

Still in Limbo?

An exploration by young people from
Tar Anall Youth Project

compiled by

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Introduction

In 2000, Farset Community Think Tanks Project collaborated with Tar Anall – a support group for the families of Republican prisoners – in bringing together a group of prisoners’ children to describe their personal experiences and explore their innermost feelings. The views they expressed – presented in Pamphlet No. 31, *Left in Limbo* – enlightened many readers, saddened others, and even shocked a few – but they were taken seriously, especially by Tar Anall itself. As far as Tar Anall was concerned, this was the first time that the voices of children – particularly those whose family life had been severely disrupted by imprisonment – had been heard with such openness, honesty and clarity.

The pamphlet itself was utilised productively. Not only was it given to prisoners still awaiting release, but the children themselves went into the prisons and discussed its contents directly with the inmates. It was also availed of by numerous families; and some children, trying to cope with the many problems associated with either living without a parent (or parents, in some cases) or suddenly having them back home again, found that it helped them understand that they were not alone, and assisted them to cope better with the various stresses they were encountering. Tar Anall also used the pamphlet purposefully in the development of their Youth Project.

And now, five years on from the original publication, and with all prisoners having been released as part of the Good Friday Agreement, the core workers at Tar Anall wondered in what way things might have changed for the present generation of ex-prisoners’ children. A new group of young people was therefore invited to replicate the earlier discussions, and given a similar freedom to express themselves honestly and openly. (Additionally, the original group was also reconvened to ‘review’ their previous involvement and share their views on the current situation facing young people.)

Both groups clearly revealed that, despite the release of all remaining prisoners, issues impacting on ex-prisoners’ families are still very much alive. Even more depressing – despite a decade of relative peace – is the realisation that, for many young people, one set of problems has just been replaced by another. The impact of youth suicide, rampant anti-social behaviour, punishment beatings and the lingering legacy of sectarianism, are just as prominent, and worrying, realities for today’s young people as the conflict was for their predecessors. It is sad that eleven years after the ceasefires our children still do not have the carefree and nurturing society which they so much deserve.

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Still in Limbo?

The original group

Some of the young people who had taken part in the original discussions in 2000 were brought together again to share their views. To begin with, how did they now view their involvement with Tar Anall?

For me it sort of put me on the path to a career in youth work. Now, I've come leaps and bounds from when I started in Tar Anall, but that was basically where I started off. I was always getting in trouble, and my ma basically sent me to Tar Anall to keep me out of trouble. I then left it for a while and started getting into trouble again... but because of all the stuff we'd done here I wanted to come back, and I ended up getting into youth work. And I've been working full time here for the last five years.

I'm a full-time youth worker too.

Same with me.

I work full-time too, not as a youth worker but as a personal assistant in a community group.

In fact, we're all involved in either youth or community work.

It all started from the peer education training we had been involved in.

I think Tar Anall gave us all that wee bit of confidence. When you came in here you could talk about things which had happened to you in the past – or even were happening at the time – things which maybe you wouldn't have said to your mummy because she was probably under enough pressure. You came in here and said, 'Aye, that happened to me.' You could relate to what had happened to everyone else in the group and you were able to talk about it in a way you wouldn't have done in the house... or even outside.

Yes, even with friends outside you mightn't have said anything – except maybe to certain friends.

But, at the same time, it wasn't that you automatically felt comfortable coming in and talking about it. I mean, it was a gradual thing....

Somebody might have said something like, 'The peelers came in and raided our house', and then somebody else might have said, 'Aye, they were in our house too.' And one by one everybody joined in these discussions, and we slowly felt more able to talk to each other.

Being able to sit in a wee group and talk about everything gives young people more confidence to share any problems.

I can honestly say that if it wasn't for this group I don't think I would be where I am today. When I first came to Tar Anall I couldn't speak at all in front of people, and now I have no problem.

I used to be involved in joyriding and stuff and I knew I had to stop. I saw a post advertised in Tar Anall, and I came down. I told them everything I had been up to, but they didn't hold it against me. And I got the post, and now I'm trying to help other young people who had problems like I had... I try to help them settle down.

What were their memories of being involved in compiling the pamphlet?

Even though there were no names in it my da could pick out every single bit I said in it. I remember him reading it and being annoyed, like. I don't know if he was annoyed with me for what I said, or annoyed over what us children had gone through. I remember some people reading it and saying, 'That's really sad' ... and that type of stuff.

And it was sent out to all the community groups and the ex-prisoner groups... I think the entire town had a copy! I seen copies in the Linen Hall Library.

I think it was kind of good for me. Because up till it came out I didn't do nothing but fight with my da and he was always blaming me, saying it was always my fault. And then he read that wee booklet and he could see that it wasn't just me – other ex-prisoner families were going through the same things with their children – and it sort of helped. Of course, I sometimes used it against him! If he and I would start fighting I would remind him of the wee booklet and go: 'See, it was all *your* fucking fault!'

I really think it helped families to understand what was going on.

I've used the booklet quite a few times in the work I do with other young people. When young people start talking about different problems, I would say to them, 'Here, have a read of that. It'll let you see that we all went through these things at some stage.' And it was useful in that way.

When some of the others talked about their problems I can remember thinking that whenever my da was released it was going to be different. I can remember thinking that that's *not* going to be the case for me and my da, our relationship is going to be different. But whenever it actually happened – when he got released – the same issues that everybody had been talking about actually came out. There wasn't a relationship there in the way I had thought it would be, you had to rebuild it, because we were two different people, you know what I mean? But all along I had been sitting thinking, 'No, no, that's not going to be me', but eventually it *did* happen to me. And I believe that knowing what others had gone through helped me face things better.

I think it was not only the first time children of prisoners had been asked to describe their experiences, but it was the first time we were actually allowed to say how we really felt, or what we were going through. The community always thought that the young people weren't really affected, that you should just cope with things until your da, or ma, got out of jail. The attitude more or less was: 'How could youse be suffering, youse are safely at home... youse aren't out fighting for your country.' And if some of us even hinted that we'd have preferred our da's to be at home with us rather than out fighting the war it was a case of: 'How dare you say that!' But that wee pamphlet changed all that. People could see what we had all gone through and what some of us really felt.

It was sent up to the jail and all.

Aye, and they sent us up after it! To talk to the prisoners, especially those close to release.

I remember talking to one prisoner and he said it was amazing. He had never realised that kids might actually be *worried* about their dads getting out, in case it would upset things at home; most prisoners assumed that their children would be just longing for them to get out. And he was saying, 'What an insight.'

Yeah, I think people in jail got great benefit out of it. They were all asked to read it before they were released.

It let them know what problems might emerge and how to try and avoid them. And the prisoners took it on board, so they did –well, most of them.

One of the parents actually came in and said to me, 'I read that wee booklet, and I had a chat with my child about all that stuff...' So it was promoting real dialogue between parents and children as well.

Young people rarely get the opportunity to sit down and say what they feel. Some parents will ask their children, but most parents don't sit you down and say, 'Well, how you do feel about all this?' So it was really good to be able to talk about all our fears and put them down in that booklet.

Was the anger that some of them had expressed back then still present?

At that stage in my life I would have been really angry and stuff. I'd say to my dad: 'You left me for your country... you bastard!' And if people were saying, 'Don't be talking like that!' I would say to them, 'I don't give a fiddler's fuck'.... It give me the opportunity to talk about it with other people who had been in the same situation, because you didn't really have that opportunity anywhere else.

I would still have feelings the same way but they wouldn't be as aggressive. But I think at that time and especially with what we'd all been though, that that was the truth at that time in our lives.

We could say things even our mothers couldn't say. My ma had a really difficult time when my da was inside, but she thought if she said anything about it she was letting my da down, or letting down 'the cause'. So my ma didn't say anything –she didn't want to let my da down.

I remember some of our mummies talking about it, and saying that it was good and it was about time something like that came out.

Our daddy's dead you see, that's why we were part of it, our daddy wasn't in jail. But our mother would be very positive about talking about stuff, you know, getting it off your chest. She's now a counsellor and a family support worker, you see –in here, funny enough.

It's like a big family in here!

I still would sort of blame my da for certain things, but I think I've sort of grown up a wee bit and you just learn to get over things.

There's still issues with my da, but I wouldn't bring them up. It's not even worth the time... I'm out of the house now so we don't get the opportunity to fight, but when I was in the house we'd argue all the time.

Given that all the prisoners have been released (except for some in the Republic), did the group believe that the children of ex-prisoners still warranted help?

I think they do. And there's different issues facing the children now, some of them just as hard to deal with. For example, there's a lot of parents splitting up now that the 'Troubles' is over – and their kids are feeling it.

The Troubles kept them together, and even jail might have kept them together. Like out of a sense of duty.

Now that it's over, a lot of relationships are falling apart and the kids are caught in between. Well, when I say 'a lot', there's twelve in the wee group I have – of ex-prisoners' kids –and I know that for four of them their parents have split up. And to me that's a lot.

I've heard of quite a few parents who are in serious need of help – 'cause they've now got drink problems, mental problems....

I think it's sort of trying to fill that gap... the Troubles was something that was driving them, they had something to focus on, but now... when things started to settle down people had a lot of time on their hands and that's when marriages started to go on the rocks and some people would have hit the drink... I think sometimes they are just burying or suppressing their feelings.

What's weird is that our pamphlet was called, 'Left in Limbo', whereas I really think that it's the ex-prisoners who are now 'Left in Limbo'.

I know, what do they do now? A lot of them haven't got a focus. They've

went to jail and they've come out again, but they might as well have stayed inside because many of them just don't have a focus or any drive or motivation....

You have men in their 40s and 50s going, 'I have no trade, I have nothing.' And they're barred from certain jobs because they spent time in prison.

I've an uncle and he was constantly in and out of jail. When the war was on everybody saw him as this great man in his community, but now he can't get any further than running about doing skivvy jobs on building sites.

I think there's other things as well. During the Troubles the community seemed more supportive of one another, but I don't think there's the same community spirit there now –many people don't seem to want to talk to each other as much. Whenever you were a kid you'd have run about the street and you'd have been in and out of different people's houses; there would have been three or four of your mates sitting in front of your TV and all, but that doesn't seem to happen any more. People would have been calling in, sitting down, saying 'What's the craic?' and having a cup of tea....

It affects prisoners' children in new ways as well. I remember going for a job, and I had to fill in this security form on which I had to say that my father's address for the last ten years was prison, and that was the last I heard from them. I think the likes of Tar Anall should be lobbying about issues like that.

I think there's still work to be done to help families. When the parents split up that affects young people –their self-esteem, their confidence. They probably didn't start off with great confidence with their da or their ma being in jail, but any attempt to build confidence is set back if there are still family issues which worry them. There's still plenty of young people coming in here with no real confidence.

And it'll be a knock-on effect. When they themselves have kids, if they feel insecure they'll pass those feelings onto the next generation.

I think the funders really need to support Tar Anall's work, for the same reason that we got help here – because it is the only place I know where the children of ex-prisoners can come and share their worries and talk about what they have in common.

Like, I would still call in here every now and then. No matter how long you would be away from the place, any time you walk in there's always somebody that's going to recognise you and say, 'Come on in and get a cup of tea.' And you just sit and yarn away.

And here there is that sense of welcome. I mean, you can come back, like T_____ said, whenever you feel like it. And there's always going to be somebody there who you can sit down with and say, 'Well, what's the craic, what's been happening?'

And what of the work they are each currently engaged in?

The goal of the programme we were on was that we would end up being mentors. We'd be trained up as peer educators and we would go back in and help other young people. And I think we have been successful in that.

I'll give you an example... we were in town a couple of weeks ago and we met one of the young people we had worked with and he was asked the question, 'Who were your role models?' And he named me and H_____ as his role models because we were the only two fellas he was sort of close to. And we were like: 'Shit, maybe we did have a bit of an impact.'

I think it was successful because we were only a few years older than some of the children we worked with. Whereas if we'd have been 30 or something, and trying to advise them, they'd have been going, 'Aye, dead on.'

One of them is working in Tar Anall as a volunteer now, he's down here and part of our team now. So obviously it had a good impact on him because he wants to be a youth worker, and he says it's because of the work we were doing here.

Did they feel optimistic for the future?

I work right across the North, and meet different young people and workers who really are fighting hard for their communities, so I definitely would have a faith in the society we are living in. But I think the focus has definitely shifted: there's much more focus now on anti-social behaviour as opposed to paramilitary activity. There's definitely some scumbags out there, especially the racial attacks that were taking place, but I think the majority of people, the majority of decent people, don't like that type of stuff and want to live in good communities.

If places like Tar Anall was just kept going I'd be optimistic, but if they start closing places like this down I don't know what would happen.

You have to build peace at a community level. Peace is not just an end of violence.

I mean, if you had've said to me five years ago that I'd be working on a cross-community project – which I am at the moment – I'd have laughed at you. But as time went on and I've grew and meet different organisations, and people and stuff like that, my attitude has changed. And if I can do it then I think there's an opportunity there for a lot of other people to do it.

There's so much enthusiasm among many youth workers; they have that ability to empower young people. And if young people have the right attitudes then I think they can make a difference in society.

Most of us now have cross-community contacts, not necessarily through our work, but generally.

I'm on a training course which is cross-community.

I just grew up in West Belfast basically, that was the community you grew up in, and you were very sheltered and you weren't told an awful lot about the Shankill Road and places like that. And until you actually found out for yourself, you had all these ideas and stuff about what Protestants were like. And it was only until I actually went out and started meeting new people that I began to get a better understanding of things.

I work in a peer education project quite similar to this actually, in East Belfast. Now I don't broadcast the fact that I'm a Catholic, mainly for safety reasons, but it doesn't annoy me going into different communities, I've never had any issues with Protestants.

We had a Protestant worker here from East Belfast, and he said he couldn't believe it, he said he loves all the work that's being done over here. He says the work here is amazing, everybody is so open-minded. He accepted that a lot of his own mates still have this hatred of Catholics but he said that work is being done to change those attitudes. But it will take time.

Had they any faith in – or even any interest in – the political process (separate from the peace process)?

I don't vote.

Politicians say they're working for the people but they never actually come out and ask them what they really want. They certainly don't ask young people.

I don't know; it's the same as everything else. Some people involved in politics are genuinely there to do what's good and there's others who aren't... You can't really generalise.

It's the community groups who are doing most of the work to change this society, not the politicians.

I've no interest in politics at all... it puts my head away.

I'm not politically-minded either. I don't vote.

I do. I vote... but, to be honest, I don't know what I'm voting for.

That's the same for me. When I was 18, I was told, 'Go down and give your vote down there', and I did. But now I don't know why I should. If anyone gave me one good reason, I might vote.

What sort of issues did they feel young people were confronting today?

I sometimes think that the more 'normal' a society we become the worse it's going to get, with drugs and everything else that's coming into our communities... Just look at Dublin and other cities.

Many times young people are just stigmatised. If young people stand around anywhere in a group, people will say: 'Move on, we don't want to see you lot hanging around here.'

Aye, but there's a woman I know lives down in Albert Street, and if she heard us saying, 'It's a disgrace that young people are all getting moved,' she would say, 'No, it's not a disgrace, come you down and try to live here, and you'll see why they should be moved on.' The fact is there are a minority of young people who are just scum basically, and they're only interested in terrorising neighbourhoods and stealing cars every night.

Aye, they're just thugs... intimidating the residents and stuff to the point where people don't know what to do with them any more.

'Cause, like, we stood down at that corner for years and we never tortured nobody. We just chatted, played cards or whatever... but see now....

What did they feel could be done about this situation?

Communities have to deal with it themselves without having to go to paramilitaries. Communities should get together and say, 'We don't want you standing there.' And if it's a certain family causing anti-social behaviour or whatever... then the entire community should go to their door. That would have more affect than taking wee lads out and shooting them.

A couple of young fellas were shot around our way, but sure they've recovered and they're out doing stuff still, so it didn't do any good knee-capping them or beating them.

I was working with a wee fella in Springhill and he got his knees done and he was out joyriding again on his crutches.

Some of the ones I used to mess about with years ago are still at it. One is about 27, 28 now. He's been doing it his whole life – I don't think he knows what else to do.

There's a thing about a sense of identity with their friends... To me a lot of those young people are like lost sheep, and they don't want to be out of step with the crowd they're in, for fear of feeling isolated.

Were there any aspects of the Troubles for them which most definitely haven't diminished?

I think I'm paranoid from my da being in jail. When I go into the house I make sure my door is locked, and when I was renting a house I made sure it had one of them doors that people couldn't kick in, one of them big PVC ones. And it's because my whole life I was brought up with our door secured... big trap bar and all.

So did we.

You still imagine that the peelers, or Loyalists, are going to come in through the door.

And these days, you'd be just as afraid of some hood coming in and robbing you.

That's one legacy that still affects many ex-prisoners' children: the need to feel secure in your own home.

My granny still has a big security gate and all at the bottom of her stairs. She's had it for years... From when the soldiers come in..... She'd that many children in different organisations she was always getting raided. You never knew which one of her children they were looking for. She's had it from about 1980... and it's a sight.

We had one of the big black doors with the drop bars and then a big gate at the stairway. But after a while it never ever got locked – everybody was too lazy.

The new group

A group of new young people was assembled, to see whether their experiences had been similar to the original group, and whether, five years on, the current problems confronting young people had changed in their nature. But first they were asked if they retained any vivid memories of the conflict.

I remember mummy cracking up at me when I was about four or five years old. I was outside playing when either the peelers or the Brits came into the street, I can't remember. They had their guns with them and – I was only a kid – I goes over and says, 'Let me look at it.' And the next thing my mummy came tearing across the street –I will never forget it –and I got dragged into the house by my ear! Here's me: 'What's wrong?' She says: 'They're only keeping you beside them so they won't get shot.'

My ma was the same. We used to get pulled backwards along the street by our ponytails. She used to never even call you, she used to just run over and trail you into the house. And then shout: 'You're grounded, get up to your bed!'

My ma told me that if the Brits heard you talking Irish, or even if you tried to talk to them, they'd cut out your tongue! And after she said that I never went near them.

I wouldn't talk to them because I just knew what they done to my ma... my ma told me about the strip-searching and all... I just got to the point where I would call them for everything.

Know the way they used to go through all your personal stuff and all? Well, my mummy still doesn't like remembering that, she can still feel upset that people could have gone through all her personal things.

When my mummy got out and started having more kids she tried to keep everything –you know, like the stuff you get when you're born. She keeps them because when she got lifted the Brits ripped all mine up or else threw them out the window.

They did that with us; they ripped up all our toys and all... I'd nothing left. They cut up all our teddy bears; they said they were looking for stuff.

They smashed our toilet... I used to have to go across the road about five times a day. I think the woman was sick seeing my face!

I remember once they called me a 'Fenian bastard', but I was only a kid and I didn't know what it meant. I was standing with my da. It was when someone got shot over our way by the Brits, and there was rioting – and the Brits were driving up and down shouting 'Fenian bastards!' at people. I remember another time they spat at me and I got tore into a Brit. My ma and my da both ran out and grabbed me and shouted: 'Get you back into the house!' I was scared, like, but when my da got into the house he says, 'Fair play to you, son.' I remember one day some Brits were on patrol and I run out and hit one a big boot in the leg and he turned around and hit me a big slap – and there was murder in the street over that, like.

Have you ever had like a massive, really big police raid in your street? I've had one of those, with the helicopters flying above and all. I was about ten years old, and you're getting dragged back into your house by the scruff of the neck. Apparently the fella across the street from us was really big in the 'RA', and he was hiding guns under his floorboards. And we were like: 'What, him? Sure he was always so quiet!' All these police and soldiers poured into the street, helicopters flying above and you're sitting there thinking, 'What's going on!' It was like something out of a bloody film or something.

That happened to us as well. They were raiding our house. We had only moved in and they were doing some man across the street too, they were doing the two houses at once. My mummy says there must have been about 20 jeeps blocking the whole street, they were all lined right down the street and then there was cops lined all up. And then the Brits run into the house, and then diggers and all were in our back, digging up all the soil –because someone touted, said that my daddy had guns buried under the back garden; so they came in and did the two houses.

I remember they done that to the house of a mate of my da. I was in the house across the road at the time and, swear to God, the whole cul-de-sac was bunged out with cops. I was a wee bastard and my mate was doing his room

up so we grabbed a tin of paint each and climbed over the wall and crept around beside one of the police jeeps. The cops weren't standing at that side so we started to paint it all over, wheels and all... There were Saracens there too, so we started to paint them as well. The next minute my mate got grabbed, and I ran like Hell!

It's frightening to think that you actually saw stuff like that and it just eventually washed over you. Like, you would have thought that stuff like that would really terrify you.

The way I think about some things now is the result of what happened to me in the past. Our house was raided, God knows how many times, it was nearly happening once a month at one stage. And my granda's house was being raided, and my other granda's house too... the cops were constantly giving you abuse. It's very much the reason why I don't trust the police. In a way, it also made you racist towards the English: when you seen English people, the first thing you done was turn your nose up at them.

I remember walking down the street one night and a couple of IRA snipers were sitting in a garden. I turned around casually and saw these cops walking down behind me. As soon as I turned the next corner I ran like fuck! I just wanted away from them as fast as I could, because I knew what was likely to happen. And when I got home, I was waiting to hear the police sirens going and thinking: I wonder are those peelers I looked at now dead or are they alive? Did the snipers open up or not? You know what I mean? In our area you never knew what was going to happen from one day to the next.

What was it like to have a parent in prison? And what memories did the young people retain about prison visits?

I couldn't wait each week to go up and see my ma... I was always waiting every Saturday morning to go up and see her, and bring her up two bars of Turkish Delight. When she got out of jail and you moved into a house with your sisters again, it was good. 'Cause before that you only got to see them once a week and then next day you were all split up again around the different relatives. So it was good when she got out, because you were all with each other every day and stuff... you could get playing games and all with one another again.

I was a little more different to everyone else at Tar Anall, because they all sort of grew up with parents in prison, whereas my parents had been in prison *before* I was born.

My da was in jail already when my ma got put in. We moved down South, so we did, me and my sister –my ma's best friend took us and we moved down South. I don't think anybody knew, the neighbours thought they were our ma and da, and we were told not to say anything to anybody. After that, it all changed when my da got out and we moved into the 'Murph' [Ballymurphy]. And it was a big shock... Everybody in our street either had a ma or da who

was in jail or an older brother or something... so it was weird. See when the houses were getting raided and all, everybody used to support each other and all. When my da got lifted the neighbours would come and take us into their houses. You could see it was a big change, like, and you could tell more people understood what children like us were going through.

When we went up to the jail to see my ma you weren't getting your own privacy with her, to talk to her, because you always had a screw standing beside you... But the weird thing was that when she got out, for a while you *still* didn't know whether to say nothing, because you were that used to not saying nothing because the screws were standing there. It was weird; even though she was back living in the house, you'd done that for so many years you had just got into the way of it.

It was a bit weird for me too. In the beginning whenever I would go up on a visit I used to think it was my mummy's friend instead of my daddy, because I was so young. Later on I once said to him, 'Daddy, why did you get put in jail?' and all the screws and all gathered round, you know, to see what he would say... And he just looked at me and... you know... It was dead weird, like, because whenever I asked him something in the jail, like, he wouldn't answer it, he would always, like, put his head down or look away.

I hated the way the screws would read any letter you brought up, and they would go though everything....

I actually used to think it was brilliant getting searched and all by the dogs when you were going in. But then as I got older it started to piss me off, so it did. And you were sitting and you were trying to talk till him, and you couldn't because of the screw... There was this screw who was always there and he was an aul bastard... He always stood on our side and looked at him, and I remember my dad used to get frustrated, you know, big time, you could see it. It done my head in... But getting the free grub wasn't too bad. And I used to love the journey going up; I used to love sitting in the minibus, looking out the windies and all.

I didn't really know who my daddy was at first, because he went in when I was only a couple of months old. Whenever I went up to the jail I used to think he was my uncle or my brother or something. I just didn't believe that he was my daddy, I used to think that my daddy was over in England. And I used to say, 'Alright, Uncle' and all, and he used to look at me and the screws would laugh at him. That's what my mummy told me.

It was hard, like. See when you were leaving the jail on the Saturday your ma didn't want you to go, you could see the aul tears building up in her eyes. When she got out we all had to move back into one house... she'd been in jail a load of years, like, and it was as if she had to start all over again bringing us up, so it was tough for her as well as us.

You hated it in a way because when you were going up to the jail you had

men touching you and searching you and stuff, before you went in to see your parents and then on the way back out... I didn't like that. And dogs sniffing all over you.

It was hard for me. I lived with my granny. I never really grew up with my mummy until I was 12, and then my mummy came on the scene. So it was strange. I never felt affected the way others did, because I had grown up with my granny. But then when my granny died it was like there was now two important people missing out of my life.

I know one kid who never wanted to leave his da in jail, he was sticking his head in the bars and all, and he had to be pulled away every time.

What was the home situation like when the imprisoned parent was released?

Whenever he did get out of jail it was dead weird in our house, because I wasn't used to a man being in the house with my mummy. And whenever he came home, like, he sort of took over; he made rules up and all and I wasn't used to it. I used to be really close to my mummy, and sometimes slept in her bed, and he just came and took over the bed. I says to my mummy, 'Who's he?' and she went: 'That's your daddy.' And I went: 'But I don't have a daddy.' And she says, 'You do, it's just he was in jail. That's the man you used to go up and visit.' I still don't really like him for coming home.

My da got out of jail first and he spoiled us rotten... We didn't whinge for anything, but if we were in the town and I seen something I wanted he would buy it for me. But as soon as my ma got out it was different. I rebelled against her straight away. She told us to be in for ten o'clock and all and wouldn't let us eat sweets, and changed the whole rules and all... so me and my sister rebelled against her, and we said we hated her and wished she was back in jail and all! My da's still like that, he'd do anything for you. I think it was partly because he felt guilty that he was in jail while we were growing up.

I've always felt cheated so I have. My mummy used to talk about my daddy as if he was the life and soul of the party; she'd say, 'Oh, he's so full of life and energy.' You can sort of see that with his mates, but I've always felt cheated that jail sort of changed him, for he doesn't get on like that with us, he's not like that at all, he's sort of really strict and even sullen around us. He's only really started to change since my mummy died. He was very strict and my mummy says he was never like that before any of us were born, and he was, like, really happy-go-lucky and great craic to be around. But when he got out of jail he was completely changed. And he was even strict with mummy as well. I remember him sitting us upstairs one night because we wouldn't behave and actually threatening to phone the adoption agency to come and take us away. It really scared the life out of us and my mummy said it scared her as well, because he'd never been like that before. I think it was jail which changed him. My mummy said he'd completely changed, he was a completely different man. She still loved him and all, she could still see all the same qualities, but he wouldn't show as much love as he had before. And

I've always felt cheated by that, because I never really got to experience that side of him.

That's the same in my house. It was all good and then whenever he got out he was all strict and my mummy says he was never like that before, he used to be a big party animal and he used to always be active and want to do stuff. Yet whenever he got out of jail he didn't want to do nothing, he didn't even want to leave the house. We threw a party for him whenever he got out, and he took a huff and started shouting at his family and telling them all that he hated them, and he told my mummy that he hated all of us as well. And this was all because we threw a party for him and he didn't want nobody to know – but everyone knew why he was in jail. It was only his kids didn't know.

I think my dad slept downstairs for about three weeks, he says he wasn't used to the stairs or something! We gave him some stick for it, like. I loved my da getting out of jail, I thought it was brilliant. Although, at the same time, I used to love going up to the jail, I don't know why, I was just a kid and you used to get free crisps and all – they would give you a big free bag of Tayto crisps, and chocolate and all – so I used to love going up. And do you remember them notice boards that they had the whole way along? Well, I jumped on one once and the whole thing collapsed and it fell on a screw. And he got up and he pushed me and I remember my da just bounced up straight away and tried to get into him – he says he got the ballocks knocked out of him by the screws afterwards for it, like. And when my da got out of jail that's how I expected him to be, someone who would always be there for me and all, and he was... That's why I loved it when he got out of jail. But I just hated it when my ma got out... she changed our whole routine. We had our da wrapped round our wee fingers, exactly the way we wanted, and then she came in and just changed it.

See in our house, because my daddy was so used to everything being his own way in the jail – know, like, in his cell? – whenever he got out everything had to be a certain way, and if you touched anything in the house he would have shouted or something. You weren't allowed in his bedroom, and whatever way he done the house up you didn't have a say in it – it was his house at the end of the day. Like – he never lived in our house for so many years, yet whenever he got out he says it was now 'his' house, and he was the master of the house. Yet, he didn't do the cleaning or cooking because he was a man and that was a woman's job. And if you didn't have the dinner ready by a certain time he didn't want it.

See when my da first got out of jail we lived in a house just off Springfield Road. And the house had plenty of rooms and we got it done exactly the way we wanted it. My sister done the living room, she picked all the stuff and all.

My da used to have loads of rules whenever he got out. You weren't allowed to leave our garden at all, and I was six or older, and my wee mates across the street used to have to come over to me. And I used to cry and all, I used to

say, 'I hope you die and I hope the peelers shoot you, I hope the English bastards get you!' He used to ground me for the slightest wee thing. 'You're not allowed to play water fights, you'll get hurt.' And my mummy would say to him, 'Wise up!' 'No, she's not playing then, get her in!' And all my mates was out having fun and I wasn't allowed to do half the things that they were allowed to do.

I think my mummy sort of compensated for the fact that my daddy was always very cold with us. 'Cause my mummy was really bubbly all the time and really warm and I remember coming home from school one day and me and my brother and sister were playing chasies around the house. And my mummy joined in – she was firing ice cubes at us, trying to catch us, and it was really good fun... but then see when my daddy pulled up in the car everything just suddenly stopped automatically... it really sort of cast a shadow. I think my mummy was sort of trying to compensate for the mood that he sort of brought over the house, because it was really sort of sullen, you know: respect him and go by his rules... all that sort of stuff.

Soon after my ma got out she and my da ended up splitting up, so they did, I think both personalities clashed, they just didn't get on. And I think being in jail was partly to blame. Because when I would have went up to see my ma – my da would have taken us up – them two would be holding hands and all and talking. And then when they got out it was just weird for them, you could tell it was weird for them. I remember when they told us they were getting divorced I couldn't believe it. And I blamed her for it, for about a year or so I did, I don't know why, I just wanted to blame someone so I blamed her.

When the Good Friday Agreement was coming about my da got parole – when some prisoners were allowed out for a few days. But although he was getting out for, like, three days, he only spent one day with me. I couldn't understand, like, and I was thinking: You're out for three days, you're meant to spend all your time with us! And, in fact, he was out one day with his mates, then one day with us, and another day he was with his brothers and sisters. I was still too young, stubborn and all, to realise that he had to see these people, that he couldn't just spend all his time with us. But I just felt annoyed with him and said to him, 'You just go on with them'ens and all, sure we don't need you anyway, you've never been here for us!' And then as I got older, and I was old enough to go out and have a drink with him... the relationship *did* build. Like, he rings me up all the time now; any time he's doing anything he rings me and we go for a drink together.

See for me, it was totally different. See when my da got out me and him were alright, but see after a while we drifted apart and now I don't even talk to him, like. I haven't talked to him in about a year and a half, haven't even seen him in about a year and a half. We lost so many years that there's no relationship there, we've just nothing in common, like. It's just... I want to talk to him, like, and I've tried talking to him but I can't, I just can't be bothered now.

When my da got out they said to him, 'We've a flat ready for you and you'll be on the 'brew' for six months.' And my da says, 'No way!' When he got out my da took us down South for a holiday, a tour of Ireland. And he was only back from the holiday four days when he was straight out to work, and he's never looked back since.

When my da was in jail he done a PhD. But when he came out of jail he said to me that he turned against everything he had fought for. He says when he got out of jail it was completely different, the cause he fought for wasn't there any more.

What did the parent(s) say to their children about the reason for their imprisonment? And did they express any opinion on the cause for which they had been incarcerated?

I don't know what he was in jail for, he still won't tell me. I know he done something bad, like, but I don't know what.

That's the same as my daddy. I'm nearly 20 years old and I'm still not allowed to know what my daddy did. None of us are allowed to know, not even my eldest brother, who's like 28 with two children.

I got told.

So did I. My mummy told me.

I know what my ma done, but I still don't know what my da done.

As I said earlier, my da had been in prison *before* I was born. And I felt very resentful of the fact that we only found this out when I was about 12 years old. We were all sat down one night in the living room, and it was like: 'We've something important to tell you all.' And we were going: 'What's going on, who's dying?' And my mummy said, 'Your daddy was in jail.' 'What! Why?' 'Well, we're not telling you what it was for, it's too serious.' 'Why not?' 'Oh, alright, but you can't tell anyone.' 'Why not?' 'Because it's not the sort of area that you could tell anyone that your father has been in jail.' Right, and I mean we're living in Poleglass! So, like, nobody in my street knows that my daddy has been in jail?

I actually do think that my mummy was trying to tell us one night... we were pestering her for days about it, like: 'Why was daddy in jail?' We wouldn't let it go, we were really pestering her. And finally she turns round and says, 'He killed someone.' And we burst out laughing and she says, 'What are youse laughing at!' We says, 'That's so funny, like, daddy killing someone!' We were really wetting ourselves laughing. She says, 'No, seriously, he killed someone', but we didn't believe her and couldn't stop laughing. And she says, 'Right, I'm telling you fuck all from now on!' And we wouldn't talk to him for about a week, sitting there panicking about whether he killed someone or not, and whether it was accidental or if he did it on purpose. But we could never believe that he had murdered someone, you know.

I don't know what my father did... he never speaks about his history, what he was involved in. I don't know why he was in jail, but I do know he now has a big drink problem. And when he's been drunk a few times he sometimes starts talking about kids growing up in England with no daddies because of him, things like that... He's probably telling me – without telling me directly at the same time – that he was in jail for murder. He was telling me these things when he was drunk, which led me to believe that his drink problem is because of his past. It ended up the marriage broke down, and even now, my brother who's coming nine is still suffering from what happened to our family. It's a knock-on effect... and I know it's not uncommon.

I was very confused by it all. I didn't resent his involvement, I was always proud of it. But when I was younger it was an embarrassing thing as well. I lived in Turf Lodge and my friends would have give me a hard time about being a Provie. They would say, 'Your da's a Provie... your uncle is a Provie... you're a Provie'... Say you were out drinking or there was some drugs firing about, and my mates were trying out new drugs, some of them would say, 'Don't be telling him, his da's a Provie, he'll get us done.' But, apart from that, I was proud of what my da had done, and it's created very much the person I am today. But I didn't know why I had supported my da in what he had done, I just, you know, went along with the idea that being a Provie was a good thing. But it did get me a bit of a bad reputation where I lived... I was running about beating up hoods, throwing bricks through car windows and other things. Nobody liked me, because they seen me as the young Provie.

I grew up actually hating the 'RA', so I did. I didn't like them one bit. Because I felt that *both* sides took my parents away, not just the Brits, for I blamed the 'RA' as well. We had to move down South and live with a complete stranger, and at the time we didn't know why. We had no family life at all, we lost all that, because our ma and da were inside. So I grew up hating the 'RA', and I still do a bit, because at the end of the day they took my ma and da away from me, and I don't care what it was for.

What has been the ongoing impact of being the child of an ex-prisoner? What type of incidents come to mind?

Last year –my last year in school – I was telling one of the girls about Tar Anall and stuff like that and she says, 'What's that for?' And I says, 'It's for, like, ex-Republican prisoners and their families.' She says, 'Oh right; well what about if you're from a normal family?' 'What do you mean? I am from a normal family.' She says, 'No, you're not, your da was in jail.' 'I'm still from a normal family.' But she says, 'But what about people whose parents are, like, normal and don't do stuff like that?' Here's me: 'I *am* normal.' She said it in front of the class and here's me: you're one cheeky bitch. Just because she came from a different background and both her parents were teachers and stuff like that, she thought that only that was 'normal'.

I was 15, going on 16, and the cops stopped us one day. We were standing on

the Limestone, about midnight, eating a carry-out and they came up and took it off us. So we started slabbering at them. And one of them said, 'What's your name?' And when I said my name the cop gave me this look, and next thing I knew I was threw over the fucking wall into a garden and got about four digs to the face. And my mates, like, they didn't know what to do. The cops called me a 'Fenian bastard' and all... There's other times, like when I've applied for a job and I haven't got it... My ma was saying they won't employ you because you're from a republican background and stuff like that there. But it doesn't really bother me now, to be honest with you.

Things are different these days. See when I was a kid, people cared more that you were a prisoner's child. Now, I'm not saying they wrapped you in cotton wool or anything, but it meant something to them. But see now, people out on the streets don't really care. If you say to anyone, 'His ma or da is an ex-Provie or... they were in jail', they're just as likely to turn around and say, 'So what?'

The other weekend we got stopped by the cops. We were coming past the New Lodge flats, and the cops drove past and then stopped. There was me and two mates, three of us all together, and they said, 'Where are you all from?' And we said, 'Here.' And then for no reason my mate just bolted and me and my other mate were standing looking at each other and it just made things ten times worse. And one cop, he was a real big bastard –you know, one of them intimidating cunts – goes, 'I bet you know how to drive.' And here's me, 'No.' And he goes, 'Sure someone round here will teach you; you're from the New Lodge, they're all scumbags and hoods around here.' This was the other week. They ended up putting us in the jeep and brought us to the top to the road and I got out first and as my mate was getting out they kicked him out of the thing, and they just drove away and we were going, 'What the fuck!' So when we seen the cops going up the road the other day and we were playing football, we cracked one of them up the head with the football... shot and a half, like!

Part of my mother's family wouldn't talk to us. When they went to jail, my ma's best friends had to take us down South because there was no-one in our family would take us, and on my da's side there was no-one able to look after us. Even now my aunt wouldn't talk to us, because her husband's brother or something was a Brit and he was shot dead or something. He wasn't even shot dead over here, but she sort of blames us for it.

When I was younger I always wanted to work in an airport. But you can't work in the airport for security reasons –because you're an ex-prisoner's child.

It's like the civil service as well, you can go in as an 'AA' [administrative assistant] but that's about it, that's about the only job you can get in there, you can't move any higher because of your family's prison record... They're terrified of you getting information that certain people might use.

The young people stressed that their generation – whether from an ex-prisoner background or not – was facing new and quite different challenges to even a few years ago.

We don't have political influences, we have *other* influences... each generation is finding that different things influence us. Nowadays it would be like alcohol and drugs, we're getting more of the impact of that on our generation. We don't care about all that political stuff because we've all quite different things going on now in our lives. Like my brother's best friend committed suicide a few years ago, but what upset my brother most was that his friend actually waited until my brother went on holiday before doing it – so that my brother couldn't stop him. He was overdosing on drugs and all that sort of stuff before he killed himself. And that's the type of thing which impacts on our generation more than anything else.

Yes. I lost one of my friends through suicide. A friend I used to knock around with hung himself the other week there... I felt gutted.

I think a lot of young people see it as an easy way out. I know one wee fella who was walking up the road, and he was feeling really depressed, and he seen this van. It was a work van, it had a metal rail on it, so he took off his belt, threw it round his neck and jumped up and tried to hang himself. He woke up in hospital. This man seen him hanging on the thing, and he ran over and got him off it. The wee fella said he was just walking up the road, he said he wasn't intending to hang himself before he saw the van – he just seen the opportunity and he took it. Like, one of my friends hung himself 'cause his best friend hung himself... After his friend's funeral he was so depressed he climbed up into the church and hung himself... this was in Ardoyne.

I would say there's a major difference between our generation and our parents' generation. They were, like, willing to die for the cause and stuff like that, and our generation just want to die as a way out – basically, they're just looking for a way out. So, when you think of young people today wanting to kill themselves, and our parents having been so willing to give their lives for the cause and all that sort of stuff, I think it's *all* really mad.

The young people readily admitted that the rise in anti-social behaviour, especially among young people, was a major problem for all communities at present.

There's nothing for most young people to do these days, and see when there's nothing to do you end up mucking about with the wrong crowd, and end up stealing cars and taking or selling drugs.

My ma's a Sinn Féin councillor. And one time this aul woman called to our house, she was crying and all, because there was ones hanging around her door and they were causing trouble. I thought she was maybe talking about wee kids doing a lot of shouting but when we went down they're all, like, 17 or 18. My ma went over and said, 'Would you mind moving away from that wee woman's house?' But they just turned and spat at her... I saw red and

near ended up in a big fight. Then ones from the ‘community watch’ came over and surrounded them and made them move on.

Around my area the hoods steal cars and crash them into walls. Or they throw bottles at each other. And there’s not much you can do if they’re not going to co-operate with you. If you ask them to move and they refuse or tell you to ‘Fuck off!’ what can you do?

It’s having a really damaging effect on the old community spirit. Divis and that fell away for a long time, but see a couple of weeks ago they had a big fun day in Divis, they were trying to bring the whole community back together, because it was getting wrecked and there was hoods out every night and they were wrecking people’s lives and all. People weren’t getting to sleep, and many people wanted out of the community because it was wrecking their nerves. Wee grannies were being terrified and tormented. People are trying their best down there to build the community back together, because it was a strong community before the hoods came in and started wrecking it.

In my community I really only know *one* of my neighbours –the wee woman who lives next door. I go in every time I’m going to the shop and ask if she needs anything. She always says, ‘No, but thanks for asking.’ But apart from her I don’t know anyone else. Maybe when we pass in the street we might say ‘Alright?’ to each other. But see when I lived with my da in a wee cul-de-sac, you could just walk over to a neighbour’s house and knock the door –or even just walk in – and say, ‘Do you have any sugar’ or ‘Did you watch the match last night?’ You know, stuff like that. But see communities where there’s a lot of joyriding and all – I think that splits them apart big time.

It makes everyone become a little bit more hard-faced and they keep to themselves, and keep their doors locked. Because they don’t want any bother.

Up our area there’s a community restorative justice scheme, and since that started up a couple of years ago things like joyriding and all has went down. Because the young people –including some of the hoods – can get away out of it all, and get places on holiday schemes and stuff like that.

I couldn’t even tell you about joyriders up our way any more because I have got that good at sleeping through it. Seriously – you don’t hear anything any more, unless somebody comes into your room and wakes you up to say, ‘Did you hear that bloody car crashing!’ And you’re like: ‘Where?’ ‘It’s in the back square.’ ‘No, didn’t hear it.’ ‘How could you not hear it, sure your bedroom window’s right there!’

My house is like Fort Knox. There’s like bulletproof windows at the front... and when you come in, right, you’ve to do this big lock, and it’s one of them security doors. And when you get to the bottom of the stairs there’s a gate at the bottom of the stairs...

Aye, we have one of them too....

...It was first put up against the Brits and the Loyalists, and then got took down. But when my ma became a Sinn Féin counsellor it all got put up again. Every other weekend some hood throws something at our house. And I get abuse all the time. I'm walking down the street and some hood shouts: 'Provie bastard!' –and all because my ma is a Sinn Féin councillor.

There was a consensus, however, that punishment shootings and beatings were not the answer.

I think the paramilitaries are stuck in a 'lose-lose' situation. If they do shoot these people they get criticised for it, but see if they *don't* shoot them... I remember going to a meeting and there was this man and he was standing there arguing with two fellas, who were, like, paramilitaries. And he was saying, 'Youse don't do nothing; youse need to beat them, they were standing outside my front door and I'm sick of it!' And one fella said, 'Well, if you're sick of it why don't you have the balls to go and do something about it? What's the difference between you doing it and me doing it?' And the man went, 'Aye, but then they'll get back at me.' And one of the fellas says, 'Sure I got my car burnt the other week just because I was out stopping fucking joyriders.' So it's a 'lose-lose' situation for them, if you know what I mean.

Paramilitary shootings don't work. Sure they get shot and all, then they just go out and do it again, even with their legs broke... And with the hoods it's like a gift to them'ens. See when they get out of hospital after getting shot, they go and boast to their mates about it. It's like a badge of honour to them, like.

See over our way, they tell you to show for your punishment beatings. I remember we all heard about some wee fella going to get shot in the entry and when we went to see there was a fella standing guard at the bottom of the entry and we heard a couple of shots and then these two other fellas come out and got into a van and away... And we went up the entry and the wee lad was lying there with a packet of fegs, and says, 'They've phoned me an ambulance, it'll be here any minute.' They had gave him the fegs and said, 'It's alright son, we're going to shoot you now.' See if it was me.... I'd have shit myself.

One hood got brought into one of the flats and was tortured, more or less. Not physically, he was blindfolded, stuck in a corner, nothing said to him, a gun clicking now and then, and then the water getting turned on and water getting thrown at him. He couldn't see none of this. He got two digs in the back of the head and that was it, but this was all spread over two hours. He said it felt like the whole fucking day and he said he just told them everything they wanted to know and then just moved out of the area. Said he pissed himself so many times, he was shit-scared. So instead of shooting people and maiming people, maybe they should just give them that sort of treatment.

Have you ever actually seen someone getting a punishment beating? It is the scariest thing in your life. There's a fella across from us, and everyone knew he was heading for trouble. He was joyriding all the time and we knew it was

only a matter of time before the ‘RA’ came out to get him. And the night we all knew for sure it was coming the whole street cleared... it was like a bloody Western or something, everybody peeking out through their blinds and all to see what was going on. I could hear my mummy screaming up the stairs, ‘Get away from that window!’ And when they dragged him out onto the street you could hear the baseball bats go ‘Clunk! Clunk!’ off the top of his skull – it was a really strange sound. And then a gun went ‘Bang, bang!’ And I’m standing there in the room – I was about 15 years old – just watching one of my brother’s mates getting beaten and shot in the middle of our street, and thinking: this isn’t real!

Had they any fears that the peace wouldn’t hold?

If it all started up again I’d move away... I wouldn’t get involved in it, I’d move to England, America, New Zealand – anywhere to get away from it. Especially if I had children there’s no way I would want them to be affected the way I was. I’d just pack my bags and move the very next day it all started up again – and I wouldn’t come back until it was over again.

I’m the opposite of that. I don’t think I’d get involved but I wouldn’t move, I wouldn’t let anyone drive me out of my home. I’d stay. I know your house would be raided and all that because you are from a Republican background, but I wouldn’t move for anybody, I don’t care who they are.

I lived on the Whiterock Road at the start, in my Granny’s, and one day a coffee jar bomb went off outside the Whiterock Road Library, just facing us. Like, my ma could have been standing there when it happened. I wouldn’t want any of my kids to go through that there, so I wouldn’t.

When we were away on that weekend discussion there I did get into a big debate so I did, over it all. I came out straight and said what I believed. ‘Cause if I knew that peace was going to be broke on our side, or their side, and even if it meant voting Unionist to make sure it wouldn’t break, I would do that. And a lot of people weren’t too happy with what I said, but that’s the way I think – because I don’t want to go back to all that, so I don’t.

Sometimes I think there is no real peace yet. Crowds are still throwing stones at the police.

How can it be called ‘peace’ when it’s still not safe for a Catholic to walk down the Shankill? You can’t walk down Springmartin, so you can’t.

I work with a few Protestants, they’re dead on.

I grew up with all different, mixed religions, in my family. On my mummy’s side there’s 13 of them, so there is. One of my aunts is married to an ex-Brit, and my cousin is married to an English fella and the other one... he’s sound. See if you go to England, it’s nothing like here, no-one classes you, ‘Are you like a Protestant or a Catholic?’ You just go over there and have a good aul craic and nothing is said.

I was walking through Yorkgate with a few of my mates and we seen a wee fella wearing a Rangers top so we went over and kicked the face off him. Like this was years ago, I wouldn't do it now... But I still don't trust Protestants, I've just grown up not to trust them. I moved into the New Lodge when I was young and it was like, 'Watch your back, if you see one, hit them first, don't let them get you' –you know, that way.

I remember my granny told me that if a person's eyes are too close together, you shouldn't go near them because they're a Protestant!

Not every Protestant is bad. You have to realise that we're sitting here going, 'They done this, and they done that and that', but they're probably sitting saying the same things about us.

I heard that when one of the Springboard groups was in a pub in the States they all – Protestants and Catholics –sang the Sash together. You'd normally think a mixed group couldn't do the like of that, but it just shows you that when you get to know one another you can do those things.

I honestly feel that it's going to get better. I know our parents were fighting for the cause and stuff like that, but I think we've grown up as a generation where we don't care any more. Fair enough, our parents felt it was important to them, and I'm not knocking them. But it doesn't influence our generation as much as it influenced our parents; I don't think many young people care about it as much as their parents did.

I think politics here is the same old shit –it's basically the same thing just being replayed year after year.

There is one politician who's okay, a woman from Ardoyne. She's a Sinn Féin councillor, but she's also a youth worker. Normally when you see a politician, they're in their wee suit, always dressed to impress, they always want to look smart. But this woman, you see her going out to the street corners and standing with ones you wouldn't even look twice at, because they're bad cunts. She just walks up to them and talks to them, has a laugh and asks them 'What's the craic?' and all. She asks them'ens to go up to the youth club and sometimes they do. So politicians like her are okay.

I'm not really worried about voting.

I *am* going to vote.

Most people I know just don't care, full stop, they don't want to know. My mates and all are what you would call 'corner rats', the ones that stand at the corner 24/7. They don't care about politicians, and I think why they don't care is because the politicians don't talk to them; politicians *assume* what young people are thinking, they don't sit down and ask them directly. See if any of the politicians came to the corner and asked the young people their opinions or tried to explain things to them, they'd get more votes.

Aye, they take your vote for granted.

What do the young people get from coming to Tar Anall?

It's kind of hard to explain, really –it's a different sort of connection you don't have with your other friends who don't have the same experiences as you. It's like everyone in here has a similar sort of past in their family life. It's that sort of connection you don't even get with, say, with your best mate who doesn't really understand what it meant to have one of your parents in jail or doesn't understand that you feel sort of, I don't know, really stigmatised.

In here you've been through similar experiences as the others, and you're able to talk about it openly and freely.

See when you're out with your friends you have to be careful what you say as well, so you do. But in here you can relax and you don't have to worry about people judging you and all.

You always leave here with a certain sort of buzz, no matter what you've been talking about.

I think it makes you feel more relaxed too, because you know that in here there's always someone who's been through the same thing as you and you can always go and talk to them.

I never knew nobody when I came in here at first, and I made a lot of new friends and all, went away places and met other new people. I wouldn't have done that only for Tar Anall.

I'm never out of the place... See when you come to Tar Anall they make you feel welcome, make you feel that you are somebody, if you know what I mean. They open your eyes as well... you get opportunities you mightn't get anywhere else... Like, I wouldn't be in the job I'm in today if it hadn't been for Tar Anall.

Many community organisations involving young people are all the same – they focus on activities, like snooker tables, PlayStations –but this project tries to educate you.

I think Tar Anall has made me able to speak better to people, explain things better. Many young people haven't even been out of West Belfast before and only see one side of it. And you try to explain to them it isn't just like that there, there's always two sides to a story, there's not just your way, you have to listen to others.

My fear would be this place closing down.

I just hope it stays open so more young people can get involved in here.

My real fear for the future would be if the war started up again. And if it did,

that would mean more children's mothers and fathers would be going to jail and they would go through those kinds of experiences that we've all gone through, and that's a real fear I have.

What type of activities are they involved in, or hope to get involved in?

A couple of us do a course with Springboard, with Protestants and Catholics and some from Dublin. One fella, A____, is Protestant and he's getting an awful lot of pressure and even threats from the UDA. And I was telling him what we do in Tar Anall, and he told me he was the child of an ex-prisoner too. And he felt it would be great to have a support group for the children of Loyalist ex-prisoners which did the same type of things that Tar Anall does. He said he would try and talk to some people about it where he lives. So Tar Anall gave me the confidence to be able to relate to someone from a different background, by seeing what we had in common. And, hopefully, what I told him might help him and other young people over in his community.

We do residential. And sports – like water sports and all. And team-building activities.

The thing I'm doing... it's just an idea at the moment, I haven't got no plan drawn up... is to organise this big event in probably Beechmount, like football, a football tournament.

We want to set up a young women's group in here. Because the wee girls in here aren't as close as what they could be. There's certain wee cliques and all. There is a young men's group and they get to do stuff that wee girls wouldn't be interested in. So we want to start up a young women's group and ask them what type of things *they* want to do.

The Youth Project is split into three ages, 13-plus, 16-plus and 18-plus, and the whole purpose of the Youth Project is that when young people come here at age 13 they go through a programme of personal and social development, but obviously they dictate what the programme is. With the goal that whenever they're 16-18, they in turn take over the project. So everybody here runs their own group for other young people in Tar Anal and some go out to other organisations.

Maria, Tar Anall core worker, who had co-facilitated the Think Tank, commented:

I would just like to say that the young people that we've had the opportunity to work with in here have been absolutely amazing, you've seen how open and honest they are. At a time when young people often get a very bad press it's just amazing the work you can get done when you try to build a positive relationship with young people. And I just think the young people in here have been amazing and even if the project doesn't continue, all the young people who use this project are going to go into their own communities and really make a difference and I'm just glad we've been part of their lives, so thanks very much.