



Youth Justice Strategy Review June 2020

Submission by Le Chéile Mentoring

“If you are being offered a service like that, grab it with both hands because it really really helps, it really does help, I don't think anyone wants to go to jail”

Young Man, aged 17.

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An tSeirbhís Phromhaidh
The Probation Service



Irish Youth Justice Service
Seirbhís na hÉireann um Chiontas i leith an Aoise Óige

1. Introduction

Le Chéile Mentoring welcomes the draft Youth Justice Strategy and the opportunity to influence the final strategy. The draft strategy is ambitious and sets out a framework for youth justice which has the potential to address the causes of youth offending, as well as improving outcomes for young people. We welcome the guiding principles, such as the children first approach, the commitment to children's rights, the voice of children, to minimise undue delay, inter-agency collaboration, minimal intervention, family support and detention as a last resort.

This submission is informed by a consultation with young people on their experience of youth justice, our experience in working with hundreds of young people and their parents/carers over the last fifteen years, as well as evidence informed practice.

2. Le Chéile Mentoring overview

Le Chéile Mentoring is a national, volunteer mentoring and family support service, which works with young people and their families, where the young person is involved in or at risk of offending. Our two primary services are mentoring and restorative justice. Both services have been independently evaluated, as summarised below.

2.1 The impact of the Le Chéile mentoring model.

An independent evaluation of the youth and parent mentoring serviceⁱ made the following findings:

1. Mentoring has significant positive impacts for young people who engage with the service, with gains made in the areas of self-confidence, hopefulness, communications, engagement in activities and, crucially, offending behaviour.
2. Le Chéile's mentoring service gives a social return on investment of €4.35 for every €1 invested.
3. The current model of mentoring for young people and parents is robust and fit for purpose.
4. The fact that mentors are volunteers is a key strength of the Le Chéile model.
5. A number of young people and their parents commented that they would have benefitted from earlier access to mentoring.
6. Mentoring was seen as having a valuable role in providing support for young people from care backgrounds.
7. Young people and their families appreciated the support during detention and mentors commented that it strengthened the basis for mentoring after release.
8. Parents who are mentored are better placed to deal with the child who is in trouble and to restore and develop a healthier home environment for themselves and any siblings.

2.2 Restorative Justice

Le Chéile is committed to a restorative approach. We run a Restorative Justice Project in Counties Limerick and Clare for young people referred by the JLOs and the Probation Service. The project was independently evaluated in 2014 and was found to have significant benefits for young people, their families and the victims of crimeⁱⁱ including an estimated social value of €2.92 for every €1 invested.

Le Chéile's mentoring model incorporates a restorative ethos and all staff and volunteers are trained in restorative practice.

3. Consultation with young people

3.1 Consultation process

In 2019, Le Chéile Mentoring commissioned an independent consultant, Lynne O'Connor, to carry out a consultation with young people in order to inform our submission to the forthcoming Youth Justice Strategy. The consultation sought to find out young people's views on their experience of the youth justice system, their experience of mentoring and restorative justice, and their recommendations for the youth justice strategy.

Fourteen young people, who had taken part in mentoring with Le Chéile and had been on probation, participated, 11 males and 3 females, who ranged in age from 15-23 years of age. Eight face to face, one to one interviews and six online surveys were carried out in the period December 2019 to January 2020. The participants came from a broad geographic spread across the country including Dublin, Laois, Meath, Clare and Limerick. Interviews took place in a variety of locations accessible to the young people, including a Probation office, Oberstown Children Detention Campus, a hotel, a youth centre, a courthouse and a cafe.

The quotations included in this submission are from the young people who participated in this consultation.

3.2 Young people's views on the Courts

Many young people talked about their experience of the Courts being an upsetting, confusing and frustrating experience. Many interviewees talked about not being happy about putting their families through stress.

Most of the frustration about being involved with the Courts came from dates being changed or postponed and a feeling of not knowing what was happening. Young people wanted this to be addressed and for things to be 'more organised.' One young man said at one point he was thinking 'just lock me up if you're going to', such was the feeling of frustration.

Some young people felt they did not understand what the Judge was saying in Court and that it should be slower and that child friendly language should be used to help with understanding.

'There is no point talking all mad words when it's a children's court, a child might not know what you were on about, conditions etc.'

Although young people, found Court to be a stressful experience overall, some acknowledged that they felt the gravity of their situation in Court. One young man, although feeling extreme anxiety when in Court, felt the Judge was 'very good' to him despite having a lot of charges and convictions, that he *'always tried to put me on the straight and narrow, he is hard on people but every time he sent me away, I kind of deserved it'*.

Two young people felt strongly that they should have access to a Children's Court like in Dublin and have a Judge that only deals with children.

Young people talked about not being heard in Court. An opportunity to give your opinion and have your say in Court was recommended, as it was felt that children do not get to voice their opinion in Court.

3.3 Young people's views on mentoring and restorative justice

All of the young people consulted had participated in either mentoring or the restorative justice programme with Le Chéile.

The feedback was overwhelmingly focused on 'talking', being 'valued' and feeling a level of care.

'It definitely wasn't like what I expected, felt like I could sit down and talk with my service (Le Chéile) my opinion was valued, I felt like I was actually cared for, not like the person on the other side of the table was just doing their job, it felt like there was actual care there.'

3.3.1 Views of young people on mentoring

'I felt it wasn't going to work for me and it has worked, I've been through a lot of services and I know what I'm on about.'

All young people spoke highly of their mentors and it was evident that the relationship with their mentors was very important and critical to the success of their experience with Le Chéile. They described being able to talk as having enormous value and that the talking was with somebody outside their family circle was identified as positive.

Two other young people mentioned the fact that their mentors had similar life experiences to them was helpful as they felt better understood.

There was a strong sense in all interviews of the trust felt towards their mentor and a sense of not feeling judged even though they had committed crimes.

'They don't treat you as if you are a bad person, they treat you as if you are the same as them, that's key....it takes two to tango, I have to do my part, we meet in the middle.'

With all the participants of the face-to-face interviews, there was also a strong sense of them being able to put their crimes into perspective and to see how destructive their behaviour was. One young man said he felt good that he wasn't drinking every weekend and 'wrecking the place' but felt shame when he thought he used to be like that. Some of the young people could identify the risk they were putting themselves and other people in and, overall, they could see a difference in themselves.

'You can have a laugh at the meetings, but once your laugh is over it's down to business. That's key, I think that is very important – you have to come in, have a laugh and a joke and get down into it. Get into why you are here. Wouldn't want to change that'.

3.3.2 Views of young people on Restorative Justice

The participants reflected that Restorative Justice was actually challenging for them in a way they hadn't expected because they had to work at it and it made them think.

'It is harder than expected, harder than it looks, have to own up to the facts of how you are going to fix it, to do that is harder than being locked up, I think its very easy to be up in Oberstown, you get your dinner, it takes a real man and a real person to actually put his hand up and say I did this and I'll fix it'

Learning was also identified by young people as being important with the Restorative Justice participants who felt that although it was hard work, that was a positive. One young man said *'it's not like you're going to court where you just get told things, you can have a chat about things, do activities sheet and you don't know there the things you are doing, put through situations where you can see it, it's good.'*

3.4 Young people's views on other supports and challenges

The theme of talking and being 'able' to talk was prevalent among both male and female respondents. It is not surprising that services whose approach is centred on creating opportunities for young people to talk and feel 'heard' came out as most helpful. Young people specifically cited Le Chéile and other services which were supportive, including the Probation Service, youth clubs, Garda Youth Diversion Projects and counselling services as positive.

Young people talked about the importance of family, especially mothers.

The young people who took part in the face-to-face interviews in particular, spoke about what they felt could be preventative factors in helping young people avoid getting into trouble. Underlying issues, such as drink and drugs were identified as key factors for four young people that led to people getting into trouble in the first place, tied in with feeling anger and being part of a group that goes down the wrong path.

'Any fella I know that got into trouble never went and robbed a car on his own, always part of a group' and both male and female respondents identified getting away from negative peer groups as helpful.

Finally, young people were asked what had been specifically helpful to them in progressing and moving on with their lives. While two stated they had not moved on and were still in trouble, for the others there were two key factors, firstly getting away from their peer group and secondly having a significant person in their lives, such as their mother, a mentor, or a partner.

4. Recommendations on the draft Youth Justice Strategy

4.1 Child friendly justice: Le Chéile welcomes commitments in the draft strategy in relation to the provision of child friendly justice. Criminal proceedings should minimise delays; measures should be put in place to ensure children's voices are heard and respected; and that children understand the charges, court processes and outcomes. All judges and court officials dealing with children and young people should be trained in how to communicate with children.

4.2 Mentoring: In the context of mentoring being an effective diversion intervention for young people who have offended, as evaluated in relation to Le Chéile Mentoring and the Princes Trustⁱⁱⁱ we recommend that

1) mentoring for young people and parents/carers by volunteer mentors be expanded to national provision, in particular for young people on probation.

2) volunteer delivered mentoring should be expanded nationally as a diversion measure for young people on GYDPs and other special projects, young people in detention and post detention, and for their parents/carers, where appropriate.

4.3 Restorative Justice: We welcome the commitment to engaging the victims of crime in restorative processes, where appropriate. We also recommend greater use of Restorative Justice as a positive and powerful intervention to support young people to make positive life choices and desist from offending. Training in restorative practices should be a core competency for all staff and volunteers working with young people in a youth justice context and training should be resourced and included in the new strategy.

4.4 Educational disadvantage: We welcome actions to address early school leaving and educational disadvantage. In our experience almost all young people on probation are not actively engaged in education, training or employment. We recommend the development of a targeted inter-agency initiative for young people on probation, which supports young people to return to education, training or employment.

4.5 Family support: The UNCRC situates child rights in the context of the family. We recommend that in all youth justice/diversion interventions, there should be a family support component offered to parents/carers, which provides a continuum of proven supports including parent mentoring and evidence based parenting programmes.

4.6 Young people in detention: Le Chéile provides mentoring for young people in Oberstown and adult prisons, and for their parents or carers. We recommend that young people should only be detained for serious violent crimes. We recommend a through care approach, such that mentoring and post detention supports be available to all young people and young adults under 25 years of age.

4.7 Community involvement: The draft strategy is weak on community involvement and voluntarism. Our experience is that young people and their parents are very positive about community and voluntary involvement. The strategy should include greater recognition of the role of trained volunteers and enhancing community capacity and support for vulnerable young people and families.

4.8 Children Act 2001: We broadly welcome the indicative areas for reform outlined, in particular the statement of Principles. However, we recommend that there is further consultation on the specific measures to allow for informed consideration.

ⁱ Dr Kieran O'Dwyer, 2017, Reducing Youth Crime in Ireland - An Evaluation of Le Chéile Mentoring, Le Cheile: Ireland.

ⁱⁱ Quigley, M. Martynowicz, A. and Gardner, C. (2014) Building Bridges: An Evaluation and Social Return on Investment Study of the Le Chéile Restorative Justice Project in Limerick, Le Chéile: Ireland

ⁱⁱⁱ Prince's Trust (2011). Evaluation Summary: Working one to one with young offenders. Prince's Trust, London.