

How Oberstown is reshaping youth detention

‘It’s a good little place; it’s nothing like prison. There’s good people here’

JOHNN* is a rapper, and the way he’s talking about his near future, he might have some new lyrical material.

Now 16, he’s tall but young-looking, even though his voice could be that of someone older. He’s been in Oberstown, the country’s national youth detention facility, for a while now, and will be for a time longer — until January 2024, the date etched in his mind and mentioned more than once.

“I’m trying me best; I’m better than I was,” he says. “I am just in that mindset that it is what it is.”

Oberstown, he declares, “is brilliant”. “It’s a good little place; it’s nothing like prison. There’s good people here; there are people who give a shit about you.”

Looking back, not tapping into that, not utilising what was on offer, is a regret.

“I didn’t take advantage of this place,” he says, “and it’s the worst mistake I made in me life cos I have no legs to stand on.”

“I was in that mind state where I don’t give a fuck, I don’t want help, I don’t give a shit’ like, that’s the way I was. I’m still trying but I could have done it differently. Shut me mouth, that’s what I would have done. Shut me mouth.”

John was one of 35 young people detained in Oberstown on the day of our visit, the hottest day the country had seen in more than a century. The campus, out on the plains of North Co Dublin, was baking in the heat, which might explain why everyone was inside. There was an air of calm around the place — no bad thing for a facility that has seen its fair share of troubles over the past few decades, even as it has evolved into a polished setting that now offers more of a co-operative model than ever before between those detained and those assisting them.

Earlier this year the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) staged an exhibition of original artworks created by young people in Oberstown and called *The Ride Away From The Storm*.

It was so successful that, according to communications officer Matthew Kelly, the only regret of the



Youth offenders in Ireland are sent to Oberstown, which has a new focus on behaviour, therapy, and providing opportunities and stability for young people who have often known nothing but chaos. **Noel Baker** reports from inside the facility

patrons was that the artworks were not for sale. New initiatives have seen young people receive occupational health and safety training, or learn barista skills.

The next big idea is a course in forklift driving, though it is at an early stage.

The achievements of some of those detained in Oberstown have been recognised through Gaisce Awards, while six young people achieved the Junior Certificate and one the Leaving Certificate last year.

However, as Damien Hernon, director of the Oberstown Children Detention Campus, points out, there is more than one way to define success when it comes to young people who may have lived the most chaotic lives imaginable.

“These kids have been out of everything for years, so it’s almost like intensive therapy at times,” he says. “Then running alongside that you have big huge emphasis on their behaviour.”

“So we are tackling... everything,” he adds with a laugh.

102 detained

Last year, 102 young people were detained on the campus and at any one time almost half are on remand. Some of those in Oberstown are here for a relatively short space of time, but others, like John, will be here until the point at which they transfer into the adult prison system.

For whatever period of time they spend in Oberstown, the aim is to “maximise their potential”, according to Damien, whether that is through art, music, education, metalwork, other skills — or rapping.

It typically starts with a medical and dental appraisal, and the change in scenery can be dramatic, Damien explains.

“I didn’t take advantage of this place... and it’s the worst mistake I made in me life.”

“Imagine your 14- or 15-year-old self, imagine you can run a mile out beyond, no limits, no controls, and all of a sudden one night you stab someone and they die.”

“Then you’re brought in here, coming down off all the drugs in your system, and you’re trying to figure ‘did I actually kill that person? What happened?’”

It can mean some people in the early parts of their detention feeling they are in “direct conflict” with those around them. For those on remand, those who don’t have an end date in sight, this can persist.

In the main, numbers at Oberstown have been heading in the right direction: Fewer people detained, the facility typically operating below capacity, and most metrics trending downwards. Incidents of single separation did increase last year, but are still well below where they were five or six years ago, with incidents of physical intervention likely — on the current trajectory — to come in at 50 or fewer this year. It’s another form of progress, Damien believes.

“Single separation did go up a little last year,” he says.

“There are some very complex characters who skew the numbers completely; we still have those complex characters but they’ve been with us [for longer].” He says developing these relationships mean “it’s a lot smoother”.

Damien, who exudes a quiet authority, is also keen not to underplay the role of the Covid-19 pandemic. Oberstown has a pleasant visiting area, complete with Sade soundtrack wafting from the speakers, and three types of visitation room: The screen room, used for higher-risk visits, the classic two-way mirror room, which “doesn’t get a lot of use”, Damien says, and the straightforward visitation room where those in Oberstown and those coming to see them can interact.

Covid stopped all that for a while, yet the move to virtual visits, conversely, proved beneficial for many.

“Video visits due to Covid effectively allowed kids into the home to see their dog, their family, so that was a positive,” he says, adding: “It’s hard for families to come up here; there is a stigma attached to it. We don’t want to enhance that stigma, we want to lower it.”

Oberstown is a smoke-free campus and drugs are virtually non-existent — “we’re really sharp on that stuff”, Damien explains.

In his view, most of the families of those detained here are supportive and want the best for their loved ones. The type of scenarios that played out some years ago, when the partner of a young person’s mother was observed injecting heroin in the carpark, is unlikely these days. Yet, just as so many detainees want to be outside the walls, the return to family and community can pose its own risks.

“The family will be well intentioned and on board,

[but] when the kids have gone home, we don’t know whether the family composition has changed, whether their bed is gone, somebody else is sleeping in it, we don’t know where their food is going to come from, and that creates all that noise again,” Damien says.

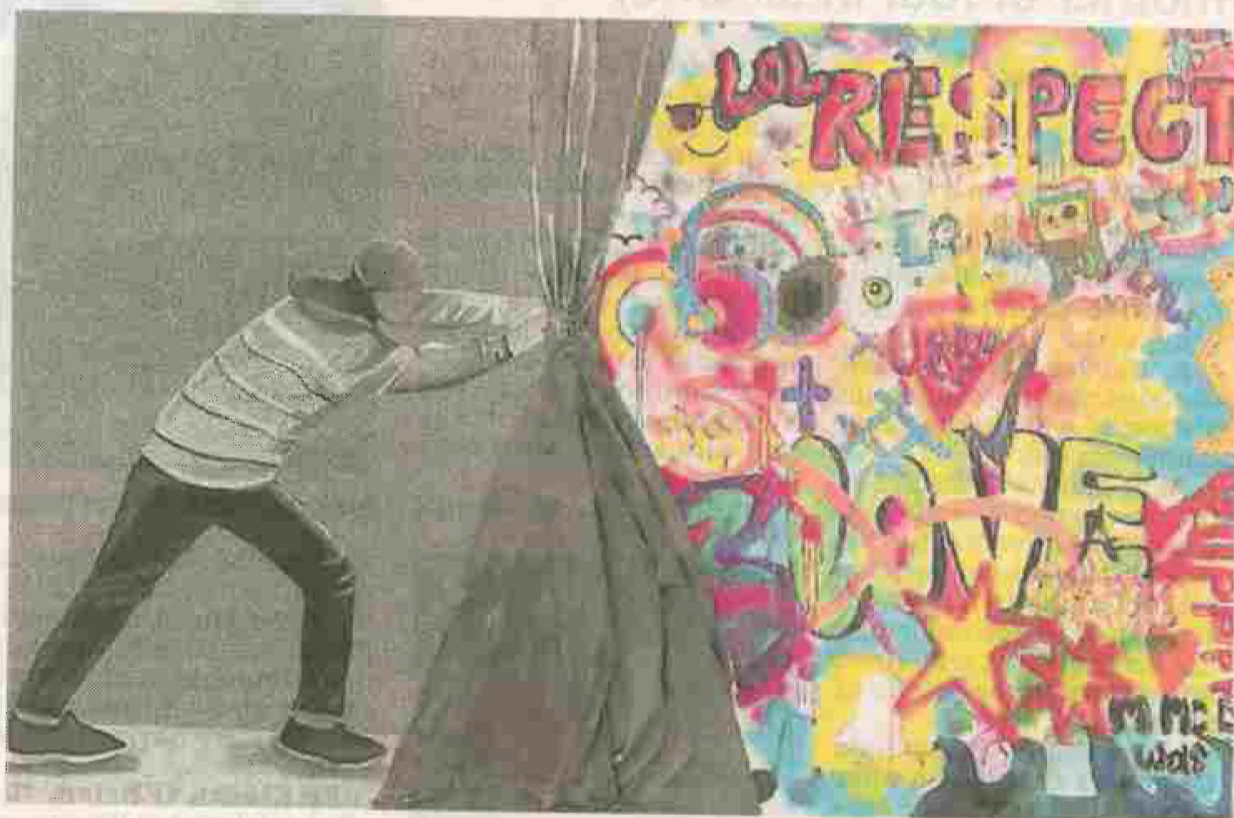
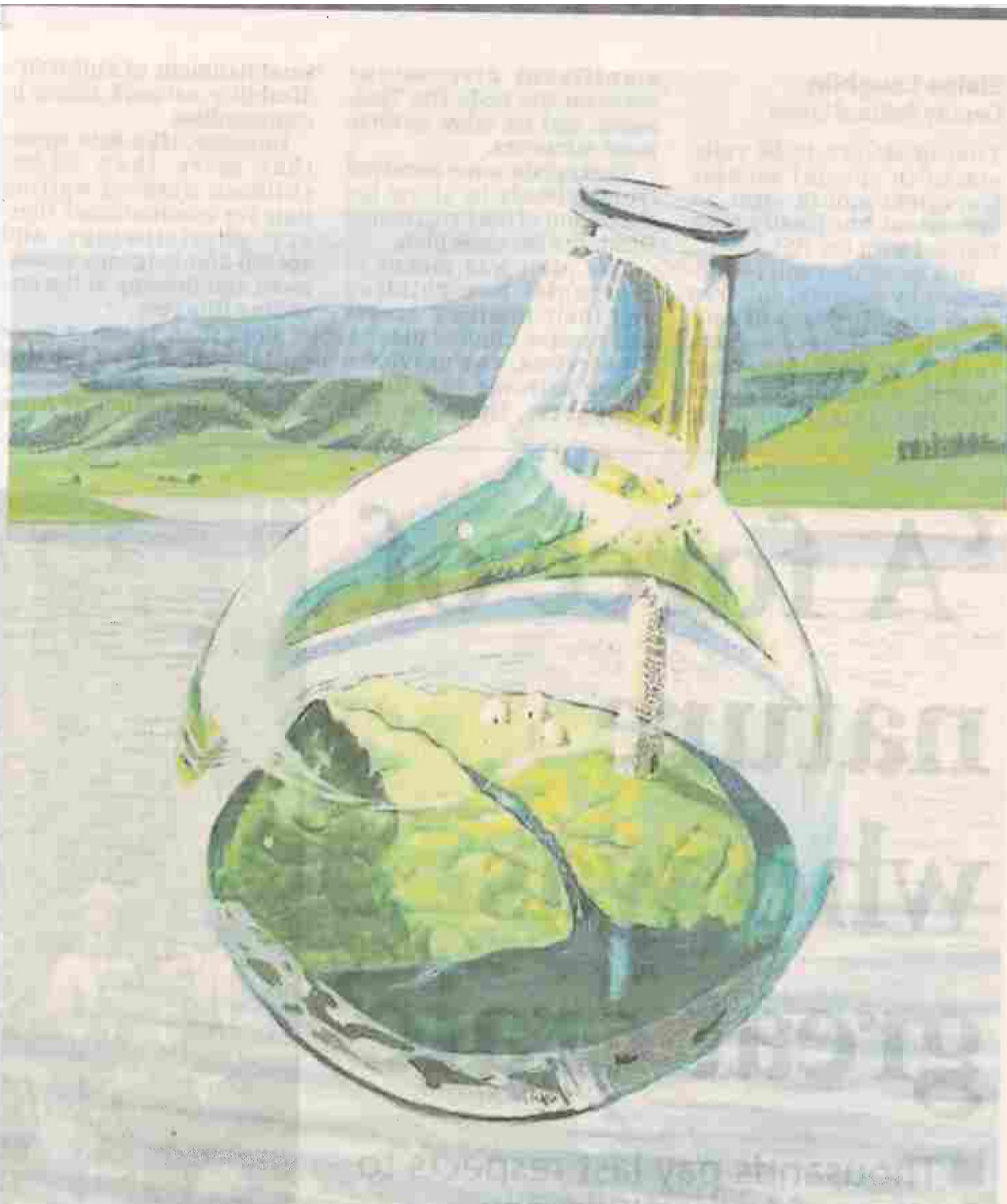
“We do have some kids who manage to manage that and drive on regardless but it’s a big piece. One of the real challenges is they are entering into an adult market — get a house, get a job, all that stuff. If your background hasn’t been as clean-cut as others, that’s a challenge.”

Some remnants of the old campus still remain — dull buildings with long, gloomy corridors. But no one stays in them any more and they are for the wrecking ball in the near future. Instead, the newer units, with a capacity for eight detainees, have improved courtyards and facilities inside and out, including basketball hoops — something requested by members of the Campus Council, a grouping which allows the young people in Oberstown to have a say in how the facility looks and operates.

“When we started this place we were probably more risk averse than we needed to be,” Damien says of the refreshed campus.

As Matthew Kelly points out, the request for and eventual granting of the basketball hoops showed some of the more sceptical detainees that the council model worked. During the pandemic, it resulted in each unit forming its own group, discussing how best to contain any likely spread of the virus.

It wasn’t always like this. In July this year a man who was one of four detainees that caused €120,000 damage at the Oberstown campus received a four-year jail term



as a result. There were a number of reasons for the delay in the case being finalised, and Damien says there is a "tension" as to what the threshold is regarding prosecuting someone for a crime committed while in detention, adding: "There is an expectation around positive behaviour and if we weren't seen to be making a complaint to the guards there might be a challenge to it."

Maybe this is the key point: The dental treatment, the medical assistance, the tailored programmes — they are all designed to repurpose the recipient.

The punishment is the detention, the absence of liberty. But the assistance can help refit lives in danger of going, or staying, off the rails.

Education

Another example is the impressive school programme operated by principal Suzanne Fitzpatrick.

"We would have high expectations for them, regardless of what they have arrived with," she says. "This is also a very safe environment for people to explore or open up to talents or experience new subjects."

She refers to Spanish lessons being made available during the summer months. The reading list taped to the door ranges from *Rules of the Road* to *The Bell Jar*.

Suzanne, who previously worked in a high-support special school where the biggest problem was getting students to class, says: "I suppose lot of young people's negative experience of authority would have been in school, so it's very important from my point of view that they are comfortable with me as principal and the teachers as people, to assist, rather than point out their inadequacies."



Damien remembers something from years ago, when a school inspector visited and identified two brothers from a nearby town, for whom he then requested intervention, to no avail. One of the youngsters went on to kill someone, the other also committing crimes.

"It's early intervention," Damien says. "I know his da, I know his uncle — it's inter-generational... You have to get in early." And if you don't get in early, do it anyway.

"I think the key is they are small units [on campus] and the resources are fairly adequate in terms of looking after them," he says.

Each young person has two key workers and individualised plans, with the aim of meeting targets for that young person. "It's very different to coming on a landing with 50 prisoners and two prison officers," Damien says.

Maybe that's the rub. While the average length of stay for those in detention last year was approximately 364 days, some will leave Oberstown and never return. According to Damien, some will progress in their lives and eventually bring their spouse to the campus some day to show them where they went to school.

Others sentenced on the most serious charges will transfer into the prison system proper. Damien freely admits that the care and attention afforded to people in Oberstown "doesn't win any votes" but he also refers to the change in outlook when it comes to juvenile detention — how we have moved away from the days of "throwing away the key", which means that, in his view, there needs to be a broader discussion of what happens to the young adults.

Referring back to John, and his preoccupation with his move to the adult system, Damien asks: "What would

Special report



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Artwork, far left, created by young people at Oberstown Children Detention Campus, where 'The Ride Away From the Storm' art project is among many aimed at maximising the potential of those detained in facilities which have undergone recent improvements.

how best to continue to positively influence those young people as they move on — “that outreach piece”. Even as the campus changes and evolves, there are still echoes of the past. Damien remembers Gary Douche, who was killed in Mountjoy in August 2006, and how a memorial card featured a photograph of him at the predecessor to Oberstown, Trinity House. The man who killed him, Stephen Egan, was in the same youth detention facility at the same time.

High-profile cases

Oberstown is now the place of detention for the perpetrators of a number of high-profile cases, or “people that sometimes can challenge people here”, as Damien puts it. “We have professional relationships where the core principles would be around being non-judgmental and accepting the young person as they are, and that’s not diminishing the crime. “We have high-profile cases — for all those cases the judge has given orders and we have to administer that. That is the punishment piece. “We exist in a country that has a particular drive in relation to... a second-chance mentality.”

Ultimately, the bedrooms are functional — better than they were, but still undeniably a place of detention; the TV screen is behind an unbreakable perspex shield; and communication can be facilitated through a hatch in the wall. Damien refers to people who might pass comment sometimes that, on hearing what is on offer at Oberstown, “I wouldn’t mind being out there myself.” “That’s great until quarter to 10 at night and you’re in your room and you’re not going anywhere,” he says. “Your liberty is gone and that is huge for any of us. “You can’t go down to the shops for a can of coke and a 99 on a day like today.” * Name has been changed.



The launch of an exhibition of work by young people in Oberstown, 'The Ride Away From the Storm', with director Damien Heron, IMMA director Aine Fletcher, Minister Roderic O’Gorman, IMMA’s Helen O’Donoghue, Gaisce chair John Cunningham and its CEO Yvonne McKenna.

be wrong with him staying here for another few years? I think that is somewhere the country has to get and I think it will under the Youth Justice Strategy.”

New strategy

That new strategy, covering the years 2021-2027, was launched in April last year and includes a range of issues, including early intervention and preventative work, family support, and diversion from crime. According to a Department of Justice spokesperson: “A key action of the strategy is to involve children and

young people as active partners in the monitoring and development of the operation of detention facilities, including in Garda stations and Oberstown Children Detention Campus, and in relation to transitions to adult facilities. It also includes an action relating to transition from Oberstown to the prison system. “This notes the intention to build on existing procedures and practices and assess any gaps, including with regard to appropriate continuity of work done in Oberstown, and develop appropriate recommendations and measures to address

these.” The strategy could be the key to unlocking some of the issues facing those moving on from Oberstown, with Damien admitting that for some of those ‘aging out’ and moving into mainstream prisons, “there is a chance the benefits will be lost”. “What they are looking at is a diversion programme for 18 to 24-year-olds. What that would do is cut the numbers in detention and then it creates opportunities to build somewhere or develop somewhere that will look after 18 to 24-year-olds. It is probably a seven to 10-year journey.” There have been dis-

cussions recently with barristers, solicitors, and judges regarding how cases are dealt with, about finding the child’s voice, and about how what happens in terms of the courts — “you can be brought to Letterkenny for 30 seconds”, Damien says — can impact the rhythm of what the young person does in Oberstown. The young people do leave, whether it’s back home or to an adult prison or somewhere else, hopefully somewhere better. And the staff can become attached; as Damien says, you need to be able to let go, even as the staff at Oberstown consider