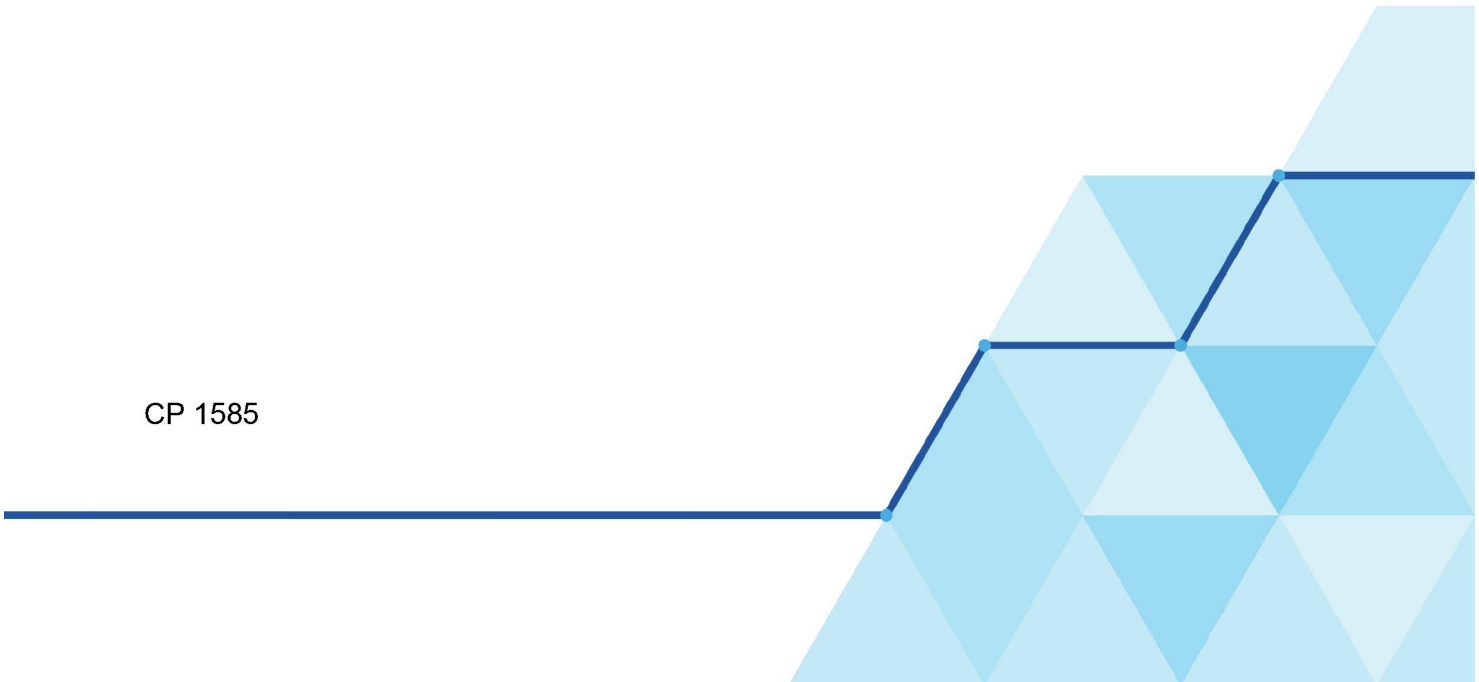
Ministry of Justice

Cutting Youth Crime. Changing Young Lives.

The youth justice system reform and delivery plan



CP 1585



Government of the United Kingdom

Ministry of Justice

Cutting Youth Crime.
Changing Young Lives.

The youth justice system reform and delivery plan

Presented to Parliament by the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice by Command of His Majesty

May 2026

CP 1585

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Foreword



Most children in our youth justice system begin their journey into crime long before they reach the courtroom or come to the attention of the police. Their lives have often been shaped by instability, trauma and neglect – the kind of childhood most of us could barely imagine.

Some grow up surrounded by violence, addiction and abuse. Others are passed around children's homes or foster care placements, never staying in one place long enough for the stability they need to get on in life, let alone the love and care that would enable them to really thrive. All are factors which make them far more likely to end up in the justice system.

As a young boy growing up in Tottenham in the 1980s, I saw too many young people – often Black boys like me – take their first steps towards trouble. Many were pulled towards violence and criminality without anyone stepping in to change their path. By the time the State noticed them, it was already too late.

When we fail to intervene early enough, the consequences can be devastating – not only for children, but for victims and entire communities. Around eighty per cent of prolific adult offenders first entered the justice system as children.

If we want fewer adult offenders, and fewer victims, we must intervene earlier and more effectively – support children before risks escalate, or signs of harm or offending first emerge.

Over the past two decades, we have seen real progress. Fewer children are entering the justice system and the number in custody has fallen. But that also means the children who remain in the system today are often the most vulnerable, with the most complex needs.

At the same time, the risks children face have changed dramatically. Today's children are growing up in a world of online exploitation, criminal grooming through social media, and extremist content spreading at terrifying speed. Yet too often, the system has struggled to keep pace.

Opportunities to intervene are missed. Agencies responsible for safeguarding and preventing harm do not consistently share information. Children fall through the cracks between services, while risks escalate and responsibility becomes blurred.

The lessons emerging from the Southport Inquiry – following the tragic murders of three young children by a violent 17-year-old known to agencies – are a sobering reminder of what can happen when systems are not sufficiently coordinated or decisive in the face of escalating concerns.

We must learn those lessons – and this government is determined to act.

This White Paper represents once-in-a-generation reform of youth justice in England and Wales. It sets a new direction: modernising the system for today's risks, intervening earlier, reducing unnecessary use of custody, all with a relentless focus on protecting the public.

Our goal is clear: fewer children being drawn into crime, fewer victims, and safer streets.

We are driven by a clear principle: believing in a child's capacity to turn their life around. But this should never mean ignoring harmful behaviour or failing to act when risks emerge. Not criminalising children unnecessarily must never mean not intervening.

Our approach is rooted in what works. Evidence shows that relying too heavily on custody once behaviour has escalated creates more adult offenders, more crime and more victims. More than two-thirds of children released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months go on to reoffend within a year.

By contrast, intervening early, building trusted relationships with professionals, strengthening families, improving school attendance and tackling the causes of offending all reduce reoffending and cut crime.

That is why this government will intervene earlier – and more effectively. Our Turnaround programme, which supports children on the cusp of offending, will now receive guaranteed funding of £15.4 million a year for the next three years. The findings are encouraging with low levels of offending among children who complete the programme.

But where offending does happen, the response must be tough and decisive. Genuine diversion means gripping problem behaviour early, addressing root causes, and reducing the likelihood that future victims will be created.

That is why we will fundamentally reform out-of-court resolutions so they genuinely address problem behaviour, and introduce new Youth Intervention Courts – courts designed to address the causes of criminal behaviour and break the cycle of repeat offending.

Custody will always be necessary for the most serious and high-risk children – but it must remain a last resort. As it stands, we are seeing an overuse of remand and short custodial sentences, which do little more than upend children's lives – disrupting education and severing family ties. This entrenches offending, rather than turning lives around.

That is why we are setting an ambition to reduce the number of children remanded to custody by 25 per cent, backed by £5 million for community placements and enhanced bail support. We are also considering wider reform to move away from ineffective short custodial sentences for children, by raising the minimum term for Detention and Training Orders, while ensuring custody remains available for the most dangerous offenders.

Alongside this, we will strengthen parenting orders, so there are real consequences for parents and carers who wilfully fail to support efforts to address their children's behaviour.

We will also, crucially, look again at the childhood criminal records regime, so that children who make mistakes, but go on to turn their lives around, are not condemned to carry those mistakes for the rest of their lives. Too many young people are being locked out of education, employment and other opportunities long after they have changed course. That is not in their interests, and it is not in the public interest either. We will publish detailed proposals for reform by the end of the year.

And we will carefully consider whether the age of criminal responsibility – currently set at just 10-years old – still reflects modern understanding of childhood, vulnerability and development in today's society.

We will also pursue the removal of serious violent and sexual foreign national youth offenders where it is safe to do so, whatever their age, and the Home Office have introduced legislation to bring in a new Youth Diversion Order to tackle the increasing number of young people being brought into the criminal justice system for terrorism offences, allowing agencies to intervene before risks escalate.

We are also fundamentally reforming the Youth Justice Board, which will focus on driving the continuous improvement of youth justice services. We are transferring key functions of the board into the Ministry of Justice to ensure ministers are fully accountable for how the system performs.

This White Paper also addresses the inequalities that continue to shape outcomes across youth justice. Children with care experience remain dramatically overrepresented. So too do Black boys – both in custody but also as victims of serious violence themselves. We cannot build a fair or effective youth justice system while ignoring the persistent racial disproportionality within it, including the continued 'adultification' of Black children compared with their white peers. Taken together, our reforms represent a meaningful step towards addressing this disproportionality by making the system fairer, more consistent, and preventing escalation into offending.

Ultimately, the strongest youth justice systems are those that create the fewest future victims. This is not a choice between punishment and rehabilitation, or between being "tough" or "soft" on crime. It is about what works: protecting the public, cutting reoffending,

and stopping vulnerable children – so often victims themselves – from becoming tomorrow's dangerous adult offenders.

This government will do whatever it takes to give more children the chance of a better future, and crucially, to keep the British public safe.

SIGNATURE

The Rt Hon. David Lammy MP

Deputy Prime Minister, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice

Executive summary

The case for change and wider cross-system challenges

i. Children growing up in England and Wales today are doing so in a world that is profoundly different from that of previous generations. Digital technology and social media can pose new risks. Mental health is a growing concern. And the effects of the pandemic, with its impact on education and poverty, are still being felt. Despite these challenges, the majority of our children thrive and do well.

ii. Against this backdrop, the youth justice system is now working with a smaller but increasingly complex cohort of children, many of whom face multiple vulnerabilities. Patterns of offending are also evolving. Yet the systems, structures and services designed for an earlier era have not always kept pace with these changes. This limits the system's ability to intervene early, reduce offending and protect the public.

iii. Too many lives are lost, too many lives are ruined, and too many communities, high streets and businesses are blighted by crime, disorder and offending committed by children.

iv. In preventing and tackling this behaviour, the system must also ensure that all children are treated fairly and consistently. At each stage, we see differences in outcomes for different groups. Children in care, and Black and Mixed Heritage boys, for example, experience unacceptable disparities – this plan sets out how we will address this.

v. This government is clear in its approach. The right response depends on the circumstances. There is strong evidence that unnecessary criminalisation of children is not effective in the long term. But at the same time, **avoiding criminalisation does not mean failing to intervene**. Where behaviour causes harm, or where offending becomes persistent, timely, proportionate and effective intervention is essential to protect the public and to support lasting change. This White Paper sets out how the government will reform the youth justice system to do more of this effective early intervention.

Intervening early, changing trajectories before children commit crime

vi. We will drive the youth justice system to be more focused on intervening early. We are continuing to invest in the effective **Turnaround programme**, and will also look at how it and other government programmes can join-up to support children on the cusp of offending.

vii. We will tackle the **over-criminalisation of children in care and care leavers**, developing and publishing a more ambitious refreshed national protocol in England in the coming months. We will also deliver on our manifesto commitment to create a new criminal offence of **child criminal exploitation**, as well as introducing child criminal exploitation prevention orders to place conditions on adults that will protect vulnerable children from the grooming that leads them into criminality.

Right response, right time

viii. The current approach to diversion is falling short, and failing to deliver the consistent, effective intervention that children need, and that victims and communities deserve. We want to see a more robust and more consistent approach, and greater focus on addressing children's underlying needs. We will therefore set out our plans for a **fundamental reform of the youth out-of-court resolution framework**, exploring issues such as the question of whether and how children are currently required to admit guilt.

ix. Children who appear in front of the youth court today are typically accused of serious crimes and present with complex needs, but the system supporting them has not kept up with those changes. We will (aided by an expert adviser, David Ormerod) take a **fundamental look at the function and purpose of criminal courts for children**, reporting by August 2027. Meanwhile, we are working with the legal sector to develop **specialist training requirements** for lawyers representing children, and we will pilot **Youth Intervention Courts** for children to test a brand new, problem-solving model that we anticipate will be better suited to reduce reoffending rates.

x. Detaining children in custody whilst awaiting serious charges is critical for public protection and justice. However, too many children are held in **custodial remand** unnecessarily – with poor outcomes for taxpayers, victims and the children. Whilst always ensuring public protection, we will lead efforts to reduce this population by 25% this Parliament by reforming funding arrangements, expanding investment in robust community alternatives, and introducing legislation.

xi. The **youth sentencing framework** has not, like much of the system, kept up with changes around it. We will modernise the framework, prioritising rehabilitation throughout. Children will rightly continue to be sentenced to custody – public safety requires this. But we will explore how we might safely reduce the number of short custodial sentences, as well as strengthening community sentences, particularly for first-time offenders. We will also ensure that **parents and carers who wilfully do not comply with court orders about their children's behaviour face more meaningful consequences**.

xii. The government will carefully consider the Bar Council's review about whether the **age of criminal responsibility** remains appropriate.

xiii. Public protection is a vital part of the criminal records regime, particularly for keeping children and vulnerable adults safe. It should also reflect that children are not fully developed, and offending committed when young should be treated differently. The government will therefore set out plans for **a targeted, proportionate package of potential reforms for the childhood criminal records regime** by the end of the year.

Strengthening youth justice services

xiv. Expert, local, multi-agency youth justice services are, and will remain, a critical part of the youth justice system. They perform a vital role, and performance is generally strong. However, youth justice services need more stable and joined-up funding and oversight arrangements, and to be freed from unnecessary bureaucracy. Meanwhile, children, victims and taxpayers deserve more consistent, effective performance to reduce the offending and reoffending committed by children. We will, in the coming months, set out what a new approach to youth justice service oversight could look like from 2027/28, and our plans for more effective long-term funding arrangements.

xv. To support greater innovation across youth justice services, we will introduce a **new Youth Justice Innovation Fund, worth at least £1.5m over 2027/28 and 2028/29,** and we welcome youth justice services' and others' views about the proposed initial areas of focus.

xvi. We will explore how **new technology can support modernisation of the youth justice system**. We will consider how AI-enabled transcription and productivity tools can reduce the administrative burden on frontline staff, and we will draw on expertise from our new Advisory Panel about the potential role of preventative analytics to support earlier identification and intervention.

xvii. The UK and Welsh Governments share a commitment to establishing **a clearer and bigger role for the Welsh Government in the delivery of the youth justice system**. This will begin with the devolution of specific funding programmes, and both governments will discuss potentially going further still.

Secure custodial establishments that protect the public and support rehabilitation

xviii. The focus of this White Paper is the wider youth justice system rather than the youth custody estate. However, we see some of the same challenges – of arrangements that have not kept up with the changes around it – also materialising in custody. The number of children in custody has fallen dramatically over the past two decades, from more than 3,000 to fewer than 400 at any one time. However, many of those children (largely in custody for violent offences) are held in environments that are not currently capable of rehabilitating them. **We will therefore consider whether the legislation governing youth custodial settings remains fit for purpose**.

xix. The government aims to move away from large custodial institutions (like Young Offender Institutions) towards smaller, more rehabilitative settings. This is a significant long-term goal and the youth custody estate requires its own detailed reform and delivery plan, which meets the seriousness of both the challenges it currently faces and the cohorts it holds.

xx. **We therefore will publish a Youth Custody Transformation Plan in autumn 2026** about our plans for doing this. This will focus both on the staff working in the estate, including how we best ensure the workforce is diverse and able to deliver safe and effective provision, as well as on the services within it – how children are safeguarded, the opportunities they can access and how we will drive down reoffending. Finally, the plan will also detail how we intend to transition the youth custody estate from large, centralised sites to a network of smaller, regionally distributed, therapeutic settings over the next ten years.

Chapter 1: The case for change

1.1. At its core, this White Paper is about safety and protecting people from harm. That means protecting victims, protecting the public, and protecting children themselves – from being harmed and from causing serious harm to others. A system that intervenes too late, acts inconsistently, or avoids confronting serious risk, is a system that fails everyone.

1.2. This government is clear that, with the right support at the right time, most children who offend can turn their lives around. At the same time, the government is clear that a youth justice system focused on rehabilitation must also be a system that takes safety seriously and responds firmly. That does not only apply to the most serious individual offences, but also to patterns of persistent and prolific offending – the acquisitive crime that harms businesses, the anti-social behaviour that causes misery.

1.3. A small number of children present very serious risks. Where those risks are not identified, shared or acted on early enough, the consequences can be devastating. The tragic events at Southport highlighted the grave consequences that can occur when the system fails to intervene effectively.

1.4. A culture change is needed across the youth justice system and wider children's services. Preventing serious harm requires more than good intentions or isolated interventions. It requires professional curiosity, ownership of risk, and a willingness to challenge where practice falls short. Children must be treated as children. But the adults and professionals working with them must be held to high standards, with clear expectations about interventions and accountability when opportunities to act are missed.

1.5. Protecting, promoting and upholding the rights of children are vital in our civilised and compassionate society. But this cannot and must not be elevated far above others' right to live a life free from the misery of anti-social behaviour, the lifelong consequences of serious injury, or worse. It is often forgotten that the victims of children's offending are, very frequently, other children.[1] The government's response to the Southport Inquiry will set out wider plans to ensure we strike the right balance in future. Anything less is a disservice to our children, to victims and to the communities the system exists to protect.

[1] Nature of crime tables: children aged 10 to 15 years – Office for National Statistics

Section 1: Growing up in today's society

1.6. Children growing up in England and Wales today are doing so in a world that is profoundly different from that of previous generations.

1.7. Digital technology and social media now play a central role in young people's lives. While online spaces can offer connection, creativity and opportunity, they also expose children to risks at an unprecedented scale and intensity. Many children are now regularly encountering harmful content online, including material that glorifies violence and criminality, normalises misogyny, or promotes distorted ideas about status and identity. For some children – including many boys and young men who may already feel marginalised or disconnected – these online pressures can spill quickly into the real world, shaping attitudes, behaviour and peer dynamics in ways that adults and public services are still learning to navigate.

1.8. These digital pressures sit alongside the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Periods of isolation, disrupted education, and reduced access to services have left many children with setbacks in learning, social development and emotional resilience. For those already facing poverty, family instability or with special educational needs, the pandemic often compounded existing challenges.

1.9. At the same time, there is growing recognition of a mental health and wellbeing crisis among children, with many children experiencing challenges including anxiety, depression and the impacts of trauma, alongside greater awareness and identification of neurodiversity. These needs are placing significant and growing pressures on many families, schools and frontline services – and when timely, early support is not available, difficulties can intensify. Unmet needs can heighten vulnerability or compound existing risk factors, including exclusion from school, exploitation and violence.

1.10. For some boys and young men in particular, these challenges can play out against a backdrop of uncertainty about identity, belonging and purpose. Many grow up with limited access to positive male role models, inconsistent boundaries, or narratives that frame masculinity in narrow and harmful ways. In some communities, violence, status and fear have become currencies of respect. Reinforced by online culture, this can contribute to the persistence of serious violence, including knife crime, and to harmful attitudes towards women and girls at an increasingly early age.

1.11. Most children are able to successfully navigate these pressures, with support from their families, peers, schools and communities. But for a minority, modern influences and disadvantage can compound – persistent online harms, social isolation, unmet mental health needs, family instability, poverty, exposure to

violence, abuse or exploitation – risking a dangerous trajectory which can escalate into offending.

1.12. None of this is to excuse crime and disorder committed by children. But it is against this backdrop that we must examine how the state identifies these children and offers them support. Not just for their sake, but to protect others (including other children) from harm and crime.

Section 2: Supporting today's vulnerable teens

1.13. The system inherited by the government does not work as effectively as it should in identifying and supporting that minority of children who struggle the most with the above challenges.

1.14. Despite hard work from committed staff and vast sums of taxpayers' money being spent, the system is not as effective or as efficient as it should be. Too many children fall through the cracks, and too much time and energy is spent on process and bureaucracy rather than actually working with children.

1.15. This White Paper sets out the government's plan for transformation of these wider systems in Chapter 2. This is a long-term goal – one that will take years to be fully implemented. And even when it comes into force, and we have improved how the state identifies and supports these 'at risk' young people, the government is realistic – children will still commit crime. As such, this White Paper sets out a bold focused, transformative but realistic plan for how we will reform the youth justice system over this Parliament.

Section 3: Today's youth justice system

1.16. The youth justice system in England and Wales is intentionally distinct from the adult system, with a unique principal aim 'to prevent offending by children and young persons.'[2] At its best, the youth justice system brings together multi-disciplinary agencies to understand a child's educational, health and social needs, putting the necessary support and interventions in place to address harmful behaviour and prevent future offending.

1.17. Children who first come to police attention may be diverted from court altogether, through community-based responses that focus on repairing harm and tackling the reasons for their behaviour. When cases do progress, they are typically heard in

[2] Crime and Disorder Act 1998

youth courts, where specialist magistrates and judges apply a separate legal framework that emphasises rehabilitation and proportionality. Children who are given a community sentence are supported by their local youth justice service – multi-disciplinary local authority teams bringing together police, health, education and social care professionals. When custody is used, children can be held in a range of secure sites – Young Offender Institutions, Secure Children's Homes, the Secure Training Centre or the Secure School.

Historical and emerging trends

1.18. The last two decades have seen significant reductions in youth offending. In 2009/10, almost 107,000 children were cautioned or sentenced.[3] By 2024/25, this figure had fallen by around 88% to 13,000,[4] driven by sustained efforts to improve early intervention and diversion, and reduce unnecessary criminalisation. A similar transformation has taken place in youth custody. In 2003/04, around 2,800 children were detained at any given time;[5] today the figure is below 400 – over an 85% reduction.[6]

1.19. The increased use of targeted early intervention, diversion and community alternatives to custody has reshaped youth justice service caseloads. Youth justice services now work with a smaller cohort of children with highly complex needs, often with more entrenched patterns of harmful behaviour and more serious offence histories. Alongside this, youth justice practitioners have become increasingly skilled at assessing risk and supporting children safely in the community. Many youth justice services have shifted resources upstream, working with children on the cusp of offending to prevent escalation and reduce the likelihood of them entering the formal system at all. While overall volumes of proven offending by children have reduced, we continue to see frequent media reports of children committing the most serious crimes, and knife crime is one of the most commonly raised concerns among young people.[7] This government has therefore set out a plan to halve knife crime by 2034. Whilst 2024/25 saw the number of teenage homicide victims fall dramatically to the lowest level since 2012/13, recent peaks have been over double those seen in 2012/13.[8] Despite a dramatic fall in sharp instrument teenage homicides in the last year, in around two-thirds (65%) of teenage homicides, the method of killing was with a knife or sharp instrument,

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3 Youth Justice Statistics: 2019 to 2020 (2021) – GOV.UK

4 Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

5 Youth Justice Statistics: 2019 to 2020 (2021) – GOV.UK

6 Youth custody data (2026) – GOV.UK

7 Inside the mind of a 16-year-old (2025)

8 The number of homicides of young people tend to be volatile from year to year and so recent trends should be interpreted with caution.

compared with 39% for all homicide victims over the same period.[9] Despite recent improvements, hospital admissions for children with knife injuries are 33% higher than ten years ago, and more than 400 children were admitted in 2024/25 alone.[10] These harms are often linked to exploitation, or escalation of conflict online and locally concentrated patterns of violence.

1.20. At the same time, we are seeing a concerning rise in harmful sexual behaviour, alongside a broader increase in harmful online content. While making up a relatively small proportion of youth crime, the volume of proven sexual offences committed by children has increased for the third year in a row (rising by 6% in the latest year).[11]

1.21. And, while small in number, cases involving extremism, radicalisation and violence-fixation are becoming increasingly prevalent among children. Youth justice services may increasingly need to support children who display ideologically-motivated behaviour, consume extremist or hate-based material online, or demonstrate obsessive interest in weapons and mass-harm narratives.

1.22. Anti-social behaviour committed by children continues to blight too many people's lives. Too many neighbourhoods and communities have been expected to simply put up with children's unruly and disruptive behaviour. This White Paper sets out the action we are taking to ensure that children are given support and productive alternatives to help them desist from anti-social behaviour, or face the consequences if they do not.

Evidence base for effective youth justice practice

1.23. The evidence underpinning effective youth justice is clear and consistent. Across academic research, inspections, practice insights and international comparisons, a clear picture emerges – children's outcomes improve when responses are timely, proportionate, holistic and involve effective multi-agency working.

1.24. The right response in the right circumstances is key. There is clear evidence that over-criminalisation of children is not effective in the long-term – charging a child, taking them to youth court or detaining them in custody all have (and will have) a vital role to uphold justice and protect the public. But there are many circumstances where diversion out of the criminal justice system, with proportionate intervention, is more efficient and effective – through working with that child, addressing the issues

9 Homicide in England and Wales – Office for National Statistics

10 Youth Knife Crime | Core Indicators | Youth Endowment Fund

11 Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

that caused them to commit crime in the first place, we can help them turn their back on crime for good.

1.25. But, crucially, **not criminalising children does not mean failing to intervene, and we must remain alert to the risk of perverse incentives created by an overly narrow focus on reducing first-time entrants to the youth justice system. Benign neglect, however well-intentioned, is still neglect.** This is particularly true where children offend repeatedly. Failing to intervene decisively in cases of persistent offending risks allowing harm to escalate, undermining safety for victims and communities, and storing up more serious problems for the future.

1.26. Intervention is most effective when it is community-based, holistic, integrated and genuinely multi-agency, with partners working together to address the underlying factors driving harmful behaviour such as unmet needs, trauma, family circumstances or exploitation. No single agency can address this breadth of need alone; effective support relies on clear referral pathways, shared responsibility and aligned practice across early help and children's social care, education, health, youth justice and the voluntary sector. Positive and stable relationships with trusted and skilled practitioners across this wider network are crucial – these help children feel safe, regulate their emotions and develop a more pro-social identity.

Section 4: Why youth justice reform is needed now

1.27. The youth justice system of today is dealing with a smaller but markedly more complex cohort of children, many of whom are involved in serious violence or have prolific offending histories. This is also a vulnerable cohort, and many children entering the system have long histories of adversity. Many are also victims and survivors themselves – of violence, criminal exploitation, coercion or grooming – and the system is increasingly required to respond to this dual profile of vulnerability and risk.

1.28. At the same time, incidents of serious violence and knife crime remain too high, and emerging trends, such as rising numbers of children presenting with harmful or extremist attitudes and behaviour, frequently exacerbated by online influences, are putting new pressures on local youth justice services. The system must adapt to respond earlier, more decisively and more consistently to prevent escalation into serious harm.

1.29. Reform of the youth justice system is essential to delivering this government's wider mission to cut crime and strengthen public safety. The evidence is clear that the most effective way to reduce crime in the long term is to intervene early and effectively. We know that the majority of prolific adult offenders began offending in

childhood, and failures to respond firmly or constructively at this stage allow harm to escalate and become entrenched. Youth justice reform is not separate from wider criminal justice reform – it is a core part of delivering a system that protects the public, supports victims and cuts crime.

1.30. The youth justice system must be one that operates fairly and consistently. However, long-standing patterns of inequality continue to shape the experiences and outcomes of children across the youth justice system. While overall numbers in the system have fallen sharply over the past two decades, not all groups have benefitted equally. This has caused disproportionality – the overrepresentation of certain groups compared to their share of the general youth population – to become more pronounced.

1.31. Boys make up the vast majority of children in the youth justice system. Many of these boys – including many White working-class boys – have grown up facing poverty and disadvantage, and their early lives have been marked by instability, unmet needs, exclusion from school and exposure to violence or exploitation.

1.32. Children from ethnic minority backgrounds – and Black boys in particular – continue to be disproportionately represented at almost every stage of the system. Black children, who make up just 6% of the 10-17 population,[12] represent 9% of arrests, 12% of sentences and cautions, 26% of custodial remands and 22% of the youth custody population.[13] Children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds are also overrepresented across the system, and we are seeing a rise in the overrepresentation of Mixed-heritage children. Biases, including adultification bias (where Black children in particular are perceived as older, less vulnerable and more culpable than their peers) at key decision-making points is likely to contribute to this overrepresentation as children move through the system.

1.33. Racial disproportionality is not only an issue of system contact, but an issue of safety. Black young people are around six times more likely to be victims of homicide than their peers.[14] Some young people face a far greater risk of the most serious harm, and that is not acceptable.

1.34. Other groups are also significantly overrepresented in the youth justice system, including children with special educational needs or disabilities / additional learning needs (SEND/ALN) and care-experienced children.[15] And while girls make up a

[12] Ethnic group by age and sex in England and Wales (2023) – Office for National Statistics

[13] Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[14] Racial Disproportionality YEF (2025)

[15] Education, children's social care and offending Descriptive Statistics (2022) – MoJ & DfE

small proportion of the youth justice cohort (14%),[16] those who do enter the system often present with highly complex needs linked to trauma, exploitation and self-harm – yet the system is largely designed and provision shaped around the needs of boys. Many children in the youth justice system belong to more than one over-represented group – this can compound disadvantage and calls for a response which effectively reflects this intersectionality.

1.35. This increased concentration of complex needs and persistent disparities exist within a system whose structures have not kept pace with modern demands. Data systems are outdated, fragmented and often cannot communicate with one another – this means that key information about a child's risk, safety, education or mental health can sit across multiple agencies without a unified view, hindering early identification of escalating risk, and slowing case progression. Funding arrangements compound challenges – annual grant cycles and variable partner contributions create instability, curb long-term planning and commissioning, and make it difficult to build and retain the skilled, multi-disciplinary workforce needed to respond to today's challenges.

1.36. Taken together, these pressures – a highly complex cohort, entrenched inequalities, emerging trends of serious violence and harm, and outdated system infrastructure – make clear that reform is needed now. **The youth justice system must be equipped to intervene earlier, respond more consistently, and provide high-quality support that reflects the realities facing this cohort of children today. Victims and communities need and deserve this transformation.**

[16] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

Chapter 2: Intervening early, changing trajectories

What this government has already done:

Invested in upstream programmes across education, health, employment and children's social care, which will help address drivers of youth offending.

Delivering on the manifesto commitment to establish a Young Futures programme, identifying and supporting vulnerable young people through Young Futures Panels in more than 50 local areas and launching the first eight Young Futures Hubs in areas of high crime.

Extended the successful Turnaround programme, investing over £15 million per year over the next three years to support at least 12,000 children on the cusp of offending away from criminality.

Delivered the manifesto commitment to introduce a new criminal offence of Child Criminal Exploitation and gone further by introducing civil orders to disrupt adults who exploit children into criminality at an earlier stage.

Strengthened the response when a child is found carrying a knife, ensuring there are timely, multi-agency, evidence-based and robust mandatory interventions.

What this government will do:

Publish an ambitious refreshed 'protocol' this year to reduce the criminalisation of children in care and care leavers in England.

Open 50 Young Futures Hubs by the end of this Parliament, bringing together services at community level to increase access to opportunities, improve mental health and wellbeing, and help divert children away from crime.

Introduce the youth diversion order to provide a new risk management tool for the increasing number of children and young people showing signs of involvement in terrorism-related activity, and provide £1.5 million over three years to fund interventions.

Identify children with a parent in prison so that they can be offered timely and effective support to enable them to achieve and thrive.

2.1. Intervening early – well before a child comes into contact with the criminal justice system – is vital to help children to thrive, make positive choices and stay safe, while also reducing crime and improving wider public safety. We know that around

80% of prolific adult offenders began offending as children.[17] That is why early intervention must be active and substantive – timely support for children, when they have greater capacity for change, can play an important role in breaking the cycle of offending and improving broader outcomes for children.

2.2. The cost of late intervention is significant, estimated in 2016 at almost £17 billion across England and Wales.[18] And the evidence is clear that early intervention works. An evaluation of the Supporting Families programme in England – which provided tailored, whole-family support – found positive results including significant reductions in children being convicted and receiving custodial sentences, and delivered cost benefits of £2.28 for every £1 invested.[19] When children and families receive timely support, pressure on public services is reduced.

2.3. The moral case is equally strong. Children are developmentally distinct from adults, they are more vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation, and we know that cognitive, emotional and social maturation continues well into adulthood. Proportionate and timely intervention, which addresses underlying needs, is critical to support children to thrive through adolescence and into adulthood, reducing the likelihood of future criminalisation.

2.4. The prevention landscape in Wales is distinct, because services such as health, education and social care – which are central to early intervention – are devolved to the Welsh Government. Wales sets out its whole-system, trauma-informed, prevention-focused approach in the Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales. The Prevention Framework brings together all services involved in preventing youth offending into a single, joined-up vision for prevention, clarifying the roles of devolved services and partners, and reflecting the distinct youth justice landscape in Wales and its links with welfare, health, and wellbeing services.

Effective, earlier intervention is a necessary shift for the system. No child should be drawn into offending because help arrived too late or the system was too fragmented. This government is strengthening its national leadership on crime prevention to build a more coordinated system that prevents crime long before it occurs – a system that identifies vulnerability early, strengthens the protective foundations around a child, and responds quickly when the first signs of risk emerge.

[17] Prolific Offenders (2019) – GOV.UK

[18] The cost of late intervention: Early Intervention Foundation (2016)

[19] Supporting Families: 2021-22 and beyond (2021) – GOV.UK

Section 1: Tackling upstream causes of crime

2.5. Children's pathways into offending are often shaped by a complex mix of individual, familial, social and structural factors. Experiences of trauma, exclusion from education, domestic abuse, family instability, parental imprisonment or poverty do not determine a child's future, but they can increase vulnerability – particularly where multiple pressures come together.

2.6. This is why a 'prevention-first' approach is central to this government's strategy to tackle youth crime. The best way to reduce crime is to prevent it from happening in the first place, by strengthening the foundations that help children, and ensuring that the right support is available at the right time. Upstream action is more effective, more sustainable and far less costly than responding once harm has occurred.

2.7. Family stability, community support and a children's social care system that protects and supports the most vulnerable – alongside participation in education, training and positive activities – are central to reducing harm and preventing children from being drawn into offending.

2.8. We know that reducing child poverty is central to creating stability for families and strengthening protective foundations. This government's Child Poverty Strategy (2025-2035) aims to achieve this by lifting 550,000 children out of relative low income – projected to deliver the largest reduction in child poverty within a single Parliament. The Child Poverty Strategy for Wales lays out five objectives aimed at contributing towards the eradication of child poverty over the next decade or more.

Children's social care and safeguarding responses

2.9. We are reforming the children's social care system in England so it is effectively set up to protect children and address the most significant drivers of criminality, including investing £2.4 billion in the Families First Partnership (FFP) programme and delivering the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act.

2.10. These reforms are underpinned by the Children's Social Care National Framework and Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance. These shift the focus firmly towards earlier intervention, stability and safeguarding, improving information sharing between agencies and ensuring education providers and childcare settings are fully integrated into multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

2.11. While we are overhauling the children's social care system, we know that children who are care experienced continue to be significantly overrepresented in the youth justice system. Self-reported findings from children surveyed in Young Offender Institutions and the Secure Training Centre in 2024/25 suggested that 65% had at

some point been in local authority care.[20] Experiences of trauma, poverty, and a lack of stable relationships and sense of belonging – often compounded by multiple placement breakdowns and disrupted education – can heighten vulnerability to exploitation and criminalisation.

2.12. But we know that the system also over-criminalises children in care. Behaviour that might be dealt with within a family home can, for a child in care, escalate into police involvement and formal justice responses. At the same time, the instability and isolation that can stem from involvement with children's social care can heighten vulnerability to criminal exploitation. The statistics speak for themselves – 52% of care-experienced young people have been convicted of an offence by aged 24, compared to 13% of people who have never been in care.[21] The consequences are stark – a large proportion of young adults sentenced to custody have experienced social care involvement; more than two in five were 'children in need' and almost one in five had been in care.[22]

2.13. **That is why this government will publish an ambitious, refreshed protocol this year on reducing the overcriminalisation of children in care and care leavers in England.** Building on the 2018 protocol, it will be significantly strengthened, setting out clear expectations for what local agencies should do to safeguard care-experienced children and young people from unnecessary criminalisation, across all care settings. It will also introduce improved scrutiny of outcomes, and address how care experience intersects with other characteristics such as race, disability and gender.

2.14. Alongside this, and subject to legislation, this government will establish the Child Protection Authority (CPA) to strengthen England's child protection system by providing national oversight and helping to ensure that children are not failed by those responsible for keeping them safe. The CPA will play an important role in identifying systemic weaknesses, promoting learning across agencies, and highlighting where action is needed to improve practice, including by helping to identify and address demographic disparities in keeping children safe. These functions are delivered by the National Safeguarding Board and Regional Safeguarding Boards in Wales.

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20 Children in custody 2024-25 (2025) – HM Inspectorate of Prisons

21 The education background of looked-after children who interact with the criminal justice system – Office for National Statistics

22 The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system – Office for National Statistics

2.15. Any child who experiences or is likely to experience significant harm, deserves a child protection response. Working Together to Safeguard Children and Working Together to Safeguard People in Wales are clear that a coordinated, multi-agency approach is required to identify exploitation early and put safeguards in place. This requires shared assessment frameworks, clear joint decision-making protocols, integrated information sharing, and training for professionals to recognise the signs of exploitation.

2.16. Child criminal exploitation is a significant driver of youth offending. Exploited children are victims, whose behaviour often reflects fear, unmet need or adult influence. In response, this government has refreshed the Multi-Agency Practice Principles for responding to child exploitation and extrafamilial harms in England, to strengthen the national approach to tackling child exploitation and other forms of extra-familial harm.

2.17. Legislative reform will also strengthen the system's response. The Crime and Policing Act introduces a **new child criminal exploitation offence to strengthen the tools available to hold perpetrators to account.** This must sit alongside earlier identification of exploitation, timely safeguarding action, and clear routes to intervene where concerns first emerge, so that children are protected before exploitation becomes entrenched. To support this, the Act introduces child criminal exploitation civil preventative orders. These will provide a powerful new tool to disrupt adult perpetrators' exploitative behaviour at an earlier stage, including where the criminal threshold has not yet been met or where prosecution is not possible. They will allow courts to impose proportionate restrictions and requirements on adults who pose a risk of exploiting children, helping to prevent harm and escalation while wider safeguarding and support arrangements are put in place. We will issue statutory guidance to police alongside non-statutory guidance for practitioners to support the implementation of the new offences and improve identification of victims of child criminal exploitation. This guidance will highlight the importance of multi-agency working to support children and raise awareness and understanding of child criminal exploitation with all practitioners.

2.18. County lines are the most violent model of drug supply and a harmful form of child criminal exploitation. This government is investing more than £34 million this year in the County Lines Programme to disrupt exploitative drug dealing gangs and safeguard children being criminally exploited. Since July 2024, the programme has led to more than 3,700 county lines being closed, over 10,100 arrests and the seizure of 1,200 knives. Between July 2024 and December 2025, around 750 children and young people received specialist support and the National County Lines Coordination Centre assess that the number of children involved in county lines has fallen by 17% since 2022/23.

2.19. This sits alongside the government's response to Baroness Casey's National Audit, which includes establishing an Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs to examine systemic, institutional and individual failures, launching a national police operation into group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse, and strengthening the law by creating new offences in the Crime and Policing Act covering rape and other penetrative sexual activity with a child under 16 by an adult and introducing a disregard scheme for convictions and cautions issued to children for on-street 'prostitution'.

2.20. This government is also exploring how we can identify children with a parent in prison sensitively so that they can be offered effective support, in line with the manifesto commitment. This will help to reduce intergenerational harm, improve children's wellbeing and provide children with the support they need to thrive.

Participation and wellbeing

2.21. Keeping children in school, college or training, engaged in learning, is key. It builds their skills, relationships and a sense of belonging and purpose, while also reducing vulnerability to harm and offending. This government is strengthening participation through improved educational engagement, which we know is one of the strongest protective factors against future offending, providing targeted support for children who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), and widening access to safe, enriching activities.

2.22. This government's Every Child Achieving and Thriving Schools White Paper will ensure that more children in England are in school by setting high standards for attendance, while removing barriers, strengthening behaviour support and promoting inclusive practice. Our SEND reforms will ensure children in England receive early, evidence-based support in mainstream settings, so they can stay in education, and achieve and thrive alongside their peers. We will integrate support across health, care and family services to ensure children's needs are identified and addressed as soon as they emerge. This will help reduce preventable exclusion and disengagement, which are consistently linked with a higher risk of offending.[23]

2.23. Economic insecurity and disengagement from education or employment are well-established risk factors for youth offending. This government has invested in Youth Guarantee Trailblazers in England, which are testing innovative approaches to better identify and support young people who are NEET, or who are at risk of becoming NEET. Some Trailblazers focus specifically on young people with complex needs or experience of the youth justice system. Alongside this, the government's National Youth Strategy strengthens protective factors by expanding

[23] Cordis Bright (2024) – Do interventions to prevent school exclusion reduce and/or prevent offending?

access to safe spaces, enriching activities and trusted adults, helping divert children away from harmful behaviours and towards positive opportunities.

2.24. To further reduce the risk of young people becoming NEET, the government is investing in Youth Hubs to provide early, place-based employment support for 16–24-year-olds facing barriers to work, offering tailored employability support, skills development, and access to wider services such as housing, mental health and wellbeing. In March 2026, the government confirmed 80 new Youth Hub locations across England, with plans to expand to over 360 sites across Great Britain over the next three years.

2.25. We know that, across the country, children's mental health needs have been rising – around one in five children now have a probable mental disorder,[24] and many more likely deal with distress or emotional dysregulation that may not meet diagnostic thresholds but may still affect school attendance, relationships and behaviour.

2.26. Whilst the majority of children who experience mental health difficulties will not go on to offend, there are high rates of mental health needs amongst children in the justice system.[25] We know that children can be vulnerable to being drawn into crime when mental health needs intersect with other adversities such as poverty, trauma, school exclusion and unmet SEND. We are therefore improving early identification of mental health needs, access to support and joined-up responses across education, health and community services.

2.27. This government's 10 Year Health Plan for England will accelerate the expansion of mental health support teams in schools and colleges in England, reaching full national coverage by 2029. This will support earlier identification of need and reduce escalation to crisis. In parallel, the government will invest £13 million to pilot enhanced training for staff, enabling teams to better support children with complex needs, including trauma and neurodivergence. Alongside this, new neighbourhood-based multidisciplinary teams for children and young people are being established to provide integrated support and more timely access to specialist advice.

2.28. In addition, this government has confirmed a £7 million funding boost for early support hubs across England, which provide open-access drop-in mental health support for young people. These hubs offer timely, accessible help for a range of mental health challenges, without the need for a referral or GP appointment, and

[24] Mental Health of Children and Young People in England (2023) – NHS England Digital

[25] Assessing the needs of sentenced children in the Youth Justice System – GOV.UK

are expected to deliver around 10,000 additional community-based interventions, helping prevent escalation and reducing pressure on specialist services.

2.29. The NHS England Framework for Integrated Care (Community) vanguards strengthen joint working across health, education, social care and youth justice. They support partners in local systems to better meet the needs of children and young people with complex needs who may be vulnerable to exclusion, exploitation or offending. Now operational in 11 local areas, the vanguards have demonstrated clear benefits including improved outcomes for children and families, preventing escalation into placements in secure youth justice, welfare and mental health settings, and supporting a more confident and consistent workforce.

2.30. The then Welsh Government's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, published April 2025, outlined its plans for improving access to mental health support. The strategy has a focus on early intervention, prevention and person-centred care at the heart of mental health services, ensuring people are referred to the most appropriate form of support at the right time, without delay.

Section 2: A system that intervenes early

2.31. When individual children start to exhibit behaviours that indicate a risk of being drawn into crime, the system must be equipped to act quickly, effectively and proportionately at the first signs.

2.32. Many children who come to the attention of the police or youth justice service are already known to other agencies; some are also themselves victims of exploitation, violence, neglect.

2.33. A modern early intervention system therefore depends on strong multi-agency collaboration, reliable identification of risk of harm, and clear, timely pathways into support – ensuring that children receive the right support, before harmful behaviour escalates or becomes entrenched.

2.34. This government has a clear focus on supporting at-risk children to fulfil their potential and on intervening early to prevent involvement in offending.

Putting the right systems and partnerships in place

2.35. We recognise the importance of coordinated, preventative approaches to reduce serious violence. We are continuing to invest in Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) and the Serious Violence Duty (SVD), which bring together local partners to tackle the underlying causes of violence, with a statutory requirement to collaborate and share information. A recent evaluation of VRUs reported encouraging findings,

including significant reductions in hospital admissions for assault and sharp-object injuries among young people.[26] Statutory safeguarding partnerships (Regional Safeguarding Boards in Wales) also play a crucial role in protecting children from harm, providing a formal mechanism for local authorities, police and health to work together to identify harm earlier, coordinate safeguarding responses and ensure accountability for keeping children safe. Strengthening the alignment between safeguarding partnerships, VRUs and SVD partnerships will ensure that the system responds more consistently to emerging risks and that opportunities for early intervention are not missed.

2.36. To better address the multi-faceted challenges that can impede children's progress and make them more vulnerable to negative outcomes, this government is delivering the Young Futures programme which will strengthen early intervention for vulnerable children through Young Futures Panels and Young Futures Hubs.

2.37. Young Futures Panels are being piloted in more than 50 local authorities across England and Wales, bringing together statutory and voluntary sector partners – including youth justice services – to identify and support children at risk. The Panels align with existing multi-agency arrangements and programmes such as Turnaround, helping ensure that children who might otherwise remain 'unseen' are identified and supported at an earlier stage.

2.38. In addition, we will open 50 Young Futures Hubs by the end of this Parliament, which will introduce new coordination between local services, including co-location to improve access to opportunities, support mental health and wellbeing and divert young people away from crime. Backed by £4.2 million of initial investment, the first eight Hubs started operating in March 2026. Moving forward, Young Futures Hubs form part of a £70 million transformation programme over the next three years which will also support select local authorities to enhance and improve local youth service offers.

2.39. This government will also strengthen the impact of Serious Violence Duty partnerships, recognising that they form a core part of the same local partnership landscape. As part of our work to rationalise statutory arrangements, we will seek to increase engagement from local partners best placed to identify risk early, through clarifying roles and responsibilities and developing more robust cross-government oversight to support consistent, effective collaboration and accountability.

[26] Violence Reduction Units year ending March 2025 evaluation report – GOV.UK

Turnaround programme

2.40. We are also providing dedicated funding for youth justice services to intervene with children on the cusp of the youth justice system, like those released under investigation, on pre-charge bail, or who are committing the anti-social behaviour that blights too many communities. Since December 2022, the Ministry of Justice has invested £71 million into the Turnaround programme, funding bespoke, evidence-based interventions for up to 20,500 vulnerable children.[27]

2.41. Participation in Turnaround is voluntary and does not require an admission of guilt. Children and families are actively involved in shaping the support they receive – this supports engagement with those who may distrust statutory services or be reluctant to engage with the justice system, enabling youth justice services to reach children and families who might otherwise remain disengaged. Youth justice services retain flexibility to tailor their Turnaround offer to local priorities, for example by targeting particular cohorts of children within the programme's eligibility criteria to address gaps in local provision.

2.42. An independent evaluation of the first two years of the programme highlighted encouraging findings, particularly in relation to offending – as of December 2024, just 7% of children who had completed Turnaround interventions had gone on to receive a sentence or caution.[28]

2.43. Beyond reductions in offending, Turnaround delivery staff, families and carers also reported improved behaviour, educational engagement and attendance, social and emotional wellbeing, and children's outlook on their futures among children who completed Turnaround interventions. Whole-family working is a core principle of the Turnaround programme, and evaluation evidence showed improved family relationships because parents, carers and siblings had opportunities to participate in intervention activities. Youth justice services also reported that the programme has strengthened partnership working between youth justice services and key partners – including police, schools and health services – enhancing collective capacity to identify risk early and deliver coordinated, timely support.

2.44. Turnaround has also demonstrated the value of strong partnership working with the voluntary and community sector (VCS), including commissioning mentoring and, in some areas, whole-programme delivery. We know that VCS organisations can be particularly effective in engaging children and families who may be more distrustful

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[27] Turnaround Programme (2023) – GOV.UK

[28] Outcomes of the Turnaround cohort are tracked for a period of 12 months after a child's Turnaround interventions are completed. As children joined the programme at different points, some had not yet been tracked for the full 12 months by December 2024.

of statutory services, and we will continue to work with youth justice services to explore how these relationships can be strengthened further.

2.45. In February 2026**, this government announced a further £15.4 million per year investment in the Turnaround programme, guaranteed as a three-year settlement until March 2029.** This will fund the Turnaround programme to deliver interventions for a target of at least 12,000 more children over the next three years.[29] We are developing plans for further evaluation to strengthen the evidence base for Turnaround.

2.46. Turnaround has played an important role in supporting youth justice services to intervene earlier and reduce the risk of children entering the formal justice system, but as the programme matures, it is right to ensure it supports sustainable outcomes for children. During 2026/27 we will work with youth justice services and other key partners to consider eligibility criteria, how the programme can best support positive outcomes for child victims and share good practice, with a view to ensuring Turnaround continues to operate effectively and complements wider prevention and diversion activity from 2027/28 and 2028/29.

Section 3: Transforming the state's response to escalating risks

2.47. While the programmes and initiatives above are supporting local areas to identify need early and intervene, we know that the early intervention and prevention landscape across England and Wales is complex, with multiple statutory arrangements, thresholds, processes and funding streams. Not only is this a complex landscape for professionals, children and families to navigate, but too often fragmented responsibility means that risks are not owned by any single part of the system, increasing the likelihood that warning signs are missed and children slip through the gaps as risks escalate. This was laid bare in the report of the Southport Inquiry published in April this year which considered the tragic events of 2024 and identified a failure of any organisation or multi-agency arrangement to take ownership of the risk posed by the perpetrator. The government has already delivered significant improvements across a range of policy areas to keep the public safe, but as the report illustrates, there is much more work to do, and the government will respond in full to the recommendations by this summer.

[29] This target is subject to ongoing discussions with the Welsh Government, where devolved funding arrangements from 2027 may affect how Turnaround delivery is implemented in Wales.

2.48. This government will also undertake a review of the specific landscape across the prevention of youth crime to develop a clearer understanding of the statutory duties, partnerships and programmes which it consists of, and to identify where and how greater rationalisation and efficiency can be achieved. In Wales, the strategic and operational landscape has been mapped, as published in the Prevention Framework. Both governments will work together, taking into account and capturing these differing contexts.

2.49. This work will produce recommendations to inform the final Prevention Partnership model, which will be tested with stakeholders as we continue to develop and deliver the Young Futures model over 2026/27 and 2027/28.

2.50. We know there is already strong local practice in many areas, where partners have established effective arrangements. We have seen, for example, a number of strong examples of local integration between the Turnaround programme and wider early intervention arrangements. In Hammersmith and Fulham, the existing Turnaround Panel has been expanded to deliver the aims of the Young Futures Panel, combining police-based referrals with youth justice, early intervention and self-referral routes to ensure children are identified and supported early. In Greater Manchester, many of the Young Futures panel coordinators are police youth justice officers which enables effective triage to direct children quickly to the most appropriate youth justice or prevention support, often before cases reach the panel. In Essex, the youth justice service triages all cases to ensure those most appropriate are referred to the panel. Timely assessment and rapid access to interventions drive positive outcomes.

Improving multi-agency working

2.51. Alongside rationalising the landscape, we must ensure that agencies can share appropriate information effectively, so that risk and harm are identified quickly and acted upon based on a full understanding of a child's circumstances. Current fragmented and incompatible information systems can prevent practitioners from accessing a complete picture, meaning early opportunities for support are sometimes missed. Fragmentation is particularly acute at key transition points, including between community-based youth justice services and the custodial estate, and between youth custody and adult custody systems, where continuity of information and planning is critical. Where agencies cannot easily access or share relevant information, children and families are too often required to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences to different professionals, and emerging risk can escalate without timely, coordinated intervention.

2.52. This government will work with youth justice services and partners across the children's sector to explore what a more modern and effective youth justice case management system could look like – one that builds on existing good practice, addresses shortcomings in existing tools, and interfaces more effectively with systems used in education, health, social care and custody. A modern approach to case management should reduce administrative burden, limit repeated data entry, strengthen continuity, and enable professionals to spend more of their time working directly with children and families. We will set out our proposed way forward in the autumn.

2.53. Alongside this, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act aims to address barriers to multi-agency working in England by introducing a new information sharing duty to provide a clear legal duty to share information to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and making provision for a single unique identifier. This will enable key information held across education, health, social care, youth justice and other partners to be linked more effectively. In Wales, the Wales Accord on the Sharing of Personal Information (WASPI) facilitates effective and legal data sharing across health, education and justice.

2.54. Modernised, more joined-up information systems will support practitioners to build a fuller, shared understanding of a child's risks, needs and previous interventions, reducing delays in decision-making and helping ensure that no child falls between services due to gaps in information-sharing.

Section 4: A focus on key areas of harm – knife crime, VAWG and terrorism

2.55. All crime is unacceptable. So-called "low-level" crime and anti-social behaviour can be devastating for victims and communities. This government's reforms to the youth justice system aim to tackle all types of offending.

2.56. But there are some areas where the public concerns and societal harms deserve particular focus.

Tackling knife crime, particularly by preventing it before harm occurs

2.57. Knife crime has destroyed far too many lives, and this government has set an ambitious but essential target: to halve knife crime over this decade. We are already making tangible progress. Since the start of this Parliament, knife-enabled crime has fallen by 10%, knife homicides are down by 27%[30] and hospital admissions for

[30] Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables – GOV.UK

stabbings have fallen by 13%.[31] We have banned dangerous weapons such as ninja swords and zombie style machetes, and we have taken more than 63,000 knives and weapons off our streets.[32]

2.58. Tackling knife crime is one of this government's highest priorities. Our plan to halve knife crime sets out how we will ensure that the youth justice system is equipped to intervene earlier, respond consistently and tackle both early and entrenched knife offending. Improving early identification of harm, strengthening diversion, and ensuring children receive timely, evidence-based support will be key. This sits within a cross-government effort that brings together schools, policing, local authorities, health services and community partners to prevent harm long before it occurs.

2.59. Too often in the past, children carrying knives has become normalised, and the response has been too slow and too weak.

2.60. This government is clear that responses to child knife possession must be swift, robust and grounded in evidence, with the primary aim of preventing further offending and improving public safety. That is why this government committed to ensuring that every child caught in possession of a knife would be referred to a youth justice service and would receive a mandatory plan to prevent reoffending.

2.61. As a first step towards strengthening the collective response to child knife possession, the Ministry of Justice and Home Office have jointly published new government guidance for child knife possession offences, working closely with key operational partners across policing, youth justice and related services. This marks an important milestone in the government's mission to halve knife crime within a decade and to make our streets safer. The guidance brings greater clarity and consistency to operational partners and will require a step change in the way that the criminal justice system responds when a child is found in possession of a knife. Our expectation is clear – the response to knife possession should always be swift, robust, evidence-based and thorough.

2.62. This government is committed to driving this step-change in all areas. Going forward, child knife possession offences should only be met with a charge, a youth conditional caution or, in select cases, a deferred prosecution, which will be available in all police forces to ensure a non-criminal outcome where appropriate. We will strengthen our oversight of how responses to child knife possession are delivered in practice – where outliers exist, they will be identified and supported

[31] Hospital admissions for assault by sharp objects April 2025 – NHS England Digital

[32] Knife homicides down 27% after 63,000 knives taken off streets – GOV.UK

towards compliance. This will include improved use of data to ensure knife possession receives mandatory plans entailing high-quality evidence-based interventions, and a new focus for forthcoming inspections of youth justice services and police forces, at both a national and local level. Alongside this, we will draw on emerging insights about the small number of locations where knife crime is most concentrated, ensuring preventative activity is targeted precisely where it will have the greatest impact.

2.63. And, to help every school child feel safe, we are working across government and with partners to implement an innovative 'Safety In and Around School Partnership' in England. This will provide targeted, tailored support to schools in communities most affected by youth violence. Up to 250 schools in knife-crime hotspots will receive specialist training and support, informed by hyper-local data, to improve safety in and around schools and on journeys to and from school, with more intensive support for those facing the highest risks.

2.64. The Welsh Government is working with partners from across Wales to develop all Wales resources to help manage incidents where individuals take, or are suspected of taking, weapons onto school premises. This will support the existing 'Safe and effective intervention – use of reasonable force and searching for weapons' guidance and wider activity being taken forward around supporting positive behaviour and engagement in school.

Responding early to harmful sexual behaviour

2.65. Harmful sexual behaviour among children is being driven by profound shifts in the social and digital environments in which they grow up. Early and repeated exposure to online pornography, misogynistic content, domestic abuse in the family, and deeply harmful norms around relationships, consent and power are shaping attitudes and behaviour from an increasingly young age. The scale of harm appears to be growing sharply – proven sexual offences committed by children have risen by around 60% over the last three years.[33]

2.66. Concerningly, harmful sexual behaviour, coercion and abuse are now routine in many children's everyday lives. A survey found that nearly half of 13-17-year-olds in an intimate and partner relationship reported experience of violence or controlling behaviour, including sexual coercion, physical violence and image-based abuse.[34] These harms reflect patterns of behaviour that, if left unchallenged, risk becoming normalised and entrenched at a young age, and escalating into adulthood.

[33] Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[34] How do boys and girls experience violence (2024) – Youth Endowment Fund

2.67. The youth justice system and wider services have not kept pace with the speed, scale or nature of the changing influences in children's lives, particularly in the online environment. As technologies evolve and harmful content becomes more accessible, responses that intervene too late or act inconsistently leave children, and victims, exposed to escalating harm. We need, and will help drive, a step change in our response to this growing challenge.

2.68. Harmful sexual behaviour by children requires early, decisive and preventative action. Every child should understand consent, respect and healthy relationships, and they should be supported by parents, teachers and role models to challenge harmful attitudes and behaviours before they become entrenched. The scale of violence – which is largely, albeit not exclusively, perpetrated against women and girls by men and boys – is intolerable. Effective prevention cannot wait until harm escalates into criminal offending. Identifying and addressing harmful sexual behaviours, attitudes and beliefs at the earliest possible opportunity is critical to protecting victims and preventing future harm.

2.69. Schools and education settings play a critical role in shaping attitudes and behaviours. This government is taking urgent action across schools and education settings to help build a future in which misogynistic attitudes and harmful content are challenged and where young people are supported to form safe, respectful relationships. As set out in our Freedom from Violence and Abuse VAWG Strategy, this government is overhauling the relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) curriculum, with a renewed focus on developing the skills needed for healthy relationships from the beginning of primary school, and equipping children with the tools to recognise, resist and challenge harmful influences. This will include teaching children about misogynistic narratives and influences, in a way that avoids stigmatising boys, as well as increasing awareness of emerging issues such as AI-generated content and deepfakes. In Wales, the Peer-on-Peer Sexual Harassment in Education Settings: Action Plan sets out a coordinated, whole-system approach to preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviour in education settings, with particular focus on online harms and disproportionately affected children.

2.70. It is important too to recognise that developing an understanding and respect for healthy relationships and consent does not end at the school gates or after secondary school. The VAWG Strategy is clear that preventing harm requires a whole-system response, spanning education, families, communities and public services.

2.71. The youth justice system has a vital role to play within this wider landscape, and not only with children who have already committed sexual offences, but long before that point. Youth justice services are well-placed to identify emerging behaviours,

respond quickly and proportionately, and intervene in ways that are developmentally appropriate and focused on behaviour change. This government is working with youth justice services, statutory partners and specialist organisations to strengthen the system's ability to respond robustly to harmful sexual behaviour and misogynistic attitudes.

2.72. Success will depend on the system being equipped to deal with the rapidly evolving online environment, where new digital platforms and emerging forms of online harm are shaping how young people interact and form norms. Prevention starts with equipping practitioners with the confidence, skills and support to identify risk early and act decisively. Over the coming months, we will work with the sector to assess capability, identify gaps in support, and determine what future action is needed. We will set out next steps later this year. This will sit alongside the government's Growing Up in the Online World consultation which seeks to understand how technology impacts children's wellbeing and what more can be done to ensure their experiences online are safe and enriching.

Tackling youth terrorism and violence-fixation

2.73. The number of children involved in terrorism remains very low. However, we have seen a worrying rise in recent years, particularly in the number of cases where children have been radicalised online, often becoming fixated on violence.

2.74. The first phase of the Southport Public Inquiry has reported and identified terrible failings which can never happen again. The government will consider its findings carefully and respond by summer 2026. We have committed to better understand and address the risk posed by individuals fascinated by extreme violence, like the perpetrator of the Southport attack, and have established a Home Office taskforce to coordinate this work. But we will not wait to act – following recommendations from the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, we have already committed to change the law to criminalise those planning mass casualty attacks without a terrorist motive.

2.75. In his 2023 Annual Report, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation noted that too often, children at the earliest stages of terrorist offending are often vulnerable or exploited, and investigative services must 'wait' until an offence is committed before a meaningful intervention can be put in place. This failure to intervene early risks public safety and increases the risk of labelling a child as a terrorist for life.

2.76. Drawing on the Reviewer's recommendation, this government has introduced youth diversion orders – a new civil order to ensure we can intervene earlier and divert children away from offending. Counter-terrorism police will be able to apply to the

courts to issue the youth diversion order to children and young people aged between 10 and 21 who have committed, or may commit, a terrorism offence. As part of this order, up to 12 months of structured engagement with rehabilitative interventions will be required, delivered by youth justice services. To support this work, we will provide nearly £1.5 million over three years to equip youth justice services in England and Wales to work with the very small number of children expected to be subject to an order, either directly or by commissioning specialist interventions. We will inform youth justice services how this funding will be administered by autumn.

2.77. More broadly, the Prevent scheme plays a vital role in protecting the public and diverting individuals away from pathways that could lead to terrorist offending. We have already made changes to ensure rigor and consistency in every Prevent referral decision, and enabled early referral to Channel. We will strengthen oversight of referrals that do not meet Prevent thresholds or which are transferred to other services, and the response to online radicalisation.

Section 5: Preventing harm

2.78. Preventing harm is the central purpose of early intervention. When warning signs are acted on early and responsibility for risk is clear, the system can intervene before behaviour escalates, keeping children, victims and communities safe.

2.79. The tragic events in Southport demonstrated the devastating consequences when risk is not taken seriously, information is not shared, or action is delayed. A system that allows responsibility to dissipate as concerns escalate is a system that fails in its most basic duty. Strengthening early intervention must therefore go hand in hand with local clarity of ownership, decisive action and a willingness to act sooner when risk increases, including escalating responses where behaviour does not change – ensuring that concerns are not simply observed, but addressed.

2.80. But there will always be cases where the system fails to prevent harm, and when harm does occur, the system must act quickly, firmly and proportionately, with a focus on protecting the public, while supporting children to change.

Chapter 3: Right response, right time

What this government has already done:

Published a Youth Justice Charter that sets out the standards children should expect to receive at every stage of the youth justice system.

Introduced a new youth court legal aid fee scheme, providing an additional £5.1 million per year, around an 80% increase in youth court fee spending at the time of introduction.

Commissioned an Expert Advisory Group to develop recommendations on specialist training for lawyers representing children.

Committed £20 million of funding per year over this Spending Review period for youth remand, re-focusing the funding on local investment in community alternatives to custodial remand, providing multi-year certainty for the first time, and modernising the formula used to calculate funding.

Announced a further £5 million over the next three years to invest directly into community remand placements and support through regional partnerships.

What this government will do:

Lead fundamental reform of the youth out-of-court resolution framework, setting out our proposals in autumn 2026.

Incentivise the use of deferred prosecution as an effective diversionary pathway for children by recognising cases closed through deferred prosecution as ‘resolved’.

Introduce new Youth Intervention Courts for children and have at least one site operational by spring 2027.

Take a fundamental look at the function and purpose of criminal courts for child defendants, reporting by August 2027.

Reduce the custodial remand population by 25% over this Parliament by reducing unnecessary custodial remands through reforming remand funding, investment in expanding robust community alternatives to custody, and introducing changes to legislation, while ensuring custodial remands are available where necessary for public safety.

Reform the youth sentencing framework to better reflect the modern youth justice cohort, prioritise rehabilitation and ensure custody is used as a last resort by strengthening community sentences, including the youth rehabilitation order and referral order.

Undertake remand and sentencing reforms which could see a reduction in the overall number of children in custody of 20% by the end of this Parliament, while ensuring custody is available where it is necessary for public protection.

Consider carefully the Bar Council's review, and whether the age of criminal responsibility, currently set at 10 years old, remains appropriate for the modern era.

Pursue reform of the childhood criminal records regime to support children to rebuild their futures, setting out specific plans for changes by the end of the year.

3.1. Children who come into contact with the youth justice system need timely, fair and proportionate responses that reflect both the seriousness of their behaviour and their potential for change. Getting this balance right is critical. The system must protect the public and children must face serious consequences for serious offending – recognising that seriousness is not only defined by a single high-harm offence, but also by the persistence and frequency of offending over time. The government is clear and unapologetic about that. But we are also seeking to avoid unnecessary criminalisation or use of custody, in line with what we know gives children the best chance of changing their lives for the better.

3.2. While the youth justice system has seen much success over the past two decades, we know that the youth justice landscape today is marked by variation in practice and inconsistent decision-making, alongside processes and frameworks that have not kept pace with the rising complexity of the cohort. Every child should have access to the right response at the right time, ensuring intervention is effective, proportionate and prevents future offending.

Section 1: A firmer, fairer approach to youth diversion

3.3. Effective diversion is increasingly central to our youth justice approach, offering children who commit lower-level offences a proportionate response that avoids unnecessary criminalisation. Over the past decade, the use of out-of-court resolutions (OOCRs) has expanded – OOCRs are now used in some cases that, five or ten years ago, would likely have been charged and prosecuted in a court room. This shift reflects the evidence base which shows that minimal intervention, when done well, can be more effective in diverting children from future offending. In Wales, the Youth Justice Blueprint sets out plans to embed a consistent and evidence-based approach to diversion across forces and youth justice services, and the Welsh Youth Justice Advisory Panel is already focused on this.

3.4. However, we are concerned that the current approach to diversion is falling short, and failing to deliver the consistent, effective intervention that children need, and that victims and communities deserve.

3.5. The youth OOCR framework has evolved organically over time. The system now includes a range of statutory and non-statutory disposals, each with different requirements and levels of formality. Statutory options (youth cautions and youth conditional cautions) require an admission of guilt, while non-statutory approaches (community resolutions and deferred prosecution) offer greater flexibility, including the ability to proceed without a formal admission of guilt. As these tools have grown in use, significant variation has emerged across police forces.

3.6. This has resulted in a clear 'postcode lottery'. The same child, committing the same offence and with the same background, can receive a different OOCR – or no OOCR at all – depending on where they live. Forces differ in their expectations of what constitutes an 'intervention', in whether and how an admission of guilt is required, and in the availability and use of deferred prosecution – with some police forces hardly using it, if at all. There is also widespread use of interventions which have low or no evidence to support their use, such as knife crime awareness courses.[35] Some areas have no access to the most effective interventions. These inconsistencies undermine both the effectiveness, and fairness, of diversion.

3.7. The lottery is not only geographic, but also demographic. Evidence indicates a pattern consistent with structural biases, including adultification, contributing to Black children being disproportionately less likely to be offered diversionary interventions or receive the same level of support as White children, for the same offences.[36] Further, we know that individuals from an ethnic minority background, and Black people in particular, are less likely to make an admission of guilt, often due to lower levels of trust in the police and wider justice system. This can limit their access to OOCRs that require a formal admission of guilt, creating disparities in who benefits from diversion, and increasing the likelihood of children from ethnic minority backgrounds being escalated into formal criminal proceedings.

3.8. We also see significant inconsistencies in how OOCRs are recorded and tracked. The current framework does not support consistent monitoring of interventions, outcomes or reoffending, and very limited national data collection makes it difficult to understand outcomes or effectiveness, or ensure that good practice is adopted consistently.

[35] Youth Knife Crime Education Programmes YEF Toolkit

[36] Exploring racial disparity in diversion from the youth justice system (2022) – Nuffield Foundation

3.9. These concerns were echoed in the 2025 joint report by HM Inspectorate of Probation (which inspects youth justice services) and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (which inspects police forces). It described the current OOCR framework as 'fragmented and inconsistent' and highlighted the need for a clearer and more consistent national framework.[37]

The youth diversion system must be one that acts consistently and fairly. Every child should receive the right response at the right time, regardless of where they live or their ethnicity. A modern diversion framework will ensure that decisions are proportionate and rooted in public protection, and interventions are timely and effective. This government will take the time to consider this issue carefully to ensure that the OOCR framework works for every child and keeps communities safe.

A modern OOCR framework

3.10. OOCRs have great potential to deliver swift justice for victims and reduced reoffending. To deliver on this potential, all practitioners in the youth justice system, whether police, youth justice service practitioners or prosecutors, need an OOCR framework which has clear and consistent definitions and expectations, set out in straightforward guidance applicable to everyone, with data to support decision-making.

3.11. We have begun to take decisive steps towards addressing this. From April 2026, the Youth Justice Board will begin gathering data on interventions provided to children under OOCRs, so we can better understand and scrutinise what steps are actually taken to address the root causes of a child's offending. This is a vitally important aspect of the youth OOCR landscape, and we will have clearer sight of how they are used to inform targeted improvements. But we will go further still.

3.12. Since the Lammy Review, many police forces have set up robust deferred prosecution schemes. A key goal and benefit of these schemes is that, by not requiring children to admit guilt, we address some of the issues described in paragraph 3.7 and ensure more equal and fair access to the benefits of effective diversion.

3.13. However, there has been an uneven uptake of deferred prosecution schemes around the country. The government has listened carefully to the case that the schemes (which, to work, require strong partnership-working, relationship-building and robust case management) deserve recognition in the way that police forces'

[37] The effectiveness of diverting children from the criminal justice system: meeting needs, ensuring safety, and preventing reoffending (2025) – HMI Probation & HMICFRS

performance is measured. As a result, **the government has decided that Deferred Prosecution should have its own distinct outcome codes: Outcome 23 for children and Outcome 24 for adults. Cases closed under Outcome 23 and Outcome 24 will both be considered 'resolved' to incentivise and reward effective diversionary work**. We will keep this under active consideration going forward. This change will be set out in guidance from the Home Office, which will be clear that for a crime to be considered closed in this way, there must be a thorough intervention in place and proper oversight built in, so as to ensure that diversion has been an effective and robust alternative to charging the child for the crime. **We must not see a return to the empty warnings and insufficient grip that has typified too many out-of-court resolutions**.

3.14. The above steps will, put together, constitute a significant change to the OOCR framework for children. However, they will constitute only further evolutionary reform to an already complex system. As a result, we will go further and will immediately begin work on a root-and-branch review of the youth OOCR framework. **We will set out our proposals for a fundamental reform of the youth OOCR framework in autumn 2026**. These proposals will outline a wholly new approach and framework – one that is focused on strengthening consistency, clarity and fairness, while retaining the flexibility needed to respond proportionately to children's circumstances and needs.

3.15. This government's goal is to design a youth OOCR framework which truly delivers the potential of diversion. That means looking not just at the formal policy structures for OOCRs, but also which and how interventions are delivered as part of them. It will, therefore, draw on the wider reflections and reforms set out in this White Paper, aimed at ultimately addressing the reasons why a child commits crime.

3.16. A central issue for consultation will be whether and how to change the current requirements around admission of guilt. The Lammy Review highlighted the limitations of a rigid admission of guilt test, which directly informed the creation of Outcome 22 and deferred prosecution. While a form of consent remains an important safeguard against 'summary justice' (quick decisions made without the safeguards of a formal process), a strict requirement for a full admission of guilt can prevent appropriate diversion, particularly in lower-level cases. In response, some police forces have adopted a more pragmatic approach, accepting an 'acceptance of responsibility' rather than a formal admission. We will explore whether a broader and more consistent national approach to admission of guilt should be adopted, and whether a new approach might help tackle persistent disparities in access to diversion.

3.17. To ensure best practice, we will also consult on whether these disposals, as well as community resolutions, should be placed on a statutory footing. While giving

practitioners important flexibility, the current non-statutory status of these disposals may contribute to inconsistencies in understanding and use across the country. Making these disposals statutory could support more consistent practice, but would require clear legislative definitions, and statutory guidance, to ensure effective delivery and appropriate safeguards while preserving necessary practitioner discretion.

3.18. Our proposals will also explore whether participation in OOCR interventions should be mandatory for certain offences, building on the approach already taken for knife possession. At present, community resolutions, youth cautions and some forms of Outcome 22 do not require mandatory engagement with youth justice services, even when used for relatively serious offences such as possession of an offensive weapon in private. We will consider this with the aim of ensuring public protection.

3.19. For the same reason, children who have committed a crime should truly understand the harm that crime can cause to others and to themselves – whether that crime was littering or knife possession. We will therefore consider how best practice around restorative justice, where children make good on the harm they have caused, through constructive activity in the community or with victims, can be built upon and expanded. The story of Jacob Dunne shows the power of restorative justice – we will draw on him as an expert adviser to inform our youth justice policy-making and plans, starting with a roundtable event that he and the minister for youth justice will chair with frontline services and voluntary sector specialists in the summer.

3.20. Children need structure, stability and sustained support to break out of cycle of offending. We will consider learnings from elements of international examples and pilots, including the Oranga Tamariki military-style academies in New Zealand, to ensure youth justice services can provide tough interventions which ensure offending will never happen again. This will include visible reparative work – communities and victims deserve certainty that offending is met with consequences.

3.21. Finally, we will seek views about whether to extend the maximum length of youth conditional cautions up to 12 months for certain offences, such as some offences preparatory to terrorism, and some sexual offences not involving penetration. These offences are serious – preventing escalation to even more serious offending is vital. We are concerned that the current standard maximum duration of 16 weeks is not sufficient to undertake meaningful rehabilitative work to address risk. The lack of a sufficiently long or serious OOCR may lead the police to conclude that they should prosecute instead – which can lead to a slower process for actually addressing the underlying issues that led to a child committing crime, and poorer reoffending rates.

3.22. We know that the adult OOCR system also faces many of these issues. Sir Brian Leveson's Independent Review of the Criminal Courts gave detailed consideration to the role of OOCRs, including and especially for adults. We are actively considering the Review's recommendations in this space, including where reforms to the youth OOCR framework could and should also apply to adults.

Strengthening policing to support effective diversion

3.23. For diversion to work well, police forces must be equipped with the structures, processes and skills needed to identify risk early, make proportionate decisions, and respond in ways that reflects children's needs and vulnerabilities. We know that there are many examples of police forces across England and Wales undertaking effective interventions focussed on youth crime prevention and diversion, many of which have been independently or locally evaluated, and are included in the College of Policing's practice bank.

3.24. However, the current policing landscape is itself fragmented, with variable effectiveness and inconsistent practices between forces – this affects the quality and availability of diversion. In some areas, police officers have strong partnerships with youth justice services, clear processes for OOCR decision-making, and good understanding of childhood vulnerability. In others, gaps in capability, confidence or coordination can lead to children receiving very different outcomes for similar behaviour, depending on where they live.

3.25. In his Independent Review of the Criminal Courts, Sir Brian Leveson recommended standardised training for police using OOCRs for children. This government is delivering on this recommendation. The Policing White Paper, published in January 2026, set out a programme of major reforms aimed at building a more coherent, better coordinated and more consistently delivered police service. These reforms will support more effective crime prevention, strengthen core operational standards and improve the way police work with other agencies.

3.26. As part of this transformation, this government will ensure that changes within policing also strengthen officers' capability and confidence in working with children. The new National Policing Service and the introduction of a Licence to Practise give us clear means for improved training about the youth justice system and how officers can best intervene with children, and clearer expectations around the appropriate use of youth diversion. These measures will help ensure that police decision-making is proportionate, fair and effective.

Section 2: A fair and effective legal process for every child

3.27. Children who come into contact with the youth justice system must be able to rely on a legal process that is fair, proportionate and capable of supporting change. Decisions taken at every stage – from legal advice and charging through to court outcomes – can have life-changing consequences. Getting these decisions right, and ensuring the process is fair, is crucial, not only to uphold the rule of law, but to ensure children understand what is happening to them. **That is why this government published the Youth Justice Charter last summer, so that any child who comes into contact with the criminal justice system knows what to expect and their rights.**

3.28. Despite the existence of a specialist youth court and a distinct sentencing framework, too many children struggle to engage meaningfully with criminal proceedings. Complex legal language, unfamiliar processes, and limited understanding of what is happening in court can undermine children's ability to participate in decisions that may have life-changing consequences. These challenges are particularly acute for the many children in the system with speech, language or communication needs or who are neurodiverse.

3.29. This is not simply a question of fairness – it is fundamental to the effectiveness of court proceedings. Where children (or indeed adults) do not understand what is happening to them, or why decisions are being taken, they are less likely to engage meaningfully with the process or comply with interventions. That, in turn, can undermine rehabilitation and increase the risk of further offending. A system that children cannot understand is less likely to change their behaviour and therefore keep the public safe.

3.30. While the support of an effective appropriate adult with a sound understanding of the youth justice system can help to safeguard the rights of children, too often, children are receiving poor legal advice, both in police stations – where early decisions can shape future outcomes – and in the courtroom itself. The Independent Review of Criminal Legal Aid concluded that children are let down by inexperienced lawyers and highlighted variable quality across practitioners, with youth work too often used as a 'training ground' for newly qualified, inexperienced lawyers rather than a specialist area requiring expertise. In response, this government introduced a new youth court legal aid fee scheme, providing an additional £5.1 million per year – an estimated 80% increase at the time – to better reflect the complexity, vulnerability and seriousness of youth cases.[38]

[38] £24 million boost for criminal legal aid to support most vulnerable (2024) – GOV.UK

3.31. The new scheme was designed to attract and retain lawyers with the specialist procedural knowledge and experience to deal with the increasingly complex and vulnerable cohort of children coming into the youth courts. However, despite the unique demands of youth justice legal work, there is currently no mandatory training requirement for defence lawyers representing children. This is a clear anomaly – district judges, magistrates, legal advisers and prosecutors working in youth courts must all undertake specialist training, while the defence lawyers, who hold critical responsibilities for advice, representation and safeguarding, are not required to meet equivalent standards.

3.32. The youth court itself has changed little over the past 25 years, despite a significant shift in the profile and needs of the children it now deals with. Increasingly, children appearing before the youth court have committed serious offences, and present with complex needs and multiple vulnerabilities.

3.33. Each year, around 13,000 children are sentenced.[39] Despite significant efforts, around a third of these children go on to reoffend.[40] Outcomes are particularly concerning for children who receive youth rehabilitation orders (YROs – a community sentence that combines supervision, support and sometimes restrictions) – in the year ending March 2024 the reoffending rate for children who had received a YRO reached 60%.[41]

3.34. Our current approach is not reducing reoffending at the pace of scale required. We know that around 80% of prolific adult offenders first offended as children[42] – early patterns of offending, if not effectively addressed, can evolve into entrenched criminality. In its current form, the youth court is not consistently able to deliver the tailored, flexible and needs-based response required to effectively support the rehabilitation of this increasingly complex cohort.

[39] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[40] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[41] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[42] Prolific Offenders (2019)

Every child should experience a legal process that is fair, comprehensible and capable of supporting change. This means access to high-quality legal advocacy from professionals with the specialist skills and confidence to represent vulnerable children with complex needs, the support of an effective appropriate adult, alongside a more responsive, child-centred court model. By embedding problem-solving, multidisciplinary approaches that bring the court, youth justice services and specialist support together around the child, the system can address the root causes of offending, strengthen compliance with rehabilitative sentences and give children the best possible opportunity to make positive, lasting changes.

The future of the criminal courts for children

3.35. These challenges raise fundamental questions about the role and function of the criminal courts for child defendants. Over time, the profile and needs of children appearing before the courts have changed significantly, while the core structures and processes of the youth court have remained largely unchanged.

3.36. Fundamentally, the courts must be capable of preventing crime by supporting children to turn their lives around. This may require radical change in the role of the courts pre- and post-conviction.

3.37. We are also interested in the role of the criminal courts in holding those responsible for children to account. Where risks were known but not acted upon, information not shared, or safeguarding responsibilities not managed effectively, questions of accountability must be taken seriously. Treating children as children must go hand in hand with treating the adults and professionals responsible for their, and the public's safety, as such. We will consider if and how the court system can better recognise, surface and respond to wider system failures, rather than placing responsibility on the child alone.

3.38. **This government will take a fundamental look at the function and purpose of the criminal courts for child defendants.** This work will consider alternative approaches to the role and structure of the current court system, and will make recommendations informed by best practice and tested approaches. It will consider issues such as whether the existing set-up of the criminal courts is supporting children to turn their lives around and prevent crime, what can be learned from approaches in other jurisdictions and international comparators, and whether there is merit in other cohorts (including vulnerable adults and young adults) being subject to a different process in our criminal court system, either the same as (or similar to) children. We have asked David Ormerod to act as our expert adviser on this issue, reporting by August 2027.

3.39. But while this longer-term work considers the future of criminal courts for children, there are clear and immediate improvements that must be made now to improve the legal process that children experience today.

Mandatory training for youth advocacy

3.40. To address long-standing concerns around inconsistent practice and variable legal standards, **this government is working with the legal sector to develop a new model for specialist training requirements for lawyers representing children.** We have commissioned an Expert Advisory Group, bringing together representatives from the different legal professions, to help set the standards of criminal advocacy for children.

3.41. The Advisory Group will deliver its recommendations by summer 2026 and the government will then consider how best to implement the proposed standards, including options to make specialist youth training mandatory.

3.42. This represents a significant step change in how the system ensures quality and consistency in youth justice advocacy. Whether a child is detained in a police station, entering their plea in the youth court, or facing trial in the Crown Court, the new system will recognise that representation of children – in any setting – is complex work that requires specific skills and experience. This will also bring defence practice into alignment with the specialist training obligations already in place for the judiciary and prosecution in the youth court.

Introducing Youth Intervention Courts

3.43. Introducing mandatory training for those representing children (as per paragraph 3.40 above) will be a step-change in a modernised youth court. But it will still essentially be the same youth court arrangement as was introduced in 1992.

3.44. This government will pursue more robust, evidence-based responses to the small cohort of children at the highest risk of continued offending. Specifically, building on the intensive-supervision court (ISC) model being tested in the adult magistrates' court, **we will legislate to introduce Youth Intervention Courts**.

3.45. Youth Intervention Courts will represent a fundamentally different way of working – a more structured, problem-solving approach that will bring judges, youth justice services and specialist support around the child in a coordinated and consistent way. Instead of short, fragmented court appearances, children will experience a court that is actively involved in their rehabilitation – one that sets clear expectations, monitors compliance closely and uses the authority of the court to motivate and sustain change.

3.46. This new approach has the potential to reshape outcomes for some of the most vulnerable and high-risk children in the system, while also strengthening confidence in community-based sentences as an alternative to custody. Where earlier responses have not worked, this more structured intervention may be what is needed to change behaviour, disrupt persistent offending, and protect victims and communities.

3.47. The pilots will draw on learnings from adult ISC pilots, while adopting a differentiated approach that reflects the distinct needs of children and the unique aims of the youth justice system. Pilots will focus on the cohort of children sentenced to youth rehabilitation orders who we know (aside from those sentenced to custody) have the highest risk of reoffending.

3.48. We have today launched an expression of interest process to identify pilot sites, with at least one Youth Intervention Court expected to begin operating by spring 2027. The government believes that this new court model has the potential to be a bold and positive shift to the role of the youth court. However, to test this assumption and whether the emerging positive findings from the adult ISC model can be repeated for children, the pilots will be evaluated to inform future decisions about wider rollout.

3.49. If successful, Youth Intervention Courts could become a cornerstone of a modernised youth justice system for children whose risks cannot be safely or effectively managed through existing community sentencing routes.

A legal process that works for victims

3.50. A youth justice system that commands public confidence must work not only for children who offend, but also for victims of crime. Victims have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, to be kept informed, and to understand how decisions are made throughout the justice process. Where victims are themselves children, as is the case with many youth justice cases, these needs are particularly acute and complex.

3.51. The government welcomes and supports the greater focus on youth justice services' support to victims in the inspection framework introduced by HM Inspectorate of Probation in 2025.

3.52. This government is committed to strengthening victims' experience of the criminal justice system. The Victims' Code sets out the minimum standards victims can expect, but we know the system can be confusing and overwhelming, particularly for victims who are children. That is why the government launched a public consultation on the new Victims' Code including proposals to make the Code more accessible for children and to explore whether a separate children's Code is needed to ensure their distinct needs are met.

Section 3: Reducing unnecessary custodial remands

3.53. The number of children in youth custody is at a historic low. However, every year, hundreds of children are held in custody before they have been tried or sentenced – in 2024/25 these children represented 44% of all children in custody and 62% of those did not receive a custodial sentence.[43] There will always be cases involving the most serious offences where the risk to the public is too great and therefore court-ordered custodial remand is right and necessary. In those cases, public protection must, and will be, the priority. However, this government is clear that custodial remand should be considered only as a last resort, and current figures suggest that is not always the case.

3.54. The average number of children on remand in custody has decreased over the last five years,[44] however we are still seeing some custodial remands for relatively minor offences (such as minor drug offences and theft)[45] and it is disproportionately Black and Mixed Heritage children who are remanded to custody (28% and 18% of the remand population respectively).[46] In an HM Inspectorate of Probation thematic inspection of youth remand to custody, it was judged that 46% of the children assessed could have been safely accommodated in the community instead.[47] This indicates that some children are being locked up unnecessarily at one of the most formative points in their lives.

3.55. The consequences of unnecessary custodial remand are serious for the young person – disrupted education, separation from family, friends and community, and exposure to a potentially criminalising custodial environment. Unnecessary custodial remands can also be counter-productive for public protection, and are extremely costly for taxpayers – with a single custody place costing up to nearly half a million pounds per year.[48]

3.56. We are not, in seeking to reduce unnecessary custodial remands, wanting children accused of crimes to simply be released into the community, into the very circumstances that led to their (alleged) offending. The police and courts have a variety of tools and interventions available to them to robustly supervise and oversee that child's behaviour. If they do not follow those requirements or if they

[43] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[44] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[45] Criminal Justice Statistics quarterly: December 2025 (HTML) – GOV.UK

[46] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[47] A joint thematic inspection of work with children subject to remand in youth detention (2023) – HM Inspectorate of Probation

[48] The Recovery of Costs (Remand to Youth Detention Accommodation) Regulations 2025

commit further offences, there could and should be consequences, including being detained in custody.

3.57. However, despite past reforms, the system continues to struggle to offer strong community alternatives quickly enough in some cases where this could be an appropriate option. Fragmentation across the courts, police, local authorities, social care, education and health means that vital information is not always shared and bail packages are often pulled together too late. Children with the most complex needs – those already known to multiple services – often fall through the gaps between systems that do not work in a coordinated way.

3.58. At the same time, robust community options are too often unavailable. The number of households approved for youth justice fostering has collapsed in recent years, and wider shortages of specialist accommodation make it harder for local partners to put forward suitable alternatives to custody.

3.59. When services do not work together quickly enough, or strong community options are not available, children are being remanded to custody, sometimes even for lower-level offences, not because custody is necessary but because the system around them has failed to offer a viable alternative. The result is a remand system that is inconsistent and too often unfair. Some local areas make excellent use of community options, while others see relatively high numbers of custodial remands.

Our ambition is to reduce the number of remanded children in custody (at any one time) by 25% by the end of this Parliament. There will always be high-harm, high-risk cases where a remand to custody is justified at the time and the child does not go on to receive a custodial sentence – but this should be the minority of cases because the law is clear that custodial remand is a last resort.

To achieve this, we need to rebuild a remand system that is fair and proportionate. A child should be supported in their community wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so, with strong bail packages that protect the public and support better long-term outcomes. This will require a more joined-up system, with clearer accountability and stronger coordination across agencies, supported through new regional partnerships to ensure every area can offer robust alternatives to custody.

Sustainable remand funding that builds capacity

3.60. For too long, the funding that underpins youth remand has been unstable and short-term. Local services have had to plan year-by-year, which is challenging given the number of children at risk of custodial remand in any given local authority is small and can fluctuate dramatically. This volatility makes it very difficult for local areas to invest confidently in the community alternatives needed to keep children safe and out of custody.

3.61. This was compounded by the approach to funding. Until now, areas that have successfully reduced custodial remands have seen their funding allocation fall – undermining effective practice and financially disincentivising investment in community alternatives to custody.

3.62. As outlined in our policy statement in February, A Modern Youth Justice System, **this government is transforming the approach to remand funding**. This began in April when local authorities received multi-year funding settlements. This financial stability and certainty will enable more effective planning and longer-term investment in alternatives to custody. Alongside this, we have modernised the formula used to distribute funding so that it supports and rewards the outcomes we want to see. Instead of being driven largely by custodial bed nights, the formula will be reweighted to recognise the use of robust community-based options, including high-supervision bail and remands to local authority accommodation, ensuring that areas are not penalised for successfully diverting children from custody.

3.63. The capacity increase we need to safely reduce custodial remands cannot be achieved by individual local authorities acting alone – regional working is the solution. We successfully tested this approach in Greater Manchester. Where local areas plan and commission services together, they can build a more stable and diverse network of specialist placements, reduce shortages and ensure no child is remanded to custody simply because suitable accommodation was not available. We will now support areas to develop regional remand partnerships, with dedicated project management funding support for areas to establish regional working.

Expanding robust community options

3.64. Creating new community placements is not the whole solution, but it is a vital part of enabling partners to safely manage children in the community. In recent years, this government has tested a range of approaches designed to strengthen community alternatives to remand, including the Ministry of Justice's Greater Manchester pilot, and more recently pilots in West Yorkshire and Kent and targeted fostering schemes in Birmingham and Lambeth, as well as the Youth Justice Board-funded London Accommodation Pathfinder.

3.65. **We are now building on this evidence base and investing a further £5 million over the next three years in remand fostering, accommodation and bail support, to support the safe management of children in the community.** Alongside existing remand projects in Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire, this funding will be delivered through 17 new regional remand partnerships, ensuring that areas plan and commission services collectively rather than in isolation. By working at a regional scale, local authorities will be better equipped to develop the specialist provision required, avoid shortages, and ensure that no child is remanded to custody simply because the right community placement is not available.

3.66. Remand is an area where we see significant racial disparities, with Black and Mixed-heritage children more likely to be remanded to custody than their peers, even after controlling for demographic and offence-related factors.[49] The London Accommodation Pathfinder provides supported accommodation and wrap-around support to predominantly ethnic minority children. Insights from the pilot point to locally tailored, community-informed, robust alternatives to custody effectively diverting ethnic minority children from custody.

3.67. Alongside accommodating children safely in the community on bail and remand, it is vital that children have access to education and meaningful activity while on trial, otherwise their risk of offending and breaching bail is heightened. Our new regional remand partnerships should and will collectively strengthen their education and training offers for children on bail and community remand and can use the additional funding to develop bespoke education provision for this cohort to prevent remands to custody.

Strengthening the remand legal framework

3.68. The average remand population in custody has fallen over the last five years,[50] but data suggests that the amendments made in 2022 to the legislation governing court-ordered remand have not led to a significant reduction in the number of children detained before trial or sentence. Remand to custody should, and will, remain an option for the most serious cases, where remand or bail to the community is not safe. Yet some children continue to be remanded to custody for summary-only offences, which does not appear to align with the current requirement that a custodial sentence must be 'very likely' if the child is convicted.[51]

[49] Ethnic disproportionality in remand and sentencing in the youth justice system (2021) – GOV.UK

[50] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[51] Criminal Justice Statistics Quarterly: September 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

3.69. Legislative reform alone will not resolve the challenges within the youth remand system, as many other factors influence youth remand decisions. However, it could play an important role in reinforcing the principle that children should be remanded to custody only as a genuine last resort, and in supporting courts to apply that principle consistently in practice. **This government will therefore introduce changes to the legislation governing remand to custody. We will legislate at the earliest opportunity to update the statutory criteria for remand to custody.**

3.70. The law must also be clear about the responsibilities on local authorities in the remand process. Youth justice services play a critical role in developing effective plans to manage children safely in the community, and presenting robust bail packages that courts can have confidence in. However, in practice we know that the short timeframe between a child being charged and their first remand hearing can limit the ability of youth justice services to prepare successful packages. In some cases, a lack of suitable local authority accommodation, or insufficient clarity among local partners of their statutory responsibilities, can further restrict the availability of viable community-based alternatives to custody.

3.71. Strengthening accountability and oversight of remand decisions will be essential to ensuring that any legislative reform translates into meaningful change on the ground. As part of the forthcoming legislative reforms, the government will set out how partners can work more effectively together, so that decisions are supported by the joined-up planning we know leads to better outcomes for children.

A joined-up approach to diverting children from custodial remand

3.72. We know that the journey into custodial remand often begins well before a child reaches court. Many children who are remanded to custody are already known to multiple services, and frequently present with complex needs and vulnerabilities. When these needs are not addressed early, they can contribute to crisis escalation, placement breakdowns and increasing restrictions on liberty – whether through custodial remand, deprivation of liberty orders, or secure welfare placements.

3.73. By supporting local authorities to work more effectively across health, children's social care and justice, it is possible to identify children at the greatest risk earlier, and provide more consistent, coordinated support. This could help reduce the number of children in complex situations entering youth custody, improving outcomes for some of the most vulnerable children.

3.74. **This government will invest over £15 million over the next three years to fund three areas to deliver an integrated model across education, health and social care.** These areas will use multidisciplinary assessments, psychological formulation and relationship-based models to support children who are at risk of, or already

experiencing, deprivation of liberty. The programme will test how integrated, cross-system operational models can support more effective care planning in practice for children in the most complex situations.

3.75. Diverting children from custodial remand in Wales requires close collaboration with the Welsh Government, reflecting its devolved responsibility for areas such as education, health and social care. Working in partnership is essential to ensure remand reforms align with devolved systems and enables integrated responses to meeting children's needs. In addition, we have committed to devolving remand funding to the Welsh Government from 2027/28 to reduce the use of unnecessary remand for Welsh children.

3.76. Children's services in Wales continue to develop therapeutic accommodation and services to meet the needs of children and young people with behaviours of high concern. Welsh Government funding has supported the development of more 'therapeutic' services, overseen through a Good Practice Forum, a Monitoring Framework and visits, recognising the high level of wide-ranging skills required to meet these children's needs.

3.77. The police also play a central role in the child's journey, including at the crucial decision-point of bail or remand. Once a child is detained in police custody post-charge partners must act quickly to prepare bail proposals for court. The Ministry of Justice and Home Office share a commitment to explore whether current use of remand by the police is as effective and proportionate as it should be when involving children accused of crimes. We acknowledge that police remand is sometimes crucial for public safety, especially for the most prolific offenders where other interventions have not worked. However, we need to better understand the evidence on police use of remand and what impacts this has on the number of children remanded to custody by the courts who do not subsequently receive a custodial sentence. We also need to consider the evidence of overrepresentation of Black and Mixed Heritage children in custody. **We will undertake a joint project this year across the two departments to examine the data and evidence on the use of police and court remand together, and whether remand is being used appropriately across the system. We will also consider whether amendments to legislation can support a more child-tailored approach. This project will inform our policy consideration of what provisions can be put in place to support good practice**, and keep children and communities safe, while ensuring remand to custody – whether in police custody or the youth secure estate – remains a genuine last resort.

Section 4: Modernising youth sentencing

3.78. The youth sentencing framework has remained largely unchanged for many years, and was largely unaffected by the Sentencing Act 2026 that followed David Gauke's Independent Sentencing Review. Given the challenges set out in Chapter 1, now is an opportune time to assess whether the current youth sentencing framework continues to meet the youth justice system's principal statutory aim – to prevent offending by children and young people, while having regard to their welfare.

3.79. Statute and longstanding youth justice principles are clear that custody should be reserved for only the most serious offences, where no other sanction is appropriate. However, this is not always reflected in practice. In 2024/25 the average custodial sentence length was just 18.8 months,[52] and in the three years from 2023 to 2025 custodial sentences were sometimes imposed for offences such as possession of cannabis (7 children); offences relating to theft of a motor vehicle (34 children); and driving whilst disqualified from holding or obtaining a licence, (7 children) all offences which (without reference to individual cases) you could reasonably expect to be managed in the community with effective supervision.[53]

3.80. Custodial sentencing is also applied disproportionately to some ethnic groups. Analysis by the Youth Justice Board found that, even after controlling for demographic and offence-related factors, Black children were between 2 and 8 percentage points more likely that White children to receive a custodial sentence rather than the alternative community sentence, a youth rehabilitation order.[54]

3.81. We know that short custodial sentences are not effective – for children or for public protection. More than two-thirds of children released from custodial sentences of twelve months or less in 2023/24 went on to reoffend within a year. Just over one-third of children sentenced to community sentences during the same period were proven to reoffend.[55] Yet around half of all custodial sentences imposed on children in 2025 were under 12 months.[56]

3.82. Given that the evidence tells us that short sentences may not be as effective in reducing offending as community sentences,[57] our challenge is to ensure the

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52 Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

53 Criminal Justice Statistics quarterly: December 2025 (HTML) – GOV.UK

54 Ethnic disproportionality in remand and sentencing in the youth justice system (2021) – GOV.UK

55 Proven reoffending statistics: January to March 2024 (2026) – GOV.UK

56 Criminal Justice Statistics quarterly: December 2025 (HTML) – GOV.UK

57 Impact of sentencing on proven reoffending for young offenders in England and Wales, 2012 to 2014 – MoJ (2019)

system has strong community-based sentencing options that address the need of today's cohort of children, and provide credible, safe alternatives to a custodial sentence. The current sentencing framework offers limited flexibility, particularly where children plead guilty at first appearance, but who may already have a significant history of earlier offending or harmful behaviour outside the formal court process, due to the increasing use of diversion. For example, in the case of the perpetrator of the Southport attack, despite a long pattern of concerning behaviour that suggested serious and escalating risk, when he did come before the court for the first time, the court's options were more limited than they otherwise would be if it were not his first conviction and he had pled guilty.

3.83. Today's system also isn't making enough use of family-focused interventions to address the factors that can contribute to children committing crime, nor is it ensuring that parents and carers face consequences when they do not take responsibility for their role in addressing their child's rehabilitation.

3.84. The youth sentencing framework needs reforming to align to the realities of modern youth offending. Without reform, sentencing will continue to rely too heavily on short custodial periods which do not support rehabilitation, fail to provide sufficiently robust community interventions, and miss opportunities to promote family support.

3.85. The reforms set out in this chapter will improve how sentencing operates for children, ensuring greater consistency with their needs and circumstances. Looking ahead, the government will assess the most effective means of further structural reform, with the aim of ensuring that the youth sentencing framework is genuinely bespoke to children, rather than an adapted version of the adult system. We will work with experts across the sector as this work is developed.

The reforms in this chapter will improve how sentencing operates for children, ensuring greater consistency with their needs and circumstances. Looking ahead, the government will assess the most effective approach to further structural reform, with the aim of ensuring that the youth sentencing framework is genuinely bespoke to children, rather than an adapted version of the adult system. We will engage with expert voices across the sector to inform this work. The youth sentencing regime should be one which supports children to turn away from crime by prioritising rehabilitation and using custody only when absolutely necessary. Clear, credible and flexible community-based options and a renewed focus on the role of the family will be essential to give courts the confidence that children can be safely and effectively supervised in the community.

Robust community sentencing options

3.86. **This government will widen the range of community-based sentencing options available to courts, to ensure responses are proportionate, credible and capable of managing risk, while supporting rehabilitation.** We will widen the range of community-based sentencing options available to courts so they can respond more flexibly and appropriately when children plead guilty to a first offence. We will revisit the current restriction that generally requires courts to impose a referral order in these cases, and **we will instead make the youth rehabilitation order (YRO) available for some, or all, children in receipt of their first conviction**. By enabling courts to impose a YRO in these circumstances, we will empower frontline practitioners to draw upon a broader and more robust set of interventions – the YRO offers up to eighteen requirements and can last for up to three years, allowing for more structured supervision and sustained rehabilitative work.

3.87. Referral orders were first introduced in 1999 as the main court order for a first conviction, usually low-level offending. In that context, the logic and principle of a panel of community volunteers designing a child's intervention plan was sound – it is an important part of our criminal justice system that members of the public are involved in. The government values and applauds the contribution of citizens from across our communities who volunteer their time. We know that (in many parts of the country) this system can and does work well.

3.88. However, the government believes it is timely to look fundamentally at whether it remains appropriate for volunteers to play a formal decision-making role in the design and oversight of intervention plans for an increasingly complex cohort of children, including those who may have committed more serious offences. We will therefore consider whether youth justice services should lead panel decision-making, with volunteers continuing to make an important contribution in an advisory capacity rather than holding formal decision-making powers. Volunteers may also play a useful role in supporting robust scrutiny of whether plans developed by the panel are being followed as intended, and whether agencies and children are meeting their respective responsibilities. Depending on the ultimate role of volunteers, we will consider how best to ensure training is appropriate and consistent, and whether an enhanced role in scrutiny would strengthen volunteers' contribution and reinforce rigorous accountability throughout the order. We will seek to make changes as soon as possible, by updating the statutory guidance and also considering if further subsequent legislative change is needed.

3.89. Alongside this, the government will strengthen the availability of more intensive community-based sentences for children who present higher levels of risk. We are exploring how the youth rehabilitation order with intensive supervision and

surveillance (YRO ISS) can be applied more flexibly drawing on learning from pilots testing dynamic electronic whereabouts monitoring alongside structured rehabilitative activity. Feedback from pilots was mixed – monitoring was generally seen as a positive tool for managing children safety in the community, and magistrates were largely positive or neutral about the impact of the powers on their confidence in YRO ISS as a robust alternative to custody. Youth justice services highlighted that greater flexibility would be valuable, noting that a 12-month activity requirement was too long for most children, but longer periods should be available where sustained support was needed. There was no indication that the pilots had a negative effect on breach rates, but nor was there strong evidence that the new powers, in the current format, significantly increased the use of YRO ISS as an alternative to custody.

3.90. We recognise that electronic monitoring can play a role in managing risk in some cases, but should be applied proportionately and in ways that support engagement and compliance. To that end, we do not intend on making electronic whereabouts monitoring mandatory, but will explore ways to affirm its value to practitioners through, for example, refreshed guidance.

3.91. Our Youth Intervention Courts pilots (set out at paragraphs 3.43 to 3.49) will test a new approach for some children subject to youth rehabilitation orders, with regular judicial oversight and more coordinated support. The pilots will test whether this model can strengthen court confidence in community sentences, and improve the poor outcomes for children subject to youth rehabilitation orders.

3.92. We also know that courts must have comprehensive information about a child – especially about any SEND/ALN or neurodivergence – to make the right decisions. Too frequently, this is not the case and courts cannot make fully-informed decisions. Section 9 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1969 gives one route to address this – when invoked by the youth court, it can require the local authority to investigate and report on the home surroundings, school record, health, and character of a young person involved in criminal proceedings. We will strengthen practice in this area, including raising awareness among youth justice services of the importance of ensuring this information is effectively communicated to the courts.

Custody used as a last resort

3.93. Custody must be reserved for the most serious and high-risk cases, where no other response can safely protect the public. This government is committed to reducing the use of custody for children wherever possible, while ensuring that robust custodial options remain available for the children for whom they are genuinely necessary.

3.94. Short custodial sentences can be particularly ineffective, and often counter-productive. As we set out above (paragraph 3.55) in relation to remand, sending a child to custody (often hundreds of miles from home) for a matter of weeks or months can often serve only to cause disruption and huge cost to taxpayers, without delivering better outcomes for victims or communities. The Sentencing Act 2026 created a presumption to suspend custodial sentences of 12 months or less for adults. That change was introduced in part because of the capacity crisis in our adult prisons that this government inherited – the youth estate does not face the same pressures but there is a case for also taking action on short youth custodial sentences.

3.95. We are clear – some children should, must and will go to custody. Committing serious violent and sexual offences requires a long custodial sentence, one which reflects the seriousness of the harm caused to victims and the need to protect the public. But too many children are sentenced to custody when they would be better kept in the community – where they can get the rehabilitative interventions they need, more effectively and at lower cost.

3.96. **As such, our ambition is to reform the framework for lower-level and shorter custodial options.** In particular, we will limit the role and use of the most commonly used youth custodial sentence, the detention and training order (DTO – a sentence which lasts up to two years, with half served in custody and half in the community). As part of this reform, our aim is to reduce the use of short DTOs.

3.97. We do not intend to replicate the adult model or apply adult sentencing approaches to children, as the evidence does not support this. We will not, therefore, introduce a presumption against short custodial sentences, as in the Sentencing Act 2026. Instead, we are proposing to legislate to raise the minimum DTO term to 12 months, working closely with the sector and delivery partners to ensure the legislation meets our objectives and avoids unintended consequences. The evidence shows that sentences below this threshold can have significantly poorer outcomes than community alternatives.[58]

3.98. Alongside these reforms, there will be targeted exemptions to ensure that custodial outcomes remain available where necessary. In implementing these changes, we will ensure there is sufficient flexibility within the framework to allow custody to be used where it is necessary to protect the public. This will include for children that present a clear risk of harm to others, where community sentences are unlikely to provide effective control. We will continue to work through the detail of this

[58] Impact of sentencing on proven reoffending for young offenders in England and Wales, 2012 to 2014 – MoJ (2019)

approach with the youth justice sector, the Knife Crime Coalition and delivery partners to ensure it delivers our public protection objectives, maintains public confidence, and avoids unintended consequences. In making these changes, we will ensure custody is reserved for children that need to be there on public protection grounds.

3.99. **The combined impact of our remand and sentencing reforms could see a gradual reduction in the custodial population of 20% by the end of this Parliament.**

3.100. The above reforms should take us towards a situation where a child is only locked up where they have committed a serious offence, and will serve a long sentence, in some cases well into their adulthood, or where non-custodial options have repeatedly failed to address offending behaviour. As more children serve longer sentences, a key role for youth custody will be preparing them for that and planning a good transition into the adult estate.

3.101. Nevertheless, children will still (for at least the foreseeable) be released back into the community from youth custody. As such, we will also examine whether current release arrangements for children serving custodial sentences remain appropriate. While the Sentencing Act 2026 introduced revised release provisions for adults, the position for children requires separate consideration. As part of our wider review of custodial sentencing, we will assess whether existing release points for youth sentences support effective rehabilitation and public protection.

3.102. The government will continue to work closely with the sector to shape a balanced and evidence-led approach that strengthens community-based responses where possible, while retaining the right custodial tools for the most serious cases. This will include working with victims' organisations, practitioners and local partners to ensure that reforms command public confidence, properly reflect the impact of offending on victims, and support effective risk management.

Deporting foreign national children who commit serious offences

3.103. Foreign nationals who commit serious offences should be removed from our country at the earliest possibility. Children are not exempt from this. The UK government and the British public believe in offering second chances for mistakes made as a child. But if a foreign national – no matter their age – commits a serious sexual or violent offence, they have lost that right, and we should and will remove them at the earliest possibility.

3.104. Under the current law, people who are convicted under the age of 18 do not automatically receive a deportation order and the UK's prisoner transfer agreements with other countries do not cover children. However, children can be

deported under wider powers related to whether their presence in the UK is conducive to the public good, and individuals can be returned under prisoner transfer agreements once they turn 18.

3.105. This government will pursue removal of serious sexual and violent foreign national offenders (FNOs) whenever it is safe to do and whatever their age. Deportations of foreign national offenders, including murderers and rapists, are up 32%, with more than 8,700 deported since this government came into power.[59] The Ministry of Justice and Home Office will, as part of the government's wider stance on FNOs, pursue removals of all individuals – whatever their age – as early and as quickly as possible.

Parents and carers taking responsibility

3.106. Government and public services cannot be held predominantly responsible for children's behaviour. Parents and guardians have a fundamental responsibility to properly care for and supervise their children. This is particularly the case when a child commits a crime or causes anti-social behaviour. Families and home environments can be critical in reducing reoffending, and parents and carers must play an active role in their child's rehabilitation. The system must do more to engage and support this.

3.107. We will ensure that parents and carers of children who offend are clear on what is expected of them and there is a greater onus on youth justice services to engage families throughout the justice process. We will explore the benefits of applying Family Group Decision-Making in the youth justice setting to help develop robust and effective plans for children and ensure that families play their part in preventing further offending.

3.108. But the system must also hold parents and carers to account where they do not engage. Parenting orders provide an important tool to do so, yet their use in criminal courts has declined dramatically, from more than 1,000 orders in 2009/10[60] to just 33 in 2022/23.[61] **This government will take action to encourage and strengthen the use of parenting orders. We will ensure that parents and carers can face more meaningful consequences when they wilfully do not comply with an order that the court considers key for their child's rehabilitation, or prevention of further offending.**

[59] Offenders: Deportation (20 February 2026) – UK Parliament

[60] Youth justice annual statistics: 2010 to 2011 (2012) – GOV.UK (supplementary table 5.8)

[61] Youth justice statistics: 2022 to 2023 (2024) – GOV.UK (supplementary table 5.9a)

3.109. This is not about punishing good parents trying their best. But to preserve confidence and faith in the youth justice system, it is important that there are consequences for those parents who wilfully do not engage or intervene with a court's plans for a child that is causing misery or harm to others.

Section 5: The age of criminal responsibility

3.110. The minimum age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is set at 10 years old. It has long been the government's position that this provides flexibility for early intervention to prevent later offending, and allows the justice system to respond where harm does occur.

3.111. Looking across the UK, Scotland has increased its minimum age of criminal responsibility to 12 (in 2019), and Northern Ireland has recently consulted on raising its threshold from 10. Internationally, many comparable jurisdictions have adopted higher thresholds, and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends a minimum age of criminal responsibility of 14. Many Parliamentarians and organisations across England and Wales have called for the government to increase the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

3.112. In practice, very few of the youngest children engaged in offending will receive formal criminal justice outcomes. There have been fewer than 50 sentences given to children under 12 in the past 5 years, none of which have been custodial sentences.[62]

3.113. The government also notes that other countries, which have a higher age of criminal responsibility, often have different arrangements for particular offences. For example, in Ireland, the wider age of criminal responsibility is 12 but children aged 10 or 11 can still be charged with murder, manslaughter, rape or aggravated sexual assault. In practice, therefore, how our age of criminal responsibility compares with other jurisdictions is a more nuanced picture than is sometimes reflected in commentary.

3.114. Nevertheless, we recognise the strength of views and interest in the issue of the age of criminal responsibility. We note that the Bar Council, chaired by Kirsty Brimelow KC, has established a dedicated working group to consider whether changes should be made to the minimum age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales. We welcome the Bar Council's focus on this issue, and its analysis will make an important contribution to the wider evidence base. We will carefully

[62] Criminal Justice Statistics quarterly: December 2025 (HTML) – GOV.UK

consider and respond to the Bar Council's findings, as we assess whether, and when, it may be appropriate to explore reform in this area.

3.115. Any future decisions on the minimum age of criminal responsibility must and would be approached with the utmost care. This is a complex and sensitive issue that relates to child welfare, public protection, victim confidence, and wider societal expectations. It is therefore essential that any potential reform is not rushed, and grounded in robust evidence, shaped by expert insight, and mindful of the needs and perspectives of victims, children and the wider public.

Section 6: A criminal records regime that unlocks positive futures

3.116. The criminal record disclosure regime is intended to strike a balance between rehabilitation and public protection – between enabling ex-offenders to move on with their lives and giving employers the information they need to make safer recruitment decisions. The regime rightly aims to make it harder for unsuitable people to enter workplaces where they might be a risk to others. But it should also support those who have put their offending behind them to take up employment, improve their life chances and make a contribution to society.

3.117. Over the past decade, parliamentarians, third sector organisations, and independent bodies such as the Law Commission have identified areas of concern within the criminal records regime when it comes to offending committed as a child. Although disclosure rules can vary (particularly in terms of the length of rehabilitation periods), most of the rules do not distinguish between childhood and adult offences. As a result, England and Wales have some of the strictest disclosure requirements across comparable countries when it comes to childhood offending.

3.118. The government recognises that it is particularly important that the regime supports the rehabilitation of those who commit offences when they are a child. Some children commit serious offences and, sadly, do pose potentially long-lasting risks which the public needs to be protected from. The regime needs to reflect that. However, it should also reflect children's developmental stage and greater capacity for change. Having a criminal record can create barriers to education, employment and other opportunities. We need to ensure that individuals do not unnecessarily face repercussions for things they did as children after they have grown up and left their offending behind.

3.119. The government will always ensure that our policy and systems protect people, particularly children and vulnerable adults, from harm.

3.120. It is, however, also important that disclosure rules do not entrench inequalities for groups already overrepresented in the youth justice system – including Black and ethnic minority children, children with SEND/ALN, and care experienced children. In 2024, Department for Work and Pensions analysis found that a criminal record was the second most frequently cited barrier to hiring people from disadvantaged groups, reported by 47% of employers.[63]

Those who offend should, where appropriate, be supported to move on from their mistakes, not face lifelong consequences that limit their opportunities and social mobility. The government is committed to ensuring we have an effective and proportionate regime for childhood offences – one that protects the public while enabling ex-offenders to rebuild their futures.

Consulting on potential targeted and proportionate childhood criminal record reforms

3.121. **This government will set out a targeted, proportionate package of potential reforms for the childhood criminal records regime, by the end of 2026.** All proposed changes will prioritise public protection whilst examining whether there are some sensible changes to disclosure rules that better reflect the fact that offending committed as a child is different.

3.122. The potential reforms we set out will be developed in parallel with other changes set out in this White Paper – about, for example, the OOCR framework and the use of custodial sentences.

3.123. As part of our plans for a more coherent, nationally-supported OOCR framework, we will examine whether and how to reform the criminal record implications of receiving a youth conditional caution (which currently requires automatic disclosure for a 3 month period). The premise of an out-of-court resolution is to ensure there is a nimble and targeted intervention to address the root causes of why a child committed a less serious offence. Creating a barrier to employment or education at such a pivotal time could be unnecessarily counterproductive.

3.124. At present, all custodial sentences imposed for childhood offences require lifelong disclosure for sensitive roles. As per Section 4, we know that children can and do receive custodial sentences for less serious offences. As we develop proposals for reforming the detention and training order, to ensure that custody remains a true

[63] DWP Employer Survey 2024: Diversity and disadvantaged groups (2025) – GOV.UK

last resort for childhood offending, we will also look at the criminal record implications.

3.125. Alongside those specific changes, we will also examine whether there is a case for treating childhood offending somewhat differently in specific circumstances. The government is not convinced of the case, called for by some, for wholesale 'sealing' of all crimes committed as a child. However, we will examine whether the disclosure period for childhood offences under basic checks (i.e. for roles not involving work with children or vulnerable adults) could be shortened. We will also review the list of offences which must always be disclosed for sensitive roles. It is extremely important that such a list exists – some crimes are so horrific, and some risks are so great, that they should never be 'wiped'. However, we will examine whether the full set of offences is relevant when it comes to offending committed as a child, still developing mentally and emotionally.

3.126. Any and all proposed changes that we set out will be targeted, proportionate and will have public protection at their heart. As we develop proposals, we will be particularly focused on ensuring that serious violent and sexual offending is treated with the utmost importance.

Chapter 4: Strengthening youth justice services

What this government has already done:

Introduced three-year core grant funding settlements to provide greater stability and certainty.

What this government will do:

Pursue reform of youth justice service funding arrangements and oversight, setting out our proposals in July. Any significant changes to funding arrangements would take effect in the next Spending Review period, whilst we anticipate oversight arrangements changing from 2027/28.

Introduce a new Youth Justice Innovation Fund, worth at least £1.5 million over 2027/28 and 2028/29.

Reform the role and remit of the Youth Justice Board so that it is focussed on continuous improvement of youth justice services, and transfer relevant functions to the Ministry of Justice.

Explore the rollout of AI-enabled transcription and productivity tools to reduce administrative burden on practitioners.

Establish an Advisory Panel to explore the responsible use of preventative analytics to support earlier identification and intervention.

Work with the Welsh Government to determine a clearer and more substantial role for the Welsh Government in youth justice, starting with devolved Turnaround and youth remand funding from 2027.

Strengthen our ongoing partnership with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), starting with the consolidation of Turnaround and youth remand funding so this can be directed and distributed by the GMCA.

4.1. Youth justice services play a unique and indispensable role in the youth justice system, acting as the core multi-agency vehicle for preventing offending and reoffending by children. Youth justice services are a partnership of organisations (including police, probation, health, and local authorities including education and children's social care) responsible for delivering youth justice in the local authority, including delivering community sentences, supervising children on licence following

release from custody, assessing children and delivering rehabilitative programmes, and providing reports and information to courts. They also deliver crucial prevention and early intervention work with children at risk of offending.

4.2. A successful youth justice service can interrupt the trajectories that lead to adult criminality. However, youth reoffending rates are high (around a third of children go on to reoffend),[64] and given 80% of prolific adult offenders begin offending as children,[65] it is clear that the system is still not consistently addressing the drivers of youth offending.

4.3. Although first-time entrants and overall caseloads have fallen across the last two decades, the cohort entering the system now has a high concentration of children with complex needs which require intensive, joined-up support. Against this backdrop, some statutory partners have been withdrawing resource as they face increasing demand on their own services – this has placed pressure on youth justice services' ability to respond to children's complex needs effectively. Others have scaled back their strategic involvement in youth justice service management boards and planning, leading to a reduction in collective strategic oversight and system-level leadership of youth justice services. Where joint ownership has not been consistently maintained, this has constrained the capacity of local youth justice services and contributed to variation in provision and outcomes between areas.

4.4. These local decisions are understandable. However, the youth justice service model of local, multi-agency partnerships is fundamentally sound – it was right in 1998, and remains the right core arrangement to tackle the challenges set out in Chapter 1.

4.5. And many of the teams perform well. However, a significant minority continue to underperform. This fails the children and victims they work with and the communities they serve. For example, the new standalone victims standard in HM Inspectorate of Probation inspections has highlighted that many youth justice services and their partners need to improve how they engage with and support victims.

4.6. Current oversight arrangements make it difficult to address this variation – responsibilities are spread across the Ministry of Justice, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and HM Inspectorate of Probation, with no single national performance framework to hold statutory partners accountable at both strategic and operational

[64] Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[65] Prolific Offenders (2019) – GOV.UK

levels. This fragmentation limits the system's ability to drive youth justice service performance from 'good' to 'great.'

4.7. Furthermore, the funding model that underpins youth justice services is outdated, inconsistent and no longer reflects the needs of the system. The historical development of the core grant for youth justice services is complex, and the current funding arrangement was arrived at by accident rather than design. The current method for distributing the core grant is based on population and deprivation data from 2009 and reflects decisions made in 2011/12 to merge several ringfenced grants as a temporary holding position. Well over a decade later, this 'transitional' arrangement remains in place, despite the youth justice landscape having changed significantly.

4.8. Funding from the Ministry of Justice now makes up on average around one-third of youth justice services' funding, but the proportion varies dramatically between areas – from as little as 9% to as much as 64%[66] – with the remainder funded by local authorities, police, probation, health and others. In Wales, a large proportion of funding is provided by devolved sources, reflecting the role of devolved responsibilities within the system. Resourcing and financial contributions of partner agencies are set by different organisational decision makers, limiting MoJ's levers for influence and leading to a wide variation across youth justice services. While local variation is a natural part of a locally delivered system, it cannot be right that there is such a 'postcode lottery' for financing these vital youth justice services.

Every youth justice service should be consistently delivering the high-quality, evidence-based support that addresses the complex drivers behind youth crime and prevents further offending. Services must be equipped with the multi-agency capacity, capability and clarity of responsibility needed to respond to the rising levels of complexity and need in the youth justice cohort.

To achieve this, every youth justice service must have fair, timely, sustainable and sufficient funding that is equitable and based on need. Youth justice services must have the stability to plan, invest and innovate, backed by consistent contributions from all statutory partners within the multi-agency model. Stronger oversight and frontline and peer support will drive continuous improvement and deliver consistent high standards of practice.

[66] Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

Section 1: Stable and sustainable funding

4.9. This government has introduced a more stable and sustainable approach to funding by offering youth justice services three-year core grant awards. This will give services the certainty they need to retain crucial staff, develop more comprehensive integrated plans with their statutory partners, and commission services and interventions more efficiently.

4.10. But we will go further. **We will, in the coming months, set out our plans for longer-term youth justice funding reform, building on learning from work to develop a new funding formula, and ensuring that future arrangements reflect projected need and the full landscape of available funding sources.**

4.11. We want to make these changes in partnership with youth justice services, and will seek their views about the detail of their implementation. As part of this wider reform, we want to explore how we can reduce the administrative burden placed on youth justice services by central government. We will therefore also seek views on the requirement for local authorities to produce youth justice annual plans and submit serious incident notifications.

4.12. We will also work closely across government to ensure that broader public service changes – including ongoing reforms to the NHS through Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), local government reform and reorganisation, reforms to policing governance following the abolition of the PCC model in May 2028, and the ongoing reforms to the Probation Service to deliver sustainable workloads and improve public protection – protect the continuity and effectiveness of youth justice delivery.

Section 2: Driving performance and raising standards

4.13. To deliver a consistently high-performing youth justice system, we must ensure that accountability, capability and oversight keep pace with the evolving needs of the youth justice cohort. Those responsible for delivering youth justice (local services, partners, practitioners) must be held to clear standards and supported to meet them. Staff need the skills, resources and training to respond effectively to the complex needs of the children they work with, and where appropriate, services should be making effective use of voluntary and community sector organisations. Alongside this, proportionate and effective systems are required to monitor performance, identify problems early and step in with targeted support when needed.

4.14. Most youth justice services already perform well – but a stronger national approach will help even more to reach 'good' or 'outstanding', ensuring that no child's experience or outcomes are determined by where they live, and that every victim of

child crime receives a consistently high standard of support. Crucially, a strengthened approach to performance should play an important role in the urgent need to reduce racial and other disparities across the system.

4.15. At the same time, we know there is increasing pressure on statutory partners, and that youth justice services often struggle to access essential specialist provision – such as speech and language therapy, health support, and consistent education engagement – despite clear evidence of its importance to effective assessment and intervention. We also know that not all youth justice services have access to a seconded probation officer and we are taking action with partners to develop and implement solutions that tackle this inconsistency.

4.16. Strong partnership arrangements are essential at both operational and strategic levels. Good operational partnerships enable accurate assessments, timely information sharing, and coordinated responses that no single service can deliver in isolation. Effective strategic partnerships provide shared ownership of risk, clearer accountability, and the collective capability to influence local systems.

4.17. Alongside this, a resilient and skilled workforce is essential – the quality of youth justice services is dependent on the people that work every day to support children and divert them from offending. We want to ensure that youth justice practitioners and leaders can access the level of training and continuous professional development to equip them with the skills required to work effectively with partners and deliver effective services.

4.18. National Youth Justice Standards should also be reviewed to ensure they remain aligned with the realities of current practice, for example by reflecting the highly complex needs of children in the youth justice system which require integrated and specialist responses.

4.19. And so, as well as setting out plans for future funding arrangements, **this government will also commit to a fundamental review of youth justice service oversight.** We will seek the views of the sector in summer 2026 on proposals for:

- a proportionate national oversight framework
- strengthening strategic partner arrangements
- how oversight can drive progress on tackling persistent disparities
- how Youth Justice National Standards should be changed

4.20. To drive this change, **this government has established a new Youth Justice Innovation Fund of at least £1.5 million over 2027/28 and 2028/29.** This fund will invest in testing radical new approaches to reducing youth offending. We envisage this being spent on a small number of projects to thoroughly test practical new ways of achieving the goals set out in this White Paper – to develop clear, evidence-based practice conclusions to inform future policy and funding decisions.

4.21. This new fund will build on the 'Pathfinder' projects that the Youth Justice Board has undertaken in recent years, including the London Accommodation Pathfinder which has successfully tested community-based alternatives to custodial remand. As part of the government's reforms of the YJB (see the next section), we anticipate that it will play a key role in this innovation fund as part of its continuing vital role in driving improvement across the youth justice system. We will set out the precise mechanism for the fund in due course.

4.22. In line with the new partnership that the government set out in February's policy statement, we are keen that youth justice services, and other organisations with an interest in youth justice, help inform the government's decisions about which thematic priorities should be prioritised for the fund's first investments. We are currently minded to focus initially on the following areas:

- preventative analytics and IT systems – as set out below in section 4, we want the youth justice system to make better use of the most modern technology to identify and intervene early with children. We could use this innovation fund to work with some services to test these new technologies or casework systems;
- violence against women and girls – delivering the government's mission of halving VAWG will, as set out in Chapter 2, require a whole-system approach. We want to pilot new ways that youth justice services can identify risks and respond quickly, and the fund could help deliver on this goal; and
- reducing criminalisation of care-experienced children – the fund could test innovative approaches to reducing unnecessary criminalisation, such as alternative crisis responses for residential carers that would prevent escalation into custody.

4.23. We and the YJB will seek views from services and other interested parties in the coming months about these (and other) ideas for early priorities for the fund from 2027/28. We expect to be able to confirm the thematic priorities in the autumn.

Section 3: A new purpose for the Youth Justice Board

4.24 Since its creation in 1998, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) has played an important role in shaping the youth justice system. It has overseen major shifts in practice, supported local services during a period of significant transformation, and contributed to the substantial reductions in youth offending and the use of custody over the past two decades.

4.25 But the context in which the system now operates has changed profoundly since 1998. The youth justice cohort is smaller but with a higher concentration of complex needs, the drivers of harm more acute, and the demands on local frontline services are greater than when the Board was first established. The landscape of public accountability has also evolved, with a renewed emphasis on democratic oversight and system efficiency following the Cabinet Office Public Bodies Review.

4.26 In December 2024, the Ministry of Justice commissioned an independent review of the YJB and its operations, undertaken by Steve Crocker. His report provides a valuable assessment of the Board's current strengths and challenges, and offers clear recommendations on how its work could better support a modern, dynamic youth justice system. However, the scale of change needed – and the clear message from the wider Public Bodies Review – makes it clear that more significant reform is required than that report recommended.

4.27 The remit of the YJB has already evolved over time. The transfer of custodial commissioning to the Youth Custody Service, part of HM Prisons and Probation Service, in 2017 signalled a shift in where operational accountability should sit. That change rightly brought Ministers closer to the decisions that shape youth custody, enabling democratic oversight of a cohort that is increasingly vulnerable and presenting with higher average levels of need.

4.28 With fewer children being held in custody, pressures on local youth justice services have intensified. Complexity in children's needs and worrying trends in serious violence are increasing the demands placed on frontline teams. These challenges require clear national leadership and system alignment.

4.29 To meet these demands, this government has decided that the role of the YJB will be reformed so that it focuses on where it can add the greatest value – providing expert, independent insight into practice, identifying and promoting best practice, and supporting local services in their continuous improvement. This renewed remit will harness the Board's considerable expertise while strengthening accountability within central government for the oversight, funding and monitoring of the youth justice system.

4.30 Under these reforms, responsibility for several key functions will transfer from the YJB to the Ministry of Justice – including national oversight of the youth justice system, monitoring of youth justice service performance in England and Wales and development of National Standards. These are functions that should sit under clear democratic accountability. The core grant for youth justice services, which has long been administered by the YJB, has also transferred to the Ministry of Justice – aligning funding, oversight and policy responsibility in one place.

4.31 This change does not diminish the importance of the YJB. As the system evolves, the YJB's independent voice, thematic expertise and focus on best practice and continuous improvement will be more important than ever – for example to drive much-needed improvement on complex and cross-cutting areas such as reducing racial disproportionality and responding effectively to violence against women and girls.

4.32 With youth justice services entering a period of funding reform, with multi-year settlements and a greater emphasis on innovation and collaboration, the YJB's reformed role will help ensure that frontline teams are supported to deliver consistent, high-quality, evidence-based work. In doing so, it will play a central part in improving outcomes for children and strengthening public safety.

4.33 To ensure that youth justice services and partners get the practical support they need to improve outcomes for children, we will make better use of data and technology (as set out below in section 5), and we will work with partners like UK Research and Innovation and with academic institutions to answer our key areas of research interest, set out at Annex A. This will ensure that guidance and support always follow the evidence for what works to prevent offending.

4.34 The Ministry of Justice and the YJB Board have agreed on the following 'vision' for a reformed YJB: **The reformed Youth Justice Board will drive measurable, evidence-led improvement across youth justice services by identifying what works, supporting innovation, and accelerating the spread of effective approaches to improve outcomes for children, victims and communities.**

4.35 The Ministry of Justice will work in close partnership with the YJB and the wider sector to manage this transition, ensuring it is smooth, transparent and supportive of frontline services. We will engage regularly with the sector as plans develop, sharing updates, listening to feedback, and providing clarity on operation implications well in advance of any changes taking effect. As part of this work, we will also consider how to introduce a strengthened role for the Welsh Government with regard to youth justice performance and oversight in Wales.

4.36 To lead this new phase, in January the government appointed Phil Bowen as interim Chair of the YJB. His extensive experience in criminal justice innovation and system reform will provide strong leadership during this transition. Recruitment for a permanent Chair of the YJB will begin shortly.

Section 4: Strengthening the role of devolved governments and regional partners

Youth justice devolution in Wales

4.37 As part of our commitment to delivering a high-performing youth justice system, this government recognises the part that that the Welsh Government and devolved partners play in identifying and addressing the needs of their local communities. As set out in the UK and Welsh Governments' joint statement on 25 March 2026, we will agree an expanded and clearly defined role for the Welsh Government as part of wider youth justice system reform. Since the current arrangements for youth justice services were established in 1998, the context in which services operate in Wales has changed considerably and we are committed to updating the arrangements to reflect these developments.

4.38 We will start this new arrangement by, from April 2027, devolving funding to reduce the use of remand for children in Wales, as well as for youth justice early intervention and prevention, currently delivered through the Turnaround programme. This will offer the Welsh Government the flexibility to reduce bureaucracy in current funding arrangements and support more streamlined delivery, as well as to better target funding and tailor interventions in a way that reflects the context in Wales. The UK and Welsh Governments have also started discussions regarding an expanded role for the Welsh Government in relation to the youth justice core grant.

4.39 We would also like to explore a clearer and strengthened role for the Welsh government that goes beyond the devolution of funding. As part of our work to review and reform the oversight of and strategy for youth justice services, we will continue to work closely with the Welsh Government to reflect the role of Welsh democratic institutions in providing strengthened democratic accountability for devolved services in Wales, with a view to an expanded and clearly defined role for the Welsh Government.

A bold new partnership with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority

4.40 The UK Government recognises the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) as a strong and trusted regional partner. Greater Manchester is uniquely well-positioned to act as a trailblazer for a more ambitious, regional approach to

delivering youth justice – one that places decision-making closer to communities and enables services to respond flexibly to local need. This approach builds on well-established partnerships between GMCA, the Ministry of Justice, its constituent councils and their children's and community services, and its joint strategy and coterminous authority with the Greater Manchester Police.

4.41 That is why, from April 2026, we have pooled both Turnaround and community remand funding across Greater Manchester youth justice services, giving GMCA the authority to direct and distribute that funding alongside GM Directors of Children's Services as the statutory duty holders. This arrangement will support greater coordination across the system and allow funding to be used more flexibly in response to local need.

4.42 We are also actively exploring how to strengthen this partnership in future years to build on our shared ambition to improve outcomes for children through innovative and locally led approaches, including through delivering a similar arrangement for the youth justice core grant from April 2027. The Ministry of Justice and GMCA will shortly sign a 'strategic partnership statement', setting out our shared objectives and principles for delivery. We will update on the progress of these discussions later this year.

Section 5: Harnessing technology to strengthen practice

4.43 The youth justice system must be equipped with tools that reflect the realities of modern practice. While the nature of childhood offending and the needs of children have changed significantly, the digital infrastructure that supports youth justice services has not always kept pace – outdated systems and processes can actively limit the time practitioners are able to spend working directly with children and families. This government wants to ensure that youth justice services have access to modern, reliable technology that enables high-quality practice and supports professional judgement.

4.44 Practitioners should be spending most of their time and energy on meaningful engagement with children and families, not endless record-keeping. We know that some local services have already seized the opportunities posed by new technology like artificial intelligence-enabled transcription and productivity tools – we will look at how the government can support this across youth justice services and youth custody, building on innovative practice elsewhere in the justice system.

4.45 We also know there is significant untapped potential to use data and technology more proactively to support earlier and more appropriate intervention. A more modern approach to data use could allow services to bring together existing

information – including assessment scores and outcomes – alongside professional insight. Used responsibly, this could support a more rounded understanding of a child's strengths, needs, risks and vulnerabilities, enabling earlier and more precisely targeted support.

4.46 Many local authorities and youth justice services are already exploring how better use of data and technology can support earlier identification of risk and more effective multi-agency working across education, children's social care, youth justice and policing. As part of its reformed role, the Youth Justice Board, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, will work with services to identify where these approaches are delivering positive impact, support shared learning, and help scale effective practice across the system.

4.47 **Alongside this, the government will explore how machine learning and advanced analytics could be applied responsibly within the youth justice system to support early intervention and harm prevention.** The aim of this work would not be to automate decision-making, but to provide practitioners with evidence-informed insights that help identify where support may be most effective and timely. We are clear that this will require strong ethical, technical and operational safeguards to mitigate the risks of stigmatisation, unnecessary criminalisation or biases, and that tools should inform, not replace, professional judgement.

4.48 To support this complex work, this government is establishing an Advisory Panel on preventative analytics for youth justice in spring 2026, bringing together academic and practitioner expertise to inform future development and ensure that high standards are maintained and risks mitigated.

Chapter 5: Secure custodial environments that protect the public and support rehabilitation

What this government has already done:

Invested £300m into youth justice placements in Secure Children's Homes until 2032

Established a Youth Custody Performance Taskforce, chaired by the Minister for Youth Justice, to drive short-term improvements.

Commissioned the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families for England to lead a review into safeguarding arrangements across the youth custodial estate.

Published the government response to the independent review of girls in youth custody, established the Girls in Youth Justice Advisory Board, and committed to strengthening decision-making behind placing girls in Secure Children's Homes, and improving the workforce's ability to support and care for girls in custody.

Expanded Release on Temporary Licence to support resettlement planning.

What this government will do:

Review whether legislation governing youth custodial settings remains fit for purpose.

Move away from large custodial institutions towards smaller, more child-centred settings.

Increase the time children spend out of their rooms in Young Offenders Institutions, engaged in education, purposeful activity and rehabilitation, by at least 50% by the end of this Parliament.

Publish a Youth Custody Transformation Plan in autumn 2026, setting out plans for the future of the custodial estate, the workforce that supports it, and the steps we will take to strengthen provision for children.

5.1. The youth custody population has fallen dramatically over the past two decades, from more than 3,000 children and young people in 2004/5 to an all-time low of around 410 in February 2026.[67] This reduction reflects the long-standing principle

[67] Youth Custody Data (2026) – GOV.UK

that custody should only ever be used as a last resort for children, and reserved for the most serious cases.

5.2. Today, the youth custodial estate holds some of the most vulnerable children in society – children who have experienced multiple layers of disadvantage, trauma and unmet need throughout their lives. These children often present with highly complex needs, and require intensive interventions. Particular groups are also significantly overrepresented in the youth custody population – Black and Mixed children, Muslim children, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, children with special education needs, disabilities, or neurodiversity and children with care-experience.

5.3. The youth custody estate is comprised of four different 'sectors':

- Young Offender Institutions (YOIs): Larger, more prison-like establishments, typically used for older children. These operate more rigid regimes and have lower staff-to-child ratios than other parts of the estate.
- Secure Training Centres (STCs): STCs aim to provide a more structured learning and behavioural support, with a higher staff to child ratio, compared to YOIs.
- Secure Children's Homes (SCHs): These are small, welfare-led settings run by local authorities that provide intensive care and support. Mainly used for younger or more vulnerable children, with a strong emphasis on safeguarding and emotional wellbeing, and higher staff-to-child ratios than YOIs and STCs.
- Secure School: A newer model of youth custody; the first secure school opened last year, operated by the Oasis Trust. It aims to integrate education, health and care in a therapeutic setting.

5.4. However, some of the environments in which many of these children are held are not currently capable of addressing those needs. Despite the significant fall in numbers, the conditions within the youth custody estate remain deeply concerning. Reoffending rates for children in custody remain far too high (62% of those released in 2023/24 reoffended within a year),[68] demonstrating that the system is failing to rehabilitate children effectively. Violence is widespread – both between children and towards staff – creating unsafe, volatile environments that undermine attempts at stability or therapeutic work. Levels of self-harm across the estate are profoundly troubling, signalling a system struggling to provide emotional safety or adequate mental health support. Many children continue to spend excessive amounts of time in their rooms, significantly limiting their access to education, meaningful activity

[68] Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

and positive relationships with trusted adults. Where education is available, provision is often inconsistent or inadequate, varying significantly between establishments. Staff across the estate need far stronger specialist training to work with the children detained in custody.

5.5. These challenges are compounded by the fact most Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) – where the majority of children in custody are held[69] – are fundamentally not fit for purpose. Their size, layout and culture are out of step with contemporary evidence on how best to support children in custody. Large, institutional environments make it harder to create safety, stability and sustained relationships – all core components of effective rehabilitation. But where there are good examples of positive practice, such as performance at YOI Parc, we will seek to emulate this across the estate, ensuring leaders are able to learn from, and support, each other across sites.

Section 1: Stabilising and strengthening today's estate

5.6. Although the youth custodial estate continues to face profound challenges, this government has already taken some important steps to stabilise the system, strengthen safeguarding and improve the experiences and outcomes for children in custody.

5.7. The Youth Custody Service has introduced Roadmaps to Effective Practice which set out clear, time-bound actions to improve performance at site level. These include strengthening early induction, so children are stabilised more quickly on arrival; embedding reflective supervision to support consistent staff responses; redesigning custody regimes to protect education and reduce operational disruption; and taking practical steps to improve safety, reduce violence and enhance decency across the estate. Case information and professional insight are increasingly brought together through multi-disciplinary support meetings, improving joined-up responses around each child. These changes are being implemented now and throughout 2026–27, to ensure improvements take root across each YOI immediately.

5.8. Secure Children's Homes are the best-performing sector in the youth custody estate (as per Ofsted judgements), so we have recommissioned essential placements in several Secure Children's Homes, protecting these well into the next decade. We have also supported children's resettlement by changing the Release

[69] On average, 63% of children were held in a YOI in the year ending March 2025. Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

on Temporary Licence operational policy, enabling more children to maintain links with their communities, access education or employment opportunities, and build resilience ahead of release.

Despite the progress already made, this government must and will go further. We need to deliver a step-change across the youth custodial estate, raising standards to ensure that every child's custodial experience is safe, purposeful and rehabilitative. We will work towards all children spending meaningful time out of their rooms, engaged in high-quality education that strengthens core skills and builds practical capabilities they can carry into their communities. We will drive down violence so that safety becomes the norm for both children and staff. Specialist support will be delivered by a skilled and compassionate workforce who understand children's needs and can form the stable, constructive relationships essential to rehabilitation.

Driving performance and accountability

5.9. This government is taking decisive action to drive up performance across the youth custodial estate. Reoffending rates for children leaving custody remain far too high. Improving outcomes for children in custody – and reducing their likelihood of returning to the system – is central to our reforms.

5.10. **We have established a new Youth Custody Performance Taskforce, chaired by the Minister for Youth Justice, which will rigorously monitor key performance indicators and drive targeted action where required.**

5.11. Alongside this, the government is strengthening its oversight of equality and fairness across the youth custodial estate. Improved use of data and insights will support a better understanding of children's experiences in custody, including where outcomes differ between groups, enabling targeted action where disparities are identified. Key areas of focus are incentives and earned privileges, adjudications and use of force.

5.12. Violence between children and against staff cannot and will not be tolerated. We will closely scrutinise violence data through three-month and twelve-month trends to ensure reductions are decisive and sustained. We will also track other critical indicators, including high-quality education delivery.

5.13. We are seeking to significantly increase the proportion of time that children spend outside their rooms, engaged in meaningful rehabilitative activities – education and vocational training, enrichment activities and interventions. We are reviewing the way we measure and record these activities to ensure we have a robust measure

that allows us to effectively monitor progress. Under the current measure however our goal is to increase time out of room by at least 50% by end of this Parliament.

A skilled and sustainable workforce

5.14. Staff are the backbone of a safe and stable custodial environment. Every day, they work in challenging conditions with professionalism, resilience and a deep commitment to the children in their care. Given the complexity of needs of the children in custody, it is vital that this workforce is supported, valued and equipped to address those needs.

5.15. To strengthen staff capability and confidence, we are considering how we can best support the workforce, including through exploring mentoring opportunities and extending programmes designed to bolster reflective practice. This will provide youth justice workers with structured, ongoing support – creating space for reflective practice, strengthening professional capability and improving wellbeing. In turn, this will strengthen the care they provide and the relationships they build with children.

5.16. We will closely monitor completion of Minimising and Managing Physical Restraint training to ensure staff are equipped to de-escalate conflict and manage challenging behaviour safely. We will continue to work closely with the Independent Restraint Review Panel to ensure that restraint is a last resort for staff.

5.17. We are reviewing foundational training for Band 3 Youth Justice Workers to ensure it reflects a child-centred approach, and will review and strengthen induction processes for new recruits across all grades. Alongside this, the Youth Custody Service is working to attract and retain a diverse workforce, recognising the importance of representation, fairness and trust in delivering effective custody.

5.18. However, the government wants to go further still and is examining how to broaden the pathways into youth custody careers, so that new staff – including those who may never have considered this type of work before – can bring fresh skills, diverse experiences and new perspectives to the estate. There are various ways we will achieve this, and we are already examining our recruitment campaigns and selection processes to ensure they can target individuals able to offer these fresh perspectives. We will learn from successes across the public sector where specific programmes (such as Teach First for teaching, or Frontline for social care) have widened pre-existing routes into frontline roles to broaden expertise. We will set out more detailed plans for how we will deliver this level of ambitious change in youth custody in our custody transformation plan in autumn.

5.19. Finally, as part of this, we will consider whether current operating models around recruitment, and where youth custody staff sit within the broader prison framework, are best suited to bringing in those perspectives.

Putting safety and welfare first

5.20. No child should ever be at risk of harm, not least whilst in our care. Ensuring the highest standards of safeguarding is paramount. This government has established a Safeguarding Panel to review current processes, provide increased scrutiny and deliver recommendations in the coming months, to ensure that any safeguarding concerns in the future are acted upon with the appropriate urgency.

5.21. Whilst the youth custody estate looks very different today, this government is committed to learning all possible lessons from the Prison and Probation Ombudsman's recent investigation into the horrific abuse at Medomsley Detention Centre between 1961 and 1987. No government can ever undo the profound harm suffered by the many victims – but we are, and we must, take steps to ensure it never happens again. On behalf of all governments, we are deeply sorry for the pain and suffering the victims and survivors at Medomsley felt and continue to feel.

5.22. We have commissioned the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families for England to lead a comprehensive review of safeguarding across the youth custodial estate. Through their recommendations – and the expertise of our Safeguarding Panel – we will strengthen safeguarding practice across the system. This will include enhancing safeguarding culture among staff by equipping them with more effective training, ensuring there are clear and consistent routes for children, and those around them, to raise safeguarding concerns, and ensuring that the system responds quickly and appropriately when concerns are raised.

5.23. This government will also consider the roles and responsibilities of children's social care in relation to children in custody, as part of this review led by the Chief Social Worker.

Raising the ambition for education

5.24. Many children enter custody with a history of chronic disengagement from school, exclusion and significant gaps in basic literacy and numeracy skills. Last year, the Children's Commissioner for England found that education in Young Offender Institutions is too often inconsistent, narrowly focused, lacks continuity with education before and after custody, and does not adequately support those with additional needs. The report concluded that declining education provision could be attributed to two key factors – a lack of expert educational involvement and current education contracts giving government little control and input into education provisions.

5.25. We have therefore asked the Children's Commissioner for England to develop proposals for reform that address these longstanding weaknesses. Early insights point to a more ambitious and simplified model – one that sets clearer, higher expectations for all children and staff to attend, engage, attain and excel in education. We should not assume that the same models which did not work for these children in the community will be effective in custody, and are committed to providing staff with the autonomy and resources required to ensure they can provide the best quality education possible.

Addressing the distinct needs of girls in custody

5.26. This government is taking significant steps to improve the experiences of girls in custody. Girls make up a very small proportion of the youth custody cohort (2%)[70] but present with some of the most complex needs and often high levels of self-harm.[71] In 2024, we commissioned Susannah Hancock to undertake an independent review into the placement and care of girls in the youth custody estate.

5.27. In November 2025, the government published its response to the independent review, setting out a clear programme of work. Since then, we have established the Girls in Youth Justice Advisory Board (GYJAB), chaired by the Minister for Youth Justice, to maintain high-level oversight and drive sustained improvement. The Board's first meeting considered progress on the Girls Care Project 2026, and explored how support for girls could be strengthened across the wider youth justice system, focusing on vulnerabilities, gaps in provision, and priorities for strengthening community responses.

5.28. To ensure children have access to the most appropriate support and setting for their needs, we are working closely with Registered Managers of Secure Children's Homes (SCHs) and the Youth Custody Service to strengthen their decision-making when determining custodial placements. We are encouraged that every SCH has signed up to a new 'protocol', which will offer more assistance and peer-support when dealing with some of the most complex children in the system – a key recommendation from the independent review.

5.29. This government is committed to working closely with frontline staff and clinical advisors to deepen our understanding of the needs of girls, and to building a robust evidence base that informs future work on how best to address those needs.

5.30. Beyond these commitments, we will continue to explore broader changes to improve the experiences and chances for this small but often very complex cohort.

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[70] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

[71] Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate: Update to September 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

As part of this, we are considering where girls are placed, and whether these continue to be the most appropriate arrangements for their needs.

Section 2: Vision for the future

5.31. The legislation which governs different custodial settings is nearly 30 years old, and reflects a different system to that which exists today. As we make wider changes to the youth justice system to ensure it is fit for the future, the same applies to the rules which govern our secure estate. **This government will therefore consider whether the legislation which governs youth custodial settings remains fit for purpose – to provide safe, rehabilitative environments for children.**

5.32. However, the future of the youth custodial estate must be one which moves away from large, outdated institutions and towards smaller, more child-centred settings. More familial units – like those found in Secure Children's Homes - will sit at the heart of this shift, as we know these environments are better placed to offer the therapeutic care and high-quality education that helps children rebuild their futures.

5.33. Outcomes for children deprived of their liberty – whether on justice or welfare grounds – remain unacceptably poor, with very high lifetime costs. Tackling these deep-rooted issues will not be simple, but maintaining the status quo is not an option.

5.34. Part of the challenge is the system itself. There is no single, coherent secure care system that spans welfare, justice and health. The legislative, financial and commissioning landscape is complex, spanning across multiple departments and stakeholders, including local authorities – too often, the setting a child enters depends on the route through which they arrived, rather than their underlying need. This fragmented landscape raises serious questions about value for money, but more importantly, limits the system's ability to deliver consistent, high-quality care.

5.35. The Ministry of Justice is committed to working closely with the Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care/NHS England, the Welsh Government and other partners, to think creatively about what secure care should look like in the long term. In doing so, we will not limit our ambition to the legal pathways children may take into the system, but instead focus on what each child needs to thrive.

5.36. **This government will set out its long-term ambitions for youth custody in more detail in a dedicated Youth Custody Transformation Plan, to be published in autumn 2026.** This will be the first comprehensive statement of our vision for youth custody in a generation, reflecting the profound changes in the size,

composition and needs of the custodial cohort over the past two decades. The plan will set a clear direction for the future role of custody within a modern youth justice system, and will set out how we will address the significant challenges facing the estate, and strengthen safety and rehabilitation.

Chapter 6: A modern youth justice system that prevents offending

6.1. The challenges facing children and communities today are fundamentally different from those faced by previous generations. Alongside this, patterns of youth offending, the way we approach it, and the cohort of children being supported, have shifted. Yet the youth justice system has not kept pace with these changes, too often responding too late, inconsistently, or in ways that do not reflect the evidence base for what works to prevent offending and keep communities safe.

6.2. Taken together the package of reforms we have set out represents a decisive shift. A modern youth justice system must intervene earlier, respond consistently and proportionately, and have rehabilitation at its heart. But it must also be serious about risk, and capable of acting decisively when warning signs emerge or behaviours escalate.

6.3. For children, this means a system that is better equipped to prevent escalation into offending, reduce unnecessary criminalisation, and provide tailored, evidence-based support where harm has occurred. By following the evidence-base about what we know prevents reoffending, the system will be better equipped to help children turn away from crime and build safer, positive futures.

6.4. For communities and victims, this package of reforms will strengthen public protection by reducing harm in the first place, and responding more effectively when harm does occur. Persistent offending, even where individual incidents may appear lower-level, can have a serious cumulative impact on victims, neighbourhoods and public confidence. Tackling the drivers of offending, intervening before harm occurs or escalates, and ensuring that responses are timely, evidence-led and focused on rehabilitation, will be crucial for ensuring there are fewer victims of youth crime. Greater consistency, oversight and accountability across the system will help build confidence that youth justice is firm, fair and effective.

6.5. And for those groups of children we know are overrepresented across the youth justice system, this package of reforms is intended to deliver earlier, fairer and more effective support. This government is clear that overrepresentation should not be seen as inevitable, yet recognises the complex interaction between disadvantage, unmet need, exposure to harm and patterns of decision-making that can shape children's journeys through the system.

6.6. Taken together, the reforms we have set out are designed to prevent escalation into offending, reduce unnecessary criminalisation, and ensure that responses are proportionate, consistent and focused on rehabilitation. These changes will improve outcomes for all children, particularly for those groups who are currently more likely to be drawn into the system.

6.7. Boys make up the clear majority of children in the youth justice system.[72] For the many boys from disadvantaged backgrounds – including White working-class boys – earlier intervention, stronger prevention and more consistent use of diversionary tools will reduce the risk of escalation and help address needs before patterns of offending become entrenched. By intervening at the right time, and responding in ways that are evidence-led and rehabilitative, the system will be better able to support safer and more positive pathways.

6.8. For children with SEND/ALN and neurodivergent children, these reforms will support a shift away from the criminalisation of unmet or poorly understood need. Earlier identification, stronger information-sharing between agencies and more consistent assessment within youth justice services will help ensure that behaviour is better understood and that responses are tailored to children's individual circumstances and needs.

6.9. And, for children from ethnic minority backgrounds, this package of reforms is intended to make the youth justice system fairer and more consistent. Nearly 10 years have passed since the Lammy Review, yet persistent racial disparities undermine trust in the system and risk entrenching disadvantage rather than supporting children to move away from harm. Addressing racial disproportionality is central to this government's vision of a modern youth justice system that commands public confidence and delivers better outcomes.

6.10. The reforms we have set out represent the start of a comprehensive programme to address key structural drivers of disproportionality across the system. Reforms to legal advocacy, diversion, courts, remand, sentencing and criminal records are intended to reduce unnecessary criminalisation, promote proportionate decision-making and ensure that children are supported in the community wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so.

6.11. Delivering lasting change will depend not only on national policy design, but on how reforms are implemented locally. This government will closely monitor the impact of key reforms using disaggregated data to track both overall numbers and proportional representation across the system. Where evidence indicates that

[72] Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025 (2026) – GOV.UK

disparities persist or widen, further action will be taken to understand and address the underlying causes.

6.12. Strong local accountability, improved oversight and effective partnership working – including with voluntary and community sector organisations – will be critical to ensuring that these reforms translate into meaningful change on the ground. The YJB's renewed focus on continuous improvement should be central to this, helping services to understand key issues and supporting the adoption of effective practice.

6.13. Through the reforms set out, continued scrutiny of their impact, and upcoming engagement and policy development, this government is committed to building a youth justice system that is not only fair in principle, but also fair in practice – one that supports every child to turn away from offending and towards a positive future.

6.14. Delivering these reforms will require sustained focus and coordination across government. **This government will therefore establish a cross-government Youth Justice Taskforce** to build and maintain focus and momentum on delivering the commitments we have set out, and monitor whether these are achieving the real-world outcomes we are seeking.

6.15. And to ensure transparency and accountability for delivery, **this government will publish at least annual progress updates on the implementation of these reforms and monitor the trends in the outcomes they are aiming to improve.**

Annex A: Research golden questions

We set out below some key evidence gaps that need to be addressed to support effective delivery of our youth justice reforms. They are intended to guide future research, evaluation and data development, helping to ensure that policy and operational decisions across youth justice are informed by strong evidence. These questions are not exhaustive, nor do they pre-judge policy outcomes. Instead, they are designed to support collaboration with the research community, improve understanding of what works for children, and strengthen the evidence base over time.

- How can the effectiveness of youth diversion activity be assessed, including long-term outcomes for children who have been diverted from the youth justice system?
- What works to enable early identification of children at risk of specific profiles of offending, such as prolific and serious violent offending, to better target services and interventions?
- How can we better understand levels of crime committed by children and the effect of interventions beyond proven (re-)offending rates?
- What types of youth justice interventions and disposals work best to reduce (re)offending and promote positive life outcomes for children, for whom, under which circumstances and why? For example, are there critical intervention points and do some approaches work better for children with specific characteristics or backgrounds? Are offence-specific interventions effective, for example, in relation to violence against women and girls, and knife-crime?
- What is the relative cost effectiveness of youth justice interventions?
- How can we better understand complex journeys through the youth justice and family justice systems, including interactions with the wider network of children's services?
- What are the links between child exploitation and abuse and youth offending?
- How can disparities in the youth justice system be addressed? Why are some children criminalised and others are not?
- How much impact does adopting a "Child First" approach have on improving outcomes for children and supporting pro-social identity?
- What are the barriers and enablers to delivering evidence-based practice in youth justice, including "Child First" approaches? Which delivery models and structures are most effective?
- What does a successful youth justice system look like for different groups, including victims, children, and the public? What factors can be used to measure success?

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