

100 days as Chair of the Youth Justice Board

Today marks 100 days since I became the Chair of the Youth Justice Board. In some ways it's an arbitrary milestone, but it feels as good a time as any to share my reflections and to confirm my priorities.

The many conversations I have had with stakeholders, ministers, the Board and YJB staff over the past few months have confirmed two things for me.

Firstly, the youth justice system is not working for everyone. There are disparities in outcomes and experiences, and not just for children from a black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) background. Youth custody, although improving, is far from the nurturing environment it needs to be and, in the community too, we often struggle to meet the multiple needs of children in the system.

The second confirmation for me has been one of hope. In every single conversation I have had over the past 100 days, people have told me of their dedication to improve the system, and of their confidence that we can, and will, make a difference. This commitment is universal, from ministers to the third sector to the youth custody service to youth offending teams and I am determined to harness it during my tenure.

If we are to build a youth justice system that works to create safer communities and fewer victims we need to understand what works, specifically what is proven to work. That means adopting what is known as a 'child first' approach. In its most basic sense it means we must:

- treat children as children and ensure their rights are upheld
- support children to reach their potential
- ensure children are fully included and engaged
- keep children safe and, wherever possible, out of the justice system

This does not equate to being 'soft on crime'. It means that we do what we know works to help children escape the dead-end cycle of reoffending and positively contribute to society instead. It is one of my top priorities to see child first principles being practically applied across the whole system.

My other top priority is to address the over-representation of children from certain groups within the youth justice system, specifically children from a BAME background, including children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, and looked-after children. There is, quite rightly, an increasing focus on fairness and equality more generally within society, particularly in minority communities and black communities, which has helped to further highlight the stark inequalities experienced by children in the youth justice system. Yes, it's a complex issue, and change must also be sought beyond the justice system, but we must not hide behind this complexity.

I have made addressing over-representation a top priority for the YJB and I will not shy away from challenging other government departments to do the same. We must all champion and challenge for equality if we are to achieve the change these children desperately need.

I sincerely hope that being appointed as the first black Chair of the YJB and also now, as a Commissioner for the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, that I can help to make a difference.