



Youth Justice Board
Bwrdd Cyflawnder Ieuenctid

The Youth Justice Board strategy for delivering positive outcomes for children by reducing offending and creating safer communities

2024 to 2027



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Foreword

I am privileged to introduce our second strategic plan during my time as Chair of the Youth Justice Board. We have a crucial role in ensuring that the Government's central investment of just over £100 million a year in youth justice is used effectively.

This strategy sets out our approach for how we will continue to work with others to realise our vision and deliver services that promote positive child outcomes, reduce crime, support victims and make communities safer.

The first plan of my tenure was launched in 2021 while we were still very much in the throes of a global pandemic., and I opened that plan with the following statement:

“We live in challenging times. Yet, with every challenge there is an opportunity.”

This is just as true today as it was then. There will always be challenges, but I firmly believe the greater the challenges, the greater the opportunities.

Performance in the youth justice sector is strong. The number of children entering the youth justice system has dramatically reduced over the last decade, as has the number of children in custody. Independent assessments conducted by the Inspectorate of Probation shows that local youth justice service and partnerships are generally delivering a good service to children and their communities. There is a solid foundation to build upon and to face the future.

The challenges we face today are considerable and I must acknowledge that it is an uncertain time to be presenting our strategic vision for the next three years. The world is continuing to adapt to the social changes brought by the pandemic, including an acceleration in the use of technology, intensification of inequalities and increased pressure on local public services to meet the needs of local communities. A range of global factors have contributed to economic uncertainty, with people and public services experiencing the stresses caused by increased costs of living. We are also operating in an environment of political uncertainty, with a general election due to be held within the next nine months and a planned review of the Youth Justice Board, where the Cabinet Office will look at whether we are delivering the best possible outcomes for taxpayers.

The Youth Justice Board is not unique in having to navigate an uncertain world, and our role is to continue to adapt to the circumstances which we are operating in and the resources which are available to us.

A key aspect of our strategy for the next three years will be to ensure that this investment from central government is used effectively by local services. Our assessment is that local youth justice services are broadly performing well. They benefit from expert and committed staff from multiple agencies including health, probation, education, police and youth justice teams who work in partnership to meet the needs of children and their local communities. There is, however, always room for improvement. For example, we need to strengthen our support for the victims of crime, redouble our efforts to reduce racial disparity, and develop our services to meet the unmet needs of children, including their speech, language and communication difficulties. Our overarching priority will be to continue to evaluate the

effectiveness of these services and to steer improvement through promoting good practice and providing targeted support.

In our last strategic plan three years ago, we set out our commitment to a Child First approach, which is rooted in national and international research and a contemporary analysis of the evidence. It provides the foundation for this strategy and the way in which we will monitor and promote practice across the entire youth justice system.

Although this evidence provides a strong base for maintaining the direction of our strategy, we must ensure that the Youth Justice Board is an efficient, effective and responsive organisation which understands interdependencies within the youth justice system and that services are delivered within the resources which are available. This will enable us to focus on where we can have the most impact by supporting improvements to front-line youth justice services. Ultimately, we offer value to the public by supporting the delivery of positive child outcomes, less crime, and safer communities.

Strategic context

The past decade has seen extremely positive long-term trends across the youth justice system in England and Wales.

- The number of proven offences committed by children has fallen by approximately 65%, from 98,937 in 2012/13 to around 34,300 in 2022/23;^{1, 2}
- There have been substantial falls in the number of children entering the justice system in the first place, with a reduction of around 77% between the years ending March 2012 and March 2023.^{1, 2}
- There were approximately 11,900 occasions where children were sentenced at court in the year ending March 2023, which is 73% lower than in the year ending March 2012.^{1, 2}
- The number of children being sentenced to custody has also shrunk: in the year ending March 2023, the average monthly population of the youth secure estate was the lowest it has ever been at around 440 children.²

We believe that a greater focus by practitioners and policy makers, both within the youth justice system and in related fields, on preventing and diverting children away from the youth justice system are partly responsible for these trends. However, we recognise that these gains cannot be taken for granted and the most recent statistics for 2022/23 bear this out with slight increases in some measures from the previous year. These achievements could all be put at risk by changes in children's behaviour, including: their use (and misuse) of new technologies; the way in which adults draw them into criminal activity; national and local economic circumstances; and potential changes in policy and practice, especially by criminal justice agencies. The Youth Justice Board has a critical role in supporting youth justice services to mitigate and, if possible, avoid these factors turning into negative outcomes for children and communities.

There remain profound and entrenched challenges in the youth justice system. While we are encouraged that the latest set of published statistics are the third year where we have seen improvements in disproportionality for the third year, focus and effort must not let up as there continues to be significant racial disproportionality across every stage of the system. This particularly affects Black boys, although children from other minority ethnic groups have also been identified as experiencing poorer outcomes.³

¹ [Youth justice statistics 2012/13: England and Wales - GOV.UK. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2012-13](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2012-13)

² [Youth justice statistics: 2022 to 2023 \(accessible version\) - GOV.UK. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2022-to-2023/youth-justice-statistics-2022-to-2023-accessible-version](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2022-to-2023-accessible-version)

³ [Annual statistics: a youth justice system failing Black children - GOV.UK. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/annual-statistics-a-system-failing-black-children](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/annual-statistics-a-system-failing-black-children)

The overwhelming majority of the children who came through the youth justice system over the past three years have complex backgrounds and needs.⁴ This is especially so for those sentenced to custody - and while the reduction in the number of children being held in custody is welcome - the patterns of violence, self-harm and trauma that are seen among children in these settings are unacceptable.

It must also be recognised that the youth justice system does not exist in a vacuum and that socio-economic circumstances profoundly influence the lives and opportunities of children across the country. We know that many of the children who come into contact with the justice system are from our most deprived communities, where the experience of a cost of living crisis has created conditions where children are more likely to engage in violence.⁵

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic also continues to cause significant disruption in the lives of children as their access to education and other services was disrupted for a protracted period. The latest data shows that 22.3% of children were persistently absent during the 2022/23 academic year, which is double the equivalent figure for 2018/19⁶, and will have considerable impact on their social development and commitment to learning.

Lastly, for the public services charged with delivering youth justice, significant budgetary pressures remain and there will be difficult decisions about what, and how, services can or cannot be delivered. This is compounded by changes in the job market in the youth justice sector and increased mobility of employees and competition for skilled workers, which makes it a challenge to recruit and retain the best staff.

Against this backdrop of change, there are considerable challenges throughout the youth justice system. However, longer-term trends are positive, and we believe that the most trustworthy guide in uncertain times is to follow an evidence-based approach.

Youth justice in Wales

⁴ Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice (2021): 'Assessing the needs of sentenced children in the Youth Justice System 2019/20'. This report found that of all sentenced children in 2019/20, 90% of sentenced children were assessed to have safety and wellbeing needs, 72% were assessed to have mental health concerns, 71% were assessed to have speech, language and communication concerns, and 57% were assessed to be a current or previous child in need.

⁵ Lesley McAra and Susan McVie (2016): 'Understanding youth violence: The mediating effects of gender, poverty and vulnerability', 45 Journal of Criminal Justice pages 71-77.

⁶ [Pupil attendance in schools, Week 29 2023 - GOV.UK. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-attendance-in-schools/2023-week-29>](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-attendance-in-schools/2023-week-29)

Although justice remains a reserved matter with decisions taken by the UK government, the Senedd Cymru has delegated responsibility for policy areas that directly shape the lives of children, including education and health, with Welsh Government providing funding to prevent offending by children in Wales.

We have a long-standing strategic partnership with the Welsh Government. Our Operations Directorate for Wales enables us to influence strategic and operational direction to ensure the partnership approach in Wales is reflected in the business of the Youth Justice Board.

Our vision

Despite the complex challenges facing the Youth Justice Board in 2024, we remain committed to the vision we introduced in 2021:

A youth justice system that sees children as children first, treats them fairly and helps them to build on their strengths so they can make a constructive contribution to society. This will prevent offending and create safer communities with fewer victims.

As we seek to achieve this vision, the Youth Justice Board is committed to following an evidence-based approach, and we can draw on decades of national and international evidence of what works in creating positive outcomes for children.

We have summarised this evidence as the Child First approach.⁷ It provides the guiding principles for everything we do at the Youth Justice Board, including our oversight of local youth justice services, the data and analysis that we publish, and advice that we offer to Ministers and partners throughout the justice system.

The Child First approach has four tenets which are:

As children

Prioritise the best interests of children and recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights and potential. All work is child-focused, developmentally informed, acknowledges structural barriers and meets responsibilities towards children.

Building a pro-social identity

Promote children's individual strengths and capacities to develop their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance, leading to safer communities and fewer victims. All work is constructive and future-focused, built on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society.

Collaborating with children

Encourage children's active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers.

⁷ For further detail, see: Youth Justice Board (2022): 'A guide to Child First'. Available at: https://yjresourcehub.uk/images/YJB/Child_First_Overview_and_Guide_April_2022_YJB.pdf

Diverting from stigma

Promote a childhood removed from the justice system, using pre-emptive prevention, diversion and minimal intervention. All work minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system.

Our mission

In working to achieve this vision, our mission statement provides more detail about our core purpose and the approach the Youth Justice Board will take:

The Youth Justice Board is the only statutory body to have oversight of the entire youth justice system. We provide independent, evidence-based advice and leadership to drive improvements that increase children's positive outcomes and prevent offending.

The legislation which established the Youth Justice Board in 1998 also defined a set of functions for the Board⁸ which include: monitoring the operation of the youth justice system and provision of youth justice services; identifying and promoting good practice; and providing advice to the Secretary of State on a range of specified matters.

The way in which we deliver these statutory duties has evolved since they were originally established. Over the lifespan of this strategy, we will seek to meet the core purpose set out in our mission through the following:

Support improvement throughout the youth justice system and in the provision of local youth justice services

We will use our oversight of youth justice system to:

- contribute to effective resourcing of youth justice services
- set clear standards for justice⁹
- support improved performance of youth justice services
- use our data and evidence to identify opportunities to innovate and improve
- promote and strengthen engagement with communities and victims
- monitor services to constructively challenge statutory partners and agencies

⁸ Section 41 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/37/section/41

⁹ Standards for children in the youth justice system - GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-standards-for-youth-justice-services>

Inform the public, practitioners and policy makers about the operation of the youth justice system

We will provide understanding and insight about the operation of the youth justice system and local youth justice services by publishing independent research, statistics, analysis and advice. We will operate IT systems to support the exchange of information relating to children in the system and the operation of youth justice services.

Influence practitioners and policy makers to apply the Child First approach in delivering positive outcomes for children

We will use our insight, expertise and advice to engage and influence organisations within the youth justice system and other areas of critical social policy, to embrace, apply and invest in the Child First evidence.

Our strategic objectives: 2024 to 2027

1. Supporting improvement of youth justice services in local communities

We must provide leadership for the continuous improvement of local youth justice services by working with them and the partnerships they operate within. We are responsible for administering their core grant funding on behalf of the Secretary of State, and for ensuring that they use this funding in the right way by monitoring data and guiding practice.

Responsibility for delivery of local youth justice services in England and Wales lies with 157 multi-agency partnerships that sit within local authorities. Delivering youth justice services in this way reflects evidence that working with children is most effective when the response is based on their individual needs, starts as early as possible, and draws together perspectives and skills from a range of different professionals and disciplines. This approach is supported by the Chief Inspector of Probation who inspects local youth justice services and in their 2022 annual report, they said that:¹⁰

“The multi-agency model embodied in each YJS, and their management boards has remained a great source of strength through some difficult times. Additionally, the range and depth of specialist services that YJS’ can provide the children on their caseloads, from speech and language therapy to educational welfare and psychological support, continue to impress.”

Over the next three years, we seek to improve the overall performance of youth justice services by:

Monitoring youth justice services and partnerships against clear, evidence-based expectations and standards

We will support youth justice services to reduce variations in performance by:

- providing clear grant terms and conditions for youth justice services

¹⁰ See: [2022 annual report: inspections of youth offending services - HM Inspectorate of Probation. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/inspections/yar-2022](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/inspections/yar-2022)

- measuring performance of youth justice services and their wider partnership through Key Performance Indicators¹¹
- scrutinising youth justice plans
- ensuring that standards for justice¹² reflect the current evidence and work with HMIP to align this with inspection frameworks.

Supporting youth justice services to improve delivery

Inspection outcomes, key performance indicators and our operational judgements are an important measure of youth justice services and the system. We will build on the steady improvement in the provision of community services over the life of the strategic plan.

Providing youth justice services with stable and fairer funding

We will continue to administer core grant funding to local youth justice services and advise Ministers on options for revisions to the grant funding formula to enable fairer distribution of funds, including consideration of awarding multi-year grants.

Moreover, we seek to support improved performance of youth justice services in the following areas of activity.

Provision of diversion across the country

There is evidence that diverting children away from criminal justice proceedings and court and into alternative programmes can prevent reoffending. We will collaborate with the police, HM Inspectorate of Probation, the Youth Endowment Fund, youth justice services and others to promote the framework of support and supervision and enable increased diversion of children linked to offending. This will include ensuring improved national data collection on diversion is in place.

Working with partners to prevent and reduce serious violence

The Serious Violence Duty requires youth justice services to collaborate and plan with other local services to prevent and reduce serious violence.¹³ We will support

¹¹ See: [Key performance indicators for youth justice services - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/key-performance-indicators-for-youth-justice-services). Available at: www.gov.uk/guidance/key-performance-indicators-for-youth-justice-services

¹² See: [Standards for children in the youth justice system - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-standards-for-youth-justice-services). Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-standards-for-youth-justice-services

¹³ See: [Serious Violence Duty - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-duty/serious-violence-duty-accessible#chapter-2-planning-and-collaboration). Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-duty/serious-violence-duty-accessible#chapter-2-planning-and-collaboration

improvements to the response for children involved in violent crime by ensuring that: intelligence is shared appropriately; those involved are safeguarded; data about incidents is collected and published; and learning from research into incidents involving children is analysed and shared.

Improving youth justice services' support to victims of crime

We will work with victim support organisations to identify and share positive practice; monitor annual youth justice plans to ensure all youth justice services provide for young victims, including the use of restorative justice where it is an appropriate response; and promote engagement with local communities and victims on development of local youth justice services.

Providing for children during the time that they are in custody and when they leave

We will seek to ensure that constructive resettlement is the basis for planning transition of children from youth custody, whether they are on remand or sentenced; and options for accommodation placements are available if they are returning to the community.

Supporting workforce development

Adoption of Child First is most effective when people understand how it applies to their role. We will offer support to organisations working in the youth justice system so that any new training for their staff reflects the principles of Child First.

2. Focussing on addressing persistent racial disparities across the youth justice system

The Youth Justice Board is committed to recognising and addressing inequality and the children who are involved with the youth justice system reflect a range of social inequalities. There is over-representation of children in care, children living in poverty, those with neurodivergent conditions or speech and language difficulties, and those who have experienced trauma. However, the most persistent and significant overrepresentation is children from minoritised racial communities.

In his 2017 report, David Lammy¹⁴ identified that successes in the evolution of the youth justice system over the previous 20 years as seen in falls in the numbers of children and young people offending, reoffending and going to custody, had not been experienced

¹⁴ See: The Lammy Review - GOV.UK. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/lammy-review-final-report

equally by children and young people from minority ethnic groups, and that this was one of his biggest concerns.

Despite the increased commitment and action to address this in subsequent years, racial disparities continue to damage the lives of children and young people and the communities where they live. This is unacceptable and we are determined to take action.

Over the next three years, we will seek to reduce racial disparities in the youth justice system by:

Identifying and informing stakeholders about racial disparities in youth justice processes and outcomes

This will include identifying and publishing regular statistics and analysis to enable identification of disparities, so that targeted action can be taken to reduce incidence of inequality.

Ensuring equitable outcomes and access to services for all children, irrespective of their protected characteristics

We will work with organisations throughout the youth justice system to ensure that all outcomes, including referrals to diversion and prevention programmes and use of remand and custody, are applied fairly and without prejudice to children from minority ethnic groups.

Enabling effective action to reduce disparities

We will work with local services, experts and people with relevant lived experience to identify action that works in reducing disparities. Subject to ministerial agreement, we will make targeted investments to develop effective approaches.

Championing inclusion and becoming an anti-racist organisation

This will include implementing the action plan developed by our internal Equity, Diversity and Inclusion group.

3. Influencing development of policy and practice to advance adoption of Child First throughout the youth justice system

Our unique, independent position enables us to support and influence change to improve the lives of children who are involved (or at risk of being involved) in the youth justice system.

The Youth Justice Board will use our understanding of evidence and insight gathered from our oversight of local youth justice services to provide expert advice to ministers and partners across government and advise, influence and engage organisations which work with children.

By promoting the evidence which underpins the Child First approach, we will work with others to help them apply effective practice across the youth justice system, from policing through to our courts and to custody and beyond.

In support of this ambition, we will:

Review our standards for children in the youth justice system

This will ensure that the standards which apply to organisations operating across the youth justice system reflect the most up-to-date evidence.

Understand and develop measures of positive child outcomes

We will undertake a review into how children's needs, progress and measures of success are assessed, to develop a consistent model for organisations operating throughout the youth justice system.

In addition, there are parts of the youth justice system where the Youth Justice Board does not lead on implementing change, but where our role is to provide advice and support to those who do.

Over the lifespan of this strategic plan, we believe there will be benefits for children if lead agencies and departments focus on the following:

Improving the court experience and outcomes for children

Whether children are appearing as a defendant, witness or victim, they will have a much-improved experience at court if they understand what is happening and are given a voice. We will support the Ministry of Justice, HM Courts and Tribunals Service, the legal profession, judiciary and others in developing youth courts which have a more constructive and inclusive approach, with a focus on resolving problems.

Creating models of child custody which are care-focused and promote a pro-social identity

We look forward to the opening of the new Secure School in 2024 as an important next step in the transition to more care-focussed secure accommodation for children, but levels of violence and self-harm in parts of the current youth secure estate are too high. We will continue to advise the Ministry of Justice and Youth Custody Service in making the changes needed to implement a Child First model in youth custody.

Recognising the vital role of education settings to identify and support children who are at risk of becoming involved in the youth justice system

Education which meets the needs of children can equip them with the skills they need to develop a pro-social identity, participate in society and access opportunities for a positive future. We support the development of education practice and services which reflect the needs of children who are at risk of contact with youth justice services.

Success measures

Over the next three years, we are committed to use our role to support improvements that increase children's positive outcomes, prevent offending and build safer communities. We will draw on a range of different data, evidence and independent judgements to help us understand whether we are achieving our mission.

Support improvement throughout the youth justice system and in the provision of local youth justice services

1. **Inspections:** improvement in the outcomes of independent assessments conducted by HM Inspectorate of Probation.
2. **Key Performance Indicators:** the data will show continuous improvement across key performance indicators.
3. **Outcome measures:** there will be reductions in youth justice outcome measures including first time entrants, custody rates and reoffending.
4. **Disproportionality:** data will show reduced disproportionality and inequality across youth justice processes and outcomes.
5. **Targeted funding:** independent audit will assess that targeted funding to support pilot activity offers value for money.

Inform the public, practitioners and policy makers about the operation of the youth justice system

6. **Oversight:** Government Internal Audit Agency analysis of outcomes from oversight assessments, recommendations from HM Inspectorate of Probation inspection outcomes and self-assessments show that oversight is effective.
7. **Data and research:** commissioning formal survey and focus group feedback will ensure that our data, research and insight materials meet the needs of users.

Influence practitioners and policy makers to apply the Child First approach in delivering positive outcomes for children

8. **Value for money:** ongoing evidence from the Government Internal Audit Agency and the National Audit Office identifies that we are effective in managing resources allocated by the core department, and that we are continuing to meet the outcomes set out in this strategy.
9. **Risk:** our goal is for the Youth Justice Board to be assessed as 'low risk' to the work of the Ministry of Justice by the Public Bodies Centre of Expertise and to maintain that assessment.
10. **Quality of advice:** independent audit of the provision of advice shows that this is effective, and case studies illustrate how advice translates into impact on the youth justice system.

A more impactful Youth Justice Board

Realising our vision and delivering the objectives in this strategy will require the Youth Justice Board to adapt and change.

We recognise that we need to deliver in an environment in which public money will be scarce throughout the three-year period of this strategy. To enable us to continue to deliver our vision, we will seek to become more efficient, inclusive and effective, as well as continuing to be transparent and accountable.

An efficient Youth Justice Board

In the challenging economic climate, all public services and public bodies including the Youth Justice Board must ensure that they reduce costs and deliver value for money.

An inclusive Youth Justice Board

We will continue to strive to be an inclusive organisation, making sure that our policies and decisions are fair and impartial and do not adversely impact anyone, including those with characteristics protected under the Equality Act.

An effective Youth Justice Board

If we are to be effective, we will need to utilise the combined skills and expertise of our Board members and executive team to provide leadership, strategic direction, advocacy and independent scrutiny of the youth justice system.

In delivering this strategy, we will promote excellence and strive to continue to be an exemplary public sector organisation and employer. We will review the skills, knowledge and behaviours required by our staff to deliver the objectives in this strategic plan and focus our learning and development offer to support our people excel in these areas.

We need to ensure we can attract and retain the talent we need, while we continue to ensure that we meet the requirements of the Civil Service recruitment protocols. We will review and embed a new set of core values to ensure that we describe the standards of behaviour needed from our staff to achieve the very best for each other and the communities we serve.

A transparent and accountable Youth Justice Board

As an organisation committed to evidence and one that plays a role in oversight, we welcome outside scrutiny of our own operations and seek to be as transparent as possible.

The Secretary of State for Justice is accountable to Parliament for the performance of the Youth Justice Board, and for appointing board members.

The Youth Justice Board publishes two planning documents: an annual Business Plan and a three-year Strategic Plan – as well as an Annual Report and Account which sets out our audited accounts and details of progress and delivery against our Business Plan objectives.

Our ongoing performance is formally reviewed by the Ministry of Justice via quarterly business assurance meetings, chaired by the Head of the Public Bodies Centre of Expertise in the Ministry of Justice and attended by the Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Board. These meetings focus on our performance, risk, and finance to provide assurance that the Youth Justice Board is functioning efficiently and effectively.

The Ministry of Justice also monitors our performance through day-to-day partnership with the Youth Justice Policy Unit and attendance at our quarterly Finance, Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee meetings. The Government Internal Audit Agency provides further external oversight and their reviews give us assurance that our processes are doing what they should be doing.

Youth Justice Board / Bwrdd Cyflawnder Ieuenctid

Clive House
70 Petty France
London
SW1H 9EX

Welsh Government Buildings
Llys-y-ddraig
Penllergaer Business Park
Penllergaer
Swansea
SA4 9N

YJB.Enquiries@yjb.gov.uk