

Strong progress towards a Child First youth justice system

Today we published our [Annual Report and Accounts for 2021 to 2022](#). This was my first annual report as Chief Executive Officer of the Youth Justice Board (YJB), and I would like to place on record my thanks to all those who have helped produce this report and ensure its accuracy.

The opportunity to lead the Youth Justice Board as Chief Executive is enormously exciting, and there is nothing more important for me than improving the life chances of children. When I was working in adult prisons, I saw first-hand the consequences of failure and I believe, as a result, you will not find anyone more determined to ensure we are effective in keeping children out of the system and supporting them to live happy, safe, crime-free lives.

Our activity over the past year was yet again set against the backdrop of the pandemic. At the YJB, we continued to follow a fully remote operating model from March 2020 up to January 2022. Following consultation with our staff we subsequently developed a hybrid model, enabling our staff to return to face-to-face working, where appropriate, whilst allowing the organisation to attract and support diverse talent with an increase in national rather than London-based contracts.

Despite us seeing the easing of COVID-19 restrictions across England and Wales, the challenges for both children and the sector were still evident, and we have yet to see the full impact this has had on their lives and futures. Reduced access to education and other critical support services, increased trauma and mental illness, fewer opportunities for safeguarding and more opportunities for online exploitation all form a worrying reality for children and those across the sector.

Of course, we welcome the past year's continued falls in the number of children entering the justice system and those who received a caution or sentence. Reoffending rates decreased again, and the youth custody population stands at an all-time low. But there is no room for complacency: as highlighted recently in a review by the National Audit Office, we have serious grounds to expect a worsening of this picture in the immediate future, with a potential doubling of children in custody by 2024. Long term impacts of the pandemic, combined with the economic shocks that have followed it, seem likely to make far more children far more at risk of coming into the criminal justice system. The YJB will grasp with both hands the challenge of ensuring that the gains made in recent years are sustained.

But, while I welcome these reductions, overwhelmingly I was saddened by yet more evidence of the shocking disparity for children from ethnic minorities. In particular, children with Black and Mixed ethnicities are significantly overrepresented at every stage in the youth justice system. We have undertaken a wide range of activity over the past year to tackle this issue

which includes commissioning two research projects with a focus on disproportionality, sharing area level detail on disparity with Police and Crime Commissioners and taking forward an initiative to get children from ethnic minorities into employment. We have also continued to work with our partners, such as the Magistrates Association, to help tackle these disparities, including the development of a checklist for magistrates, to further guard against any potential bias in decision-making.

I was pleased to see that strong progress was made towards our vision of a Child First youth justice system. In essence, we want a system which treats children as children and supports them to become the best version of themselves.

We've never been under any illusions about how ambitious this goal is and recognise that it will take a concerted effort from us and all our partners. Nevertheless, we are up for the challenge and the potential benefits to children and our communities alike far exceed any drawbacks. Significant activity over the past year includes work in Wales to develop trauma informed approaches and services in support of its Youth Justice Blueprint. Also, across both England and Wales we commissioned a joint prevention and diversion project to help us increase our understanding and oversight of how this work is delivered by youth justice services.

This year we also took the opportunity to review the pathfinder model that was introduced in 2018. The review found that the pathfinder model was a worthwhile element of sector improvement work. It was also clear that the underlying principles of pathfinders were sound and the introduction of a formal selection process would improve the model further. All current pathfinders will continue as planned and we are designing the selection process for the next pathfinders. We are working to have the new approach in place ready for the 2023/24 financial year.

In December 2021, we secured Board approval for an exciting new initiative to maximise our impact, rebalance how we deliver our statutory functions and change our focus from being driven by risk to being driven by benefits. Known as our 'new sense of purpose', this change programme will allow a significant review of our current position and consider how we deploy our people, manage processes, provide advice and invest tax-payers money, including the youth justice grant.

Finally, I would like to thank YJB staff and our colleagues and partners across the system for the welcome shown to me as I started my new role. I remain in awe of your relentless determination to improve the lives of children in the youth justice system and all that you have achieved over the past year.