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Case management guidance

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How to assess children in the youth justice system

Information on the types of assessment, how to undertake one and what you should consider. It includes information on undertaking assessments to inform intervention plans, reviewing, AssetPlus as well as some specialist assessments.

Conducting an assessment

Good quality assessment is the foundation of effective youth justice practice. It is vital to:

- identify and meet the needs of children

- make a plan tailored to the needs and circumstances of each child
- identify factors to support positive outcomes for the child such as inclusion in education and importantly desistance from offending
- identify safety and well-being concerns
- identify the child's strengths, interests, activities and support networks which can help them to develop a positive mental picture of themself and their place in society
- identify any mental health and emotional wellbeing needs
- screen for any drug, alcohol or other substance misuse support needs

Assessment is a process of information gathering from the child, their parents/carers and other professionals who have supported them. It is undertaken before any work commences with the child and is the start of a dynamic and cyclical process. This process leads to the planning of work, supervision of the child and a review of progress.

Assessments also inform the preparation of pre-sentence reports that inform sentencing decisions and they advise Referral Order Panels on the content of contracts.

Assessment is continuous, as you get to know the child and their parents/carers you will continue to gather new information. The child and their parents/carers should play an active role, they will have important information to offer that is both verbal and non-verbal. You will also want to test your understanding of their circumstances with them for accuracy. Assessment should provide a comprehensive picture of the child within the context of their environment, situation and circumstances to understand what support they require to move towards a positive self-image. Home visits are an integral part of this, and at least one should be undertaken for each assessment.

Assessment helps you to understand the child's vulnerabilities and needs, and to identify any barriers to positive outcomes. To do this you should:

- ensure the child and their parents and carers understand the purpose of the assessment and how it will be used
- engage the child and their parents or carers to discuss and identify what is important to them, their needs, future goals and aspirations
- review information from existing documentation e.g. previous assessments and pre-sentence reports
- obtain relevant information from other sources such as children's services and health and education professionals to inform the assessment; ensuring that these are evidence based
- undertake at least one home visit and assess the environment in which the child lives and its potential impact upon them to ensure it is stable and suitable accommodation
- consider whether the child is the victim of exploitation of any kind
- take into account diversity, including sex, race or other life and cultural experiences
- recognise that a child's diversity and any experiences of discrimination will inform your understanding of their reality and in turn how you engage with them
- consider the child's age, maturity and any particular speech, language, health or learning needs they have, to understand what is appropriate for them
- consider whether the child has experienced adverse childhood experiences in their early years and upbringing which may have resulted in trauma, may have had an impact on their well-being and is likely to influence their behaviour
- find out about the child's strengths, interests and factors which can support positive outcomes
- identify any harm the child may pose to themselves or others
- ensure that assessment is an on-going dynamic process and is kept up to date particularly if circumstances change or new information becomes available

Unconscious bias and discrimination

It is important to be aware that when conducting assessments, your judgement may be affected by bias. This is natural and will result from your own experience, feelings, perceptions and the nature of the offence. However, it can affect how you make decisions and it is important that you reflect upon your thinking and examine any possible bias. Factors to be aware of are:

- failure to adequately explore cultural issues and the needs of children from different backgrounds
- focusing too much on a particular aspect of the assessment to the detriment of others

Care should also be taken to ensure assessments are free from cultural myths, stereotypes and the adultification of certain groups - in the sense that children from some communities are treated as older and more culpable than others at a similar stage of development. Assessments should also be free from discriminatory language and other factors which could negatively impact on children.

Assessment must go beyond merely describing the facts. The purpose is to help to improve your knowledge of the child's situation and the factors contributing to their behaviour, including experience of trauma and exploitation and what would assist them to lead a positive lifestyle. You should analyse the information obtained and ensure the conclusions you draw are linked to the evidence you have gathered. This enables you to present defensible conclusions in reports for courts or panels and ensure the child has a greater likelihood of achieving positive outcomes, keeping both the child and the public safe. Assessment informs intervention planning and can also be used for providing information for external purposes such as for multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA).

You should allow sufficient time to ensure the assessment is good quality and comprehensive. It is important to remember that assessment is a process which leads to a plan of intervention, not

an end in itself. Assessment is an on-going process, every conversation or interaction you have with a child will increase your knowledge and understanding of them.

The Youth Justice Resource Hub (https://yjresourcehub.uk/) contains some additional tools which can assist you with assessment (including assessing through a trauma-informed lens).

AssetPlus

AssetPlus is the Youth Justice Board's (YJB) end-to-end assessment and planning framework. It aims to provide a single record for each child involved in the youth justice system, whether in the community or custody.

AssetPlus is the required assessment tool to inform court and Referral Order reports and should be used for children under the statutory supervision of the youth justice service. It may be used for assessing children for out-of-court resolutions but is not mandatory for this purpose. An out-of-court resolutions module for AssetPlus will be publicised and made mandatory in 2024. You should be aware of what assessment tools are used locally if AssetPlus is not used for out-of-court resolutions.

The AssetPlus framework (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/362278/AssetPlus_framework_diagram.pdf) contains several sections which can guide you to gather appropriate information and plan interventions with children. It has several standardised self-assessment tools in English and Welsh. Other assessments (whether specialist) or alternatives to AssetPlus can and should be attached to the framework.

For further information:

AssetPlus: assessment and planning in the youth justice system (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assetplus-assessment-and-planning-in-the-youth-justice-

system/assetplus-assessment-and-planning-in-the-youth-justice-system) on the structure of AssetPlus. The AssetPlus Model Document (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/364092/AssetPlus_Model_Document_1_1_October_2014.pdf) for more on each of the different sections of the AssetPlus framework.

Examples of assessment practices in other areas, including identifying trauma in the assessment process are on the Youth Justice Resource Hub (https://yjresourcehub.uk/)

Information from other sources that informs your assessment

Children and their families are the primary source of information for your assessment, but you should also contact statutory agencies such as children's services, health, education, the police and other (third sector) organisations who may have had contact with the child and their family. This is to ensure that the information is as comprehensive as possible, the perspectives of different agencies are incorporated and the assessment is accurate and holistic.

Enquiries with children's services should establish whether there has been current or previous contact and the nature of that contact, for example as a child looked-after (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance/how-to-manage-transitions#child-looked-after), as a child in need (of care and support) or if there are child protection concerns. This will identify whether the child has a current social worker, the level of support they are receiving from them and any factors relating to the safeguarding and welfare of the child which needs to be considered when planning activity.

If the child is looked after, you should be familiar with the content of their care plan and liaise regularly with their social worker to ensure that assessments, plans and any relevant information

regarding the child's situation and circumstances are shared. This is to ensure that:

- the youth justice service's assessment remains up to date
- that work undertaken with the child is complementary
- the roles and contribution of each agency is understood by the child

If you are assessing a child and you have concerns about their safety and well-being you should be aware of the referral process to children's services and be familiar with local processes for following up on referrals. This includes escalating concerns in your own organisation if they are not being addressed.

If necessary, the court has the power to ask local authorities to carry out investigations into child defendants under Children and Young Persons Act 1969 (legislation.gov.uk). This is rarely used, because children's needs are assessed as a core part of the pre-sentence report. However, if you experience any difficulty in obtaining information from children's services, which cannot be resolved through local escalation, the court can use this power to ensure information is presented.

How to use the National Referral Mechanism

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support. Modern slavery is a complex crime and may involve multiple forms of exploitation. This includes trafficking and forced or compulsory labour.

Many children in the justice system are the victims of criminal exploitation. Where there is a concern that this may be the case, processes arising from the Modern Slavery Act 2015 can be used to assess and support children who are victims of trafficking and exploitation. If you are concerned about a risk of criminal exploitation, you should

make a referral to the NRM (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/guidance-on-the-national-referral-mechanism-for-potential-adult-victims-of-modern-slavery-england-and-wales), or devolved local equivalents, without delay and giving as much relevant information as possible. The agency making the referral is known as the First Responder.

Support for child victims is provided through the local authority. First Responders should ensure the local authority children's services are contacted immediately. You should work with partners to obtain all relevant information to enable the NRM to take a decision about whether a child is a victim of trafficking or exploitation. If found to be a victim, the child is entitled to a period of recovery and additional help and support. It may also affect whether and how the child is dealt with in criminal proceedings.

The First Responder should always make a referral to the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG) service if available in the area. Independent Child Trafficking Guardians in England and Wales are an independent source of advice for trafficked or exploited children. They can speak up on their behalf and act in the best interests of the child.

Read the Interim Guidance for Independent Child Trafficking (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819572/Interim-Guidance-for-Independent-Child-Trafficking-Guardians-Early-Adopter-Sites.pdf) for more information on where the service is currently available and what to look for if you suspect a child has been trafficked and/or exploited.

Statutory guidance on the Modern Slavery Act 2015 for England and Wales (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modern-slavery-how-to-identify-and-support-victims) is available online.

How to involve children in their assessment

The assessment process is unlikely to be a neutral event for a child. This is particularly true for those with little or no experience of the justice system and for those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences and trauma. The telling (and re-telling) of their stories to individuals they do not know may be difficult and painful. The youth justice service may also be one of a range of agencies which is assessing their needs.

The assessment should not be conducted according to a standard interview schedule. The way information is gathered is likely to be determined by:

- the length of time you have known the child
- any previous involvement with the justice system
- their emotional well-being
- problems with speech, language and communication and learning difficulties and disabilities

Services should:

- fully engage children and, where appropriate, their parents and carers in the assessment process
- encourage them to participate and tell their stories in their own way
- think about what interventions would assist and be meaningful to them

Sensitivity and skill is needed when the child and parent/carers are present together. You should always speak to them separately. They need to understand:

- what the purpose of the assessment is
- how it will be undertaken and how the information obtained will be used

- the circumstances under which any information might be shared

Particular attention should be given to:

- how questions are asked about sensitive issues such as family difficulties and adverse experiences
- distress or discomfort
- areas the child is reluctant to talk about
- what you can do to reduce anxiety

The information gathering section of AssetPlus includes a section in which children and their parents/carers can undertake a self-assessment (in English or Welsh). This provides the opportunity for them to state their views about various aspects of their life (which can be compared over time). Self-assessment can play an important part in understanding the child's experiences, identifying what is important to them and demonstrating their views are being taken into account.

The option of completing a self-assessment tool should be provided to all children and their parents/carers. Consideration should also be given as to whether they need any assistance to do this and how this could be provided.

The best way to conduct a self-assessment is for it to be fully considered in line with the child's needs.

Self-assessment covers the following topics:

- bail
- custody
- family, home and relationships
- smoking, drinking and drugs
- health and how I feel
- friends
- school, college and work
- offending (statutory only)
- my future

- working with the youth justice service (YJS)
- working with probation services
- review
- custody review
- end of intervention

The self-assessment section of AssetPlus should be re-visited at regular intervals to ensure the views of children and parents/carers are thoroughly considered throughout their period of involvement with the YJS (not just at the start or end), to encourage their active involvement and contribution to the development of their assessments and intervention plans.

How best to conduct a self-assessment should be fully considered in line with the child's needs. Best practice would suggest that this should be discussed with them and their parents/carers beforehand. There is a presumption that self-assessments should be undertaken face to face, however in circumstances where professional judgement considers that a face to face self-assessment does not best support the child's needs the reasons should be fully recorded and a managerial discussion undertaken.

Following assessment, an intervention plan is required for all children receiving statutory supervision from a youth justice service. The plan is produced by the child's case manager. It will identify all actions required to support desistance from offending and any other actions which can support the child to lead a positive lifestyle. Read guidance on how to develop an intervention plan (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance/how-to-work-with-children#develop-intervention-plan) and how to complete the Pathways and Planning Section of AssetPlus (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance/how-to-work-with-children#complete-pathways-and-planning).

How to consider online activity when assessing children

Children's online lives are an integral part of their lives and identity. Practitioners should consider online activity as part of a comprehensive assessment to ensure digital contexts are understood alongside other aspects of a child's life. The Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool (https://yjresourcehub.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Prevention-and-Diversion-Assessment-7.3-Tool-Guidance-2024-final.pdf) provides guidance around both access and harms that could be associated with online activity.

When assessing online activity, practitioners should explore the child's access to the internet and whether not being able to access this could have a detrimental impact on their education and the family's ability to access resources and support. It is also important to assess the type of device that the child uses to access content e.g. phone, tablet, family computer, games console etc. as well as the location and time. It is also important to understand the platforms and communities the child engages with, what they enjoy about these spaces, and whether these connections are primarily with known peers or unknown individuals.

Safety and privacy practices should also be considered, such as whether the child knows how to block or report harmful content, whether accounts are private, and whether location-sharing features are used. It is important that the child's age and developmental level are considered alongside this. It is helpful to consider the environment the child resides within and if parents / carers monitor online activity by the child. It may be helpful for practitioners to consider and understand parents / carers knowledge and understanding of parental controls and restrictions that are available for children's devices and more broadly through internet providers. There are a range of resources available to support parent / carers to improve their understanding from organisations such as Internet Matters (https://www.internetmatters.org/).

Assessment should consider any exposure to harm, such as bullying, unwanted contact, or pressure to share images, as well as experiences of harmful content.. Alongside risks, practitioners should identify strengths and resilience, such as positive

online interests, creative skills, and trusted supports. The child's own account should be the primary source of information, supplemented by observations from parents or carers and relevant input from partners such as schools, social care, and police.

How to decide the frequency of contacts arranged with children

The court determines the length of time for the child's order and, where relevant, sets its requirements. The details of how this is delivered in practice should then be agreed with the child, their parents or carers and key professionals (and in the case of Referral Orders, with community panel members).

You should begin by considering how best to engage the child. Your aim is to support them in the journey to their future self. The content of the order should therefore be framed around the outcome, rather than setting the amount of work that the child needs to do.

The amount of contact required should be proportionate to the child's needs. It should also be balanced with the requirement to ensure the safety and well-being of the child and ensure public protection. Consideration also needs to be given to putting a credible proposal to the court whilst at the same time ensuring that the response to the child remains commensurate and proportionate to the offence(s) they have committed.

The following areas should be considered when determining the frequency of contact:

1. What is the duration and nature of the order? For example, the supervisory requirements of a short Referral Order are likely to be very different to that of intensive supervision and surveillance (which is an alternative to custody).
2. Has the level of intervention required on an individual basis been assessed and what will work best for a given child rather than taking a standard approach?

3. What is the minimum and maximum levels of supervision required to be able to effectively engage and work with the child?
4. Have you explained what is statutory contact and why or where an intervention is voluntary? For example, mental health or substance appointments are therapeutic in nature and likely to be impeded by being made mandatory.
5. Have you retained flexibility of approach? For example, levels of supervision and support can be increased (on a voluntary basis if the child is in crisis and needs more support) or statutory contacts i.e. the appointments set as part of an order or condition, can be decreased where good progress is being made and the need for more frequent contact with the youth justice service (YJS) is diminishing. Management oversight will be necessary where there are significant public protection concerns e.g. where the child is under review through MAPPA or other similar processes, to ensure defensible decision-making.
6. Have you considered any requirements attached to an order (or activities included in a Referral Order contract) in terms of the cumulative expectations placed on the child and what is likely to be effective in supporting and engaging them to minimise the likelihood of harm occurring? The plan needs to be realistic for the child to manage.
7. Have you considered the sequencing and nature of interventions and how that might influence contact frequency? For example, some activities may be carried out more frequently at the start of an order and then tail off.
8. Did you develop a plan with the child so they can clearly see what their engagement with the YJS looks like, the benefits they can hope to achieve, that it is time-limited and the potential for early revocation is there if they make good progress?

An example plan might be: “Maximum levels of statutory appointments twice a week during the first three months of an order (or six months for orders longer than a year); with that frequency reducing as the child moves forward.” You should note that you have the professional discretion at any stage to

vary the frequency of statutory appointments that includes fewer appointments, for example if the child is overwhelmed by expectations and struggling.

It is important that the criminal justice system is not used to address safeguarding, welfare or support needs. You may be identifying and addressing those needs during the course of your intervention with a child, but they should not form part of the mandatory intervention on the court order. Making these interventions mandatory would penalise children for having support needs. It is always preferable for the child to engage with universal or specifically targeted support for these needs, which will be available beyond the conclusion of their involvement with youth justice agencies. This is so that support can be provided which is not contingent on the justice system; and responds to them as a child with welfare needs.

You may wish to refer to Youth offending inspection - Domain two - Case assessment rules and guidance (https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/document/youth-justice-inspections-domain-two-and-victims-standards-case-assessment-rules-and-guidance-carag-v1-3-march-2025/) which sets out the expectations from HMI Probation.

Describe the frequency of proposed contacts to the court and others

In forming proposals, for example in a pre-sentence report, you should emphasise that the frequency of statutory contacts will be focussed on the desired outcome of moving the child to a positive self-identity and addressing barriers to their development. This might include engaging more with education or training, activities which build a pro-social friendship group, or family support. You may refer to the suggested maximum statutory contact frequencies described above. You may also inform the court that welfare, vulnerability and safeguarding needs may be separately addressed through services which will not form part of the

statutory court order and that you will advocate for these.

In making recommendations to a Referral Order Panel, you may wish to suggest the level of statutory contact likely to be needed to move the child to a positive self-identity. You may also emphasise the distinction between statutory contacts, and referrals for support to address safeguarding and welfare needs.

Assess risk of harm

The behaviour of children in the justice system can cause harm or serious harm to others and to themselves. Risk of the child causing any harm is consequently assessed to consider what measures are required to protect the public and indeed the child.

The YJB defines serious harm as 'death or serious personal injury whether physical or psychological' and risk of serious harm is the likelihood and imminence of this happening, and the impact if it did.

Vulnerability or public protection concerns can arise as a result of:

- the behaviour of others e.g. through adverse childhood experiences, intimidation and exploitation
- events such as transitions or changes in living arrangements
- The child's own behaviour e.g. self-harm, risk taking, substance misuse

In assessing the degree of concern presented you should ensure:

- it is individualised and contextualised
- you identify who may be at risk and in what circumstances
- you assess whether any risk of harm to the child or others is imminent or not

- what controls are in place to protect the child from harming others or themselves
- what positive interventions are in place to promote the child's safety and wellbeing, such as counselling, educational support, or services provided by external agencies to address mental or physical ill-health or substance misuse

It is also important to recognise that risks and their nature can change over time. This should continue to be explored in assessment so that plans remain current and relevant, therefore, contingency plans to review risk and safeguarding must be updated. The original plan must clearly highlight what actions will be taken if there is a change of circumstances to a child's need and how this will impact risk of serious harm and safeguarding or welfare needs. Both must be considered in isolation and reviewed accordingly.

Within the assessment the 'explanations and conclusions' section of AssetPlus gives an indicative rating of the likelihood of harmful behaviour being caused by the child. You will use professional judgement to agree with or amend this as appropriate, ensuring that this judgement is evidenced, and seek to identify and eliminate elements of unconscious bias. The assessed level of risk of harm to others is derived from the assessment, taking into account:

- the seriousness of the offence
- the circumstances around it
- the child's attitude towards it
- past offending history
- any indication the action may or may not be repeated

The assessment should also consider whether there are any factors which lessen the likelihood of this occurring such as positive changes in circumstances since the offence was committed, motivation to desist and other protective factors.

Risk of harm levels are defined as follows:

Low risk

When there is no evidence to indicate any likelihood of future serious harmful behaviour.

Medium risk

When some risk is identified but the child is unlikely to cause serious harm unless circumstances change. Relevant issues can be addressed as part of the normal supervision process. For example, a change in circumstances, failure to take medication, loss of accommodation, relationship breakdown, and drug or alcohol misuse.

High risk

When the potential event could happen at any time and the impact would be serious. Action should be taken quickly and the child may need additional support.

Very high risk

When the child is likely to commit the behaviour in question as soon as the opportunity arises, and the impact would be serious. Immediate multi-agency action is likely to be required.

You should consider the impact of assessing children as 'risky' and what it might mean to them in terms of labelling and self-identity (a status symbol or something they consider to be detrimental/damaging). Consideration should be given to how you engage with children and their parents/carers on matters relating to levels of risk and harm, what it means and whether they would assess themselves in the same way.

You may wish to refer to Keeping other people safe in case management (https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/case-supervision/) produced by HMI Probation.

When to review the assessment

You should complete a new AssetPlus assessment at the start of every new order and for every new pre-sentence report. It should then be reviewed whenever there is a significant change in the child's circumstances or as more becomes known about them. Such changes in circumstance must take into consideration any changes to risk and safeguarding. In light of these changes, contingency plans should also be reviewed and updated.

Reviews should take into account their response to interventions and engagement with the youth justice service. They should also consider whether any changes need to be made to the intervention plan because of progress made or difficulties in engaging the child with any elements of it.

As part of the review process you should ask the child and their parents/carers whether they would like to complete a further self-assessment and utilise the information provided to assess how the order is progressing. It is important that the child can recognise that the work they are doing benefits them.

The review process should consider what positive progress has been made to inform decisions about early revocation. This should be considered as a standard part of the review process – see early revocation (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance/how-to-work-with-children#early-revocation) for more detail.

Recording on the case management information system

Once completed, you must record the AssetPlus assessment on your case management information system. Assessments should be jointly produced with the child and shared for transparency.

Personal information must be recorded and processed in line with the General Data Protection Regulations 2018 and Data Protection Act 2018.

Quality assuring assessments and plans

You may wish to refer to the ways to improve quality (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance/ways-to-improve-quality) section of this guidance for more detail.

Quality Assurance tools (https://yjresourcehub.uk/assetplus-quality-assurance-tool-derby-youth-offending-service-july-2020/) are available on the Youth Justice Resource Hub. They will help you to scrutinise and audit assessments and plans completed using the AssetPlus framework. Quality assurance aims to ensure assessments and plans:

- are high quality
- are balanced and unbiased
- contain a link between the evidence gathered and the interventions planned;
- have interventions that promote potential and desistance

Quality assurance processes can support training and development. Providing feedback on the timeliness and quality of assessments and plans will identify how they can be improved and ensure a consistent approach across the youth justice service.

The quality assurance process should also ensure that assessments are unbiased and do not discriminate against any groups of children in any way which might lead to unfavourable outcomes. You are advised to use the YJB's ethnic disproportionality toolkit (https://yjresourcehub.uk/youth-justice-service-toolkits-youth-justice-board-updated-august-2022/th-justice-services-october-2021/) to monitor how children from different ethnic groups are represented in the youth justice system.

The YJB's standards for children in the youth justice system 2019 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-

standards-for-youth-justice-services) sets strategic and operational standards for youth justice service (YJS) management boards and practitioners. They require that services meet specific standards in relation to the quality of their assessments and plans. YJSs are periodically required to self-assess against the standards to identify effective practice and to develop action plans if improvements need to be made.

Information on the quality and outcomes of assessments and plans should be regularly shared with the management board.

Consideration of multi agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA)

When assessing a child, you need to consider whether they meet the following MAPPA eligibility criteria:

- category 1: sex offenders
- category 2: violent offenders receiving a 12 month or over custodial sentence
- category 3: other dangerous offenders where there is an agreed risk of serious harm needing multi-agency involvement

For further details see How to manage multi-agency public protection arrangements (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance/how-to-work-with-children#multi-agency-public-protection-arrangements).

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