a return to secure settings.

Going straight back to previous children’s home was difficult and I got caught up in everything again and ended up back in secure

Understanding these environmental risks as well as individual risks can enable professionals, in consultation with the young person to formulate a plan at an earlier stage that leverages strengths and plugs gaps across the ecology.

Conclusion

Between Oct and December 2019, a sample of care experienced young people with direct experience of living in out-of-community settings within the justice or care environments were engaged in a series of focus groups and interviews with the aim of eliciting their views on the review of regional facilities and integration of care and justice facilities.

Through this process a number of key themes emerged.

1. Safety

In line with international rights standards (UNDHR Art 3; UNCRC Art 19) and regional policy (PfG; CYPS 2019-2029), young people expressed a need to feel safe. Unfortunately, some young people found this safety out of the community and within a justice or secure care facility. Whilst on one hand this is encouraging, the safety that the majority of young people require should be cultivated within the community. Young people had their own ideas about how this might look and the sorts of services and supports that would be required to firstly prevent an escalation of issues likely to increase the risk of entry into secure care or custody but also to help maintain them in the community even when an escalation presents. This however would require greater collaboration between sectors, longer-term commissioning of services (particularly within the community and voluntary sector) and more investment in specialist services that all young people could access when they require them.

2. Stability

Throughout this process young people referred to the need for stability both in the community and at a last resort, within a secure facility. The findings here are peppered with examples of how young people acknowledge this and refer to times that stability was placed at risk. They spoke of stable physical environments but also and possibly more crucially, stable relationships. At an earlier stage, young people felt that more efforts to help facilitate difficult family circumstances and specialist support to address complex family needs could have helped to prevent breakdown. For those in the care system, they felt that arbitrary use of disciplinary protocols undermined their stability in the community. At a later stage, young people overwhelmingly referred to the need for positive and stable relationships with key individuals within secure settings. For those who had a positive key worker relationship for example, the experience was more fruitful. However, there appears to be a significant gap between out-of-community and into-community provision. For most, they appeared to lose those stable relationships and services during reintegration. Therefore, a step down process was broadly welcomed by young people. A way in which re-entry was graded, with supports designed in a planned and purposeful way from day 1.

3. Voice

Young people have clear views on a range of issues and their capacity to articulate their experiences and provide an input on the strategic development of regional facilities was clear. Respondents overwhelmingly welcomed the opportunity to engage in decision making processes that affected their lives and this was evident in their responses regarding the panel. Children and young people who are removed from the community and placed in a justice or care facility are often those who have experienced significant adversity. Engaging them in decision making processes where transparency is enhanced can go some way to mitigate the re-traumatising impact of out-of-community placement and subsequent psycho-social outcomes.

4. Choice

Most young people had a variety of ideas around what could have helped them, their wellbeing, their behaviours and their place in the community. Many even indicated that they were aware of the names and organisations of those providing the services they felt that could have been beneficial to them. However, several indicated that the services they wished to engage in were either unavailable (due to waiting lists for example) or not feasible (because of the other mandated services they were engaged in for example). Young people advised that they would appreciate choice around what to engage in and who to engage with. In some cases however, respondents indicated that their choice was taken away simply by the lack of effective services in their particular community. Where young people had both access to decision making process and access to effective supports they suggested their willingness to engage in those and perceived outcomes from them were enhanced. Through this process, young people had the opportunity to engage in a consultative process and inform the thinking around how the review is designed and implemented. As the review continues, continued engagement with young people will help to address some of the challenge raised in this report and illuminate further questions for the programme board to consider.